

The concierge at a space resort is hiding a deadly obsession.

ZODIAC

In a fixed orbit three hundred miles above Arizona, the solar-powered Zodiac resort satellite resembled a glittering, revolving spider web. Its brilliance enthralled everyone save astronomers, who raged at the light pollution.

Vera, the resort's concierge, kept her office and apartment at the center of the satellite. Her shiny black body suit and scarlet belt matched the Black Widow spider who lived in a glass sphere on her desk. Unlike her pet's reputation, however, Vera was regarded as Miss Congeniality and Superwoman combined as she catered to her Zodiac clients' every whim with tireless good humor.

When the shadow of night fell over Arizona, Vera looked down at the lights of her former home, MegaSun, which seniors over 150 remembered as separate cities called Phoenix and Tucson. Grateful to have escaped from the foster family that had treated her like Cinderella, she had changed her name from Amy to Vera cover her tracks. But the longer she worked at Zodiac, the more determined she became to get revenge on her foster mother, father, sister and brother for their abuse. The only thing stopping her was that she hadn't figured out how to go about it.

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Taking a break from his treadmill, Marvin glanced up at the resort satellite that shone like a miniature sun in the daytime. He'd been watching the wall-sized video screen in the leisure room of his Star Heights condo in MegaSun.

"Look, Alene, it's that ad again," he called out to his consort. "*Zodiac space resort—new luxury condos—shuttle departures daily.*"

"Shut up! Can't you see I'm feeding Regina?" She held out a leg of raw pork to the miniature *Tyrannosaurus regina*. The dinosaur was a birthday gift from Marvin which he had lived to regret. Cloned from the DNA of a *T. rex*, the creature was cute until she grew as big as a pony, complete with needle-sharp teeth and deceptively small forelegs that grabbed with lightning speed.

"Ow! She bit me!" Alene flapped her hand, dripping blood from her minor lacerations as she stepped out of the animal's oversized cage and secured the door. "Look what you made her do, you idiot. Did you remember to feed her when I was on my book-club trip?"

"Of course, dear. A side of beef twice a day, like you told me." He helped her squeeze into the size XL recliner and handed her the jar of herbal salve she kept next to the cage to doctor her cuts.

He cleared his throat. "Um—I was thinking, hon, since the new inheritance law went into effect on 304-day—"

Exhaling loudly, Alene closed her eyes. "Talk about a slow learner. For positively the last time, Marvin, I—do—not—accept—the—new—cal—en—dar. The date in question was October 31st." She switched on the chair's massager and her fat vibrated to its rhythm. "Furthermore, I'm well aware that since I have no daughter, my entire estate goes to the government. If it went to you, you'd probably wish I'd die tomorrow."

Marvin's hazel eyes had the glassy stare of a professional victim. "That's not true, sweetheart. But I was thinking—a little change of scene—"

"Forget thinking. Your job is to keep track of my estate, period. I get plenty enough change of scene with my book-club trips around the globe, for pity's sake. What's the point of floating around up there in space?" Still vibrating, she reached for a bowl of black-market eclairs on a side table.

"Angel, I saw on the news that only the *crème de la crème* can afford the trip to Zodiac, never mind own a condo there. Pretty exclusive, wouldn't you say?"

Alene paused in mid-eclair, her eyes gleaming like raisins in a lump of dough. "Hmm. Being my beautiful, pampered boy toy isn't exclusive enough for you, Marvin?"

Not any more, it wasn't. Each time their annual Consortium contract came up for review she refused to let him out of it, for the new laws gave the woman the last word. Since the tragedy had recently occurred for the fifth time, he didn't know how long he could go on without either going crazy, self-euthanizing, or euthanizing his unbearable consort.

The glow of her money had worn off, and the two hundred pounds she'd gained made her twice as cranky. Unable to maintain his part of the bargain, he needed his freedom while he was still in his seventies with handsome enough looks to be picked in

the next bachelor auction. Next time he'd be way more choosy about whom he signed on with.

Marvin handed his gelatinous spouse another éclair. "You deserve the best, angel. Being the first in the neighborhood to own a condo in space will be a real coup. You'll start a book club for trillionaires—you'll be the Queen of Zodiac." He helped himself to a slice of tofu. "I'll stay here in MegaSun and make sure your property isn't burglarized."

"Aha—so that's it. I knew you had a hidden agenda. You'd love to get rid of me." She licked the chocolate off her pudgy fingers. "Well, good luck, sonny boy—because we're *all* going to Zodiac, the three of us, so snap to it and make the arrangements."

Marvin turned away to hide a grin. Alene had unwittingly guessed right about his hidden agenda, while he had guessed right about her reaction.

He'd also done his homework. Geared to the international supersonic set, the Zodiac space colony was unfettered by the web of surveillance systems that blanketed Earth. Next he needed to find out how the satellite handled waste disposal. He'd have to get rid of the dinosaur as well, because Alene was the only one who could handle the brute.

Marvin remembered how Zodiac's developer, Donald Trump VI, had staked his reputation that many celebrities would go for a concept based on astrology. Once they paved the way, the fad-conscious public would follow in droves. The video talk shows had done their best to ridicule the enterprise, but—as Trump had predicted—the adverse publicity only drew more attention to both the satellite and astrology. In no time, owning a condo on Zodiac had become a status symbol like no other.

Much as Alene thrived on status symbols, she insisted that living in space was stupid. Marvin was equally stubborn about pursuing his plan. While she was at a book club meeting in New Zealand, he contacted the satellite on video phone and spoke to a beautiful and charming lady named Vera. When he described his consort's preferences, she understood immediately.

"Marvin, I believe I have just the thing for you. I'm organizing a VIP tour of the satellite to be hosted by celebrities. It's not within everyone's budget, and it's by invitation only. Would you be interested?"

Marvin was elated. He knew Alene would be totally impressed by the celebrities, hopefully enough to be persuaded to buy a condo.

"Sounds perfect, Vera. Please make reservations for us on the first tour."

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Alene's brain was reeling from meeting an actual Trump descendant on the hour-long flight to Zodiac. Her stomach was also reeling from an overdose of gourmet snacks and champagne. She put all her weight on Marvin's arm as she tottered onto the red carpet in the satellite's arrival dock.

Her eyes focused on a striking woman with jet black hair and pale ivory skin, who wore a shiny black body suit with a scarlet belt emphasizing her tiny waist. Watching Marvin's eyes light up, Alene jerked on his arm.

He looked down at her with a hint of insolence in his smile she hadn't seen before, and pulled her forward to meet the concierge. The women joined pinkie fingers in the popular germophobe greeting and they proceeded to the office.

The Black Widow spider in a sphere on the desk reminded Alene of her childhood home in MegaSun, which had been infested with the creatures. She squinted at the concierge. "Vera, you look awfully familiar. Have you ever been on television?"

"I'm flattered, but no. I've been at Zodiac since it opened three years ago." There was no trace of recognition in her face as she invited them to be seated.

Alene took up most of the loveseat while Marvin squeezed into what was left. Her eyes went straight to a dish of bonbons on the desk.

Vera moved it within her reach, and also handed them flute glasses of a lime-green drink. "I hope you like avocado lemonade?"

"Mmm, delicious," Alene said. "May I have the recipe?"

"Of course," Vera said. "By the way, would I be correct if I guessed you're a Scorpio?"

Alene felt her cheeks flush with annoyance. "Oh, I guess so, but I don't believe in that stuff." The concierge's voice also sounded familiar, and it bothered her that she couldn't place it.

"Princess Victoria from the British royal family will be hosting tea in the salon at three o'clock, but there's still plenty of time for you to check out one of our luxury suites in the Scorpio sector."

Alene shrugged. "Well, now that I'm here, I suppose there's no harm in looking."

Expecting to be bored, she couldn't help gasping at the view from the Scorpio luxury condo. Its circular nine-foot window afforded ever-changing panoramas of the cosmos and the Mother Planet as the satellite revolved smoothly on its axis.

The Gulf of Arizona fascinated her. She vaguely recalled it was created in about 2054 by an earthquake centered in California's San Andreas fault. The massive upheaval had widened the Gulf of California northward, submerging the land from Puerto Peñasco to Mexicali and Yuma. Arizonans were ecstatic to have their very own coastline, and a new industry was born importing the finest beach sand from Mexico to enhance the tourist experience.

As for the Zodiac experience, Alene had to admit it rivaled the best of her book club trips. A condo on Zodiac would be the envy of her entire social circle. She turned to Vera. "I can see this as a vacation home. Do you take pets?"

"Certainly, as long as they're well trained and not too large."

"We have one of those mini-dinosaurs, about the size of a large dog. She's very docile," Alene said innocently. "It would be a condition of buying a condo."

The concierge assured her it was no problem. While Alene and Marvin were having tea with the royal princess, Vera completed the documentation, and the deal was sealed by the time they boarded the shuttle to return to Earth.

During the flight back to MegaSun, Alene's euphoria at acquiring the spectacular new property was constantly interrupted by her mind trying to place the concierge in her past. Sipping pensively on her second glass of champagne, she paused in mid-sip and dribbled it down her chin.

"Of course! She's Amy!"

"What, sweetness? Who's Amy?"

"*My step-sister!*" Alene yelled. "That concierge woman."

Fellow passengers turned to stare.

She blotted her chin with a lace handkerchief. "We adopted her when she was six. Her parents were killed in the first terrorist attack on MegaSun."

Marvin's smile hinted at a sneer. "She didn't seem to recognize *you*."

"She wouldn't. I had a bit of remodeling done so I could look good for boy-toys like you—plus I've gained a couple of kilos." She paused for breath. "After all we did for her, the ungrateful bitch ran away from home when she was fifteen. Police never found her. We knew she must have changed her name." She took another gulp of

champagne. "I can't believe the little freak had the gall to apply for a job at a swanky resort."

"Well, angel, if you hate her that much, why not cancel the condo?"

Alene shook her head. "Hell, no. I can't wait to get even with her for leaving us in the lurch. The whole family depended on her, and one night she simply vanished—left us with no help whatsoever."

"That was years ago. Can't you let it go now?"

How dare Marvin take that bitch's side! The jealousy over her step-sister's beauty and charm had lost none of its pain power. "No! I'll never let it go until the score is settled. What's more, you'll help me, sonny boy, and you'd better not breathe a word if you know what's good for you."

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Vera's office desk was crowded with samples of a new fruit drink a salesman had brought. She planned to have guests vote on it, and Marvin was the first to arrive.

"How nice to see you, Marvin. Are you all settled in?"

A crease between his eyebrows made him look as if something was bothering him. "I'm still trying to get my space legs, but otherwise everything's great. Alene's busy driving her decorator crazy, so I took some time off. She loves the condo."

"How does Regina like her cage?"

"It gives her plenty of room to spread out. Thanks very much for going to all that extra trouble."

"You're most welcome. Is she using the wheel?"

"Took to it like she thought she was a squirrel. It's perfect for working off her excess energy—which she has plenty of, let me tell you."

Vera chuckled. "Your mini-dinosaur isn't as mini as I expected, but I'm glad we were able to create the right environment. Now, what can I do for you?"

"I'd like to check out your gym facilities. Do you have a minute?"

As he folded himself into the love seat, his well-developed muscles rippled under the blue-grey body suit. Most of Zodiac's gentleman tenants wore the latest climate-controlled attire, but Vera thought none filled it out as well as Marvin did.

Realizing she was staring, she looked down at the beverage samples. "I'll have a minute as soon as you help me decide if I should order some of this new drink for Zodiac." She handed him an orange-sized container.

He took a sip and smacked his lips. "Tastes like watermelon. I like it. Put me down for a case." A hint of dimples in his square-jawed face gave him a mischievous look. A moment later his preoccupied frown returned.

Vera searched his features for a clue to his thoughts. "Now, you said you'd like to arrange time in the gym?"

Leaning forward, Marvin tapped the glass sphere and the spider scurried to meet his fingers. "That's right. But before I forget—how do you dispose of trash up here? On Earth, someone is always making a fuss about space debris."

Vera sighed. "At least once a week I get a call about it. All waste from the satellite is reduced to a fine powder and sold to China. You wouldn't believe the range of things they can make out of it."

He folded his muscular arms across his chest. "When you say *all* waste, would that include—?"

"The dear departed? Yes indeed. Our Recyclotron is a state-of-the-art processor for loved ones, and we have a special unit for pets. The Zodiac program offers a wide choice of containers and ceremonies. We make every effort to customize to your taste." She patted his arm. "But hopefully for you that's in the distant future. What sort of recreation do you and your consort prefer?"

Marvin sighed. "For the five years we've been together, Alene's favorite entertainment—besides her book club—is always the same: vibrate in her recliner and eat chocolates." The frustration in his voice was hard to miss.

"Let me suggest some activities you and Alene might enjoy." Vera picked up a remote control and turned on a video screen set in the wall behind her desk. The picture showed a stunning closeup of Zodiac taken from outside the satellite.

Glancing at it briefly, Marvin turned to face her and ran a hand over his ash-blond hair. "Tell me, Vera, do you have a consort?"

She leaned away from him and clicked to another view of the space resort. "My Zodiac clients are my consorts. I'm too busy to look for one of my own." Sensing he was strongly attracted to her, she hoped he wouldn't find out she resembled her Black Widow pet in more ways than one.

Poisoning consorts (three, so far) with the help of avocado lemonade was a habit she deplored, but couldn't seem to shake. While her memory refused to dredge up specifics, she feared she'd been molested as a child by her step-father or step-brother.

"Where's your home on Earth?" Marvin said, edging closer to her.

"I grew up in MegaSun." She felt tears coming. Shocked that she could still react so strongly to the mere thought of her childhood, she looked down to hide her eyes. Fighting for control she cleared her throat. "How do you spend your time on Earth, Marvin?"

"Trying to keep myself in shape and Alene happy. It gets harder every year." His shoulders slumped. "Women can get away with anything on Earth now."

Vera knew it was strictly against the rules—not to mention her own preference—to get involved in clients' personal lives, but she found herself feeling sorry for him. "A five-year consortium is practically a record these days. What's your secret of success?"

Looking around he lowered his voice. "The secret is, she won't let me out of the contract."

The concierge leaned toward him. "That's unusual. Why not?"

"Partly for spite. Partly because she knows she'll never find another consort the way she looks now. She admitted she got herself remodeled right before she won me in the bachelor auction."

"The what?"

"Bachelor auction. Every year, this Dowagers for Dollars group auctions off the best-looking single guys to raise funds for charity. I happened to be in a temporary credit crunch, and Alene looked pretty good to me at the time, before she tripled her weight." He took another gulp of the fruit drink. "I figured it'd be easy to pay off my debts in a year or two, then quietly bail out of the Consortium."

"Oh dear—you mean you didn't read the microscopic print?"

He smiled with tight lips. "Exactly. It's up to the woman, not the man, to end the contract. End of story." The desperation in his voice sounded serious.

"Well, it's good you let me know about the situation, Marvin. I wish I could help somehow."

"Don't be concerned. If Alene knew I was talking to you like this, she'd get her revenge." He leaned toward her. "That reminds me, she's convinced you're someone she knew called Amy. I told her she's crazy, otherwise you'd remember her, right?"

Vera's heart missed a beat. She'd never have connected this Alene with the Alene who'd made her life a misery for nine long years. Yet it could be true, because the only person by that name she'd ever known was her vicious step-sister. Although she hadn't

recognized the woman's physical appearance, there was something in her aggressive swagger that rang a believable bell.

A grey fog clouded Vera's eyes and she fought for breath, tried to stand up but fell back onto the love seat, while the video remote hit the floor with a clatter.

"Oh my god, Vera, what's wrong?" Marvin placed the remote on the desk and put an arm around her shoulders. "How do I call for emergency help?"

After a moment her breathing began to function properly. "Just so you know, the number is 9-0-9. But don't call now—it's nothing—I'm fine."

"You sure don't look fine. You're white as clouds." He squeezed her hand.

Vera forced a smile. "I'm so sorry to have worried you. It was just a—a slight asthma attack. Do you mind taking a rain check on the gym tour?"

Marvin stood up. "Not at all. If you're sure there's nothing I can do, I'd better leave before Alene decides to feed us both to Regina."

They chuckled as they linked pinkie fingers, their eyes locking for a second. Vera began wondering how she and Marvin could help each other.

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In the reduced gravity of the satellite, each step was like two on earth and Marvin struggled to get the hang of it. The transparent walkway between the hub and the Scorpio sector reminded him of the viewing platform at Arizona's Grand Canyon, but he was blind to the spectacular vistas from space.

"Oh, shit!" he muttered. "Why did I have to blab what Alene told me not to, about Vera being Amy? I don't know what got into me. Yes, I do—I was hypnotized by that stunning girl." The mental image of Vera made the climate control in his outfit go into overdrive. "I swear to Gaia, as soon as I get rid of Alene I'm going after Vera to be my next consort."

At the door to his condo he met the decorator coming out with a glazed look in his eyes. Knowing Alene's appetite for sex, Marvin suspected the hapless young man had been intimidated into more than he'd come for—just like the other victims littering the planet after her book club meetings. He was grateful to one and all for taking the pressure off him.

His guess was confirmed by the glow in Alene's little raisin eyes, as if she'd just devoured the world's largest chocolate eclair, but her face quickly morphed into a

scowl. "You're back early. I thought I said not to interrupt me and the decorator for an hour. What were you doing?"

Marvin folded his arms across his chest. "I told you, I went to ask the concierge about the exercise equipment. She was going to show me a video of some activities you might like, but she had an asthma attack so I left."

"Ha! That woman is going to have more than an asthma attack."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll show her an activity I might like. I'm going to withhold Regina's food for a couple of days, till she's ravenous. Then I'll make up an excuse to get Amy—Vera—into the cage. That'll be the end of her. A tragic accident."

"Lots of luck, sweetcakes. Why would anyone be dumb enough to get into a cage with a fudging dinosaur?"

"Customer service, bozo. She has to do what her clients want or she'll be fired. Knowing her, she'll knuckle under like the servant she is. I'll bet Zodiac is the job of her dreams."

Marvin felt his face heat up in a rush of anger. It took every gram of strength he had to keep his mouth shut and his clenched fists at his side. When he calmed down enough to trust his voice he said, "Sounds like a plan, angel. When shall we do it?"

"Today is 162. I won't feed Baby today or tomorrow. On 164-day I'll be struck down by a mysterious condition that will require a wheelchair."

Marvin's stomach flipped. Her sudden acknowledgment of the new calendar was an ominous sign she meant business.

The recliner creaked as she landed in it. "When Vera brings the wheelchair, you'll tell her she has to take the food into the cage for me, because Regina is allergic to you."

"Which is true. Too bad we didn't put a feeding hatch in that cage, so we could just shove the food in from outside."

Alene grinned. "By that time Regina will be ready to eat anything in sight. She might even start bellowing loud enough to upset the whole satellite. Vera won't need convincing to shut her up."

"How clever of you," Marvin said, daring to be sarcastic. He poured her a glass of avocado lemonade from the canister Vera had sent them.

She gulped down the yellow-green drink. "Damn right. As soon as she's inside, you'll lock the cage—and I'll be right there to make sure you do it, understood?"

"Of course, sweetness. I'm sure you're doing the right thing." He laid on the sarcasm even more heavily.

"Don't give me that smarmy look, boy toy. One false move and you'll be in there along with her."

Marvin didn't take her threat lightly. With momentum, Alene made up in weight what she lacked in strength. Once in Mexico she'd gaily jumped into a glass-bottomed boat and crashed right through it.

During the next two days and nights he waited for an opportunity to slip away and warn Vera, hoping Alene would forget to arm the security system.

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Early on 164day, Vera received a video call from Alene requesting, or rather demanding a wheelchair, saying she was in great pain from a hereditary condition that attacked her without warning.

Vera was only too familiar with the "hereditary condition"—her foster family had been textbook hypochondriacs—but she wondered what her step-sister from hell was up to now. With caution aforethought, she made sure her telescoping stun baton was fully charged before she attached it to her belt. Leaving her assistant in charge, she transported the emergency conveyance to the Scorpio sector.

Marvin opened the door, looking delighted to see her. She felt unexpectedly pleased to see him as well, and wasn't quite sure what to do about it. "Here's the Airolift chair," she said, handing it to him.

His smile turned upside down. "Oh, but Alene wanted a wheelchair, not a back rest." In a whisper he added, "She'll throw a fit."

"Don't worry, Marvin, she won't have to. As you know, the satellite has artificial gravity, and the Airolift operates by neutralizing the gravity."

Alene screamed from the living room, "What's going on out there?"

Vera took the anti-gravity chair to Alene and demonstrated how it worked. "This dial makes gravity lighter or stronger, depending on your needs. Marvin would have to turn it up to Medium to counteract the satellite's gravity, which is close to Earth's. You can use the Low setting because your weight will keep you near the floor. These buttons on the arm propel you in different directions. Any questions?"

"You mean if I turned the dial to High, I'd float up to the ceiling?"

"Hopefully," Vera said, grinning without apology. "But that setting is only for emergencies, and so far we haven't had to use it, thank Gaia."

Alene pouted. "I don't know why I can't just have a regular wheelchair."

"Of course we can order one of those old clunkers for you from Earth, but the Airolift is so much easier to operate."

"Hah! Well, there's something else I need as well. Since I'm incapacitated, I need you to feed Regina. She won't take food from Marvin." Her tiny raisin-eyes squinted at the concierge. "You're not afraid of mini-dinosaurs, are you?"

Oh, so that was her plan. Vera knew it had to be something devious if not deadly, to get even with her for having dared to escape from slavery, no matter how long ago.

She smiled as her hand subtly touched her weapon. "My clients come first, Alene. When do you normally feed Regina?"

"Right about now. Help me into this contraption, will you?"

Vera placed the legless chair on the sofa and held it steady while Marvin helped the bogus invalid settle herself on it. The extra-wide model still left kilos of fat hanging over. Securing the safety belt Vera switched on the lithium battery and adjusted the dial. The Airolift rose slowly—Vera could almost hear it groan—and hovered just above the sofa.

Alene gasped and the whites of her eyes appeared. She pressed a button on the arm and the lift inched forward. She smiled faintly. "How do I make it go faster?"

"You should practice a little first," Vera said. "If you put it in neutral, another person can push you around just like a regular wheelchair."

"I don't want to practice being a snail, you imbecile!"

Vera pressed her lips together. "Imbecile" had been one of the family's favorite names for her..

Marvin had figured out the controls on his own, and showed Alene the speed adjustment. She gave the lift full throttle and promptly crashed into the coffee table, sending the avocado lemonade flying.

"Look what you made me do!" she shrieked. "I think I broke my leg! I'll sue you and Zodiac for this, you bitch!"

Vera and Marvin looked at each other in silent collusion. Vera switched the Airolift to neutral while Marvin pushed it and its passenger to Regina's quarters. He

opened the electronic lock on the dinosaur's cage with his thumbprint and the door slid open. Flexing his muscles he sent the machine and its tasty cargo sailing smack into the deadly arms of a very hungry beast.

Alene's raucous cursing ended with a shriek as she groped frantically for the Airolift's controls, trying to evade Regina's grasp.

Protected from the predator by more available meat, Marvin stepped back to exit the cage. He was stopped in his tracks by the sliding door which had automatically locked behind him.

Sweat poured like water down his ashen face. "Vera! Help me!" His voice wavered like a faulty wireless connection. "The door can only be opened by Alene's or my thumbprint. I can't reach it. Call 9-0-9!"

Vera froze as two instincts fought for dominance: the Black Widow syndrome commanding her to kill her infatuated suitor, and her vow to get revenge on Alene. Turning abruptly, she blocked out the desperate cries of the dinosaur's captives and ran to the kitchen. Grabbing a cleaver she ran back to the cage.

"Marvin, give me your hand."

He squeezed his broad hand through the narrow bars.

Grabbing his thumb she lopped it off with the razor-sharp blade. Blood spurted everywhere. She pressed the thumb onto the control panel to open the door.

Nothing happened.

He screamed, "It's the wrong thumb! Why didn't you tell me what you were trying to do?"

"Give me the other one!"

Regina had finished devouring Alene. A piece of purple lace from a camisole dangled from one razor-sharp tooth. She let loose a dinosaur-sized burp before aiming her little black eyes, so like Alene's, at Marvin.

Vera's knees threatened to collapse. Her only consolation was that carnivores, unlike humans, knew how to kill mercifully with one swift bite to the neck.

Freed of Alene's weight, the Airolift shot up to the height of Marvin's chest. Staggering from shock, he grabbed control and held it between himself and Regina, adjusting it until he was able to climb on. Then he played cat and mouse with the creature, zooming out of her reach just as she made a grab for him.

Vera knew he wouldn't be able to keep it up much longer, for his face was grey and blood was still dripping from his wound, tantalizing the dinosaur.

Cursing herself for not thinking of it sooner, she unholstered her stun baton and set it on maximum power.

"Come to the door!" she yelled over Regina's snorts of glee at this new game.

He hesitated.

"It's okay, no cutting." She waved the stun baton. "I'll short out the control panel."

With a sizzle and a pop, the door sprang open. The dinosaur got there first, but a powerful jolt of electricity sent her reeling back.

Marvin fell off the lift into Vera's arms—but the cage door refused to close. It took Regina only a nanosecond to realize she was free to pursue her prey, which barely had time to escape from the condo and slam the door behind them.

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Vera called 909 and accompanied Marvin to the infirmary, where he was treated with stem cells to regrow his severed thumb. Not much later, the two agreed that Alene's family should take charge of Regina.

That arrangement proved to be revenge enough for Vera to stop remembering and start admitting she felt dangerously fond of Marvin. Much as she desired to have him as her consort, she feared the deadly obsession implanted during her childhood might always have the power to overcome her best intentions.

She came to say goodbye to Marvin at the launch pad for the earthbound shuttle. Without Alene's money, he had no choice but to return to MegaSun and get ready for the next bachelor auction.

Vera held out her hand to link pinkie fingers, but instead took his hand in both of hers, germs be damned. "Marvin, will you be—will you be a personal trainer for Zodiac? We've been needing another one."

Right there in public he hugged her so hard, she felt her Black Widow obsession might be a thing of the past. Time would tell.

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