

## Chapter 6

**M**iranda desperately needed a way out of Museum's, preferably alone, but in this time, in this universe, she knew she could not. She searched frantically for a drunken man's arm to link onto on his way out. She scanned by the door for what felt like hours but was only mere seconds and found what she was looking for. She dashed over to the man, making a fuss and acting, very well she thought, as though she knew him and genuinely cared about him.

She hurried the man out the door and sprung free of his arm as soon as the doorman closed the doors behind them. Her eyes scanned the landscape for Xavier and that gorgeous woman on his arm, controlling his mind. She had almost started to panic when at last, she found them. They were walking arm in arm, Xavier holding his red bow tie in his left hand, swinging it without a care in the world. Miranda wanted to make a mad dash for the two of them but thought better of it and followed in the shadows a block or so away.

*Okay, she has his mind under her control; does that mean she can read his thoughts? Does that mean she knows I'm here to kill her?* These questions and many more assaulted Miranda's mind and senses. As she followed them, she tried desperately to work out a mental plan of action that would not involve killing Xavier, too. Venus and Xavier stopped in front of an old stone building with a giant red door. They talked a few seconds, with Miranda doing her best to read their lips, but she could not. Venus kissed Xavier on the cheek - which made Miranda dry heave, bile rising in the back of her throat - and they walked through the giant red door still arm in arm.

Approaching softly, quietly, Miranda went across the street to hide in the bushes, scope the place out, and plot. She stayed there until dawn, watching men and women come and go, all of them dressed in various combinations of black and red, talking in hushed whispers that Miranda could not hear, yet they were all happy. Clearly they must not have known their minds were being fed by Venus and they were nothing but her minions. There were so many of them, Miranda eventually lost count. She would have to figure out a way to catch Venus alone. Or catch Venus alone with Xavier. That thought disgusted and angered her in ways she had never before imagined she could feel. Surely Xavier was not aware that Venus had control of his mind.

Slowly realizing this mission would take more than a few days, at the absolute least, Miranda headed for Acad's apartment. She needed a place to crash and a woman alone in a hotel room in this universe did nothing more than make her look like a classy street walker. Acad's apartment would have to serve as her base if she had any hopes of saving this universe. Begrudgingly, Miranda started off toward Acad's.

When she got there she glanced at her watch. Seven o'clock. She let out a deep sigh, feeling bad about the night before when she had so terribly abused him and also that it was now seven in the morning and she was going to ask this poor man for a place to stay. She raised her fist to knock and hesitated. *This is not going to go over well.* She knocked and Acad opened the door in one of the most questionably male

fashions. He was wearing a red silk and lace robe that confused and jarred Miranda's thoughts, which had shown in her facial expression.

"Miranda! Why do come in!" he said, gesturing quite grandly and even bowing a bit.

"Um, oh, I, uh...thank you, Mr. Acad."

Miranda walked in, seeing he had magnificently cleaned the whole of the living room as if the previous night's events had not taken place. She stood there stupidly in the foyer as he closed the door and walked back her way.

"Miranda, I must thank you. You freed me from Venus' mind clutch and saved me from doing who knows what. What brings you by this lovely morning?"

"Well, I, uh," she groaned just thing about the words she was about to say, "I need a place to stay for the next few days and seeing how staying in a hotel would make me look rather obvious, among other things, I was wondering if you would be so kind as to let me stay on your couch."

"Why of course you may stay here! You truly saved my life last night, I believe. If there is anything you need, anything at all, you just let me know and I will be more than happy to handle it."

"Mr. Acad, that is tremendously gracious of you..." the words she wanted to speak were all jumbled now, truly perplexed by Acad's generosity and excitement.

"Mr. Acad, thank you. You really don't need to go through all this trouble for me."

"Oh, but I do. You saved me from destruction."

Miranda nodded and thanked the man again. She could use a nice hot cup of coffee but she really did not want Acad waiting on her hand-and-foot. She had stalking to be done and plans to make; Acad being with her, even every moment she attempted to simply get herself a cup of coffee from the kitchen, could not be allowed. Nor would Miranda be able to tolerate him following her like a puppy who just found his new master.

"Mr. Acad, do you have any coffee brewed? I could really use a cup right now. And a pen and notepad if you have them."

"Sure, sure! I'll go gather your coffee first. You look as if you've been awake all night!"

"I have and thank you again. This means a great deal. Much more than you can fathom."

Miranda wanted nothing more than to sit on his comfy couch but there was work to be done, so she did what she had always done when working - she sat down on one of the largely uncomfortable dining room chairs at the table. Her thoughts swirled around in her stubborn brain and bumped into each other so much that she was starting to get a little irritated by this mission. No matter. She would give the universe a piece of her mind when this was over.

Acad came bustling in with a silver serving tray in both hands. On it was a small metal coffee pot, a mug, and a few toasted English muffins. He had even put a small amount of incredibly soft spreadable butter in a dish for her muffins. It all looked like something she would be served at a fancy coffee shop, the kind she liked to visit back

in her universe. He set the tray in front of her and bustled away, presumably for her other requests, a notebook and pen.

Miranda lifted half an English muffin only to find that while she was very hungry, this was not anything close to what she wanted to eat. Somehow something inside her was changing and she did not know what it was, but her hunger was just...different. She put some butter on the half she was holding and forced it down her throat anyway. She needed some kind of sustenance if she was going to start any kind of planning in detail. The urge for something more kept pounding away at her insides like an axman chopping at a very large tree. She pushed the urge away just as Acad came back into the room with a notebook and multiple pens.

"Thank you so very much," Miranda said.

"My dear, it is a small thing. Is there anything else I can get you?"

"Um, actually, yes please. A change of clothes perhaps? Something preferably more comfortable."

Acad snapped his fingers, said, "I have just the thing!" and went running off into his bedroom. He came back almost instantly with a very nice lounge set on a hanger for her. It was the same red as his robe and appeared to be made of a fine satin-like material. Miranda stood, thanked him again, and went off to change before doing anything else.

## Chapter 7

The stench of her dress was more than she could currently handle, practically ripping it at the seams to get it off even though it was already unzipped. Shoes and stockings went flying in a fit and she quickly put the beautiful lounge suit on. It felt calmingly smooth on her skin. Miranda hung her dress on the hanger the lounge suit came off and hung it on the shower rod. She knew she should take it to be cleaned but that was something she could do later.

Walking back into the dining room and thanking Acad again - she really was grateful for everything he was doing - she sat back down to drink the coffee and eat the dry yet buttered English muffins. They did nothing to satiate her hunger but she was currently past the point of figuring out why that was or what, exactly, it was she needed to properly feel full. Grabbing the pen, Miranda started jotting down notes of what she had witnessed the night before and got so lost in her note-taking that she did not even notice Acad had left the apartment. She finished the pot of coffee that came with the serving tray and was getting up to get more when he walked back in.

"Oh! I didn't even know you went anywhere!"

"I went to drop your dress at the dry cleaner and took the liberty of picking you up some fresh clothes of your own. I went by the size of your dress to pick out a few things for you."

"Mr. Acad, really, this is all too much."

"No, this is me thanking you for saving my life. How many times must we do this before you get that through your obviously thick skull?"

Miranda could not help but laugh at his astute observation and nod her head in thanks. She hugged him and skipped off to the kitchen for another pot of coffee. She hummed to herself as she poured from the percolator into the pot, a tune she swore she had heard somewhere before but could not place. She did not even recognize the tune itself. It was dark and brooding. *Another thing to figure out later. I've got too much to think about right now,* she was thinking to herself when the hunger pangs came again. She growled and ground her teeth. *Maybe once I'm finished this pot, I'll take a nap. That may lessen this hunger a little.* Back out to the table and uncomfortable chair she went. Another hour or so of notes and drawing the building for her planning went by, the coffee pot emptied about a half hour ago.

"Mr. Acad, would you mind if I took a short nap on your couch?"

"Nonsense! Take my bed. Something tells me you'll be sleeping longer than a mere nap, my friend. You deserve it! Go on. I will not hear any word of protest."

"Okay, if you say so, but I feel as though I'm putting you out, and that is something I don't like to do."

"Nonsense," he said with a wave of dismissal, "go. Sleep. You have more than earned your rest in a comfortable bed."

Miranda lay down in Acad's bed and instantly drifted off into what could only be assumed a coma for the next ten hours. She awoke feeling rested; rested, angry, hostile, her blood and mind shouting for the urge to be heeded. She ground her teeth

and accidentally bit her lower lip with an incisor. Blood poured from the wound and she licked it, angry it even happened. *Where is all this anger coming from?!* Miranda was frustrated by all this - the urge, the anger and hostility, all of it. But now was not the time, nor the place, to try figuring this out. She had much more stalking and planning ahead of her - nights of stalking the strange building and its people - before she could form a proper plan to take out Venus.

Miranda got out of bed to go rinse her face with cold water, thinking that might help to calm the rage burning hot just under her skin. It did help, if only a little. She quickly dressed into one of the outfits Acad had picked up for her, which perfectly suited this night's activities. It was a military looking top and pants, complete with boots and a baklava, if it was needed, all in black so she could blend in with the dark shadows of the night. Leaving Acad's bedroom to attend her planned private viewing of the building and its visitors, she paused when she noticed Acad fast asleep on the couch, lost in a peaceful slumber. She wondered how long it had been since he had slept like this, smiled, and silently left.

She walked slowly and determinedly to the building, the building to which she was not yet able to find a name for until she managed a better vantage point from a tree across the street. *L'hôtel*, she thought, *unassuming enough - for poor unassuming travelers weary and looking for a place to vacation*. Remembering the building plans Acad had managed to pull for her, she realized the place, was, in fact, an old hotel. This was not going to be easy and the words pummeling her brain did not bode well. This mission would end badly for someone and Miranda could only hope she was not that someone.

She wanted nothing more than to leap from the tree and barge into the building beating and killing anything or anyone in her way, but she knew she must remain patient. This night was not the night for attack. Careful planning must be done – very careful planning. There were simply too many people going in and out at all hours of the night. *I will sit in this tree until sunrise and come back during full daylight for a full 360 view of this place's 'patrons'.*

The sun was starting to rise and Miranda knew her cover was quickly giving up, so she lightly landed from her perch, careful to make sure no one heard or had truly seen her. If she had been caught, it would be certain doom for her, and that was not allowed. Caught meant failure; Miranda did not care for, or allow failure. She tip-toed her way from the park and upon turning the corner, jogged back to Acad's.

The screaming of the urge and hunger returned during her jog. She really did not have time for this distraction and it only served to heighten the anger that was already burning at her very soul. She picked up her pace and found herself back at Acad's in no time. She opened the front door as silently as possible, only to find Acad in the kitchen, the smell of coffee freshly brewed and breakfast cooking. Miranda went into the kitchen to wash her hands that had managed to get covered in sap from the night in her tree perch. *Gloves would be needed next time*. She poured herself and Acad each a cup of coffee.

"How do you take yours?"

"Black, just like you do," he responded with a smile, not looking up from the

bacon he was carefully frying.

“Oh. Ok. Well, I’ll leave this here for you. I’m going to take a quick shower.”

Sipping the coffee and walking was a task, given what a klutz she was, or wasn’t. Her reflexes had become intensely honed without any real practice. Miranda was not sure how or what to think about this before her thoughts started their dizzying dance again. Pushing them away, each time requiring more force and energy, she closed the bathroom door, started the shower and undressed. The hot water was relaxing, even though the fire inside her felt as though it would burn through her skin at any moment if she kept refusing to listen. She stood there, hot water running down her face and hair, steam rising and filling the bathroom. The sensations she was feeling on top of the relaxation she could not explain. She knew people would die. Quite possibly many people, hopefully not including Xavier, yet she was so remarkably composed. Miranda was the approaching storm, preparing to unleash a fury like nothing else had before – she subconsciously knew this but it had not yet come to her full consciousness; to the forefront of her mind. What did it all mean?

She turned the shower off and dried herself quickly. She wanted to grab some bacon before it got cold so she quickly dressed herself in a greenish colored outfit similar to the one she had just taken off, pulled her hair into a ponytail, and set off for the dining room. Acad had a whole spread laid out. Bacon, English muffins, eggs, toast, sausage, and the stainless coffee pot from yesterday on its serving tray, all piping hot and smelling delicious. Miranda’s stomach heaved and twisted, leaving her confused about why, but she did not care. There was meat on the table ready for her to devour it alongside fresh hot coffee. She sat down and Acad took her plate as if to serve her.

“Acad, this is too much. Let me get my own food. Seriously. You do not have to wait on me and foot like a servant.”