



# Claimed By the Alien Warlord

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Science Fiction

**Description:** She broke my window. Now I'm going to break her.

I came to Earth to complete a mission—not to get distracted by a foul-mouthed human with nothing but debt, attitude, and a body made to be conquered.

But the moment Reily Dawson defied me, something ancient woke up inside me.

She doesn't know I'm not human. Doesn't know what I look like without the disguise.

Doesn't know I've already decided she's mine.

Now she's in my home. Wearing what I command. Working under my eye.

She thinks this is punishment.

No.

This is courtship.

And when I'm done?

She'll be begging to carry the heir of a monster.

Read on for alien alphas, forced proximity, one bed, heat that melts panties and starships, and a heroine who doesn't submit easy—but breaks hard. This possessive alien doesn't just fall in love. He claims. HEA guaranteed.

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## CHAPTER 1

### REILY

The POS sputters, coughing like it's on its last breath, as I clutch the wheel and lean forward like I can will it to keep going. "Come on, you rustbucket. Just five more minutes. Don't you dare die on me now. We've been through worse, right?" The engine groans in response, but it keeps rolling, and I let out a shaky breath.

My stomach growls loud enough to compete with the engine. Empty fridge, empty cabinets, and an empty wallet. All thanks to Gary freaking Irons. "That dickhead billionaire shows up, buys the mine, shuts it down, and now I'm begging for a job at a grease pit." I mutter under my breath, tightening my grip on the wheel. The mountains loom in the distance, their majesty doing nothing to ease my frustration.

The POS wheezes into the parking lot of Fast Freddy's, the neon sign flickering like it's on its last legs too. I pull into a spot and give the dashboard a pat. "Atta girl. Maybe I'll scrape together enough to get you a new muffler. Or at least a prayer."

I catch my reflection in the rearview mirror. My hair's a mess, my face pale from skipping breakfast. "Stop looking so sad," I tell myself. "No one wants to hire someone who looks like they've been chewed up and spit out. Smile, and the whole world smiles with you." I force a grin, but it's more of a grimace. My fingers stretch my lips into something that resembles a smile, but my eyes still scream help me.

Inside, the smell of overcooked fries hits me like a wall. The place is empty except for two zit-faced teenagers behind the counter, their heavy metal band tees hanging

off their skinny frames like they're trying to wear their older brothers' clothes. Boris and Barfbag. Just my luck.

"Hey, baby," Boris says, his braces catching the fluorescent light as he grins. "If I were in charge of the alphabet, I'd put my D next to your P."

Barfbag snorts, doubling over like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard. "Dude, that's gold. Pure gold."

My jaw tightens. "Real original. Did you come up with that all by yourself, or did you have to google 'cheesy pickup lines for losers'?"

Boris leans on the counter, undeterred. "Someone's feisty. I like it."

"I'm here for the job interview," I say, refusing to let my annoyance show. "Is the manager around, or are you two the welcoming committee?"

Barfbag gestures toward the back with a greasy spatula. "He's in the office. Knock yourself out."

"Thanks." I mutter, stepping past them. My stomach growls again, louder this time, and I force myself to keep walking. I need this job. Even if it means working with these idiots. Even if it means serving greasy fries to every tourist passing through Coldwater. Even if it means swallowing my pride and pretending not to hate every second of it.

I need this job.

The door to the manager's office looks like it's seen better days—scuffed and dented, with a crooked nameplate that reads Chad Browning, Manager. I knock twice, sharp and quick, and wait.

The door swings open after a moment, and there he is. Chad. His tie is too short, his mustache too thin, and his expression too smug. His eyes flick over me like he's already decided I'm not worth his time.

"Can I help you?" His voice is all nasal condescension, like he's doing me a favor just by acknowledging my existence.

"Yeah, I'm here for the job interview. Reily Dawson."

His eyebrows lift a fraction, like he's surprised I managed to string a sentence together. "Ah, yes. Come in." He steps back with a flourish, gesturing toward a chair that's seen more asses than a carnival ride.

I sit, trying not to fidget as he closes the door and takes his place behind the desk. He picks up my resume like it's a piece of evidence in a trial and peers at it over the top of his glasses.

"So, Reily. I see you've worked at... a bait shop?"

"And a gas station."

"Hmm." He sets the paper down, folding his hands like a TV lawyer. "This is a quick service restaurant, Reily. It's fast-paced. Demanding. Are you sure you're... qualified for that kind of environment?"

"Um, I kind of think I can learn the more technical aspects."

His lips press into a thin line. "That's what everyone thinks." He leans back, his chair creaking under his weight. "Here at Fast Freddy's, we expect dedication. Discipline. You'll be permanently on call, meaning if I need you, you come in. No excuses. If you don't show up, you're terminated."

My eyebrows shoot up. “Whoa, dude, aren’t you going a bit far for a fast food job?”

His face turns red, and he slams his hand on the desk. “It’s a quick service restaurant. Say the words ‘fast food’ again, and you’re gone before you even start.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. “Got it. Quick service. Totally different.”

He glares at me, clearly unamused. “This isn’t a joke, Reily. We take our work seriously here.”

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“Yeah, I can tell.” I glance around at the peeling wallpaper and the flickering fluorescent light. “So... do I have the job or not?”

He leans forward, steepling his fingers like a Bond villain. “I’ll keep your name in consideration. I’m still at the accepting applications stage. Bye.”

I stand, my chair scraping loudly against the floor. “Right. Thanks for the... chat.”

He doesn’t respond, already flipping through a stack of papers like I’ve ceased to exist.

Back in the dining area, Boris and Barfbag are leaning on the counter, grinning like they’ve been waiting for me.

“Sooo,” Boris drawls, “how’d it go? You gonna be slinging fries with us?”

Barfbag snickers. “Yeah, you and us, the dream team.”

“Keep dreaming.” I head for the door, my stomach sinking.

“Aw, come on,” Boris calls after me. “Don’t be like that. We’re just messing with you.”

“Yeah,” Barfbag adds. “It’s not like you lost arealjob or anything.”

I don’t look back, but their laughter follows me out the door.

, The POS groans to life, and I steer it toward Dauber's Pharmacy, the engine hiccuping like it's mocking my bad luck. I park in the small lot, the gravel crunching under my boots as I head inside. The bell dings above the door, and Jeffry Dauber looks up from behind the counter, his gentle smile easing some of the tension in my shoulders.

"Reily," he says warmly. "How's your mother holding up?"

"Hanging in there." I lean on the counter, forcing a smile. "She's tough."

"That she is." He turns and starts pulling the meds from the shelf behind him, the labels a blur of complicated names and dosages. "Got everything ready for you. Just give me a sec."

I nod, pulling out my wallet and flipping it open to the debit card that's seen better days. Jeffry rings up the order, and I swipe the card, holding my breath.

Declined.

I blink at the machine, then swipe again.

Declined.

Jeffry clears his throat gently. "It's okay, Reily. Happens to the best of us."

I pull out my phone and check my account balance, my stomach sinking as I see the number staring back at me—lower than it should be, thanks to the interest on that payday loan I took out last month. My throat tightens, and I swallow hard.

"Hey," I say, forcing my voice to stay steady. "Which of these can she skip? Just for a week or so? I'll get the rest next time."

Jeffrey's brow furrows, and he shakes his head. "Reily, these are all important. Your mother needs them."

"I know, but—" My voice cracks, and I press my lips together, willing myself not to cry in front of him. "I just... I can't do it all right now."

Jeffrey's expression softens, and he pushes the bag of meds toward me. "Take them. We'll settle up next time."

I shake my head, my hands trembling as I push the bag back. "No, I can't. I know you're struggling too. I've seen the notices about the chains moving in. I can't do that to you."

"Reily," he says, his voice firm but kind. "You're good for it. I know you are. Your mother needs these, and I'm not going to let her go without because of a temporary hiccup."

"But—"

"No buts." He tucks the bag into my hands and gives me a reassuring smile. "Take care of your mother. That's what matters."

I clutch the bag, my vision blurring as tears spill over. "Thanks, Jeffrey. I... I won't forget this."



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He nods, his smile never wavering. “You’ll make it right. I know you will.”

I turn and head back to the POS, the bag of meds feeling heavier than it should. I climb in and sit there for a moment, the dam finally breaking as I let out the stress in a flood of tears. Minutes pass, my shoulders shaking as I cry into the steering wheel, the sound of the engine ticking as it cools the only thing keeping me company.

Eventually, I scrub my face with my sleeve, take a deep breath, and start the car. Time to go home.

The POS wheezes to a stop in the driveway, and I take a deep breath before grabbing the bag of meds and heading inside. The front door creaks like it’s protesting my existence, and I step into the living room to find my mom on the floor, one leg stretched up in the air like she’s auditioning for Cirque du Soleil.

“Hi honey,” she says, her voice calm, like this is perfectly normal. “I was just doing some yoga.”

I drop the meds on the couch and cross my arms. “Mom, don’t lie to me. You fell again. Why didn’t you use your medical alert alarm?”

She glances at the device hanging around her neck and sighs. “It costs a hundred dollars every time they send someone out to get me back up. Besides, I knew you would be home soon.”

“That’s not the point.” I kneel down and loop an arm around her shoulders, helping her sit up. “What if I wasn’t? You can’t just—ugh, never mind. Let’s get you off the

floor.”

She winces as I hoist her to her feet, her walker toppled nearby like a monument to her stubbornness. I right it and guide her to the couch, where she sinks into the cushions with a grateful sigh.

“Now stay put while I figure out dinner.” I head to the kitchen, rummaging through the cabinets for something edible. Half a box of pasta, a can of diced tomatoes, and some spices. Good enough.

“How’d the job hunt go?” Mom calls from the living room.

I pretend to focus on the pot of boiling water. “Good. Couple of promising leads. Should hear back soon.”

“That’s wonderful, honey.” Her voice is bright, and I feel a pang of guilt for lying. I’ll tell her the truth eventually, but right now, she doesn’t need to worry about me.

Dinner’s a quiet affair—pasta with a makeshift tomato sauce that tastes better than it has any right to. Mom eats every bite, and I count that as a win. After, I make sure she takes her meds, the pills lined up on the table like little soldiers ready for battle.

“All set,” she says, swallowing the last one with a sip of water. “Thanks, sweetie.”

I help her to bed, tucking her in like she’s a kid instead of the other way around. “Sleep well, Mom.”

“You too, Reily.” She smiles, , I feel like maybe, just maybe, things will be okay.

I flop onto the living room couch, my body sinking into the worn cushions. My eyes drift shut, and for the first time all day, I let myself relax.

Which, of course, is when the doorbell rings.

I groan, dragging myself to my feet. “If this is Boris and Barfbag, I’m setting The POS on fire.”

The doorbell screeches again, like a cat being strangled, and I yank the door open, ready to unleash hell.

I yank the door open, ready to unleash hell, but instead, I find Clem and Seabus standing there, looking like they just lost a fight with a tornado. Clem’s flannel shirt is rumpled, his Skoalcap crooked, and Seabus is pacing behind him, his face red and his hands clenched into fists.

“He’s finally done it,” Clem says, his voice shaking. “He’s gone too far this time.”

Seabus spits on the ground, narrowly missing my porch. “Rich sonofabitch.”

I cross my arms, leaning against the doorframe. “What are you two talking about? What’s Irons done now?”

Clem takes a step closer, his broad shoulders hunched. “He’s applied for a permit to build a hydroelectric dam on Silver Stream.”

“Silver Stream?” My stomach drops. That river is the lifeblood of Coldwater’s tourism. People come from all over to fish, kayak, and camp along its banks. “You’re kidding.”

Seabus shakes his head, his tattoos gleaming under the porch light. “Wish we were. Dam’s gonna make the river unusable for recreation. And it’ll flood Mirror Lake.”

“That’s insane!” I explode, my hands flying to my head. “Mirror Lake’s one of the

most popular spots in Dawson Park. Tourists love it. Businesses depend on it. He can't just?—”

“He can,” Clem interrupts, his voice hollow. “And he will. He won't be happy until he kills the entire town.”

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“He already has killed the entire town,” Seabus growls, his fists tightening. “This dam is just the eulogy.”

The despair in his voice cuts through me. Clem’s eyes are wet, and the man who used to haul tons of rock out of the mine looks defeated. It’s too much. I can’t let them spiral. I reach out, grabbing Clem by the front of his flannel and shaking him hard.

“You shut up!” I snap, my voice sharp enough to make him blink. “Coldwater is not dead! Not yet! It’s time we do something about Gary Irons.”

Seabus squares his shoulders, his chest puffing out like a rooster. “I got a shotgun, a shovel, and a free night.”

Clem raises a hand, cutting him off. “I think she’s got something less lethal in mind.” He turns to me, his eyes narrowing. “Go on, Reily. Use them book smarts and tell us how we’re going to stop one of the richest, most powerful men in the world.”

I freeze. I hadn’t actually thought that far ahead. My mind races, scrambling for something, anything, to keep these two from marching off to Irons’ mansion with pitchforks and torches. Then it hits me.

“We’ll organize a protest,” I say, the words tumbling out faster than I can think. “Against the dam proposal. The biggest this city has ever seen! We’ll get everyone—fishermen, shop owners, families—to show up and make some noise. Boss Hoag won’t be able to ignore us. He’ll have to tell Irons no.”

Clem raises an eyebrow, skeptical. “You really think Hoag’s gonna stand up to Irons?”

That man's got more money than common sense."

"He will if he's got half the town breathing down his neck," I shoot back. "We'll make it so loud, so impossible to ignore, even Hoag can't pretend not to hear us."

Seabus grunts, crossing his arms. "A protest, huh? Sounds a lot less fun than my idea."

"Fun doesn't matter," I say, my voice firm. "This town matters. And if we're gonna save it, we need to do it together."

## CHAPTER 2

### GUVAN

The scent of rot and infection hits me before I see the bear. My nostrils flare, the holographic disguise of Gary Irons flickering for a moment as my true form threatens to break through. The air is thick with the stench of festering wounds, the kind that drives a creature mad. I don't need the tracker embedded in my wrist to tell me I'm close. The forest is silent, the usual chatter of birds and rustle of underbrush replaced by a heavy, oppressive stillness. Even the trees seem to hold their breath.

I step over a fallen log, my boots crunching on the brittle leaves. The bear's trail is easy to follow—broken branches, deep gouges in the bark, and the occasional smear of blood. It's not hunting anymore. It's lashing out, driven by pain and rage. I've seen it before, in soldiers and beasts alike. When the body breaks, the mind follows.

"Should've stayed in the mountains," I mutter, my voice low and gravelly, the kind of tone that doesn't belong to Gary Irons. The hologram flickers again, and I adjust the image inducer on my wrist. Can't have the locals seeing a seven-foot-tall scaled alien wandering their woods. Not that they'd believe it if they did.

The ridge comes into view, the town of Coldwater sprawled out below like a toy model. The bear stands at the edge, its massive frame silhouetted against the pale sky. Even from here, I can see the arrows jutting from its back, the wounds swollen and oozing. It's a monster, but not by choice. Someone did this to it.

The bear's head snaps around, its nostrils flaring as it catches my scent. Its eyes lock onto mine, , I see the pain there, the confusion. Then it roars, a sound that shakes the ground beneath my feet, and charges.

I drop the hologram. The air shimmers, and Gary Irons is gone, replaced by the scarred, scaled warrior I truly am. The bear doesn't slow. It's a freight train of muscle and fur, its claws tearing up the earth as it closes the distance. I brace myself, my muscles coiling like springs.

"Come on, then," I growl, my voice a deep rumble that matches the bear's roar. "Let's end this."

It's on me in seconds, its massive paw swinging down with enough force to crush a car. I sidestep, the claws missing me by inches, and drive my fist into its side. The impact sends a shockwave through my arm, but the bear barely stumbles. It swings again, and this time I catch its paw, the force of the blow driving me back a step. My boots dig into the dirt as I hold it, the muscles in my arms straining against the bear's weight.

"You're strong," I admit, my voice tight with effort. "But so am I."

I twist, using its momentum to throw it off balance. The bear crashes to the ground, the earth trembling beneath it. It's up in an instant, roaring in fury, but I'm already moving. I leap onto its back, my claws digging into its fur as I grab one of the arrows. The bear bucks, trying to throw me off, but I hold on, my grip like iron.

The bear rears up one last time, its massive body towering over me, its breath hot and rancid. I drive the arrow deeper, the barbed tip piercing its heart. The beast lets out a final, guttural roar, its eyes wide with pain and confusion, before it collapses onto the ground with a thud that shakes the earth beneath my feet. I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding, my chest rising and falling as I step back.

I kneel beside the bear, resting a clawed hand on its head. Its fur is coarse, matted with blood and dirt. "You didn't deserve this," I mutter, my voice low and gravelly. "You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time." I give its head a final pat before standing and turning my attention to the arrows sticking out of its back.

I grab one of the shafts and pull it free with a swift, practiced motion. The arrow is a mess—barbed tip, jagged edges, and a sickly sheen that screams poison. Illegal, even by Earth's lax standards. Whoever did this wasn't just hunting; they were torturing. And then they left the poor creature to suffer.

My compad hums as I pull it from my belt. The holographic display flickers to life, scanning the arrow with a soft blue light. The screen flashes red, then populates with data—manufacturer, buyer, transaction history. It doesn't take long to zero in on the name: Henry Lothar. Of course. Local dirtbag with a reputation for cutting corners and skirting the law.

"You're not just an idiot, Lothar," I growl, my tail flicking in irritation. "You're a lazy idiot." I tuck the arrow into my belt and activate the image inducer. The air around me shimmers, my scaly form replaced by the sleek, polished facade of Gary Irons. The suit fits well enough, but the disguise feels like a prison. I hate this charade.

I stride down the ridge toward Coldwater, the town's lights flickering in the distance. The weight of the arrow in my belt is a constant reminder of the task ahead. Lothar's place isn't far, and I don't plan on knocking. This isn't a visit; it's a reckoning.



The streets of Coldwater are quiet, the only sound the crunch of gravel under my boots. Lothar's house is a squat, rundown thing on the edge of town, the kind of place that looks like it's one strong wind away from collapse. I don't bother with the door. Instead, I kick it in, the wood splintering under the force of my boot.

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“Henry Lothar?” My voice echoes through the house, cold and sharp. “We need to talk.”

The stench hits me before I even cross the threshold—burnt chemicals and sweat, the unmistakable reek of human weakness. Lothar’s slumped in a rickety chair, a glass pipe still clenched between his fingers. His pupils are blown wide, his greasy hair stuck to his forehead with sweat. He doesn’t even register me standing there.

I let the image inducer flicker off.

The human disguise melts away, revealing the seven-foot nightmare beneath. Lothar blinks up at me, slow at first—then all at once, his body jerks like I’ve jabbed him with a cattle prod. His mouth falls open, but no sound comes out. Just a wet, strangled gasp.

"Henry Lothar," I rumble. My voice doesn’t echo. It just stays, heavy in the air between us.

He scrambles back, knocking the chair over with a clatter. His foot catches on the rug, and he goes down hard, the pipe skittering across the floor.

I take a slow step forward. "You shot a bear. With poisoned arrows." Another step. His back hits the wall. "Left it to suffer."

"Wha—I—" His fingers scrabble at the floorboards, desperate. "Didn’t mean—it was just?—"

I reach down and haul him up by the shirtfront. His feet dangle half a foot off the ground. The fabric strains in my grip.

"You ever tortured something to death before, Henry?" His breath stinks of meth fumes and stale beer. "Let me tell you how it feels." I turn, slamming him into the wall hard enough to rattle the framed NASCAR poster behind him. His head snaps.

"—Fuh—fuck?—"

"You're going to call the state police." I release him just enough to let his toes brush the ground. His eyes dart toward the door. "Not Coldwater PD.State." My free hand closes around his wrist, squeezing until the bones creak. "You hear me?"

"Y-yeah, Gary, I?—"

"Gary isn't here."

He shuts up. Smart.

I drop him. He crumples like a sack of flour, groaning. My compad hums in my belt. I thumb it on, holding it out to him.

"Call."

He does.

He mumbles, stutters, but manages to confess to enough illegal hunting violations that they won't ignore him. The dispatcher sounds bored until he mentions poisoned arrows. Then she getsveryinterested.

I leave before the sirens start.

By the time I reach the cabin, the hologram's locked back in place, and the town's hatred is spray-painted on my fence in jagged letters. IRONS GO HOME. FUCK U GARY. Someone's even managed to slop a crude anarchy symbol in what smells like motor oil.

I rub at the tightness between my eyes. The mine had to go. The spores in that silver vein would've turned the whole town into fever-ridden zombies within a decade. But Coldwater doesn't know that. They know empty pockets, skipped meals, prescriptions they can't afford. And they know Gary Irons took their silver away.

"Fine," I mutter, stepping inside. The door clicks shut behind me. "Hate me."

Mission first. Mission always. Even if it tastes like ash on my tongue.

The door to the cabin creaks open, and I don't even need to turn around to know who's standing there. The faint scent of ozone and the low hum of a compad in standby mode give him away. Pyke. Always with the dramatic entrances.

"Make yourself at home, Captain," I say, not bothering to mask the sarcasm in my voice. I'm standing in the middle of the living room, surrounded by a sea of clutter—empty takeout containers, discarded clothes, and a stack of unopened mail that's been gathering dust for weeks. The place looks like a tornado hit it, and I don't care.

"If you would make regular reports, Guvan, I wouldn't have to take drastic measures like house calls," Pyke replies, stepping inside. His red scales catch the light from the chandelier, and his eyes sweep over the mess with a mix of amusement and mild disgust. "You have plenty of money to hire someone to clean this place up, you know."

"I'm not home much," I grumble, crossing my arms over my chest. The image

inducer on my wrist flickers, and I adjust it with a quick tap. “What can I do for you, Pyke?”

He steps further into the room, his boots crunching on a stray potato chip that’s been ground into the rug. “Veritas intel has picked up reports of a planned protest against the Coldwater Dam Project.”

I blink, my tail flicking in irritation. “A protest? Why? The dam’s going to create jobs and cheaper electricity for everyone. What’s there to protest?”

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Pyke chuckles, a deep rumble that fills the room. “Humans, like Vakutans, become attached to places and situations as they are. They don’t always see the bigger picture. Silver Creek and Mirror Lake mean something to them—memories, traditions, whatever. They’re not just resources to be exploited.”

I snort, my claws flexing at my sides. “Sentimentality. That’s what’s holding them back?”

“It’s not just sentimentality, Guvan. It’s identity. You of all people should understand that.” He gives me a pointed look, and I know he’s referring to the scars I refuse to heal. I ignore the jab.

“So what do you want me to do? Hold their hands and sing campfire songs?”

“I want you to be diplomatic,” Pyke says, his tone firm. “No threats, no intimidation. Just talk to them. Listen. Try to see things from their perspective.”

I let out a low growl, my tail lashing behind me. “I’m a soldier, Pyke, not a politician. I don’t do diplomacy.”

“You’re whatever Veritas needs you to be,” he counters, his voice softening. “And right now, we need you to be Gary Irons, billionaire industrialist, not Guvan, the warrior who’d rather disintegrate the problem than solve it.”

I glare at him, but there’s no heat behind it. He’s right, and we both know it. “Fine. I’ll talk to them. But if they start throwing rocks, all bets are off.”

Pyke claps me on the shoulder, his grip firm but not unkind. “So do we all, my old friend. So do we all.”

He turns to leave, pausing at the door to glance back at the mess. “Get this place cleaned up, Guvan. One way or another.”

The door clicks shut behind him, and I let out a long, frustrated sigh. I glance around the room, at the chaos I’ve let accumulate, and mutter under my breath, “It would be so much easier if I could just disintegrate the protesters.”

## CHAPTER 3

### REILY

The garage is a mess of paint, cardboard, and too many bodies. I’m elbow-deep in a pile of protest signs, trying to separate the ones that say “Save Silver Creek!” from the ones that say “No Dam Way!” Clem’s leaning against the workbench, arms crossed like he’s waiting for me to screw this up. Seamus is in the corner, stacking T-shirts like they’re bricks for a fortress. And then there’s Boris and Barfbag, who somehow ended up in charge of marker duty.

“Yo, Reily,” Boris holds up a sign he’s been working on. The words “Gary Iorns is a Jerk” are scrawled in black Sharpie, the ‘I’ in ‘Irons’ clearly missing.

Barfbag snorts, doubling over like it’s the funniest thing he’s ever seen. “Dude, you forgot the ‘R’. It’s like, GaryI-orns. What’s an Iorns?”

Boris frowns, squinting at the sign. “It’s, like, a type of jerk. Obviously.”

“Guys,” I snap, handing them another stack of blank cardboard. “Focus. If you’re gonna butcher the spelling, at least make it legible.”

Clem chuckles, pushing his Skoal cap back on his head. “You sure you want those two in charge of anything? Last time I saw them, they were trying to deep-fry a Frisbee at the drive-thru.”

“Hey, that was art,” Boris says, defensive.

“Explosive art,” Barfbag adds, grinning like a hyena.

Seamus tosses a T-shirt at them. “Art doesn’t set off the fire alarms. Keep it together, or I’m sending you two to the back of the protest line.”

The garage door rattles open, and a stream of volunteers pours in. I didn’t expect this many people. The shirts are disappearing faster than I can count them. “Clem, we’re gonna run out of supplies.”

“Already on it,” he says, pulling out his phone. “I’ll call in some backups. We’ll get more paint, more shirts. This thing’s bigger than we thought.”

Boris points to a stack of blank shirts. “We could, like, make more. Custom designs. Abstract protest vibes.”

“Abstract my ass,” I mutter, but I hand them the markers anyway. Better they’re here making bad shirts than out causing trouble.

By the time we’re ready, the street outside my house is packed. Five thousand people, maybe more. Signs bob above the crowd like flags, and the hum of voices is louder than I’ve ever heard it. Clem shoves the megaphone into my hands. “You’re up, Reily.”

I freeze. “Me? Why me? You’re the one who’s good at this.”



“Because you’re the one who got us here,” he says, giving me a nudge toward the crowd. “They’re here for you.”

The crowd quiets as I lift the megaphone. My hands are shaking, but I swallow it down. “Listen up, Coldwater! We’re not here to start a fight. We’re here to finish one. Gary Irons thinks he can come in, take what he wants, and leave us with nothing. But we’re not nothing. We’re a town that fought back when the mine closed. We’re still here. And we’re not going anywhere.”

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The crowd roars, and I feel it in my chest. “This is our home. Silver Creek, Mirror Lake—they’re ours. And we’re not gonna sit back while some billionaire tries to take them away. But hear this: no violence. No destruction. We’re better than that. We’re Coldwater, and we’re gonna show them what that means.”

Clem claps me on the back, grinning. “That’s my girl. Now lead the way.”

I step off the porch, the crowd parting like water. Behind me, the chant starts low and builds: “Save Silver Creek! Save Silver Creek!” Clem’s at my side, Seamus a step behind. Even Boris and Barfbag are in the mix, holding their misspelled signs high.

We’re marching now, all of us, a sea of people moving as one. The streets of Coldwater haven’t seen this kind of energy in years. I feel like maybe we’ve got a shot.

The crowd swells behind me as we march down Main Street, the chants of “No Dam Way!” echoing off the storefronts. City Hall looms ahead, its white columns glaring under the afternoon sun. Susan Reece is already on the steps, her camera crew setting up like she’s about to film the next big blockbuster. She waves me over, her grin sharp enough to cut glass.

“You think Boss Hoag has the guts to come out and face us?” I ask, my voice already scratchy from shouting.

Susan adjusts her mic, her eyes flicking toward the building. “We’ll make it really hard to ignore us. That’s the power of the press.”

“And the power of five thousand pissed-off people,” Clem adds, stepping up beside me. He raises his fist, and the crowd erupts into another round of “Save Our Lake!”

My throat feels like sandpaper, but I grab the megaphone again. “Silver Creek isn’t just water—it’s our history! Our future! And we’re not gonna let Gary Irons or Boss Hoag take it away from us!”

The crowd cheers, louder this time. Boris and Barfbag are front and center, their misspelled signs held high. “Yeah, no dams for jerks!” Boris yells, completely serious.

I glance at Susan. “He’s really committing to the bit.”

“Don’t knock it,” she says, her camera rolling. “Bad spelling gets attention.”

The door to City Hall creaks open, and Lt. Roscoe steps out, his uniform straining over his gut. He looks like he’d rather be anywhere else. The crowd’s chanting shifts—“We want Hoag! We want Hoag!”—and Roscoe flinches like he’s been slapped.

“We’re here to talk to Boss Hoag!” Clem shouts, his voice booming.

“Yeah, give us the wolf, not the sheep!” Boris adds, looking way too proud of himself.

I lean toward Susan. “That’s pretty deep for him.”

She smirks. “Seamus coached him to say it.”

Roscoe clears his throat, holding up his hands like he’s trying to calm a pack of wild dogs. “Now, folks, let’s keep this civil. If you want to talk to the mayor, you can

make an appointment individually.”

The crowd boos, the sound rolling over Roscoe like a wave. He glares, his face turning red. “You people asked for it!” he shouts, jabbing a finger at us. “Mr. Irons has graciously given us a stipend to hire an outside security agency to deal with you pests.”

The words hang in the air, and for a second, it’s silent. Then the crowd erupts into angry shouts, and Roscoe backs up, slamming the door shut behind him.

The rumble starts low, a growl that vibrates through the ground and up my legs. I turn toward the sound, and there they are—Apocalypse Jack and his gang of lunatics, Cold Slither, roaring down Main Street like a pack of wolves. Their bikes gleam under the sun, chrome and black leather swallowing the road. The crowd’s chanting falters, replaced by murmurs of confusion and unease.

Boris and Barfbag, of course, are the exception. They’re practically vibrating with excitement. “No way,” Boris breathes, his eyes wide. “It’s them. It’s really them.”

Barfbag starts chanting, his voice cracking with enthusiasm. “We’re Cold Slither, you’ll be joining us soon! A band of vipers, bringing your doom!”

Clem’s hand snags the back of Boris’s shirt, yanking him hard. “Will you punks knock it off? This isn’t a damn fan convention.”

The gang doesn’t slow down. Jack leads the charge, his bike skidding to a stop right in front of City Hall. The rest of the gang forms up behind him, a wall of leather and menace. Jack swings off his bike, the movement smooth like he’s done it a thousand times—and he probably has. He snatches a megaphone from a protester’s hand, barely glancing at them like they’re an afterthought.

His voice crackles through the speakers, sharp and mocking. “As the duly appointed, fully deputized security agent of the fine city of Coldwater, I’m politely asking you good people to go the hell home before we curb stomp you into red paste.”

He tosses the megaphone to the ground and crushes it under his boot. The screech of feedback is deafening, but it’s nothing compared to the roar of engines as the gang revs their bikes and charges into the crowd.

The protesters scatter, most of them too smart to stand their ground against a pack of bikers. But not Clem. He’s already stepping forward, his fists clenched. “Like hell I’m letting these clowns push us around.”

I grab his arm, digging my fingers in. “Not now,” I hiss. “You start swinging, and this whole thing turns into a brawl. We can’t win this way.”

“So what, we just let them chase us off like a bunch of scared kids?” Clem’s voice is low, tight with anger.

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“We’re not out of the fight yet,” I say, pulling him back. “But we’re not winning it with our fists today. Come on.”

The bikers are herding the crowd now, their bikes cutting through the square like wolves through sheep. I keep my grip on Clem, dragging him away from the chaos. Boris and Barfbag are still staring at the gang like they’re rock stars, their protest signs forgotten.

“Move it, you idiots!” I shout at them, and they finally snap out of it, scrambling to follow us.

Coldwater’s never felt smaller than it does right now, with the roar of engines at our backs and the taste of defeat in the air. But I mean what I said—we’re not done. Not even close.

## CHAPTER 4

### GUVAN

The limo hums to a stop on the dirt road, the holographic driver flickering out of existence as I kill the projection. I step out into the crisp Montana night, the chill biting at the exposed skin of my human disguise. The river glints under the moonlight, Silver Stream winding its way through the landscape like a lazy serpent. I tilt my head back, scanning the stars. There—a faint ripple in the air, a distortion that doesn’t belong.

The cloaked shuttle lands with a soft thud, the grass flattening beneath its weight as it

decloaks. Jareth steps out, his yellow scales catching the pale light, his smirk already in place.

“Gary,” he says, his tone dripping with mock formality. “Looking as dashing as ever. That human disguise really brings out your... eyes.”

“If you’ve got something to deliver, deliver it,” I grunt, cutting through his nonsense. “I don’t have time for your commentary.”

He reverently hands me the package. I take it and carefully tuck it under my arm.

"Thank you. Are there any other reports from up top?"

“Actually, yes.” Jareth crosses his arms, his tone shifting. “There’s a disturbance downtown. A protest against your dam project. Pyke thought you should know.”

My jaw tightens. “They’re protesting the dam? Do they not understand it’s for their own good?”

“Humans,” Jareth says with a shrug. “They’re emotional creatures. They don’t always see the bigger picture. But hey, maybe you should try talking to them. Diplomacy, remember?”

“Diplomacy,” I repeat, the word tasting bitter. “Right. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Jareth claps me on the shoulder, his grip firm. “You’re doing good work, Guvan. Even if they don’t see it yet.”

I grunt, brushing off his hand. “I don’t need their approval.”

He steps back toward the shuttle, but hesitates, turning to me with a look I can’t quite

place. “One more thing. This isn’t from Pyke, by the way. This is me, as your friend. You’ve been holed up in that cabin for too long. It’s not healthy.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “What are you getting at?”

“Calm your ridges,” he says, holding up his hands. “I’m just saying, you need someone. A friend. Or better yet, a woman.”

I roll my eyes, turning away. “I don’t need anyone.”

“Suit yourself,” he says, climbing back into the shuttle. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The shuttle hums to life, cloaking itself once more before rising into the night sky. I watch the distortion fade into the stars, then turn back to the road. The package feels heavy in my hands, but not as heavy as the weight of Coldwater’s disdain. Diplomacy. Right.

I climb back into the limo, the holographic driver reappearing as I settle into the backseat. The tires crunch over the dirt as we pull back onto the main road, heading toward the town and its angry mob.

I don’t need anyone. Least of all a woman. But as the lights of Coldwater come into view, I can’t help but wonder if maybe, just maybe, Jareth has a point.

The holographic driver flickers back to life, and I program the route to take me through downtown Coldwater. The limo glides forward, the headlights cutting through the darkness. I’m not concerned about the protestors. They can shout and wave their signs all they want. They don’t understand what’s at stake. What I’ve already sacrificed for them.



The package sits heavy in my lap, the wrapping crisp and precise. My fingers tremble slightly as I undo the folds, the paper falling away to reveal the crystal globe. Sunrise on Vakuta. The name alone is enough to make my chest tighten. I cradle it in my hands, the mosaic of red and orange scales catching the dim interior light. The warmth of it, or maybe the memory of it, seeps into my skin.

I close my eyes, , I'm back there. My mother's voice, low and soothing, fills the air as she sings a lullaby. My father sits across from me, his hands steady as he works the final touches into the globe. The scales he uses are his own, my mother's, and mine. A family, immortalized in crystal.

The memory fractures. They're gone. Dead in the war. All I have left is this.

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A tear slips down my cheek, landing on the globe with a soft plink. I wipe it away quickly, but another follows. And another. My shoulders shake, the weight of it all pressing down on me. I squeeze the globe gently, afraid I'll shatter it but needing to feel something, anything, that connects me to them.

The limo slows as we approach the outskirts of downtown. The flicker of torches and the faint sound of chanting reach me, but I don't look up. I can't. Not now. Not when the ache in my chest is this raw.

Jareth's words echo in my mind. You need someone. Or better yet, a woman. I scoff, but the sound comes out hollow. He's wrong. I don't need anyone. I've survived this long without them.

But as I sit there, the globe clutched to my chest, the lie feels heavier than the truth. I am lonely. More than I've ever admitted, even to myself. The tears come harder now, silent sobs wracking my body. I don't have the luxury of breaking, but for this moment, in the back of this limo, I let myself. Just for a moment.

The limo eases into downtown Coldwater, the streets eerily quiet for a town that's supposedly in the throes of protest. I wipe the dampness from my cheeks with the back of my hand, the residue of vulnerability clinging to my skin. The globe sits heavy in my lap, its weight grounding me as I peer out the tinted window.

Discarded signs litter the sidewalk, their slogans—No Dam Way—scrawled in bold, angry letters. A few stray flyers cling to the lampposts, fluttering in the chilly breeze. The remnants of a crowd, but where are the people? My eyes scan the area. No mob. No shouting. Just a couple of bikers leaning against their motorcycles in front of city

hall, their posture relaxed, almost bored. They're decked out in blue, black, and red, their jackets adorned with a red cobra emblem. It means nothing to me.

"Huh." I mutter to myself, leaning back in the seat. "Guess they got tired of yelling."

The holographic driver glances at me through the rearview mirror, his expression neutral. "Would you like me to stop, Mr. Irons?"

"No," I say, waving a hand dismissively. "Keep driving. Nothing to see here."

The bikers don't even look up as the limo glides past. One of them lights a cigarette, the flame flickering in the dim light. The other laughs at something, the sound harsh and grating, but they're not bothering anyone. Just loitering, like bikers do.

I turn away, my attention shifting back to the globe in my hands. The subtle warmth of it seeps into my palms, a quiet reassurance. I run a thumb over the smooth crystal surface, tracing the intricate patterns of scales locked inside. Red and orange, fire and blood, the colors of Vakuta. The colors of my parents.

"Take me home," I tell the driver, my voice firmer now. "The cabin."

The limo accelerates, leaving the hollow shell of the protest behind. I stare out the window, the passing streetlights casting fleeting shadows across the interior. The globe feels heavier now, not just in weight but in meaning. Jareth's words echo in my head again. You need someone. Or better yet, a woman.

I scoff, but it's a weak defense. The truth is, I've been alone for so long I've forgotten what it's like not to be. This globe is the closest thing to company I've had in years. It's a monument to who I was, who I lost, and who I've become. A reminder that I'm still here, even if no one else cares.

## CHAPTER 5

### REILY

We're huddled at Dick's, crammed into a corner booth under the glassy stare of Niner, the nine-foot grizzly bear mounted on the wall. Clem's clutching his beer like it's the only thing holding him together, the foam sloshing over the rim every time he slams his fist on the table. Seabus is next to him, his face redder than a boiled lobster, muttering curses under his breath like a broken prayer. I'm on my sixth or seventh beer—I stopped counting after the third—and my head feels like it's floating a foot above my shoulders.

"That damn Hoag," Clem growls, his knuckles white around the bottle. "He's got his little greasy fingers in every pie in this town. Selling us out to Irons like we're just—what? Collateral damage?"

"Collateral?" Seabus snorts, his voice thick with beer and bitterness. "We're roadkill, Clem. Straight-up roadkill. That dam's gonna flood Mirror Lake, and Silver Creek's gonna be a goddamn puddle. What's left for us? Huh? Tell me that."

I lean back, the wood of the booth pressing into my spine. "We're not done yet. Hoag thinks he can just brush us off, but we're not gonna let him. We'll find another way."

"Another way?" Clem's laugh is more of a bark. "Reily, that protest was our shot. And what happened? Those biker goons ran us off like we were stray dogs."

"Jack and his gang of rejects," Seabus spits. "Ain't nothing but a bunch of two-bit thugs with bad tattoos and worse attitudes."

"Cold Slither," I mutter, swirling the dregs of my beer. "More like Cold Shit."

Clem slams his bottle down, and the sound makes me jump. “We’re not just gonna roll over, Reily. If Hoag and Irons want a fight, they’re gonna get one. I don’t care if it’s stupid or violent or whatever. I’m done playing nice.”

Seabus nods, his jowls quivering like a bulldog’s. “Damn right. We hit ‘em where it hurts.”

I open my mouth to argue, but Clem’s phone buzzes, cutting me off. He checks it, his mouth pulling into a tight line. “Uber’s here. Gotta get home before the wife starts hollering.” He slides out of the booth, his movements stiff and heavy. “You coming, Seabus?”

“Hell yeah. I ain’t gotta death wish. Martha’ll skin me alive if I’m late again.” Seabus grunts as he stands, his belly brushing the edge of the table.

Clem tosses a few crumpled bills onto the table and claps me on the shoulder. “You gonna be okay, Reily? Need a ride?”

“Nah,” I say, waving him off. “I’ll nurse this one for a bit. Clear my head.”

Clem hesitates, but Seabus is already dragging him toward the door. “Don’t do anything stupid, alright?”

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“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I lie.

Once they’re gone, I signal Dick for another round. He shuffles over, his apron stained with grease and beer, and crosses his arms. “You’ve had enough, Reily. Time to call it a night.”

“The hell I have. Pour me another.”

“Not gonna happen. You’re cut off.”

“You’re killing me, Dick.” I glare up at him, but he doesn’t budge. “Fine. Be that way.” I slam my empty bottle down and stumble out of the booth, my boots scuffing against the sawdust-covered floor.

The night air hits me like a slap, cold and sharp. My head’s spinning, but I keep walking, the anger in my chest burning hotter with every step. “Not fair,” I mutter to no one. “None of this is fair.”

And then I see it—a sleek, black limo idling at the red light not twelve feet away. My breath catches. “Gary Irons,” I slur, squinting through the haze of alcohol. “Come to survey your handiwork, you prick?”

I spot half a crumbled brick on the sidewalk, its edges jagged and sharp. Without thinking, I grab it, the weight of it solid in my hand. “Take that, you fucking rich asshole!” I hurl it with everything I’ve got.

The brick arcs through the air, spinning end over end, and smashes through the limo’s

rear window with a deafening crash. The sound of shattering glass is like music to my ears. I grin, a rush of elation surging through me.

The roar that follows isn't human. It's primal, guttural, and it shakes the air like thunder. The limo door flies open, nearly ripping off its hinges, and out steps Gary Irons. Except it's not Gary Irons—not the man I've seen in the papers. He's massive, towering over the limo, his eyes burning like red coals. In his hands, he cradles shattered glass like it's something precious.

“Oh, shit,” I whisper. My legs move before my brain can catch up. I turn and run.

My boots pound against the pavement, the sound echoing off the brick walls of the alley. His footsteps are right behind me, heavy and relentless, like a freight train gaining speed. I don't dare look back. My lungs burn, and my vision blurs as I push myself harder.

The chain-link fence at the end of the alley looms like a death sentence. No time to climb. I skid on my knees, dirt and gravel digging into my skin as I dive under the gap at the bottom. My shirt catches on the wire. I yank, but it's no use.

Gary's hand grabs a fistful of fabric. He pulls, and the shirt tears clean off, leaving me in nothing but my bra and jeans. I scramble to my feet, the cold night air biting at my exposed skin. “Stay the hell away from me!” I scream, but it comes out more like a sob.

I bolt into the woods, branches whipping at my face and arms. My feet slip on damp leaves, and my breath comes in ragged gasps. I fumble for my phone, only to remember it's still sitting on the table at Dick's. No one's coming to save me.

The ground gives way beneath me, and I tumble down a steep incline. Rocks and roots tear at my skin as I roll, my world spinning until I land in the icy water of the

brook. The cold shocks me, and I gasp, pulling my sopping hair out of my face.

He's there. Standing over me like a nightmare, his silhouette blocking out the moonlight. His chest heaves, and his eyes—God, his eyes—burn like hellfire.

"You!" he roars, his voice so deep it rattles my bones.

I scramble backward, my hands slipping on the wet rocks, but he's faster. His massive hand closes around my throat, lifting me off the ground like I weigh nothing. My back slams against a tree trunk, the impact knocking the air out of me.

I claw at his hand, but it's like trying to bend steel. "Let me go!" I choke out, my vision swimming.

"Do you have any idea what you have done?" he hisses, his face inches from mine. His breath is hot, his teeth bared like an animal's.

"It was just glass," I manage to choke out, my voice barely more than a wheeze as his hand tightens around my throat. My vision's blurring at the edges, but I can still see the fury in those burning red eyes.

"Just glass?" Gary sputters, shaking me like a rag doll. My head snaps back, and I bite my tongue hard enough to taste blood. "You dare mock my grief?"

Mock his grief? What the hell is he talking about? It was a stupid window! But his grip is crushing, and the words won't come. Panic claws at my chest. I've only made him angrier, and now I'm paying for it in oxygen.

"I'll make it up to you," I gasp, my hands clawing uselessly at his arm. His skin is hot, almost scalding, and I can feel the muscle beneath it, unyielding as steel.



"Make it up to me?" He growls, his voice low and dangerous. "Impossible."

"I'll pay for it," I rasp, desperation making my voice crack. My legs dangle uselessly, and my bra feels like the flimsiest shield against the night air—or his gaze.

"I have plenty of money," he snaps, his lips pulling back in a snarl. "What you have taken from me cannot be replaced."

His hand tightens further, and spots dance in my vision. I kick at him, but it's like kicking a brick wall. "Please," I cry, my voice breaking. "I'll do whatever you want, don't kill me!"

Gary freezes, his grip loosening just enough for me to suck in a ragged breath. His eyes narrow, , the rage in them flickers, replaced by something darker, more calculating. "You'll do whatever I want?" he replies, his tone low and dangerous.

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I nod, too scared to speak, too scared not to. His gaze drops, raking over me like he's seeing me for the first time—not as some idiot who smashed his limo window, but as... something else. His pupils dilate, and his nostrils flare, like he's scenting me. A shiver runs down my spine, and it's not just from the cold.

Suddenly, I feel exposed in a way that has nothing to do with my missing shirt. His hand is still at my throat, but it's not crushing anymore—it's possessive. His thumb brushes against my collarbone, and I freeze, my breath catching in my chest.

The air between us is thick with tension, a dangerous cocktail of anger and something else entirely. I don't know what's worse—the hunger in his eyes or the way my body responds to it, like a spark catching flame. My heart pounds, and my cheeks burn, and I hate myself for the way I'm not entirely against the idea of paying for my crime with my body.

Gary leans in, his face inches from mine, glorious as I bask in the heat radiating off him. "Whatever I want?" he repeats, his voice a low growl that sends a jolt through me.

I swallow hard, my throat dry. "Whatever you want," I whisper, the words barely audible.

Gary's hand lingers at my throat for a moment longer, his fingers brushing against my skin in a way that should feel threatening but instead sends a jolt of heat through me. His eyes are closed, his face twisted in what looks like agony, and I can see the muscles in his jaw working like he's trying to grind his teeth to dust.

“No,” he mutters, low and gravelly, like the word is being ripped out of him. “It would not be honorable.”

Honorable? What the hell is he talking about? I don’t have time to process it before he lets go of me and steps back, his chest heaving like he’s just run a marathon. His shoulders tense, his huge frame shuddering like he’s fighting some invisible battle.

I crumple to the ground, my legs giving out the second he releases me. The cold earth bites into my bare skin, but I barely feel it. My heart’s still pounding, my breath coming in ragged gasps. I wipe at my face with the back of my hand, smearing dirt and tears across my cheek.

Gary doesn’t look at me. He turns away, his back to me, and I can see the tension in every line of his body. His fists are clenched, his shoulders rigid, and I think turn around and finish what he started.

But he doesn’t. Instead, he growls, the sound rumbling through the night like thunder. “You’re mine. Understand? You belong to me.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I can’t tell if the heat that spreads through me is from fear or... something else. I nod instinctively, but of course, he can’t see me.

“What—what do you want me to do?” I ask, my voice trembling.

He doesn’t turn around. “You will be at my house tomorrow at twelve noon. Sharp,” he snaps, his tone cutting through the air like a blade. “Perhaps I can make some use of your wretched existence.”

And just like that, he’s gone, striding off into the darkness with the same terrifying grace he had when he appeared. I watch him until he’s out of sight, my body

trembling from the cold—or maybe from the sheer intensity of whatever just happened.

I sit there for a moment, staring at the spot where he disappeared, before dropping my head into my hands. “What have I gotten myself into?” I groan, my voice muffled by my palms.

## CHAPTER 6

### GUVAN

The reinforced oak door barely survives as I slam it open, hinges screaming. My claws carve grooves into the wood paneling—human craftsmanship never stood a chance. The leather couch upends with a single kick, sailing across the room to crater the drywall. Glass shatters as I backhand a vase off the mantel.

Broken glass.

Her words claw at me worse than the physical fury. I seize the heavy oak coffee table and hurl it through the floor-to-ceiling window. Cold mountain air rushes in, carrying the scent of pine and creek water—and her.

I tear the drapes from the rod with my teeth, fabric shredding between serrated molars. The taste of cotton threads mixes with the metallic tang of rage. My reflection glares back from the remaining shards of the shattered window—scarred face contorted, crimson scales flushed darker with fury.

"You insignificant, miserableworm—" My fist impacts the stone fireplace hard enough to crack the mortar. The pain barely registers.

Then the adrenaline gutters out. My knees hit the hardwood, shaking the wreckage

around me. Scalding tears streak down my face, hissing against my heated scales.

Sunrise on Vakuta is gone.

Not just glass. Them. Every flaked-off scale a whisper of my mother's battle hymns, my father's calloused hands polishing the globe after raids. Centuries of carrying their absence—only to have some drunken human child shatter the last physical echo of their voices.

I drive a claw into my own thigh. The sting is nothing compared to the void cracking open in my chest.

Then the anger surges back, molten and righteous.

She offered herself.

The memory scorches: her pulse hammering under my grip, the hitch in her breath when my claws grazed her collarbone. That sharp, defiant little face flushed with fear—and something hotter. Deeper.

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I snarl, palming the undeniable proof of my own twisted hunger. My fingers still stink of her—sweat and cheap whiskey and salt.

"Pathetic." The word drips venom. Disgust coils in my gut—not just at her, but at the way my body betrays me. A warrior shouldn't crave the enemy. I shouldn't ache to pin her again, to carve I own you into her skin with teeth and tongue until she?—

The grandfather clock chimes midnight.

I inhale sharply, forcing myself upright amidst the wreckage. Noon. She'll come. And when she does, I won't let her forget who holds the debt now.

I'm too angry to sleep, so I head outside to chop some wood for the hearth. I don't need the warmth but the dancing fire is nice.

The axe bites into the wood with a satisfying crack. I split the log clean in two, then grab another from the pile. My muscles coil and release, over and over, the rhythm of it grounding me. The scent of fresh pine sap mingles with the sharp tang of my own sweat. The night air is cool against my heated scales, but it does nothing to quell the fire still simmering in my chest.

The pile of split wood grows taller with each swing. Stacked neatly, it nearly reaches my shoulder—enough to keep the hearth burning for weeks. My breath comes in measured huffs, the weight of the axe a familiar comfort. But no matter how many logs I split, the image of her face lingers. That mix of fear and defiance. The way her pulse raced under my grip.

My compad buzzes. I lower the axe and fish the device from my pocket. Pyke's hologram materializes, his scaled face lit by the soft blue glow. His crimson eyes narrow as he takes in the scene behind me—the stack of wood, the axe in my hand, the faint sheen of sweat on my scales.

"Report," Pyke says, his voice clipped. "What happened with the protests?"

I shrug, muscles still taut from exertion. "There were no protests. By the time I arrived, it was just a couple of bikers and some signs on the ground. Nothing worth noting."

Pyke leans forward, his holographic form flickering slightly. "Nothing worth noting? Guvan, our sensors picked up significant activity. You're telling me there's nothing to report?"

I exhale sharply, the memory of her hitting me like a second wind. "There was one incident."

"One incident? Care to elaborate?" Pyke raises a brow, his tone dry.

I hesitate, then press the compad's scanner to my claws. The device whirs, analyzing the trace skin cells still clinging to my scales. "A human woman. She smashed my car window."

Pyke's holographic arms cross over his chest. "And?"

"And nothing. I handled it."

"Handled it how, exactly?" Pyke's voice is sharper now, edge of a blade just waiting to cut.

"I let her live, if that's what you're asking." I snarl the words, my grip tightening on the axe. "She'll be working off her debt. No harm done to the timeline or Veritas."

The compad pings, displaying Reily's name and address. Pyke's eyes scan the data, then widen slightly. "Reily Dawson? Our intel says she's the instigator behind the protests."

I grunt, dismissing the flare of curiosity that sparks at her name. "Lucky coincidence, then. If she's too busy scrubbing my floors, she won't have time to stir up trouble."

Pyke rubs his scaled jaw, a rare smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "You might've stumbled into a solution, Guvan. Keep her occupied. Keep her out of trouble."

"So...I can keep her?" The words slip out, and I wince. "I mean, I can keep her to her agreement?"

Pyke's smile widens, though there's a warning in his eyes. "Just...behave yourself, Guvan."

Pyke's hologram flickers out, and I toss the compad onto the counter. The house is too quiet, the kind of quiet that lets memories creep in like shadows. I head for the shower, stripping off my clothes and tossing them into a heap. The water hisses as I crank it to scalding, stepping under the stream with a low growl. The heat bites into my scales, stinging but not enough to burn. I clench my fists against the tile, letting the water drown out everything—the memory of her pulse under my claws, the shards of Sunrise on Vakuta scattered across the floor.

"Broken glass," I mutter, spitting the words like they taste foul. I scrub my hands over my face, the scars along my left cheek twinging faintly. "Just broken glass." My voice echoes off the tiles, hollow and unconvincing.



When the water runs cold, I step out and towel off, not bothering to dry completely. The night air will do the rest. I throw on a pair of loose pants and head for the porch, the wood creaking under my weight. The air smells of pine and damp earth, the creek murmuring in the distance. I stretch out on the chair, the rough wood pressing into my back, and close my eyes.

Sleep comes quickly, too quickly. My dreams are a chaotic swirl—battles fought and lost, comrades screaming my name, the acrid stench of burning metal and scorched scales. And then her. Reily. Sometimes she's standing in the woods, her eyes wide and defiant, her shirt torn away. Her breath catches as I close the distance, my claws brushing her collarbone. Other times, she's closer, her body pressed against mine, warmth bleeding through my scales. "You're mine," I snarl in the dream, but she doesn't flinch. She laughs, low and throaty, and?—

I jolt awake, my heart hammering. The night is silent except for the creek's soft murmur. I scrub a hand over my face, my scales hot to the touch. "Damn it," I mutter, pushing out of the chair and pacing the porch. The wood groans under my weight. My claws rake through my hair, tugging at the roots. "Get a grip, Guvan. She's a liability, not... not that."

But the image lingers, stubborn and vivid. I grab the axe leaning against the wall and head back to the woodpile. The steady rhythm of splitting logs helps, the sharp crack of the blade cutting through the silence. Each swing drives the dream further away, until my arms ache and my breath comes in ragged huffs.

I stack the wood neatly, my motions mechanical. The pile grows, but the night stretches on, endless and restless.

### CHAPTER 7

#### REILY

I sit on the edge of my bed, the bathrobe clinging to me like a second skin. Dawn creeps through the window, painting the sky in soft pinks and oranges, but sleep is a no-show tonight. My hands are cold, my thoughts louder than any morning birdsong.

"Just broken glass," I mutter, my voice dry and too sharp in the quiet room. My fingers trace the faint marks on my neck, the memory of his grip still there, like a phantom no amount of scrubbing will erase.

"Get a grip, Reily," I hiss, slapping my hands on my thighs. The bathrobe slips off one shoulder, and I yank it back up like it's betrayed me. "You're not some damsel. You're not..." I trail off because the thought of what I might be, what he made me feel, is too much to unpack right now.

The whole thing feels like a trap. If I don't show up, he'll come after me. Worse, he'll go after Mom, the house, everything I've barely managed to hold onto. And if I do show up? Who knows what he'll demand.

I groan, pressing my face into my hands. "Why does this have to be the thing I can't stop thinking about?"

"Because you're an idiot," I snap at myself, standing abruptly. The robe falls open, and I wrap it tighter, as if it can somehow shield me from my own stupidity. "He's dangerous. He's... whatever the hell he is. And you're..."

I stop, pacing the small room. The floorboards creak under my weight, each step echoing my agitation.

"Fine," I say to the empty room, my voice steadier now. "You'll go. You'll play nice. And if he tries anything, you'll..."

I trail off again because the truth is, I don't know what I'll do. But the thought of being in that house, of getting close to him again, sends a shiver down my spine—and it's not all fear.

I yank open my closet door, staring at the handful of clothes that pass for my wardrobe. "What do you even wear to a billionaire's house when you're basically his prisoner?"

Jeans and a flannel shirt stare back at me, judgmental in their plainness. "Fantastic," I mutter, grabbing them anyway. "At least I'll look like myself."

I throw them on the bed and sit back down, running a hand through my messy hair. "You're not going there for him," I remind myself, my voice low but firm. "You're going to figure out how to stop him. Save the town. Save Mom. And if he wants to play games..."

I struggle to contain myself, my fingers tightening on the edge of the mattress.

"Well, let's see who wins."

The coffee percolates, filling the kitchen with its bitter wake-up call. I grip my phone like it's a life raft, scrolling through contacts with a sinking feeling in my gut. Every name I call—Seabus, Clem, even that weird girl from the laundromat—either ghosts me or has some critical excuse. Halfway through the list, my thumb hacks a ragged nail into the screen.

Ofcourseit comes down to this.

Boris picks up on the second ring. His voice oozes pure, unfiltered grease."Hey, baby, I knew you couldn't resist my manly charms for long. My place, or yours?"

The mug in my other hand creaks under my grip. "I need someone to sit for my mom. You're my last resort. I'll pay you—withmoney,don't get ideas—and next time we do a demonstration, you can use a megaphone."

A muffled scuffle erupts on the other end, punctuated by Barfbag's hyena cackle. When Boris comes back, he's practically wheezing."Barfbag gets a megaphone, too. And you have to show us your boobies."

The mug slams onto the counter hard enough to send sparks of pain up my wrist. "Yes to the megaphone. And if you mention my boobies again, you're both going to need dental implants before you hit twenty."

A beat of silence. Then, in deeply theatrical reverence:"We accept your terms, mistress."

I squeeze my eyes shut. Mom's gonna take one look at these knuckleheads and think I've finally lost it. The thought of explaining—No, no, they're just deeply unfortunate human beings who owe me after the whole 'roadkill smoothie' incident last summer—makes my temples throb.

"Just—just be at the house in an hour. And for the love of God, don't call me 'mistress' in front of my mother."

The line goes dead with their laughter still ringing in my ear. I slump against the counter, staring into the black depths of my coffee. "What the hell am I doing?" I mutter.

The coffee doesn't answer. Smartest conversation I've had all morning.

The doorbell rings, and I open it to find Boris and Barfbag standing there, their faces lit up with matching grins that make me instantly regret this decision. Barfbag's got a Slayer shirt on, the shirt I'm pretty sure he's worn every day since eighth grade, and Boris is holding a bag of Doritos like it's a peace offering.

"Hey, Reily," Boris drawls, popping a chip into his mouth. "We're here to babysit your mom. Cool, huh?"

"Thrilling," I mutter, stepping aside so they can come in. "Just... don't wreck the place, okay?"

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*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 6:59 am*

Barfbag snorts, already scanning the living room like a vulture. "Wrecking stuff is kinda our thing, Reily. But we'll try to keep it to a minimum."

Mom's in her wheelchair by the window, and when she sees them, her face lights up. "Oh, hi boys! Come on in!"

"Whoa," Boris says, his eyes widening as he takes in Mom's collection of vinyl records on the shelf. "You're into Slayer too, Mrs. D?"

"Absolutely!" Mom beams, her enthusiasm catching me off guard. "Reign in Blood is a classic. Have you heard South of Heaven?"

Barfbag lets out a whoop, grabbing one of Mom's records like he's found buried treasure. "You're officially the coolest mom ever!"

I stare at her, my mouth hanging open. Since when does Mom know Slayer lyrics? Since when does she care about heavy metal? She's supposed to be the one who listens to old country music and hums along to Patsy Cline, not headbang to Angel of Death.

"Mom," I say slowly, "what's going on?"

She shrugs, her eyes gleaming. "What? I had a life before library books and diaper changes, you know."

Boris and Barfbag are already air-guitaring in the middle of the living room, their heads bobbing to some imaginary beat. Mom joins in, her fingers moving like she's

shredding on an invisible guitar. I've officially stepped into some alternate dimension.

"Hey, Mrs. D," Boris says, pausing mid-air-guitar. "Have you ever taken your wheelchair through a fast food drive-thru? Like, does that even work?"

Mom tilts her head, considering. "You know, I've never tried. Should we find out?"

Barfbag's eyes light up. "This is gonna be epic."

I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose. "At least my mom is in...good?...hands I guess."

"Don't worry, Reily," Mom says, grinning at me. "We'll be fine. You go do what you need to do."

"Yeah, yeah," I mutter, grabbing my keys off the hook. "Just... don't burn the house down."

"Only a little bit," Barfbag calls after me, and Boris laughs like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard.

I head out to the POS, sliding into the driver's seat and slamming the door. The engine sputters twice before finally roaring to life after I punch the dashboard a few times for good measure.

"Perfect," I mutter, gripping the steering wheel. "Just perfect."

As I pull out of the driveway, I can see Mom and the boys through the window, their laughter echoing out into the yard. For a second, I almost feel guilty for leaving her with them. Almost.

The POS rattles down the road, and I focus on the task ahead. Gary's cabin looms in my mind like a storm cloud, and I can't shake the feeling that I'm walking into something I might not walk out of. But for now, I push that thought aside and keep driving.

The POS sputters down the long, winding private road, kicking up gravel and dust like it's trying to take a last stand before giving up the ghost. I squint at the signs posted every ten feet. No Trespassing. Trespassers Will Be Shot. Survivors Will Be Shot Again.

"Charming," I mutter, tightening my grip on the wheel. The man's got a real flair for hospitality.

The cabin comes into view, all natural wood and stone, looking like something out of a billionaire's fever dream. It's massive, with windows that probably cost more than my entire house. I pull up in front and kill the engine, the POS wheezing its last breath as I step out.

No sign of Gary. The silence is unnerving, broken only by the distant thwack of someone chopping wood. I follow the sound around the back, my boots crunching on the gravel.

There he is. Shirtless, sweat glistening on his chest as he swings an ax with the kind of precision that drives me wild. He's built like a damn mountain, all hard lines and sharp angles. The scars on the left side of his face catch the sunlight, giving him a jagged, broken look that's equal parts terrifying and mesmerizing.

I clear my throat. "Excuse me."

He doesn't stop. The ax bites into the log with a satisfying crack.



"Excuse me," I try again, louder this time.

Still nothing.

"Hey!Gary!"

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 6:59 am*

He pauses mid-swing, his shoulders stiffening. Slowly, he turns, those red eyes zeroing in on me. They travel down my body, lingering on my chest so long I can practically feel the weight of his gaze. When they finally meet mine, there's a heat there that makes my skin prickle.

"Your uniform's inside," he growls, voice low and gravelly. "Get dressed and then report to me for your first assignment."

I nod, my throat suddenly dry. At least he got me a uniform. I won't have to ruin my own clothes doing whatever menial labor he's got planned.

Inside the cabin, the mess hits me like a punch to the gut. Furniture overturned, a shattered vase on the floor, and a coffee table that looks like it's been hit by a sledgehammer. This isn't just messy—this is rage, pure and unfiltered.

"What the hell happened here?" I mutter, stepping over a pile of broken glass.

I find the door propped open with a handwritten sign that reads STAFF. Inside, there's a small dressing room with a vanity and a bathroom attached. A garment bag hangs on the wall, and I unzip it with a mix of curiosity and dread.

No. No, no, no.

The maid uniform stares back at me, a nightmare in black and white. The bodice is so tight it looks like it's been painted on, with a neckline that plunges indecently low. The skirt is a joke—short enough that I'll be mooning the wildlife if I bend over.

"Maybe it's not as bad as it looks," I mutter, pulling it out of the bag.

Spoiler: it's worse. The lace edges scratch at my skin, and the skirt barely covers my ass. I tug at the hem, but it's hopeless. There's no way I'm wearing a bra with this thing—my girls are on full display, and the thought of Gary seeing me like this makes my face burn.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and immediately look away. "What the hell does he have in store for me?" I whisper, my reflection staring back with wide, horrified eyes.

I square my shoulders as I stare at my reflection in the mirror. My cheeks are flushed, my hair a tangled mess from tugging at the damn uniform. But there's no time for fixing it. I've got a job to do—even if that job involves this nightmare of a costume.

"Suck it up, Ray-Ray," I say, pointing a finger at my reflection. "You're not doing this for you. You're doing it for the good of Coldwater. And if that means prancing around in this ridiculous outfit, so be it."

I grab my phone and head back into the living room, which looks like a tornado hit it. The overturned furniture, the shattered vase, the coffee table split in two—it's all evidence of someone's rage, and I'm betting it's Gary's. Perfect. If I'm going to take him down, I'll need leverage. I snap photo after photo, making sure to capture every detail. The broken glass, the splintered wood, the chaos that screams unhinged.

After a moment, I open my messages and start typing. "Susan, need a favor. Got some dirt on Gary Irons. Check these out." I attach the photos, my thumb hovering over the send button. Then I pause, glancing down at the uniform. A slow grin spreads across my face.

I angle the phone downward, snapping a selfie that shows the full extent of this

ridiculous outfit. The plunging neckline, the too-short skirt, the lace that itches like hell. I attach it to the message and add a caption: "This is what he wants his female employees to wear."

Satisfied, I hit send and tuck the phone back into my pocket. Susan's a bulldog when it comes to stories like this. If anyone can use this to stop Gary, it's her.

I head outside, the cool air hitting my skin as I round the corner to where Gary's still chopping wood. The rhythmic thwack of the ax is almost hypnotic, but I clear my throat loudly, signaling my presence. He doesn't stop. Of course he doesn't.

Finally, he slams the ax blade into the chopping block with a one-armed swing that makes my stomach do a weird little flip. The sheer strength in that movement—it's unnerving. And, okay, maybe a little impressive.

"That really shouldn't be as hot as it is," I think, even as I keep my expression stubborn and defiant.

Gary turns, his chest glistening with sweat, his eyes narrowing as they land on me. Then they widen, his jaw tightening as he takes in the uniform.

"What are you wearing?" he demands, his voice low and gravelly.

I straighten my spine, forcing myself to meet his gaze. "My uniform, Master," I say with exaggerated politeness, adding a fake English accent for good measure. "The one you left out for me."

Gary's eye twitches, and for a second, I think he might actually explode. Instead, he pulls a phone out of his pocket, his fingers gripping it so hard I'm surprised it doesn't snap in half. "I'm going to kill you, Jareth," he mutters, his voice dark. "You are a dead man. Dead."

It hits me then—the realization that this uniform isn't what Gary ordered. Jareth must've pulled a fast one on him. The thought is so absurd, so wildly out of left field, that I can't help it. I start laughing.

It starts as a snort, then builds into full-blown, uncontrollable laughter. I double over, clutching my stomach, tears streaming down my face.

“Genius billionaire?” I choke out between gasps of laughter, my sides aching as I try to catch my breath. “You can't even tell the difference between a proper work uniform and something you get from Spirit Halloween.”

I glance down at myself, the absurdity of the situation hitting me all over again. The lace digs into my skin, the skirt barely covering my dignity. I'm a walking punchline.

“Or maybe Victoria's Secret is more appropriate?” I mutter, unable to stop myself. “This is a lot to go through for some broken glass?—”

His hand slams over my mouth and nose before I can finish, cutting off my air and muffling my words. His skin feels wrong—too rough, almost scaly, like I'm being smothered by a reptile. My eyes widen as I stare up at him, the laughter dying in my throat.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 6:59 am*

Gary's face is inches from mine, his red eyes burning with a rage that makes my blood run cold. "You mock me," he growls, his voice low and guttural, more animal than man. "You mock my pain, my grief! You mock the memory of..." He cuts himself off, his jaw tightening, and I think he might kill me.

I struggle, clawing at his hand, but it's like trying to move a brick wall. My lungs scream for air, panic clawing its way up my throat. He must see it in my eyes because he shifts his hand, uncovering my nose but keeping my mouth firmly shut. I gulp in air, my chest heaving, but his grip doesn't loosen.

"Know this," he says, his voice still that same inhuman growl. "Gary Irons makes no mistakes. If you are wearing something that you feel degrades and humiliates you, it is by design." His eyes bore into mine, and I see something beyond the anger—pain, raw and unrelenting. "You have no idea what you have taken from me, but I will give you some measure, some inkling of my pain before I am through with you."

He releases me suddenly, and I stumble back, my legs trembling so badly I almost fall. I press a hand to my face, the skin where he touched me still tingling. His skin—it wasn't right. It wasn't human.

My heart hammers in my chest as I stare at him, trying to make sense of what just happened. The anger, the pain, the way he looked at me like I was the one who had shattered something irreplaceable. My mind races, trying to piece it together.

"What have I done?" I think to myself, my throat tight. "To break someone as powerful as this?"

## CHAPTER 8

### GUVAN

I turn away from her because looking at her is like staring into the sun—too bright, too raw. The shattered remnants of Sunrise on Vakuta burn in my mind, and the wood chopping isn't doing a damn thing to quiet the storm inside me. Especially not with her standing there, watching. Waiting. Her presence is a distraction I can't afford, a thorn in my side that I can't pull out.

I spin around, forcing my eyes to stay locked on her face and not wander down to the ridiculous outfit Jareth thought was appropriate. "Why are you still standing here?" The words snap out of me, sharp enough to make her flinch. "You saw the mess, I'm certain. It had better be cleaned before it's time for my dinner."

She doesn't move. Just stares at me with those blue eyes that see too much, that dig too deep. There's fear there, sure—good. She should fear me. But there's something else, something soft and dangerous. Pity. My chest tightens.

She knows. The thought hits me like a punch to the gut. She knows how broken I am because I lost control.

I kick the chopping block hard enough to send it toppling over, the sound of wood against wood cracking through the clearing. She takes a half-step back but doesn't run. Doesn't look away. Her spine stays straight, her chin up. And that look in her eyes—it's still there.

"Don't look at me like that," I growl. "Don't you dare pity me."

"I don't pity you." Her voice is soft but steady. "I just... know what it means to lose."

Before I can stop her, she steps forward, her hand reaching out. Her fingers brush against my chest, right over my heart. The contact is light, almost hesitant, but it feels like a brand. My hand twitches, , I almost cover hers with mine. Almost.

“It’s okay to feel sad,” she says, her words quieter now, almost a whisper. “It doesn’t make you weak.”

I freeze. The weight of her hand, her words, her gaze—it’s too much. I snatch her hand away from my chest, my grip tight enough to make her wince. Her eyes widen, but she doesn’t fight me.

“My living room isn’t going to clean itself.” The words come out harsh, jagged. I drop her hand and turn away before she can see the cracks in my armor. Before she can see anything more.

She hesitates for a moment, her breath catching in her throat. Then, without a word, she turns and walks back toward the cabin. I watch her go, my jaw clenched so tight it aches. The storm inside me rages on, but it’s quieter now. And that’s worse—so much worse.

I can’t stay. The cabin, the woods, this planet—it’s all suffocating me. Reily’s presence is a weight I can’t carry, her words a blade cutting through defenses I’ve spent centuries building. I turn and run, my boots pounding against the earth, the rhythm of my stride grounding me in something familiar. The image inducer buzzes faintly on my wrist, and I rip it off, letting it clatter to the ground. My scales flare in the sunlight, dark red and unyielding, and the air feels cooler against my skin.

I don’t stop until I reach the ridge overlooking Mirror Lake. The view is... breathtaking. The water is a perfect mirror, reflecting the mountains and the endless blue sky. It’s beautiful. And it’s going to be destroyed because of me.



The weight of that knowledge hits me harder than I expected. I've destroyed plenty of things in my time—ships, cities, lives. But this? This feels different. Reily's face flashes in my mind, the way her eyes narrowed when she accused me of ruining Coldwater. She'll hate me for this.

"Why does it matter what she thinks?" I mutter aloud, my voice a low growl. It shouldn't. She's just a human. A stubborn, infuriating, beautiful human who somehow sees right through me.

I kneel at the edge of the ridge, my claws digging into the earth. My mind drifts to impossible things—her laughter, her touch, the way her body would feel pressed against mine. Stupid fantasies.

"No," I snarl, shaking my head like it might dislodge the thoughts. I slam a fist into the ground, sending a shower of dirt and rocks tumbling down the slope. "She's not mine to want. She's not anything."

But the memory of her hand on my chest lingers, warm and soft, and it makes my scales itch. I can't afford this. I can't afford her.

"You're a warrior," I remind myself. "Not a fool."

I stand, turning my back on the lake. The image inducer is still in pieces somewhere behind me, but I don't care. Let the humans see me for what I am. Let them fear me. It's easier that way.

The hike back to the cabin does nothing to clear my head. Every step feels like a battle, the weight of Reily's presence clinging to me like a shadow. I try to focus on the crunch of leaves underfoot, the distant call of a hawk overhead, but it's no use. Her face keeps flashing in my mind, her blue eyes wide and defiant, her hand brushing against my chest like she thought she could fix me with a single touch.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 6:59 am*

I clench my fists. She doesn't get to do that. She doesn't get to see the cracks in the armor I've spent centuries building. She doesn't get to make me feel like this—like I'm something more than a weapon, like I'm weak. No. I'm going to punish her for it. For the broken window, for the shattered sunrise on Vakuta, for the way she makes my chest tighten every time I think about her. She'll learn her place.

By the time I reach the cabin's front yard, my mood hasn't improved. My compad buzzes on my belt, and I snatch it up, scowling at the screen. A Zoom meeting. I forgot about it entirely. Typical. The human farce of "Gary Irons, billionaire industrialist" is exhausting, but it's part of the mission. I should've been prepared for this.

I glance down at my bare chest, scales glinting in the sunlight. No time to fix that now. I activate the image inducer, the holographic disguise snapping into place over my skin. Good enough. I sit down on a stump in the yard, propping the compad on a nearby log and joining the call.

The screen fills with faces, each one glancing at me with varying degrees of surprise and amusement. I don't care. Let them think this is some kind of power move. Let them think I'm too much of an "alpha" to bother with a shirt. It's better than admitting I forgot.

"Mr. Irons," one of the board members says, his voice tinged with a mix of awe and confusion. "I see you're... embracing the great outdoors."

I lean back, my expression flat. "I find it helps me think. Get to the point."

The man clears his throat, glancing nervously at the others. “Right. Of course. We’re here to discuss the quarterly?—”

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. “Summarize. I don’t have time for small talk.”

They scramble to condense their presentations, their voices stumbling over each other. I barely listen, my mind still stuck on Reily. What’s she doing in the cabin right now? Cleaning? Plotting? Thinking about me? My jaw tightens. It doesn’t matter. She’s mine to deal with, and I’ll deal with her soon enough.

The meeting drags on, and I growl at the board members to hurry it up. They practically trip over themselves to finish, their faces a mix of admiration and fear. Good. Let them see the beast beneath the billionaire. When the call finally ends, I toss the compad onto the ground and exhale sharply.

Reily. She’s what matters now. I’ll deal with her. And I’ll make sure she never forgets who’s in charge.

## CHAPTER 9

### REILY

Isweep the last of the broken glass into the dustpan, my hands trembling. The room looks spotless now, the granite countertops gleaming, the furniture polished. Not a single speck of dust dares to linger. I straighten the last throw pillow on the couch and step back, surveying my work. It’s perfect. Too perfect. Why do I care so much? I don’t owe this man anything.

I think about the way he grabbed me, the way his skin felt under my fingers—rough, almost...scaly. But that’s impossible. I shake my head, trying to dislodge the memory. Maybe it’s just some kind of condition, like psoriasis or something. Yeah,

that's it. A skin condition.

"You're losing it, Ray," I mutter under my breath, pacing the room. "Focus. You're here to find dirt on him, remember? Not to play housekeeper."

But I can't stop thinking about the look in his eyes when he grabbed me. There was pain there, deep and raw, like I'd shattered more than just a window. What could I have broken that would make a man like him come undone?

A noise outside snaps me out of my thoughts. My heart leaps into my throat. Is it him? My stomach does this weird flip, and I hate myself for it. I shouldn't be excited to see him. I should be terrified.

I creep toward the window, peeking through the blinds. My breath catches in my chest.

There's a monster out there.

I duck down, pressing my back against the wall, and clap a hand over my mouth to stifle a scream. My heart hammers against my ribs. What the hell is that thing? It's huge, maybe seven feet tall, covered in dark red scales. Its eyes glow like embers in the sunlight.

I peek again, my hands shaking so hard I can barely hold the phone steady. I need a picture. Susan would kill for this.

But when I look back, it's gone. Instead, there's Gary, shirtless, chopping wood like nothing happened. The sunlight glistens off his sweat-slicked skin, , I'm transfixed.

I blink hard, rubbing my eyes. Did I imagine it? Was it some kind of...stress hallucination?

“Get it together, Ray,” I whisper, crouching back down. “You’re losing your damn mind.”

The door creaks open, and I freeze mid-sweep, the broom hovering over the floor like a lifeline. Gary strides in, his presence filling the room like a storm cloud. My stomach knots as his eyes sweep the space, sharp and calculating. He snorts, a sound that’s half disdain, half amusement.

“I did what I could,” I blurt out, fidgeting with the broom handle. The maid uniform clings to me like a bad joke, and I feel absurdly exposed. “But I don’t know how to repair masonry, or, um, have the tools to do it, so...”

My voice trails off as he circles the room, his boots thudding against the hardwood. He’s searching for something, anything, to criticize. I can see it in the way his eyes narrow, the way his jaw tightens. He wants a fight, and he’s going to find one.

Then he stops. Bends down. My heart sinks as he brushes his fingers under the edge of a bookshelf, coming up with a faint streak of dust no wider than my pinky. He holds it up like evidence in a court case.

“Sorry,” I mutter, my tone dripping with sarcasm. I cross my arms over my chest, trying to reclaim some dignity, but the uniform makes it impossible. I feel ridiculous, and I hate him for it.

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*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 6:59 am*

He glares at me, those red eyes burning like coals. “Is there something wrong about your boss telling you that the job you did was insufficient?”

Boss. The word grates on me, but I bite my tongue. Fine. If he wants to play this game, I’ll play.

“I was expecting maybe some praise for everything else,” I shoot back, gesturing at the room. “I mean, except for that one little bit of dust, it looks pretty good, right?”

His lips twitch, but it’s not a smile. It’s a warning. “My praise is earned, never given,” he growls.

I stiffen as he snaps his fingers and points at the floor. “Now get on your knees.”

Heat floods my face, and I hate myself for the way my stomach twists at his command. I don’t move, though. Not yet. My chin lifts, and I meet his gaze head-on.

“You know, for someone who talks a big game about earning things, you sure do like giving orders,” I say, my voice steady despite the storm raging inside me. “Are you always this charming, or am I just lucky?”

His eyes narrow, like he’s trying not to laugh. But then it passes, and his expression hardens again. He takes a step closer, his presence looming over me.

“On. Your. Knees.”

The words are low, almost a growl, and I feel them reverberate in my chest. My legs

move before my brain can catch up, and I hate myself for it. I sink to my knees, the hem of the ridiculous skirt riding up, and I stare up at him, defiance burning in my gaze.

“Happy now?” I ask, my voice tight.

He doesn’t answer. Just stares down at me, his eyes unreadable. The air between us crackles with tension, and I can’t decide if I want to punch him or...no. I shut that thought down before it can fully form.

“Clean it,” he says finally, his voice cold. “Again.”

I grit my teeth and reach for the dustpan, my fingers trembling. This isn’t about the dust. It’s about control. And right now, he’s winning.

My knees hit the floor, my palms flat against the cool hardwood. I can feel his presence behind me, a wall of heat and tension. My heart pounds in my chest, each beat echoing in my ears. I grip the dustpan tighter, my knuckles whitening. The tiny speck of dust mocks me, sitting there in the middle of an otherwise immaculate floor.

“This is bullshit,” I mutter, my voice low but sharp. The words are out before I can stop them. I can feel his gaze burning into the back of my skull. My jaw tightens, and I shove the dustpan aside, standing on shaky legs. The skirt of this godforsaken uniform rides up, but I don’t care anymore. I turn to face him, my hands clenched into fists.

“No,” I say, louder this time. My voice cracks, but I push through it. “This is bullshit. I’ll clean this little bitty dust pile up, but not until you acknowledge that I busted my ass for two hours while you were galivanting shirtless through the woods!”

My breath comes in short, shallow gasps, my chest rising and falling like I’ve just run

a mile. His eyes narrow, those red irises pinning me in place. The air between us feels charged, like the moment before a lightning strike. I can't tell if he's going to explode, or if he's just... waiting.

The silence stretches, thick and heavy. I don't move. I won't. My legs feel like they're made of lead, but I keep my chin up, my gaze locked on his. His nostrils flare, and for a second, I swear I see something flicker across his face—something that isn't entirely human. It's gone before I can process it, replaced by that same cold, calculating expression.

“It is time that you learned full and well that I am in charge here,” he says, his voice low and gravelly, like the growl of a predator.

Before I can react, he's on me. His hands are like iron, gripping my wrists and pulling them behind my back. I stumble, my balance thrown, and he spins me around, my back pressing against his chest. One hand moves to cover my mouth, his palm rough and warm against my lips.

“What are you doing?” I gasp, but the words are muffled against his hand. My heart hammers in my chest, a wild, panicked rhythm. I struggle, but his grip is unyielding.

“Silence,” he growls, his breath hot against my ear. “You will learn to speak with proper submissiveness and only when required.”

His voice sends me on a dizzying trip, I hate myself for it. I hate that part of me that responds to his commands, that feels a flicker of... something when he speaks like that. I twist in his grip, but he doesn't budge. My pulse races as he looms over me, his size a constant reminder of how outmatched I am.

The apron strings dig into my wrists, rough lace chafing against my skin. I test the knot—tight. Gary's fingers linger just a second too long against my pulse point before



he finally pulls away. His reflection glares back at me from the polished glass of a framed hunting trophy, eyes like banked coals.

"You're—" My voice cracks. I swallow hard, tilting my chin up. "You're enjoying this."

He exhales through his nose—sharp, unamused. "You assume my aims are petty." One hand settles heavy on my shoulder. His fingertips graze the exposed nape of my neck, calluses scraping. "This is correction."

Correction. Like I'm a dog that pissed on his rug. I huff a laugh that doesn't sound as steady as I want. "Funny way to spell revenge."

His grip tightens. A warning. I should shut up. But my mouth keeps running.

"You tied me up like a damn Christmas turkey overdust," I snap. The more I talk, the more my breathing evens out. The more I ignore how my nipples are stiff little points under the stupid bodice. "Next you'll spank me for not fluffing the pillows right?—"

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A low sound rumbles in his chest. Not quite a growl. Something darker.

"Keep running that mouth," he murmurs, leaning in. His breath gusts hot against my ear. "See where it gets you."

My thighs press together. The brush of the garter straps against bare skin is maddening.

Gary steps back suddenly, leaving me swaying. He circles in front of me, gaze dragging down my body like he's cataloging every tremor. His tongue clicks once against his teeth.

"On your knees."

A full-body shudder. I bite the inside of my cheek until I taste copper. "Make me."

His mouth curves. Not a smile. A predator baring teeth. "Or what? You'll throw another brick?"

I lunge?—

—and he catches me by the waist, effortless. My bare knees hit the hardwood. Breath punched out of me. His hand fists in my hair, tipping my head back.

"You are infuriating," he grits out.

The heat between my legs is obscene. My pulse jackhammers where his thumb

presses against my throat.

"Tell me what you want," I dare.

His nostrils flare. For a heartbeat, I think he might actually answer. Then his grip shifts?—

—and he shoves the dustpan into my bound hands.

"Clean."

My inner feminist is screaming at me to stop this. What the hell are you doing, Ray? she demands, her voice sharp and scolding. This is not who you are. You don't let men—beasts—like him control you. You fight back. You?—

But my inner sex fiend cuts her off with a low, throaty laugh. Oh, shut up. Look at him. Just look at him. That body. That power. You've never felt anything like this, and you know it. So stop pretending you don't want it.

I sway on my knees, my hands still bound, the ridiculous apron strings digging into my wrists. My skirt is hiked up to my hips, and I don't even care. My cheeks are on fire, but it's not just from embarrassment. It's from the heat radiating between my legs, from the way my body is screaming for more.

Gary stands over me, his belt in hand, folding it over with slow, deliberate movements. The leather snaps against his palm, and I flinch, my stomach tightening. His red eyes lock onto mine, and I can't look away. My heart pounds in my chest, and I'm hyper-aware of every inch of my body—the way the bodice digs into my ribs, the way my breasts are barely contained in the plunging neckline, the way my nipples are hard peaks under the thin fabric.

I swallow the lump in my throat and lean forward, brushing the dust into the pan with my bound hands. It's awkward and clumsy, and I can't stop the little whimper that escapes my lips. My skirt rides up even more, and I know he can see the wetness between my thighs. I glance up at him, and my breath catches. The bulge in his pants is massive, straining against the fabric, and I can't help but stare. My mouth goes dry, and a fresh wave of heat surges through me.

"I'm done," I say, my voice shaky. I offer him the dustpan, my hands trembling.

"Are you?" Gary's voice is low, almost a growl. "And you called me something earlier, when you were mocking me...what was it? Oh yes. Master. I think that's how you'll address me from now on."

"Fuck you," I snap before I can stop myself. My inner feminist cackles with approval, but my sex fiend groans in frustration.

Gary grabs me by the hair, yanking me to my feet. His hand slips between my legs, and I yelp, my body arching into his touch. "Eager, are we?" he asks, his voice mocking.

"Yes, you are," I shoot back, my knee bumping against the massive bulge in his pants. I can feel the heat of him through the fabric. My inner feminist is silent now, drowned out by the pounding in my chest and the wetness pooling between my thighs.

Gary's free hand rips my panties off in one swift motion, and I open my mouth to protest—Hey, I'm not paying for those!—but he shoves the torn fabric into my mouth, gagging me. His belt wraps around my head, securing the makeshift gag, and I glare at him, my body trembling with a mixture of fury and arousal.

"That will be the end of your smart-mouthed comments," Gary says, his voice dark

with promise.

He pulls a silver cigar case from his back pocket, and my eyes widen. My heart races, and I think he's going to do something kinky, something that will make me scream into the gag. But instead, he shreds the cigar, piling the tobacco on the floor in front of me.

"On. Your. Knees," he commands, his voice leaving no room for argument.

I sink to my knees, my pussy so wet that the floor beneath me is sprinkled with drops. My inner sex fiend is practically purring now, and even my inner feminist is quiet, her protests drowned out by the pounding of my heart and the heat in my core.

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I kneel there, the tobacco ground beneath me, my hands bound and my mouth gagged, but I'm not defeated. Not entirely. My body hums with something raw, something defiant, and I decide to lean into it. I arch my back, pushing my ass up into the air, the ridiculous maid uniform barely covering me. I feel exposed, vulnerable, and it's terrifying—but there's a thrill in it too. A power. I can feel Gary's eyes on me, and I know I've got him.

I start to clean, my movements slow and deliberate, the dustpan awkward in my tied hands. I can barely focus on the task, my mind racing, my pulse pounding in my ears. I'm halfway done when I hear it—a low, guttural sound from behind me. I freeze, my breath catching.

Then he's on me.

Gary drops to his knees beside me, his massive hands grabbing my hips and flipping me onto my back. My skirt bunches up around my waist, and I'm exposed to him completely. His red eyes burn into mine, and for a second, I think he's going to say something, to mock me, to scold me. But he doesn't. He buries his face between my legs, and I gasp, the sound muffled by the gag.

His tongue is firm, insistent, and I arch off the floor, my bound hands clutching at nothing. He licks me with a kind of hunger I've never felt before, his mouth hot and wet against me. He sucks on my lips, pulling them into his mouth until they pop free, and I moan, the sound vibrating against the fabric in my mouth. His tongue plunges inside me, and I writhe, my hips jerking uncontrollably.

He shifts his attention to my clit, teasing it with the tip of his tongue, tracing slow,

deliberate circles that have me gasping, my body trembling. I'm on the edge, teetering, and I can't hold back. I nod furiously, my eyes pleading, even though he can't see them.

"Do you want to cum?" he growls, his voice muffled against my skin.

I nod again, desperate. He doesn't make me wait. He sucks my clit into his mouth, and I shatter. My body convulses, my back arching off the floor as I scream into the gag. It's like nothing I've ever felt—waves of pleasure cresting and breaking over me, leaving me gasping, trembling.

When I finally come down, I'm drenched, and Gary is staring down at me, his eyes wide, almost...awed. He shakes his head, his fingers brushing my cheek gently.

"How?" he whispers, his voice rough. "How do you have so much power over me?"

I want to laugh, to tell him he's insane. I'm the one tied up, gagged, completely at his mercy. But I don't. I can't. My body still thrums with the aftershocks, and I know there's more to this—more to us—than I understand.

Gary scoops me up effortlessly, cradling me against his chest as he carries me toward the stairs. I should protest, should fight him, but I don't. I know we've crossed a line, but looking up at his face, at the way he's looking at me, I don't want to go back. Not yet.

The stairs creak under his weight, and I close my eyes, letting myself sink into the warmth of his arms.

## CHAPTER 10

REILY

I lay on Gary's bed, my chest heaving, my wrists still bound behind me with those damn apron strings. The lace digs into my skin, but the discomfort is a distant echo compared to the heat pooling between my legs. Gary looms over me, his eyes dark, his jaw clenched. I can see the storm brewing in him—anger, desire, something deeper I can't quite name.

"I'm still angry with you," he growls, his voice low and rough, like gravel under a heavy boot. "This changes nothing. You still have much to atone for, and I am going to relish punishing you."

Don't threaten me with a good time, I think, biting back a smirk. My body's already humming, my skin tingling where he touched me earlier. I want to snap something sarcastic, but the gag muffles my words, leaving me with nothing but a muffled grunt.

Gary doesn't waste time. He pounces, his weight pinning me to the bed, and his lips crash against my neck. His teeth scrape my skin, sharp enough to make me gasp, but his tongue soothes the sting, leaving a trail of heat in its wake. My back arches involuntarily, pressing my chest against his. His hands are everywhere—groping, kneading, possessive. He grabs my breasts, his thumbs brushing over my nipples, and I let out a strangled moan into the gag.

"You're mine," he mutters against my skin, his breath hot. "Every inch of you."

I can't argue, even if I wanted to. His mouth moves to my breast, his teeth grazing the sensitive peak before he sucks hard, and I nearly come undone right there. My hips buck against him, desperate for more, and he chuckles darkly, the sound vibrating through me.

"Patience," he rasps, pinching my other nipple between his fingers, tugging just hard enough to make me whimper. "You'll take what I give you when I give it to you."



I don't know if it's the roughness in his voice or the way his hands dominate my body, but I'm trembling, every nerve on fire. He shifts, his weight pressing me deeper into the mattress, and then I feel him—thick, hot, and insistent. He slides inside me in one smooth motion, and I scream into the gag, my body convulsing around him.

“That's right,” he growls, his hand wrapping around my throat, not tight enough to cut off my air but enough to remind me who's in control. “You're mine. Take my cock and learn to love it.”

I think I already do, I think, my mind fracturing under the intensity. His shape is different, unexpected, but it's good—so good. There's a ridge along his length that presses against me just right with every thrust, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body. I'm panting, sweating, my hips moving in time with his, chasing that edge.

Gary doesn't let up. He fucks me with a raw, primal intensity that leaves me breathless. My orgasm builds, coiling tighter and tighter, until it finally breaks, and I shatter beneath him. My body clenches around him, waves of pleasure crashing over me, and I lose myself in it, my mind blank except for the feel of him.

When I finally come back to myself, I'm still trembling, my breath ragged. I open my eyes, blinking up at him—and freeze.

It's not Gary anymore.

The man above me is gone, replaced by the same scaled monster I saw earlier. His eyes are still red, burning with the same intensity, but his face is different—sharp, angular, covered in dark red scales. His teeth are bared in a snarl, and for a second, I think I'm dreaming, hallucinating from the intensity of what just happened.

My eyes widen as I take him in—his face, his scales, the sharp ridges of his jaw. For

a second, I'm not sure if I'm dreaming or if this is real. His eyes, those same burning red eyes, flicker with something I've never seen in him before—fear. He's frozen, his body stiffening above me, and then he starts to pull away, his cock sliding out just enough to make me whimper into the gag.

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No. The thought is instant, primal. I don't care what he is. I don't care if he's some kind of alien or monster or whatever the hell this is. I just know I don't want him to stop. My legs are the only part of me not tied up, so I act fast, wrapping them tight around his waist and yanking him back into me with a force that makes him grunt.

"Mmph!" I mumble around the gag, my hips bucking up to meet his. I'm not letting him go. Not now.

He stares down at me, his scaled face twisted in confusion for a moment before he lets out a low, rumbling chuckle. His hands slide down to my thighs, his claws—claws—digging lightly into my skin as he snaps one of my garters with a sharp, playful flick. I yelp behind the gag, my body arching into his touch.

"Very well," he growls, his voice deeper now, rougher, like the growl of a predator. "But now that you know my secret, I might have to keep you as my pet forever."

I can't help but laugh inwardly. Pet? Sure, Gary—or whatever his real name is—thinks he's in control, but the way he's looking at me, like I'm the one who's got him wrapped around my finger, tells a different story. My first thought is practical, almost absurd: Well, I'd have to go home at least some of the time to take care of my mom, but I could get into that. Then it hits me—this man, this thing, is not human. He's stronger, faster, and probably more dangerous than anyone I've ever met. But instead of scaring me, it just makes the heat between my legs burn hotter.

He starts moving again, his thrusts harder, more deliberate, like he's trying to remind us both who's in charge. The ridges along his cock—because of course he's got those too—drag against me in a way that makes my toes curl. Every snap of his hips sends

another wave of pleasure crashing through me, and I'm panting, screaming behind the gag, my body trembling on the edge.

"You'll learn to love this," he snarls, his claws digging into my hips as he pulls me even closer. "You'll learn to crave it."

I already do. My body's on fire, every nerve alight with need. When he comes, it's with a roar that shakes the room, his cock pulsing inside me, the sensation so intense I nearly black out. My own climax hits me like a freight train, my body convulsing beneath him, my screams muffled but no less desperate.

He collapses on top of me, his weight crushing but comforting in a way I can't explain. One hand still clutches my breast possessively, his claws flexing against my skin as he catches his breath. I'm still trembling, my body humming with the aftershocks, but I don't want to move. Not yet.

Gary lifts his head, his red eyes locking onto mine. The tenderness in his gaze catches me off guard—something soft and vulnerable that I didn't think he was capable of. His clawed hand cups my cheek, the rough texture of his scales against my skin. It's strange but not unpleasant. He hesitates for a moment before pulling the belt from my mouth and gently removing the panties that had been gagging me.

I open my mouth to say something—What? I don't even know—but he silences me with a kiss. It's deep, claiming, and it steals my breath all over again. His tongue tangles with mine, and I forget everything else—the scales, the claws, the fact that he's not human. All I feel is him.

Then, without warning, he flips me onto my stomach. My heart skips a beat, but he's not rough. His hands work quickly, untying the apron strings that bound my wrists. The moment I'm free, I rub at the soreness, the ghost of the restraints still clinging to my skin. I'm too stunned to speak, too caught up in the whirlwind of emotions

swirling inside me.

Gary pulls me close, my back against his chest, his arm draped around my shoulders. My head rests on him, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. I trace the scales on his belly absently, marveling at how they feel—smooth but firm, like polished stone. He doesn't stop me, doesn't flinch. If anything, he seems to relax under my touch.

The silence stretches between us, heavy but not uncomfortable. Finally, he breaks it with a soft, almost hesitant voice.

"Go ahead," he says. "Ask."

I lift my head, meeting his eyes. "Ask what?"

He gives me a look, half exasperated, half amused. "You know very well what I'm speaking of."

I swallow hard, my throat suddenly dry. "What happened to you? Is this some kind of side effect from one of those longevity treatments you billionaires are into? Or did a rival businessman try to poison you but turn your skin scaly instead of killing you?"

He laughs—a full, genuine laugh that surprises me. It's deep and rich, filling the room in a way that makes me smile despite myself. I like the sound of it. It's warm, real, and it makes him seem... less alien.

"I'm almost afraid to disappoint you with the truth," he says, still chuckling. "Your ideas are so creative. But I am from another planet."

I blink, processing his words. "Wait, seriously? You're not messing with me?"

"No," he says, his expression serious now. "I'm Vakutan. My real name is Guvan."

This form—" He gestures to his scaled body. "This is what I truly look like. The human guise is... a disguise."

I stare at him, my mind racing. It's not the answer I was expecting, but somehow, it makes sense. The strength, the strange texture of his skin, the way he moves—like a predator. It all clicks into place.

"So, what, you're like an alien spy or something? Here to take over the world?"

He snorts. "Nothing so dramatic. I'm here to protect it. My people are at war with an enemy that threatens more than just Earth. I was sent here to ensure their influence doesn't spread."

I let that sink in, my fingers still tracing the scales on his chest. "And the dam? The mine? What's all that about?"

His expression darkens, , he looks away. "The mine was poisoned by my enemies. I had to shut it down to prevent further harm. The dam... it's complicated. But it's not what it seems."

I nod slowly, my mind a whirlwind of thoughts. "And me? What am I to you?"

He looks back at me, his red eyes intense. "Right now? You're a complication. A distraction. But one I'm not sure I want to let go of."

I smirk despite myself. "Wow, way to make a girl feel special."

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He growls, but there's a hint of a smile pulling at his lips. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah," I say, leaning back against him. "I guess I do."

The sunlight streaming through the window is too low, too golden. My stomach drops as I bolt upright in bed. "Shit.Shit."

Guvan stirs beside me, his massive frame shifting against the sheets. His voice is a rumble, still half-asleep. "What is it?"

"It's after five," I mutter, scrambling out of bed and scanning the room for my clothes. "I was supposed to be home an hour ago. My mom—she can't be alone too long. She's sick, and I?—"

"Your mother has the sickness," he interrupts, sitting up now, his expression darkening. His scales catch the light, a dull red sheen that makes him look both alien and impossibly real. "I failed to protect her from the grolgath. I am sorry. We're working on a cure."

I freeze, one hand clutching the crumpled maid uniform I'd tossed aside earlier. "We? There's more of you?"

He nods, his eyes never leaving mine. "Veritas. A group of us—Vakutans, humans—working to stop the grolgath and protect your planet. The mine, the sickness, it's all connected."

I let that sink in for a second, then shake my head and yank the maid dress back on

just long enough to find my jeans and shirt. The stockings and garter belt are still in place, and I'm not about to strip down again to deal with them. Jeans over top will have to do.

Guvan lets out a low chuckle as I pull my jeans up over the stockings. "What's so funny, Alien?"

"Not a thing," he says, his smirk widening. "I like the idea of you wearing something hidden and sexy that only you and I know about. And I instructed you how to address me."

I pause, one leg half in my jeans, and cock an eyebrow at him. "Oh, really?" Before he can respond, I'm on him, throwing myself into his lap and kissing him hard. His arms wrap around me, pulling me closer, , I let myself get lost in the heat of it.

But only for a moment. I break away before he can pin me down again, sliding out of his grip and hopping to my feet. "Whatever you say," I say, blowing him a kiss as I head for the door. "Master."

His face is a picture—part confusion, part amusement, all completely dumbfounded. And yeah, sure, maybe he's also sporting a very obvious problem in the tented sheets, but that's his problem, not mine. I duck out the door before he can recover, the sound of his laughter chasing me all the way to my truck.

I collapse into the driver's seat of the POS, the door creaking shut behind me. My hands grip the steering wheel, knuckles white, as I stare out the cracked windshield. A laugh bubbles up from somewhere deep in my chest, helpless and disbelieving. "Well," I mutter, shaking my head. "That just happened. I guess I have an alien billionaire master now."

The keys jangle as I shove them into the ignition. The engine sputters to life,



coughing like it's about to give up the ghost. I pull out of Guvan's driveway, the gravel crunching under the tires, and head for home. The road stretches out in front of me, empty and quiet, and my mind starts racing. "Okay, Reily, think. You've got an alien wrapped around your finger. Maybe you can use that. Convince him not to dam Silver Creek. Save the town, save the lake. Be the hero." I drum my fingers on the steering wheel, my thoughts spinning. "But does he even have the authority to stop the project? Or is this some big Veritas master plan? And what if he says no? What if he just laughs in my face and tells me to get back on my knees?"

I groan, smacking the wheel. "Ugh, Reily, you're such an idiot. You can't even figure out how to save the town. You're just his..." My voice trails off. I don't even know what I am to him. A distraction? A pet? A mistake?

The POS rattles as I hit a pothole, jolting me out of my thoughts. I glance at the clock on the dash—almost 6 PM. Mystomach drops. "Mom." I press the gas pedal harder, the car lurching forward. I skid into our driveway a few minutes later, the tires kicking up a cloud of dust. The house is dark, the front door ajar. Panic sets in as I burst inside, my boots clattering on the hardwood. "Mom?"

No answer. The living room is empty, the kitchen too. My heart pounds in my chest until I see the note on the table, scrawled in Boris's messy handwriting. "Hey Reily, we had to work our shift at Greece Hutt, so we took your mom with us. Don't freak out. She's fine. -Boris & Bags."

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. "Thank God." I grab the keys again and head back to the POS. The engine groans as I reverse out of the driveway, and I mutter under my breath, "Come on, old girl, just a little farther."

Greece Hutt comes into view, the neon sign flickering like it's on its last legs. I pull into the parking lot and spot Mom sitting in one of the booths by the window, a half-eaten gyro in front of her. Boris is behind the counter, messing up an order, and

Barfbag is in the corner, headbanging to whatever's playing through his headphones.

I push the door open, the bell jingling overhead. Boris looks up, his face lighting up with a grin. "Hey, Reily! You're late. We thought you bailed on us."

"Yeah, yeah," I say, waving him off. I slide into the booth across from Mom, forcing a smile. "Hey, Mom. You okay?"

She looks up, her eyes tired but bright. "Oh, sweetie, I'm fine. Boris and Barfbag have been taking good care of me." She pauses, narrowing her eyes at me. "Where have you been? You look...flushed."

"Nowhere," I say quickly, my face heating up. "Just...stuff. You know. Town stuff."

Mom gives me that look—the one that says she knows more than she's letting on. I flush crimson, but she doesn't press. She just smiles softly and pats my hand. "You're a good girl, Reily," she says, her voice warm but laced with something I can't quite place. "Just be careful, okay?"

I nod, swallowing hard. "Yeah, Mom. I will."

After I get her settled in for the night—her meds taken, her blanket tucked around her—I slip out to the porch and pull out my phone. Susan's already texted me twice. We need to talk. Dick's. Now. I groan and fire back a reply: On my way.

The drive to Dick's is short, but my mind races the whole way. How do I explain this? How do I protect Gary—Guvan—without sounding like a lunatic or, worse, a traitor? The POS sputters into the parking lot, and I take a deep breath before heading inside.

Susan's already at a table, a plate of wings between us. She looks up, brushing her

bangs out of her eyes, and gestures for me to sit. “You’re late.”

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“Yeah, well, mom duty,” I say, sliding into the booth. I grab a wing and take a bite, mostly to avoid talking.

Susan doesn’t waste time. “So, the living room. Smashed to hell. Big bad billionaire Gary Irons throwing a tantrum. It’s not exactly a smoking gun, Reily. People expect rich jerks to do stuff like that.”

I nod, relief flooding me. “Right. Yeah, I figured.”

“But the uniform,” she says, leaning in, her eyes sharp. “That’s something. That’s sexual harassment. We could use that to pressure him.”

I choke on my beer, coughing as Susan watches me with growing suspicion.

“Reily!” she snaps, her voice low but intense.

“I know, I know!” I say, covering my face with my hands. My cheeks are on fire, and I can feel the garters digging into my thighs under my jeans.

Susan’s eyebrow arches. “How could you?”

“It just sort of happened—oh my god, don’t tell anyone, please. Seabus would shoot me dead.” My voice is a panicked whisper, and I’m acutely aware of the hickeys Susan’s already spotted.

Susan sighs, leaning back in her seat. “Your secret’s safe with me,” she says, but her eyes drop to my wrists. “By the way, if Gary’s rich, he can definitely spring for silk

ropes. They don't cause abrasions on the skin." She smirks. "And your collar isn't nearly high enough to cover all those hickeys."

"I fucking hate you so much," I mutter, hiding my face again. The stockings and garters feel like they're burning through my jeans.

Susan leans forward, her tone serious now. "Reily, be careful. Stay in touch. And for god's sake, don't let him wreck you."

I nod, finishing my beer in one long gulp. "Yeah. I'll try." My life just got a whole lot more complicated.

## CHAPTER 11

### GUVAN

I stride into City Hall, the weight of the briefcase in my hand a trivial burden compared to the weight of dealing with men like Boss Hoag. The air smells faintly of cheap lemon cleaner and desperation. My eyes sweep the lobby, catching on the cluster of Cold Slither bikers lounging near the entrance. Their leather jackets gleam with the gang's cobra emblem, and their presence is as subtle as a gunshot in a library. They don't move, don't speak—just watch. Like predators waiting for a reason to strike.

I keep my expression neutral, but my instincts itch. They're regrolgath. I'd bet my scales on it. Their human disguises are convincing, but I can almost taste the reptilian stench beneath the cologne. Still, Veritas rules bind me. No interference unless there's direct proof of their meddling. For now, they're just bikers. For now.

The secretary at the front desk looks up, her eyes widening as she recognizes me. "Mr. Irons! Mayor Hoag is expecting you." Her voice is an octave too high, her smile

painted on like a bad watercolor.

“I’d hope so,” I say, my tone flat. “I don’t make a habit of dropping by unannounced.”

The door to Hoag’s office bursts open before I can even finish my thought. The man himself waddles out, his suit straining against his bulk, and his headpiece—some kind of synthetic monstrosity—shifts slightly as he moves. His hand is outstretched before he’s fully in the room.

“Gary! Always a pleasure, always a pleasure.” His handshake is overly enthusiastic, his palm slick with sweat. I suppress the urge to wipe my hand on my trousers when he finally lets go.

“Mayor,” I say with a nod, my voice clipped. “Let’s get to business.”

“Of course, of course!” He ushers me into his office, a space that reeks of stale cigars and self-importance. A scale model of the dam project dominates the room, perched on a table like a trophy. Hoag gestures to it with a flourish. “A thing of beauty, isn’t it? Progress, Gary. That’s what we’re building here. Progress.”

“Progress,” I repeat, my tone neutral. I set the briefcase down and open it, pulling out a stack of documents. “The permits are in order. The environmental assessments—revised, as you requested. Everything’s moving forward.”

Hoag’s smile doesn’t falter, but his eyes flicker with something greasier than enthusiasm. “Excellent, excellent. Just one small thing, Gary. A minor detail, really. Administrative fees. Bureaucracy, you know how it is. An additional sixty thousand should cover it.”

I stare at him, letting the silence stretch until it’s uncomfortable. “Sixty thousand?”

My voice is low, almost a growl. “Forwhat, exactly?”

Hoag laughs nervously, his jowls jiggling. “Oh, you know. Paperwork. Inspections. The usual red tape.”

“The usual red tape,” I repeat, my tone icy. I lean forward, letting my height and presence loom over him. “Let me make something clear, Mayor. I’m not one of your desperate constituents. I’m not a man you can strong-arm or swindle. If you think I’m going to hand over sixty thousand dollars for nothing, you’re mistaken.”

His smile falters, and he takes a half-step back. “Now, Gary, let’s not be hasty. We’re partners in this, aren’t we?”

“Partners don’t try to extort each other,” I say, my voice sharp enough to cut steel. “Drop it. Now.”

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He swallows hard, his face flushing. “Of course, of course. No harm in asking, eh?”

I snort, gathering my documents and snapping the briefcase shut. “Asking and demanding are two very different things,” I say, turning toward the door. But as I reach for the handle, I pause, glancing back at him. “By the way—what’s with the bikers outside? Cold Slither, isn’t it?”

Hoag’s face lights up like I’ve handed him a lifeline. “Oh, them? Just extra security. You know how it is these days. Can’t be too careful.”

“Extra security,” I say, my tone dripping with skepticism. “For a government building? In Coldwater?”

He chuckles, but it’s a nervous sound. “They’re not causing any trouble. Just, uh, keeping an eye on things. Making sure everything runs smoothly.”

I narrow my eyes, my fingers tightening around the briefcase handle. “They better stay that way. If they step out of line?—”

“They won’t,” Hoag interrupts, his voice too loud, too eager. “They’re professionals, Gary. Nothing to worry about.”

“Good,” I say, my voice low and dangerous. “Because if they do, I’ll handle it. Personally.”

I don’t wait for his reply. I stride out of the office, my boots clicking sharply against the polished floor. The Cold Slither bikers watch me as I pass, their eyes cold and



calculating. I meet their gaze, my jaw tight, , the air feels charged, like the calm before a storm. But then I'm out the door, stepping into the cold Montana air, and the tension snaps like a taut wire.

For now, they're just bikers. For now.

The limo's interior is quiet except for the hum of the engine and the faint static of the autopilot system. I lean back in the leather seat, my fingers brushing against something sharp on the cushion beside me. A shard of glass, no bigger than a fingernail, glints in the dim light. I pick it up, rolling it between my thumb and forefinger. Sunrise on Vakuta. Or what's left of it.

My chest tightens, a wave of anger and grief crashing over me. I was supposed to punish her. Reily. She destroyed the only thing I had left of my parents, my home, my past. And yet... Instead of breaking her, I let her in. I let her see me, truly see me, in a way no one has in centuries. She slipped past my defenses like they were nothing, like I was nothing. And now, I can't stop thinking about her. The way she felt beneath me, the way she looked at me when my image inducer faltered, the way she knew me.

I hate this. I hate the vulnerability, the helplessness. I hate her for making me feel this way. My fist closes around the shard, the sharp edges digging into my palm. I should cut her out of my life, tell her to stay far away from me before she burrows any deeper.

The thought makes my stomach twist. No. I can't let her go. I won't. She's mine, and I'll remind her of that—remind her who's in charge.

I grab my phone, my fingers moving quickly to her contact. My thumb hovers over the call button, but I hesitate. No. Text is safer. Less revealing.

Come. Now.

The response is almost instantaneous. Those three dots taunt me, mocking my impatience. Who is she talking to? Another man? My jaw tightens, jealousy flaring hot and sharp in my chest.

I'm sorry, MASTER but you'll have to put in more work than that. Earth women can't just have orgasms on command.

The emojis she adds—a laughing cat, an eggplant—irritate me further. I growl low in my throat, my thumb jabbing at the screen.

I mean come over. Immediately.

Can't. There's no one to watch my mother.

My teeth grind together. Of course. Always something standing in my way. But I'm not a man who takes no for an answer.

Then I will provide staff to stay with her.

Are you showing off, she replies, or was it really that good?

I smirk despite myself. Both, little human. Both.

The staff will arrive shortly. Come over once they arrive and you have briefed them on your mother's needs.

Okay.

The single word sends a jolt of satisfaction through me. But then she adds, My

apologies. I'll be there as soon as I am able—Master.

Good. She's learning. But it's not enough to quell the storm raging inside me. Anger, desire, loneliness—they collide in a chaotic mess, churning in my gut. I arrange the mom sitters through my assistant, my fingers moving quickly over the screen. It's done.

I lean back in the seat, my hand resting on the growing bulge in my trousers. Soon. She'll be here soon. I'll have her, and I'll remind her who she belongs to. My fingers tighten, the fabric straining. Soon.

### CHAPTER 12

#### REILY

The phone buzzes on the counter as I'm stirring the grits, Clem's voice crackling through the speaker.

"You really think Susan's going to play along?" he grumbles. "She's got her own agenda, Reily. Always has."

I glance at the clock. The caregiver's due any minute, and I haven't even brushed my hair. "Susan's agenda is exposing Hoag. So is ours. That's enough common ground for now."

"Fine. But if those biker freaks start something, I'm not just gonna stand there and take it."

"Clem, I'm serious. No weapons. You go in there looking for a fight, and Hoag wins. Just... cool it, alright?"

He sighs, the sound like a tire deflating. "Alright, alright. But if this blows up, it's on you."

"Noted."

I hang up just as the doorbell lets out its tortured screech. Out of habit, I yell, "Mom, don't get up!" even though I know she's not moving from that bed today.

A woman in scrubs stands on the porch, her smile as crisp as her uniform. “Hi, I’m Janet. Mr. Irons sent me.”

“Right, come on in.” I wave her inside, trying to ignore the way my stomach flutters at the mention of him.

Janet’s eyes sweep the room, taking in the threadbare carpet and the photos of Dad. “Cozy place.”

“Thanks. My mom’s upstairs. She’s having a rough day, so she’s in bed. She’s got her meds, and I just made her some cheesy grits.”

“Got it. I’ll take good care of her.”

I grab the bowl of grits and head upstairs, Janet trailing behind. Mom’s propped up against her pillows, her face pale but her smile bright.

“Hey, Mama,” I say, setting the bowl on her nightstand. “This is Janet. She’s gonna hang out with you for a bit.”

Mom’s eyes twinkle. “Another date with Mr. Billionaire?”

I freeze, the spoon halfway to the bowl. “It’s not a date. It’s... strategy.”

“Uh-huh.” Mom takes the spoon from me, her smirk widening. “You know, your father used to get that same look on his face when he was trying to hide something. Like when he bought me that saddle I didn’t want for Christmas.”

“Mom.”

“Just saying, sweetie. Be careful with that one. He’s got ‘trouble’ written all over

him.”

I kiss her forehead, my face burning. “I’ll be back soon.”

Downstairs, Janet’s already making herself at home, flipping through a magazine like she’s been here a thousand times.

“Call me if you need anything,” I say, grabbing my bag.

“Will do. Have fun on your...strategysession.”

I glare at her, but she’s already engrossed in an article about celebrity diets.

As I head out the door, my phone buzzes. A text from him.

Gary: Don’t keep me waiting.

I roll my eyes but can’t stop the grin spreading across my face.

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“Be good, Mom,” I mutter under my breath, heading for the car.

Whatever this is, it’s definitely not just about the dam.

The garage door clatters open with a mechanical hum, and I roll the POS inside, the engine coughing its usual death rattle. My phone buzzes in the cup holder. I grab it, the screen lighting up with a text from Guvan—no, Gary. I have to remind myself to think of him that way, even if the alien underneath the disguise is becoming harder to ignore.

Park in the garage this time, and get dressed before you come inside.

Get dressed? My stomach does a little flip. “What’s he got in store for me today?” I mutter, glancing at the rearview mirror like I might find answers in my own reflection. “Oh god, I’m going to end up with a broken heart when this is all over. I just know it.”

I maneuver the car into the garage, the door grinding shut behind me. The dim light filters through the dusty windows, casting long shadows across the concrete floor. And there he is, sitting in a leather wing-backed chair like some kind of alien king. His three-piece suit hugs his frame in all the right places, but the hologram is off, and his true form is on full display. Dark red scales catch the light, his ridges sharp and unyielding. And those eyes—those red, piercing eyes—lock onto me the second I step out of the car.

“Get dressed for your day’s duties, Reily,” he commands, exhaling a plume of cigar smoke. The amber glow highlights the planes of his face, making him look even more

otherworldly. He nods toward something behind me, and I turn to see the maid uniform, pristine and pressed, hanging in a clear garment bag.

I swallow hard, my pulse quickening. He's going to watch me change. Of course he is. It's a power play, one I'm not about to let him win. Not without a fight.

"You know," I say, crossing my arms, "most employers don't make their staff strip in the garage. But hey, I guess when you're a billionaire alien with a god complex, you get to make the rules, right?"

His lips curl into a smirk, the cigar perched between his teeth. "Do you always talk this much, or is it a special talent you've decided to showcase today?"

"Only when I'm dealing with overgrown lizards who think they're the center of the universe."

"Careful, Reily. Push me too far, and you might find yourself with more duties than you bargained for."

I grab the garment bag and unzip it, the sound loud in the quiet garage. The uniform is just as ridiculous as I remember—skimpy, tight, and designed to make me feel exposed.

I don't take my eyes off Guvan as I peel off my tank top, letting it drop to the garage floor. His chair creaks as he shifts forward, the cigar smoke curling around his scaled face like a halo of sin. My nipples harden under his gaze, but I don't touch them—not yet. I'm in control here, even if he thinks he is.

"Getting comfortable?" I ask, popping the button on my jeans. His eyes flick down, and I swear I hear a low growl rumble in his chest.



“Do I look uncomfortable?” he counters, taking a long drag from the cigar. The tip glows orange, the ember reflecting in his red eyes. “You’re stalling.”

I smirk and shimmy out of my jeans, kicking them aside. My panties are next, and I make a show of sliding them down my thighs, bending over just enough to give him a glimpse of what’s coming. When I straighten up, I catch the way his claws dig into the armrests of the chair.

“Are you sure you don’t want to help?” I tease, reaching for the maid uniform.

“Wait.” His voice is a command, sharp and low.

I freeze mid-reach, arching an eyebrow. “What now, Your Majesty?”

He gestures with the cigar, the ash falling to the floor. “Play with your nipples. Make them hard.”

My mouth drops open. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I cross my arms, my cheeks burning. “Is this part of the maid training? Because I don’t remember this in the job description.”

He leans back in his chair, his smirk widening. “Consider it a performance review.”

“You’re impossible,” I mutter, but my hands are already moving, trembling as they brush against my breasts. His eyes darken, his breath hitching as I pinch my nipples, rolling them between my fingers.

“That’s it,” he purrs, his voice like gravel. “Show me.”

I close my eyes, the sensation sending sparks down my spine. “Are you having fun, little spitfire?” he asks, his tone dripping with smug satisfaction.

“Yes,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. Then, in a rush of desperation, I add, “But not as much as if it were you touching me, Master.”

His growl is primal, a sound that vibrates through the garage and makes the tools on the shelves rattle. “Patience.”

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I don't know if he's talking to me or himself, and right now, I don't care.

"Spread your legs," he commands, his voice rough with desire. "Wider."

I obey, I step my feet apart. His eyes are locked on me, drinking in every detail.

"Good girl," he murmurs, and the words send a shiver through me. "Now, touch yourself. Show me how much you want this."

My hands move without hesitation now, one sliding down my stomach while the other teases my nipple. I'm wet, so wet, and the way he's watching me—like I'm the only thing in the universe—makes me feel powerful in a way I've never experienced before.

"Turn around," he says, his voice strangled. "Show me everything."

I turn, my heart pounding as I bend over slightly, spreading my cheeks for him. The air is thick with the scent of cigar smoke and arousal, and I can hear the rustle of fabric as he adjusts himself.

"Perfect," he growls, and I can't help the moan that escapes my lips. His desire is a physical thing, a heat that radiates across the room and wraps around me. I've never felt so wanted, so needed, and it's intoxicating.

He's watching me like I'm a revelation, and I feel like one.

I stumble forward, my legs trembling beneath me, until I'm standing in front of him,

his red eyes burning into mine. His claws dig deeper into the armrests, the leather groaning in protest.

“Come here,” he growls, the sound so low and guttural it makes my head swim. He leans forward, his muscles coiled like a predator ready to pounce.

I step closer, and his hand snaps out, grabbing me by the small of my back. The scales of his palm are rough against my skin, but the heat radiating from him is intoxicating. He yanks me onto his lap, and I gasp as my bare skin presses against the fabric of his suit.

His mouth is on me before I can catch my breath—hot and relentless. He kisses my neck, his tongue flicking against my pulse point, his teeth nipping just hard enough to make me shiver. I grab the back of his scaled head, my fingers tangling in the ridges there, and press him harder into my skin.

“Oh god,” I moan, tilting my head to give him more access. The contrast between his fully clothed form and my nakedness is stark, a reminder of my place in this dynamic, and it sends a thrill through me.

I squirm on his lap, feeling the hard length of him beneath me, and finally manage to settle onto his cock. The stretch is intense, his vakutan ridges undulating inside me, and I cry out, my back arching.

“Who owns you?” he demands, his voice sharp as his eyes lock onto mine.

“Master Guvan owns me,” I breathe, my words hushed but sure. The weight of his control washes over me, that golden glow of subspace wrapping me in its warmth.

I grab the lapels of his suit, feeling the fine fabric crumple in my fists, and start to move. My hips roll and grind, taking him deeper with every motion. His cock pulses

inside me, and I can see the way his jaw tightens, the way his eyes darken with every stroke.

“That’s it,” he growls, his hands gripping my hips, sharp claws pricking my skin. “Take what you need.”

I do, riding him harder, faster, until the room is filled with the sound of our ragged breaths and the slick slide of skin against scales. His mouth finds my breasts, his tongue swirling around one nipple while his teeth graze the other.

When I finally come, it’s with a scream, my body tightening around him as he spills inside me.

“Did I do a good job?” I ask, my voice dripping with cheeky snark as I catch my breath. “Master?”

His eyes narrow, but there’s a flicker of amusement in them. “Don’t push your luck, little spitfire.”

I grin, leaning in to kiss him, but he stops me with a clawed finger under my chin.

“You’re not done yet,” he rumbles.

His hand tangles in my hair, pulling my head back sharply. I gasp, the sting sending a jolt of heat straight to my core. His mouth crashes into mine, all teeth and tongue, a collision that steals my breath and fills my lungs with the scent of cigar smoke and something wild, something alien. My hands clutch at his shoulders, the scales slick under my palms, and I moan into his mouth, the sound swallowed by his growl.

Before I can process it, he spins me around, his claws gripping my hips as he yanks me back against him. I feel his cock, hot and ridged, pressing against me, and I lift

my hips instinctively, expecting him to slide into me like before. But instead, I feel the blunt tip of him nudge against a place I've never explored.

“Master?” My voice wobbles, a mix of nerves and curiosity. I've never done this before, and the idea is equal parts terrifying and thrilling. My heart pounds, my body caught between wanting to pull away and wanting to push back.

He leans forward, his breath hot against my ear. “I won't let you get hurt, Reily.” His voice is low, softer than I've ever heard it, and the words wrap around me like a promise. “I'd never let you get hurt.”

The tension in my shoulders eases, and I let out a shaky breath. I trust him. God help me, I trust him. Slowly, I lower myself onto him, the stretch sharp but not unbearable. His ridges glide against me, sending sparks shooting up my spine, and I whimper, my hands gripping the arms of the chair for support.

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He growls, a deep rumble that vibrates through me, and leans forward to bite my shoulder. The sting is followed by the gentle press of his fingers against my clit, coaxing me back into rhythm. I move on him, tentatively at first, but his hands guide me, steady and firm.

I ride him with growing confidence, the intensity building with every motion. His claws dig into my hips, keeping me steady, and I let myself go, surrendering to the sensations, to him. The sharpness fades, replaced by a deep, consuming pleasure that has me gasping his name.

When I come, it's with a cry, my body tightening around him as he spills inside me, his growl echoing in the stillness of the garage. He holds me close, his breath ragged against my neck, , there's nothing but the sound of our breathing and the pounding of my heart.

I lean back against him, my limbs heavy and my mind hazy with the glow of subspace. His arms wrap around me, and I feel safe, cared for in a way I've never experienced before. Later, I think. I'll bring up the dam later. For now, I just want to stay here, wrapped in him, and forget the world exists.

## CHAPTER 13

### GUVAN

Reily's head rests on my chest, her soft breaths warming my scales. Her fingers trace idle patterns over my stomach, , I forget everything—the war, the dam, the grolgath. All that exists is her. This tiny, infuriating, irresistible human. How did she get here?

How did she get inside me? I was supposed to punish her, break her, make her regret ever crossing me. Instead, she's unraveled me, and I'm not sure I'll ever be the same.

"Have you ever been fishing on Mirror Lake?" Her voice breaks the silence, casual, as if she's not sitting naked in my lap in my garage.

I glance down at her, my brow ridge lifting. "No."

"Do you want to go?" she asks, tilting her head to look up at me.

"Now?" I blink, caught off guard. The idea is absurd. It's the middle of the day, and I'm in my true form, half-expecting Pyke to call and remind me of some duty I'm neglecting.

"Why not now?" She sits up, her blue eyes challenging me. Her lips curl into that damnable smirk, the one that makes me want to both strangle her and pin her against the nearest surface.

I sigh, running a clawed hand through her fiery hair. "No reason we can't, I suppose. It's just... sudden."

She exhales heavily, her expression softening. "If you're going to flood Mirror Lake, you should at least spend one day out on it. To remember how it used to be."

There's something in her tone—a weight, a plea. I narrow my eyes, studying her. This isn't just about fishing. She's up to something. But then again, when isn't she? I nod, giving in because, at this point, I'd follow her anywhere.

"Very well. Let us go... fishing." The words feel strange, foreign. I haven't done anything so mundane in... ever.



Reily grins, triumphant, and slides off my lap. She grabs her clothes from the floor and starts dressing, her movements quick and efficient. I watch her, my gaze lingering on the curve of her hips, the way her skin glows in the dim garage light. My cock twitches, reminding me of how easily she can best me in this game we're playing.

"You're going to need clothes," she says, throwing my shirt at me. It hits me in the chest, and I catch it before it can fall. "Unless you plan on going as your scaly self. Which, actually, might make for an interesting fishing story."

I snort, standing and pulling the shirt over my head. "I'll use the inducer. No need to scare the fish."

She laughs, the sound light and free, and it does something to my chest—something I don't want to examine too closely. "Fair enough. But don't blame me if you don't catch anything. You've got the patience of a toddler on a sugar high."

I growl, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her close. "And yet, I've managed to reel you in, haven't I?"

She looks up at me, her eyes darkening. "Maybe. But I'm the one holding the rod right now."

I kiss her, hard and demanding, because it's the only way to shut her up. She melts against me, her hands tangling in my shirt, and I consider forgetting about fishing altogether. But then she pulls away, her smirk returning.

"Later, big guy. We've got fish to catch."

I shake my head, following her toward the door. She's going to be the death of me. And yet, I can't wait to see what she does next.

Reily jingles the keys to her rusted Gremlin with a grin. “I’ll drive.”

I raise an eyebrow, skeptical but amused. “That thing? It’s a miracle it hasn’t disintegrated yet.”

She rolls her eyes. “Come on, big guy. Get in.”

I try. I really do. But even with the seat all the way back, my knees are jammed against the dashboard, and my head brushes the roof. I grunt, extracting myself from the sardine can. “No. Absolutely not.”

Reily leans against the car, arms crossed, smirking. “Too good for the POS, huh?”

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“Toobig,” I counter, striding toward the garage. I yank a tarp off a gunmetal gray Range Rover. “We’ll take this.”

Her eyes light up. “Oh, now we’re talking.”

She climbs into the passenger seat, but as soon as we hit the winding road to Mirror Lake, she’s leaning forward, gripping the dashboard. “Faster,” she urges, her voice full of mischief.

I glance at her, the corners of my mouth twitching. “You’re enjoying this.”

“Damn right. Come on, Gary Irons, billionaire speed demon. Show me what this beauty can do.”

I press the accelerator, the engine roaring as we hug the curves. Her laughter fills the cabin, wild and carefree. I can’t help but think how magnificent she is—unafraid, bold, completely alive.

When we reach the lake, we pull up to a boat rental shop. The owner, a grizzled man with a suspicious glare, takes one look at me and scowls. “We’re closed.”

Reily steps in front of me, flashing her most charming smile. “Hey, Jimmy. Listen, I’m trying to show Mr. Irons here what he’s going to destroy if he builds that dam. Give us a chance to change his mind, huh?”

Jimmy’s eyes narrow, but he relents. “Fine. But it’ll cost you.”

I pull out my wallet, tossing twice the rental fee on the counter without a word. Jimmy pockets the cash with a grunt, gesturing toward a decent-sized fishing boat.

Reily takes the helm, guiding us out onto the water with practiced ease. “See? You’re already learning something.”

“How to overpay for a boat?” I grumble, sinking into the seat beside her.

She laughs, shoving my shoulder. “No, dummy. How to appreciate what’s right in front of you.”

We anchor near a quiet spot, and she hands me a fishing rod. “Here. Let’s see if you can catch something.”

I frown, examining the contraption. “I just sit here? And wait?”

“Yep. It’s called patience. You should try it sometime.”

I glare at her, but she’s already casting her line, her focus on the water. The silence is... peaceful. Uncomfortably so. I’m used to action, to doing. But here, with her, it’s different.

After a while, she points to the shoreline. “Look at that. See those families? The kids playing? The people kayaking? That’s what you’re going to take away, Gary. All of it.”

I shift, uneasy. “The dam isn’t about destroying. It’s about rebuilding. Coldwater needs jobs, stability?—”

“And this is the only way to do it?” She turns to me, her eyes piercing. “Come on, Mr. Billionaire Genius. Surely you can come up with something better.”

Her fingers brush my chest, trailing lightly over my shirt. My breath catches, and I look down at her, resisting the urge to pull her into my lap.

She bats her eyelashes, her voice softening. “You’re smart. You’re powerful. You don’t have to do this. Please, Gary.”

Her use of my human name sends a jolt through me. I exhale, defeated. “You’re impossible, you know that?”

She grins, victorious. “And yet, here you are.”

I reach out, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Fine. I’ll see what I can do.”

Her smile widens, and she leans into my touch. “Knew you’d see it my way.”

I groan, shaking my head. “You’re going to be the death of me, Reily Dawson.”

“Maybe,” she says, her voice light. “But you’ll die happy.”

I can’t argue with that.

The tug on the line snaps me out of my thoughts. I reel in the bluegill, its scales glinting in the sunlight. It’s a small thing, barely worth the effort, but Reily’s grin makes it feel like a victory.

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“First catch,” she says, clapping her hands mockingly. “Look at you, Gary Irons, master angler.”

I grunt, unhooking the fish and tossing it back into the lake. “It’s a start.”

She laughs, leaning back in her seat. “A start? That’s the pinnacle of your fishing career right there. Don’t ruin it by catching something bigger.”

I shake my head, but I’m smiling. She has a way of making even the most mundane moments feel... alive. We stay out on the water for a while longer, the sun dipping low on the horizon.

When we finally head back to shore, the laughter and shouting from Cold Slither’s bonfire reach us before we even step off the boat. I glance over, my eyes narrowing as I spot the two teenagers—Boris and Barfbag, if Reily’s reaction is any indication.

“Oh no,” Reily mutters, her voice tightening. “They’re too dumb to know Cold Slither’s just messing with them. This is just torture.”

I don’t need her to explain. I see the setup—the boat, the fireworks, the cruel grins on the gang’s faces. Boneshaker’s booming voice carries across the sand.

“Come on, it’ll be cool,” he says, slapping Barfbag on the back hard enough to make him stumble. “If you pass the initiation, we’ll let you join the gang.”

Barfbag and Boris exchange looks, their faces lit with a mix of fear and excitement. They start chanting Cold Slither’s slogan, their voices shaky but determined.

“We’re Cold Slither, you’ll be joining us soon. A band of vipers, bringing your doom!”

Reily grabs my arm, her fingers digging in. “Gary, we have to stop this. They’re going to get hurt.”

I glance down at her, the fire in her eyes mirroring the anger building in my chest. “I’ll handle it.”

She nods, trusting me without hesitation. It’s a dangerous thing, that trust, but I don’t have time to dwell on it.

I stride toward the bonfire, my boots crunching on the sand. The gang notices me almost immediately, their laughter fading to a low murmur. Jack steps forward, his grin sharp and mocking.

“Well, well, look who decided to join the party,” he drawls, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Gary Irons, billionaire philanthropist. What brings you to our little gathering?”

I ignore him, my gaze locking on the two teenagers. “Get in the boat,” I tell them, my voice low but firm.

Boris blinks, his braces catching the firelight. “Uh... what?”

“Now,” I snap, and they scramble to obey, their earlier bravado evaporating. Jack steps into my path, his eyes narrowing. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on there, Mr. Irons. These boys are about to join Cold Slither. You’re interrupting a sacred tradition.”

I step closer, my height and bulk forcing him to tilt his head back to meet my gaze.

“Funny,” I growl. “I don’t recall asking for your permission.”

Boneshaker moves to flank Jack, his massive frame looming. “You’re outnumbered, Irons. Why don’t you turn that fancy ass around and walk away before things get messy?”

I smile, slow and dangerous.

“Oh, I’m counting on it getting messy.”

Jack’s grin falters, but he tries to play it off. “You’ve got a real death wish, don’t you?”

Reily’s voice cuts through the tension, sharp and clear. “Leave him alone, Jack. He’s not the one you should be worried about.”

The gang’s eyes shift to her, their laughter returning. “What’s this?” Jack sneers. “Little Reily Dawson, playing hero? You’re out of your league, sweetheart.”

I don’t give him a chance to say more. My fist crashes into his jaw, sending him sprawling into the sand. The gang erupts, and I brace myself for the fight.

Finally, I think, a thrill running through me. It’s been too long.

“Stop!” Jack shouts from the sand, holding up a hand like some kind of dramatic soap opera actor. Cold Slither freezes mid-lunge, their faces twisted in confusion. Boneshaker looks like a dog denied its chew toy.

“Boss?” Crazy Steve asks, his clown paint smeared from the heat of the bonfire. He tilts his head like a confused puppy, though I’m pretty sure he’s more rabid than innocent.



Jack gets to his feet, brushing sand off his leather jacket with theatrical slowness. He's got blood on his chin where my fist connected, and he wipes it away with the back of his hand, smirking like he's just won the lottery.

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“Sure, we could pound the shit out of this rich asshole,” Jack says, his voice dripping with mockery. He gestures at me like I’m some sideshow freak. “But I’d much, much rather sue him for millions of dollars!”

The gang erupts into laughter, though I can tell some of them don’t get the joke. Boneshaker’s still glaring at me like he wants to rip my arms off, but he doesn’t move.

“Sue me for what?” I sputter, my fists clenching at my sides. I’m still itching for a fight, but the smug look on Jack’s face makes me pause.

“For assaulting me in front of dozens of witnesses,” Jack says, spinning around to address the gang like he’s performing for an audience. He clutches his jaw dramatically. “I might need surgery! Not to mention mental anguish, and loss of work!”

“Loss of work?” I growl, stepping forward. Jack doesn’t flinch, just spreads his arms wide like he’s inviting me to hit him again.

“Yeah, I think I’m going to have to call off my security shindig tomorrow on account of my injury,” he says, his smirk widening. “In fact, I might have to go on disability. That’s even more I can sue you for, Irons.”

I grit my teeth, my fists trembling. Every instinct in me screams to take him down, to make him regret every word, but Reily’s hand slips into mine, her grip firm and grounding.

“Gary,” she says quietly, her voice low but urgent. “Not like this. He’s baiting you.”

I glance down at her, her blue eyes steady and unwavering. She’s right, of course. Jack’s playing a game, and I’m about to hand him the win on a silver platter. I exhale sharply, forcing myself to relax.

Jack grins, clearly enjoying himself. “Go ahead,” he says, spreading his arms wider. “Make me a rich man, Irons.”

Reily tugs my hand, pulling me away from the bonfire. Boris and Barfbag trail behind us like lost puppies, their wide eyes darting between me and the gang.

“Let’s go,” Reily says, her tone leaving no room for argument. “This isn’t the time.”

I let her lead me away, my jaw clenched tight. My anger simmers just beneath the surface, hot and unrelenting. Jack thinks he’s untouchable, hiding behind his human disguise and legal threats. But he’s not. He’s a grolgath, and I’m going to make sure everyone knows it.

As we reach the Range Rover, I glance back at the bonfire. Jack’s watching us, his smirk sharp and victorious. My hand tightens around the car door.

“Reily,” I say, my voice low. “I need to expose them. Once they’re out of the shadows, I can take them down.”

She nods, her expression thoughtful. “We’ll figure it out. But not tonight. Tonight, we get these idiots home.” She gestures to Boris and Barfbag, who are still staring at Cold Slither like they’ve just witnessed something legendary.

I grunt, climbing into the driver’s seat. My mind races, plotting and scheming. Jack’s not going to win this. I’ll make sure of that.

## CHAPTER 14

### REILY

We stride into Boss Hoag's office like we own the place. The man himself is perched behind his desk, a mountain of paperwork and cheap bourbon bottles cluttering the surface. His hairpiece is crooked today, a tuft of synthetic hair flopping to the side like a wounded bird. He scrambles to his feet, his jowls jiggling as he scurries around the desk with a smile plastered on his face that doesn't reach his beady eyes.

"Mr. Irons," he says, his voice dripping with a syrupy fake charm that makes my stomach turn. "What an unexpected pleasure." His eyes dart to me, and the smile falters for a split second. "And who's your lovely friend... Reily Dawson?"

Gary doesn't respond right away, his stance towering and unyielding, his red eyes narrowed. I can feel the tension radiating off him like heat from a forge.

"Boss Hoag," I say, crossing my arms and leaning slightly against Gary's side. "Fancy meeting you here."

Hoag's eyes flick between us, his confusion turning to something darker as he pieces it together. His grin tightens, but there's no humor in it now.

"What's this about, Irons?" he asks, his tone sharp. "Why are you consorting with the enemy? This woman led the protest against the dam project you and I are so heavily invested in."

"I think you mean that I am so heavily invested in." He takes a step forward, and Hoag instinctively takes one back, bumping into his desk. "The truth is, I've decided to no longer pursue this hydroelectric project. I'm looking into alternative methods to stimulate the local economy instead."

Hoag's face turns a shade of red I didn't think was possible. His hands clench into fists.

"You can't back out on me now, you long-ass sumbitch!" he spits, his voice rising to a near screech. The charming mask is gone, replaced by raw, unfiltered rage. "This dam project will finally make me mean something!"

I step forward, my own temper flaring. "Makeyoumean something?" I snap. "What about the people of Coldwater? The dam would've destroyed Silver Creek and Mirror Lake—everything that makes this town what it is. If you really cared about the people you're supposed to serve, you never would've agreed to the dam in the first place."

Hoag's eyes narrow, and he turns to Gary with a sneer. "The poon tang pie must be really?—"

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Before he can finish, Gary moves. He's on Hoag in an instant, his massive hand grabbing the front of the man's shirt and lifting him clean off the ground. Hoag's eyes widen, his legs kicking uselessly in the air.

"Insult Reily again," Gary growls, his voice so low it's almost a vibration, "and it will be the last thing you ever do. Threaten me at your peril. The dam is not happening."

He drops Hoag back into his chair with a thud, and the mayor gasps, clutching at his chest like he's been sucker-punched.

"That dam is going to happen, Irons!" Hoag shouts as we head for the door, his voice cracking with desperation. "It's toolate to stop it! I'll find someone else, someone smarter than you to invest!"

Gary doesn't even bother looking back. He takes my hand in his, his grip firm but gentle, and leads me out of the office. The door slams shut behind us, muffling Hoag's tirade.

"Let us depart," Gary says, his tone clipped but calm. "That man makes my scales crawl."

I can't help but grin as we walk down the hall, my hand still in his. "Makes mine crawl too," I say. "But I think you handled that pretty well...Master."

He looks down at me, his red eyes glinting with something I can't quite place. "Don't push your luck, Reily."

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I say with a wink, and we step out into the sunlight, leaving the chaos of Boss Hoag’s office behind.

Gary’s car pulls into the parking lot of Dick’s Insider Trading Club, the tires crunching over gravel. The place is lit up like a neon beacon, and I can already hear the faint thrum of classic rock leaking through the walls. Gary opens my door for me, his hand lingering on my lower back as we step inside. The air smells like cheap beer, fried food, and wood polish.

Clem and Seabus are already at a corner table, mugs of beer in hand. Susan’s there too, her laptop open and a notebook sprawled out next to it. She’s scribbling something furiously, her brow furrowed in concentration. She looks up as we approach, her face lighting up with a grin that’s half mischief, half relief.

“About time you two showed up,” Susan says, snapping her laptop shut. “We’ve got intel.”

Gary slides into the booth beside me, his massive frame taking up most of the space. Clem raises his beer in a mock toast.

“Took you long enough, Irons. You’ve been holding out on us. Got yourself a new partner in crime here?” Clem’s eyes flick to me, and I roll mine.

“Clem, focus,” I say, leaning forward. “What’s going on with Hoag and those bikers?”

Clem takes a long pull from his beer, smirking like he’s about to drop the juiciest gossip of the century. “You know me, Reily. I’m a man of many talents. One of those talents is poker. And part of poker is not just playing your hand—it’s playing the man across the table.”

Seabus nods enthusiastically, his jowls jiggling. “Clem’s the best damn poker player in Coldwater. Won twenty bucks off me last week.”

“And I let you win that one,” Clem shoots back, winking at Seabus before turning serious. “Anyway, point is, I had a sit-down with Hoag earlier today. Wanted to see if I could shake some loose change out of his pockets for the protest fund. And guess who was there? That Jack fella, leader of Cold Slither.”

I exchange a glance with Gary, who’s sitting stiffly beside me. His jaw is clenched, his red eyes fixed on Clem. He’s already told me about the Grolgath, but we can’t exactly spill that to everyone just yet.

“What about him?” I ask, keeping my tone neutral.

Clem leans in, lowering his voice like he’s about to reveal state secrets. “The man didn’t blink. Not once. Twenty damn minutes in Hoag’s office, and I’m staring at him the whole time. Not a single blink.”

Seabus frowns, scratching his head. “Maybe you blinked at the same time he did. Like, synchronized or something.”

Clem gives Seabus a look that could melt steel. “Every time? Perfectly synchronized? Did you switch brains with Boris and Barfbag or something?”

Susan snorts, covering her mouth with her hand. “Clem’s not exaggerating. I’ve been digging into Cold Slither, and there’s something off about them. No records, no history. It’s like they just appeared out of thin air.”

Gary’s voice cuts through the chatter like a knife. “They’re dangerous. Whatever they are, they’re not what they seem.”



Clem raises an eyebrow. “You saying they’re aliens or something?”

Gary doesn’t flinch. “I’m saying they’re not human.”

The table falls silent for a moment, the weight of Gary’s words settling over us. Susan’s the first to break the tension. “So, what do we do? Sit around and wait for them to make the next move?”

“No,” Gary says firmly. “We go to them. Their roadhouse is on the outskirts of town. We scout it, gather intel, and figure out what they’re up to.”

Clem slams his beer down on the table. “Count me in. Me and Seabus are hunters. We can sneak up better than anyone.”

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Seabus nods, puffing out his chest. “Damn right. We’ll have the element of surprise.”

Gary’s eyes narrow. “This isn’t a hunting trip. These men—whatever they are—are dangerous. I’ll handle it.”

Clem looks at me, his brow furrowing. “He’s not exactly the stealthy type, Reily.”

I reach over and pat Gary’s massive arm, feeling the tension coiled in his muscles. “Trust me, Clem. Gary can handle it.”

Clem looks skeptical, but he doesn’t argue. Susan closes her notebook, her expression thoughtful. “Just be careful, all of you. Whatever’s going on with Cold Slither, it’s bigger than we think.”

Gary nods once, his jaw set. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

"I'll take three orders of buffalo wings," Seabus announces, slapping the table. His grin turns wolfish as he eyes Gary. "Unless our wealthy friend here ain't interested in feeding the troops?"

Gary exhales sharply through his nose, but pulls out a black credit card. "Order whatever you want." His fingers brush against mine under the table, sending a spark up my arm.

"Boss Hoag floated the idea of getting another dam investor," I say, keeping my voice low. The smell of fried grease and whiskey sticks to the air. "What's our play if he does that?"

Gary's grip tightens around his untouched beer, knuckles white. "I have considerable influence in financial sectors. Any investors that Hoag finds will face a thorny path indeed to their dreamed-of riches."

Seabus leans forward, squinting at Gary like he's trying to solve a puzzle. "You talk funny, Irons. Where you from?"

The temperature at our table drops ten degrees. Gary's crimson eyes lock onto Seabus, unblinking. "Lots of different places."

"Will you knock it off?" My boot connects with Seabus' shin under the table. He yelps, rubbing his leg. "Gary is on our side now. He's seen the light, so stop treating him like an enemy."

Susan twirls a pen between her fingers, grinning. "Oh, it's Gary now," she sing-songs. "But Reily's right." She flips her laptop around, showing us a spreadsheet. "I've done a little digging into Irons Enterprises. Turns out Mr. Irons is pulling his funding like he promised."

Gary's fingers flex against the table. "You spied on me?"

Susan shrugs. "Wouldn't you, if you were me?"

For a second, I think he's going to flip the table. Then his shoulders relax—barely—and his lips twitch. "I suppose I would." His voice drops into a growl that resonates in my bones. "But this is more dangerous than any of you—except Reily—realize. You've done your part. Now let me handle the heavy lifting."

The way he says it, like he's already planning how to dismantle Hoag's schemes brick by brick?—

Christ.

I cross my legs, suddenly hyperaware of every shift of his massive frame beside me.

A waitress drops off the wings, and Seabus immediately shoves two in his mouth, sauce dripping down his chin. "So what's step one, boss?" He gestures at Gary with a drumstick. "You gonna buy out the whole town next?"

Gary catches my eye, his smirk doing things to my pulse. "Something like that."

## CHAPTER 15

### GUVAN

The sun hangs low over Mirror Lake, painting the water in streaks of amber and violet. I lean back against the hood of the Range Rover, the metal warm beneath me, and Reily sits next to me, her legs tucked up under her. The air smells like pine and the faint tang of the lake, , the world feels still. Peaceful. Something I haven't felt in a long, long time.

"I'll save this lake," I say, my voice low but firm. "It's a treasure. I've seen wonders across the galaxy, but this... this is unmatched. Well, almost."

Reily tilts her head, her red hair catching the last rays of sunlight. "Almost? What's more beautiful than this?"

I don't hesitate. "You."

She snorts, a little laugh escaping her, but there's a flicker of surprise in her eyes. "Smooth, alien boy. Real smooth."

“I’m not trying to be smooth,” I say, my tone serious. “I’m stating a fact.”

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She falls quiet, her fingers playing with the hem of her flannel shirt. I feel the tension in her body, the way she's coiled tight like she's bracing for something. Sshe finally speaks, her voice barely above a whisper. "Guvan?"

"Hmm?"

"What did I break? That night, when we... you know. You were so angry. I've been too scared to ask, but... I need to know."

The question hangs between us, heavy and raw. I suck in a breath, letting the cool air fill my lungs before I exhale slowly. The anger I've been carrying since she smashed that brick through my limo window feels distant now, like a storm that's passed. I'm done being mad at her. She didn't know. How could she?

"It was a globe," I say, my voice steady but soft. "About this big." I hold my hands apart, the size of a softball. "My parents made it, using their own scales. It was called Sunrise on Vakuta. They crafted it together, a mosaic of red and orange. It was... it was the last thing I had left of them. The only thing."

Reily's breath catches, and her hands fly to her mouth. "Oh, God. Guvan, I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I swear, I didn't know."

Her voice breaks, and she starts to cry, her shoulders shaking. I reach out, my large hand cupping her cheek, the warmth of her skin against my rough palm. "Hey. Look at me."

She does, her blue eyes swimming with tears. "I didn't mean to take that from you. I

was just so angry, and I... I didn't think. I'm so sorry."

I brush a tear away with my thumb, my voice soft but firm. "You didn't take anything from me, Reily. Not really. I've gained so much more. You've given me something I haven't had in centuries."

Her breath hitches again, and she leans into my touch. "What's that?"

"You," I say simply. "You're my sunrise now."

She lets out a choked laugh, tears still streaming down her face. "That's the cheesiest thing I've ever heard."

"It's true," I say, leaning in to kiss her forehead, then her cheeks, brushing away the tears. "I love you, Reily Dawson. My little spitfire."

She buries her face in my chest, her arms wrapping around me. "I love you too, Guvan...my Master."

I hold her close, the sound of the lake lapping at the shore blending with the rhythm of her breathing. For the first time in a long time, I feel whole.

The sun dips below the horizon, casting the lake in a golden glow. Reily shoves her phone into my hand and leans back, her arms spread wide like she's trying to hug the entire view.

"Take it," she says, grinning. "Make me look good."

I raise an eyebrow. "You always look good."

She rolls her eyes but keeps smiling. "Yeah, yeah, but this is for the grandkids,

Guvan. We need proof we were young and hot once.”

I snort, holding the phone out with my long arm to get the best angle. She’s framed perfectly, the lake behind her shimmering with the last light of the day. I snap a few shots before handing it back. “Why the sudden urge for photos?”

She flips through the pictures, nodding approvingly. “We exchanged the L word, Guvan. My mom’s been hinting she knows something’s up, and so has everyone else. They’re not dumb.”

“What are you getting at?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

She steps closer, her blue eyes locking onto mine. “We’re together. We kind of already were, unofficially. But it’s official now, so that means I want pictures we can show our grandkids someday.”

I laugh, the sound low and rumbling. “You’re planning our future already?”

“Damn right,” she says, punching my arm playfully. “Someone’s got to keep you in line.”

The drive back to the cabin is quiet, my hand resting on her thigh as she hums along to the radio. When we pull up, I’m surprised to see Jareth sitting on the porch, his human holographic disguise flickering slightly.

“You,” I say, stepping out of the Range Rover. “I’ve wanted to get my hands on you since that maid’s uniform incident.”

Jareth holds up his hands in mock surrender. “How was I supposed to know about human cultural nuance? I’m a tech guy, not a fashion consultant.”



Reily laughs, leaning against the car. “Nice to see you, Jareth.”

He nods, tossing her a small vial filled with a clear liquid. “Veritas finally developed a cure for the sickness. It’s tasteless and colorless, so it’s being added to the town’s water supply. But I brought a concentrated dose for your mom. It’ll work almost instantly.”

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Reily's eyes widen, and she clutches the vial like it's made of gold. "Thank you. Seriously, thank you."

Jareth shrugs, a smirk playing on his lips. "Don't mention it. Just don't let it go to your head, Irons."

I clap him on the shoulder. "It sort of makes us even."

Reily hops into her POS, waving as she speeds off to deliver the cure.

Jareth turns to me, his hands stuffed in his pockets. "So, got any beer?"

I glance at him, then at the cabin. "Yeah. Come on, let's crack a few."

He follows me inside, and I feel like maybe, just maybe, things are falling into place.

I lean back in the armchair, the fire crackling in the hearth, and take a long swig of beer. The taste is bitter, earthy, and it reminds me of the cheap swill we used to drink on Vakuta during the war. Jareth sits cross-legged on the rug, his own bottle resting on his knee.

"Remember the Battle of Krixus Ridge?" he asks, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "When you charged that Grolgath artillery line with nothing but a plasma glaive and a death wish?"

I grunt, tipping the bottle toward him. "And you were supposed to cover me, but you were too busy arguing with Command about whether the cloaking tech on your ship

was faulty.”

Jareth laughs, the sound light and sharp. “It was faulty. You nearly got turned into a smear on that ridge.”

“But I didn’t.” I take another drink, the memory of the fight still fresh in my mind. The smell of burning fuel, the roar of plasma cannons, the way my glaive had sung as it sliced through the enemy. “We won that day.”

“Barely.” Jareth rolls his eyes, but there’s a glint of respect in his gaze. “You’re a maniac, Guvan. Always have been.”

I shrug, not disagreeing. “It worked, didn’t it?”

The fire pops, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney. We fall into a comfortable silence, the kind that only comes from years of shared history. After a moment, Jareth breaks it.

“So,” he says, leaning forward with a mischievous grin. “Reily Dawson. You’re serious about her, aren’t you?”

I stiffen, my grip tightening on the bottle. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, big guy. You’re not exactly subtle.” Jareth gestures at the cabin. “You’ve got her photo on your compad, which, by the way, I saw when you handed it to me earlier. You’ve been smiling more in the last two weeks than in the last two centuries. And don’t even get me started on the way you look at her.”

I glare at him, but there’s no heat in it. “She’s... different.”

“Different?” He snorts. “Guvan, I think she might be your jalshagar.”

The word hits me like a punch to the chest. My jalshagar. My soulmate. It's a concept I've never given much thought to, not since the war. Not since I became what I am—a weapon, a soldier, a monster. But now, sitting here with Jareth's words hanging in the air, it feels... right.

“Maybe,” I admit, my voice low.

Jareth just nods, like it's the most obvious thing in the universe. “Wouldn't surprise me at all.”

I clear my throat, desperate to change the subject. “Speaking of Grolgath...”

“Ah, here we go.” Jareth leans back, crossing his arms. “What's on your mind?”

“Is there a way to force them into their true forms? Something that works over a wide area? If I can expose Cold Slither as Grolgath, I can act against them openly.”

Jareth frowns, tapping his chin. “Chemical agents can do it, but you'd have to get close. Like, really close. A wide-area solution...” He trails off, his eyes narrowing in thought. “I'll have to look into it. I might be able to rig something up, but it'll take time.”

“Do it,” I say, leaning forward. “I need options.”

“I'll see what I can cook up.” He raises his bottle in a mock toast. “For you, big guy, anything.”

I chuckle, clinking my bottle against his. “Thanks, Jareth.”

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My compad buzzes on the coffee table, cutting through the moment. I reach for it, the screen lighting up with a message from Pyke. I open it, and his holographic face materializes above the device.

“Guvan,” he says, his voice calm but firm. “Do not use your fortune to block Hoag from finding new investors for the dam. This is a human matter, not a Veritas matter. Do you understand?”

I grit my teeth, frustration bubbling up inside me. “What am I supposed to do, then? Just let it happen?”

Pyke’s expression doesn’t change. “Act within human means. Use your influence, your connections, your reputation—but no alien technology, no Veritas resources. I don’t know the solution, Guvan, but you’re free to find one. Just keep it... conventional.”

The hologram flickers out, leaving me staring at the empty space where Pyke’s face had been. I set the compad down, my mind racing. I promised Reily I’d save Mirror Lake, but how am I supposed to do that without the tools at my disposal?

## CHAPTER 16

### REILY

I step into the house, the screen door slamming behind me with a soft thwack. Mom’s on the couch, her head tilted back, eyes fixed on the TV. Jeopardy’s theme music drones in the background.

“Hey, Reily,” she calls out without looking at me, “what’s the name of the Johnny Cash song about the end of the world?”

I freeze for a second, the vial of cure in my pocket suddenly feeling heavier. “Um, ‘When the Man Comes Around’?” I answer, trying to keep my voice casual as I pull the vial out and unscrew the cap.

“Ha, you were right!” Mom laughs, finally turning to look at me. Her eyes narrow as I hover near her iced tea. “Can I help you with something?”

I squirt the clear liquid into her tea, the cure disappearing without a trace. “Um, no, just make sure you drink ALL of your tea,” I say, handing it to her. “It has a new vitamin supplement in it that should help you feel a little better.”

Mom takes a sip, her nose wrinkling slightly. “Is that why it tastes funny?”

“Um, yes?”

She shrugs, taking another sip. “It’s okay, I kind of like it.” She drains the glass and hands it back to me with a smile. “Thanks, sweetie.”

I hover for a moment, watching her like a hawk. Nothing. No sudden burst of energy, no miraculous recovery. Just Mom, still pale and frail, leaning back into the cushions. My heart sinks a little, but I force a smile and head outside to the porch.

The old wooden steps creak under my weight as I sit down. The sun’s starting to dip low, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink. I’m trying to be patient, really I am, but the waiting’s killing me.

The sound of boots crunching on gravel pulls me out of my thoughts. Seabus ambles up the driveway, hands shoved deep in his pockets.

“Hey, Reily,” he grumbles, stopping at the foot of the steps. “Heard some bigwig multinational corporation’s gonna re-start the Silver Creek dam project.”

I blink at him, my stomach tightening. “Gary said he would stop it.”

Seabus shrugs, his face scrunching like he just bit into a lemon. “I know, but no offense, I believe in a good incontinence strategy.”

I snort despite myself. “I think you mean contingent strategy, but do go on.”

He leans against the porch railing, looking out toward the lake. “If we can collect ten thousand signatures, we can force Boss Hoag to hold a referendum vote on the dam project. The power of democracy can bring it down.”

I raise an eyebrow, skeptical. “Ten thousand signatures? That’s like one fifth of the town’s population.”

“Yeah, well,” Seabus mutters, scratching the back of his neck, “it’s not like we’ve got a lot of options. Boss Hoag’s not gonna listen to reason, and Gary—well, no offense, but he’s got his own battles to fight.”

I sigh, leaning back on my hands. “Yeah, I know. But ten thousand signatures? That’s a tall order.”

“Better than sitting around doing nothing,” Seabus fires back, his voice sharp. “Unless you’ve got a better idea?”

I don’t. And that’s the problem.

I’m sitting on the porch with Seabus, staring at the lake in the distance, when Mrs. Henderson from next door comes ambling over. She’s got a floppy sunhat and a

watering can, like she just wandered off from her garden.

“Reily, honey,” she calls out, squinting at me through her oversized glasses. “You two look like you’re plotting something. What’s going on?”



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“Just trying to figure out how to stop the dam project,” I say, leaning back on the porch railing.

Mrs. Henderson sets her watering can down and plants her hands on her hips. “Well, count me in. That lake’s been there since I was a girl, and I’ll be damned if some billionaire’s gonna turn it into a reservoir.”

Before I can respond, Mr. Patel from across the street pokes his head over the fence. “Did I hear something about the dam? Because if so, I’ve got opinions.”

“Join the club,” Seabus grumbles, scrubbing a hand over his stubbly chin. By now, a few more neighbors are drifting over—Dauber from the pharmacy, Clem with his Skoal cap pulled low, and even the McLaughlins with their three-legged dog.

It’s turning into a full-blown block party when Boris and Barfbag roll up on their bikes, their heavy metal T-shirts flapping in the breeze. They skid to a stop and hop off, grinning like fools.

“What’s up, losers?” Boris says, tossing his helmet onto the grass. “Did we miss the revolution?”

“Almost,” I say, shaking my head. “We’re brainstorming how to get ten thousand signatures to stop the dam.”

“Ten thousand?” Barfbag’s eyes go wide. “That’s, like, a lot of signatures. Can’t we just, I dunno, start a mosh pit at city hall?”

“Brilliant plan,” Seabus mutters. “Except for the part where it’s completely stupid.”

I decide it’s time to play host. “I’ll grab some refreshments,” I say, heading inside. The kitchen smells amazing—sweet and warm, like baked cookies. And there’s my mom, standing at the counter, scooping oatmeal raisin dough onto a baking sheet.

“Mom?” I freeze in the doorway. “Are you all right?”

She looks up, her face glowing with energy I haven’t seen in months. “That vitamin tonic did a good job,” she says, her voice light and cheerful. “All of a sudden, I just felt like getting up and doing something again. It feels good. Do you know if any of your friends have nut allergies? You know I like to put walnuts in my cookies.”

I don’t even try to hide my grin. “I’ll go check,” I say, wrapping her in a tight hug. She feels solid, alive, like she’s finally back to herself. I whisper a silent thank-you to Guvan before heading back outside with a pitcher of lemonade and a tray of cookies.

Mom follows me out, and the crowd cheers when they see her. “Mary!” Mrs. Henderson exclaims, rushing over to hug her. “You look fantastic!”

“I feel fantastic,” Mom says, beaming. She sets the cookies down on the porch railing, and Boris and Barfbag are on them like vultures.

“Careful, boys,” Clem says, snagging a cookie for himself. “Mary’s cookies are a religious experience.”

“No kidding,” Barfbag mumbles around a mouthful, crumbs tumbling down his shirt. “These are, like, the best thing ever.”

I pour glasses of lemonade and hand them out, watching as the group falls into easy conversation. For the first time in a long time, it feels like we might actually have a

shot at this.

Clem leans against the porch railing, scratching the back of his neck like he's trying to dig out a thought. "Too bad we don't have some big-shot celebrity in Coldwater," he says, voice low and gruff. "Someone who could get on social media and spread the word. That'd make this whole signature thing a hell of a lot easier."

Barfbag, perched on the steps with a cookie in each hand, snorts. "Yeah, like if Taylor Swift justhappenedto live here and was, like, 'Save Mirror Lake, dudes!'"

"Don't think Taylor Swift's gonna move to Coldwater anytime soon," I say, rolling my eyes. "What we need is a way to get a ton of people together in one place. Something fun, something that'll put them in a good mood. Then we hit 'em with the petition while they're all feeling warm and fuzzy."

Boris, who's been quiet up until now, suddenly snaps his fingers. "Music festival," he blurts out, like he's just discovered fire. "People love music, right? We could totally get everyone to show up for that. But—" he grins, braces glinting in the sunlight, "—it has to be nothing but death metal bands. Like,allddeath metal. No exceptions."

"Hell no on the death metal band thing," I say immediately, crossing my arms over my chest. "Not everyone wants their eardrums blown out by Boris and Barfbag's 'sick riffs,' okay? But the music festival idea? That's actually not bad. We could get a big name or two. Some of those music stars are really into conservation."

"Like who?" Seabus asks, his arms folded over his chest, skeptical as always.

"I don't know, like... Jason Aldean? Miranda Lambert? Someone like that," I say, waving a hand like it's obvious. "We just need someone who can pull a crowd."

"And where the hell are we gonna find the money to pay for all these big names?"

Clem asks, his bushy eyebrows furrowing. “Because last I checked, none of us are exactly rolling in it.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I say, though I have no idea how. “First things first—we need acts. A lot of them. At least enough to make it feel like an actual festival and not just me and my guitar.”

Mom, who’s been quietly sipping lemonade, perks up. “Well, you’ve already got one performer,” she says, smiling at me like she’s just handed me a winning lottery ticket. “You.”

“Oh hell no,” I say immediately, holding up my hands like I’m fending off an attack. “Absolutely not. I’m not getting up on a stage. No way.”

“Why not?” Boris says, grinning like a jackal. “You’re always singing around the house. You’re, like, actually good.”

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“Yeah,” Barfbag chimes in, mouth full of cookie. “You could totally be our secret weapon. Like, ‘surprise, it’s Reily Dawson, everyone!’”

“No,” I say firmly, shooting them both a glare. “I’m not your secret weapon. I’m not getting up on a stage. Period.”

But before I can shut it down completely, Mom chimes in again. “Honey, you have a beautiful voice. And this is for a good cause. Don’t you want to do everything you can to save the lake?”

“I—” I start, but the look she’s giving me makes it hard to argue. It’s the same look she used when she’d catch me sneaking cookies before dinner as a kid—soft but unyielding.

“It’s settled then,” she says, clapping her hands like she’s just won a debate. “Reily’s our first act.”

I groan, burying my face in my hands while Boris and Barfbag start chanting, “Re-i-ly! Re-i-ly!” like a couple of idiots.

Mary’s laugh rings out loud and bright, sharper than the cicadas buzzing in the pines. “Well, I guess your boyfriend might as well show up too,” she says, her eyes twinkling as Gary’s Range Rover rolls up the gravel driveway. The tires crunch like they’re chewing on rocks, and the sun glints off the windshield, blinding everyone for a second.

“Is he really your boyfriend?” Boris asks, his voice cracking somewhere between

curiosity and disbelief. He's leaning against the porch railing, his braces catching the light. "Like, officially?"

I don't answer. Instead, I hop off the porch and stride toward Gary. His engine cuts off, and he steps out of the car, his suit jacket slung over one shoulder. He looks like he just stepped out of a boardroom, all sharp lines and that no-nonsense expression. But there's something softer in his eyes when he sees me.

"Hey," I say, stopping just short of him. "What's up?"

Gary's jaw tenses, and he glances toward the house. "Pyke called. Veritas funds are off-limits for this. I can't use them to stop the dam. It has to be human influence only."

"Funny you should mention that," I say, grinning despite the bad news. "We've got a plan. A music festival. Big names, big crowd, and we hit them with the petition while they're all in one place. It could work."

He raises an eyebrow, and I see the gears turning behind those blood-red eyes. His lips twitch, like he's trying not to smile. "A music festival," he repeats, his voice low and measured. "Not a bad idea."

"Thanks," I say, rocking back on my heels. "But we're gonna need some big acts. Like, really big ones."

Gary chuckles, a deep rumble that makes my stomach flip. "I can pull some strings. I've got a few friends in the industry."

"You're kidding," I say, my grin widening. "Who?"

He shakes his head, his expression turning smug. "Let's just say you'll be

impressed.”

“I’m already impressed,” I say, throwing my arms around his neck. He stiffens for a second, like he’s not used to this kind of thing, but then his hands settle on my waist, pulling me closer. I kiss him, quick but fierce, and he hums against my lips.

“Careful,” he murmurs when I pull away. “I’m going to have to punish you for that.”

“What? What did I do?” I laugh, poking him in the chest. His shirt feels smooth under my fingers, but I can feel the solid muscle beneath.

“You didn’t tell me you could sing,” he says, his voice dropping low. He leans in, his breath warm against my ear. “That’s a serious offense.”

“Oh, come on,” I say, shoving him playfully. “It’s not like I’m hiding a super double-secret identity or something.”

“No,” he says, his lips brushing my temple. “But you’re full of surprises.”

I laugh again, but it gets caught in my throat when he kisses me. It’s not like the others we’ve shared—this one’s softer, slower, like he’s savoring it. When he pulls back, he keeps his forehead pressed against mine for a moment, his eyes closed. Then he straightens, taking my hand in his, and we walk back toward the house together.

The gang on the porch is watching us like we’re the main act at the circus. Boris whistles, and Barfbag makes a sound that’s half-gag, half-laugh. Mary just smiles, her eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Well,” Clem drawls, his voice dry as dust. “Looks like we’ve got ourselves a real power couple here.”

“Shut up, Clem,” I say, but I’m grinning as I say it. Gary’s hand feels solid in mine, and I let myself believe we might actually pull this off.

## CHAPTER 17

### GUVAN

The scaffolding rattles as I shift my weight, the metal beams groaning under my bulk. From twenty feet up, the chaos of Mirror Lake looks almost organized. Volunteers dart around like ants, lugging plywood, hammering stages into place, and unraveling cords for the sound system. I’ve hoisted the speaker array up here with one hand, and now I’m securing it with the kind of precision that would make a Veritas engineer proud.



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“Gary, watch your footing!” Reily’s voice cuts through the noise below. I glance down, and there she is—cutoffs frayed at the edges, bikini top clinging to her like it’s holding on for dear life. Her red hair shines in the sunlight, and she’s grinning up at me, waving like I’m some kind of rock star.

I wave back, a rare smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. And that’s when it happens. The scaffolding shifts, the metal groans, and my balance tips. For a split second, I’m weightless, the ground rushing up to meet me. I hit the dirt with a thud that sends a cloud of dust billowing into the air.

“Gary!”

The cry comes from all directions. Bodies close in around me, voices overlapping in a cacophony of concern.

“Is he okay?”

“Did he break anything?”

“How is he not a pancake right now?”

I sit up, brushing dirt off my... scales. My heart sinks as I realize the impact must’ve shorted out the image inducer. I’m exposed. My true form—red scales, ridges, all of it—on full display.

Boris is the first to break the silence. “Whoa, he’s got scales! Like a... a lizard man or something!”

Clem steps forward, his Skoal cap pulled low over his brow. He spits a wad of tobacco onto the ground and levels a glare at Boris. “No, he doesn’t.” His voice is a growl, low and dangerous. “I don’t see a damn thing but Gary Irons, billionaire philanthropist. Right?”

Mr. Dauber nods vigorously, adjusting his glasses. “That’s just Gary. I’d recognize him anywhere.”

Barfbag blinks, his face scrunching in confusion. “Um, are you guys all stupid or something? He’s clearly?—”

Boris slaps him on the back of the head. “Shut up, dude. We’re like, roleplaying.”

“Oh. Okay. Then I want to be a paladin with a charmed longstaff. Longstaff, get it?”

Seabus groans, rubbing his temples. “Barfbag, you moron. Paladins can’t use a charmedlongstaff!”

Everyone turns to stare at him. He freezes, his face flushing a deep red. “So I’m told,” he mutters, looking down at his boots.

Reily steps forward, her hands on her hips. “Alright, everyone, back to work! We’ve got a festival to build, and Gary’s fine. Aren’t you, Gary?”

I meet her gaze, my jaw tightening. She’s not just brushing this off—she’sprotectingme. My chest tightens with an emotion I can’t quite name. Gratitude? Affection? Whatever it is, it feels alien.

“I’m fine,” I say, my voice gruff. The crowd disperses, though I catch a few lingering glances. Reily stays by my side, her hand on my arm.

“Nice save,” she says under her breath. “But next time, maybe don’t fall off the scaffolding, huh?”

I grunt, my eyes scanning the crowd. Clem’s watching me with a knowing look, his arms crossed over his chest. He gives me a small nod, and I nod back. In that moment, I realize something: the people of Coldwater aren’t just tolerating me. They’re accepting me.

Even if they’re pretending not to notice my scales.

The stage is finally up, the last nail hammered in just as the sun dips below the horizon. The volunteers crack open beers, the sound of laughter and clinking bottles filling the air. Reily’s leaning against the stage, her arms crossed, a satisfied smirk on her face. I’m about to join her when the low rumble of motorcycles cuts through the celebration like a knife.

“Oh no,” Reily mutters, her eyes narrowing as she peers into the gathering darkness.

Cold Slither rides in, led by Jack. His gang colors—blue, black, and red—gleam under the fading light. The rest of the bikers fan out behind him, engines growling like feral beasts. The volunteers freeze, beers half-raised to their mouths, tension thickening the air.

I turn my image inducer back on, the human facade sliding into place. “Stay back,” I tell the crowd, my voice low but firm. “All of you.”

Reily steps forward, her jaw set. “Gary?—”

“Stay. Back.” I don’t look at her, but I feel her hesitation before she finally nods and starts herding the volunteers away from the approaching threat.

I stride out to meet Jack, stopping about a stone's throw from the festival grounds. He dismounts, his boots crunching on the gravel as he saunters toward me. His grin is all teeth, no warmth.

“Step aside, Irons,” Jack says, his voice dripping with mockery. “We’re here to have some fun.”

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“Fun?” I fold my arms over my chest, my tone flat. “What kind of fun involves tearing apart a community event?”

Jack’s grin widens. “The kind where we remind people who’s in charge. This little festival... It’s in our way. So we’re gonna tear it down. Piece by piece.”

“Over my dead body.”

He laughs, a harsh, grating sound. “That can be arranged.”

I pull my compad from my pocket, fingers flying over the interface. Jareth’s frequency disruptor activates, and the air shimmers with an invisible pulse. One by one, Cold Slither’s human disguises flicker and dissolve, revealing the grolgath beneath—scaly, reptilian, and bristling with malice.

The volunteers gasp, a ripple of fear spreading through the crowd. Jack snarls, his true form now exposed, his yellow eyes blazing with hatred.

“All you’ve done is sign your death warrant,” he hisses, raising a clawed hand. “And everyone else here.”

“The only dead man I see is you,” I reply, tossing the compad aside.

I let the image inducer drop, my true form—dark red scales, scars, and all—unleashed for the first time in front of the town. The gasps behind me are louder now, but I don’t have time to care.

Jack lunges, his claws slashing through the air. I sidestep, my tail whipping around to knock him off balance, and then I'm in the thick of it. Boneshaker charges at me, his hulking form a blur of muscle and rage. I meet him head-on, our collision sending shockwaves through the ground.

Crazy Steve's manic laughter echoes as he leaps onto my back, but I grab him by the arm and hurl him into Shegot Daboodie, sending them both sprawling.

Jack recovers, his claws glinting as he strikes at my side. I grunt, the pain sharp but familiar. I've fought worse than this. Much worse.

"You're outnumbered, Irons," Jack snarls, circling me with his gang closing in.

"Good," I say, cracking my neck. "That means I don't have to hold back."

I launch myself at him, my claws meeting his in a clash of sparks and fury. The fight is brutal, unrelenting, and I feel alive.

I stagger to my feet, blood dripping from the gashes Jack's claws left across my chest and arms. My scales itch as they try to knit themselves back together, but it's not fast enough. Not with the way Jack's circling me like a shark, his yellow eyes gleaming with predatory delight. He's not as strong as I am, but he's faster—much faster—and he's been saving his energy for this moment.

"You're slowing down, Irons," Jack sneers, flicking a clawed hand to the side, splattering my blood on the ground. "Can't keep up, can you?"

I don't answer. Talking wastes energy, and every drop I've got left is going into staying upright. My chest heaves as I try to catch my breath, but he's already moving again, a blur of scales and fangs. I barely manage to deflect his next strike, his claws screeching against my armored forearms. He darts back before I can counter, his

laughter echoing across the festival grounds.

“Come on, big guy,” he taunts, circling me. “You’re supposed to be the big bad alien protector. Where’s that legendary Vakutan strength now?”

I lunge at him, but he sidesteps with ease, his tail whipping around to catch me across the ribs. I grunt, stumbling, and he’s on me in an instant, his claws raking across my back. The pain is white-hot, and I feel my legs buckle as I hit the dirt.

“Pathetic,” Jack spits, standing over me. “I thought you’d put up more of a fight.”

I glance over to Reily. She’s standing at the edge of the crowd, her hands clenched into fists, her face a mask of fury and fear. The volunteers are behind her, frozen in place, their eyes wide as they watch this nightmare unfold.

And then, salvation comes in the most unlikely form.

“Hey, scaly dickface!” Boris’s voice rings out, followed by the distinct whoosh of something flaming through the air. Jack barely has time to turn before the flaming bag of gasoline-soaked dog shit explodes against his head. The smell is immediate and vile, and Jack lets out a roar of rage as he stumbles back, clawing at his face.

“Bullseye!” Boris crows, pumping his fist in the air. Beside him, Barfbag is already lighting another bag, his zit-covered face twisted in a manic grin.

“Eat flaming ass, lizard boy!” Barfbag yells, hurling the next bag with surprising accuracy. It hits Jack square in the chest, and he howls, stumbling back even further.

Clem steps forward, a fist-sized rock in his hand. “This one’s for my family,” he growls, winding up and launching it with all the force of a former miner. The rock catches Jack right in the crotch, and he doubles over with a strangled gasp.

“And this,” Seabus shouts, his fishing rod whipping through the air, “is for my son!” The hook embeds itself in Jack’s ass, and Seabus yanks hard, pulling the gang leader off balance.

I don’t waste the opportunity. Planting a hand on the ground, I push myself up, my body screaming in protest but my mind laser-focused. Jack’s still struggling with the hook in his ass when I’m on him, my fist slamming into his jaw with a satisfying crunch. He hits the ground hard, and I’m on top of him in an instant, my claws at his throat.

“Yield,” I growl, my voice low and dangerous.



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Jack glares up at me, his eyes burning with hatred, but he knows he's beaten. "This isn't over," he hisses, spitting blood onto the ground.

"It is for you," I say, and with one final punch, I knock him out cold.

## CHAPTER 18

### REILY

I'm pacing backstage, my boots scuffing the dirt floor as I mutter to myself. The crowd's roar is deafening, a wall of sound that makes my stomach twist into knots. I glance at the setlist in my shaking hands, the words blurring as my vision swims. Three times the turnout expected. Three times the number of eyes that'll be on me. I've never played for more than a handful of people before, and now I'm about to face a sea of them.

"Reily."

His voice cuts through the noise, steadying me like a lightning rod in a storm. I turn to see Guvan—Gary—standing there, his red eyes sharp, his smile faint but reassuring. He's in his human disguise, but I can still see the alien warrior beneath the suit and tie.

"You're going to wear a hole in the ground if you keep that up," he says, his tone dry but laced with amusement.

"Funny," I snap, though my voice wavers. "I might throw up first."

He steps closer, his presence like a wall of heat. “You won’t. I have more good news. We’ve surpassed twenty thousand signatures.”

My knees buckle, and he catches me with one hand, his grip firm. “Twenty thousand?” I whisper, my heart pounding.

“Yes. Even if Hoag tries to fight it, he won’t succeed. The dam project is dead.”

Relief floods through me, and I sag against him. “Good. That’s good. Then I don’t have to go out there, right?”

His chuckle rumbles in his chest. “Oh, you’re going on that stage. Consider it an order from your Master.”

I glare up at him, my cheeks flushing. “If you’re going to call yourself that, you’d better prove it to me later.”

The corner of his mouth quirks. “As if it were not always my intention.” He steps back, his hand lingering on my arm for a moment before he nudges me toward the stage. “You’ll be fine. They’re here for you, Reily. Not the signatures, not the cause. You.”

I center myself, my fingers tightening around my guitar. Clem’s already on the drums, grinning like a kid on Christmas. Seabus is tuning his bass, sweat gleaming on his bald head. And Mom—my heart swells as I see her on the slide guitar, smiling at me with that quiet confidence she’s always had.

I step onto the stage, the spotlight blinding me for a moment. The crowd quiets, a hush spreading like a wave. My throat feels like sandpaper, my hands clammy on the guitar. I glance offstage and catch Guvan’s eye. He mouths the words, “You can do it.”

I swallow hard and step up to the mic. “Howdy, folks,” I say, my voice trembling. “Thank you for coming out to save our lake and our river. I’ve never played for anyone before, so... I’m just going to start singing.”

The first chords of *Suspicious Minds* ring out, and the crowd erupts. My voice wobbles at first, but as the music takes over, I find my rhythm. Clem’s drums pound behind me, Seabus’s bass thrumming in my chest. Mom’s slide guitar weaves through it all like a whisper of wind.

By the time I hit the chorus, I’m grinning, my fingers dancing across the strings. The crowd sings along, their voices rising like a tide. I catch Guvan’s gaze again, and he’s clapping harder than anyone, his eyes shining with something I can’t quite name.

And through it all, no one cheers louder or claps harder than Gary.

I step off the stage, my heart still pounding from the rush of the crowd’s applause. My boots crunch against the gravel as I sprint toward Guvan, who’s waiting with his arms open. I crash into him, laughing, the adrenaline still buzzing in my veins.

“Did you see that?” I gasp, pulling back just enough to look up at him. His red eyes are bright, the corners of his mouth tilted in that rare, soft smile of his.

“I did,” he says, his voice low and warm. “You were... exceptional.”

Clem saunters over, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “Damn fine show, Ray. But you two get outta here. We’ve got this covered.” He jerks his thumb toward the army of staff Guvan hired, already dismantling the stage and hauling away equipment. “Gary here can’t use Veritas funds for the dam, but sure as hell can use his own money to clean up his mess.”

Guvan’s jaw tightens, but he doesn’t argue. “Let’s go,” he says, taking my hand. His

grip is firm, grounding me as he leads me toward the car.

We drive in comfortable silence, the hum of the festival fading into the distance. The moonlight spills across the dashboard, casting shadows on Guvan's face. He pulls off onto a dirt road, and after a few moments, we're at a secluded spot by Silver Creek. The water glimmers under the moon, the sound of it soft and soothing.

He pops the trunk and pulls out a basket, then spreads a blanket on the grass. I raise an eyebrow as he pulls out a bottle of champagne and two glasses.

"Guvan Irons, are you trying to be romantic?" I tease, smirking as I sit down on the blanket.

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He scowls, but there's a warmth in his eyes. "Is it working?"

I laugh, leaning back on my hands. "Maybe."

He pours the champagne, the bubbles fizzing as he hands me a glass. I take a sip, the coolness and the sweetness dancing on my tongue. The distant hum of the festival music mixes with the sound of the creek, and I feel... peaceful.

I tilt my glass back, finishing the last of the champagne, when something clinks against my teeth. I freeze, pulling the glass away and peering inside.

"Oh no, I think I have a bug in my glass," I say, making a face. Without thinking, I flick the object out, watching it disappear into the grass.

Guvan lets out a strangled noise, leaping to his feet. "Reily!"

I blink, startled by his reaction. He's on his hands and knees, frantically searching the grass. "What are you doing?"

"The bug," he growls, his voice tight. "It's not a bug."

My heart skips a beat. "Wait... what?"

He freezes, his shoulders tense, then slowly turns to look at me. His eyes are wide, a mix of panic and something else—something vulnerable.

"Reily," he says, his voice rough, "I put a ring in your glass."

I stare at him, my breath caught in my throat. My hand flies to my mouth, and I let out a strangled sob. “Oh my God, Guvan, I’m so sorry!”

He’s still on his knees, his hands fisted in the grass. “It’s fine,” he mutters, though his tone suggests it’s anything but. “I’ll find it.”

“No, wait,” I say, scrambling to my feet. “Let me help.”

He glares up at me, his red eyes blazing. “Sit down. I’ll handle this.”

But I’m already down on my hands and knees beside him, the moonlight catching the glint of something in the grass. I reach for it, my fingers closing around a small, cool metal band.

“Got it,” I whisper, holding it up.

He stares at me, his expression unreadable, then lets out a long, slow breath. “Give it to me.”

I hesitate, my heart pounding. “Only if you ask nicely.”

His lips twitch like he could laugh. Instead, he sits back on his heels, his gaze never leaving mine. “Reily Dawson,” he says, low and steady, “will you marry me?”

My breath catches, and I feel like the world has stopped. I look down at the ring, then back up at him. “Yes,” I say, my voice trembling. “Yes, you big alien idiot, of course I will.”

He takes the ring from me, his fingers brushing against mine, and slides it onto my finger. It fits perfectly.

“Good,” he says, his voice rough. “Because if you’d said no, I was going to throw you in the creek.”

I laugh, the sound bubbling up from deep inside me. He pulls me into his arms, , we’re just two people under the moonlight, lost in each other.

“Love you, Master,” I murmur against his chest.

He sighs, his breath warm against my hair. “And I you, Little spitfire.”

## CHAPTER 19

### REILY

The POS rattles and groans as it rolls up the dirt road to Gary’s cabin. The box of my stuff in the passenger seat sways dangerously every time I hit a pothole, which is often. I grip the wheel tighter, muttering under my breath. “Come on, baby. Just one more trip. Don’t die on me now.”

The cabin comes into view, all sleek wood and modern lines, looking like it was plopped down in the middle of the forest by aliens—which, technically, it was. I pull up beside Guvan’s parked limo, cutting the engine. The POS gives a final shudder and goes silent, like it’s exhausted from the effort.

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I haul the box out of the car, my arms straining under the weight. It's the last of my things from the old house—a few books, some clothes, and the old guitar Mom gave me when I was twelve. I'm halfway to the door when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I wrestle it out one-handed, glancing at the screen. Mr. Mayor. I grin and hit answer.

“Hello, Clem,” I say, balancing the box on my hip. “Have you worn a butt imprint into the seat yet?”

Clem's deep laugh rumbles through the phone. “Not yet, but give it time. Turns out being mayor is a lot less exciting than Boss Hoag made it look. Mostly just signing papers and arguing with people who still think I'm gonna let them build that dam.”

“Well, I'm glad you won,” I say, shifting the box. “Coldwater's lucky to have you.”

“To be fair, I'm glad Boris and Barfbag aren't old enough to run yet. I don't know if I could've beaten them,” Clem says, his tone teasing.

I laugh, leaning against the doorframe. “Yeah, those two would've turned City Hall into a mosh pit.”

Clem chuckles, but then his voice turns serious. “Hey, Reily, I've been meaning to ask—are you gonna sign that recording contract? The one from the music festival?”

I sigh, setting the box down on the porch. “I don't know, Clem. At one time, it's all I wanted—to be a star, to get out of this town. But now... I'm just glad the town is safe, my mom's healthy, and I found a good man. Even if he is scaly.”



Clem's laugh is warm. "Well, whatever you decide, you've got our support. Coldwater's proud of you, Reily."

"Thanks, Clem. That means a lot."

We say our goodbyes, and I tuck my phone back into my pocket. I reach for the doorknob but stop when I see a note tacked to the door with my name on it. I pluck it off, unfolding the paper with one hand while balancing the box with the other.

Now, what's this about?

I bite my lower lip, my thighs squeezing together as I read the note. The handwriting is sharp, deliberate, and entirely his.

"Spitfire. Remove all of your clothing and put on your uniform prior to entry. Master intends to discipline you."

A shiver runs down my spine, and I glance to the side where the maid uniform is hanging, waiting for me. My hands tremble as I start peeling off my clothes, folding them neatly and setting them on the porch railing. The cool mountain air brushes against my bare skin, raising goosebumps, but I don't feel the cold. My heart's racing too hard for that.

I slip into the uniform, the fabric hugging me in all the right (and wrong) places. The bodice pushes my breasts up, the plunging neckline leaving little to the imagination. The skirt barely covers what it needs to, and I can't help but adjust it, even though I know it's pointless. This outfit isn't meant for modesty. It's meant for him.

I pause, smoothing the skirt one last time before I step inside. The cabin is quiet, the only sound the soft creak of the floorboards under my feet.

Guvan stands in the center of the room, his back to me, and my breath catches. He's wearing a finely tailored Armani suit, the fabric hugging his broad shoulders and tapered waist. In one hand, he holds a bundle of silk rope, slapping it against his open palm in a slow, rhythmic motion.

"Come here," he commands, his voice low and firm.

I swallow hard and walk toward him, my heels clicking softly against the floor. I put on my best pout, tilting my head to the side as I stop in front of him. "What did I do to displease my Master?"

"Nothing," he says, his red eyes locking onto mine. "But I feel the need to remind you who's in charge."

His words send a rush of warmth through me, and I lower my gaze, feigning submission. "Whatever my Master thinks is best."

He steps behind me, his large hands gripping my shoulders and turning me to face away from him. He pulls my arms behind my back, and I feel the cool silk of the rope as he starts to bind me. His movements are methodical, each loop of the rope tightening around my wrists, then winding up my arms and around my torso.

Every turn of the rope, every cinch of a knot, makes me feel more helpless, more exposed. My breath hitches as the ropes dig into my skin, and I can feel myself falling into that golden glow of subspace. I arch my back, pressing my ass against the growing bulge in his pants.

He chuckles, a low, rumbling sound that vibrates through me. "You won't succeed in distracting me, Spitfire."

"I wouldn't dream of it," I murmur, my voice trembling.

He continues his work, using more ropes to create an elaborate harness that crisscrosses over my torso. He ties one leg folded up, my ankle secured to my thigh, leaving me balanced precariously on one foot. The ropes are tight, unyielding, and I feel completely at his mercy.

"How do you feel?" he asks, his voice rough.

"Like I want you to touch me," I gasp, squirming helplessly in my bonds.

"You like it?" His fingers brush against my inner thigh, and I jerk in response.

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"If my hands were free, I'd be playing with myself right now," I whisper, my voice thick with desire.

"Like this?" His hand moves higher, stroking me through the thin fabric of the uniform. I gasp, my hips rocking against his touch. He works me up until I'm teetering on the edge, but he doesn't let me fall.

"Patience," Guvan growls, his voice low and commanding, sending a shiver down my spine. His hand moves away from my throbbing core, leaving me teetering on the edge. "You'll cum when I say so and not before."

"Yes, Master," I gasp, my body writhing in the ropes, desperate for release. My skin feels like it's on fire, every nerve alight with anticipation.

He steps closer, his towering frame towering over me. One hand tangles in my hair, tilting my head back as his lips crash into mine. The kiss is deep, hard, claiming, and I melt into it, my muffled moans lost against his mouth. When he pulls away, I'm breathless, my heart pounding.

Before I can recover, he slips the ball gag into my mouth, the smooth silicone pressing against my tongue. My eyes widen as he tightens the straps, securing it firmly. I let out a muffled whimper, the sound muffled and helpless.

"We're going to play a little game, Spitfire," he says, his voice dripping with dark amusement. "You don't have my permission to cum, so every time you do, I'm going to spank that glorious ass."

His hand lands on my backside with a sharp smack, and I jerk in the ropes, a surprised cry escaping around the gag. The sting is instant, followed by a wave of pleasure that ripples through me. My body convulses, and I come hard, soaking my panties as I squirt against my will.

“You came without permission,” he says, his tone mockingly stern. “Naughty girl. Would you say ten spanks are a good penalty?”

I shake my head frantically, my muffled protests garbled around the gag.

“What’s that?” he asks, tilting his head as if pretending to misunderstand. “You think twenty is better? Very well.”

A guttural sound escapes me, a mix of laughter and protest, as he begins the spanking. His hand lands on my ass with practiced precision, each smack sending a jolt of pain and pleasure through me. I’m trembling by the time he reaches ten, and then it happens again—I come, my body betraying me completely.

“Another one?” he says, his tone almost amused. “You’re making this harder for yourself, Spitfire. Twenty more it is.”

He slides my panties down, baring my ass completely. The cool air brushes against my heated skin as he resumes the spanking, his hand alternating between sharp smacks and gentle caresses. His other hand slips between my legs, teasing my pussy with expert strokes.

I’m lost in the sensations, the pain and pleasure blending into one overwhelming wave. My muffled cries fill the room, my body arching against the ropes as I’m pushed closer and closer to the edge.

By the time he finishes the spanking, I’m a trembling, soaked mess. He steps back,

admiring his work with a satisfied smirk.

“Your ass looks so cute with my handprints all over it,” he says, possessive.

I let out a muffled groan, my body still trembling from the aftershocks. My legs feel like jelly, and I’m completely at his mercy—just the way he likes it.

I’m still trembling, suspended in the ropes, my body buzzing with the aftershocks of the spanking when Guvan steps back. His red eyes gleam with mischief, and I know that look. It’s the look that says he’s not done with me. Not even close.

He reaches into a drawer and pulls out something that makes my eyes widen—a sleek, alien-looking device with a ridged shaft and a tip that’s shaped like... well, let’s just say it’s not something you’d find at your average sex shop. He holds it up, the soft hum of its motor already vibrating in the air between us.

“This,” he says, deliberately, “is a Vakutan vibe. It has multiple settings, each designed to amplify your pleasure.”

I swallow hard, the gag in my mouth muffling the whimper that tries to escape. My hips shift involuntarily, the ropes digging into my skin as I squirm. He steps closer, the vibe humming louder as he presses it against my inner thigh.

“Do you want to feel it?” he asks, though we both know it’s not really a question. His free hand trails up my leg, teasing the edge of my soaked panties. “Nod if you want me to use it on you.”

I nod frantically, my heart pounding in my chest. He smirks, sliding my panties to the side and pressing the tip of the vibe against my entrance. The sensation is electric, even before he pushes it inside. Slowly—so slowly—he slides it in, the ridges of the shaft catching on my sensitive flesh. I moan around the gag, my body arching against

the ropes.

He flicks a switch on the base of the vibe, and it comes to life, vibrating at a low, steady thrum. My eyes roll back, the sensation almost too much to handle. But then he flicks it again, and the intensity increases, sending shockwaves of pleasure through me. He watches me, his eyes dark with desire, as he cycles through the settings, each one more intense than the last.

“Cum for me,” he commands, his voice firm and unyielding.

I do. Hard. My body convulses, the ropes biting into my skin as I shatter around the vibe. Guvan doesn't stop, though. He ties the vibe in place with more rope, securing it snugly against me so the vibrations don't let up. I whimper, my body still trembling as he steps behind me.

His hands slide up my sides, his breath hot against my neck as he leans in. “You're not done yet, Spitfire,” he murmurs. I feel the press of his cock against my ass, the heat of him unmistakable even through the ropes.

“Soon,” he says, his voice rough with need. “But first...”

He bites down on my earlobe, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin and sending another wave of arousal through me. His hand slips between my legs, teasing me as the vibe continues to vibrate relentlessly inside me. I'm on the edge again, my body begging for release, when he finally lines himself up and pushes into me.

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The sensation is overwhelming—the vibrator in my pussy, the thickness of his cock in my ass, the feeling of being completely at his mercy. I can't think, can't breathe, can't do anything but feel. And then he starts to move, his thrusts deep and deliberate, the ridges of his cock rubbing against the vibrator through the thin membrane of flesh separating them.

I'm gone. Lost in a haze of pleasure so intense it's almost painful. He grabs my hips, holding me steady as he fucks me with a rhythm that's both punishing and perfect. My body convulses around him, the vibrator pushing me over the edge again and again until I'm a trembling, sobbing mess.

When he finally cums, his cock pulsing inside me, he wraps his arms around me and pulls me close, his breath hot against my neck. "You're mine," he growls, his voice thick with possessiveness. "Now, and forever."

I can't respond—not with the gag in my mouth, and not because I would've argued anyway. I'm his. Always have been. Always will be.

Guvan's hands move with a deliberate slowness as he unties the ropes binding me. The silk fibers slide against my skin, leaving faint red marks that he traces with his fingertips, his touch softer than I expect from a man—alien—of his size and strength. When he reaches the ball gag, he pauses, his red eyes locking onto mine. His clawed fingers brush my cheek as he eases it out of my mouth, the sensation making me shiver.

"You okay, Spitfire?" His voice is low, almost a growl, but there's a tenderness there that catches me off guard.



I nod, my voice still shaky. “Better than okay.”

He leans in, his lips brushing mine in a kiss that’s both possessive and gentle. The contrast between the intensity of his eyes and the softness of his touch leaves me breathless. Before I can respond, he scoops me up like I weigh nothing, cradling me against his broad chest as he carries me to the bed. The silken sheets are cool against my skin as he lays me down, his movements careful, almost reverent.

He climbs in beside me, pulling me into his arms. His body is warm against mine, the smooth scales of his chest a familiar sensation now. I rest my head on his shoulder, listening to the steady rhythm of his hearts. The window is open, the sounds of the forest drifting in—birds chirping, leaves rustling, the distant rush of Mirror Lake. It’s peaceful, a stark contrast to the chaos of the last few hours.

“I love you,” he murmurs, his voice rumbling through my chest. “Every stubborn, impulsive, infuriating inch of you.”

I snort, tilting my head to look up at him. “You’ve got a funny way of showing it, you know. Ropes, gags, spankings—pretty sure that’s not how they teach it in the romance novels.”

He smirks, his sharp teeth glinting in the fading sunlight. “Romance novels don’t have Vakutans in them. Lucky for you, I’m the one-of-a-kind model.”

“Lucky me,” I mutter, but I’m smiling. I trace a finger along the scar that cuts across his face, feeling the roughness of it under my touch. “You’re stuck with me, you know. For better or worse.”

“Worse is more likely,” he shoots back, but his arms tighten around me. “But I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I laugh, the sound soft and content. Then, after a moment, I let my curiosity get the

better of me. “Do Vakutans have a concept of heaven?”

He tilts his head, considering. “Sort of. We believe in a similar place—a warrior’s paradise where the honored dead feast and fight for eternity. It’s not exactly fluffy clouds and harps.”

“Sounds like your kind of place,” I say, nudging him with my elbow. “But as far as I’m concerned, we’ve found heaven right here. Right now.”

He looks at me, his expression softening in a way that still surprises me. “You’re my heaven, Spitfire.”

His words send a warmth through me that I can’t explain, and I lean in, pressing my lips to his. The kiss starts slow, gentle, but it quickly deepens, his hands sliding down my back to pull me closer. I can feel the heat building between us, the earlier tension reigniting.

Before I can catch my breath, he’s pinning me down, his body trapping me against the mattress. His lips trail down my neck, his tongue flicking against my skin, and I arch into him, my hands tangling in his hair.

“You’re mine,” he growls, his voice full of that possessive edge. “Remember that.”

“Like I could forget,” I gasp, my body already humming with anticipation.

And then there’s no more talking, just the two of us, lost in each other as the sun sets over Mirror Lake, painting the sky in shades of gold and crimson. It’s messy, it’s raw, it’s perfect. And it’s ours.