



Billionaire Alien Boss Daddy

Author: *Athena Storm*

Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: She walks into my office thinking she's here for a job. She doesn't know I've already chosen her.

I'm Shomun Vakarr—billionaire CEO, alien commander, and the last line of defense in a war Earth doesn't know is coming. Clarice Redding is supposed to be a spy, planted to uncover my secrets. But from the moment I see her, I make a decision.

She'll work for me.

She'll answer to me.

And she'll learn exactly what it means to belong to me.

She says she's here to gather intel.

I say she's here to obey.

Read on if you want more than just a love story because this is a war story, a redemption arc, and a fight for survival across the stars. If you're into fierce heroines, alien warriors with secrets, and a bond that defies galaxies—welcome aboard. Strap in, because once this ride starts, there's no going back.

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CHAPTER1

CLARICE

The bus lurches forward, the humid New Orleans air pressing against the windows. I tug at the hem of my blazer, smoothing out invisible wrinkles. The elderly woman next to me, her face lined with years of stories, gives me an approving nod.

“Sweetheart, you look like you just stepped out of one of those fancy magazines. Corporate, right?”

“Thank you,” I say, forcing a polite smile. “Yes, I’m on my way to a job interview.”

Her eyes light up, and she leans in closer. “Oh, how exciting! Where at?”

“The Parthenon,” I reply, my voice steady despite the knot tightening in my stomach.

Her eyebrows shoot up. “That’s quite the place. Must be a big job. You nervous?”

“A little,” I admit, staring out the window. The street blurs as we pass the historic district—or what’s left of it, anyway. “The man interviewing me... he’s my ex.”

She lets out a low whistle, shaking her head. “Well, isn’t that a twist. You sure you’re up for that?”

“I don’t have much of a choice,” I say, more to myself than to her. The bus slows, and I stand, clutching my bag. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck, dear. Just remember—you’re the one with the power now.” She winks, and I offer a tight-lipped smile before stepping off the bus.

The Parthenon looms ahead, its sleek glass facade glinting in the sunlight. My stomach churns as I crane my neck to look at the top floor. “Please don’t make a pass at me, please don’t make a pass at me,” I mutter under my breath, pushing through the revolving doors.

The elevator ride feels like an eternity, the muzak version of a blues song—my favorite genre—grating on my nerves. When the doors finally ding open, I’m greeted by the sight of a secretary who barely looks up from her nail polish. “Go on in,” she says, waving a hand toward the frosted glass door.

I take a deep breath, pushing it open. The scent of artificial citrus hits me as I step inside. Silas stands in the middle of the room, VR goggles strapped to his head, practicing his golf swing with a futuristic putter.

“Claire, is that you?” His voice is smooth, practiced. Too familiar. “Go ahead and take a seat. Make yourself a drink if you want. I’ll be right with you.”

“I’m good, thanks,” I say, bypassing the wet bar and settling into the chair opposite his desk. The leather squeaks under me, cold and unyielding.

At least he’s not naked. Small victories.

I scan the office while Silas finishes his VR golf swing, my eyes landing on the photos lining the walls. There he is, shaking hands with industry giants, his plastic smile plastered on every frame. One shot catches my eye—Silas standing beside a former president, looking like he’s just won the lottery. My gaze shifts to his desk, where a photo of him with a wife and a toddler sits front and center. At least that’s one thing he’s managed to stick with—marriage.

Silas yanks off the VR goggles, his hair slightly disheveled, and bounds over like he's just won the Masters.

"Claire!" He grabs my hand, pumping it like he's trying to start a lawnmower. "You look amazing. Corporate chic really suits you."

"Thanks," I say, pulling my hand back and subtly wiping it on my skirt. "So, what's this about?"

He gestures for me to sit, leaning against the edge of his desk.

"I've got an opportunity for you. Something big. I know you're sharp, Claire. I've seen your work."

I pull a memory stick from my bag and hold it up.

"I've got my full resume here, transcripts, references—everything you'd need."

He waves it off like it's a fly. "I don't need to see that. I already know you're overqualified for the business stuff. But I need someone who can handle... extra duties."

I stand so fast the chair wobbles. "Oh, no. I knew this was a mistake. I should've listened to my gut. You're not getting me into your bed again, Silas."

He's in front of me before I can take a step, hands up like he's surrendering. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Claire, stop. It's not that. I'm a happily married man now. Believe it or not, I've moved on. Just hear me out."

I glare at him, my arms crossed. "Fine. But if this is another one of your vague, manipulative schemes, I'm walking out that door and blocking your number."

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He steps back, holding his hands up like I'm pointing a gun at him. "Fair enough. Let's sit down."

I hesitate, then reluctantly sink back into the chair.

"All right, Silas. What do you mean by extra duties? And don't give me some corporate double-talk. Be specific."

His grin widens, and I swear his plastic surgery makes it look like it's about to crack. "Okay, here it is. I want you to be a corporate spy."

I rub the bridge of my nose, feeling the start of a headache creeping in. "You can't pay me enough to break the law, Silas."

He puts his hands up like he's surrendering. "I'm not asking you to. Not really."

"Oh, that's comforting," I mutter, crossing my arms. "What's the job, then?"

Silas leans forward, his plastic smile stretching. "See, there's this guy—Simon Karr. He's been poking around New Orleans lately. Big guy, flashy, owns a Formula One team. He's been sniffing around my business, and I need to know why."

"Wait, Simon Karr? The guy who races his own car?" I frown, trying to place the name. "I've seen him in the news. What's he doing here?"

Silas waves a hand dismissively, his face twisting like he's swallowed something sour. "Oh, please. Driving around in circles isn't exactly brain surgery. He's just

another rich guy with too much time on his hands.”

“Jealous much?” I raise an eyebrow.

He scoffs, leaning back with a forced chuckle. “Hardly. But here’s the thing—I’ve got reason to believe he’s been spying on me. And not just the corporate kind.”

Silas swivels his monitor around, tapping the keyboard. A video plays on the screen—a grainy security feed of a masked figure sneaking through the Parthenon’s server room. The guy’s huge, easily a head taller than the filing cabinets he’s rifling through.

“That’s him,” Silas says, pointing at the screen. “Or at least, I’m pretty sure it’s him.”

I squint at the video. The guy’s wearing a black mask and gloves, but his build is unmistakable—broad shoulders, towering height, and a stride that’s almost predatory. “How can you possibly know that’s Karr? The man’s wearing a ski mask.”

Silas gives me a look like I’m missing the obvious. “Claire Bear, look at him. He’s built like a brick house. How many guys that size are walking around New Orleans? Come on, it’s gotta be him.”

“Don’t call me Claire Bear,” I snap, leaning back in the chair. “But okay, fine. Let’s say it might be him. Why not just go to the police?”

Silas groans, rolling his eyes. “I already did. They came up with jack and shit. And jack left town. The NOPD doesn’t exactly specialize in corporate espionage, Claire. I need someone—someone like you—to get close to him. Find out what he’s up to.”

I shake my head, my stomach churning. “I’m not some private investigator, Silas. I don’t even know the first thing about spying.”

“That’s where I come in,” he says, leaning forward with that sleazy salesman grin. “I’ll get you a job as his personal assistant. You’ll have access to his office, his devices, everything. All you have to do is keep your eyes and ears open.”

“And if I get caught?”

“You won’t,” he says, but the way he avoids my eyes tells me he’s not as confident as he sounds.

“Silas, this is insane. I’m not risking my career—or my freedom—for this.”

He sighs, pulling a checkbook out of his desk drawer. “How does half a million sound?”

I freeze, my mouth going dry. “That’s... that’s a lot of money.”

“And if you find proof—either way—I’ll fund your own startup. Any business you want. You’ll be your own boss.”

My heart skips a beat. My own business. No more late nights in a cubicle, no more answering to people like Silas. It’s tempting—too tempting.

I chew on my lip, staring at the floor. “This is a terrible idea.”

“Probably,” he says. “But it’s also your ticket out of corporate hell. Think about it, Claire. Your own company. Your own rules.”

I take a moment to try and think, my mind racing. This is insane. Dangerous. Reckless. But... it’s also the kind of opportunity I’ve been dreaming of.

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“Fine,” I say, the word tasting bitter in my mouth. “I’ll do it. But if this blows up in my face, I’m taking you down with me.”

Silas grins, his teeth gleaming like a shark’s. “Wouldn’t expect anything less, Claire Bear.”

“Don’t call me that.”

My heels click against the marble floor as I enter Simon Karr's office building. The security guard barely glances at my ID before waving me through. Three days of research, two spa appointments, and one maxed-out credit card later, here I am. Ready to spy on a man who might be spying on my ex.

My life has become a bad romance novel.

The elevator mirror shows a woman I barely recognize. The aesthetician worked miracles with my skin—it practically glows. My honey-blond hair falls in perfect waves, each strand exactly where it should be. The charcoal blazer hugs my curves without being obvious about it.

But it's the skirt that's making me second-guess everything.

I smooth my hands over the fabric for the hundredth time. The hem hits right at the knee—professional enough for an interview, but with just enough leg showing to catch attention. At least, that's what the saleswoman promised.

"He likes precision," I mutter to myself, adjusting my blazer. "Focus on that, not your

legs."

The elevator dings at the top floor. My stomach lurches, and not from the altitude. What if Silas is wrong? What if Simon Karr isn't spying on him at all? What if I'm about to make a complete fool of myself?

The receptionist points me toward a set of heavy oak doors. My hand trembles as I reach for the handle.

"I should have worn pants," I mumble, pushing through the entrance of Simon's office.

I step into the small lobby outside Simon's corner office, and my stomach drops. More than a dozen applicants crowd the space, perched on sleek leather chairs or pacing anxiously. Men and women in sharp suits clutch portfolios, their eyes darting toward the frosted glass door like it's the entrance to a lion's den. I scan the room, my heart pounding. Silas said this was a sure thing. He said I'd walk right in. But this... this looks like a cattle call.

I hover near the edge of the room, clutching my bag like it's a life preserver. Every seat is taken, so I lean against the wall, trying to look casual. The air smells like expensive cologne and desperation.

"How long have you been waiting?" I whisper to the woman next to me. She's got a tight bun and a jacket that costs more than my monthly rent.

"Forty-five minutes," she mutters, checking her watch. "He's only seen three people so far. Two came out crying, and the third..." She trails off, her eyes narrowing. "Let's just say I didn't catch his name."

Great. Just great.

Before I can respond, the door to Simon's office swings open. A man stumbles out, his face pale and tear-streaked. He's clutching a wrinkled tie like it's the only thing holding him together.

"He's a monster," the man says, his voice trembling. He looks around the room, his eyes wide and haunted. "A monster!"

The room goes silent. The man doesn't say another word. He just bolts for the elevator, leaving the rest of us staring after him.

"That's it," someone says, standing up. "I'm out."

One by one, the applicants get to their feet and head for the exit. The woman with the bun gives me a sympathetic look before following the herd. Within minutes, the lobby is empty—except for me.

My heart hammers in my chest, and my palms are slick with sweat. I glance at the frosted glass door, then back toward the elevator. I could leave. I should leave. But Silas's promise of half a million dollars and a fresh start taunts me.

"Next," comes Simon's voice from the other side of the door. His tone is deep, commanding, and it sends a shiver down my spine. It's not just a voice—it's a force of nature.

I freeze. My feet feel like they're rooted to the floor.

"Next!" he barks again, and this time, his words are sharper, more impatient. "Or are there nothing but cowards in this swampy metropolis?"

Swampy metropolis? Okay, rude. But also... not wrong.

I square my shoulders, and force myself to move. The door creaks as I push it open, and I step inside, plastering a smile on my face. Here goes nothing.

“Good morning,” I say, stepping into the office. The words hang in the air, half-formed, as my gaze locks with Simon’s. For a split second, the room seems to tilt, and I swear I see something monstrous—scaly skin, sharp teeth, eyes like molten lava. My breath catches, and I blink hard. Nerves. It’s just nerves. I keep my expression blank, but my pulse is racing, and my palms feel slick against the handle of my bag.

Simon is seated behind a massive desk, his posture rigid, his face unreadable. His gray eyes are sharp, assessing, and they don’t waver as I step fully into the room. For a moment, he’s perfectly still, like a predator sizing up its prey. Then something shifts. His eyes widen, just a fraction, and his chest rises with a quick, uneven breath. His gaze sweeps over me—quick, deliberate—and lingers on my legs. A flicker of heat flashes across his face, and I can feel it in the way his eyes linger, in the way his jaw tightens.

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So the skirt was a good move after all. The thought flits through my mind, unbidden, and I swallow hard. There's something primal in the way he's looking at me, something that makes my skin prickle and my stomach twist. It's not just attraction—it's something deeper, something that feels like it's stripping me bare.

"Name," he says, his voice low and rough, cutting through the silence like a blade. His gaze doesn't waver, and I feel pinned under it, exposed.

"Claire Redding," I manage, but my voice cracks on the last syllable. I clear my throat, trying to steady myself, but it's no use. I'm trapped in his gaze, and it's terrifying—and exhilarating. Normally, when men look at me like this, I feel disgusted, or at least annoyed. But with Simon, it's different. My heart is pounding, my mouth is dry, and there's a strange, fluttering sensation low in my stomach. It's terrifying, but it's also... fun.

Simon leans back in his chair, his eyes still on me, the weight of his silence pressing down on me. He doesn't speak, doesn't move, and I can't tell if he's waiting for me to say something or just enjoying the way I'm squirming.

"I'm here for the assistant position," I finally say, breaking the silence. My voice is steadier this time, but my hands are still trembling, and I grip the strap of my bag like it's a lifeline.

Simon's lips twitch, just barely, and he leans forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "Do you know what this job entails?" His voice is still low, but there's an edge to it now, a challenge.

“Organizing your schedule, managing communications, handling logistics—” I start, but he cuts me off with a wave of his hand.

“That’s the job description,” he says, his voice sharp. “I’m asking what it entails. Can you handle pressure? Deadlines? Demands? Can you keep up with me?”

I swallow hard, trying to ignore the way my heart is racing. “I can handle it,” I say, and my voice doesn’t waver this time. I meet his gaze head-on, refusing to look away. If he’s trying to intimidate me, it’s not going to work. Not completely, anyway.

Simon rises from his seat, and I feel the weight of his presence before he even moves. My hands instinctively clasp behind my back, my spine straightening as if I’m standing at attention. He’s big—taller than I remember from the security footage—and the room seems to shrink as he steps around the desk. His shoes thud against the polished floor, each step deliberate, measured. I can hear the faint creak of leather as he moves, the scent of it—warm, earthy—wafting toward me.

He begins to circle me, slow and predatory. My skin prickles as his warm breath brushes against the back of my neck, stirring the fine hairs there. I force myself to remain still, my gaze fixed on the wall ahead, though every nerve in my body is screaming to turn, to face him, to run. I don’t dare fidget. I won’t give him the satisfaction.

“I put stock in deeds, not words, Ms. Redding,” he rumbles, his voice low and resonant, like the growl of distant thunder. It vibrates through me, settling somewhere deep in my chest. “If I hire you, I will expect you to show me your worth, not try to sell me on it.”

I swallow hard, my throat dry. “Imminently logical, Sir,” I say, and I mean it. There’s no fluff in his words, no empty promises. It’s refreshing, in a way, after years of Silas’s slick sales pitches and hollow charm. I respect a man who values results over

rhetoric.

Simon pauses mid-step, his shoes scuffing against the floor. I can feel his gaze on me, sharp and assessing, though I don't dare look at him. He leans in, his mouth inches from my ear, and I catch the faintest whiff of something smoky, like a campfire on a cold night.

"What did you say?" he demands, his breath hot against my skin. I can't tell if he's testing me or if he genuinely didn't hear. Either way, my heart is hammering so hard I'm sure he can hear it.

"I said, 'Imminently logical, Sir,'" I repeat, louder this time, though my voice doesn't waver. "I prefer an employer who values results instead of sycophantic assurances of personal quality."

For a moment, he doesn't respond. The silence stretches, thick and heavy, the seconds ticking by like drumbeats in my chest. Then, I hear it—a soft inhale, like he's taking in my scent. I don't know if I'm imagining it, but the thought is enchanting to say the least.

"I believe you," he says finally, his voice quieter now, almost contemplative. He steps back, resuming his circle, though his pace is slower, more deliberate. "So far, we seem of a mind, Ms. Redding."

I exhale slowly, the tension in my shoulders easing just a fraction. It feels like I've passed some unspoken test, though I know this is only the beginning. Simon Karr isn't the kind of man who hires on a whim, and I'm not fool enough to think a few well-placed words are enough to win him over.

I haven't landed the job yet—and the job is just a stepping stone to my real mission. But if I don't get the job, I can't exactly spy on Simon Karr and find out if he's the one

who broke into the Parthenon a few weeks ago.

No job, no payday. No payday, no funding to start my own business.

I have to get this job. I have to.

CHAPTER2

CLARICE

"The position often requires late nights," Simon says. "Are you willing to stay after hours?"

"I can go all night long." The words tumble out before I can stop them, eager and breathy. Heat floods my cheeks as I realize how that sounds—and worse, how I said it. Like some desperate freshman trying to impress the quarterback.

What's wrong with me? I'm supposed to be composed, controlled. That's how I survived growing up, how I made it through college, how I navigate the corporate world. Never show weakness. Never give them ammunition. But something about Simon strips away my carefully constructed walls, leaving me exposed and vulnerable.

His lips curve into the barest hint of a smile, acknowledging the double entendre without commenting on it. Instead, he shifts topics smoothly, professionally.

"What if I tell you to write up a ten page proposal on the merits of an acquisition, but I only give you four hours to do it. Can you impress me?"

"Yes, Sir." I straighten my spine. "I've written longer proposals in less time."

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The floorboards creak behind me. Simon's presence looms large, his breath hot against my neck. The scent of leather and smoke envelops me, and my pulse quickens traitorously.

"So you're arrogant?" His voice drops low, dangerous.

"No, Sir," I reply without missing a beat. "I'm just confident in my ability to serve you, Sir."

The words feel heavy on my tongue, laden with something I can't quite name. My cheeks burn, but I resist the urge to fidget. I keep my hands steady on the edge of the chair, my posture rigid.

Simon grunts, a low rumble that vibrates through the room, making the air between us feel charged. "An excellent answer," he growls, and the corners of his mouth twitch. "Perhaps the best I've ever heard."

Pride surges through me, hot and heady, mingling with something else—something giddy and electric. My pulse quickens, and I'm surprised by how much his approval means to me. It's not just about the job anymore. I want him to keep looking at me like that, like I've just handed him a secret he didn't know he was searching for.

He stares, his gray eyes sharp, assessing. "What if I tell you to scrap the proposal you've spent hours on and draft an entirely new one? What then?"

"I will obey." The words slip out before I can second-guess them, and they crackle in the air between us. My voice is steady, but there's something beneath it, a current

Simon can't miss. The double entendre is impossible to ignore, and I don't even try to hide it. I like saying those words—more than I expected. And judging by the way his pupils dilate, he likes hearing them.

He doesn't respond immediately, his gaze lingering on me, heavy and deliberate. The silence stretches, the tension thickening until it's almost tangible. I can hear my own heartbeat, a rapid thrum in my ears.

"Good," he finally says, his voice rougher than before. "What if I tell you to take an overseas trip on a moment's notice? No time to prepare, no time to think. Just go."

"I will obey." This time, I look him straight in the eyes, refusing to break the connection. My breath hitches, and I can tell he notices—his chest rises and falls just a little faster, his mask slipping ever so slightly. His tongue flicks out to wet his lips, and I feel the heat pool in my stomach, a strange, unfamiliar warmth.

He leans forward, resting his forearms on the desk, and his voice drops lower, almost a purr. "What if I tell you to work weekends, holidays, nights—no exceptions, no excuses?"

"I will obey." My voice doesn't waver, but I'm breathing harder now, my chest rising and falling visibly. His eyes flicker to my neck, and I feel my pulse throb under his scrutiny.

The questions keep coming, each one more hypothetical, more absurd. Yet, my answer remains the same—three words that seem to unravel something in both of us with every repetition. Simon's composure is fraying, his breaths coming quicker, his questions growing sharper, more pointed. He's pushing me, testing me, but it feels like he's doing it just to hear me say those words again and again.

And I don't mind. Not at all.

The room feels smaller now, the air thicker, charged with an energy I can't explain. My skin prickles, and I shift in my seat, trying to ground myself, but it's useless. Every time I say, "I will obey," it's like a spark ignites between us, and I can't tell which one of us is more affected by it.

Simon's eyes are dark now, his voice a low rumble that. "What if I tell you to stay late tonight? No questions, no hesitation."

I don't even think before I answer. "I will obey."

The printer whirs to life, spitting out sheets in crisp succession. Simon doesn't look at me as he gathers them, his fingers precise and deliberate. He hands the stack over without a word, his gray eyes locking onto mine like he's trying to bore through my skull.

"This is your contract offer," he says, his voice flat, almost bored. "Read it over carefully. In one hour, you must either sign it or return it."

I take the papers, my fingers brushing against his for the briefest moment. A jolt runs up my arm, and I force myself not to react. Instead, I nod, all business, and start flipping through the pages. The numbers jump out at me first—the salary, the bonuses, the stock options. It's more than generous. It's obscene.

I did it. I impressed the meanest alpha-hole boss in America, and I landed the job. For a second, I let myself bask in the glow of accomplishment, the thrill of knowing I've proven myself to someone as exacting as Simon Karr.

Then reality crashes in. It's not real. I'm not here to work for him. I'm here to spy on him for Silas. The thought feels like a wet blanket smothering my elation, and I push it aside, focusing on the contract in front of me.

I skim the clauses, my gaze catching on one in particular. My eyes widen, and I glance up at Simon. He's watching me with that same intensity, like a predator waiting for the right moment to pounce.

"The contract stipulates that you must approve of my clothing choices both inside and outside of work," I say, keeping my tone neutral. "But there's nothing about specific details, or whether I will be compensated for buying all these new clothes."

Simon's lips twitch, the faintest hint of a smile. "If I'm approving your wardrobe, Miss Redding, I'll ensure it's suitable. As for compensation..." He leans forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "I will cover the expense. And I'll expect receipts."

"You'll expect receipts?" I raise an eyebrow, trying to hide the flutter in my stomach. "Do you micromanage all your employees this closely, or am I special?"

The corner of his mouth tilts up, and for a moment, I think he's going to smile. But the look disappears as quickly as it came. "You're special," he says. "But don't let that go to your head. I hold everyone to the same standards. Precision. Discipline. Obedience."

The way he says "obedience" is super hot. I clear my throat, forcing myself to stay composed. "So, what happens if you don't approve of my choices? Do I get a demerit? A write-up?"

Simon doesn't miss a beat. "You'll correct it. Immediately. And if it happens again, there will be consequences."

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Consequences. The word hangs in the air between us, heavy with unspoken meaning. I feel my cheeks flush, and I look back down at the contract, pretending to read as I try to steady my breathing. This is supposed to be a ruse, a means to an end. So why does the thought of disappointing him make my stomach twist?

"Anything else I should be aware of?" I ask, my voice steady despite the storm brewing inside me.

Simon's gaze doesn't waver. "Sign the contract, and you'll find out." He leans back again, all casual confidence, like he already knows what I'm going to do. Like he already owns me.

And damn it all, part of me wants him to.

The pen hovers over the paper, my hand steady despite the storm brewing inside me. I glance up one last time—a calculated move, a show of deliberation—before lowering the pen to sign. The ink glides across the page, smooth and inevitable. But just as my signature starts to take shape, his voice cuts through the silence like a blade.

"Wait."

My hand freezes mid-stroke, the pen trembling ever so slightly. I look up, and Simon's gaze pins me in place. There's something in his eyes—sharp, unrelenting—that makes my stomach twist.

"I must make certain you understand what your contract entails before you sign it,

Ms. Redding."

His voice is low, a rumble that vibrates through the room and settles deep in my chest. I swallow hard, forcing my nerves to steady. "I just read through it, Sir. I understand the terms."

He leans forward, his elbows resting on the desk, and those gray eyes bore into mine. "I'm not talking about the words on the page. I'm talking about the spirit of the contract."

I tilt my chin up, refusing to flinch under his scrutiny. "I understand, Sir."

"Do you?" he challenges, his voice dropping even lower. "If you sign this, your opportunities will be boundless. But it's up to you to seize them. I won't hand them to you. You'll have to earn every single one."

"I understand, Sir," I repeat, my voice firm despite the heat creeping up my neck.

Simon doesn't look away. His gaze is relentless, like he's trying to peel back every layer of pretense I've built up over the years. "And once you sign your name," he continues, his tone slow and deliberate, "you belong to me. You are mine. Until you fail me or decide you can't handle the pressure."

The words hang in the air, heavy and electric. I feel a warmth pooling low in my belly, a sensation I can't quite control. My legs tense, thighs pressing together as if that could somehow ground me. His words echo in my head, twisting my thoughts into something I'm not ready to examine.

"I won't fail you, Sir," I say firmly, despite the storm inside me. "And whatever you give me, I can take it."

His lips curve into the faintest hint of a smirk, and he nods, satisfied. "Good. Sign it."

The pen moves again, my signature flowing across the page. I hand the contract back to him, and he reviews it with the precision of a man who doesn't miss a single detail. Then he signs his own name with a flourish, tucking the document away in the top drawer of his desk.

He picks up the phone, his movements deliberate and unhurried. "Kenneth? Bring the car around out front, now."

He hangs up without waiting for a response and looks at me, his expression unreadable. "Get up."

"Where are we going?" The question slips out before I can stop it, and his brow arches in a silent rebuke. My cheeks flush, and I quickly correct myself. "Yes, Sir."

I rise from the chair, my legs feeling strangely unsteady, and he's suddenly there, standing so close I can feel the heat radiating from his body. His hand lands on the small of my back, and I stiffen for a moment before forcing myself to relax.

"Do not disappoint me, Clarice," he murmurs, his breath brushing against my ear. The low, menacing tone thrills me. "It would be a shame if I had to discipline you on your first day."

His hand presses gently but firmly, guiding me toward the door. I move with him, my heart pounding in my chest. The thought of disappointing him twists my stomach—but beneath that, there's something else, something I don't want to acknowledge.

As we step out of his office, I can't help but think that the idea of discipline doesn't sound so bad after all.

CHAPTER3

SHOMUN

My hand tingles where it rests against the small of her back. The silk of her blouse does nothing to mask her body heat. I guide her into the rear of my limousine, fighting the urge to let my fingers linger.

"Thank you, Sir." Her voice carries a hint of Louisiana in its cadence.

I slide in beside her, maintaining professional distance. The leather seat creaks beneath my weight. Even with the image inducer making me appear human, I still mass the same as a Vakutan warrior.

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The DNA scan results flash across my mind again. Human. Definitely human. But that means nothing these days. The grolgath are clever bastards. They could have gotten to her, turned her into an asset. Those referrals worry me.

"Are you cold?" I ask, noting the goosebumps on her arms.

"No Sir. Just excited to start work."

The scent of her perfume fills the cabin. Jasmine and something deeper, muskier. My enhanced senses pick up the subtle changes in her body chemistry. She's aroused. That could be useful... or dangerous.

Silas Greer's name on her resume burns in my mind like a warning beacon. That smug corporate raider has been on Project Veritas's watchlist for months. Too many coincidences. Too many connections to known grolgath operations.

And now his former employee sits beside me, all wide green eyes and demure responses.

I need to keep her close. Watch her. Test her. The fact that I want to do exactly that for entirely unprofessional reasons just makes this more complicated.

The car pulls away from the curb. I keep my expression neutral, but my mind races through contingency plans.

The limo glides through the streets of New Orleans, the hum of the engine a low, steady backdrop. Claire shifts in her seat, her thigh brushing against mine for the

briefest moment. The contact sends a jolt through me—sharp, electric, and entirely too distracting. I keep my face neutral, my gaze forward, but I’m hyper-aware of her presence. The faint scent of her perfume—something floral with a hint of spice—fills the space between us. It’s maddening.

She’s staring at me now, waiting for an answer. Her green eyes are wide, curious, and maybe a little wary. I can practically hear the gears turning in her head.

“May I ask where we’re going, Sir?” she says, her voice soft but steady.

I rattle off her address without looking at her.

Her eyebrows shoot up. “That can’t be right. That’s my home address.”

“I know,” I say, still not looking at her.

She blinks, her lips parting slightly. “Do you personally visit the homes of all your hires?”

“No.” I leave it at that, letting the word hang in the air like a challenge.

She narrows her eyes, clearly not satisfied. “I think I’m entitled to know why you want to see where I live.”

I turn to her then, my gaze sharp. “Claire, do you trust me?”

The question catches her off guard. She opens her mouth, hesitates, then shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Sir, but we have only just met?—”

“Precisely,” I cut her off, my tone firm. She flinches, and I can see the frustration flicker across her face, but she doesn’t push further. Smart girl.

The rest of the ride passes in silence. She stares out the window, her arms crossed, while I watch her from the corner of my eye. The tension between us is electric, charged with questions neither of us is ready to ask.

When we pull up to her building, I step out first, holding the door for her. She hesitates, her eyes darting to mine as if waiting for some kind of explanation. I offer none, and she finally gets out, her movements stiff.

I follow her up the narrow staircase to her efficiency apartment. The place is small but tidy, with a faint scent of lavender and old wood. She stands awkwardly by the door, her arms still crossed, as I glance around.

I pull out my compad, thumbing the screen to activate the scanner. The holographic interface glows faintly, casting a blue hue over my hand as I wave it slowly through the air. The sensors hum softly, analyzing the room for any signs of grolgath tech or residual energy signatures.

Claire's eyes narrow as she watches me. "Are you... taking video of my apartment, Sir?"

I glance at her. Her arms are crossed, her posture tense. The worry in her voice tugs at something in me. I'm not used to feeling... anything, really, but this human woman has a way of cutting through my usual detachment.

"This isn't a trick or a reprimand," I say, my tone steady. "I'm a man with many enemies, and it behooves me to be extra cautious."

She nods, but the tension doesn't fully leave her shoulders. Her green eyes flicker to the compad, then back to me. "Okay. Just... let me know if you need me to move anything."

“I will.” The compad’s readings come back clear—no grolgath tech, no hidden devices. It’s a relief, but it doesn’t mean much. Grolgath are clever. They could have her working for them without her even knowing it.

I tuck the compad back into my pocket and turn to her. “Show me your wardrobe.”

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She hesitates for a moment, then says, “Yes, Sir,” and leads me to her bedroom. The room is small, cluttered, and smells faintly of lavender. Clothes are strewn over the back of a chair, and the bed is unmade. She grabs a handful of items and stuffs them into a hamper in the corner.

“Maid’s day off,” she says with a nervous laugh, trying to lighten the mood.

I grunt, unimpressed. Her smile fades, and she opens the closet door. “It’s mostly thrift store stuff,” she admits, gesturing to the rows of clothes inside. “I know you’ll probably want me to upgrade my wardrobe.”

I step closer, inhaling deeply. My Vakutan senses pick up nothing unusual—no grolgath scent, no hidden devices. The closet is just a closet. I scan the walls and floor, checking for hidden panels or compartments, but everything is clean.

“Your apartment is... acceptable,” I say finally, closing the closet door. “But we’ll discuss your wardrobe tomorrow. You’ll need to look the part if you’re going to work for me.”

She nods, her expression a mix of relief and uncertainty. “Yes, Sir.”

I take one last look around the room. For now, I’ve found nothing suspicious, but that doesn’t mean I can let my guard down. Claire Redding is an enigma—one I intend to solve.

The boutique is exactly what I expected—opulent, exclusive, and utterly overwhelming for someone like Claire. She stands in the center of the room, her arms

stiff at her sides as a swarm of tailors and assistants descend on her like vultures on fresh prey. One of them kneels at her feet with a measuring tape, another circles her with a critical eye, muttering about her complexion and the hues that would best complement her.

Claire's eyes dart to me, wide and unsure. She's out of her element here, and it shows. Instead of retreating into her usual demure composure, she looks to me for reassurance. A small crack in her façade, and it's all I need.

"You're fine, Ms. Redding," I say, my voice calm but firm. "You're in the very best of hands."

Her shoulders relax slightly, and she offers a shy smile. It's small, hesitant, but real. Something warm and unfamiliar stirs in my chest. Approval? Protectiveness? I push the feeling aside. I don't have time for sentimentality.

The lead tailor, a wiry man with an impeccable mustache, steps forward with a bolt of fabric draped over his arm. "Now, Ms. Redding, we'll start with a classic pantsuit. Something tailored but not too severe?—"

"No," I interrupt, my voice sharp enough to make the man freeze mid-sentence. "No pants. Skirts only, and above the knee unless style demands otherwise."

The room goes quiet. Claire's head snaps toward me, her green eyes narrowing. "Excuse me?"

I meet her gaze without flinching. "Skirts, Ms. Redding. It's a professional requirement."

Her cheeks flush, and her lips part like she's about to argue, but then she presses them together and looks away. She understands. Good.

The tailors scramble to adjust, shuffling through racks of dresses and skirts with renewed urgency. Claire stands stiffly as they measure her again, her face still pink. I watch her closely, noting the way her hands clench and unclench at her sides. She's flustered, maybe even angry, but she's not fighting me. That's progress.

The lead tailor returns, this time with a sleek pencil skirt in a deep emerald green. He holds it up for approval, and I nod. "Yes. That will do."

Claire's jaw tightens, but she doesn't say a word as she takes the skirt and disappears into the dressing room. I lean against the wall, crossing my arms, and wait.

When she emerges, the skirt clings to her hips in a way that's both professional and undeniably alluring. The tailors fawn over her, adjusting the hem and pinning the waistband, but I barely notice. My eyes are fixed on her. She's beautiful, but it's more than that. There's a spark in her now, a defiance that wasn't there before. It's intriguing.

She catches me staring and raises an eyebrow. "Happy, Sir?"

"Very," I reply, my tone even. "But we're not done yet. Let's move on to the blouses."

The afternoon sun catches in Claire's honey-blond hair as we exit the boutique. Her new outfit - a cream silk blouse and that emerald pencil skirt - transforms her from mousy accountant to corporate goddess. The sight stirs something primal in me, something I thought long buried under centuries of discipline and duty.

I clench my jaw. Human women are a pleasant diversion, nothing more. A night of passion, then onto the next mission. That's how it's always been. That's how it should be. But Claire...

The way she moves in that skirt sets my blood on fire. The slight sway of her hips speaks of untapped sensuality waiting to be unleashed. Dangerous thoughts for a Vakutan warrior. More dangerous still for a Veritas operative with a mission.

She has power over me. The realization hits like a plasma bolt to the chest. This slip of a human female has worked her way under my scales without firing a shot.

No. I am her superior, her master. I will mold her into the perfect assistant, train her to my exacting standards. And if she proves trustworthy, perhaps...

I shake off the thought. "You may have the rest of the afternoon off," I tell her as we reach the car. "Enjoy it, because starting tomorrow at five AM you belong to me. Do not be late."

The drive to her apartment passes in charged silence. I watch in the rearview mirror as she exits the car, her new skirt highlighting every curve. She stands on the curb, watching my departure with those mesmerizing green eyes.

One way or another, I will solve the Claire enigma.

CHAPTER4

CLARICE

I sit on the edge of my bed, fully awake, staring at the flashing numbers on my alarm clock like they're taunting me. The shrill beeping starts, and I slap it off before it can fully erupt. I take a deep breath, the kind that's supposed to steady you but just makes you hyperaware of how tight your chest feels. I barely slept last night, tossing and turning, my brain a whirlwind of what-ifs and how-did-I-get-here's.

First day on the job. Simon's job. The man I'm supposed to spy on, to uncover proof he's the one who broke into Silas's office. I know it's not going to happen today, probably not tomorrow either. I need time to earn his trust. How long that'll take, I have no idea. And that's the part that keeps my stomach in knots.

I shower quickly, the water just shy of scalding, hoping it'll wake me up and wash away the unease clinging to me. It doesn't. I pull on one of the outfits Simon bought for me—the ivory silk blouse and the black pencil skirt that stops just above my knees. The fabric feels luxurious against my skin, but it also feels wrong. Like I'm wearing someone else's clothes, someone who's more confident, more daring, more... okay with this kind of thing.

I tug at the hem of the skirt, trying to make it longer somehow. It doesn't work. The blouse, buttoned up to the collar, fits like it was tailored to my exact measurements, which of course it was. It clings to me in a way that feels intentional, not just fashionable. I catch my reflection in the mirror and stop, my hands hovering over the edge of the sink.

The heels I slip into are strappy and black, with a four-inch heel that makes me feel like I'm teetering on stilts. I look at myself, really look, and something clicks. The outfit, the shoes, the way it all fits—it's too perfect, too calculated. Like I'm an adult film parody of a secretary rather than the genuine article.

"He dressed me up like his doll," I mutter to my reflection, my voice low and sharp. "Why should I feel guilty about spying on him?"

The words hang in the air, but they don't make me feel any better. I grab my bag, sling it over my shoulder, and head for the door. The heels click against the hardwood floor, each step echoing in the silence of my apartment.

The lobby of Simon's office building is eerily quiet at this hour, the kind of silence that makes the click of my heels sound like gunshots. The reception desk is manned by Miranda, her dark hair pulled into a severe bun, her green eyes sharp and assessing. She doesn't smile when I approach, just stares at me like I'm a puzzle she's trying to solve—or a threat she's evaluating.

"Morning," I say, forcing a brightness I don't feel into my voice.

Miranda's gaze sweeps over me, taking in the silk blouse, the pencil skirt, the heels. Her expression doesn't change, but somehow it feels like it does. Like she's cataloging every detail and filing it away for later. She slides a lanyard across the desk without a word.

I pick it up, the plastic cool against my fingers. My name is printed in bold letters: Clarice Redding. I loop it around my neck, the weight of it settling against my chest like an anchor.

"Elevator's to your left," Miranda says, her voice flat. No warmth, no welcome. Just facts.

“Thanks,” I say, though it feels unnecessary. She’s already looking back at her computer, her fingers tapping away at the keyboard like I’ve ceased to exist.

The elevator ride is short, the hum of machinery the only sound. When the doors slide open on the top floor, I step out into Simon’s corner office. It’s as lavish as I remember, the French Quarter decor softening the sharp edges of modern tech. Simon is at his desk, his back to me as he flips through a stack of documents.

I clear my throat softly. He doesn’t turn.

“Good morning, Sir,” I say, my voice steadier than I feel.

He finally looks up, his gray eyes locking onto mine. His gaze is slow, deliberate, moving from my face to my heels and back again. I can feel the heat of it like a physical touch, and my cheeks burn. I look away, my fingers fidgeting with the edge of my blouse.

Simon snorts, a sound that’s equal parts amusement and disdain. He looks intense, arms crossed over his chest. “You waltz in here at five twenty and have the audacity to say good morning?”

I blink, thrown. “You said work starts at five thirty. I’m actually early.”

He shakes his head, a small, humorless smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “No. Successful people get up earlier than anyone else. If the job starts at five thirty, you’d better be there by five at the latest.”

The irritation bubbles up unbidden.

“What time did you arrive?”

His smile vanishes, replaced by a look that could freeze molten lava. He's silent for a long moment, his eyes narrowing as he studies me. I feel myself shrinking under that gaze, my knees going weak for reasons I don't entirely want to examine.

"Four thirty," he says at last, his voice low and measured. "Perhaps you've heard the human saying, the early bird catches the worm?"

I laugh, a short, nervous burst of sound that escapes in a rush. "Yes, I've heard that humansaying before."

His face darkens, embarrassment flickering across his features before they harden into anger. He points to the floor in front of his desk. "Come here."

My body moves before my brain can process the command, every step sending a jolt of heat through me. I stop a few feet away, close enough to feel the weight of his presence but not so close that I can't breathe.

He's terrifying. He's magnetic. And I'm in so much trouble.

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“Um, maybe I should explain—” I start, my voice shaky, trying to fill the silence. But Simon moves faster than I thought possible. His hand covers my mouth before I can finish the sentence, his palm pressing against my lips, his fingers spanning my jaw. The warmth of his skin against mine is startling, and I freeze, my eyes wide.

“There are times to talk,” Simon says, his voice low, almost a growl, “and times to listen.” His breath is warm against my ear. “You must learn the difference if you’re going to make it as my assistant. Do you understand?”

I can’t open my mouth—his hand is holding my jaw shut. I try to mumble yes, slip around his fingers, the words muffled but clear enough. My heart is pounding, my cheeks burning. It’s terrifying, the way he’s so effortlessly in control, but there’s something else, too. Something that makes my stomach twist in a way I don’t want to examine.

“Good,” he says, finally pulling his hand away. I resist the urge to touch my face, to feel where his palm lingered. My skin feels like it’s on fire, and I shift my weight from one foot to the other, the heels he picked out suddenly unbearable. I can’t stop fidgeting.

“Would you stop fidgeting like a toddler?” Simon snaps, his tone sharp enough to cut through steel.

“I’m just not used to wearing heels this high—” I start, but his hand is back over my mouth before I can finish. His fingers press harder this time, and I can feel the faint pressure of his nails against my skin.

“I see that you require greater initial instruction than I anticipated,” he says, his voice dropping to that low, dangerous rumble. He doesn’t need to hold me still—his gaze does that just fine. It pins me in place, sharp and unrelenting, and I feel like a butterfly under glass, completely at his mercy.

“Don’t move,” he orders, releasing me. He turns and strides to his desk, his movements smooth and deliberate. I stay frozen, afraid to breathe, let alone shift my weight. My mind races. Should I say yes sir? Or does staying silent count as obedience? I don’t know what to do, and the uncertainty is almost worse than the command itself.

Simon opens a drawer, his broad back blocking my view of what he’s retrieving. My imagination runs wild—is it a write-up form? A disciplinary notice? Something worse? The silence in the room is suffocating, the only sound the faint rustle of papers and the click of the drawer closing. When he turns back to face me, whatever he’s holding is concealed behind his back, and his expression is unreadable.

Simon reveals a roll of clear packing tape in his hand. My eyes widen. This can’t be happening. This isn’t normal. This isn’t professional. This isn’t—well, it’s not anything I’ve ever experienced before. I should run. I should scream. I should do something. But I don’t. I just stand there, frozen, as he steps closer.

“Hold still,” he says, his voice calm but commanding.

I open my mouth to protest, but before I can get a word out, he tears off a strip of tape and presses it over my lips. The adhesive clings uncomfortably, sealing my mouth shut. I could rip it off if I wanted to. It’s not like it’s superglue. But the way Simon looks at me—like he expects it to stay—makes me hesitate.

My body hums with adrenaline, a strange mix of fear and something else I don’t want to name. My clit throbs insistently, and I’m suddenly hyperaware of every inch of my

body. The silk blouse feels too tight, the skirt too short, the heels too precarious. I fidget, my hands twitching at my sides.

Simon steps back, tilting his head as he appraises me. “There. Now, shall I continue?”

I blink at him, unsure how to respond. How can I respond? My mouth is taped shut. I make a muffled noise, something between a question and a protest, but it comes out as a pathetic whimper.

He frowns, his eyebrows drawing together in disapproval. “The response is always yes, sir. No matter the circumstance.” His tone sharpens, cutting through the heavy silence. “You obviously need help concentrating on my words. On your knees.”

My eyes widen, and I let out a startled, muffled sound. What the hell is happening? If this were a normal job, I’d already be halfway to HR, ready to file the most epic lawsuit of my life. But it’s not a normal job. I’m here to spy on Simon, to gather evidence that he’s the one who broke into Silas’s office. I need to play along if I want to get what I came for.

I tell myself that’s why I’m sinking to my knees. It’s for my career. It’s for the payout from Silas. It’s for the chance to prove myself. But deep down, I know the truth. I’m kneeling because I want to. Because there’s something about the way he looms over me, his presence so commanding, that makes my body respond in ways I can’t control.

I look up at him from the floor, my hands trembling in my lap. He seems larger than life, like a parent disciplining a misbehaving child. And suddenly, all I want is to please him. The spying mission fades into the background, a distant thought drowned out by the heat pooling in my core.

“Enough fidgeting,” Simon says, his voice cutting through the air like a whip. “Put your hands behind your back and listen.”

My heart hammers a mile a minute in my chest. I mumble a muffled yes through the tape and slowly obey, clasping my hands behind my back. The position not only makes me feel utterly vulnerable and helpless, it also causes my breasts to thrust forward in a lewd manner, straining at the buttons of my shirt. I can feel the fabric pulling tight, the silk clinging to my skin in a way that’s both uncomfortable and electrifying.

Simon’s gaze lingers on my breasts for much longer than it needs to. He doesn’t bother to hide his interest in my body, his eyes darkening as they roam over me. I feel exposed, like he’s seeing straight through the fabric, straight through me. My cheeks burn, but I don’t look away. I can’t. His presence is too commanding, too magnetic.

He begins listing my job duties, his voice low and measured. “You’re to attend to my every need, at my beck and call night and day. If I need a report, you need to know how to fill it out, process it, and bring it back to me. If I need you to call one of my holdings and get a complete inventory, you need to know how to do that as well.”

He leans over, his face inches away from mine. His breath is warm against my skin, and I can feel the heat radiating off him. “Sometimes you will be making high-level business decisions on my behalf,” he says, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “And sometimes, your duty will be to fetch me a coffee, or give my shoulders a massage. Or go get my lunch. If you have a problem with any of this, the door is right there. Otherwise, I expect absolute obedience.”

I’m so close to orgasm I can barely hold myself back. My body is on fire, every nerve ending screaming for release. I know what he wants, but I’m afraid of what will happen if I say it. Afraid of what it means that I want to say it.

Finally, I can't put it off any longer. "Yes, Sir," I mumble behind the tape, the words muffled but clear enough. It's too much for me, and I cum hard, groaning behind the tape despite my efforts to remain quiet. I double over, but I don't break the position he put me in as my body heaves with ecstatic spasms.

"What in the world is wrong with you?" Simon snaps, his voice sharp and incredulous. "Get up and stop carrying on."

He takes me by the arms and pulls me to my feet. I continue to cum, squirting through my panties and drenching myself and the floor beneath us. My legs tremble, and I can barely stand, but Simon's grip is firm, holding me upright.

He realizes what's happened, and his face goes slack. He seems more embarrassed than I feel, if that's possible. His grip on my arms tightens for a moment before he releases me, stepping back like I've burned him.

"Clean this up," he mumbles, his voice uncharacteristically quiet. He turns on his heel and retreats into his private bathroom, leaving me standing there, trembling and soaked, the sound of the door closing behind him echoing in the silence.

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I shiver, the aftershocks still rippling through me as I stare at the mess on the floor. My legs feel like jelly, and my mind is a whirlwind of confusion and arousal. I grab a handful of paper napkins from the desk and kneel down, dabbing at the puddle I've left behind. The tape over my mouth is still in place, and I don't touch it. I don't want to. There's something thrilling about the idea of Simon being the one to remove it, about him having that control over me. It's a thought that sends another shiver down my spine.

But I can't let myself get lost in this. I have a mission. Silas is counting on me, and I'm not about to let him down. I finish cleaning up as best I can, tossing the damp napkins into the trash. My hands are trembling, but I force myself to focus. I need to find something—anything—that proves Simon is behind the corporate espionage.

I move to his desk, my heels clicking softly against the floor. The first few folders I open are filled with mundane business documents—contracts, financial reports, nothing out of the ordinary. But then I find a folder labeled *Veritas*. My heart skips a beat. This has to be it. I open it, and my stomach drops. The page is filled with symbols and characters I don't recognize. It's not any language I've ever seen. My mind races. Is this some kind of code? Is Simon involved in something bigger than corporate espionage? Could he be... a terrorist?

I pull out my phone and snap a quick picture of the page. My hands are shaking so badly I almost drop it. I need to get out of here. I need to think. But before I can move, I hear a noise from the private bathroom. My breath catches in my throat. Simon's still in there. I should leave. I should run. But curiosity gets the better of me. I creep toward the bathroom door, my heart pounding in my chest.

I push the door open just a crack, enough to see inside. My eyes widen, and my breath catches. Simon is sitting on the edge of the bathtub, his pants around his ankles, his hand moving furiously over his cock. But that's not what makes my heart stop. It's the fact that he doesn't look human anymore. His skin is covered in deep indigo scales, and his eyes—his eyes are a burning crimson. He's beautiful. Terrifying, but beautiful.

His eyes snap open, locking onto mine. I freeze, my body going rigid. For a moment, neither of us moves. Then his lips curl into a snarl, and I know I'm in trouble.

CHAPTER 5

SHOMUN

I yank my trousers up, the fabric scraping against my scales. My heart pounds, not from fear but from the sheer stupidity of the moment. Centuries of training, of subterfuge, and I let an untested human catch me like this—pants down, image inducer off, and my damn cock still half-hard.

Claire's standing there, her green eyes wide, mouth still covered with that strip of tape I'd used to silence her earlier. I move before she can react, my hand snapping out to grab her by the throat. Her pulse thrums against my palm, rapid but steady. She doesn't struggle.

"Why are you spying on me?" My voice rumbles low, a growl that would've sent most men running.

She tries to speak, but the tape muffles her words into unintelligible nonsense. Irritation flares—I'm the idiot here, not her. I rip the tape off, my claws catching just enough to make her wince.

“I wasn’t spying,” she gasps, her voice trembling. “I just—I heard something, I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Bullshit. Her eyes dart to the scales on my arm, the faint ridges of my face. She’s lying, but not entirely. I release her throat, and her hand drifts up to rub the spot where I held her.

Her fingers brush my arm then, light but deliberate. She traces the pattern of my scales, her touch soft enough to make my skin ripple in response.

“They’re real,” she breathes, her voice a mix of awe and fear. Her hand lingers, and I don’t stop her.

Her gaze lifts to mine, and for the first time, I see no fear in her eyes. Just curiosity.

“You’re real. But...what are you?”

She says it like she’s piecing together a puzzle, one she didn’t even know she was solving.

Claire stands there, her eyes locked on mine, her breath shallow but steady. The air between us feels thick, charged with something I can’t quite name. Her fingers linger on my arm, tracing the edges of my scales like she’s trying to memorize them. I should stop her. Veritas protocol demands it. But I don’t.

“What I am takes time to explain,” I finally say, my voice low and controlled. The image inducer hums faintly as it reestablishes my human disguise, the hologram settling over my scales like a second skin. Simon Karr stares back at her, graying hair and all, but the tension doesn’t dissipate.

She swallows hard, her throat bobbing with the motion, and pulls her hand away like

she's been burned. "I guess," she says slowly, her words careful, measured, "it doesn't matter as much what you are as who you are."

I growl, the sound rumbling deep in my chest. "Do not speak in riddles, human," I snap, my patience fraying. "What are you asking of me?"

Her gaze doesn't waver. If anything, it sharpens, like she's seeing me for the first time—really seeing me. For a moment, I wonder if she's as good at reading people as I thought she was during the interview. Or if she's just reckless enough to push me.

"I want to know if you have, you know," she starts, then hesitates, her cheeks flushing the faintest shade of pink. She swallows again, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Bad intentions."

Her words hang in the air, and for a second, I'm thrown. My mind spirals into dangerous territory, imagining all the ways I could have bad intentions with her. The kind that would make her blush even harder if she knew what I was thinking. I force the thoughts down, locking them away. This isn't the time.

"I am not here to hurt humanity," I say firmly, my voice steady even as my pulse quickens. "In fact, I'm here to help."

She doesn't look convinced. Her eyes narrow slightly, and she crosses her arms over her chest, a defensive gesture that doesn't quite match the curiosity in her gaze. "Help with what, exactly?"

I exhale sharply, my patience thinning. "That's classified."

"Classified?" she repeats, her tone laced with skepticism. "You're a walking, talking classified document, and you're expecting me to just take your word for it?"

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I step closer, towering over her. She doesn't back down, though. If anything, she tilts her chin up, like she's daring me to intimidate her. It's infuriating—and, I hate to admit, impressive.

“You signed a contract,” I remind her, my voice a low rumble. “You agreed to obey.”

Her lips part, a flicker of defiance in her eyes, but she doesn't argue. Instead, she nods slowly, like she's conceding the point—but not the fight.

“I did,” she says quietly. “But that doesn't mean I'm blind. Or stupid.”

I stare down at her, my mind racing. Veritas protocol demands I erase her memory or lock her up, but the thought of doing either makes my stomach churn. And not just because of the risk.

“Claire,” I say her name softly, almost a warning. “This isn't a game. The things I deal with—the things you've stumbled into—they're dangerous. You don't understand what's at stake.”

She doesn't flinch. “Then explain it to me.”

I bark out a laugh, sharp and humorless. “You're not cleared for that.”

Her eyes flash, and she takes a step closer, closing the distance between us.

“Well, maybe you should clear me,” she says, her voice firm. “Because I'm not going anywhere. Not until I get answers.”

The audacity of it—the sheer brazenness—catches me off guard. And then, before I can stop her, she reaches out, her fingers brushing the edge of my holographic disguise. Her touch is light, tentative, but it sends a jolt through me.

“Answers,” she repeats. “Or I start making some very loud phone calls.”

I grab her wrist, halting her movement, and her breath hitches again. My grip isn’t tight enough to hurt, but it’s firm enough to make her look up at me, her green eyes wide.

“Very well,” I say, not releasing her wrist. My voice is low, edged with the kind of authority that doesn’t leave room for debate. “I will attempt to explain it to you. But first, I must make sure you are not carrying concealed listening devices.”

She blinks up at me, her green eyes wide with something between indignation and panic. “You still don’t trust me?”

I snort, my lips curling into a sneer. “I trust one person in the entire galaxy.” My grip tightens just enough to make her flinch. “You’re looking at him.”

Claire doesn’t argue. She doesn’t fight. She lets me guide her to the glass wall of my office, her heels clicking against the polished floor. The city sprawls below us, a patchwork of neon lights and shadows. I release her wrist and step back, folding my arms across my chest.

“Hands on the glass,” I command, my voice sharp. “And spread your legs.”

She freezes for a moment, her back stiffening. Then, slowly, she complies. Her palms press against the cool surface, fingers splayed like she’s trying to steady herself. She shifts her weight, her feet sliding apart. The movement is hesitant, almost shy, but she does it.

“What are you doing, Sir?” Her voice is soft, trembling with a mix of fear and something else—something I can’t quite place. Anticipation? Eagerness? It’s maddening.

“I am about to reveal secrets which could level mountains,” I say, my tone clipped. “I must ensure you are not going to record what I say in any fashion.”

She lets out a shaky breath, her shoulders relaxing as her eyes squeeze shut.

“I understand, Sir,” she murmurs. “And I will obey.”

Damnation. My cock throbs at her words, heavy and insistent, and I grit my teeth. This isn’t the time. I force my attention back to the task at hand, stepping closer until I’m right behind her. My hands hover for a moment, then I start the search.

My palms glide along her arms first, slow and deliberate. The fabric of her blouse is smooth under my touch, but her heat exudes through the silken fabric. She tenses as I move inward, her breath quickening when my hands find her waist. Her chest rises and falls in a rhythm that matches my own pounding heartbeat.

I swallow hard, my throat dry. Focus, Shomun. This is business, not pleasure. I slide my hands down her hips, then back up, my fingers splayed to cover as much ground as possible. If she’s carrying Grolgath tech, I’ll find it. Their devices are subtle, but they’re not invisible.

I glance up to see her reflection in the glass. Her eyes are still closed, her lips parted just enough to let out soft, uneven breaths. Her cheeks are flushed, her skin glowing in the dim light. I can’t tell if it’s fear or something else that’s making her react like this, but it’s distracting.

“Stay still,” I growl, my voice rougher than I intend. My hands move lower,

skimming the curve of her hips and down her thighs. Her skirt clings to her legs, the fabric whispering against my palms. She's trembling now, her fingers twitching against the glass.

"Sir," she whispers, and there's that tone again—that mix of fear and something else. It's driving me mad.

"Quiet," I snap, though my voice lacks its usual edge. My hands move back up, skimming the sides of her torso and tracing the curve of her ribs. She's soft, warm, and every inch of her feels like a distraction I don't need right now.

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My hands glide back up her legs, the fabric of her skirt whispering against my palms. She's trembling, her breath hitching as I reach the sensitive skin of her inner thighs. Her gasp is sharp, her body flinching involuntarily. I don't stop. I can't. Not yet.

"Hold still," I snap, my voice low and commanding. My hand comes down on her backside with a sharp crack, the sound echoing in the quiet office. She sucks in a ragged breath, her moan escaping before she can stifle it. Her hips press back into me, and I feel the heat of her through the layers of fabric. My cock throbs in response, and I grit my teeth, forcing myself to focus.

My hands move up her torso, skimming the curve of her waist, the dip of her ribs. She's clean—I know she is. No Grolgath tech, no hidden devices. But I don't stop. I can't. Not yet. My fingers brush the underside of her breasts, and her breath stops entirely. I hesitate, my own breathing uneven, my heart pounding in my chest. This is a line. A major one. And I've just crossed it.

Her response isn't what I expect. She doesn't pull away, doesn't protest. Instead, she arches her back, pressing her bottom into my crotch with a deliberate, almost defiant motion. Her hands stay on the glass, her fingers splayed wide, but her body speaks volumes. She's crossed a line of her own, and she's daring me to follow.

I drop one hand from her breast, letting it trail down her stomach, past the waistband of her skirt. My fingers brush the soft skin of her inner thigh, and she shudders, her breath coming in shallow gasps. I'm so close, so damn close, when the door buzzes.

"Your Six AM meeting is here, Sir," Miranda's voice crackles over the intercom, sharp and businesslike.

I freeze, my hand hovering just above the heat of her. Claire's body goes rigid, her breath catching in her throat. For a moment, neither of us moves. Then I step back, my hands falling to my sides. The image inducer hums faintly as it reestablishes my human disguise, the hologram settling over my scales like a second skin.

"Clean yourself up," I say, my voice rough. "And be ready to work."

She doesn't respond, her hands still pressed against the glass. I turn away, my jaw clenched, and head for the door. My cock aches, my body screaming for release, but I force it down. This isn't the time. Not yet.

CHAPTER 6

CLARICE

Simon strides across the office, his scaled form still glinting under the harsh fluorescent lights. I watch him, my heart pounding, my body still humming with the memory of his hands on me. My panties are soaked, and the smell of it—God, he must know. He must know what he did to me, how he made me feel.

I smooth my skirt, trying to pull myself together. My fingers brush against the damp fabric, and I wince. Focus, Claire. Focus. You're supposed to be spying on him, not... whatever the hell this is.

"Clarice." His voice is low, commanding, snapping me out of my thoughts. I look up, and he's standing by the door, one clawed hand resting on the frame. "Clean yourself up. We'll discuss this later."

"Yes, Sir," I say, my voice trembling. He doesn't move, just stares at me with those crimson eyes, unblinking. I can't tell if he's angry or... something else. My cheeks burn as I realize I'm still standing here, my legs shaky, my body betraying me. I force

myself to move, grabbing a tissue from his desk to wipe the floor.

Simon watches me for a moment longer, then toys with the fancy watch on his wrist. His form shimmers and returns to a human guise.

What the hell is he? And why does it make him even hotter? I should be horrified. I should be running to Silas right now, telling him everything. But the thought of Silas's fake smile, his plastic-perfect face, makes my stomach twist.

I glance at the file on the desk—Veritas. The strange writing I saw earlier. My fingers itch to open it, to dig deeper, but Simon could come back any second. And if he catches me...

"Get it together, Claire," I mutter to myself. I smooth my skirt again, and start toward the bathroom. I need to clean up, to look presentable before I face him again. But as I walk, I can't stop thinking about his scales, his eyes, the way he pinned me against the window. My body reacts, shuddering from head to toe.

When I reach the bathroom, I splash cold water on my face, staring at my reflection in the mirror. My cheeks are flushed, my green eyes wide and glassy. I look... different. Like I've been cracked open and put back together wrong.

"You're supposed to be spying on him," I whisper to myself. "Not... not this." But the truth is, I don't care about Silas's stupid mission anymore. I want to know more about Simon. I want to know what he is, where he's from, and why he's here. And I want him to touch me again.

The thought makes me lightheaded. I press my thighs together, trying to stifle the heat pooling there. This is insane. I'm insane. But even as I think it, I know I'm not going to stop. Whatever game Simon is playing, I'm all in.

I step out of the bathroom, my skirt smoothed, my hair tamed, and my face composed into something resembling professionalism. My hands are still trembling, but I tuck them behind my back as I approach the lounge area where Simon is sitting with a man I don't recognize. The man's skin is an unnatural shade of orange, and his smile is too wide, too fake. He's the kind of guy who probably brushes his teeth with champagne and calls it "grinding."

"Mr. Coyle," Simon says, gesturing to the man, who rises and shakes my hand with a grip that's a little too enthusiastic. "Meet my assistant, Ms. Redding."

"Claire," I say, forcing a smile that feels just as plastic as Bill's. "Pleasure."

"The pleasure's all mine," Bill says, his gaze sweeping over me in a way that makes my skin crawl. I glance at Simon, but his expression is unreadable, his gray eyes cool and detached.

"Ms. Redding, could you bring us some coffee?"

"Yes, Sir," I say, inclining my head slightly before hurrying toward the coffee station. I can feel Simon's eyes on me as I move, and it feels glorious, and wrong, and perfect.

I prepare the coffee with shaky hands, my mind racing. Focus, Claire. Focus. You're here for a reason. But every time I close my eyes, I see his scales, his red eyes, the way he pinned me against the window. My cheeks flush, and I try to steady myself.

When I return with the coffee, Bill is in mid-pitch, his voice slick and confident. "This Indonesian startup is the next big thing, Simon. Blockchain meets AI meets renewable energy. It's a goldmine."

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Simon sips his coffee, his expression neutral. “Interesting,” he says, his tone implying the exact opposite. He glances at me, and I feel the weight of his command without him saying a word. I step behind his chair, my hands clasped behind my back, my posture rigid.

“You know,” Bill says, leaning back in his chair and gesturing toward the window, “you might want to fire your window washer. Those handprints are inexcusable.”

My heart skips a beat, and I feel the heat rising in my cheeks. I glance at Simon, and his eyes meet mine for the briefest of moments. There’s something in his gaze—a flicker of heat, a memory of what happened—and I have to look away. My fingers press into the fabric of my skirt as I stand there, trying to maintain my composure.

“Noted,” Simon says dryly, his attention shifting back to Bill. “Please, continue.”

Bill launches back into his pitch, but my mind is elsewhere. I’m replaying the moment Simon taped my mouth shut, the way he made me kneel, the way he touched me. I clench my hands tighter behind my back, trying to ground myself.

Then Bill says something that snaps me out of my reverie. “And with the right investment, we could see returns of 300% within the first year.”

“He’s lying,” I blurt out, then immediately regret it. Both men turn to look at me, and I feel the weight of their combined gazes. Bill’s fake smile falters, and Simon’s eyebrows rise slightly.

“Excuse me?” Bill says, his tone sharp.

“I—I mean,” I stammer, my mind racing. “I’ve seen the numbers for similar startups. The returns are... overstated.”

Simon’s lips twitch, and I can’t tell if he’s amused or annoyed. Bill’s face turns a deeper shade of orange, and he leans forward, his fake smile replaced with a scowl. “And what would you know about it, Ms. Redding?”

I open my mouth to respond, but Simon cuts me off. “Ms. Redding has a keen eye for detail,” he says, his voice calm but firm. “If she says the numbers are off, I’m inclined to believe her.”

Bill sits back, clearly unhappy but unwilling to argue. I feel a small thrill of victory, but it’s tempered by the knowledge that I’ve just made things more complicated for myself. Simon’s gaze shifts to me, and there’s something in his eyes—approval? Curiosity? I can’t tell. But whatever it is, it makes my heart race all over again.

Bill pulls out his tablet, the screen glowing with charts and graphs that look like they were designed to confuse rather than clarify. He swipes through them with the confidence of a man who’s convinced he’s the smartest person in the room. Simon leans back in his chair, his fingers steepled, his expression unreadable. But I can see it—the slight twitch of his lips, the way his eyes narrow just a fraction. He’s not buying it either.

“As you can see,” Bill says, his voice dripping with self-importance, “the projected ROI is astronomical. We’re talking 300% within the first year. That’s not just good—that’s revolutionary.”

Simon doesn’t say anything, just raises an eyebrow. Bill takes it as an invitation to keep going. He launches into a spiel about blockchain, AI, and renewable energy, throwing around buzzwords like confetti. I’m half-expecting him to start talking about synergy and disruption any second now.

When he finally finishes, he turns to me, his fake smile plastered across his orange face. “It’s all pretty technical, darling,” he says with a wink. “But do you get the gist?”

I don’t miss a beat. “I get that you confused baffling bullshit with amazing intellect,” I reply dryly.

Simon gasps. Bill sputters, his face turning a deeper shade of orange. For a moment, I think I’ve overstepped. But then Simon lets out a deep, rumbling laugh that fills the room.

“I was thinking much the same thing,” Simon says, still chuckling. “But I could not have put it so succinctly, yet eloquently.” He turns to Bill, his expression hardening. “I’m sorry, Mr. Coyle, but you’ve wasted your time. I have no interest in investing in your startup.”

Bill’s face contorts with anger. He gathers his things, his movements jerky and aggressive. As he passes me, he glares, his voice low and venomous. “Thanks for nothing, bitch.”

Before I can react, Simon is on his feet. In one fluid motion, he grabs Bill by the arm, twisting it behind his back and forcing him to his knees. Bill lets out a yelp of pain, his tablet clattering to the floor.

“You will address my staff with the same respect you afford me,” Simon says, his voice low and menacing. His grip tightens, and Bill winces.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Bill stammers, his voice high-pitched and panicked. “I didn’t mean it!”

Simon releases him with a shove, and Bill scrambles to his feet, grabbing his tablet

and bolting for the door. He doesn't look back.

I stand there, my heart racing, my body buzzing with adrenaline. I should be scared—Simon just manhandled a guy like it was nothing. But all I can think about is the way he defended me, the way he didn't hesitate to put Bill in his place. It's... hot. God, it's so hot.

Simon turns to me, his expression unreadable. "Are you all right?" he asks, his voice calm, almost gentle.

I nod, my throat dry. "Yes, Sir."

He studies me for a moment, then nods. "Good. Let's get back to work."

CHAPTER7

CLARICE

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Simon gestures to the couch in the lounge area, his human disguise flickering out like a dying lightbulb. His true form emerges—deep indigo scales, crimson eyes, the kind of raw power that makes my stomach flip. “Sit,” he says, his voice low but firm.

I hover for a moment, my brain caught between two thoughts: Does he want to talk, or does he want to pull me into his lap? And the more dangerous question: Which do I want?

I sit, my skirt riding up slightly as I perch on the edge of the couch. Simon settles beside me, his massive frame taking up most of the space. His tail—no, wait, Vakutans don’t have tails. His thigh brushes against mine, and I can feel the heat radiating off him.

“You’ve seen me,” he begins, his voice gravelly. “My true form. That means I have to explain some things. Things that could get me—and you—killed if the wrong people find out.”

I nod, trying to keep my breathing steady. My hands are clenched in my lap, my nails digging into my palms. “I’m listening.”

He leans forward, his elbows resting on his knees. “We’re not just displaced in space, Claire. We’re displaced in time. My people, the Vakutans, we’re from the future. A future where the galaxy is at war. A war that’s lasted centuries.”

I swallow hard. “A war? With who?”

“The Ataxian Coalition,” he says, the words sharp, like they leave a bad taste in his

mouth. “Religious zealots. Fanatics. They believe their way is the only way, and they’ll burn entire worlds to prove it. The Grolgath, the lizard-like creatures you probably saw in my file, are their foot soldiers.”

I blink, trying to process this. “And... you? Where do you fit into this?”

“We’re with the Trident Alliance,” he says, his voice tinged with pride. “We fight to keep the galaxy free. But during a battle with the Grolgath, something went wrong. A thousand of us, and an unknown number of them, got thrown back in time. To here. To now.”

“The nineties,” I whisper. “So all of this—you, the Grolgath—you’re stuck here?”

He nods. “The Grolgath want to change humanity’s future. They want Earth to side with the Ataxians, not the Alliance. And if they succeed, the galaxy burns. So we fight them. In secret. To protect your timeline.”

I sit back, my mind reeling. Aliens. Time travel. Galactic wars. It’s like something out of a sci-fi movie, but the weight of his words feels too real to dismiss. My gaze shifts to his scales, the way they catch the light, the faint shimmer of indigo. He’s telling the truth. I can feel it in my bones.

“So,” I say slowly, “you’re the good guys.”

He chuckles, a deep, rumbling sound that sends shivers down my spine. “We like to think so. But I suppose that’s subjective.”

I chew on my lower lip, a nervous habit I’ve never been able to break. “Simon—Shomun—whatever your name is. I believe you. But... no one thinks of themselves as the villain. How do I know you’re not just manipulating me? That you’re not using me to further some agenda I don’t understand?”

His eyes narrow, and for a moment, I think I've pushed too far. But then he leans back, his gaze never leaving mine. "Fair question," he says, his tone softer than I expect. "But I'm not here to manipulate you, Claire. I'm here to protect you. All of you. And right now, that means trusting me. Even if it's hard."

I look at him, really look at him. His scales, his eyes, the way he carries himself like a predator at ease. He's dangerous. He's terrifying. And yet, I feel safer with him than I have with anyone else in my life.

"Okay," I say finally. "But you have to promise me one thing."

His eyebrow arches. "And what's that?"

"No more secrets. If I'm going to trust you, I need to know everything."

He studies me for a long moment, then nods. "Deal."

Simon shifts in his chair, the leather creaking under his weight. His human disguise flickers for a moment, revealing the faintest shimmer of indigo scales before it stabilizes again. "My corporation," he begins, his voice steady but laced with something deeper, "isn't just about profit. It's a front. The money funds Veritas, Project Veritas. It's how we fight the Grolgath here, in your time."

I tilt my head, studying him. "So, the billionaire playboy act—it's just a cover?"

He smirks, a flash of sharp teeth behind his human veneer. "A necessary one. I used to fight on the battlefield. Bombs, plasma rifles, starship skirmishes. Now, I fight in the boardroom. Briefcases instead of bombs. Not as glamorous, but just as crucial. The business has to be a success, Claire. The fate of humanity depends on it."

I lean forward, my elbows resting on the edge of his desk. "Okay, I get that. It's big.

It's important. But what about me? Am I in danger just by working for you?"

His expression darkens, and for the first time, I see a flicker of hesitation in his crimson eyes. "Yes," he admits, his voice rough. "The Grolgath are ruthless. They won't hesitate to use you if they think you know something. If they suspect you're connected to Veritas, your life could be at risk."

I swallow hard, my throat dry. "So, what are my options?"

"You can walk away," he says, his tone softening slightly. "If you do, I'll release you from your contract. But you must promise—on your life—never to reveal what you've learned. Not to anyone."

I glance down at my hands, the contract still fresh in my mind. Walking away would mean quitting both Simon's employ and Silas's spy mission. It would mean leaving behind the strange, exhilarating pull Simon has on me. The way he makes me feel seen, understood, even when he's barking orders at me.

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And then there's the curiosity. Aliens. Time travel. A secret war. How could I walk away from that? How could I go back to pretending like none of this exists?

"I'm staying," I say, my voice firm. "I want to keep working for you."

Simon's eyes widen, just for a moment, before he schools his expression back into its usual stern mask. But I catch it—the flicker of satisfaction, maybe even relief. He leans forward, his massive frame dwarfing the desk between us. "Very well. But understand this: nothing about me being an alien changes the terms of your contract. You still belong to me. You will still do what I say, when I say it. No excuses."

A smile tugs at the corners of my lips. "I will obey."

I see the way his fingers tighten on the edge of the desk. He's trying to keep his composure, but I've already learned how to read him. That simple phrase, those three words, they get under his scales. And it thrills me to know I have that power over him, even as he holds so much over me.

"Good," he says finally, his voice low and gravelly. "Now, back to work. We've got a meeting in ten minutes, and I expect you to be prepared."

I stand, smoothing down my skirt. "Yes, Sir."

He doesn't respond, but I catch the way his jaw tightens, the way his eyes linger on me for just a moment too long. I've got him. And he's got me. It's a dangerous game, but I'm already in too deep to walk away.

I'm at the printer, the rhythmic hum of the machine almost hypnotic as it spits out the last of the reports for the meeting. My hands are steady, but my mind is anything but. Aliens. Time travel. A galactic war. And Simon—Shomun. His scales, his eyes, the way he'd looked at me when he caught me peeking in the bathroom. I'm not sure what's more surreal: the fact that he's an alien, or the fact that I'm attracted to him. Toit. Tohim.

The printer finishes with a final whir, and I gather the warm sheets of paper, stacking them neatly. My skirt brushes against my thighs as I turn, and I can't help but think of the way Shomun's hand had felt on my leg during that thorough search. I swallow hard, my cheeks flushing.

I hear the heavy tread of his footsteps behind me before I see him. I don't need to turn around to know it's him. The air shifts when he's near, like the calm before a storm.

"The reports," I say, holding them out without looking at him. My voice is steady, but my hand isn't.

He takes them, his fingers brushing mine, and I bite my lip to keep from reacting. "Good," he says. "You're efficient. I like that."

I finally risk a glance up at him. His human disguise is flawless today, not a hint of indigo peeking through. But I know it's there, just beneath the surface. I wonder if he's thinking about it too—about what happened earlier. About the way I'd said I will obey, the way he'd touched me, the way I'd?—

"Claire," he says, snapping me out of my thoughts. His tone is sharp, but there's something else there. Something that makes my stomach flip. "Focus. The meeting starts in five minutes."

"Yes, Sir," I say automatically, the words slipping out before I can stop them. His jaw

tightens, and I see the way his eyes darken, just for a moment. He likes it when I call him that. I know he does.

He steps closer, his presence overwhelming. “This meeting is with a potential investor. He’s human, but he’s... questionable. I need you to observe. Watch for tells. I’ll handle the rest.”

I nod, clutching the edge of the printer for support. “Understood.”

He doesn’t move. “Claire,” he says, his voice softer now, almost hesitant. “About earlier...”

My breath catches. Here it is. Finally. I look up at him, my heart pounding. “Yes?”

He hesitates, his gaze searching mine. Then he shakes his head, the moment passing as quickly as it came. “Never mind. To the conference room. Now.”

I exhale, disappointment and relief warring inside me. “Yes, Sir.”

As I follow him down the hall, I can’t help but wonder if he’s as shaken as I am. If the thought of me—of us—is as impossible and tantalizing to him as it is to me. But I don’t ask. I just walk, my heels clicking against the polished floor, and try to ignore the heat that’s already pooling low in my belly.

CHAPTER8

SHOMUN

The lights of Dubai flicker to life outside the floor-to-ceiling windows of the suite, a glittering sprawl of ambition and excess. I sit in the dimly lit living area, the report in my hands, my jaw tight. The city’s glow does nothing to soothe my mood. Two days.

Two days I've been kept waiting by John Flair, the Australian representative for the rare earth mining company. It's a power play, and I despise it. Veritas needs those minerals, but I won't let him think he has the upper hand.

My thoughts drift to Claire, as they often do. She's in the kitchenette, the faint clink of porcelain betraying her presence. She's been quiet since we arrived, reserved as always, but there's something about her—a sharpness, a hidden fire that surfaces when she's relaxed. I find myself drawn to it, to her. It's a distraction I can't afford, not now. Not ever.

I force my attention back to the report she prepared. My eyes scan the pages, my mind demanding precision. And then I see it—a typo. A single misplaced decimal point. Minor, perhaps, but to me, it's an affront. My frustration boils over.

“Ms. Redding!” My voice cuts through the quiet like a whip. “Get in here.”

She appears almost instantly, her heels clicking against the marble floor. Her honey-blond hair is pulled back, her green eyes wide with concern. She's holding a cup of coffee, steam curling lazily from the surface. She sets it down on the table in front of me, her movements careful, deliberate.

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“Yes, Sir?” Her voice is calm, but I catch the faintest tremor.

I hold up the report, my finger jabbing at the offending number. “What is this?”

She leans in, her brow furrowing as she studies the page. “It’s the projected yield for the mining operation. Why?”

“Why?” My tone is sharp, and I see her flinch. “Because it’s wrong. A decimal point out of place. Do you know what happens if we base our negotiations on flawed data?”

She straightens, her chin lifting slightly. “I’ll fix it immediately.”

“You’ll fix it?” I rise from my chair, towering over her. “This isn’t a first-year accounting class, Ms. Redding. This is Veritas. Mistakes like this could cost us everything.”

Her cheeks flush, but she doesn’t look away. “I understand, Sir. It won’t happen again.”

“Ms. Redding,” I growl, my voice low and deliberate, “I will make sure that it does not happen again.” She doesn’t flinch, damn her. There’s a calmness to her that’s almost infuriating. She should be trembling, should be apologizing profusely. Instead, she’s standing there, her green eyes steady, her lips slightly parted as if she’s about to say something she knows I won’t like.

I point to the window. “Over there. Kneel. Hands behind your back.”

Her chin lifts just a fraction, and she obeys without a word. She kneels on the plush carpet, framed by the glittering Dubai skyline, her hands clasped behind her back. Her posture is perfect, her skirt riding up just enough to reveal the curve of her thighs. My jaw tightens. She's too composed, too... serene. It's as if she's enjoying this. And that thought only makes my anger burn hotter.

I grab the report and press it against the glass. "Lean forward. Nose to the decimal point. Hold it there."

She leans forward, her breath fogging the glass slightly as she places her face against the paper. "Yes, Sir," she murmurs, her voice soft but unyielding. There's a... something in her tone that I can't quite place. Something that sets my nerves on fire.

I step behind her, towering over her kneeling form. My fingers twitch, wanting to reach out, to grab her, to shake her until she understands the gravity of her mistake. But I don't. I stand there, my chest rising and falling with controlled breaths, watching her.

"If you drop that paper," I say, my voice like gravel, "I'll have to discipline you further."

She doesn't respond right away, and the silence stretches between us like a live wire. Then, in that same soft, infuriatingly calm voice, she says, "I'm sorry I failed to perform for you, Sir."

My hand clenches into a fist, and I'm suddenly aware of the heat pooling low in my abdomen. My cock stirs, pressing against the fabric of my trousers. I grit my teeth, trying to will it away, but the image of her kneeling there, obedient and yet somehow defiant, sends a jolt of arousal through me.

I reach down, my fingers brushing against the bulge in my pants. I shouldn't do this.

She's my subordinate, my responsibility. But I can't help it. The thoughts come unbidden—images of her on her knees, my hand fisted in her hair, her lips wrapped around me...

The phone on the table rings, shattering the moment. I curse under my breath and step away, my hand dropping to my side. I glance at the caller ID—John Flair. Damn it. I can't ignore this.

I look down at Claire, still kneeling, still holding the report against the glass. "Stay there," I snap, my voice harsher than I intended. She doesn't move, doesn't even twitch.

I snatch the phone off the table and answer it, my voice clipped. "Flair. You're late."

"Ah, Simon, mate!" John Flair's voice crackles through the phone, too cheerful, too smooth. "Deepest apologies for the delay. You know how it is—time zones and all that. Bloody nightmare."

I grit my teeth, pacing the room. Claire kneels by the window, her silhouette framed by the glittering Dubai skyline. Her hands are behind her back, her posture obedient, but I know her better now. She's watching me, calculating. Always calculating. "Cut the pleasantries, Flair. You're three days late. What's the holdup?"

"Well, you see, Simon," he drawls, "we've had a wee chat with the board, and, uh, seven billion seems to be the magic number."

I stop pacing. Seven billion? The company's barely worth one. My hand clenches around the phone. "Seven billion? Are you drunk, or just delusional?"

He chuckles, a sound that makes my scales itch. "Now, now, no need for that tone. Why don't you make me a new offer, eh? Something more... reasonable."

My eyes flick back to Claire. She's shifted slightly, her knees clearly aching, but she's holding her position. Good. She needs to learn. I walk over, my boots silent on the marble floor, and place a hand on her shoulder. She flinches, nearly dropping the paper pressed against the glass.

"Careful," I murmur, my voice low. "Hold it steady."

"Yes, Sir," she whispers, her voice soft but tinged with defiance.

I let my hand slide down her arm, feeling the warmth of her skin through the fabric of her blouse. My fingers trail over her side, and I cup her breast. She inhales sharply, her back arching ever so slightly. I feel her nipple harden under my palm, and a soft moan escapes her lips.

"Simon?" Flair's voice pulls me back. "You still there?"

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“Yes,” I say, the heat pooling in my gut. “Let’s talk numbers. Your operation is hemorrhaging cash, and your assets are overvalued. Two billion. Final offer.”

“Two billion?” he sputters. “That’s a bloody insult!”

I squeeze Claire’s breast, my thumb brushing over her nipple. She stifles another moan, her breath fogging the glass. “Two billion, or I walk. And trust me, Flair, no one else is going to touch that sinking ship of yours.”

There’s a long pause on the other end of the line. Finally, he sighs. “Alright, alright. Two billion. But you’re a hard man, Simon Karr.”

“I know,” I say, ending the call.

The moment the phone is down, I hear a softflop. Claire’s dropped the paper. She turns her head slightly, her green eyes meeting mine. “I dropped it, Sir. I’m sorry. I’ll accept whatever punishment you think is appropriate.”

Her tone is apologetic, but there’s a glint in her eyes that tells me she’s not sorry at all. I step closer, my hand still resting on her breast, and lean down until my lips are inches from her ear. “You’re testing me, aren’t you?”

“Never, Sir,” she murmurs, though the slight curve of her lips says otherwise.

I grip her chin, forcing her to look up at me. “You think you can play games with me, Claire?”

“No, Sir. I just... I thought you’d want to know if I made a mistake.”

“A mistake, yes,” I growl, my free hand sliding down her side, over her hip. “But this feels more like a provocation.”

She doesn’t answer, but her eyes say everything. She’s testing boundaries, seeing how far she can push me. And damn it, it’s working. My cock aches, demanding attention, and the way she’s looking at me—submissive but daring—only makes it worse.

“You’ll regret this,” I say, my voice low and dangerous.

She tilts her head slightly, her lips parting. “Will I, Sir?”

I sit back in my chair, the leather creaking under my weight, and snap my fingers sharply. “Get over here, Ms. Redding.”

Claire hesitates for a fraction of a second before stepping forward, her green eyes locking with mine. “Yes, Sir,” she replies, her voice steady but laced with something else—curiosity, maybe. Or anticipation.

She’s standing in front of me now, her hands clasped loosely at her sides, her posture perfect. I can see the faintest tremor in her lower lip, though she’s trying to hide it. I reach out, grab her wrist, and pull her down over my lap in one swift motion. She gasps, her hands instinctively bracing against the floor to steady herself. Her skirt rides up, revealing the delicate lace of her panties. I take a moment to admire the view—her ass is a work of art, round and firm, begging for my attention.

“Attention to detail is very important,” I say. My hand comes down with a sharp crack against her right cheek. She cries out, her body jerking in surprise, and I feel a surge of satisfaction at the way her skin flushes under my palm.

I spank her again, this time on the other side. Her moan this time is different, deeper, more vocal. I can feel her warmth through the thin fabric of her panties, and it's intoxicating. I increase the force of the next strike, and she practically keens, her hips lifting slightly, her body arching into the impact.

She's squirming now, her legs shifting restlessly, and I can't resist the urge any longer. My hand caresses her reddening flesh, the heat of her skin seeping into my palm. She bucks again, and my fingers slide between her legs, brushing against the damp fabric of her panties. Soaked. She's soaked.

I tug the lace aside, my fingers finding her wet, slick folds. She gasps, her body tensing, and I slip a finger inside her. She's so soft, so warm, and I can feel her clenching around me. I add a second finger, then a third, working her with a precision that makes her writhe on my lap.

"Please," she moans, her voice trembling.

"Please what?" I growl, my thumb circling her clit.

"Please, more fingers... Sir," she begs, her hips rocking against my hand.

I oblige, stretching her with my fingers, feeling her body respond to every movement. Her breath comes in short, sharp gasps, and I know she's close. I lean down, my lips brushing against her ear as I whisper, "Cum for me, Claire."

Her body tightens, her back arching as she comes undone, her cries muffled against the armrest of the chair. I keep my fingers inside her, feeling her muscles clench and release as the aftershocks ripple through her.

When she finally stills, I lift her up, pulling her back to sit on my lap. Her body is still trembling, her chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. I lean in, my lips grazing

her ear as I whisper, “Clarice, I want to be inside of you.”

She doesn’t respond with words. Instead, she grinds her bottom against my hardening cock, her body still warm and sensitive from her release. I groan, my hands tightening on her hips as I press her closer.

CHAPTER9

CLARICE

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Shomun's hands grip my waist, his scaled fingers pressing into my skin as he lifts me effortlessly into the air. My breath catches, and I bite my lower lip, the heat of his gaze searing through me. He sets me down in front of his chair, and I instinctively reach to pull my skirt down, my cheeks burning.

His hand snaps out, catching my wrist in a grip that's firm but not painful. "Did I say you could cover yourself?" His voice is low, commanding.

"No, Sir," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper. My heart pounds in my chest, the sound of it almost deafening in the silence of the room.

"Turn around," he orders, and I obey without hesitation, my body moving on its own. I face away from him, my back to his chair, his gaze on me. "Bend over. Grab your ankles."

I do as he says, bending at the waist and reaching for my ankles. The position is intimate, vulnerable, and I squeeze my eyes shut, my face burning with a mix of embarrassment and arousal. My skirt rides up, exposing me completely, the cool air of the room against my skin.

Shomun's chair creaks as he leans forward, his body close to mine. His hand brushes against my thigh, and I flinch, my fingers tightening around my ankles. "Stay still," he growls.

I force myself to hold the position, my muscles trembling with the effort. His fingers trail up my thigh, and I bite back a whimper, my body responding to his touch despite my embarrassment. His hand moves higher, the roughness of his scales against my

skin, a stark contrast to the smoothness of his human disguise.

“You’re mine, Claire,” he murmurs, his voice thick with desire. “Every part of you belongs to me.”

I nod, unable to speak, my breath coming in short, shallow gasps. His fingers brush against the sensitive skin between my thighs, and I jerk, a soft moan escaping my lips. He chuckles, a deep, throaty sound that sends a jolt of heat through me.

“Good girl,” he says, his voice filled with approval. His fingers press against me, and I gasp, my body arching into his touch. He teases me, his fingers moving in slow, deliberate circles, the tension building inside me, coiling tighter and tighter.

“Shomun,” I whisper, my voice trembling with need. His name feels foreign on my tongue, but it’s the only thing I can think of, the only thing that matters in this moment.

“Yes, Claire?” he asks, his voice soft, almost gentle. His fingers continue their slow, maddening exploration, and I can feel myself on the edge, teetering on the brink of...what?

“Please,” I beg, my voice breaking. I don’t know what I’m asking for, but I know I need it, need him.

He chuckles again, the sound sending a shiver down my spine. “Patience, little one,” he murmurs, his fingers stilling for a moment. “We have all the time in the world.”

I whimper, my body trembling with need, and he laughs softly, his fingers resuming their slow, torturous exploration. I can feel the tension building inside me, coiling tighter and tighter, until I’m sure I’ll shatter into a million pieces.

“Shomun,” I whisper again, my voice barely audible. He doesn’t respond, but his fingers press harder, and I gasp, my body arching into his touch. The tension inside me snaps, and I cry out, my body convulsing as waves of pleasure crash over me.

He holds me steady, his hands firm on my hips as I ride out the waves of pleasure. When it finally subsides, I collapse forward, my hands still gripping my ankles, my body trembling with the aftershocks.

“Good girl,” he murmurs again, his voice filled with satisfaction. I struggle to catch my breath. “Now, let’s see how well you can obey when I’m inside you.”

Shomun’s breath is hot against my skin as his scaled fingers trace the curve of my backside. I shiver, my hips pressing forward instinctively, even as I try to stay still. My heart hammers so loud I’m sure he can hear it.

“Open your legs wider,” he growls, his voice low and commanding. It vibrates through me, sending a jolt straight to my core. My knees tremble as I obey, spreading myself wider for him. The cool air brushes against my most intimate places, and I wince at the exposure.

“Good girl.” His approval sends a rush of warmth through me, even as my face burns with shame. I shouldn’t like this. I shouldn’t want this. But I do. I do.

His tongue flickers against me, hot and rough, and I gasp, my back arching. The ties around my wrists and ankles pull taut, keeping me in place. His fingers dig into my hips as he tastes me, his growls growing louder, more impatient.

“You’re wet,” he murmurs against me, his breath sending shivers through my body. “Is this how you obey, Claire? Already so eager for me?”

I choke on a whimper. “Yes, Sir.”

His laughter is dark, rumbling against my skin. “Good. You’ll need to be ready for what comes next.”

His tongue plunges deeper, and I cry out, my hands clenching into fists. The leather belt bites into my wrist, but I barely notice the pain. My world narrows to the heat of his mouth, the pressure building inside me with every stroke of his tongue.

“Please,” I gasp, my voice trembling. “Please, don’t stop.”

He pulls back, and I feel the cold absence of him. I twist my head, trying to see him, but he’s already moving. His hands grip my waist, lifting me effortlessly. I’m spun around, my back pressed against the cool surface of his desk. His red eyes burn into mine, his scaled chest rising and falling with his breath.

“You’re mine, Claire,” he growls, his voice raw with need. “Never forget that.”

I nod, my throat too tight to speak. His hand slides between my legs, cupping me possessively. I gasp, my hips jerking against his touch.

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“Do you want this?” His voice is low, dangerous.

“Yes.” The word is a whisper, but it’s enough.

His lips crash against mine, fierce and demanding. I kiss him back, clinging to him as his hands explore my body. His scales are smooth and cool under my fingers, a stark contrast to the heat of his mouth.

He pulls back, his eyes blazing. “Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” I breathe, the words pouring out of me like a prayer. “Always.”

His growl is fierce, victorious. His hands grip my thighs, spreading me wider. I feel the blunt pressure of him at my entrance, and I whimper, my body trembling with anticipation.

“Look at me,” he commands, his voice rough.

I open my eyes, meeting his crimson gaze. And then he’s inside me, filling me so completely I cry out, my back arching off the desk. He grinds into me slowly, his eyes never leaving mine.

“You’re mine,” he repeats, his voice like a vow. And I believe him.

CHAPTER10

SHOMUN

The briefing room hums with the low thrum of machinery embedded in the translucent walls of Veritas Base Alpha. Pyke stares, his crimson scales gleaming under the artificial light, arms crossed over his chest. His brow ridges raise slightly as he waits for my report. I've barely started when my compad buzzes in my pocket. The screen lights up with a text from Claire: "Miss you. When are you coming back?"

I clear my throat, sliding the compad back into my pocket. "Grolgath activity in New Orleans remains minimal. A few sightings, but no base located yet. They're laying low, which makes me uneasy."

Pyke's eyes narrow. "They're laying low because they're planning something. You remember what happened the last time they focused on New Orleans, don't you?"

The memory hits me like a tidal wave—black water surging over the city, the screams of humans drowned out by the roar of the flood. My fists clench involuntarily. "I still have nightmares about it. We can't let that happen again."

"Agreed." Pyke steeples his fingers, the sharp tips of his claws tapping together. "I'll dispatch a couple of scout teams to keep watch. We can't afford to be caught off guard."

My compad buzzes again. This time, it's a photo. Claire's honey-blond hair frames her face as she lifts her skirt, revealing a pair of lace panties. My throat tightens, and I force my expression to remain neutral.

Pyke's gaze sharpens. "Who in the Precursor's name keeps texting you during a briefing?"

"Just my assistant," I say, my tone deliberately casual. "Humans are... easily distracted."

"Don't let yourself get distracted, Shomun." Pyke's voice hardens, his red eyes locking onto mine. "The Grolgath are clearly up to something in New Orleans. It's your job to find out what it is."

I nod, slipping the compad back into my pocket. "Understood, Captain. I'll stay focused."

Pyke holds my gaze a moment longer, then nods. "Good. Dismissed."

I stand, my mind already divided between the mission ahead and the image of Claire that's burned into my thoughts. Focus, I remind myself. But even as I walk out of the briefing room, I can't shake the tug of her.

The Ancestor's Shrine at Veritas Base Alpha is a quiet corner of the base, tucked away from the chaos of command. The pedestal is worn smooth from centuries of supplicants' hands, the surface stained dark with the blood of Vakutans who came before me. I kneel in front of it, the ceremonial knife cold in my hand. The air is thick with the faint scent of incense, a reminder that this is a place of reverence, not comfort.

I press the blade to my palm, the sharp edge biting into my scales. Crimson blood wells up, and I clench my fist, letting it drip onto the altar. The droplets sizzle faintly as they hit the stone, a whisper of connection to those who came before.

"Ancestors," I begin, my voice low but steady. "I come to you not as a warrior, but as a man. I have faced grolgath fleets, infiltrated their strongholds, and never faltered. But this... this is something I cannot fight."

The words feel foreign in my mouth, but the emotions behind them are raw and unrelenting. "Her name is Claire. She's human, and she's... different. She doesn't see me as a weapon or a tool. She sees me. And I'm afraid. Afraid of what it means to let

her in, afraid of what will happen if I don't."

I close my eyes, my voice dropping to a near whisper. "Every time I've let myself care for someone, the galaxy has taken them from me. My parents, my brothers-in-arms, even my closest friend on this base—gone. And now there's Claire. She's here, and I can't stop thinking about her. But if I let myself love her, if I let her see all of me, what then? Will the galaxy take her too?"

The silence of the shrine offers no answers, but the weight of my confession hangs heavy in the air. I clench my fist tighter, watching as my blood pools on the altar. "I don't know what to do. Do I push her away to protect her? Or do I let her in and risk losing her? I need guidance, ancestors. I need... something."

I sit back on my heels, the knife still in my hand. The shrine remains silent, as it always does. The ancestors don't speak, not directly. But I can feel their presence, a quiet, watchful force. I don't expect a clear answer, but the act of asking helps clarify the questions in my mind.

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As I rise, I glance at the altar one last time. The blood has already begun to dry, a dark reminder of my plea. I sheath the knife and turn away, my mind still churning. Claire's face flashes in my thoughts, her honey-blond hair and green eyes a stark contrast to the cold, metallic walls of the base.

Whatever happens, I know I can't keep avoiding this. Sooner or later, I'll have to make a choice. And for the first time in my life, I'm not sure if I'm ready to face it.

CHAPTER 11

CLAIRE

The key turns in the lock, and I push open the door to my apartment, already kicking off my heels. My feet ache, my shoulders are tight, and all I can think about is collapsing into bed. Simon—no, Shomun—and I have been grinding through this merger proposal for what feels like a lifetime. Eighteen hours straight, and I'm running on caffeine and the memory of his hands on my waist when he leaned over my chair earlier.

I flip on the light, and the scream rips out of me. Silas. Sitting in my damn living room chair like he owns the place.

"Read your lease," he says before I can even demand an explanation. His voice is smooth, like he's been waiting for this moment. "I own this building. I've got copies of all the keys."

"That's illegal," I snap, my voice sharp enough to cut glass. My heart is still racing,

but anger is quicker than fear. “You can’t just let yourself into my apartment.”

He leans back, crossing one leg over the other, his too-perfect face smirking at me. “So is corporate espionage.” His tone is casual, like we’re discussing the weather instead of the fact that he’s sitting in my living room uninvited. “You’ve been avoiding me, Clarice. I’m here because I need to know—have you found proof that Simon was in my office or not?”

I clutch my bag tighter, my mind racing. I can’t tell him the truth about Simon. Not just because of the contract or the job, but because... well, because. The thought of betraying Shomun like that makes me ill. But Silas doesn’t care about my feelings. He’s staring at me like he’s already won, like he knows I’ll cave.

“I’m working on it,” I say, my voice clipped. “These things take time. You can’t just waltz into someone’s life and expect them to hand over secrets on a silver platter.”

“Time is money, Claire.” He stands, his movements slow and deliberate, like he’s trying to intimidate me. “And you’ve had plenty of time. So tell me—what do you have for me?”

I square my shoulders, refusing to let him see how much he’s rattling me. “You’ll get your information when I have it. Not a second sooner.”

His smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “Careful, Claire. I’m not a patient man. And you’re not exactly in a position to keep me waiting.”

He steps closer, and I force myself not to flinch. His cologne is too strong, too sharp, and it makes me want to step back. But I don’t. I won’t give him that satisfaction.

“You’re dismissed,” I say, my voice cold. “Get out of my apartment.”

He laughs, but it's not a friendly sound. "You're feisty tonight. I like it. But don't forget who's paying the bills here, sweetheart. You work for me, whether you like it or not."

He brushes past me, and I swear I can feel the weight of his gaze on me as he walks out the door.

"Lock up behind me," he says, his voice dripping with mockery. "Wouldn't want anyone breaking in."

The door clicks shut, and I let out a shaky breath. My hands are trembling, and I hate that he has this effect on me. But I don't have time to fall apart. Not when Silas is breathing down my neck.

I grab my phone and pull up Shomun's number. My thumb hovers over the screen, but I don't hit send. Not yet.

First, I need to think. And maybe pour myself a drink.

I pour myself a glass of wine, the red liquid swirling in the glass as I sit at my kitchen table. The room is quiet, the hum of the refrigerator the only sound breaking the silence. I take a sip, letting the cool, bitter tang of the wine coat my tongue. My mind races, trying to untangle the knot of lies and half-truths I've been weaving since this whole mess began.

I could just ask Shomun. Straight up. Did you break into Silas's server room? It's simple. Direct. But the thought of saying it out loud makes my stomach twist. If I ask him, I'll have to explain why I want to know. And that means telling him the truth—that I'm not just a secretary with a sharp eye for numbers. I'm a corporate spy. A liar. Someone who's been deceiving him from the very beginning.

The wine glass trembles in my hand as I set it down. I don't want to lose what we have. It's not just the sex—though, let's be honest, that's been... transformative. It's the way he looks at me, like I'm something rare and valuable. The way he trusts me, even if he doesn't say it outright. The way he pushes me to be better, to demand more from myself than I ever thought I could give.

I run a hand through my hair, pulling it back from my face. What if I tell him and he walks away? What if this thing between us—this thing I'm not even sure how to define yet—just evaporates? The idea of it makes my chest ache in a way I don't want to examine too closely.

“Okay, Redding,” I mutter to myself. “Think this through.”

I take another sip of wine, forcing myself to focus. Asking Shomun directly is out. That much is clear. But how else can I find out what I need to know? I've been digging through files, cross-referencing reports, and eavesdropping on conversations when I can, but so far, nothing concrete. Just hints and whispers. And Silas breathing down my neck, demanding answers I don't have.

I glance at the clock. It's late, but Shomun's probably still awake. He never sleeps much, always working, always planning. I could call him. Not to ask about Silas, but just... to hear his voice. Maybe it'll help clear my head. But even as I reach for my phone, I hesitate. What would I even say? Hey, just calling to make sure you're not secretly a corporate saboteur. Also, I think I might be falling for you. Talk soon.

I snort, leaning back in my chair. This is ridiculous. I'm ridiculous. I'm sitting here, freaking out over a man who's literally an alien from the future, and I'm worried about feelings. Feelings I'm not even sure I'm ready to admit I have.

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“Get it together, Claire,” I say, pressing my palms into my eyes. “You’re smarter than this.”

But the truth is, I’m not sure I am. Because right now, all I can think about is the way his scales feel under my fingers, and the way he says my name, like it’s something precious. And I’m terrified—terrified that if I keep digging, I’ll ruin the best thing I’ve ever had.

I sit at my desk, fingers drumming on the edge of my keyboard. The glow of the monitor casts a pale blue light over the room, and my thoughts are a tangled mess. Silas’s visit left me with a knot of dread in my stomach, and I know I need to figure out what Shomun was doing the night of the break-in. My eyes flick to the clock. It’s late, but he’s probably still awake. Simon doesn’t sleep much. Thinking about him tugs at something in my chest, but I push the feeling aside. This isn’t about us. This is about survival.

I pull up his schedule on my computer. As his personal assistant, I have full access—past and present. My fingers hesitate over the keys, then I start scrolling back. Week after week, meeting after meeting, until I land on the date Silas gave me. The night of the break-in. My heart pounds as I click on the day.

And there it is. A single letter, bold and unapologetic, taking up a three-hour block. V.

“V?” I mutter under my breath, leaning closer to the screen like it might explain itself if I stare hard enough. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

My mind races. V for Veritas? Shomun’s mentioned Veritas before, but only in broad

strokes. Something about protecting the timeline, something big and important. But this? A three-hour gap with no details, no notes, just a cryptic letter—it doesn't sit right.

I grab my phone and pull up Silas's number. My thumb hovers over the screen, and I hammer out a quick message.

Claire:Found something. Shomun's schedule for the night in question has a block marked "V." No details. Could be Veritas-related. Still digging.

I hit send before I can second-guess myself. The reply comes almost instantly.

Silas:V? That's it? No location? No contacts? You're going to have to do better than that, Claire.

I roll my eyes. Of course he's not satisfied.

Claire:It's a start. Give me time.

Silas:Time's up. I need answers, not riddles.

I toss my phone onto the desk and scrub a hand over my face. He's not going to back off, and I don't blame him. But "V" isn't enough—not for Silas, and not for me.

I need solid evidence.

I open a new browser tab and start digging into Veritas. The search results are sparse, mostly conspiracy theories and obscure references. Nothing concrete. Frustration bubbles up in my chest, and I slam my laptop shut.

"What are you hiding, Shomun?" I whisper to the empty room.

CHAPTER 12

CLARICE

I push open the door to Simon's office, my heart pounding as I prepare to ask him the question that's been gnawing at me. But the second I step inside, he spins around in his chair, and the words die in my throat. His eyes are dark, hungry, and they lock onto me like I'm the only thing in the room. My pulse quickens, and I suddenly forget why I came in here in the first place.

"Lock the door," he says, commanding. It's not a suggestion. It's an order.

I swallow hard, my fingers fumbling with the lock as I do as I'm told. The click of the latch echoes in the silence, and I turn to face him again. He's still staring at me, his gaze unwavering, and I feel like I'm walking into a trap—one I don't particularly mind being caught in.

"Come here," he says, his tone leaving no room for argument. I approach slowly, my heels clicking softly against the polished floor. My eyes catch a glint of light as I get closer, and I realize he's got something in his hand. It's shiny, glinting like a gemstone.

"Planning on going back in time to the 70s with that gaudy ring?" I ask, trying to lighten the mood, to steady my nerves. My voice comes out a little too high, a little too forced.

His brows arch, and he looks at me like I've just said something completely ridiculous. "What ring?"

He opens his hand, and that's when I see it. It's not a ring. It's the jewel plug, the same one from the package I saw earlier. The rose gold metal gleams in the light, the

heart-shaped gem at the base catching the sunlight streaming through the window. My face heats up, the flush spreading down my neck.

“I bought you a present, Clarice,” he says, his voice husky, dripping with something primal. “I think you’re going to love it.”

I stare at the plug, my mind racing. I’ve never done anything like this before. The idea is equal parts terrifying and exhilarating. “I... I’ve never...” My voice trails off, and I bite my lip.

“Do you trust me, Clarice?” he asks, cutting through my hesitation with that deep, steady tone of his.

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The answer comes out before I even think about it. “Yes.”

He leans forward in his chair, his eyes never leaving mine. “Then trust that I would never do anything to push you too far. I’m in charge for a reason.” He stands, towering over me, and holds the plug up between us. “Now, are you ready to receive your gift?”

“Yes, Sir,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. My knees feel like they’re made of gelatin as I turn around and place my hands on the edge of his desk. The cool wood presses against my palms, grounding me slightly, but it’s not enough to steady my racing heart.

I hear him step closer, his presence looming behind me like a storm cloud. His hands are warm as they grip the hem of my skirt, hiking it up slowly, deliberately, until the air hits the back of my thighs. I shiver, not from cold but from the anticipation of what’s coming next.

His fingers hook into the waistband of my panties, and he tugs them down, letting them fall to my ankles. He leans in, his breath hot against the skin of my ass, and I bite my lip to stifle a gasp. His hands run up the backs of my thighs, rough but not unkind, and then I feel it—the wet heat of his tongue tracing a path up my leg, pausing just below my ass.

“Glorious,” he murmurs, his voice low and reverent, like he’s worshipping at an altar. And maybe, in his mind, he is. “Absolutely glorious.”

I flush, the warmth spreading from my cheeks down to my chest. I’m not used to

being talked about like this, especially not by someone who sounds so...sincere. It's overwhelming but also intoxicating. I feel seen in a way I've never felt before.

He bites down on the curve of my ass, just hard enough to make me yelp. My hands grip the edge of the desk harder, my knuckles turning white. "Simon!" I hiss, but there's no real anger in my voice. If anything, I sound...breathless.

He chuckles, a deep, rumbling sound that vibrates through me. "You said you trusted me, didn't you?" His hands spread my cheeks, and I feel completely exposed, completely at his mercy. "And look at you. Open. Wet. Perfect."

My face burns, but I can't deny the way his words send a thrill through me. I'm not used to this kind of attention, this kind of praise. It's dizzying.

His tongue finds its target, and I gasp, my fingers curling into the wood of the desk. He's...he's good at this. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this—this slow, deliberate exploration, this overwhelming sensation that makes my legs shake and my breath hitch.

When the plug presses against me, I tense for a moment, but Simon's hands are steady, his voice a low murmur of encouragement. "Relax," he says, and I do, letting the toy slide in slowly, filling me in a way that's strange but somehow...right.

And then he pulls my panties back up, leaving the plug nestled inside me. I frown, confused. "What are you doing?" I ask, my voice tinged with frustration and a hint of panic.

He steps back, and I hear the faint sound of a remote clicking. The plug comes to life, vibrating softly inside me. I gasp again, my hips twitching involuntarily. "I never said you'd be allowed to cum yet," he says, his voice smug. "Patience, my gorgeous little human. You'll work all day with this inside you. It'll remind you who you belong to."

I glare at him over my shoulder, but there's no real anger in it. If anything, I'm...intrigued. And, if I'm being honest, a little excited.

I sit stiffly in the boardroom, my hands clutching the edge of the polished table. Simon is at the head, his voice commanding attention as he outlines the quarterly projections. His tone is calm, precise, and infuriatingly composed, considering the situation he's put me in. The plug is still snug inside me, a constant, maddening reminder of his control. I try to focus on the numbers on the screen, but my mind keeps drifting to the low hum of the toy, barely noticeable but undeniably there.

My phone buzzes on the table, and I glance down. It's a text from Simon.

"Sit up straight."

I glance at him, but he's not looking at me. He's gesturing to a graph on the screen, his expression serious, as if he's not orchestrating my torment from across the room. I straighten in my chair, my cheeks burning, and the slight shift makes the plug press against me in a way that's impossible to ignore.

The vibration kicks up a notch.

I inhale sharply, my nails digging into the table. Someone to my left—Carl from accounting—glances over, and I force a smile, hoping I look like I'm just deeply engaged in the presentation. My phone buzzes again.

"Eyes on me."

I lift my gaze to Simon, who's now discussing something about market fluctuations. His voice is steady, but there's a glint in his eyes as they meet mine. He's enjoying this. I exhale through my nose, trying to steady myself, but the vibration increases again, and my thighs press together involuntarily.

My phone buzzes. "Don't move."

I bite the inside of my cheek, willing myself not to squirm. The plug is relentless, and the heat pooling low in my stomach is becoming impossible to ignore. I glance around the table, paranoid that someone will notice, but everyone seems engrossed in Simon's presentation. Except for him. His eyes flick to me, and he smirks.

I grab my phone and type quickly. "Please, can I be excused?"

His phone buzzes, and he glances at it with a barely perceptible shake of his head. "No."

The vibration intensifies, and I stifle a gasp, pressing my lips together. My body is betraying me, creeping closer to the edge. I type again, my fingers trembling. "Mercy."

He reads the message, his expression unreadable, and for a moment, I think he's going to ignore me. But then the vibration drops—not all the way off, but low enough that I can think again. I exhale shakily, my shoulders relaxing slightly.

Simon's gaze lingers on me for a moment, and I see the faintest hint of amusement in his eyes. Then he returns to the presentation, his voice steady and authoritative.

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I try to focus, but every so often, the vibration shifts, just enough to keep me on edge. I glance at Simon, and he arches a brow at me, a silent reminder of my place. I drop my gaze, my cheeks flushing, but I can't help the small smile that tugs at my lips.

This man. He's infuriating, yes, but he's also... something else entirely. And despite the torture he's putting me through, I'm not sure I'd want it any other way.

The meeting finally ends, and I feel like I'm about to combust. I stand next to Simon, my legs trembling slightly as he exchanges pleasantries with the board members filing out of the room. My skin is on fire, my breath shallow, and I can barely focus on the polite goodbyes. Every shift of my weight sends a jolt through me from the plug still nestled inside. The vibration is low now, but it's there, a constant, maddening reminder that I'm not in control.

Simon's hand lands on my lower back, guiding me out of the room. His touch is firm, possessive. I glance up at him, my lips parting as I try to say something—anything—but he cuts me off with a look. His eyes are dark, intense, and I feel like I'm drowning in them.

The moment the door to his office closes behind us, I grab him. My hands clutch at the lapels of his suit, and I pull him down to me, my mouth crashing against his. He responds instantly, his arms wrapping around me like steel bands, his tongue claiming mine with a ferocity that leaves me breathless. I moan into his mouth, my body pressing against his, desperate for more.

But then he breaks the kiss, his hands gripping my waist. He lifts me effortlessly, throwing me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing. I yelp, my hands instinctively

grabbing at his back as he carries me toward the lounge area of his office. And then he starts spanking me. Hard.

“Simon!” I gasp, but there’s no real protest in my voice. Each smack of his palm against my ass sends a shockwave through me, the plug shifting inside me with every strike. I bite my lip, trying to stifle my moans, but it’s impossible. He’s playing me like an instrument, and I’m utterly at his mercy.

He tosses me onto the plush leather couch, and before I can even think about moving, he’s binding my arms behind my back with the Reaper’s Lingerie. The leather cuffs cinch tight, and I moan, my body arching as he secures them. He steps back, and I watch him with wide eyes as he picks up the ball gag.

“Open,” he commands, his voice a low growl. I obey instantly, my mouth parting as he slides the ball between my lips. The straps tighten behind my head, and I let out a muffled whimper. He smirks, his red eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

And then he’s back, kneeling between my legs. He pulls down my panties, and I shiver as the cool air hits my skin. He picks up the Phoenix, a wild luxury sex toy with remote control vibration and thrusting abilities.

"Spread your legs," he commands. My pussy throbs as I obey, showing him my everything, and I can’t help but moan around the gag as he slides it into me. The ridges and twists feel incredible, and I’m already on the edge just from the intrusion.

He turns it on, and the vibration starts slow, teasing me mercilessly. I squirm, my hips bucking involuntarily as he smirks down at me. But then he pulls out his compad, and I watch with wide eyes as a holographic image springs to life. It’s us—me, pinned to his desk, him ravishing me with a ferocity that leaves me breathless even now.

“Do you remember this, Clarice?” he rumbles, his voice low and husky. I nod

eagerly, my body trembling as the Phoenix pulses inside me. He strokes himself slowly, his eyes locked on the hologram, and I whine around the gag, begging him with my eyes.

“You want to cum, don’t you?” he asks, his voice a dangerous purr. I nod frantically, my body trembling with need. But he shakes his head. “No. Not yet. You’ll watch first.”

I moan, my hips bucking as the vibration intensifies. The hologram plays on, and I’m impossibly turned on by the sight of me submitting to him, of him taking me so completely. He strokes himself faster, his breath hitching, and I can feel my own release building, teetering on the edge.

He suddenly howls, his body tensing as he cums, his seed splashing against me. The sight, the sound, the feeling of him losing control is too much, and I cum with a muffled scream, my body arching as the orgasm rips through me. He watches me, his red eyes gleaming with satisfaction, and I collapse back onto the couch, groaning out aftershocks.

Shomun tsks, his red eyes narrowing as he looks down at me, still trembling from the aftershocks of my orgasm. “Clarice,” he says, “did I give you permission to cum?”

I shake my head, my heart racing. The way he says my name—like a warning, like a promise—sends shivers down my spine. My body is still thrumming with pleasure, but there’s a sharp edge to his tone that makes me realize I’m about to pay for my disobedience.

“Now I’ll have to punish you,” he growls, and I feel a mix of dread and anticipation coil in my stomach. He stands, towering over me, and I watch with wide eyes as he pulls a set of nipple clamps from the drawer of his desk. The chain connecting them glints in the light, and I swallow hard.

He kneels beside me, his hands moving with practiced precision as he attaches the clamps to my already swollen nipples. I gasp at the sensation, the sharp pinch of the metal biting into my sensitive skin. My back arches involuntarily, and I hear him chuckle darkly.

“You’re so responsive,” he murmurs, his fingers brushing over the chain connecting the clamps. “I wonder how much you can take.”

He leans in, his breath hot against my ear, and I shiver. “Now, Clarice,” he commands, “take the chain in your teeth.”

I hesitate for a moment, but the look in his eyes leaves no room for argument. I lean forward, my lips parting as I take the cool metal chain between my teeth. The movement pulls on the clamps, and I whimper around the chain, the pressure on my nipples intensifying.

“Good girl,” he purrs, and I feel a thrill at his praise, even as the pain and pleasure mix into something almost unbearable. He sits back on the couch, his eyes locked on mine, and I can see the hunger in his gaze. “Now, pull.”

I bite down on the chain, pulling it gently, and the clamps tug at my nipples, sending a jolt of sensation straight to my core. My hips jerk, and I moan around the chain, my eyes fluttering shut.

“Harder,” he growls, and I obey, pulling harder. The pain is sharp, but it’s tempered by the pleasure that’s building inside me, a confusing, intoxicating mix that leaves me breathless.

“You’re doing so well, Clarice,” he murmurs. “But I think it’s time for the next part of your punishment.”

His hands move to the Phoenix, still nestled inside me, and he pulls it out slowly, the ridges and twists of the toy dragging against my sensitive walls. I whine, my hips bucking, but he holds me still, his grip firm.

“Patience,” he says, and then he’s guiding himself into me, his cock stretching me in ways the toy never could. I groan around the chain, my body arching as he fills me completely.

“Now, bounce,” he commands, and I obey, my hips moving in rhythm with his hands. The clamps tug at my nipples with every movement, the pressure building inside me, the pleasure teetering on the edge of pain.

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“Please,” I beg around the chain, my voice muffled but desperate. “Please, can I cum?”

He smirks, his hands gripping my hips tighter. “Yes,” he growls, his voice low and guttural. “Cum for me, Clarice.”

The words are barely out of his mouth before I’m falling apart, my body convulsing as the orgasm rips through me. I feel him cum too, his cock pulsing inside me as he fills me with his seed. We collapse together onto the couch, his cock still inside me, his arms wrapped around me as we catch our breath.

He pulls the chain from my teeth, the clamps still attached to my nipples, and I moan softly as the pressure releases. His lips find mine, and we kiss, deep and hungry, the taste of him mixing with the lingering sensation of the chain on my tongue.

Shomun’s hand rests firmly on the small of my back as he guides me toward the bedroom tucked into the corner of his office. My legs are still shaky, and the lingering sensations from earlier make every step feel like I’m walking through a haze. I glance up at him, still half-expecting him to say something—anything—but his face is impassive, his red eyes focused ahead.

“Sit,” he commands as we reach the edge of the bed.

I lower myself onto the mattress, my body sinking into the soft fabric. He kneels in front of me, his hands moving with precision as he removes the jewel plug. I bite my lip to stifle a moan, the sensation of it sliding out almost as intense as when it went in. Next, he releases the nipple clamps, and I hiss as blood rushes back to the sensitive

skin.

“You’ll sleep in the Reaper’s Lingerie,” he says, his tone leaving no room for argument.

I frown, my voice small. “How am I supposed to pull the covers up without my hands?”

He smirks, his red eyes glinting. “You’ll just have to snuggle up to me for warmth.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes, but there’s a part of me that’s secretly thrilled by the idea. He stands, towering over me, and I feel a shiver run down my spine as he slides into bed beside me. His body is warm, his scales smooth against my skin as he wraps an arm around my shoulders.

“Better?” he rumbles, his breath hot against my ear.

I nod, nestling closer to him. His body heat is like a furnace, the steady rise and fall of his chest as he begins to drift off. His snoring is soft, almost rhythmic, and I let out a quiet sigh.

As I lie there, I realize I never brought up the break-in at Silas’s. My heart skips a beat at the thought, but then I remember how good it felt to be with him earlier—how completely he’s taken over my thoughts, my body, my everything.

“Tomorrow,” I whisper to myself, my eyes growing heavy. “I’ll tell him tomorrow.”

But for now, I let myself sink into the warmth of his embrace, the steady rhythm of his breathing lulling me to sleep.

CHAPTER13

SHOMUN

The warmth of her mouth wakes me, her tongue tracing the sensitive ridge of my cock with a precision that makes my scales flush. My eyelids flutter open, and I see Claire kneeling between my legs, her honey-blond hair spilling over her shoulders. She's still in the Reaper's Lingerie, her arms locked behind her back, but she's managed to maneuver herself perfectly. Her green eyes flick up to meet mine, and there's a spark of mischief there, a challenge.

I groan, my hand sliding down to tangle in her hair. "You're determined to break me this morning, aren't you?"

She hums in response, the vibration sending a jolt through me. My fingers trail down her spine, and I love the way she shivers under my touch. I reach around to her front, my fingers slipping between her thighs, finding her already wet and eager. She moans around me, her lips tightening as I stroke her, matching the rhythm of her mouth.

"Good girl," I murmur, my voice rough. "You're doing so well."

She pulls back slightly, her breath hot against me. "Are you going to let me finish, or are you just going to tease me again?" There's a bite to her words, but her pupils are blown wide, and her cheeks are flushed.

I smirk, my fingers curling just the way I know she likes. "Why not both?"

She laughs, low and husky, before taking me back into her mouth. I let her work for a moment, savoring the way she moves, the way she gives herself over to this entirely. But I can't let her have all the fun. My other hand moves to her hip, guiding her to rock against my fingers. Her moans grow louder, muffled but unmistakable.

"You're close," I say, my voice tight. "I can feel it. Let go, Claire."

She does, her body trembling as she comes, her mouth still working me over until I follow right after her, my groan echoing through the room. She pulls back, catching her breath, her lips curving into a satisfied smile.

I reach for the restraints, unlocking them carefully. “Good morning,” I say, my voice softer now.

She stretches her arms, wincing slightly. “Actually, it’s afternoon. We fell asleep at the office again.”

I chuckle, running a hand through my hair. “So we did.” I watch as she stands, her movements languid and unhurried. She grabs my shirt from the floor and tosses it to me, then starts pulling on her own clothes. I dress slowly, savoring the quiet intimacy of the moment. When she tugs on my tie to straighten it, I catch her hand, pulling her close.

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“Claire,” I start, my heart pounding. But her phone chirps loudly, the alarm cutting through the air. She steps back, glancing at the screen.

“Meeting at city hall,” she says, already moving. “I’m late.”

I let her go, my words catching in my throat. “We’ll talk later,” I say, though I’m not sure she hears me as she grabs her bag and heads for the door.

I watch her leave, the weight of what I almost said lingering in the air. Later. I’ll tell her later.

I walk through the streets of New Orleans, the afternoon sun casting long shadows over the cracked pavement. My boots hit the ground with a steady rhythm, each step deliberate, each breath measured. The air smells faintly of river water and fried food, a mix that always makes me think of the past—not the future I came from, but the disasters I’ve seen here. Katrina. The black water. The bodies. I shake my head, forcing the memory away. Not today. Today, I have a mission.

The Preservation Resource Center isn’t far from my office, but every block feels like a journey through time. The city’s history is etched into every brick, every wrought-iron balcony. And I’ll be damned if I let the grolgath destroy it again. My jaw tightens as I approach the building, a stately structure with a plaque out front commemorating its place in the city’s story. Too bad the plaque doesn’t mention the grolgath’s role in nearly erasing that story.

Inside, I’m ushered to a long table at the front of the room, a podium standing like a sentinel in the center. I take my seat, nodding to the other speakers. My eyes scan the

crowd, looking for any sign of a grolgath agent. So far, nothing. But they're good at hiding in plain sight, these flame kissers.

The first speaker steps up to the podium, and my gut twists. Ryan Pax. The man I've been investigating for months. He's tall, with a polished charm that's too perfect to be real. His speech starts generically enough—community, giving back, blah, blah, blah. But then he says it. “The bright flame of change.”

I lean forward in my seat, my hands gripping the edge of the table. That's Ataxian dogma, straight from the grolgath playbook. My suspicions solidify like concrete. Ryan Pax isn't just a man. He's a grolgath. Or at least, he's working for them.

Ryan finishes his speech with a flourish, and the audience claps politely. He takes his seat, his gray eyes locking with mine. He smiles, cold and knowing, like he's daring me to call him out. I don't. Not yet. I give him the same icy smile, my mind racing with plans. If he's here, it's not by accident. Whatever the grolgath are planning, it's happening soon.

The next speaker steps up to the podium, and I almost laugh. Silas Greer. Of course. The man's face is as plastic as his reputation, his smile as fake as his blonde hair. He launches into a spiel about innovation and opportunity, but I'm not listening. My eyes flick between him and Ryan, the tension in the room thickening like a storm rolling in off the Gulf.

Silas finishes his speech and sits down, his gaze lingering on me just a little too long. I meet his stare, unflinching. Whatever game he's playing, whatever connections he has to the grolgath, I'll figure it out. This city—its past, its future—depends on it. And I'll be damned if I let the flame kissers burn it down again.

The spotlight feels like a noose around my neck as I step up to the podium. The speech in my hand is a masterpiece of banality, so dull it could put a hypercaffeinated

Alzhon to sleep. I clear my throat, the microphone squealing in protest.

“New Orleans,” I begin, my voice flat and uninspired, “is a city of resilience. A city of opportunity. A city... of people working together.” I squint at the paper, wondering who at Veritas thought this drivel was a good idea. The crowd stares back, their faces glazed over, and I fight the urge to bolt for the door.

I drone on, my words as exciting as a tax audit, and when I finally finish, the applause is polite but half-hearted. I step away from the podium, relief flooding me. The faster I can get out of here, the better.

The reception is a nightmare of small talk and bland finger foods. I grab a glass of wine, the tartness doing little to improve my mood. I’m scanning the room for an escape route when he approaches.

Ryan Pax. His smile is smooth, his gray eyes sharp as a blade. “Simon Karr,” he says, extending a hand. “Enjoyed your speech.”

“Did you?” I tilt my head, my voice low. “I’d say it was forgettable, but that would imply it was memorable.”

He chuckles, but there’s no warmth in it. “Modesty doesn’t suit you.”

I step closer, my hand still gripping his in a vice-like shake. I lean in, my breath hot against his ear. “I know what you are.”

His smile doesn’t falter. If anything, it deepens. “We all wear masks, don’t we, Simon?” His voice is a whisper, but it cuts like a knife. “Or should I say...Shomun?”

My stomach drops, but I keep my face neutral. “What do you want, Pax?”

He leans back, his eyes glinting. “Oh, I know everything about you. Your favorite music. The brand of motor oil you insist on for your Bugatti. And, of course... who you care about the most.”

My scales itch beneath the image inducer, and my jaw tightens. “If you touch her, you die.”

He chuckles, low and mocking. “Who’s protecting Claire right now?”

The words hit me like a plasma blast to the chest. Before I can think, my fist connects with his jaw. He stumbles back, theatrically clutching his face, his fall more dramatic than necessary.

“Security!” someone shouts, and within seconds, hands are on me, dragging me toward the exit. I could break free—easily—but that’s not the play. Not here.

I’m shoved out the door, the cool night air hitting my face. I pull out my phone, my fingers trembling as I dial Claire’s number. One ring. Two. Voicemail.

“Damn it,” I mutter, shoving the phone back into my pocket. City hall isn’t far. I can run. Ihaveto run.

I take off down the street, my boots slamming against the pavement. The buildings blur past me, the lights of the city dimming as panic claws at my chest. Claire’s face flashes in my mind—her green eyes, her stubborn smile.

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I won't lose her. Not to him. Not to anyone.

I'm sprinting across the bridge, the steel beams blurring past me as the channel below glistens under the dim city lights. My lungs burn, but I don't slow down. Claire's face flashes in my mind—her green eyes wide with fear, her voice on the phone cutting off before she could finish. Ryly's smirk from the gala echoes in my head, his words dripping with malice. I push harder, my boots pounding the pavement.

Then, the roar of an engine. I glance back just in time to see the black truck veering straight for me. No time to dodge. The impact is colossal, like a starship crashing into a planet's surface. My body slams into the concrete railing, and for a moment, the world is a kaleidoscope of pain and sound. The railing gives way under the force, and we're tumbling—me, the truck, and chunks of shattered concrete—into the channel below.

The water hits like a sledgehammer, cold and unforgiving. My lungs scream for air, but I'm pinned under the truck, the weight crushing me into the muddy bottom. My scales ache, the image inducer flickering, my human disguise sputtering out.

"Come on, move!" I growl at my limbs, my voice gurgling through the water. My hands claw at the muck as I struggle to push the truck off me. One heave. Two. The frame groans, metal bending under my strength, and with a final surge, I wriggle free. My chest burns, but I don't have time to catch my breath.

The driver. He's still in the cab, seatbelt tangled, his face pale and panicked as bubbles rise from his mouth. I swim to him, my claws tearing through the shattered windshield. His eyes widen as he sees me—my true form, indigo scales and red

eyes—but I don't have time for his terror. I yank him free, his body limp in my arms, and kick for the surface.

We break through the water, and I haul him onto the concrete bank. He's coughing, sputtering, gasping for air, and I'm on him in an instant, my hand gripping his collar.

"Who sent you?" I snarl, my voice low and dripping with menace. His eyes dart around, wild and unfocused, but before he can answer, the sound cuts through the night—a sharp crack, like ice fracturing. His head jerks violently, and blood sprays across my face. I'm on my feet in an instant, scanning the rooftops, but the sniper's already gone.

The sound of sirens cuts through the night, wailing like angry ghosts. Red and blue lights flash in the distance, growing brighter as they close in. I wipe the blood from my face, the image inducer flickering back to life, restoring my human disguise. My compad buzzes in my pocket, still functional despite its dip in the channel. Precursor blessings, indeed.

I pull it out, my fingers moving quickly.

"Stay safe. Go to my office. Lock the door. Don't open it for anyone but me."

I hit send and glance up as the first squad car screeches to a halt. Two officers jump out, their hands hovering near their holsters. One of them barks at me.

"Sir, step away from the body!"

I raise my hands, slow and deliberate. "I'm unarmed," I say, my voice calm, steady. "But you might want to secure the rooftops. The shooter's still out there."

The officers exchange a glance. One of them stays with me while the other calls for

backup. Meanwhile, paramedics swarm the driver's body, but it's too late. His eyes are glassy, his chest still. I don't need a coroner to tell me he's gone.

The officer in front of me narrows his eyes. "You got a name?"

"Simon Karr," I say. "CEO of Karr Industries. I was on my way to a meeting when the truck hit me."

"You're awfully calm for someone who just got run off a bridge."

I shrug, my lips curling into a faint smile. "Years of practice."

He's not amused. "You're going to need to come with us. We've got questions."

"Of course," I say, my tone agreeable. I don't have a choice. Not if I want to keep Veritas off the radar. I glance at my compad, hoping Claire got my message.

The paramedics approach me next, fussing over the cuts and bruises I've let them see. I let them wrap a bandage around my arm, but when they suggest a trip to the hospital, I decline.

"I've got a board meeting in the morning," I say, flashing a polite smile.

"Sir, you were just in a serious accident?—"

"And I'm fine," I interrupt, my voice firm. "I'll sign whatever waiver you need."

They exchange glances but don't push. Instead, they lead me to a patrol car. I slide into the backseat, my compad buzzing again.

"Got it. Be careful, Simon."

I exhale slowly, my chest tightening. She's safe, for now. But the grolgath aren't going to stop. Not after tonight. If anything, they'll double down.

The officer in the driver's seat glances at me in the rearview mirror. "So, Mr. Karr," he says, "you mind telling me how you ended up in the channel?"

"I think the truck hit me," I say dryly.

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“Funny. You seem to have a lot of enemies.”

“Occupational hazard,” I mutter, leaning back in the seat. My mind races. Ryan’s out there, and so are his agents. They’ll come after Claire again. I need to end this.

The car pulls into the station, and I’m led inside. The interrogation room smells like stale coffee and desperation. I sit, my hands folded on the table, waiting. The grolgath might have tried to kill me tonight.

But they made one mistake.

They didn’t finish the job.

CHAPTER14

CLARICE

I pace the office, my heels clicking sharply against the polished floor, my mind racing faster than my steps. Someone tried to kill Shomun.Simon.Sho.Whatever his name is, whatever he is—the thought of him hurt, bleeding, vulnerable, makes my chest tighten so hard I feel like I can’t breathe. I stop by the window, staring out at the city below, but I don’t see the skyline. I see him, standing in his true form, those deep indigo scales catching the light, his red eyes sharp and intense. And I see him collapsing under the weight of a truck, scales dulled, eyes closed.

“Damn it,” I mutter, slamming my palm against the glass. The sting grounds me for a moment, but my thoughts keep spiraling. I’ve been lying to him from the start. Silas

hired me to spy on him, and I've been doing it—sort of. But somewhere along the way, the mission stopped mattering. Sho stopped being a target and became... everything. He's not just my boss, my lover, my alien protector of the timeline. He's mine. And I'm his. I've never felt this way about anyone before. Not Silas, not anyone. Sho makes me feel powerful, desired, seen. He doesn't just tolerate my flaws—he turns them into strengths. My shyness becomes allure, my insecurity becomes focus, my need for control becomes trust. How could I not love him?

But there's still the truth. The truth I've been hiding. I can't keep lying to him. I can't. But I also can't just blurt it out—not yet. I need to know if he's the one who broke into Silas's server room. And with Sho busy dealing with the aftermath of... everything... now's my chance.

I stride over to his desk, my heart pounding in my ears. His computer is locked, of course, but I've seen him type in his password enough times to guess it. I hit the keys—his meeting time, 4:30—and the screen unlocks. I exhale sharply, my hands trembling as I navigate to the files marked “Veritas.”

I scan through the folders on Simon's computer, my fingers hovering over the keyboard like they're afraid to touch down. My heart pounds so hard I can feel it in my throat. When I spot the file labeled Greer B and E, I freeze. Breaking and entering? That's got to be it. I click it open, my breath hitching as I start to read.

The report is written in Simon's sharp, precise tone. Relief floods through me as I realize he didn't do it. He's been investigating the break-in at Silas's server room, not orchestrating it. One of his main suspects? Ryan Pax. The man I just saw at the fundraiser, with his slick smile and veiled threats. Simon's notes mention possible grolgath connections, and I shiver. This is way bigger than corporate espionage.

I copy the file, my hands steady despite the adrenaline coursing through me. I redact anything about aliens, about Veritas, about Simon's true identity. This needs to look

like a straightforward investigation report, nothing more. I save it to my cloud and text Silas.

I have something for you. Where can we meet?

The reply comes fast. Old pumping station, Ninth Ward. You remember the one.

I do. It's been abandoned since Katrina, a crumbling relic of the storm's devastation. I grab my keys and head out, my mind racing.

The pumping station looms in the distance, its skeletal frame silhouetted against the dying light. I park and step out, the air thick with the scent of rust and decay. Silas is waiting inside, his blonde hair catching the faint glow of his phone screen.

"Claire," he says, his voice smooth but strained. "You're late."

"Traffic," I lie, stepping closer. "I've got your proof."

I pull up the report on my phone and hand it to him. His eyes narrow as he scans it, his jaw tightening with each line. When he finishes, he looks up at me, his expression a mix of disbelief and anger.

"Ryan Pax? You're telling me Ryan Pax broke into my server room?"

"Looks like it," I say, crossing my arms. "Simon's been investigating him for a while. If Pax has your data, it taints the merger negotiations. You need to tread carefully."

Silas runs a hand through his hair, his usual composed demeanor cracking. "This is a disaster. If he's got leverage, he could gut the whole deal."

"You're welcome," I say dryly. "Consider your payment earned."

He looks at me, his blue eyes softening for a moment. “Claire, you’re good at this. Really good. Come work for me full-time. I’ll double whatever Simon’s paying you.”

I shake my head before he even finishes. “No. I’ve already got a job.”

“With him?” Silas scoffs. “He’s a control freak and a goddamn tyrant. You’re smarter than that.”

“I’m exactly where I want to be,” I say, my voice firm.

Silas studies me for a moment, then shrugs. “Your loss. But if you change your mind...”

“I won’t,” I cut him off.

He hands me back my phone and walks toward the exit, his footsteps echoing in the cavernous space. I watch him go, my heart still racing. I’ve done my part for Silas. Now it’s time to focus on what really matters—figuring out my next move with Simon.

I drive back to the office, hands gripping the wheel tighter than necessary. Simon’s earlier text—Return to the office and lock yourself inside—plays on repeat in my head. The image of him standing in the street, unscathed but for the tension in his jaw, lingers. He’s alive. He’s okay. That’s what matters. I park in the underground garage, my heels echoing as I step into the elevator. The ride up feels endless, my reflection in the polished metal doors betraying the exhaustion I’m trying to hide.

When the doors slide open, Miranda’s at her desk, her dark hair perfectly coiffed, her green eyes sharp. She glances up from her computer, her expression unreadable. “You have a visitor,” she says, her voice cool and clipped.

“A visitor?” I frown, my stomach tightening. “Who?”

Miranda doesn’t answer, just gestures toward Simon’s office. I hesitate, then push the heavy door open.

And there she is.

My mother.

Dolores Redding sits in one of Simon's plush leather chairs, her blonde hair streaked with dark roots, her nails painted a chipped red. She looks up when I enter, her face lighting up with a smile that's part relief, part guilt. "Claire," she says, standing. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

"Mom?" The word slips out swiftly. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you." She spreads her hands, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "It's been too long. Thought I'd surprise you. Take you to lunch."

I blink, my mind racing. Lunch? With her? The last time we spoke, she was calling me from a halfway house, her voice slurred and her words full of promises she never kept. "I—" I glance at the door, half-expecting Simon to burst in, but the office is eerily quiet. "Okay. Lunch."

Dodo's smile widens, and she loops her arm through mine as we head out. We end up at a little Cajun place a few blocks away, the air thick with the scent of spices and fried food. I order a bowl of gumbo, mostly to have something to do with my hands. She gets a po'boy and a sweet tea, her eyes never leaving my face.

"So," she says, after the waiter walks away. "How've you been? Really been?"

"Fine," I say, my tone guarded. "Busy. Work's... a lot."

"I'll bet." She leans forward, her elbows on the table. "You've always been a workhorse, Claire. Takes after your dad, I think."

I flinch at the mention of my father—or lack thereof. "Yeah, well. It pays the bills."

She nods, her smile faltering for a moment. "I'm in a program," she says, her voice softer now. "Rehab. Here in New Orleans. Six months, maybe longer. I'm... I'm

trying to get my life together. For good this time.”

I stare at her, my chest tight. “That’s good. I’m glad.”

“I want to make things right with you,” she continues, her eyes pleading. “I know I’ve messed up. A lot. But I want to try. If you’ll let me.”

I swallow hard, my fingers tightening around the edge of the table. “Mom, I... I want to believe you. But it’s not that simple. You’ve hurt me. A lot.”

“I know,” she whispers. “I don’t expect you to forgive me overnight. I just... I want to be in your life. If you’ll have me.”

The waiter returns with our food, and I’m grateful for the interruption. We eat in silence for a while, the weight of everything unsaid hanging heavy between us.

When we finish, she hands me a slip of paper with her number on it. “Call me,” she says, her voice firm but kind. “When you’re ready. I’ll wait.”

I nod, my throat too tight to speak. I drop her off at the rehab center on my way back to the office, my mind spinning. By the time I park in the garage again, I’m shaking. I sit there, the engine off, my hands gripping the wheel as the tears come. I cover my face, the sobs tearing through me, raw and unfiltered. The emotions war inside me—relief, anger, fear, hope—twisting into something I can’t control. I don’t know how long I sit there, but when I finally lift my head, the garage is still, the shadows long and deep.

CHAPTER 15

CLARICE

I'm slumped in the driver's seat, my hands clutching the steering wheel like it's the only thing keeping me from falling apart. Tears blur my vision, and I don't even bother wiping them away. The weight of everything—Silas, my mom, Simon, the lies, the fear—presses down on me until I feel like I can't breathe. I choke on a sob, my shoulders shaking as I let it all out.

That's when a shadow falls over me. I jerk my head up, my breath catching in my throat. Simon stands there, his broad frame blocking out the fluorescent lights of the parking garage. His gray eyes—always so sharp, so piercing—are soft now, filled with concern.

He doesn't say anything, just yanks the car door open and kneels beside me. His arms wrap around me before I can even process what's happening, pulling me into his chest. I freeze for a moment, then collapse against him, burying my face in his shirt.

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“Shh,” he murmurs, one hand cupping the back of my head, his fingers tangled in my hair. “It’s alright, Clarice. I’ve got you.”

His voice is low, steady, and it makes the knot in my chest loosen just a little. I cry harder, my fists clutching the fabric of his jacket. He doesn’t rush me, doesn’t try to make me stop. He just holds me, his other hand rubbing slow circles on my back.

When the tears finally slow, I pull back slightly, my face still wet. Simon brushes a strand of hair from my cheek, his thumb lingering for a moment. “Tell me,” he says, his voice firm but gentle.

I take a shaky breath. “Silas,” I start, my voice hoarse. “He... he hired me. To spy on you. That’s why I took the job. I didn’t?—”

“I know,” he interrupts, his tone calm.

I blink up at him. “You knew?”

His lips curve into a small, knowing smile. “Clarice, I’ve been doing this a long time. I knew from the start. But I also knew you weren’t malicious. You were just... caught.”

The weight of his words hits me, and I feel a fresh wave of tears welling up. “And my mom—she showed up today. She’s in rehab. She wants to reconnect. I just... I don’t know what to do.”

Simon tilts my chin up, his gaze steady. “She’s your mother. That’s complicated, but

it doesn't have to be bad. Maybe this time, she's serious."

I nod, swallowing hard. Then, before I can stop myself, the words spill out. "I love you, Simon. I ... I think I've been in love with you for a while now."

His expression softens, and for the first time, I see something vulnerable in his eyes. "Clarice," he says, his voice rough. "I love you too. I have for a long time."

The words hit me like a fist, and I can't stop the smile that spreads across my face. Simon leans in, his lips brushing mine in a kiss so tender it makes my heart ache. I kiss him back, my fingers curling into the lapels of his jacket.

When we break apart, I rest my forehead against his. "What happens now?" I whisper.

"Now," he says, his voice steady, "we keep living our lives. Together. Your mother is a complication, but not necessarily a bad one. We'll figure it out."

I smile, my heart swelling. "You're the perfect man, you know that?"

He laughs, a deep, rumbling sound. "I'm not even a man."

"Close enough," I tease, and he grins before capturing my mouth in another kiss. This time, it's not tender—it's hungry, possessive, and it sets my whole body on fire. His hands tighten on my waist, and I slide closer, my fingers tangling in his hair.

The world outside the car fades away, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I feel like everything's going to be okay.

Shomun's compad buzzes, the sound sharp and urgent. He pulls it from his pocket, his jaw tightening as he reads the message. His eyes flick to me, then back to the

screen.

“Pyke needs me at Alpha Base. Now.” His voice is clipped, but I can hear the edge of worry beneath it.

“Why? What’s going on?” I ask, stepping closer.

“The attempt on my life. They want a full report in person.” He pockets the compad and grips my shoulders, his gaze locking onto mine. “You stay here. Do not leave this office. Do you understand?”

I nod, but my stomach churns. “How long will you be gone?”

“Not long. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He leans in, his lips brushing my forehead. “Mira will keep you safe.”

As if on cue, Mira appears in the doorway. Her usual calm demeanor is replaced with something harder, fiercer. “On my honor,” she says, her voice low and steady, “no harm will come to her.”

Shomun gives her a curt nod, then strides out the door. I watch him go, my heart pounding.

The moment the elevator doors close, Mira turns to me. “Hungry? I was thinking takeout.”

I blink. “Uh, sure. What do you—wait, Mira, are you... like him?”

Her lips curve into a smile. “Not exactly. He’s indigo. I’m red.”

“Red?”

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She walks to the desk, picking up the phone to order. “My scales. When I’m not disguised as this.” She gestures at her human form.

I sink into a chair, my mind racing. “So, you’re... Vakutan too.”

“Guilty.” She winks. “But don’t worry, I’m not as grumpy as he is.”

I can’t help but laugh. “That’s a low bar.”

We order Vietnamese from a place down the street, and soon the office smells like lemongrass and cilantro. Mira grabs a pair of chopsticks and leans back in her chair, twirling them between her fingers like a pro.

“You’ve got to teach me how to do that,” I say, fumbling with my own chopsticks.

“Step one: don’t look like you’re trying to stab your food.”

I smirk. “Very helpful.”

We fall into easy conversation, and for a while, it’s almost normal. We talk about Shomun’s obsessive punctuality, his habit of correcting grammar mid-sentence, and his inexplicable love for 90s R&B.

“He once made me listen to Luther Vandross for three hours straight,” Mira says, rolling her eyes. “I thought I was going to lose my mind.”

“He sang Dance with My Father to me once,” I admit, grinning. “It was... oddly

sweet.”

“Sweet? He’s a walking grudge with scales.”

We’re both laughing when the alarm goes off. A sharp, piercing sound that makes my ears ring. Mira’s chopsticks clatter to the table, and she’s on her feet in an instant.

“Get under the desk. Now.”

“What’s happening?”

“That alarm means a Grolgath is near.” Her voice is calm, but her eyes are hard. “Move, Clarice.”

Something flickers in the corner of my eye—a slithering movement, brown and sinuous, sliding in through the ventilation duct. I freeze, my breath catching in my throat. “Mira,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “Uh... what’s that?”

She turns, her human disguise flickering for a moment to reveal the red scales beneath. Her eyes narrow as the snake coils and shifts, its form expanding, morphing into a hulking reptilian figure. Brick. His brown scales glint under the fluorescent lights, his massive frame dwarfing the room.

“I’m taking the human woman,” Brick says, his voice a low rumble. He glances at Mira, his lips curling into what might pass for a smirk. “Don’t get in my way, beautiful.”

Mira steps between us, her posture rigid, her hands curling into fists. “You’re not taking Claire. And flattery’s not going to work on me, scales or no scales.”

He shrugs, like he’s bored already. “Your funeral.”

Mira moves first—a blur of red and fury. She's fast, her strikes precise, landing blows to his ribs, his jaw, his throat. Brick stumbles back, but he's grinning now, like she's just buzzing around him. He swings a fist, and even though she ducks, the sheer force of it sends her reeling. She recovers fast, but I can see the toll it's taking. Her breaths are coming harder now, her movements slower.

Brick lands a punch, and it's like a wrecking ball hitting a brick wall. Mira crashes into the desk, the wood splintering under her weight. She doesn't get up.

"Stop!" I scream, my voice echoing in the suddenly silent room. My hands scramble across the desk until they close around the obsidian letter opener Simon keeps there. I press the tip to my throat, the metal cold against my skin. "Let her go, or I'll do it. I swear I will."

Brick pauses, tilting his head like he's trying to figure me out. "You'd really off yourself for her?"

"Yes," I snap, my voice steady even as my hand shakes. "Now back off."

He laughs—a low, rumbling sound that sends a chill down my spine. "You're kinda hardcore for a human. Alright, fine. I don't like hurting chicks anyway. But if you resist, I'll make an exception."

He tosses Mira aside like she's a ragdoll, and she crumples to the floor. I want to rush to her, but Brick's already striding toward me, his massive hand closing around my arm. The letter opener clatters to the floor.

"Let's go," he growls, dragging me toward the door.

I glance back at Mira, my heart pounding. Her eyes meet mine, and I can see the frustration, the helplessness. She's alive, but she's in no shape to stop him.

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Brick pulls me into the hallway, his grip like iron. I stumble, trying to keep up with his long strides. He doesn't look back, doesn't even seem to care if I'm struggling. He just drags me toward the waiting van, its engine idling like a predator ready to pounce.

CHAPTER16

SHOMUN

I burst into the office, the door slamming against the wall with a crack that would've made Pyke wince. Mira's sprawled on the floor, her red scales dulled by the blood pooling beneath her. Her chest rises and falls in shallow, labored breaths, but her eyes snap open the moment I kneel beside her.

"Claire," she rasps, her voice a jagged edge. "Brick took her. I couldn't stop him."

"You're alive. That's enough." I press a hand to her side, feeling the warmth of her regeneration already knitting the worst of the damage. "Where's Pyke?"

"On his way. But you don't have time to wait." She grabs my wrist, her grip weak but insistent. "You need to go. Now."

"I know." I stand, my scales rippling with barely contained fury. "Ryan Pax. He's behind this."

"It's a trap, Shomun." Her voice sharpens, cutting through the haze of my anger. "You know it is."

“Of course it’s a trap.” I stride to the desk, pulling up the Veritas network on the holo-display. The map flashes, pinpointing Pax’s yacht out on the Gulf. “But Claire’s out there. I’m not leaving her to him.”

Mira struggles to sit up, wincing as her body protests. “Let me come with you.”

“You’re in no shape to fight.” I glance at her, my tone softening. “Call Pyke. Tell him to send reinforcements. And stay alive. That’s an order.”

She glares at me, but there’s no heat in it. “You’re an idiot, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told.” I grab my compad and head for the door, pausing only to glance back at her. “Don’t die while I’m gone.”

“Same to you, big guy.”

The marina’s quiet, the kind of stillness that feels like the world’s holding its breath. My speedboat’s waiting, bobbing gently in the water like it knows what’s coming. I climb aboard, firing up the engine with a roar that shatters the silence. The boat leaps forward, cutting through the waves like a blade.

The Gulf stretches out before me, vast and endless, but my focus is on the horizon. Somewhere out there, Claire’s waiting. And I’ll tear the ocean apart to get to her.

The Gulf’s wind whips against my scales as I spot the two speedboats closing in. Plasma rifles gleam in the hands of the grolgath aboard, their green scales catching the sunlight like polished jade. I curse under my breath, my claws tightening on the wheel. Of course I didn’t bring a weapon. Of course I didn’t think. Claire’s face flashes in my mind—her honey-blond hair, those green eyes that see right through me—and I grit my teeth. I’m not dying here. Not before I get her back.

The first shot sizzles past my ear, close enough to singe the air. I jerk the wheel hard to the left, the boat skidding across the water like a stone. Another shot hits the hull, the plasma burning through the fiberglass. I can smell the acrid stench of it.

“Come on, you scaly bastards!” I roar, my voice carrying over the waves. “Is that all you’ve got?”

One of the grolgath laughs, a harsh, guttural sound. “The Vakutan’s got no teeth, boys! Let’s finish him!”

I don’t wait for them to take another shot. I slam the throttle forward, the boat surging toward the nearest speedboat. The grolgath scramble, their rifles swinging toward me, but I’m already too close. My boat rams into theirs with a deafening crunch, the impact sending me flying. I hit the water hard, the shockwave from the explosion propelling me toward the second speedboat.

I grab the edge of the boat as I surface, hauling myself aboard with a snarl. The grolgath are caught off guard, their rifles useless at this range. I don’t give them time to think. My claws tear into the first one, ripping through scales and flesh like paper. He screams, a sound that’s cut short as I hurl him overboard.

The second one lunges at me, his claws slashing toward my face. I catch his wrist, twisting until I hear the snap of bone. He howls, but I don’t stop. My fist slams into his chest, the force of it sending him crashing into the console. The boat lurches, but I’m already on him, my claws sinking into his throat.

“You think you can take her from me?” I roar, my voice raw with fury. “You think you can touch her and live?”

The last one tries to run, but I’m on him before he can take two steps. I grab him by the tail—stupid, useless appendage—and yank him back. He hits the deck hard, and

I'm on him, my claws tearing into his chest. He's dead before he can scream.

I stand there, breathing hard, my scales slick with blood. The boat's controls are still intact, the engine humming softly. I wipe the blood from my claws and take the wheel, my eyes fixed on the horizon. Claire's out there. And I'm coming for her.

The yacht looms ahead, sleek and menacing, cutting through the Gulf's dark waters. Ryan Pax stands on the deck, his green scales glinting under the moonlight, a plasma pistol pressed to Claire's temple. Her honey-blonde hair spills over her shoulders, and even from here, I can see the tightness in her jaw, the defiance in her eyes. She's scared—I can smell it—but she's holding it together. That's my girl.

I leap onto the deck, the impact shuddering through my legs. Water and blood drip from my scales, pooling at my feet. Ryan's lips curl into a smirk, his yellow eyes narrowing as he watches me. "Took you long enough, Shomun. I was starting to think you'd lost your touch."

"If you kill her," I growl, my voice low and dangerous, "you won't live long enough to regret it."

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He laughs, a sharp, grating sound that grates on my nerves. “Oh, I’m not going to kill her. Not yet, anyway. But you? You’ve been interfering with our operations far too long. It’s time for you to die.”

“If Claire dies, you die. Period. End of story.” My claws flex, the tips clicking against my palms. I take a step forward, but Ryan’s grip on Claire tightens, the barrel of the pistol digging into her skin. She winces, and I freeze.

Ryan’s smirk widens. “I’m not going to fight you, Shomun. That’s what Brick’s for.”

At his words, the angler’s chair behind him shifts, the wood and fabric twisting and morphing until Brick’s massive form stands there, scales glistening, his yellow eyes locked on me. He’s huge, his girth almost as intimidating as his height, and he cracks his knuckles with a sound like snapping bones.

“Should’ve stayed in your lane, lizard,” Brick says, his voice a deep rumble. He charges before I can respond, his fist slamming into my chest with the force of a freight train. I skid back, my claws digging into the deck to stop myself from going overboard. My ribs scream in protest, but I force myself to stand. No time to think. No time to feel.

Brick’s on me again, his fists a blur. I duck and weave, but he’s fast—faster than he looks. His elbow catches me in the temple, and the world spins. I hit the deck, the wood splintering under my weight. My arm’s broken—I can feel it, the bone jutting through the scales—but I grit my teeth and push myself up. Claire’s watching. I can’t stop. Not now.

I lunge, driving my shoulder into Brick's gut. He grunts, stumbling back, but he's got his balance back in an instant. His fist comes down like a hammer, and I barely manage to roll out of the way. The deck shatters where I was just lying, and I use the opening. My claws slash across his side, drawing blood, but he barely flinches.

"That all you got?" he sneers, his tail lashing. He grabs my broken arm, and I bite back a scream as he twists. My vision goes white, but I don't stop. I can't stop. With a roar, I drive my good fist into his throat. He stumbles, his grip loosening, and I follow up with a kick to his knee. It buckles, and he goes down.

I don't give him time to recover. My claws tear into him, over and over, until he's lying still, his breathing shallow. I stand over him, my chest heaving, blood dripping from my claws. But there's no time to savor the victory. The sound of a plasma pistol charging makes my blood run cold.

"Good fight," Ryan says, his voice dripping with mockery. "But this is where it ends."

I turn, but it's too late. The first shot hits me in the chest, the plasma burning through my scales like they're nothing. The second hits my shoulder, then my leg, then my side. I collapse to the deck, coughing up blood, my vision blurring. The holes in my chest burn, the scent of my own blood thick in the air. I try to move, but my body won't obey. Claire's scream is the last thing I hear before darkness takes me.

CHAPTER 17

CLARICE

"Shomun!" I scream his name, my voice raw and cracked, as I drop to my knees beside him. His chest is a mess of blood, dark and slick, but beneath it, I can see the edges of the wounds already knitting together, his scales shimmering with a faint,

otherworldly glow. His eyes, those deep red orbs that had once terrified me, flutter open, and he groans, a sound that's half pain, half relief.

"Claire," he rasps, his voice low and gravelly. He lifts a hand, trembling slightly, and cups my cheek. His palm is warm despite the blood. "You're... unhurt?"

"Unhurt?" I choke out a laugh, tears streaming down my face. "You're the one who got shot, you idiot. Twice!"

He smirks, that infuriating, cocky smirk that always makes my stomach flip. "A scratch. I've had worse."

"A scratch?" I gesture at the blood pooling beneath him. "You're literally lying in a puddle of your own blood!"

"It's not my blood," he says, his smirk widening as he tries to sit up. I push him back down, my hands splayed against his chest.

"Stay down, you big oaf." My fingers skim over the edge of a wound, and I wince as I feel the heat of his rapid healing. "You're not invincible, you know."

"I'm Vakutan." He says it like it's an explanation, like it's all the excuse he needs.

"Yeah, well, your 'Vakutan healing' isn't fast enough to stop me from freaking out." I lean over him, my hair falling into my face, and I brush it back with a bloody hand. "You scared me."

He reaches up again, his fingers tangling in my hair, pulling me down until our foreheads touch. His breath is warm against my skin, and for a moment, the chaos around us fades.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, his voice softer now, almost vulnerable. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You always scare me,” I whisper, my lips brushing against his. “But not like that. Never like that.”

He chuckles, a low, rumbling sound that vibrates through my chest. “You’re one to talk. I saw what you did to Ryan.”

I pull back, my cheeks flushing as I remember. “Oh. That.”

“That,” he repeats, his eyes gleaming with something between pride and amusement. “You were... impressive.”

“Impressive?” I raise an eyebrow. “I thought Vakutan didn’t give out compliments lightly.”

“They don’t,” he says, his tone serious now. “But you earned that one.”

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I press my lips together, trying to suppress the grin tugging at the corners of my mouth. “Well, next time, maybe we can avoid the whole near-death experience, yeah?”

He nods, his fingers still tangled in my hair. “I’ll do my best.”

I lean down again, my lips brushing against his in a soft, lingering kiss. His hand slips to the back of my neck, holding me there, and for a moment, it’s just us—us and the steady beat of his heart beneath my palm.

When I finally pull away, he’s breathing easier, the worst of the wounds already closed. His scales are still slick with blood, but he’s alive, and that’s all that matters.

“You’re getting blood all over me,” I mutter, though I don’t move away.

“Good,” he says, his smirk returning. “Now you’ll smell like me.”

“Gross.” I roll my eyes, but I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face.

“You love it,” he teases, his fingers brushing against the pulse point in my neck.

“Shut up,” I say, leaning down to kiss him again.

The sound of rotors cuts through the chaos, and I glance up to see a Coast Guard vessel hovering above the yacht. The side doors slide open, and a team in tactical gear rappels down, their movements precise and efficient. Their uniforms are standard issue, but I catch the glint of Veritas insignias on their shoulders.

“About time,” Shomun mutters, his voice strained but steady. He’s sitting upright now, his arm cradled against his chest. A Vakutan medic kneels beside him, his scales a deep forest green, and his hands move with practiced ease as he sets the broken bone. Shomun doesn’t flinch, but his jaw tightens, and I reach out to grip his free hand.

“You’re a terrible patient, you know that?” I say, trying to lighten the mood.

“And you’re a terrible nurse,” he shoots back, his lips curling into a smirk. “You’re supposed to tell me it won’t hurt.”

“It won’t hurt,” I say, and he laughs—a short, pained sound that makes my chest ache.

“Liar.” His fingers squeeze mine, and I lean into him, resting my head against his shoulder.

The Veritas team moves with purpose, securing the yacht and dragging Brick to his feet. He’s still unconscious, his massive form slumped between two agents, and I feel a flicker of satisfaction. One down, one to go.

“Good work,” Captain Pyke says, stepping onto the deck. His red scales gleam in the sunlight, and his presence is commanding, even in the chaos. He nods to Shomun, then to me. “Both of you.”

“Shomun did most of the heavy lifting,” I say, my voice soft. “I just... got lucky.”

“Luck had nothing to do with it,” Shomun says, his tone firm. “Claire took down Ryan Pax. She’s earned her place in Veritas.”

I blink, stunned. “Me? In Veritas? I’m just... I’m just a human.”

“You’re not just anything,” Shomun says, his red eyes locking onto mine. “You’re brilliant, resourceful, and you took down a grolgath. That’s more than most Vakutan can claim.”

“He’s right,” Pyke says, his voice carrying the weight of authority. “You’ve proven yourself, Clarice. Humans like you are the reason Earth becomes the powerhouse it is in the future.”

I swallow hard, my mind racing. “I... I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes,” Shomun says, his grip on my hand tightening. “You belong here.”

I look at him, then at Pyke, and finally at the Veritas team moving around us. They’re an odd mix of species and skills, but there’s a sense of unity, of purpose. It’s intimidating, but also... tempting.

“Yes,” I say. “I’ll join.”

Pyke extends a hand, and I take it, his grip firm but not crushing. “Welcome to Veritas, Clarice. You’ve already made us proud.”

Shomun’s smirk returns, and he leans in close, his breath warm against my ear. “Told you you were special.”

I blush, and Pyke chuckles, a deep, rumbling sound that seems to echo across the deck. “She’s more than special. She’s magnificent.”

“I know,” Shomun says, his voice softer now, almost reverent. “She’s the most magnificent woman in the galaxy.”

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I bury my face in his shoulder, my cheeks burning. “You’re both impossible.”

“But you love us anyway,” Shomun says, and I can hear the grin in his voice.

“Yeah,” I mutter, my lips brushing against his scales. “I do.”

CHAPTER18

SHOMUN

The basket of the hot air balloon sways gently as we ascend, the burner roaring to life intermittently to keep us aloft. Below, the Gulf of Mexico stretches out like a vast, shimmering sheet of glass, the horizon painted in strokes of orange and pink as the sun dips toward the water. New Orleans sparkles in the distance, its lights flickering on one by one as dusk settles over the city. The air is crisp, carrying the faint salt tang of the sea, and Claire leans against the edge of the basket, her honey blonde hair catching the last rays of sunlight.

“It’s so beautiful up here,” she says, her voice soft, almost reverent. “I’ve seen sunsets before, but never like this. It’s like... the whole world is on fire, but in the best way.”

I pop the cork on the champagne bottle, the sound sharp and satisfying, and pour her a glass. She takes it, her fingers brushing against mine, and gives me a smile that makes my hearts—both of them—skip a beat.

“To us,” I say, raising my own glass. “And to the first of many sunsets we’ll see

together.”

She clinks her glass against mine, her green eyes sparkling. “To us,” she echoes, taking a sip. She leans back, savoring the champagne, her gaze drifting back to the horizon.

I open the small cooler beside me and pull out a tin of caviar, spreading it delicately on premium crackers. I hand one to Claire, and she bites into it with a satisfied hum.

“You always know how to spoil me,” she says, licking a bit of caviar from her thumb.

“It’s not spoiling if it’s deserved,” I reply, my voice low. I set the tin aside and take her hands in mine, feeling the warmth of her skin against my scales. “Claire, you’ve... you’ve changed everything for me. Your courage, your humility, your intelligence—your empathy. You constantly surprise me. I thought I knew what perfection was before I met you, but you’ve shown me I had no idea. I feel like the luckiest Vakutan in all of time and space to have you by my side.”

She laughs, a sound that’s light and melodic, and tilts her head at me. “You’re either about to tell me you have a terminal disease, or you’re about to propose marriage.”

I sink to one knee in the basket, the rough weave of the wicker pressing into my scales. I pull a small velvet box from my pocket and open it, revealing a ring that catches the fading light, its facets gleaming like stars.

“It’s the second one,” I tell her. “Claire Redding, will you marry me?”

Claire’s eyes well up with tears, but they’re the good kind, the kind that humans spill when they’re overwhelmed with joy. She nods, her lips pressed together like she’s holding back a sob, and I slide the ring onto her finger. It fits perfectly, of course. I measured her finger in her sleep three nights ago.

“I knew you were up to something all week long,” she says, her voice shaky but teasing. “I just didn’t know what.”

Her hands tug at my shoulders, pulling me to my feet so she can kiss me. I’ve kissed her a hundred times, maybe more, but this one—this one is different. The sun’s final rays paint the sky in hues of orange and gold, and her lips are soft, warm, insistent. I could lose myself in this moment forever.

When we finally break apart, she’s breathless, her cheeks flushed. I wrap my arms around her, holding her close as the balloon drifts lazily across the sky. The stars begin to emerge, one by one, their faint light twinkling against the deepening darkness.

“Which one’s yours?” she asks, tilting her head back to look at me. “Your star, I mean.”

I chuckle, the sound rumbling deep in my chest. “Vakuta’s star? You can’t see it from Earth’s surface. Stellar parallax and sheer distance make it impossible. But—” I pause, brushing a strand of honey-blond hair from her face. “Home isn’t a place in the stars, Claire. It’s a place in your heart.”

She smiles up at me, her green eyes glistening. “My home is wherever you are.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the chest, but in the best way. I tighten my arm around her, pulling her closer as we drift over the ocean. The sound of the waves below is faint, almost imperceptible, but it’s there, a steady rhythm that matches the beat of my hearts.

“So,” I say, breaking the comfortable silence. “You knew I was up to something?”

“Yes,” she replies, grinning now. “But I guessed totally wrong. I thought you were

just planning on doing something really freaky to me in the bedroom.”

I laugh, the sound carrying on the night air. “The evening is young. Don’t rule anything out yet.”

“Ready to go home?” I ask, my hand brushing against hers as I reach for the control panel. The remnants of our champagne still linger in the air, sweet and effervescent.

“Yes,” Claire says, her smile softening as she leans into my side. “Though I could stay up here forever.”

“Noted.” I grin and flip a switch on the dashboard with a practiced flick of my claws. The holographic disguise of the hot air balloon shudders, then collapses like a veil being torn away. Beneath it, the sleek, Vakutan shuttle glints in the starlight, its open-air deck revealing the intricate circuitry and glowing panels of Alliance engineering. Claire gasps, her grip tightening on my arm.

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“Whoa,” she whispers, her voice tinged with awe. “It’s beautiful. And... terrifying.”

“That’s the idea,” I say, my tone light but proud. I toggle the thrusters to life, and the shuttle hums, the sound low and resonant. “Hold on.”

The shuttle shoots forward, slicing through the night air like a blade. Claire lets out a yelp, her nails digging into my scales as the city lights blur beneath us. I glance at her, my grin widening. “Scared?”

“A little!” She clings tighter, her eyes wide but sparkling with adrenaline. “How fast are we going?”

“Fast enough to outrun anything Earth has to offer,” I say, my voice steady. “But don’t worry. The inertial dampeners and artificial gravity will keep you safe. You’re strapped in tighter than a Pi’Rell’s belt.”

She laughs, the sound a little shaky but genuine. “Good to know. But can we not test the limits of your fancy tech?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” I say, my claws hovering over the controls. My red eyes gleam with mischief as I glance at her. “Trust me.”

“Simon—” she starts, but I’ve already pulled the stick back. The shuttle’s nose tips upward, and we’re soaring straight toward the stars before I roll us into a loop. Claire’s scream pierces the night, high and panicked, and I laugh.

“We’re not falling!” I shout over the rush of wind. “Look!”

The shuttle completes the loop, and we're right side up again, the city lights sprawling beneath us in a glittering tapestry. Claire's chest heaves, her face pale but her eyes blazing.

"You're just the worst," she says, punching me in the shoulder. Her fist bounces off my scales, and she winces. "Ow. You act like you don't want to get any tonight or something."

I gasp, clutching my chest in mock horror. "Claire, that's cruel. You wouldn't deprive your poor, loving fiancé, would you?"

She bursts out laughing, the sound rich and unrestrained, and I feel a warmth spread through me that has nothing to do with the shuttle's engines. Her laughter fades into a soft smile, and she leans her head against my shoulder.

"You're impossible," she murmurs. "But I love you anyway."

"Good," I say, teasing. "Because you're stuck with me."

I keep the shuttle steady as we glide back toward the city, Claire's warmth pressed against my side as the wind whips through her hair. I glance at her again, feeling something. Pride, maybe. Gratitude. Love. She's fearless in ways I never expected, and I realize, not for the first time, that she's more than a match for a Vakutan warrior.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

CHAPTER 19

CLARICE

The wineglass trembles in my hand as I set it down, the vibrations still echoing through my body. Across the table, Shomun's lips twitch in that infuriating way they do when he's trying not to smirk. I glare at him, my face burning, and shift again in my seat. The chastity belt digs into my hips, and the plugs—the damn plugs—hum faintly, a constant reminder of his control.

“You're impossible,” I hiss, my voice low enough that the other diners won't hear. The candlelight flickers between us, casting shadows on his face, but I don't need the light to see him. I've memorized every detail, every shift of his expression, the way his eyes soften when he's amused and sharpen when he's focused. Right now, they're somewhere in between.

“Impossible?” He leans forward, his tailored suit stretching over his broad shoulders. The fabric clings to him like a second skin, and I hate how much I want to rip it off him. “You're the one who agreed to this.”

“Agreed?Agreed?” My voice rises slightly, and I clamp my mouth shut, glancing around the restaurant. No one's paying attention, but I still feel exposed, like the entire world can see what's happening under my dress. “You didn't exactly give me a choice.”

“I never force you, Claire.” His tone shifts, growing serious, and I freeze. Beneath the teasing, there's a thread of steel, a reminder that no matter how much he pushes me, he'd stop if I ever truly asked. It's that thought that makes my stomach tighten, my breath catch.

“I know,” I mutter, picking up my fork and poking at the remains of my coq au vin. The food is delicious, but I can barely taste it now, my focus entirely on him. “But you're still a monster.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” He reaches across the table, his fingers brushing

against mine. Even through the gloves he wears to hide his scales, the touch sends a shiver up my spine. “Finish your meal. We’re not done yet.”

“Not done?” I arch a brow, mimicking his earlier expression. “What more could you possibly have planned?”

He doesn’t answer, but the look in his eyes is enough to make my cheeks flush. I glance down at my plate, willing myself to finish eating, but every bite feels like it’s coated with anticipation. The plugs shift inside me, and I bite my lip, forcing myself to stay quiet.

Across the table, Shomun watches me, his gaze heavy, and I know he’s cataloging every reaction, every twitch, every breath. He always does. It’s maddening. It’s intoxicating.

“You’re staring,” I say, my voice a little too high.

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“You’re beautiful,” he replies, and the sincerity in his tone makes my chest tighten. I look away, my fork clinking against the plate, and he chuckles.

“Don’t think I’ll go easy on you just because you’re trying to sweet-talk me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” He signals for the check, his movements deliberate, and I feel the weight of his attention like a physical touch. When the waiter leaves, he stands, offering me his arm.

“Let’s go.”

I take his arm, my fingers curling around the hard muscle beneath his sleeve. The restaurant buzzes around us, the clink of glasses and murmur of conversation fading into the background as we make our way to the door. Outside, the night air is cool, but it does nothing to soothe the heat building inside me.

“Where are we going?” I ask as he helps me into the car.

He doesn’t answer, but the smirk he gives me tells me everything I need to know.

The door to Simon’s corner office clicks shut behind us, the sound echoing in the vast, dimly lit space. My heart races as he leads me toward the master bedroom, his grip on my wrist firm but not painful. He doesn’t need to pull me; I’d follow him anywhere, even if I pretend to resist.

“Strip,” he commands, his voice low and smooth, like velvet wrapped around steel.

I hesitate for a split second, just long enough to watch his eyes darken with anticipation. Then I move, letting my hands slide up my sides in a slow, deliberate motion. My dress clings to me as I peel it off, revealing the lingerie he insisted I wear earlier. The fabric pools at my feet, and I step out of it, my movements calculated to draw his gaze.

“Good girl,” he purrs, the sound vibrating through me. I can’t help the shiver that runs down my spine.

I drop to my knees, pressing my face against his leg. The fabric of his trousers is smooth against my skin, the hard muscle beneath. “Please, Sir,” I whisper, looking up at him with wide eyes. “Please make me cum.”

My hands clutch at his thigh, and I nuzzle against the bulge in his pants. He groans, the sound low and feral, and I feel a thrill of satisfaction that I’ve affected him this much.

“Maybe,” he says, his voice teasing.

I pout, pressing my lips together in a way I know drives him wild. “You’re cruel.”

“And you’re impatient.” He steps back, pulling me to my feet. “Looks like you need some discipline.”

He undoes the chastity belt with practiced ease, the click of the lock making my breath hitch. When the belt falls away, I feel strangely exposed, vulnerable in a way that only he can make me. He removes the plugs next, his fingers brushing against me in a way that makes me squirm.

“Stop that,” he growls, smacking my breast lightly. The sting is just enough to make me gasp. “You’ll cum when I say you can.”

I nod, biting my lip to keep from begging. He grabs a coil of silk rope from the bedside table, the material smooth and cool against my skin as he begins to bind me. The ropes wrap around my body, pulling my arms behind my back and pressing my breasts together. I can feel every twist and knot as he works, his hands moving with precision.

When he's finished, I'm a mess of silk and desire, my breath coming in shallow gasps. He runs his fingers over the ropes, tracing patterns on my skin, and I shiver as his touch lingers on my nipples.

"Please," I whisper, my voice barely audible.

"Soon, my beauty," he murmurs, his breath warm against my ear. He kneels in front of me, his hands sliding down my thighs. "Patience."

His tongue flicks against me, and I bite back a moan. He's driving me to the edge, and I'm not sure how much longer I can hold on. But I know better than to push him. Not yet.

His tongue is relentless, curling and flicking against me with a precision that makes my toes curl. I'm bound, helpless, the silk ropes digging into my skin as I writhe against them. Shomun's mouth is on me, his lips sucking at my swollen pussy lips, his tongue probing deeper, teasing that spot inside me that makes my vision blur. I can't think, can't breathe, can't do anything but feel.

"Shomun," I gasp, my voice breaking as his tongue flicks against my clit. "Please, I can't—I can't?—"

He doesn't stop. If anything, he doubles down, his tongue working me over with a skill that's almost inhuman. My hips buck against his face, but he holds me down, his hands gripping my thighs as he devours me. I'm so close, so close, and when his lips

close around my clit and suck, I shatter.

The orgasm hits me like a metoer strike, my body convulsing as I scream his name. I'm squirting, my juices coating his face, and he doesn't pull away. Instead, he laps at me eagerly, his tongue catching every drop as I writhe and tremble in the ropes.

"You cum so pretty for me," he murmurs, his voice rough with desire. He leans back, his face glistening. "I'm almost tempted to skip your punishment for cumming without my permission. Almost."

I'm still coming down from the high, tiny aftershocks rippling through me as he reaches for the ball gag. I open my mouth obediently, letting him slide it between my lips and secure it behind my head. The leather straps dig into my cheeks, but I don't mind. I'm too lost in the haze of pleasure to care.

He lights a candle, the flame flickering in the dim light of the room. I watch as he tilts it, letting the hot wax drip onto my skin. It's not painful—not really. It's more like a warm shower, the heat just this side of too much. I moan behind the gag, my body arching as the wax trails down my chest, my stomach, my thighs.

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Shomun's eyes are dark, his need for me written plainly on his face. He blows out the candle, the room plunging into near darkness. He's done playing, done teasing. His need has grown too great to hold back any longer.

He grabs my hips, dragging me under his powerful body, and I squeal with delight behind the gag. The head of his cock presses against me, slick with my arousal, and I've never been more ready to feel him inside of me.

He's inside me before I can even process the shift in his demeanor. One moment, he's kneeling before me, his tongue working me into a frenzy, and the next, he's lifting me effortlessly, his hands gripping my hips as he slides into me with a low, guttural growl. The sensation is overwhelming, his cock filling me completely, stretching me in ways that make my breath hitch and my body tremble.

"Shomun," I gasp, my voice breaking as he begins to move, his thrusts slow and deliberate, each one sending shockwaves of pleasure through me. My hands clutch at his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin, but he doesn't seem to care. His focus is entirely on me, his eyes locked on mine as he fucks me with a precision that leaves me breathless.

"You're mine," he growls, his voice rough with desire. "All mine."

I nod, unable to form words, my body arching against his as he picks up the pace. The sound of skin against skin fills the room, mingling with my moans and his grunts, and I'm lost in the sensation, in the way he makes me feel. Every thrust, every movement, is calculated to drive me closer to the edge, and I'm helpless to resist.

“Please,” I beg, my voice barely a whisper. “Please, let me cum.”

“Cum for me,” he commands, his voice firm but gentle, and I obey instantly, my body convulsing as the orgasm engulfs my body and soul. I scream his name, my nails raking down his back, and he doesn’t stop, doesn’t slow down, just keeps fucking me through the waves of pleasure.

When the first orgasm subsides, he flips me onto my stomach, his hands gripping my hips as he enters me from behind. The new angle sends a fresh wave of pleasure through me, and I’m already on the edge again, my body trembling with need.

“Again,” he growls, his voice a command, and I cum instantly, my body arching against his as he fucks me harder, deeper. The pleasure is overwhelming, and I lose count of how many times he makes me cum, how many times he changes positions, each one more intense than the last.

By the time he finally cums, filling me with his hot seed, I’m a trembling, quivering mess, my body spent and sated. He collapses on top of me, his cock still buried inside me, exulting in the weight of him, the warmth of his body, as I drift off to sleep, pinned beneath him.

I don’t know how I got so lucky, how I ended up here, with him. But as I close my eyes, I know one thing for certain: I wouldn’t trade this for anything in the world.

CHAPTER 20

SHOMUN

I step into my corner office, the weight of the overseas trip still clinging to me. The air smells faintly of stale takeout and paper, and my eyes scan the room. Papers are strewn across my desk like a hurricane hit, empty food cartons piled precariously on

the edge. My jaw tightens.

“Clarice,” I call out, my voice low and edged with disbelief. There’s no response, so I stride toward the bedroom, my boots clicking sharply against the hardwood floor.

She’s lounging on the bed, one hand propping her head up, the other lazily working a vibrator against herself. Her eyes flicker to me, a sly smile curling her lips. “Oh, are you home?” she asks, her tone dripping with faux innocence.

I cross my arms, my eyes narrowing. “Care to explain the state of my office?”

She shrugs, not missing a beat. “I was busy. And now I’m—” she hums, arching her back slightly, “—even busier.”

I let out a sharp laugh, shaking my head. “You’re going to regret that.” In three strides, I’m at the bed, grabbing her wrist and pulling her to her feet. She yelps, the vibrator clattering to the floor. “Busy, huh? I’ll show you busy.”

I drag her across the room, her feet barely touching the ground, and drop her onto my lap. Her hands instinctively brace against my thighs, but I pin her arms behind her back with one hand, holding her firmly in place. “Let’s see how you like being disciplined.”

My free hand comes down hard on her ass, the sound sharp and satisfying. She squeals, squirming against me. “Simon!” she gasps, but I don’t let up. I spank her again, the rhythm steady and unrelenting. Her skin reddens under my palm, and her squirming turns into writhing.

“Is this what you had in mind when you left my office a pigsty?” I growl, landing another smack. Her breath quickens, and she lets out a moan that’s equal parts protest and pleasure.

“I didn’t think—” she starts, but I cut her off with another strike.

“That’s the problem,” I say, my voice dark with amusement. “You didn’t think.”

Her body trembles under my hand, and she arches her back, pressing herself against me. “Please,” she whispers, her voice breaking. “Let me cum.”

I pause, my hand hovering above her ass. “Yes,” I say, and she lets out a choked cry as her body convulses, her thighs clamping together. I keep spanking her, the rhythm steady, as her orgasm rips through her. She screams, her entire body shaking, and I don’t stop until she’s limp in my arms, her breathing ragged.

I grab the vibrator from the floor, holding it up between us. Claire’s eyes widen, her lips parting as if she’s about to protest, but she doesn’t. She just watches me, her chest rising and falling with each shallow breath.

“Since you’re so fond of this,” I say, my voice low and deliberate, “you can have it all afternoon.”

Her cheeks flush, but she doesn’t argue. She never does, not when I’m like this. I retrieve the Reaper’s Lingerie from the drawer, the leather cool and familiar in my hands. She stands still as I fasten the collar around her neck, the cuffs locking her wrists behind her back. I guide her to the office chair, the one with the high back and sturdy frame, and secure her there with the harness straps. She’s bound, her arms immobile, her body exposed and entirely at my mercy.

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I turn the vibrator on high and press it against her, watching her gasp and squirm. “Don’t drop it,” I warn, my tone firm but not harsh. She nods, her eyes glazing over as the vibrations ripple through her.

I step back, pulling my cock out, already hard and aching for her. “Now,” I say, my voice commanding, “give me head.”

She leans forward, her lips parting as she takes me into her mouth. I’ve taught her well, and she obeys with precision, her tongue swirling around the tip before she takes me deeper. “Good girl,” I murmur, my hand tangling in her hair. “Just like that.”

She hums around me, the vibrations sending a shiver up my spine. I guide her movements, my fingers tightening in her hair as I set the pace. She takes me deeper, her enthusiasm evident in the way she swallows around me, her moans muffled but unmistakable. The vibrator hums against her, and I can feel her trembling, her thighs clenching as she teeters on the edge of release.

“Cum,” I command, and she does, her body convulsing as she sucks me with renewed fervor. I let her ride the wave, her moans growing louder as she comes again and again, her body trembling with each climax.

When I can’t hold back any longer, I grip her hair tightly and thrust into her mouth, releasing with a guttural groan. She swallows every drop, her tongue lapping at me until I push her back, her lips swollen and her eyes hazy with pleasure.

I release her from the chair, her legs barely able to support her as I bend her over the

desk. She's eager, her hips arching toward me as I sink into her with one deep thrust. She gasps, her back arching as I move, my hands gripping her hips as I claim her.

"Simon," she moans, her voice breaking as I thrust harder, faster, our bodies slamming together with a rhythm that's as primal as it is electric. I can feel her tighten around me, her body convulsing as she comes again, her cries echoing through the room.

I'm not far behind, my release crashing over me as I spill inside her, my body collapsing on top of hers. I kiss her, my lips crashing against hers as we come down from the high, our breaths mingling as we cling to each other.

"I love you," I whisper against her lips, my voice raw with emotion. "More than anything."

She smiles up at me, her eyes shining. "I love you too."

"How'd the fitting go? Did they manage to make you look even more radiant than usual, or did they give up and call it impossible?"

She laughs, but it's a little tight, like she's forcing it. "It went fine. They just... might need to make some adjustments." She pauses, her hand drifting to her belly. She looks nervous.

I sit up straight, my scales tingling with a mix of curiosity and concern. "Adjustments? What kind of adjustments?"

She takes a deep breath, her green eyes locking onto mine. "Well," she starts, her voice soft but deliberate, "we're either going to have to move the timeframe for the wedding up, or we're going to have to let my wedding dress out a little." She pauses, her hand resting lightly on her stomach. "If you know what I mean."

I freeze. My brain stumbles over the implications for a solid two seconds before it catches up. “Are you with child?” The words come out sharper than I intend, my voice cracking slightly.

She nods, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her blouse. “Yeah. I am.”

I’m on my feet before I even realize I’ve moved, crossing the room in two strides. “Okay with it?” I blurt out, my voice rising. “How could I not be okay with it? I’m going to be a father.” I grab her shoulders, my scales flushing a deeper indigo. “The mother of my child is the most perfect woman in the galaxy. Of course I’m okay with it.”

Her face softens, and she lets out a small, relieved laugh. “Oh, thank God. I was worried you’d?—”

I cut her off by pulling her into a hug, my arms wrapping around her like I’m trying to shield her from the universe itself. She buries her face in my chest, and I can feel her trembling slightly. “You’re going to be an amazing mother,” I murmur into her hair. “And I’ll be there every step of the way, even if I have to wrestle a black hole to make it happen.”

She laughs again, muffled against my chest, and pulls back to look up at me. Her eyes are shining, and she’s smiling that smile that makes my hearts—both of them—skip a beat. “So, uh, we should probably start thinking about names, huh?” she says, her voice light but still tinged with that nervous energy.

I grin, my lips pulling back to reveal my teeth. “Already on it. How about Shomun Jr.?”

She groans, swatting my chest. “No. Absolutely not. You’re not naming our kid after yourself.”

I feign offense, clutching my chest like she's wounded me. "What's wrong with my name? It's a strong name. A warrior's name."

"Every Vakutan name I've heard so far means 'warrior' or 'slayer' or 'fighter,'" she points out, her tone playful but firm. "I'm not raising a gladiator."

I chuckle, pulling her back into my arms. "Fair enough. But whatever we name them, I already know they'll be perfect. Just like their mother."

She sighs, resting her head against my chest again. "You're such a sap."

"Only for you," I murmur, kissing the top of her head. "Only for you."