

Permafrost

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pages

The highland plains south of Valles Marineris were almost disappointing.

Her father had spoken so highly of the rusty sand-soil that he had known in his youth. Pink skies and dreamy rainbow sunsets. But what she saw before her reminded her strangely of Titan--but with blue skies and somewhat more sun.

She watched the scene below her amused from the shuttle window. The craft drifted level with the tallest of the buildings that rose from the plains of Solis Planum. Then lower. She started at the soft jar that marked the shuttle's landing.

"Ms. Aris?"

Renegade Aris glanced away from the window to the flight attendant.

"We've landed, Ms. Aris. Will you be leaving now or with the other passengers?"

"Now, I think, thank you."

"I'll see that your baggage is transferred to your residence."

Aris smiled politely. "Anytime before the end of the day will be fine."

The man left her. She sighed and rose to her feet, arranging her desert-like garb closely around her body. They had been a gift left for her on the Deimos station from her half-brother. She was looking forward to seeing him after their five-year separation.

She paused, staring blankly out the tiny window at the people milling below. But then maybe she wasn't. She had treated him badly when he had left Titan. She had been angry with him and they had not communicated much. She suddenly wished she had not been so stubborn. She wished that she had answered more of his messages.

Finally, she donned her special glasses and wrapped the scarf over the

exposed areas of her face before emerging from the shuttle and into the sunlight. The glasses tinted the pure colors she had seen from the safety of the shuttle, dulling the red sands, and yellowing the blue of the atmosphere. She paused at the top of the ramp to survey the ground of the bustling shuttleport of New Babylon. One could easily tell the employees from the tourists. The flowing desert robes were all the rage for wear outside the protective domes of the largest colonies. Fashioned after the robes worn for millennia in the deserts of Earth, they had proved the perfect fashion for the Martians and provided acceptable protection from the UV rays getting through the incomplete Martian ozone. She had seen the fashions on the news and in the movies on Titan and had long ago become used to the natives' appearance. The employees wore more practical clothing, however. Worn close to the body and the scarves and headgear well secured. She wondered vaguely if the workers preferred the more practical garb or the flowing robes in their off time.

She had paused at the bottom of the ramp only momentarily to get her bearings. Dimitri had promised to meet her. She half-wondered if he might have forgotten. Or been called away on some "pressing" assignment.

The terminal, she decided, would be the best place to wait. But she had time to take no more than one step before a rag with a sickly smelling substance.

Aris had no time to react, hardly even to register what was happening, before her vision was clouded by the fog of white noise. Only to be quickly followed by the blackness. Then, she knew nothing.

Dimitri Lange paced impatiently behind his desk. He threw himself into his chair and pressed the comm key on the console in front of him.

"Get me Cadet Evans on the line."

"Right away, sir."

There was only a brief pause before, "Go ahead, sir," could be heard over the comm.

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the shuttleprt, sir."

Dimitri rolled his eyes at the image on the screen. "Obviously. Where is my sister? You were supposed to have her back here an hour ago."

"I know, sir, but no one can seem to locate her."

"What?"

"I'm having Shuttleport Security do a search. She's probably just out looking for you, sir."

"Was her shuttle late?"

"No, sir. It was right on schedule. At least according to the departure schedule. We contacted the linership in orbit. They said she was the first to shuttle down. Do you think something might have happened to her, sir?"

Dimitri didn't like this. It gave him a weird feeling. She might just be trying to pull one of her old tricks on him, and he could hardly fault her for trying to lighten the tension between them, but something told him this had nothing to do with her usual trickery.

He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "I want that place searched thoroughly. I want this treated like a missing person investigation, but I don't want a word of this getting out to the press. I'll sent you down some back-up. Be as discreet as you can. I want to know where this is leading us."

"Right." He paused. "Do you think this has anything to do with the rebels we caught here last month, sir?"

"It's possible," Dimitri was forced to acknowledge. "It's also

tpossible that--assuming this is a kidnapping--this is just for the money. My sister is quite wealthy. Oh, and Cadet Evans, they are not rebels. They are not part of a rebellion. It is an insurrection and they are traitors. Please try and remember that in the future. We can't be giving these people the impression that we've begun to take them seriously. That would be very bad for public relations."

"Right, sir. Evans out."

Aris woke and was immediately sorry she had. The queasy feeling in her stomach made any movement the greatest challenge to her control in living memory. Even so, she knew from the ache in her shoulders that her hands were bound with underground-issued restraints and that she had been lying in this awkward position for some time. She also knew that as long as she stayed this way she was vulnerable.

She opened her eyes to total blackness. The ground beneath her cheek was a fine, muddy silt. Damp enough to stick, but not enough to soak through her clothing. She was glad of that at least. It had made her somewhat less uncomfortable than she might have been had she been lying on pebbles, or worse.

Aris struggled into a sitting position, ceasing her struggling, only when she was sitting upright and could lean her head against the naturally smoothed rock wall behind her. She was still trying to calm her stomach when she heard the scrape of booted feet against stone. She watched the wavering light emerge from around the corner, somewhat surprised to see a man holding a flickering, and extremely ancient, kerosene lantern.

She watched him warily through narrowed eyes. It was he who spoke first.

"So, you're awake."

Aris didn't answer. She just kept watching him, knowing full well just how annoying her silence could be.

"Are you hungry?"

She knew he was trying to be pleasant, but under the circumstances it annoyed her.

"You're not going to answer? Well, then I guess I'll have to assume you're not and let you starve. Would you like that?"

Aris just stared at him, refusing even to blink.

"I don't suppose you'd want to eat in your condition, though. Chloriform is much easier on its victim, but it just isn't available here on Mars. Not to worry, though. The aftereffects should wear off completely in a couple more hours. In the meantime, I thought you should know, we aren't going to kill you, but I wouldn't be making any short term plans. At least, not right away. Now that we have you Ms. Aris, we have everything we need to keep your brother occupied while we-- But I say too much. Good day, Ms. Aris."

Aris watched the last of him closely. That had been somewhat more informative than she had hoped. For example, she knew now that there were more than one of them. She also knew that they had something to do with a case Dimitri was working on. It was possible that they had tried to kill two birds with one stone. It was possible that they might also want her money. Most people seemed to. But then he hadn't said anything about a ransom.

Definitely something to think about.

Dimitri met Cadet Evans and the Shuttleport Security team on the heliport pad on the far side of the shuttleport. He hadn't wanted to attract too much attention to their investigation, and this seemed like

the perfect location for their talk.

"What have you learned?"

It was Cadet Evans that spoke up, having apparently been chosen as the spokesman for the group. "We spoke to the crew of the shuttle. They recall seeing her get off the ship and then lost track of her. They assumed she had gone to the terminal. Her baggage has been delivered to her new residence as she requested before disembarking."

"Has she put in an appearance at her place?"

"No, sir. I have someone watching. She's to contact you if Ms. Aris turns up there."

Dimitri nodded his agreement.

"Have you found any witnesses?"

"We talked to one employee, on the shuttle maintenance crew, who says she saw a man lurking around the shuttle shortly before Ms. Aris disembarked. We also talked to three people who saw a man matching his description driving away from the shuttleport at a high rate of speed in a hovercraft. He was headed toward Syria Planum, or Noctis Labyrinthus perhaps."

"Okay, I want you to contact New Babylon police. Get them out looking. I need to know if anyone else saw this man or where he might have gone. I'll contact the Syrian Division in Psyche and get you some back-up. We haven't had a ransom demand yet, and that's starting to make me a little nervous. At least then we would know what they were after."

Cadet Evans nodded his understanding. "I'll get in touch with the New Babylon authorities. Where shall I have them start?"

"Follow the witnesses' statements as much as possible. They wouldn't want to attract too much attention to themselves by behaving suspiciously, so they were probably pretty noticeable, at least until they got beyond

the densely populated areas. I want the search area narrowed down as much as possible."

"You know, sir, there are those permafrost caverns just west of Noctis Labyrinthus. They're supposed to be closed off, but that suspect we arrested last month with the rebel-- sorry, traitor--was a spelunker. He got his training in those caverns."

"Good point. But if she is being held in those caverns, we've got to go carefully. Those caverns come close to the surface in places and the ceilings aren't very stable. I don't want to be pulling up her dead body when this is over."

Her kidnapper had been right as far as the nausea went. But by the time she finally realized that she felt almost normal again, she still was no closer to getting the hell out of her predicament.

Of course, Aris knew what Dimitri would say. He would tell her to wait where she was for someone to come rescue her. It was safer. She didn't know what kind of people she was dealing with . . .

She also knew that it could be a very long wait indeed. Even in the dark, she had deduced that she was probably in a permafrost cavern. She had read about them in her areology texts on the trip over. Permafrost caverns extended for hundreds of miles, sometimes hundreds of feet below the surface, and sometimes right near the top. They were usually dangerous and had very few accesses to the surface. This cavern could collapse at any time, and a rescue attempt, no matter how competent the IPSA claimed to be, could be just the catalyst to bury this cavern under a pile of rubble. And her along with it.

She made a face at that realization, ever more convinced she had to find a way out of here on her own. If she could find a way out, she knew



she could lead her would-be rescuers back to haul away the bad guys. The first thing on the agenda would be to get the restraints off.

She pulled herself up along the wall and paced out the chamber. The floor was covered with the fine silt she had noticed before, except for along one wall. There she found a few jagged rocks that might have worked well enough on rope bindings, but not on the metal restraints they had put on her. She silently cursed their supply sources.

Aris returned to her starting point, forming a mental picture in her mind of what she knew of her immediate surroundings. She leaned against the wall, closing her eyes, and tried to think.

A dim flickering beyond her closed eyelids alerted her that she was no longer alone. She opened her eyes to find the man she had seen before watching her from behind the flickering lamp.

He moved toward her when he saw she was alert. He took hold of her upper arm and lead her away from the cavernous chamber, down a long, narrow corridor and into an area filled with several burning lamps. Five men sat playing cards at a table in the center of the chamber. They looked up from their game as her keeper brought her through. Another man sat aloof from the others. He regarded her steadily from where he was, never wavering until she had been lead past them into the corridor beyond.

They passed two guarded entrances before they came to a narrow alcove. Her captor stopped and unlocked her restraints. She rubbed her wrists warily waiting for him to explain himself and looking for any sign of weakness.

"I'm sure you can tell by the odor around here what this little niche is used for. I suggest that you do the same. You won't be brought back her very frequently."

She regarded him coldly, but did do as he suggested lest her

stubbornness change his mind and not bring her back at all.

When she had answered her body's call to nature, she carefully tore off a strip of cloth from her robes to use as a makeshift hygienic wipe. He growled at her to not try any funny stuff, but he seemed to understand what she was trying to accomplish.

With that in mind, Aris removed an additional piece of cloth from the corner of her robes, concealing it in her hand as she emerged from the alcove. Reluctantly, she pretended to allow him to bind her hands behind her back once more. She pulled away when he reached for her second hand, and he was forced to close the other restraint's lock with her body between them.

"Don't even think of getting away, Ms. Aris."

Aris shrugged her shoulders. "Can't blame me for trying."

"So, she does speak after all! I'm sure the captain will be pleased to hear that. That will make things a whole lot easier."

She followed him back to the great room docilely enough, her hands clasped carefully behind her. She was lead back into the great room and seated at a chair that had been pulled away from the table. The five card-players had left, apparently mid-game.

The man in the alcove rose from his chair and approached her, studying her with narrowed eyes. He waved his hand at her warden, saying, "Leave us."

Aris watched him silently for a long time, but it was she who finally broke the silence. "You're going to get yourselves killed, you know?"

He raised one eyebrow. "Really? What makes you say that?"

She glanced at the shadowed ceiling overhead, studying the crumbling stone carefully before answering. "These permafrost caverns--the ceilings aren't exactly sturdy. I don't much look forward to being buried under

rock with the lot of you."

"So you've figured that out, have you? What else has the young genius figured out?"

Aris studied him before glancing pointedly at the table beside her. "I don't think there's enough in the pot yet."

The leader glanced at the pile of plastic chips in the center of the table and shrugged his shoulders. "If you wish, I can up the ante."

"Really?"

"I know that you and your brother aren't exactly close, and that you don't agree on many things."

"True enough," Aris allowed.

"We would be willing to offer you a place in our efforts, assuming we could trust you."

Aris laughed and shook her head, but had no time to answer before her keeper returned and whispered a message in his ear. The rebel's leader nodded, giving the other man instructions in the same low tone.

"It seems that we will not be able to talk further. As long as you continue to cooperate, I'm sure you will continue to enjoy your stay here." The leader departed, leaving the her warden to lead her back to her holding area.

When the man left her alone, Aris carefully paced out the space in her little chamber, nodding silently to herself. She felt certain that she had seen an additional side passageway between the great room and her holding chamber. She had no idea where it might lead, but it would be better than where she was.

Half-afraid that her plan had not worked, she unclasped her hands and tried to pull them around in front of her. After only a moment's resistance, the restraints gave away on her right wrist. She sighed in

relief, and went to her knees to retrieve the strip of cloth that had served to jam the lock. No sense in leaving evidence behind. If she got caught, she could always try it again.

She found the passage in the dark by feeling along the wall with her hand. Keeping her hand along the wall to guide her, she set off in a slow jog into the darkness. The faster she could get away from her former captors, the happier she would be.