

## Chapter 1

A vortex of water rushed like thunder from a thousand chariots. *The Mountain of Gods*. Here stood the last waterfall on a scarred and barren earth. Here the Black Tick gathered to escape decimation. With ingenuity and skill, they carved into rock an underground fortress, striking silver deep below the substrate. Precious metal became as common as oak from the great forests. *Once upon an age*. The Mountain of Gods had silver enough for kings.

Alanis navigated alone the winding, stone steps. Spray crashed upon foam spray; yet she knew the way blindfolded. She would not fall.

Remco, a sliver cut by moonlight somewhere above, faded into midday. The falls generated all power to these catacombs and the whole, gaping throat radiated with a show of blue electric rods welded into rock by silver cable. *Yet the absence of sun?* Alanis would rather bake in the heat of an A24 bomb than live smothered from the outside world.

An eggplant shroud met her at bottom's end. Like a spirit, it slid across stone. Even the pit of its cape turned up darkness (*defying the blue light*) except for the very fine point of a very fine nose.

“Oh, Jorge,” Alanis croaked.

The shroud fell to reveal a shriveled face, pale from life under the mountain, bony and cord-like from ill health. He reached out. “It has been too long.”

“How is he?”

His silence magnified humming rods as he led her down a familiar hall. It would like her dreams, a circle with only one purpose, one end — the

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great, stone door cut with diamond saws and inlaid with silver. *Creak...* always that sense of brevity when it opened, as if Atlas bent to shift the world on his shoulders. The child within wanted to shake its head and back away. A feeling of dread. A foreboding. A premonition. Children did not understand such things. And Alanis was no child. She crossed the threshold.

*Creak!* The door slid in one heavy panel till lock grabbed lock. From the bedchamber, a dark face watched her every movement, buried to the throat in ebony silk and silver brocade. A tube ran nose to floor, fed by a long, cylindrical canister that flashed red, green, red faster than the blink of bloodshot eyes or the parting of cracked and bleeding lips.

“You’re afraid of me,” it spoke with a voice dry as a desert wind.

She shook her head. “No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes,” this was final. “Goldilocks is scared to come close. Scared to see me weak.”

Her hands shook as she poured a glass of blackberry bourbon.

“Remember that first drink? We - uh — we were toasting old Hiram’s last twitch in the Capsule,” she nodded at Alpha’s prize — an electrocution device in plain view from the bed. “We worked him over good, didn’t we?”

“Alanis, come here.”

She hesitated. “Where’s Omega? At the bar with his buddies? Leaving you here...alone?”

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“It makes no difference now.” A heavy sigh. “Come, Alanis. Don’t be afraid.”

The canopy was darkness. Even sharp, pulsing orbs from the Capsule refused to penetrate shadows that hung in each fold of fabric, that clouded Alpha’s dim eyes. Alanis felt chilled to the bone. Knees buckling, she sunk to the bed, fighting weakness, fighting tears.

A hand found her.

“When I first met you, I told myself, ‘There is a woman I wish I could know in another world — another life.’” His smile peeled skin over green, decaying teeth. The smell was putrid. The whole air stunk with death. “I’ve held tight to your image all these weeks.”

“You never told us. You - you never told me it was this bad. When did Mack say it would...”

“That’s not important. But your work...it could save us all.” He was quiet for some time. Then a great gasp, a rattled breath and, “I’ve summoned Omega. The time is close now. A week. Maybe a month.”

“No, Alpha! He’ll run this place down. He has no regard for anything you’ve worked for.”

“He is my son...and I trust him.”

“You are mistaken.”

“He’ll come through. He’s impulsive...like his mother. But he knows that responsibility awaits. He will be ready.”

Alanis laughed. “How ready? He’s reckless and immature. I despise him!”