**Venus Institute**

**By Elfy**

**Chapter One - Arrival**

“Please Mom, don’t make me go!” Mike cried whilst sitting in the back of the car.

Speeding down the highway, the small family car was heading away from home and towards what Mike only know as the “Venus Institute”. Mike didn’t want to go, nobody wanted to go to the “Venus Institute” but then the people that travelled this road rarely did so by choice.

“You heard the judge.” Lisa, Mike’s mother, said sadly, “If you want to avoid jail this is what you have to do.”

“It’s not fair!” Mike sobbed as he slammed his fists on the seat.

“Not fair?” Lisa repeated before adding, with exasperation, “Honey, you were dealing drugs. You knew they changed the laws, you did this to yourself.”

The law Lisa referred to had been passed three years beforehand, it was brought in as a response to the overcrowded prisons that were now reaching critical levels. It meant that anyone over the age of eighteen who was convicted of drug and other non-violent offences could face being taken to these new facilities rather than to prison. The facilities very quickly gained a big reputation for being horrible places, to the point where people begged to go to prison instead.

“But it was only a small amount of drugs…” Mike sobbed.

Mike had always been getting into trouble with the law. As a juvenile he had been in and out of court for all kinds of different things. He had fallen in with a gang and had subsequently gone off the rails. Vandalism, gang violence, criminal damage… It sometimes seemed like if there was a law against it, Mike had broken it.

Lisa had tried everything in the book to get her 18-year-old son to straighten up and start getting his life in order. She had got him jobs, let him stay at home rent free and had generally tried everything in her power but she could not stop Mike from ending up in the sort of situation he was now in. She was sad it had come to this, but Mike had made his bed. Lisa had told him he would eventually regret his crimes one day and now it seemed today was that day.

Mike had faced a stark choice at the court. Either go to prison for a long time or go to this Facility for “re-programming” as they called it. They adjust behaviour through pretty extreme measures and that was all Mike knew, anything that happened within the rules of these institutions was very secretive. Mike would never survive in prison, since they had become so overcrowded the violence within them had grown almost out of control. Mike had chosen the institution without really knowing the full details. All he had known was that he would be spending significantly less time at the institution than he would have in prison.

When Mike had learned about the types of things that happened at these Facilities he had begged to have the sentencing changed but it was no use. He was sent home with an electronic tag that didn’t allow him to leave the house. For a week he waited until a letter arrived that ordered him to appear at the facility that they were now heading towards at a very specific time and date.

The Institutions did many things, each one seemed to have a different method of going about their business but there was usually one thing they all had in common. They had an extremely good success rate, few of the people leaving one of these places ever committed another crime. Information about people coming out the other side of these facilities was very sparse, the only thing really known was that people who came out of the other side were usually very changed from the people who had gone in.

“Mom, what if… What if we just drive away?” Mike asked desperately, “Just run away.”

“Don’t be silly, Mike” Lisa replied shortly, “I have a life here. A job, a family, friends… I’m not going to give it all up.”

“You know what happens in those places…” Mike replied as he tried to appeal for mercy.

“Mike… I know these places change people.” Lisa said slowly. The institution was appearing in the distance now, a lone building in the middle of a large open field, “But maybe you need it. You have had so many chances to straighten up but you wasted them all. Am I happy you are going to this place? Of course not. But you do deserve punishment, and you do need to reform your behaviour.”

Mike fell silent except for his sobs. He thought about his friends back at home, the ones he had grown up with, the ones who started ignoring him as soon as he had been sentenced.

When Mike had asked why they had started ignoring him he was simply told that they saw no point in talking to him since he would never be the same after his sentence was finished. Nothing had driven home how scary and life changing this was going to be like the people he knew telling him there was no point talking to him.

Shivering at the memory and out of fear of what was to happen next, Mike watched as the building in the distance started to grow larger in the window. Mike could see that the building was surrounded by a large chain link fence with barbed wire on top of it. Every now and then there was a large tower with a searchlight and armed guard. It looked very imposing, and it was clearly built to be inescapable.

A checkpoint loomed nearby. There was a small hut with a barrier down across the road next to it and a guard standing in front. Like the guards in the towers, this guard was armed and he was staring down the road to where Lisa and Mike were now driving.

As the car approached the barrier, the guard stepped over to the hut and indicated for Lisa to stop the car. Lisa slowed down and taking a deep breath, she stopped in front of the barrier and rolled down the window.

“You got reason to be here, ma’am?” The guard asked with a thick southern accent.

Mike looked at the guard in awe and terror. Every muscle in his body wanted to leap out of the car and run away but he knew it was too late. He was in the belly of the beast.

“I’m dropping off my son.” Lisa said with a trembling voice, “Michael Jones? He was sen-”

“Admission papers.” The guard grunted.

Mike saw his mom start rooting around in her handbag. His eyes were transfixed by the look of this guard. He was tall and muscular with a face that looked so hard that it looked like if you threw a rock at it, the rock would break.

“Yes… Right here.” Lisa said as she handed over the papers.

The guard glanced them over before turning to Mike and smiling. Mike watched him with nervous fascination from the backseat, he had no idea if that was a good smile or a bad one so he just stared back.

“Right on through to the car park, ma’am.” The guard said as he stepped back and pressed a button that raised the barrier.

The car slowly trundled down the long driveway towards the main compound. Mike knew there was no turning back now, the gates behind them closed as they were directed to the main reception building.

“Mom, I’m scared…” Mike said quietly as his eyes watered.

“I know.” Lisa replied, “You’ll be OK. I love you and will be there for you no matter what.”

If his mom’s statement was designed to make Mike feel better it wasn’t working. He looked at the foreboding concrete building in front of him and wished more than anything that he could just turn around.

The car pulled into a parking space and Mike watched his mom take a deep breath before stepping out. A minute later, when Mike had composed himself, he also stepped out of the vehicle and into the sunlight. Despite the warm summer sun high in the sky the air felt cold, maybe it was just Mike’s imagination but it seemed like even nature was afraid to come by this place.

Mike could feel his knees trembling as he walked towards the reception area. His mom was beside him but Mike didn’t know if that was just to keep him walking forwards, he certainly didn’t feel any comfort from her presence.

There was another guard on the door, this one was female but still looked like she could kill Mike without breaking a sweat.

“Only the prisoner passes through here.” The female guard said.

Mike looked up at his mother with big fearful eyes. Despite being an adult he felt like a small toddler as his mom hugged him tightly and told him it would all be alright. When she released him, Mike watched his mom slowly walk back to the car, from the way she wiped her face it was obvious she was crying.

“Mom…” Mike quietly whispered as she retreated.

“Michael Jones?” A young woman’s voice caused Mike to turn back to look at the front door.

A woman with shoulder length blonde hair was stood at the entrance and looking at Mike with a stern face. She was wearing a white coat and dark skirt, she looked like someone pretty important in this place. Mike saw her leafing through her clipboard, no doubt she was looking at his details.

“Y-Yes, Ma’am.” Mike replied. He threw one last look to his mother who was now pulling out of the car park. He was completely alone in this institution.

“Follow me.” The woman said sharply as she turned and walked back inside the building, “Try and do anything stupid and your time here will be doubled.”

Mike wouldn’t have dared trying to escape or fight now. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to get away or resist, but with so many guards and such imposing walls it seemed like escape would be impossible. He wanted to spend the least amount of time here that he could and if that went complying with whatever they did then so be it. Maybe it wouldn’t be as bad as everyone said.

Mike walked forward with his small suitcase of things. One of the guards at the entrance stopped him from entering. He was huge and he looked down at Mike with barely hidden contempt.

“Leave the bag.” The guard sneered, “You won’t be needing it.”

Mike found this rather ominous but he did as he was asked. He let go of the handle and, with a deep and shaky breath, he walked inside the mysterious facility. He turned to see if someone would be taking his bag somewhere but no one was touching it for the moment.

The lobby looked brand new. Its walls and floor were immaculately white and the leather seats looked very comfortable in the waiting area. Against the wall to the left of the exit was a black marble reception desk with an older woman behind it. The receptionist had greying hair that was tied up in a bun and she looked a bit heavier than the woman that Mike was following. Behind the woman, on the wall, was a large clock. It all looked so clean and all the corners were so sharp, Mike’s hairs stood on end has he was hit by a huge sense of Orwellian horror.

“One for intake, Janice.” The young woman said to the receptionist.

“Got another one?” Janice replied with a voice much higher pitched than Mike had been expecting, “We’re filling up quickly, Diana.”

“Business is good.” Diana replied as she filled out some of the forms on her clipboard. She gently hummed a tune in a carefree manner, “How are the kids?”

“They’re great!” Janice replied with a wide smile, “Little Timmy just got the lead in the school play.”

“Oh that’s wonderful.” Janice replied as she ticked the relevant boxes, “You’ve got a little thespian on your hands.”

Mike was standing beside the two women and was shocked that they were talking in such a way. It seemed almost unimaginable that normal life would be continuing outside of this institution. As Mike’s life hinged on whatever happened deep inside this building these two women were chatting just like old friends.

“Michael, I’m going to need you to sign these forms.” Diana slid what looked like a small booklet of forms across the reception desk without looking at Mike.

Mike stepped forward, his footsteps bouncing off the thick walls, and took the pen on offer. He looked at the paper in front of him with print so small he would need a magnifying glass to read it properly.

“What… What is all this?” Mike asked as he looked at both the women in front of him. Neither seemed inclined to look back, a fact that was making Mike feel increasingly uncomfortable. It was like there was a big secret that no one was letting him in on.

“Rules, regulations and waivers.” Diana replied as she filled out other forms.

“Shouldn’t I read all this before signing it?” Mike asked hesitantly as he flipped through the pages, “Maybe have a lawyer read it?”

“Listen, kid.” Diana said as she sighed in exasperation and turned to look at Mike, “You don’t have to sign it.”

“Alright then.” Mike put the pen down. He didn’t appreciate being called “kid” and he certainly wasn’t signing anything for these people. Mike watched Janice look at Diana with a quizzical look on her face.

“But if you don’t…” Diana continued, “We will stick you on the next van to the state penitentiary.”