

PARADISE
THE BOOK OF MIRIELLE
Sneak Preview

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VEGAS

Beatrice's eyes were still closed, but she was acutely aware that the day had arrived. Wasilla was asleep next to her, breathing, as if that was necessary, and delivering a faint, almost undetectable flowery scent. Beatrice cackled silently, as the association the scent triggered was that of an automated bathroom air-freshener, set to spray at regular intervals. Then she frowned, disgusted with herself, popped one eye open and scanned the room. They were still in the hotel. Leo was not on the sofa. She remembered him sneaking out on the terrace, but after that it was a blur. However, her other memories had returned, all six years, accompanied by--to her surprise--only a mild headache.

She was happy looking back. Mirielle had indeed accepted her with grace, and both had formed a strong bond. Wasilla and Leo were her stars. She had never been more content with her existence. Had these memories been in place when the recall of her father's actions came, she would not have been that angry, not at all. She kissed Wasilla and slipped out of bed.

"'Mornin!", Wasilla drew her eyes open and smiled.

"Sorry, I didn't mean..."

"Nah, that's fine. We are not cats; we must spend some time awake." Wasilla turned around and surveyed the room, "Where's our man?"

Beatrice shrugged, "He's not far, perhaps next door with Mirielle."

"Okay." Wasilla removed the sheet and set her feet on the carpet. "Let's find out."

Beatrice observed with interest how Wasilla's hair took shape and the red spots on her face disappeared. This world... She was no longer apprehensive about her appearance, but she nevertheless transformed. She gathered the courage to reveal her true self to them a long time ago, shortly after they moved together to the island of the rising sun. Transforming ensured that her choice of clothes would be age

appropriate. It was self-respect and respect for others. Wasilla and Leo started doing that too, but only on occasions. Wasilla died young at thirty-nine, and Leo wore the same regiment of age-neutral clothes. Men had it easier indeed, even in this world.

Only Mirielle needed the touch of the comb. And to wash her face, but as usual, there was no bathroom. But there was a jug of drinking water and a full kettle! Beatrice pushed Mirielle out onto the terrace and poured water in the girl's hands. Then she did her best with the comb, thinking that it was time for a haircut.

"Where did you get the dress from? Did you wish it?" She asked while trying to untangle the rebellious growth.

"No, there are boutiques in the foyer; some have clothes. Did you like it?"

"Yeah, it looked good on you. You looked good in it. I love it when you dress like a girl, but I am not going to interfere with your preferences. Wear whatever you like."

"Even if it is nothing at all?"

"You can't wear nothing." Beatrice refused to be dragged into an argument.

"Why, the king with no clothes did! But I get it, you don't want to talk. Anyway, do you wanna pick another one? I will wear it today."

"Tempting...", Beatrice considered the offer for a moment. "OK!"

On their way to the boutique Beatrice spotted a salon. At school she studied to be a hairdresser, she still had most of the skill and she was in charge of Mirielle's upkeep since she had moved in.

"Er, Mirrie, what about a haircut too, your hair had become hard to comb, I am sure that I am hurting you when I pull."

Mirielle shrugged and veered in the direction of the salon.

"You wear unisex clothes, what about unisex hairdo?"

Mirielle shrugged with indifference again, "I can't see it, why should I have preferences. Those who can see my head may. So, do whatever you want."

Beatrice took the scissors from the antiseptic jar and snipped aggressively to shoulder length. Then a bit more, that would look right on a boy too.

"Can you switch to your other self for a moment please?"

Mirielle complied. Did Leo really look like that at this age? Beatrice smiled. Then she shaped the remaining hair, "I think we are done!"

Mirielle inspected the result with touch, "Thanks, much lighter, feels good."

At the boutique the boy spread arms, "Here, pick one. The shoes are next door."

Beatrice looked around. Her eyes were drawn to a light-purplish-blue short silk skirt. She took the hanger from the rail and another one with a laced skirt, then headed in the direction of the blouses.

"Do you like these?" Mirielle had fetched a pair of striped canvas shoes.

"Mm, could you switch back please?", Beatrice felt awkward trying the garments on a boy. In her part of the old world that had become normal, boys and girls shared clothes, particularly in the North, but she never caught up with the trend, "Come, try these on, and I will fetch a top."

"You know that they will fit."

"Yes, I want to see if they look good on you and that is not guaranteed."

Mirielle slipped into the silk skirt first. Beatrice smiled; her eye was good. She pulled out a blouse that caught her fancy and handed it to Mirielle to try on. Then another one. And more.

"Hey, stop it! I'm not going to wear all that, the deal was for one set."

Beatrice didn't want to admit that she enjoyed looking at the young one as she tried different garments. It had never happened before. Mirielle wore whatever was on the hangers in the closet, which was what Leo and Wasilla wished for her. Beatrice sighed, "Ok, take the purple skirt and the black blouse, this one, yeah... And you can keep your choice of shoes. And thank you!" Beatrice pulled the now girl and kissed her then let go.

"Ah, here you are!" Wasilla entered the boutique and made way between the rails to where they stood. When they came into full view,

Wasilla froze. She blinked with her mouth ajar, then licked her lips and inhaled deeply, "Nice, very nice!"

"Really?", Mirielle asked hesitantly.

Beatrice also noticed that the tone of Wasilla's voice was off.

"Yeah, sure, I am not used to seeing you like this!"

This time Wasilla sounded more sincere.

"I was wearing a dress last night, wasn't I?"

"Yes, unusual too." Wasilla said quickly

"If you like me wearing dresses and skirts, why do you always put me in shorts and tees?"

"Because your grandparents are struggling accepting a boy in a skirt." Beatrice interjected.

"But dad wears skirts! The Scottish ones and sarongs. Geez, this dress code of yours is so confusing. And when I wear nothing, you still complain!", Mirielle angrily removed the garments, threw them on the floor and headed for the exit.

"Mirrie, wait!" Beatrice raised her voice, "You promised something for today, no? We can still talk, though, I grant you it can be weird. Customs and shit!"

Mirielle stopped. "OK", she said looking down, then returned and put the clothes back on. "Shall we leave now?" She pointed at the door.

'Fuck!' was on Leo's tongue when he sighted the kid. He swallowed the curse, then generated another one and swallowed it too. Then disheveled Mirielle's hair and smiled, "You look upset, may I enquire about the cause?"

Mirielle shoved his hand aside and proceeded toward the exit. He waited for the approaching women to come close, then asked, "Bea, why did you do that?"

"Did I do what exactly? Pick some nice clothes? She extended the offer."

"Ah, I see. But what about the hairdo?"

"Bea, don't you realize it?" Wasilla hissed, "She is a copy of her mother, a perfect one. And now, with these clothes and the

haircut, it is Lizzy herself!" She started crying. "I can't... I can't..." She stuttered helplessly.

Leo pulled her into his embrace, where she continued to sob, and squeezed his lips.

Beatrice looked down. "Sorry, I did not think of that... You are right... Sorry. I'll ask her to change! And the hair will grow!"

"Never mind, we know that it was not intended to hurt anyone." Leo said. Wasilla just switched embraces to indicate the same sentiment, then sobbed one more time and stopped.

"Well, here's where the pronoun comes in handy." Leo chimed philosophically, "I never thought of Elise as 'they'."

"Yeah, very helpful indeed! You thought of me as your twin sister, and it took you ages to change that and let me give you a hand job!" Wasilla answered.

Beatrice gasped and her green eyes grew larger. Then she burst into laughter, "What?"

"Hey, losers, aren't you coming? Steve and Margot are getting impatient." Mirielle called from the revolving door and rode its inertia back to the street.

Steve and Margot glanced at the girl in front of them from time to time. Mirielle sensed the attention and wondered what the big deal was with her new clothes. She let them pass and inspected the adults one by one. That world they all came from must be a weird place.

Steve leaned towards Leo, "One distraction on the tail of another. We came to check the local slots, but seems the world had something else in store."

"What do you mean?"

"When she greeted us earlier, we thought that Elise had returned somehow."

"Ah, Mirrie is a copy of their mom indeed. But keep it to yourselves, you know how upset they get."

"She is a beautiful girl you have here, why do you keep using this stupid pronoun?"

"But they are also a, hopefully, beautiful boy and the pronoun is entirely apt." Leo responded with a wink.

"You can always switch to 'he' when she becomes a boy and back. This is what I do."

"Just let me be, will ya!" Leo retorted and sank into the casino.

Margot pulled Steve and gave him the look. The man threw hands in the air and followed his friend inside the house of sin.

The space was mostly empty. There were no slot machines, no poker and Craps tables, no roulettes. Along one wall were lined pinball machines and along the other - claw crane machines.

"Ugh!" Steve wailed, "How disappointing! You can't hunt here, you can't fish here, you can't gamble here!"

"What is it?" Margot asked upon entering. Then she inspected the space, "Ah, crap!"

"Why can't you fish here?" Leo said. "I've seen stores se..., er, dispensing fishing rods and tackle."

"Because the fish never bites, that's why!"

Mirielle glanced at the toys then ran straight to a pinball machine. She launched the ball and started chasing it with plenty of gusto. Soon after, she transformed into a boy. When he missed and the last game ball was swallowed, he pulled the plunger for another round, then registered the shift in shape and looked hesitantly over his shoulder back at the adults.

Leo chuckled, then gestured an "OK."

Mirielle let go of the plunger and started pushing the buttons again. He had no idea why performing certain actions felt more comfortable in male shape. Would he turn back into a girl, if he played with the claw cranes? Later, the pinballs were fun.

"What now?" Leo moved his gaze away from his child and turned to his friends.

"Try finding one fitted with the right equipment?" Beatrice proposed.

"Ok, but what will we gamble with assuming we come across one? We have no money, there is no money in this world, what is a game of

chance without the risk of losing?" Steve then shook his head slowly, "Nothing indeed. Perhaps this is why there's nothing. But we can bet with chips!"

Leo thought that he could detect hope in his friend's voice. "Still, you gain and lose nothing, the chips would also be worthless. In the old world you exchange them for real money."

"Agh, fuck!" Steve cursed loudly again. Then cowered, obviously remembering the presence of the youth, "Oops!"

"'Fuck' as in kissing and hugging and licking and moaning?" Mirielle asked over his shoulder, then slammed the machine after losing the bonus ball, turned and reverted to a girl.

The adults in the hall could not help the awkward silence. Then Leo took a deep breath and shook head, "Mmm."

"I get it. Judging by your long faces, it is something I am not supposed to do. Yet! But can I at least know?"

Leo raised his hand when Beatrice opened her mouth. She was just the third in line, so to speak, he was the kiddo's dad. In the old word sexplaining would hardly be necessary, Mirielle would have gotten all the info by now. He beckoned Mirielle and put his arm around the girl's shoulders, "Phew! Ok, I will crack the nut..."

Mirielle turned to the others, "I saw a paintball shooting parlor on our way here. Are you up for a fight?"

Steve looked around, "Let's hope that it won't be like this."

On the street Mirielle wrapped arm around her father's, "Well, tell me what fucking's all about."

Leo blushed, "It is a dirty word... And, also when people, er, make love... Listen, can you be a boy while we talk?"

"But I am wearing girl's clothes right now."

"It shouldn't matter. It doesn't matter. You are fluid anyway."

"What's that?"

Leo freed his arm, put it around the child's shoulders and shaped his lips into a tube, "We will get to that too... Fucking also means having a sexual intercourse. We do it purely for pleasure here, but in the old world it is how people procreate, that is to make new humans-"

"So, you fucked mom and that made me. Then how's it purely for pleasure here?"

Leo heard Steve giggling, put some extra distance between them and continued, "The way you put it is generally considered very rude and in poor taste." He was speaking slowly, choosing carefully his words, so engulfed, that he didn't notice that Mirielle remained female.

Behind them Beatrice thought that if the little one was indeed a perfect copy, her old rival was a lovely creature. No wonder Leo fell for her when she was just a tad older. What would an aged Elise be like - she wondered? Had Elise married Leo, would their marriage have lasted? She herself was often angry, vengeful, desperate and left life disillusioned and bitter. What an older Mirielle be like? This world was gentle and safe, that certainly was going to make a massive difference. Then her thoughts invoked the place they now called home. She hated it when she was alive, she felt that it robbed her of her dreams. And her dignity, her downfall started when she went without Leo to that damned resort. But now she was happy with life there. Was it because she was dead, and the place was not actually real?