



# Grumpy Alien Billionaire

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

**Description:** I bathe dogs for a living. Now a billionaire alien wants to keep me as his pet.

One minute, I'm walking to work, coffee in hand. The next, I'm nearly flattened by a sports car—and saved by its ridiculously gorgeous, ridiculously rich owner.

Alonzo Ramone is smooth, cocky, and entirely too charming. He's also not human.

I should have known something was off when he caught me midair like I weighed nothing. Or when he looked at me like I was his the moment our eyes met. But the real kicker? He's a time-traveling alien warrior on a mission to save the future.

And apparently... I belong to him.

Now, I'm caught in a whirlwind of secret yachts, alien conspiracies, and a man who's determined to keep me by his side. He says I'm important. That I'm his.

I should run. I should say no.

Instead, I'm wondering what it would be like to let him catch me.

If I walk away, I go back to my quiet, boring life.

If I stay, I might just end up as an alien billionaire's pet.

...Or worse. His mate.

**Total Pages (Source):** 54

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## CHAPTER 1

### TYLER

Cindy's scissors slice through my paper like it's nothing. My stomach drops.

"Ha, good luck with Jurassic Bark," she says, leaning back against the counter with a smirk that could cut glass.

"Damn," I blurt out, then clap a hand over my mouth. My cheeks burn. "I mean, dang!"

Cindy rolls her eyes so hard I'm surprised they don't get stuck. "You're hopeless, Ty. Seriously, it's like you're allergic to swearing."

"I'm not hopeless," I mutter, tugging at the hem of my apron. "I just... don't like it."

"Uh-huh. Sure. Meanwhile, Goliath's waiting for you in the back. Better grab the trimmers before he figures out what's coming."

I groan, dragging my feet toward the grooming station. Goliath's already there, his massive head resting on the table like he's posing for a Renaissance painting. He's a sweetheart, sure, but the second he sees those trimmers, it's like trying to wrestle a freight train.

"Hey, big guy," I say, forcing cheer into my voice. His ears perk up, and he gives me a slobbery grin. "We're just gonna do a quick trim, okay? No big deal."

He tilts his head, like he's considering it, but I know better. I grab the trimmers from the drawer, and his eyes lock onto them like they're a snake about to strike.

"Easy, easy," I coo, stepping closer. "It's just me, buddy. Nothing to?"

He bolts. One second he's on the table, the next he's a blur of fur and drool, skidding across the floor like he's auditioning for the canine Olympics.

"Goliath, no!" I shout, chasing after him. He's surprisingly fast for a dog the size of a small horse. He darts around the corner, knocking over a stack of shampoo bottles with a crash that echoes through the shop.

Cindy's laughter follows me. "Need a hand, or are you gonna let him redecorate the whole place?"

"I've got it!" I snap, though I'm not entirely sure I do. Goliath's now wedged himself between the dryer and the wall, his tail wagging like he's proud of himself.

"Sure you do," Cindy calls back. "Just don't let him eat the trimmers. Sandy'll kill you if we have to buy another pair."

I shoot her a glare over my shoulder, but she's already turned back to her own station, still chuckling. Great. Just great.

"Alright, Goliath," I say, crouching down to his level. "Let's make a deal. You let me trim your nails, and I'll sneak you an extra treat. Sound good?"

He cocks his head, considering. Then, with a dramatic sigh, he flops onto his side, exposing his paws like he's surrendering.

"Atta boy," I say, reaching for the trimmers. "This'll be quick, I promise."

Famous last words.

Cindy peeks around the corner just as I finish the last nail. Her jaw drops.

"How do you do it? How do you get giant beasts to roll over for you?"

I shrug, scratching behind Goliath's ears. His leg thumps against the floor in pure bliss.

"I guess the animals know I'm not going to hurt them."

"Uh-huh." She crosses her arms, eyebrows raised. "There's a King Kong slash Faye Wray thing going on, I just know it." Her lips curl into a mischievous grin. "Maybe if I left you tied to a stake wearing a skimpy outfit some huge man would come along and actually take you on a date."

"I go on dates all the time!" The words come out squeakier than intended.

"Oh please." She snorts. "You mean those choir boys who text their moms every five minutes? The ones who ask 'Mother, may I?' before pecking you on the cheek?"

"Jason didn't text his mom!" Heat creeps up my neck. "He just... needed to check if his grandmother's cat took her medicine."

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"My point exactly." She shakes her head. "Face it, Ty. You're like catnip for the pure and wholesome. Even Goliath here knows it."

Goliath's tail thumps against the floor in agreement, the traitor.

Cindy's grin lingers like she's won some unspoken bet, and I feel my face flush hotter than a sunburn. I focus on Goliath, running my fingers through his fur, pretending he's the only thing that exists in this room. But my mind's racing, and it's not Jason or his grandmother's cat that's on it.

Cindy's right about one thing—I've got a type. It's just... not the type she thinks. If she knew what was on my Kindle, she'd probably keel over from shock. Or laugh so hard she'd need a doctor.

"You ever think about..." I start, then stop, biting my lip. What am I doing?

"Think about what?" Cindy's leaning on the counter now, chin propped in her hand, like she's waiting for me to say something ridiculous.

"Never mind." I shake my head, focusing on Goliath's nails. "It's stupid."

"Oh, come on, Ty. Don't leave me hanging. Think about what?"

I hesitate, my fingers pausing mid-trim. "Do you ever think about... I don't know... meeting someone who's just... dangerous?"

Cindy's eyebrows shoot up. "Dangerous? Like a guy with a criminal record? Or a

guy who doesn't use his turn signal?"

I laugh, but it comes out a little strangled. "No, not like that. More like... someone who's strong, you know? Protective. A little rough around the edges."

She snorts. "Rough around the edges? Ty, you're describing a lumberjack. Or maybe a guy who works at a hardware store."

I roll my eyes, but my stomach's doing cartwheels. If only she knew. If only she knew about the Kindle in my drawer, the one with the stories that make my cheeks burn just thinking about them. The ones where the hero's not a hero at all—he's a villain, a captor, someone who takes what he wants and doesn't apologize for it.

"Never mind," I mutter, finishing up Goliath's last nail. "It's dumb."

"Nah, it's not dumb," she says, still smirking. "Just unexpected. You're all sunshine and rainbows, Ty. Didn't think you'd be into the bad boy thing."

"I'm not!" I say too quickly, and Cindy's smirk deepens.

"Sure you're not," she says, dragging out the words.

I exhale, trying to steady my racing heart. "Anyway, Goliath's done. You can take him back to his owner."

She pushes off the counter, still grinning like she's figured out some big secret. "Whatever you say, Ty. But if you ever want to upgrade from choir boys, let me know. I know a guy."

"Thanks," I mutter, though I'm not sure I mean it.

She leads Goliath out, his tail wagging like he's the star of the show, and I slump back against the wall. My Kindle's burning a hole in my bag, and I think about the story I was reading last night—the one where the hero kidnaps the heroine and keeps her in a cabin in the woods.

Cindy would probably have a field day if she knew.

A deep bark rips through my daydream, followed by Cindy's shriek. My heart leaps into my throat as I bolt toward the front of the store.

"Tyler, help!"

Cindy's arms strain against Goliath's leash, her feet sliding on the tile floor. Outside the window, a scrawny orange cat sits cleaning its paws, completely unbothered by the chaos it's causing.

"No, Goliath, stay!" I lunge for the leash, but my fingers brush empty air.

The leather slips through Cindy's grasp. Goliath charges through the door, the bell clanging wildly against the glass. The cat's eyes go wide, and it shoots into the street like an orange bullet.

"Goliath, come back!" My feet pound against the sidewalk as I chase after him. The cat darts between parked cars, Goliath hot on its tail.

"Stop!" Cindy's scream pierces the air.

Metal screeches against asphalt. I turn my head, and time freezes. A cherry-red sports car fills my vision, bearing down on me with unstoppable force. The sun glints off its hood, blinding me. My muscles lock. I can't move. Can't breathe.

## Page 3

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The convertible's top is down, and time slows to a crawl. A man in an expensive charcoal suit grips the wheel, his mirrored sunglasses reflecting my frozen form. His jaw clenches. The muscles in his forearms flex as he wrenches the wheel right.

The car's tires screech past me, so close the wind whips my hair across my face. The scent of burning rubber fills my nose. My heart pounds against my ribs like it's trying to escape.

Metal crunches. Glass shatters. The sound pierces my ears like physical pain.

The driver's body launches through the air in a graceful arc that seems to defy gravity. His sunglasses fly off, catching the sunlight for one brilliant moment before his head connects with the telephone pole with a sickening thud.

He crumples to the ground like a broken marionette.

My legs give out. The rough concrete scrapes my palms as I hit the sidewalk. Bile rises in my throat.

"Oh God." The words barely squeeze past my lips. "He's dead. He has to be dead."

My chest constricts. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision. This is my fault. If I hadn't chased Goliath into the street...

My feet won't move. I should check on him, but what if... what if he's... The image of blood and broken bones freezes me in place.



"Sir?" My voice comes out as a squeak. "Are you... alive?"

A groan answers me, followed by the tinkle of glass hitting pavement. The man shifts, brushing shards off his suit like they're nothing more than lint. He slides off the crumpled hood with the grace of someone stepping out of a limo.

My jaw drops. Not a scratch on him. Not even a hair out of place.

He straightens his tie, then pats his face where his sunglasses should be. His head snaps up, scanning the area until his gaze locks onto something behind me.

I turn. His sunglasses are embedded in the telephone pole like some weird modern art installation.

"My com-glasses." He sounds more annoyed than injured. "Those were one of a kind."

The car's front end is wrapped around the pole like a metal pretzel. Smoke curls from the engine. Yet here he is, fussing over designer sunglasses.

My brain short-circuits. This can't be real. People don't just walk away from crashes like that. They don't shrug off hitting telephone poles with their heads.

I tug at his sleeve. The fabric is impossibly smooth under my fingers, and the arm beneath is like steel. He turns, and suddenly I'm in shadow. He towers over me, blocking out the sun entirely.

"Um, excuse me." I have to crane my neck to look up at him. "But don't you think you should go to the hospital?"

A cloud drifts across the sun, and my breath catches. Without the glare, I can finally

see his face clearly. My knees go weak. He's... he's beautiful. Not in the pretty-boy way Jason was. No, this man is all sharp angles and dangerous curves, like a weapon wrapped in designer cloth. But it's his eyes that freeze me in place - pure, molten gold that seems to glow from within.

Those eyes lock onto mine, and the world tilts sideways. His nostrils flare, like a predator catching a scent. Then his gaze drops, dragging over my body with such raw hunger that my skin burns in its wake. Heat pools low in my belly as his eyes linger on my curves, my throat, my lips.

Oh. Oh no.

The look in his eyes... I know that look. It's the same one the heroes in my books get right before they throw the heroine against a wall and... and...

My face flames. We're in the middle of the street, for heaven's sake! There are people watching! And he's looking at me like he wants to devour me whole, like clothing is just an inconvenient barrier to be torn away.

"I'm fine." His voice rumbles through me like distant thunder, and something deep inside me quivers in response. "I don't need a medivac."

"Medivac?" The strange word snaps me out of my daze. "Don't you mean ambulance?"

My heart's still racing, but now it's from frustration rather than... whatever that was before. "You need medical attention. That crash was serious."

He glances at his mangled car, and something flickers across his face - worry? Fear? The wail of approaching sirens cuts through the air, and his shoulders tense.

"No, I didn't." His golden eyes dart around like he's searching for an escape route.

"What do you mean 'no'? I watched you hit that pole!" I jab my finger at the splintered wood where his sunglasses are still embedded. "With your head!"

## Page 4

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"I jumped." He straightens his tie again, not meeting my eyes. "Got clear just in time."

My mouth drops open. The audacity! "You did not jump! You flew through the windshield like a - like a human cannonball! Your head made a dent in the pole!"

"You must have been mistaken." His voice is smooth as silk, but there's an edge to it now. "The sun was in your eyes."

I sputter, gesturing wildly at the wreck. The evidence is right there - the shattered windshield, the crumpled hood, the splintered telephone pole. How dare he stand there in his perfect suit with his perfect hair and tell me I didn't see what I absolutely, definitely saw?

"I know what I saw!" The words burst out of me. "You hit that pole so hard it should have killed you!"

His finger is warm against my lips, the contact so sudden and unexpected that my breath catches. My whole body seems to hum, like a tuning fork struck hard, and my knees wobble. I should step back, put some space between us, but my feet are glued to the ground. His touch is electric, sending tiny shocks racing down my spine.

"Shhhh," he murmurs, his voice low and smooth, like honey dripping over velvet. His yellow eyes lock onto mine, and I feel like I'm falling into them, drowning in their molten depths. "Don't trouble yourself about trifling matters. There are much more important things to discuss."

Oh God, he's still touching me. His finger lingers, tracing the curve of my lips before sliding down to my jaw. His touch is impossibly light, barely there, but it sets my skin on fire. I fight the urge to lean into it, to melt against him like I'm some kind of over dramatic romance heroine. My brain short-circuits, torn between panic and... something else. Something that makes my stomach twist and my pulse race.

"L-like what?" I manage to choke out, my voice breaking on the last word. It's a miracle I can even speak, honestly. My heart is pounding so loud I'm sure he can hear it.

"Like you, me, and candlelight on a moon-drenched bay," he says, his voice dropping to a purr that sends shivers down my spine. His finger continues its slow exploration, skimming along my jawline, brushing against the hollow beneath my ear. His touch is hypnotic, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from making some embarrassingly needy sound. "Magic time, Mamacita."

Magic time? Did he just say magic time? My brain scrambles to process the words, but all I can focus on is the heat of his hand, the way his thumb grazes my cheekbone. My stomach twists, and I'm pretty sure I've forgotten how to breathe.

"A-are you, um, asking me out?" The words tumble out in a squeak, and I immediately want to die. I sound like a middle schooler, not a grown woman who's supposed to have her life together. My face feels like it's on fire, and I'm torn between the overwhelming desire to pass out, throw up, or maybe just spontaneously combust.

His smirk deepens, and I can see the amusement dancing in those golden eyes. He's enjoying this. Of course he is. He's probably used to reducing women to stammering messes with just a touch and a few well-chosen words. Meanwhile, I'm over here trying to remember how to form a coherent sentence.

"You tell me," he says, his voice dripping with that same honeyed smoothness. "Does the idea of candlelight, a moonlit bay, and me... intrigue you?"

Intrigue me? That's one way to put it. My brain is currently a swirling mess of panic, confusion, and... something else. Something warm and fizzy that makes my cheeks burn and my stomach dip. I open my mouth to say something, anything, but the words get stuck somewhere between my brain and my tongue. All I can do is stare up at him, my heart hammering in my chest.

"I'll pick you up at eight." His voice wraps around me like silk, and my knees nearly buckle.

"My name is Lanz. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"Tyler," I whisper, barely recognizing my own voice. My heart's doing a samba against my ribs, and I'm pretty sure I've forgotten how to breathe properly.

"Tyler." The way he says my name makes my toes curl in my shoes. Like it's precious. Like it's poetry.

His fingers brush mine as he takes my phone, and electricity zips up my arm. I watch, dumbstruck, as he types in his number with casual confidence. My phone looks tiny in his hands, and I can't stop staring at his long fingers moving across the screen.

The wail of sirens grows closer, but Lanz doesn't seem concerned. He strides toward the approaching emergency vehicles like he owns the street, leaving me frozen in place. My brain's still trying to process what just happened. Did I really just get asked out by a man who should be dead? Who walked away from a car crash like it was nothing?

I watch as he speaks to the first responders, his voice too low to hear. His hands move

as he talks, painting some story that has nothing to do with me standing in the street like an idiot. Nothing to do with him hitting a pole with his head.

"Tyler, I caught him!"

Cindy's voice snaps me back to reality. She's running up, red-faced and panting, with Goliath's leash wrapped tight around her hand.

"Did that guy get killed trying to not run you over or what?"

I open my mouth, but no words come out. How do I even begin to explain what just happened?

## CHAPTER 2

### LANZ

The taxi driver's eyes widen as I hand him a hundred-dollar bill.

"Keep the change."

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My reflection shines from the marble floor of Truth-1's lobby. The security guard nods, averting his gaze. Smart man.

The private elevator whisks me to the top floor, but my mind stays stuck on those wide blue eyes and that delicate flush across her cheeks. Tyler. Such a tiny thing, barely reaching my chest. The way she squared her shoulders when questioning me about the accident...

A growl builds in my chest. The beast inside me wants to hunt, to chase, to claim. Ridiculous. I've spent decades mastering my instincts. One small human shouldn't affect me this way.

The elevator chimes. My reflection in the polished doors shows golden eyes blazing brighter than usual. Unacceptable.

"Cancel my afternoon meetings."

"Yes, Mr. Ramone." My assistant doesn't look up from her desk. Another smart one.

I stride into my office and lock the door. The view of Sunny Cove spreads before me, but instead of the usual satisfaction, it brings memories of soft blonde curls and the scent of lavender.

"This is about damage control." The words echo in my empty office. "Nothing more."

The lie tastes bitter on my tongue. Eight o'clock can't come soon enough.



A stack of contracts sits on my desk, demanding attention. I grab my pen, but her voice echoes in my head.

The pen hovers over the contract, but my mind drifts. Tyler's face flickers behind my eyes, her soft blonde hair catching the sunlight like spun gold. I imagine running my fingers through it, feeling the strands glide against my scaled skin. Her neck, pale and delicate, the pulse quickening as I lean in to breathe in her scent—lavender and something uniquely her. My body tenses as I picture pulling her against me, her small frame fitting perfectly, her warmth seeping through the air between us.

The pen moves. I don't realize it at first, but when I blink, the margins of the contract are filled with sketches. Curves. Soft lines. Her face, her body, unclothed. Every detail etched with precision. My breath hitches. I drop the pen like it's on fire.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I mutter, pinching the bridge of my nose.

The contract is ruined. I grab it, crumpling it in one hand, and stride to the shredder. The machine whirrs as it consumes the paper—and the evidence of my lapse in discipline.

I press the intercom on my desk. "Amelia, bring me another copy of the SanTech contract. And make it quick."

"Right away, Mr. Ramone," her voice crackles back.

I slump into my chair, running a hand over my face. Control yourself, Lanz. The words echo in my head like a mantra. You are an Elite Vakutan Warrior. Act like it. I clench my fists, the scales on my knuckles tightening. This isn't me. I don't lose focus. I don't daydream. Not about humans. Not about anyone.

The door clicks open. Amelia steps in, her heels clicking against the floor, and places

the new contract on my desk. She doesn't meet my eyes. "Anything else, sir?"

"No. That's all."

She's out the door before I can say another word. Smart woman. I glance at the fresh contract, the blank lines waiting for my signature. This time, I keep my mind on the task at hand. No distractions. No wandering thoughts.

The fresh contract sits before me, but my focus is shattered by the ringing of my compad. I glance at the ID and my stomach clenches - Captain Pyke.

"Yes, Commander?" I answer, keeping my tone neutral.

Pyke's gruff voice crackles through the speaker. "I heard about the incident earlier today. Were the Grolgath involved?"

"No, sir. It was simply a mundane vehicular accident." I pause, knowing what's coming next.

"Was your identity compromised?"

I hesitate, picturing those wide blue eyes studying me with concern and curiosity.

"Potentially. I'm...taking care of it."

Pyke grunts.

"What do you mean you're taking care of it?"

I choose my words carefully.

## Page 6

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"The human witnessed abilities beyond what she should have. I've arranged a meeting to discuss the situation and maintain protocol."

"See that you do." Pyke's gravelly tone leaves no room for argument. "Our intel suggests the Grolgath are planning something major along the Pacific coast. We can't afford any risks right now."

"Understood. I'll contain this." My jaw tightens as I cut the transmission.

Contain it. Such a clinical term for the delicate situation with Tyler. Just the thought of her sends an unexpected fluttering through my core. I push it aside, focusing on the matter at hand. Assessing risks, formulating contingencies - this I can handle with the tactical precision drilled into me since birth.

And yet...a persistent voice whispers that this is more than a mere risk to be neutralized. Tyler isn't some nameless human to be manipulated then discarded. She's...different. Special, in a way I can't quite define.

I shake my head, disgusted with myself. I'm letting this tiny female cloud my judgment. Ridiculous for a warrior of my stature. I'll meet with her as planned, lay out the facts, and ensure her silence through whatever means necessary. Then I can refocus on my mission without these irritating distractions.

Yes, that's the logical path forward. Simple, efficient, effective. So why does the thought of wielding such cold utilitarianism against Tyler's warmth fill me with a strange sense of disquiet?

I tap my compad, connecting to the Golden Odyssey's bridge.

"Captain Soanzo."

"Yes, Mr. Ramone?"

"Have the yacht ready to sail by eight-thirty tonight."

"Of course, sir. Should I have the helicopter fueled as well?"

"Absolutely. I have an important business meeting this evening."

A pause stretches over the line. I can picture Soanzo's weathered face breaking into that knowing smirk he wears whenever he thinks he's figured something out.

"Would this business meeting happen to involve another celebrity? Perhaps that new pop star who's been making headlines?"

My jaw clenches. The old salt knows me too well - or thinks he does. True, my reputation for entertaining the rich and famous aboard the Golden Odyssey is well earned. But Tyler...

She's different. No designer clothes or practiced smile. Just genuine warmth and that spark of curiosity in those blue eyes.

"Just have everything ready, Captain."

"As you wish, sir." The amusement in his voice makes me want to growl.

I end the call before I say something I'll regret. Soanzo may be right about my intentions having nothing to do with business, but he's wrong about everything else.

I tap my compad, connecting to my tailor's shop on the 87th floor. The holographic projection of Marco, my personal tailor, flickers to life. He's a wiry man with a perpetually harried expression, but his hands are steady as they adjust the lapel of a suit jacket.

"Marco, I need options. Now."

"Mr. Ramone," he says, his voice a mix of exasperation and deference. "You're not giving me much time. What's the occasion?"

"A date," I say, the word feeling foreign on my tongue. "Something... understated but striking. And don't bring me anything black. I'm not attending a funeral."

Marco raises an eyebrow but doesn't comment. "I'll be up in ten minutes."

True to his word, Marco arrives with a rack of suits, each one more luxurious than the last. He wheels them into my office, the fabrics catching the light in a way that makes them shimmer like liquid.

"Alright," he says, clapping his hands. "Let's start with this one." He pulls out a deep navy suit with a subtle pinstripe. "Classic, timeless, and it brings out your eyes."

I shake my head. "Too corporate. Next."

He sighs and moves to the next option—a charcoal gray suit with a velvet lapel. "This one's got a bit of edge. Perfect for a billionaire with a reputation."

"Too... predictable," I say, dismissing it with a wave of my hand.

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Marco mutters something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like “picky bastard” but moves on. He pulls out a pale cream suit, the fabric so soft it looks like it’s been spun from moonlight. “This,” he says, holding it up with a flourish. “This is the one.”

I step closer, running my fingers over the fabric. It’s smooth, almost silken, and the color is warm without being ostentatious. “What do you pair it with?”

“Charcoal shirt,” he says without hesitation. “No tie. Keep it relaxed but refined. And these—” He pulls out a pair of Italian loafers, the leather polished to a mirror shine. “—will tie it all together.”

I nod, feeling a rare sense of satisfaction. “This’ll do.”

Marco smirks as he helps me into the suit. “You’re going to knock her dead, Mr. Ramone.”

“That’s the idea,” I mutter, adjusting the cuffs. The fit is perfect, the fabric draping over my frame in a way that’s both flattering and comfortable. I catch my reflection in the floor-to-ceiling windows and can’t help but feel a flicker of anticipation.

“You’re sure about this?” Marco asks, his tone teasing. “I’ve never seen you this... particular.”

“It’s just a date,” I say, though the words feel hollow. “Nothing more.”

Marco chuckles, gathering the rejected suits. “If you say so. But if you need a time

machine to skip ahead to eight o'clock, let me know. I might have one in the back."

I shoot him a glare, but he's already wheeling the rack out the door, whistling a tune that's far too cheerful for my liking. I glance at the clock. Three hours to go. Three hours too long.

## CHAPTER 3

### TYLER

I'm pacing back and forth between my room and the living room, holding up one outfit after another, and Cindy's sitting cross-legged on the couch, sipping her iced latte like she's the queen of fashion.

"Thoughts?" I ask, holding up a loose floral blouse and high-waisted jeans.

Cindy gives me a look that could wither a cactus. "Tyler, no. You look like you're auditioning for 'Grandma Chills at the Park.'"

I huff, tossing the outfit onto the back of the couch. "Fine." I disappear into my room and come back with a sweater and a knee-length skirt. "This?"

She scrunches her nose. "You're going on a date, not a church potluck."

I throw my hands up. "Okay, Miss Fashionista, what do YOU think I should wear?"

Cindy's grin is so wide I'm pretty sure she's been waiting for this moment all day. She sets her latte on the coffee table and hops up, practically bouncing into her room. I stand there, arms crossed, tapping my foot as I hear the rustling of hangers and the occasional "aha!" from her closet.

She returns holding a hanger with a black dress draped over it. It's short. Like, shortshort. And the neckline? Let's just say it's not designed for modesty.

My mouth drops open. "No. Absolutely not. I'm not wearing that."

Cindy holds it up like she's presenting a prize on a game show. "This, my dear, is your first-date dress. It's flattering, it's sexy, and it says, 'Hey, I'm not just the girl who brushes your dog.'"

"It also says, 'Hey, I'm freezing and possibly indecent!'" I shoot back, my face heating up.

Cindy rolls her eyes. "Tyler, you're going on a date with a billionaire. Not some guy who thinks Olive Garden is fancy. This is your chance to go big or go home."

I glance at the dress again, my stomach doing a nervous flip. "I don't even know if I'm ready for 'big.' What if I spill something? What if I trip? What if?—"

Cindy cuts me off with a wave of her hand. "What if you have the best night of your life? Trust me, you're rocking this dress. Now, go put it on before I start charging you for my fashion advice."

I take the hanger, my fingers brushing against the silky fabric. It feels foreign, like something I'd admire on someone else but never dare to wear myself. But Cindy's right about one thing—tonight's different. Maybe I should be too.

"Fine," I mutter, heading back to my room. "But if I end up on the floor because of these heels, I'm blaming you."

Cindy laughs.



“Deal. Now, move it. He’s picking you up in an hour.”

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*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:18 am*

I'm dabbing on the last touches of lip gloss when Cindy shrieks from the living room.

"Oh. My. God. Tyler, get over here!"

"What? I'm not done?—"

"Trust me, you want to see this."

I shuffle to the window in these death-trap heels. Cindy points down to the street where a sleek black car idles at the curb.

"Look what Mr. Moneybags is carrying."

My heart skips. Through the twilight, I spot Alonzo stepping out of his car, his arms full of... something. "Are those flowers?"

"Girl, those aren't just flowers. That's a whole garden."

The doorbell chimes and my stomach does a backflip. I've never gotten flowers before. Not even on Valentine's Day.

I open the door and forget how to breathe. Alonzo fills the doorframe, cream suit perfectly tailored to his broad shoulders. But it's what he's holding that stops my heart – an explosion of red roses, bigger than my torso, alongside a plush teddy bear and what looks like the fanciest chocolate box I've ever seen.

His golden eyes rake over me, lingering on the places where Cindy's borrowed dress

hugs my curves. Heat floods my cheeks, and I resist the urge to cover myself. The way he looks at me – like I'm something precious and delicious all at once – makes my knees weak.

"These are for you." His voice rolls through me like thunder.

I reach for the gifts, my fingers trembling. The roses smell divine, and the bear is softer than clouds. The chocolate box has gold lettering I can't pronounce.

"I..." Words fail me. I'm standing here in borrowed courage and borrowed clothes, while this man looks at me like I'm the most fascinating thing he's ever seen.

Cindy swoops in like a hurricane, snatching the gifts from my arms. "Here, let me take those." She practically dances to the kitchen with my presents.

My mouth opens to protest but before I can speak, her hands plant firmly on my back. "Out you go!"

The gentle shove sends me stumbling forward, right into Alonzo's personal space. His cologne wraps around me – something spicy and expensive that makes my insides flutter.

My cheeks burn as Cindy's finger jabs up at Alonzo's face. He towers over her, but she doesn't back down an inch. "Now, Tyler is my best friend, and she hasn't been on a date with a decent guy in a long time, so I'm allowing you to take her out on one condition..."

Alonzo's lips curve into that dangerous smile. "Yes?"

"Don't behave yourself." Cindy's words hit me like a splash of ice water. "Trust me, she needs it bad! If you have her home before midnight I'll kill you."

The door slams behind us with a bang that makes me jump. I stand frozen, mortified heat crawling up my neck as Alonzo's golden gaze slides down to meet mine. That smile of his grows wider, showing teeth.

My heart pounds against my ribs. The things Cindy said... the way he's looking at me... it's exactly what I've been reading about in my romance novels. The kind of man who takes control, who knows what he wants.

A shiver runs through me that has nothing to do with the evening air.

He extends his hand, palm up, and I stare at it like it's a live grenade. His fingers are long, elegant, yet there's a strength in them that's impossible to ignore. My heart's doing gymnastics in my chest, and I'm pretty sure my palms are sweating. This is so not the kind of thing I'm used to. I'm more of a "netflix and chill with takeout" kind of girl, not "mystery billionaire with a voice that could melt butter" kind of girl.

"Come with me, Lovely," he says, and the way he says it—smooth, velvety, with just a hint of command—sends a shiver down my spine. It's not harsh or demanding, but it's not a question either. It's an invitation, but one I don't feel like I can refuse.

I hesitate, my brain and my body at war. My brain's screaming, "What are you doing? This guy is way out of your league!" But my body? My body's already leaning toward him, my pulse racing like I'm halfway through a marathon. I can practically hear my parents' voices in my head, warning me about men like him—men who are too smooth, too confident, too... everything. But then I remember Cindy's words, and the way she pushed me out the door like she was shipping me off to my destiny.

"Don't be afraid," he purrs, and gaze snaps onto me with an intensity that's both thrilling and terrifying. "I do not bite... unless you want me to."

My stomach does a somersault, and my toes curl in my heels. There's a heat in his gaze that makes me feel exposed, like he's seeing every secret fantasy I've ever had. I've read about men like him—alpha males who know what they want and take it—but this? This is real, and it's overwhelming.

I take a shaky breath, my hand hovering just above his. "I don't even know if I'm ready for this," I manage to say, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Ready for what?" he asks, his tone light but his eyes still burning into me. "A date? A conversation? Or perhaps something more?"

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I swallow hard, my face heating up. He's not even touching me, and yet I feel like I'm already in way over my head. But there's something about the way he's looking at me—like I'm the only person in the world—that makes me want to take the leap.

Finally, I place my hand in his, and the moment our skin touches, it's like a current zipping through me. His fingers close around mine, warm and firm, and he pulls me gently toward him. My body trembles, not from fear, but from the sheer force of my own desires crashing over me like a wave.

"Good girl," he murmurs, and the words send a jolt straight to my core. I'm not sure what I've gotten myself into, but one thing's for certain—I'm not going back.

His hand engulfs mine, warm and firm. A jolt, like static electricity, zaps me. He tugs me forward, and my ridiculous heels click against the pavement. We're a spectacle—me, clinging to his arm like a life raft, him, radiating an aura of money and power that draws stares like moths to a flame. People openly gawk. A taxi driver nearly takes out a fire hydrant, his eyes glued to my legs. I shrink, wishing I'd worn something less...Cindy.

"Can I wear your coat?" I ask, my voice barely a squeak. "I feel like everyone is staring at me."

"That's because everyone is staring at you," he says, his voice a low rumble beside my ear. "With good reason."

Heat floods my cheeks. I try to hide, tucking myself closer to his side, using his massive frame as a shield. It's no use. I'm like a beacon in this dress.

“Come on, let me wear it,” I demand, trying for a playful tone that comes out sounding more petulant than I intended.

“No.”

The word, flat and final, shocks me. No? He just...said no. No explanation, no softening. A strange mix of irritation and...excitement? ripples through me. It’s like stepping onto a roller coaster, all thrilled anticipation until the bar locks into place and you realize—I’m strapped in. I have no control.

He’s in charge. Lanz. Not Alonzo. The mask is slipping, and I glimpse the steel beneath the charm. And the most terrifying part? I like it.

"Why not?" I ask, my voice sounding smaller, more pleading than I’d intended. I cringe inwardly, hating how much I sound like a little girl begging for permission.

"Because," he says, his tone smooth but final, "I want to look at your gorgeous body."

My breath catches, and my cheeks flare with heat. Gorgeous? Me? No one’s ever called me that before—not like this, not with that kind of intensity. His golden eyes rake over me, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. I feel exposed, vulnerable, and yet... thrilled. My heart’s pounding so loudly. My brain scrambles for something to say, but all I can manage is a strangled, "Oh."

"Do not be ashamed," he says. He tugs me forward, adjusting my position so we’re walking side by side. His hand stays firm on mine, guiding me like I’m a skittish colt. "Be proud. Get used to people staring. Embrace it. You are an amazing, beautiful woman. Why conceal that?"

His words hit me like a punch to the gut. They’re everything I’ve never allowed myself to believe. My parents’ voices echo in my head—Pride is a sin, Tyler.

Humility is your shield. I've spent my life shrinking, blending into the background, hiding behind baggy sweaters and self-deprecating jokes. The idea of embracing my body, my sexuality, feels... dangerous. Wrong, even.

But Lanz isn't having it. His hand moves to the small of my back, warm and steady. "Chin up," he instructs, his voice soft but firm. I oblige, lifting my head. His other hand brushes my shoulders, straightening my posture. "Chest out, longer strides. And smile, my sweet."

I try to obey, but my legs feel like jelly. My steps are awkward, my smile forced. I'm hyper-aware of the way my dress clings to my curves, the way the heels make my legs look longer than they've ever been. People are staring—of course they are. Lanz is a magnet, and I'm the awkward accessory trying to keep up.

"The world is yours," he murmurs, leaning down slightly so his words brush against my ear. "You are a goddess of love."

A goddess of love? I almost laugh, but the way he says it—like it's a fact, like he's stating the obvious—makes me shiver. I glance up at him, and his gaze is steady, unyielding. He believes it. That's the crazy part. He believes it.

I could never do this on my own. Never walk with this kind of confidence, this kind of boldness. But if I tell myself it's him—if I tell myself he's in charge, and I'm just following his lead—then maybe, just maybe, I can manage. My chin lifts a little higher. My steps grow surer. I can feel the warmth of his hand on my back, a constant reminder that he's here, guiding me, pushing me. And for the first time in my life, I don't want to hide.

## CHAPTER 4

LANZ



Tyler steps onto the Golden Odyssey, her eyes widening as she takes in the sheer scale of it. The sun catches the polished steel hull, making it gleam like liquid gold. Her gaze travels upward, tracing the sweeping lines of the aluminum superstructure. She's practically frozen in place.

"This is... a yacht?" she finally manages, her voice tinged with disbelief. "It's more like a floating skyscraper."

"That's one way to put it," I say, guiding her forward with a light touch on the small of her back. Her skin is warm beneath my fingers, and I feel a jolt of heat ripple through me. "Welcome to the Golden Odyssey. 404 feet of German engineering and Italian design. Built to impress."

She lets out a low whistle as we ascend the grand staircase to the main deck. "You weren't kidding about the Bond villain thing. I'm half expecting a henchman in a tuxedo to pop out and offer me a martini."

"Shaken, not stirred?" I quip, amused. "I'll let Captain Soanzo know to work on his British accent."

She laughs, and the sound is light, almost musical. I like the way it cuts through the usual tension I carry. Her eyes dart around, taking in the beach club platform, the loungers, the pool that seems to stretch forever. It's all familiar to me, but seeing it through her eyes makes it feel new again.

"You've got a gym up here, too?" she asks, spotting the equipment on the upper deck. "You could run a marathon and never leave the boat."

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“Efficiency is key,” I say, guiding her toward the sun deck. “Why waste time commuting to work out when you can do it with a view of the ocean?”

She shakes her head, still taking it all in. “This is insane. I mean, I knew you were rich, but this is... next level.”

“I considered being a secret agent once,” I say casually, watching her reaction. “But the pay was rubbish. Plus, the whole ‘saving the world’ gig doesn’t come with a beach club.”

She snorts. “You’d make a terrible spy. You’re way too flashy.”

“Touché,” I admit, grinning. “But I’d argue I’m more effective this way.”

We reach the topmost deck, and her breath catches. The crew has laid out a lavish seafood platter—oysters on ice, lobster tails, crab claws—and a bottle of Dom Pérignon sits chilling in a silver bucket. The table is set for two, with crisp white linens and polished silverware that catches the fading light.

I pull out her chair, my fingers brushing the smooth skin of her shoulder as I guide her into the seat. The contact sends a jolt through me, sharp and electric. She stares eyes wide, and I can see the pulse quicken in her throat.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, her voice soft, almost shy.

I take my seat, my gaze never leaving hers. “Anything for my guest.”

I twist the top of the champagne bottle with a practiced ease, the cork popping with a muted thwop. The sound is soft, but Tyler still flinches, her wide blue eyes darting to me as if I've just set off a firework. Her hands fidget in her lap, her fingers twisting the edge of her napkin into a tight little knot. I pour the champagne into two crystal flutes, the bubbles rising in a fizzy golden cascade. I slide one glass toward her, the other staying in my hand.

She stares at the glass like it's a live grenade. "I don't really drink much," she says, her voice a little too high, a little too tight. Her cheeks flush pink, and I can't tell if it's embarrassment or the setting sun casting her in a warm glow.

"Why not?" I ask, leaning back in my chair, my gaze steady on her. I already know the answer, but I want to hear her say it. I want to see how far she'll go to unravel herself in front of me.

"Drinking lowers inhibitions," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. She glances up at me through her lashes, then quickly looks away, her gaze fixing on the horizon as if it's the most interesting thing she's ever seen. "And, uh, I'm not sure that's a good idea right now."

I tilt my head, a slow smile curling at the corner of my mouth. "Isn't that the point?"

Her blush deepens, and she fidgets again, her fingers now tangling in the hem of her dress. "Right now, I'm afraid of what would happen if I let my inhibitions get any lower. They're barely in place as it is."

I chuckle, low and soft, and take a slow sip of my champagne. The bubbles tickle my tongue, crisp and dry. "Inhibitions are like the traction control on a Bugatti Viron," I say, setting the glass down with deliberate precision. "Sometimes, they're necessary. But if you really want to have fun on the curves, you've got to turn them off."

Her eyes snap to mine, and for a moment, she's frozen, her lips parted, her breath caught in her throat. Then, as if she's made a decision, she grabs the champagne glass with both hands and tips it up, draining it in one go. I watch, my eyebrows lifting in surprise, as she sets the empty glass down with a little too much force, gasping as the bubbles hit her throat.

"Perhaps not quite so fast," I say, my voice dry, when she's got about half an inch left. She glares at me, her cheeks now a deep crimson, her chest rising and falling with the effort.

She exhales sharply, her hands still gripping the glass like it's the only thing keeping her grounded. "I don't know what came over me," she mutters, more to herself than to me. But I can see the spark in her eyes, the way her body is thrumming with energy. She's exhilarated, even if she's too shy to admit it.

I lean forward, my elbows resting on the table, my voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Welcome to the first taste of risk, Tyler. You'll find it's addictive."

She swallows hard, her gaze locking with mine, and I can see the moment she decides she wants more.

I reach for the silver platter in the center of the table, the black pearls of caviar glistening under the soft glow of the yacht's ambient lighting. I scoop a small mound onto a delicate cracker, the aroma of the sea and briny luxury filling the space between us. Tyler leans forward, her lips parting slightly, and I hold the cracker steady as she takes a careful bite. Her breath brushes against my fingertips, warm and fleeting, like a whisper from the ocean breeze.

She chews slowly, her eyes widening as the flavors hit her. I watch her closely, fascinated by the way her expression shifts from curiosity to pure delight. It's as if she's tasting the world for the first time, and I'm the one guiding her through it. Her

lips curl into a small smile as she swallows, and she looks at me with an eagerness that makes something deep in my chest tighten.

“Good?” I ask, my voice low, almost a purr.

She nods, her cheeks tinged with pink. “It’s... it’s like nothing I’ve ever tasted before. Rich, but not overpowering. Salty, but sweet at the same time.”

I can’t help but smirk. “You were meant for this life, Tyler. Sampling all of life’s many pleasures. Why do you hold yourself back?”

Her gaze drops to her lap, and she starts fidgeting with her fingernails, her confidence slipping away like water through my fingers. “I’m not like my friend Cindy,” she says, her voice soft, almost brittle. “I’m not this wild, fun person. I’m the girl who goes to the party and pretends to be interested in a potted plant while wishing someone interesting would come over and talk to me?—”

I don’t wait for her to finish. I lean forward, closing the distance between us in an instant, and press my lips to hers. The kiss is firm, deliberate, but not invasive. I don’t push for more than she’s ready to give. Her lips are soft, tentative at first, but then she leans into it, her hands fluttering to rest lightly on my chest. Her breath catches, and for a moment, the world narrows to just her warmth, her taste, the way she hesitates but doesn’t pull away.

When I finally lean back, her eyes are wide, her lips parted in surprise. I can see the wheels turning in her head, the way she’s trying to process what just happened. A faint blush creeps up her neck, and she looks at me like she’s waiting for an explanation.

“Don’t sell yourself short,” I say, my voice steady, my gaze locked on hers. “You’re far more interesting than any potted plant.”

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The yacht's engines thrum to life, and we ease away from the marina. I watch Tyler's face as the full moon bathes the deck in silver light. Her skin glows, ethereal, and my breath catches. I've seen a thousand moons in my centuries of life, but none quite like this.

Time to up the ante. I clap twice, sharp and commanding.

Right on cue, four musicians emerge from below deck. The opening notes of "Beyond the Sea" float across the waves, carried by violin and cello, piano and acoustic guitar. The melody wraps around us like silk.

I rise from my chair and extend my hand to Tyler. "Would you care to dance?"

Her eyes light up, and for a moment, I see her start to reach for me. Then she stops. Her gaze sharpens, turns calculating. The innocent farm girl facade drops away, revealing something far more intriguing beneath.

"Maybe," she says, tilting her head. "If you'll tell me how you're still alive after flying face first into a telephone pole at a hundred miles per hour."

## CHAPTER 5

### TYLER

Lanz regards me for what feels like an eternity, his golden eyes unblinking, his expression unreadable. I want to say yes to the dance, to let him sweep me across the deck of this ridiculous yacht, to forget about the car crash and the sunglasses

embedded in the pole and just feels something. But I can't. Not yet. My hands are trembling, and I clench them into fists to steady myself.

He claps his hands again, sharp and commanding, and the musicians vanish like they were never there. The sudden silence is deafening. Lanz sits back down, his movements deliberate, his face serious now. The playful glint in his eyes is gone, replaced by something heavier.

"Very well," he says, his voice low, almost solemn. "I will not lie to you, Tyler. You are not the first woman I've brought on this yacht."

I nod, trying to keep my face neutral, but the words sting more than I want to admit. Of course he's had other women here. He's Alonzo Ramone, billionaire playboy. I knew that going in. Still, hearing it out loud feels like a punch to the gut.

"But," he continues, leaning forward, his gaze locking onto mine, "you are the first woman I will reveal my secret to. My greatest secret, for I have many."

I swallow hard, my throat dry. My mind races, trying to guess what he's about to say. Is he a spy? A criminal? Some kind of superhero? My imagination runs wild, but nothing prepares me for what comes next.

"I," he says, pausing dramatically, "am an alien."

I blink. Once. Twice. My brain short-circuits. "An... alien?" I repeat.

He nods, his expression dead serious. "Yes. From a planet called Vakuta. I'm not human, Tyler. I never have been."

I stare at him, my mouth hanging open. My first instinct is to laugh, to tell him he's joking, but the look on his face stops me. He's not kidding. Not even a little. My

mind flashes back to the car crash, the way he walked away without a scratch, the sunglasses in the pole. It all clicks into place, and my stomach drops.

“Prove it,” I say, my voice shaky but firm.

He raises an eyebrow, a small smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “You’re braver than I thought.”

Before I can respond, he stands, his towering frame casting a shadow over me. He unbuttons his shirt, revealing a chest that’s... not human. Red scales glint in the moonlight, catching the light like polished gemstones. My breath catches in my throat.

“Still want to dance?” he asks, his voice soft, almost teasing.

I can’t speak. I can’t move. All I can do is stare.

"This reveal will be more...dramatic," he says.

A soft click echoes across the deck. The air around his face shimmers like heat waves rising from summer pavement. My mouth drops open as his perfect features dissolve into something else entirely. Red scales catch the moonlight, arranged in intricate patterns across prominent brow ridges. Those golden eyes remain the same, but now they seem more natural set in this alien face.

The strange thing is, it fits. The too-perfect human mask he wore before - that's what seems fake now. No stubble, no blemishes, no changing expressions. This face, with its scaled texture and sharp angles, makes more sense.

My hand reaches out. I want to touch those scales, to feel their texture under my fingertips. Heat floods my cheeks as I realize I'm still attracted to him. Maybe even



more now, knowing he trusted me with this secret.

"My real name is Lanz," he says, his voice deeper, richer somehow. "And my mission is to protect the human timeline at all costs."

The formal way he says it, like he's making a declaration, should probably frighten me. Instead, my heart races with excitement. All those romance novels I've read, all those fantasies about mysterious, powerful men - none of them compare to this moment.

He tells me about something called the Centuries War, and how his people fought the Grolgath, who were religious zealots bent on spreading a galactic jihad. In the future, Earth allies with the Vakutan...apparently.

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But the story gets even crazier from there.

I stare at Lanz, my mind reeling. "Wait, wait, wait. Let me get this straight. You're an alien from the future, your ship got sucked into a black hole and dumped you here, and now you're trying to stop other aliens from messing with humanity's future?"

He tilts his head, his golden eyes gleaming. "Basically."

"Okay." I take a deep breath, my fingers gripping the edge of the table. "And this... war thing? The Centuries War? That's what you're fighting in?"

"It's more complicated than that," he says, leaning back in his chair. "The Centuries War was a conflict between the Trident Alliance—that's my side—and the Ataxian Coalition. We won. Barely. But now, some of the Grolgath, the shapeshifting lizards I mentioned, are stuck here in your time. They're trying to change your history so humanity ends up aligning with the Coalition instead of the Alliance."

I blink at him, trying to process all this. "So, let me see if I've got this straight. You're the good alien, trying to keep humans on the side of the good guys in the future. And the Grolgath are the bad aliens trying to mess that up."

"Simplistic, but accurate." He smirks, a flash of sharp teeth behind his scaled lips.

"But... why?" I shake my head. "Why do you care? Why all the secrecy? And why, for the love of everything, are you pretending to be a billionaire playboy?"

He chuckles, a deep, rumbling sound. "Two reasons. One, funding. Veritas—that's

the team I'm part of—doesn't run on goodwill alone. We need resources, and being Alonzo Ramone gives me access to those resources. Two, influence. If I'm seen as a powerful businessman, I can guide humanity in subtle ways without them ever realizing I'm not one of them."

I stare at him, my mouth hanging open. "That's... a lot."

He leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. "It is. But it's necessary."

I shake my head, a laugh bubbling up despite myself. "I'm sorry, but this is insane. Aliens, time travel, secret wars... It's like I've stumbled into a sci-fi novel."

He grins, that same confident, cocky grin I saw when he first asked me out. "Believe me, I've been living this life for a long time. It's every bit as insane as it sounds."

I sit back, my mind spinning. "And you're telling me all this because...?"

"Because I trust you," he says simply, his voice steady. "And because I think you can handle it."

I swallow hard, my chest tightening. Trust. That's not something I'm used to, especially from someone like him. "I don't know if I believe all of it," I admit. "But... I believe you. If that makes sense."

"It does." He leans back, a thoughtful look on his face. "And if you'll let me, I'll prove it to you."

I stare at his hand, the scales catching the moonlight like polished rubies. His fingers are long, elegant, and so different from mine, yet the way he holds it out to me feels... human. Vulnerable.

“I don’t know,” I say. My stomach twists. This is insane. He’s an alien. A billionaire. A man my parents would never approve of. And yet, here I am, standing on a yacht in the middle of the ocean, considering dancing with him.

“Just one dance,” he says, his voice soft but firm. “Please. And if you decide you don’t want to see me again, I’ll take you home and leave you be.”

I raise an eyebrow, trying to lighten the mood. “You won’t erase my memory or something?”

He chuckles, a deep, rumbling sound that sends shivers down my spine. “I would never harm someone as glorious as you.”

Glorious. The word hangs in the air, and I feel my cheeks flush. No one’s ever called me that before. I place my hand in his. His skin is warm, the scales smooth but firm under my fingers. He pulls me close, his other hand sliding to the small of my back. I’m suddenly hyper-aware of every inch of space between us—or lack thereof.

“I’ve never danced before,” I admit, my voice trembling. “I’m probably going to step on your feet.”

“Just follow my lead,” he says, his golden eyes locking onto mine. “Give yourself over to me, and I’ll show you the way.”

“Dancing?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

His hand tightens on my back, pulling me even closer. “Living.”

The music swells around us, a slow, romantic melody that wraps us in its embrace. I take a tentative step, then another, letting him guide me. His movements are smooth, confident, and I find myself falling into rhythm with him. My body relaxes, and I let

go of the tension I've been holding onto all night.

“See?” he murmurs, his breath warm against my ear. “You’re a natural.”

I laugh, the sound surprising even me. “I think it’s just you. You’re a good teacher.”

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“I’ve had practice,” he says, a hint of a smirk in his voice.

I glance up at him, my heart skipping a beat. “With other women?”

“Yes,” he admits, his gaze steady. “But none like you.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I focus on the dance, on the way his body moves against mine, on the way his hand feels on my back. It’s intoxicating, and, I feel... free. Like I’m not just following the rules, but actually living.

So what if he’s an alien? At least he’s not another Mama’s boy.

The music fades, and Lanz spins me into his arms with practiced ease, his massive frame caging me in. My breath stops, my heart pounding like a drum in my chest. His scales press against me, their texture smooth yet firm, and I’m hyper-aware of every inch of him. The strength in his arms, the heat radiating off his body, the way his chest rises and falls in rhythm with mine. It’s overwhelming in the best and worst way.

“You’re trembling,” he murmurs, his voice a low rumble that vibrates through me. Our gazes lock, I can’t look away. They’re intense, almost predatory, but there’s something softer there too. Something special.

I swallow hard, my voice barely a whisper. “I’m fine.”

He smirks, a flash of sharp teeth. “Liar.”

My cheeks burn, and I glance down, but his hand tilts my chin back up, forcing me to meet his gaze again. “Don’t hide from me,” he says, his tone firm but not unkind. “You’re braver than that.”

I want to argue, to tell him he’s wrong, but the words catch in my throat. He’s so close, so much. I can feel his arousal pressing against me, and my body betrays me, leaning into him without permission. A shiver runs down my spine as I rub against him, the friction sending a jolt of heat through me.

He groans, his grip tightening for a moment before he forces himself to relax. “Careful,” he warns, his voice rough. “You’re playing with fire.”

I pull back suddenly, my face flaming. My hands fly to cover myself as if that will somehow erase what just done. I pull away from his grasp, and he lets me go with some reluctance.

"Take me home," I mumble into my hands. "Please, just take me home."

“What’s wrong?” Lanz asks, his voice steady but softer now. His golden eyes search mine, and I can’t hold his gaze for more than a second. I glance down at my hands, twisting them together like I can wring the shame out of them.

“You must think I’m some kind of hussy,” I mumble, my voice barely audible over the sound of the waves against the yacht. “The way I—the way I acted just now.”

He steps closer, the heat of his body already reaching me before his hand does. “You should have no shame for doing what makes you feel good,” he says, his tone firm but not unkind. “We both enjoyed it. What’s the harm?”

I shake my head, my cheeks burning. The words of my parents echo in my mind, their voices sharp and disapproving. “You’ll end up just like her, Tyler. Tawdry.

Loose. A disappointment.” I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block it out, but it’s no use.

“I’m not—” My voice cracks, and I bite my lip hard to keep the tears at bay. “I’m not that kind of person. I don’t—I don’t do things like that.”

Lanz lets out a breath, and I hear the faint rustle of fabric as he gestures to someone behind me. The musicians disappear silently, their absence leaving the night strangely hollow. His hand lands on my shoulder, and I flinch, not because his touch is unwelcome, but because it’s exactly what I’ve been craving.

“You are not an evil or tainted person for having desires,” he says,, almost soothing. His thumb brushes against my neck, and I shiver despite the warmth of the night. “Your parents raised a magnificent, lovely woman, but they were mistaken about this.” He pauses, and I feel his breath against my ear as he leans closer. “There is nothing wrong with pleasure, so long as it does not come at another’s expense.”

I want to argue, to tell him he’s wrong, that my parents were right. But the words won’t come. Instead, I stand there, trembling, as his hands slide down my arms and pull me back against him. I should resist. I should. But I don’t. I let him draw me into his grasp, my body fitting against his like it was made to be there.

His hand cups my cheek, and I feel the faint scrape of his scales against my skin. It’s not harsh—not like I expected. It’s warm, almost comforting, and when his thumb traces my lower lip, I can’t help the way my breath catches.

“You’re not the devil,” I whisper, more to myself than to him. But he hears it anyway.

“No,” he says, a word that I feel more than hear. “But I’m not a saint either.”



His thumb presses lightly against my lip again, and before I can stop myself, I suck on it, the instinct taking over before my brain can catch up. His breath stutters, and I feel the tension in his body ratchet up a notch. I turn my face into his palm, my lips brushing against the rough texture of his scales. It's wrong. It's so wrong. But it feels soright.

"Surrender to me, Taylor," Lanz rumbles. "You are mine."

I squeal in surprise as Lanz sweeps me off my feet and into his arms. I lose a heel as he carries me to his private cabin on the yacht. My heart pounds in my chest, a wild mixture of fear and exhilaration.

"I can't believe this is happening," I think to myself, wrapping my arms around his neck. Part of me wants to protest, to tell him to put me down. But the larger, more primal part of me is reveling in his show of strength and dominance.

"I've fantasized about being carried off by a Billionaire," I muse, my fingers tracing the intricate patterns of his scaled skin. "I've fantasized about being conquered by an alien. But to have both happen at once feels like winning the lottery and an Academy Award in the same day."

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Lanz's grip tightens as he carries me through the door of the cabin, kicking it shut behind us. The room is lavishly appointed, all rich fabrics and gleaming surfaces. My eyes are drawn to the massive bed in the center, its crisp, white sheets practically beckoning.

"You're mine now," Lanz growls, his voice a deep rumble. He lowers me to the bed, his massive frame looming over me.

I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry. "What...what are you going to do to me?"

Lanz's lips curve into a predatory smile, his sharp teeth glinting in the low light. "Everything," he purrs, his hand trailing down my side. "Absolutely everything."

## CHAPTER 6

### LANZ

My fingers trace the damp fabric. I can feel her heat, her pulse racing against my hand. I pull back just enough to see her face, those wide blue eyes staring up at me like I'm some kind of cosmic anomaly. Maybe I am.

"No one's ever touched me there before," she whispers, her voice trembling.

I tilt my head, my golden eyes locking onto hers. "Good. That means I'll be the first to make it memorable." My thumb presses against her, slow and deliberate, and she lets out a soft whimper.

“You’re... you’re not... human,” she stammers, her hands gripping the sheets.

“Do you want me to stop?” I ask softly.

Her body shudders under my touch, and she shakes her head.

My fingers hook into the edge of her panties, peeling them down her legs. She doesn’t resist, just watches me with a mix of fear and desire that makes my scales prickle with anticipation.

My lips press against her calf, the softness of her skin a stark contrast to the roughness of my scales. She shudders, her toes curling as I work my way up, each kiss deliberate, each one drawing another quiet moan from her. Her legs tremble under my touch. My tongue flicks out, tasting her, savoring the salt and sweetness of her skin. She’s intoxicating.

“Your body,” I murmur, my voice low and deliberate, “is a work of nature’s finest art. The Precursors themselves could never hope to accomplish such majesty.” My lips graze her inner thigh, and she whimpers, her hips lifting off the bed. My tongue drags along her skin, slow and methodical, and then?—

I bite. Just enough to make her cry out, to leave a mark she’ll remember tomorrow. Her hands fly to my shoulders, gripping tightly, but she doesn’t push me away. Her breathing is ragged now, her chest rising and falling in sharp, shallow bursts.

I pause, my face inches from where she’s most sensitive. I breathe in her scent, rich and heady, and exhale slowly, watching as her body arches off the bed. “You look so perfect here,” I say, my voice rough with desire. “So wet, so ready for me. I could spend hours just tasting you, savoring every little sound you make.”

Taylor’s face flushes crimson, her hands flying to cover it. “I... I can’t...” she

stammers, her voice breaking.

I tilt my head, my golden eyes locking onto hers. “Why are you embarrassed, my sweet one?” My fingers trace the inside of her thigh, and she shudders.

“Good girls don’t... good girls don’t...” she whispers, her voice trembling.

I chuckle, low and dark. “Yes, they do. Especially when they’re with me.” My thumb brushes over her clit, and she gasps, her body tensing. “So tell me, Taylor,” I say, my voice dropping to a whisper, “do you want me to make you cum?”

Her eyes meet mine, wide and pleading, and she nods.

Her scent hits me like a drug—sweet, musky, intoxicating. I lower my head, my lips brushing against her clit with a tenderness that surprises even me. My hands are firm as I spread her open, exposing her to me completely. The sight of her, wet and trembling, drives a primal hunger through me. I lean in, my tongue flicking out to taste her outer lips, the flavor of her arousal sharp and heady. I suck lightly, pulling her flesh into my mouth until it slips free with a soft pop.

“Lanz,” she gasps, her voice trembling. “I—I can’t?—”

“You can,” I murmur, my breath hot against her. My tongue plunges into her, long and ridged, exploring every inch of her. I’m relentless, my upper lip brushing against her clit with every thrust. She cries out, her body arching off the bed, but I’m not done. Not even close.

Her hands claw at the sheets, her moans turning into screams as I push her over the edge again and again. I pin her down, my grip firm as I hold her hips steady, my tongue working her with a precision that’s almost cruel in its intensity. Her body convulses under me, her orgasms ripping through her like tidal waves.

When I finally pull back, she's shaking, her breath coming in ragged gasps. I gather her into my arms, her small frame fitting perfectly against mine. My lips brush against the top of her head, my fingers gently stroking her hair.

"You're beautiful," I whisper, my voice softer than I intended. She clings to me like I'm the only thing keeping her afloat, her face buried in my chest.

"I've never... I never knew it could feel like that," she murmurs, her voice muffled against my scales.

I hold her tighter, my chest tightening in a way I'm not used to. This isn't just another conquest, another way to pass the time. This is... different. Raw. Real. And it terrifies me. But for the first time in my life, I don't care. I'm not letting go.

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Her voice is so soft I almost miss it, a fragile whisper lost in the rustle of the sheets. I lean closer, my scales brushing against her bare skin. “What did you say, my sweet?” I murmur, gently lifting her chin so I can see into those wide, vulnerable eyes of hers.

She hesitates, her gaze flickering away before she speaks. “I said, you must think I’m a low-class woman.”

My brow furrows, the ridges of my scales catching the dim light filtering through the yacht’s windows. “Why would I think that?”

She lets out a shaky breath, her fingers twisting the edge of the blanket. “Because I gave it up on the first date. My body, my virginity...”

The word hits me like a shockwave. Virginity. My golden eyes widen, and for a moment, I’m frozen. Of all the things I expected, this wasn’t it. I’ve seen her blush, her stammering attempts at flirting, but I didn’t think—no, I didn’t know. My voice is softer now, almost reverent. “Taylor...”

She flinches, misreading my tone. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything. I just—I didn’t want you to think less of me.”

“Think less of you?” I nearly laugh, but it’s not humor that fills the sound—it’s disbelief. “Taylor, look at me.” I wait until her eyes meet mine again, her cheeks flushed with shame. “You are magnificent. Every inch of you. And what we just did... that doesn’t make you less. It makes you more. The Precursors—the gods who shaped us—they gave us these bodies, these desires, for a reason. Denying them? That’s not holiness. It’s a waste.”

She blinks, her lips parting as if she's about to argue, but I don't let her. My thumb brushes over her lower lip, silencing her before she can speak. "Liking sex doesn't make you unclean. It doesn't make you weak or low-class or anything else you're worried about. It makes you alive. And you, Taylor, are more alive than anyone I've ever met."

I can see the tension in her shoulders easing, the rigid set of her jaw softening. "You really mean that?"

"Every word." My voice is firm, leaving no room for doubt. "You are a masterpiece, Taylor. And I'm honored that you chose me to share this with."

For a moment, she just stares at me, her eyes searching mine as if she's looking for any hint of insincerity. And then, slowly, a smile tugs at the corners of her lips. "You're not what I expected, Alonzo Ramone."

I grin, my teeth sharp and gleaming in the low light. "Good. I'd hate to be predictable."

When I lean in to kiss her, she meets me halfway, her lips eager and unhesitating. Her hands find their way to my shoulders, pulling me closer, and I lose myself in the taste of her, the warmth of her body pressed against mine. She's not hiding anymore, and neither am I.

## CHAPTER 7

### TYLER

My fingers trace the ridges of Lanz's scales, the texture unlike anything I've ever felt—warm, smooth, yet with a subtle firmness that makes me titter. His chest rises and falls under my touch, the raw strength coiled beneath the surface, like he's

holding back a storm. My hands drift lower, exploring the hard lines of his abdomen, each muscle defined, almost sculpted. But when I near the waistband of his trousers, I freeze. My fingers hover like I've stumbled into forbidden territory.

Lanz's hand snaps out, and he grabs my wrists. His grip is firm, controlled, but not painful. I can feel the heat of his palm against my skin. I look up at him, those golden eyes locking onto mine. He doesn't say a word, just guides my hands downward, pressing them against the heat of his arousal. My cheeks burn, but I can't pull away. I don't want to.

"Take it out," he says.

My eyes widen, and I swallow hard. My fingers tremble as I fumble with the button of his trousers, my mind racing. I've never done this before—never even come close. But with Lanz, it's different. He makes me feel bold, like I'm not the girl who blushes when someone says the word "sex." I'm someone else entirely.

I manage to undo the button, my fingers brushing against the hard length of him through the fabric.. I glance up at him again, searching his face for reassurance, for something.

"Keep going," he growls, his voice rough, sending a shiver down my spine.

I bite my lip and slowly unzip his trousers, the sound impossibly loud in the quiet of the room. My hands are shaking now, but I don't stop. I can't. I've never wanted anything so badly in my life.

Lanz doesn't make a sound, but I can feel the tension in his body, the way his muscles coil tighter as I free him. My breath catches when I see him, and for a moment, I'm frozen.



“Touch me,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper, but it might as well be a shout.

I reach out, my fingers brushing against him tentatively, and he lets out a low groan that sends a rush of heat straight to my core. My cheeks are on fire, but I don’t stop. I can’t.

“You’re doing so good,” he murmurs, his hand coming up to cup my face, his thumb brushing over my cheek.

My heart swells at the praise, and I feel a strange mix of nerves and pride. I’ve never felt like this before—like I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be, doing exactly what I’m supposed to be doing. And for the first time, I don’t feel like the shy girl who hides in the corner. I feel like I’m enough.

Lanz’s hand slides into my hair, his fingers tangling gently but with a firmness that flips all the right switches inside of me. His golden eyes lock onto mine, and for a moment, I forget how to breathe.

“Take me into your mouth,” he says, his voice low, commanding, but with a softness that makes my stomach flip.

My heart is racing, pounding so hard I’m sure he can feel it. I glance down at him, marveling at the way the light catches the ridges along his shaft, the heart-shaped crown that looks almost too perfect to be real. My fingers tremble as I reach out, brushing against him, and he lets out a low groan that makes my cheeks burn.

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I hesitate, my mind flashing back to all the times I've been told this is wrong, that it's dirty, that it's something I should be ashamed of. But Lanz's hand tightens in my hair, and I feel a surge of something I can't quite name—a mix of nerves and excitement and a determination to prove myself.

I lean in, my lips parting as I take the crown of his cock into my mouth. The taste of him is strange, not unpleasant, but entirely new. I can feel the ridges that run down his length, and I wonder what they'll feel like against my tongue.

Lanz lets out a low growl of pleasure, and the sound sends a rush of heat straight to my core. My heart's beating faster than a captured rabbit's, but I don't stop. I wrap my lips around him, my tongue exploring the ridges, and I can feel him twitch in response.

"That's it," he murmurs, his voice rough, sending a shiver down my spine. "Use your tongue. Just like that."

I follow his instructions, my movements hesitant at first but growing more confident as I feel him respond. My hands reach up, stroking the length of him, and I can hear his breathing grow heavier, feel the tension building in his body.

"You're doing so good," he says. "Such a good girl."

The praise sends a wave of warmth through me, and I feel my body respond in ways I never expected. I'm not just doing this for him—I'm doing it for me, because it feels good to make him feel good, to know I can affect him this way.

Lanz's hand tightens in my hair, and I can feel him tense, his body coiling like a spring. And then he's coming, his release filling my mouth, and I swallow it down, looking up at him as I do.

His golden eyes are locked onto mine, filled with a mix of pleasure and something else—something that makes my heart swell. I've never felt like this before, like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be, doing exactly what I'm supposed to be doing.

Lanz's hands are on me before I can catch my breath, his grip firm, almost possessive. He doesn't ask, doesn't pause—he just moves, like he's compelled by something primal, something I can't begin to understand. One moment I'm kneeling on the bed, and the next, I'm flat on my back, the soft sheets pressing into my skin as he looms over me..

"I must take you," he growls, voice like gravel and fire.

I don't have time to respond, not that I'd know what to say anyway. His words aren't a question, and they aren't a request. They're a declaration, and something deep inside me responds to it, like I'm caught in the middle of a storm and all I can do is hold on.

His hands are everywhere, hot and demanding, and I can feel the ridges of his scales against my skin as he moves over me. My heart's pounding so hard I can feel it in my throat, but it's not fear—it's something else, something wild and electric that I've never felt before.

"Lanz," I whisper, my voice trembling, but he silences me with a kiss that's almost bruising in its intensity.

His fingers slide between my legs, and I gasp as he teases me, his touch sending sparks shooting through my body. I can feel how wet I am, how ready, and it's both

embarrassing and exhilarating. He doesn't say anything, just looks at me with those golden eyes, and I know there's no turning back.

When he finally pushes into me, it's slow, almost unbearably so. I can feel every inch of him, every ridge, every pulse, and it's like nothing I've ever imagined. My nails dig into his shoulders as I try to adjust, but he doesn't stop, doesn't give me time to think. He just keeps going, filling me completely until I can't tell where he ends and I begin.

"You feel incredible," he murmurs, his voice strained, like he's holding back, and that thought alone has me on the edge.

He starts to move, and it's like the world falls away. Every thrust sends waves of pleasure crashing through me, and I can't hold back the moans that escape my lips. His cock is unlike anything I've ever felt, the ridges stimulating me in ways I didn't know were possible, and it's all I can do to hold on.

"That's it," he growls, his breath hot against my ear. "Let go."

And I do. The pressure builds until it's unbearable, and then I'm coming, my body trembling as pleasure washes over me in waves. I cling to him, my nails raking down his chest as I ride it out, and he doesn't stop, doesn't slow down. He just keeps going, driving me higher and higher until I feel like I might shatter.

When he finally comes, it's with a low, guttural groan that sends a fresh wave of heat through my body. I can feel him pulse inside me, and it's the most intimate thing I've ever experienced. He collapses on top of me, his weight pressing me into the mattress, and I wrap my arms and legs around him, holding him close.

His breathing is ragged, his chest rising and falling against mine, the rapid beat of his heart. I reach up, brushing my fingers against his cheek, and he turns his head to look

at me. His golden eyes are softer now, filled with something I can't quite name, and it makes my chest ache.

"Lanz," I whisper, my voice shaky, and he leans in, his lips brushing against mine in a kiss that's almost tender.

He doesn't say anything, just holds me close.

Lanz's arms wrap around me like living steel, his scales radiating a warmth that seeps into my bones. My head rests against his chest, listening to the steady thrum of his heartbeat. His strength could crush me without effort, yet I've never felt more protected.

A soft rumble escapes his throat as he drifts into sleep. His features soften, those fierce golden eyes hidden behind closed lids. My fingers trace the patterns on his chest, marveling at how alive he feels, how vital. Not at all the cold creature I'd expect from someone covered in scales.

Sleep eludes me. My body hums with awareness, every nerve ending still tingling from our encounter. My mind races with thoughts I can't quiet.

For years I pretended it didn't matter that I'd never been with anyone. Told myself I was saving it for something special, or that I wasn't ready. But now? Now I understand what I've been missing.

The romance novels I devoured painted pictures of passion, but they fell short of reality. The way Lanz touched me, the things he made me feel - it exceeded every fantasy I'd conjured up alone in my bed at night.

My stomach twists as Mom's voice echoes in my head: "The marriage bed is sacred, meant only for creating children." But how can something that felt so right be wrong?

The way Lanz awakened every inch of my body, the pleasure he drew from me - it felt like discovering a part of myself I never knew existed.

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I want more. I want to explore every sensation, learn every way our bodies can move together. The thought should shame me, but wrapped in Lanz's arms, all I feel is anticipation.

### CHAPTER 8

#### LANZ

The first rays of sunlight paint the sky in soft pinks and oranges as I guide my car through the empty streets. Tyler's perfume lingers in the air, mixed with the scent of sex and satisfaction. Her fingers brush against mine on the gear shift.

"Your place is just ahead?"

"Right there." She points to a modest apartment complex.

I park and rush to open her door. The morning dew sparkles on the grass, but nothing shines brighter than her smile. My lips find hers, and the kiss tastes of promise and possibility.

"When can I see you again?"

"I have work in a few hours." She traces a finger down my chest. "Then I'll need a nap. But later tonight..."

"I'll call you after nine."

"Perfect."

One more kiss, deep and thorough. I watch her walk to her building, memorizing the sway of her hips, the bounce in her step.

The drive to Truth-1 passes in a blur. My thoughts keep drifting back to last night - the taste of her skin, the sound of her moans, the way she yielded to my touch. The morning traffic parts before my car like water, sensing my impatience to start the day so it can end and I can see her again.

I park in my private spot beneath the towering spire of Truth-1. Even the familiar weight of responsibility settling on my shoulders as I enter the building can't dim my mood.

The elevator doors slide open to the top floor of Truth-1, and I stride into my office with purpose. The morning's meetings are a blur of human-centric nonsense—spreadsheets, quarterly reports, and the occasional sycophant trying to impress “Alonzo Ramone” with their latest pitch. I smile, nod, and sign where I need to, but my mind is miles away—or more accurately, down by the docks where Fishy Joe's Cannery sits, rusting and forgotten.

After lunch—a plate of seared ahi tuna that I barely taste—I lock my office door and pull up the surveillance feed on my compad. The Vakutan Scout Drone hums to life in the airlock bay, its cloaking field shimmering as it powers up. I flick my fingers across the holographic interface, sending it on its way. The drone zips out of the building, skimming low over the waters of Sunny Cove, its sensors scanning for any anomalies.

“Let's see what you're hiding, Bob,” I mutter under my breath.

The drone approaches the cannery, its sensors picking up heat signatures and



movement inside. I lean forward in my chair, golden eyes narrowing as the feed shows the drone slipping through a cracked window. The interior of the cannery is dark, littered with rusted machinery and crumbling walls. Shadows flicker across the screen, and then—nothing. The feed goes black.

I stab at the controls, trying to reestablish the connection. “Come on, come on...”

Static. Silence. The drone doesn’t respond.

I sit back in my chair, a low growl rumbling in my chest. My fingers drum against the desk. “Never send a drone to do a Vakutan warrior’s job.”

I stand, rolling my shoulders as I undo the knot of my tie. The human disguise peels away like shedding a second skin, revealing the crimson scales and hardened ridges beneath. My golden eyes gleam in the dim light of the office.

“Time to put on the real power suit.”

I stride across my office, the plush carpet muffling my steps. My fingers brush the frame of the Monet hanging on the wall, feeling for the hidden latch. A soft click, and the painting swings open to reveal a keypad.

The numbers glow faintly in the dim light. My fingers dance across the pad, inputting the 124-digit code from memory. The floor beneath me rumbles, and a hidden panel slides open with a hiss. A set of stairs leads down into the armory.

“Finally,” I mutter, stepping down into the cool, shadowed room. Racks of weapons line the walls, their polished surfaces gleaming under the soft LED lights. Plasma rifles, particle cannons, and disrupter pistols—all the tools of a Vakutan warrior. I pass them by, heading for the flight suit rack.

I slip into the sleek black suit, the material molding to my scales like a second skin. The jet pack clicks into place with a satisfying snap, the weight familiar on my shoulders. I grab a compact plasma pistol and tuck it into the holster at my side.

The tunnel entrance yawns at the far end of the armory, a narrow passage leading down toward the shoreline. I step inside, the walls closing in around me as the entrance seals shut behind me. My compad flickers to life as I move, and I open a secure channel to Veritas HQ.

“Drone investigation of Fishy Joe’s Cannery has failed,” I say, my voice echoing in the confined space. “Getting a naked eyeview instead. Increase Grolgath readiness level from one to two for the Sunny Cove area.”

“Acknowledged,” comes the reply. “Proceed with caution, Lanz.”

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“Always.” I smirk, cutting the connection as I pick up speed. The tunnel slopes downward, the air growing cooler and damper as I near the exit. The faint sound of waves crashing against the shore reaches my ears.

The tunnel ends in a concealed hatch, which hisses open to reveal a rocky outcrop overlooking the water. The cannery looms in the distance, its rusted facade barely visible in fog. I crouch low, scanning the area with narrowed eyes.

“Alright, Bob,” I murmur, adjusting the straps on my jetpack. “Let’s see what you’re up to in there.”

I leap into the air, the jetpack roaring to life as I glide silently toward the cannery. The wind whips past my face, carrying the tang of salt and the faint scent of decay. The cannery grows larger with every passing second, its darkened windows like empty eye sockets.

I land on the roof with a soft thud, my boots barely making a sound on the corrugated metal. The place looks abandoned, but I know better. My fingers brush the plasma pistol at my side as I crouch low, listening for any signs of movement.

“Let’s make this interesting,” I whisper, creeping toward the edge of the roof. The scene is still, but I can feel the tension in the air—a storm waiting to break.

The scent of Grolgath hangs thick in the air, a mix of damp scales and something metallic, like blood left to dry in the sun. My nostrils flare as I step deeper into the cannery, my plasma pistol gripped tight in my hand. The place is a maze of rusted machinery and crumbling walls, shadows stretching long and jagged in the dim light

filtering through broken windows. Every creak of metal, every drip of water, sets my nerves on edge.

“Where are you, you slippery bastards?” I mutter under my breath, my golden eyes scanning the darkness. The scent is everywhere, but there’s no sign of them. Not yet.

A skittering sound catches my attention, sharp and quick, like claws on metal. I spin, my pistol snapping up to aim at the source. A rat darts out from behind a pile of debris, its beady eyes glinting in the faint light. It freezes, staring at me, its whiskers twitching.

I don’t lower the gun. Not yet.

“Alright, you little furball,” I growl, stepping closer. “You’re either dinner or a spy. Which is it?”

The rat squeaks, its tiny body trembling. I crouch down, keeping the pistol trained on it. “Speak up. I know you Grolgath can shapeshift. What’s your game here? What are you planning?”

The rat just stares at me, its nose twitching. I wait, my finger hovering over the trigger, but there’s no sudden transformation, no flash of green scales or milky white eyes. Just a rat. A regular, Earth rat.

I lower the pistol with a frustrated snarl. “Damn it. I’m interrogating rodents now. Pyke’s never going to let me live this down.”

The rat scurries away, disappearing into the shadows. I stand, shaking my head. “Get it together, Lanz. You’re better than this.”

The words are barely out of my mouth when a bright flash of light blinds me. I throw

up an arm to shield my eyes, but it's too late. The first laser blast hits me square in the chest, the impact slamming me back into a support strut. My armor absorbs most of the blow, but the heat sears through, leaving a scorch mark on my scales.

"Son of a—" I dive behind the strut as more blasts rain down, the air sizzling with energy. The smell of burnt metal fills my nostrils, heat radiating from the beams as they slice through the air around me.

I press my back against the strut, my heart pounding. "Alright, Bob," I shout over the din. "You've got my attention. Let's see if you can keep it."

The blasts keep coming, each one closer than the last. I grip my pistol tighter, waiting for a break in the barrage. My mind races, calculating angles, distances, and the odds of making it out of this alive.

"Come on, you overgrown lizards," I mutter, peeking out from behind the strut. "Give me something to work with."

My compad chirps as I pull it from my belt, the holographic display flickering to life. The scan reveals a network of automated turrets - dozens of them - their targeting systems far more precise than even Vakutan reflexes.

"Clever bastards." I unclip my jetpack, fingers dancing over the controls. "Let's see how smart your toys really are."

The jetpack rockets skyward on autopilot, drawing immediate fire. Red beams slice through the air, tracking its erratic path. My muscles coil as I count the seconds, waiting for the perfect moment.

"Now." I sprint for the window, glass crunching under my boots. The sea stretches below, dark and uninviting. A laser catches my shoulder as I dive, searing through the

flight suit. Another grazes my leg.

The impact with the water drives the breath from my lungs. Salt water floods the burns, setting my nerves on fire. I grit my teeth, pushing through the pain as I swim deeper, letting the current carry me away from the cannery.

I surface near the shore, dragging myself onto the rocks. My wounds throb, but they'll heal. The real sting is to my pride.

I could call Pyke, have him send a strike team. But the thought makes my scales itch. This is personal now.

"I can handle this myself." The words taste like iron in my mouth. "I'll get my revenge for this insult."

I pull out my compad, wincing as the movement pulls at my burns. "Soanzo. Need a pickup. Sending coordinates."

"Right away, sir. Everything alright?"

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"Just a minor setback. Have the med kit ready."

The speedboat arrives within minutes, sleek and silent as it cuts through the waves. The crew helps me aboard, their faces carefully neutral as they take in my scorched flight suit and burns.

Back on the Golden Odyssey, I strip off the ruined suit and step into the shower. Hot water cascades over my scales, washing away salt and blood. The burns already start to heal - one of the perks of Vakutan physiology.

"Your clothes, sir." Soanzo's voice comes through the bathroom door. "And the doctor is standing by."

"No doctor needed." I wrap a towel around my waist and open the door. "But I'll take those clothes."

The fresh suit feels good against my scales. I adjust the tie, studying my reflection. The human disguise settles back into place, hiding any trace of injury.

"Cancel my afternoon appointments," I tell Soanzo. "I need time to think."

"Of course, sir. Shall I have the chef prepare something?"

"Just coffee. Strong."

I settle into the yacht's study, spreading maps and blueprints across the mahogany desk. The cannery's layout stares back at me, mocking. Those turrets weren't there by

accident - Bob knew I was coming.

But now I know what I'm up against. And next time, I won't be walking into a trap. Next time, I'll be setting one.

Let Pyke and the others think I'm just another suit pushing papers. When I drag Bob and his Grolgath cronies back to base in chains, they'll remember who I really am.

## CHAPTER 9

### TYLER

I burst through the door of Doggone Elegance, the bell jingling like an alarm clock I'd already snoozed five minutes too long. Cindy's leaning against the counter, arms crossed, a smirk plastered across her face like she's been waiting for this moment all morning.

"Well, well, look who decided to grace us with her presence," she says, her voice dripping with mockery. "Late night, huh?"

"Shut up," I mutter, rushing to the time clock. My fingers fumble with the card, and I jam it into the slot like it's personally responsible for my tardiness. The machine beeps, and I'm officially late. Great.

Cindy's already got a poodle in the tub by the time I join her, the smell of flea dip hitting me like a chemical slap to the face. She's scrubbing away, but her eyes are on me, sharp and knowing.

"So," she starts, her tone casual but her grin anything but. "How'd the date go?"

"Fine," I say, grabbing a towel and avoiding her gaze. The word feels too small, too



inadequate for what last night was, but I'm not about to spill my guts to Cindy of all people.

"Fine?" she repeats, raising an eyebrow. "That's it? Just 'fine'?"

"Yeah, fine," I snap, my cheeks burning. I can feel her eyes on me, scanning, dissecting. Then her gaze lands on my neck, and her smirk turns into a full-blown grin.

"Oh, honey," she says, laughing. "That's not just a 'fine' kind of hickey. That's a 'we're not getting out of bed until next Tuesday' kind of hickey."

My hand flies to my neck, and I can feel the heat of the mark even through my collar. "It's not—I mean, it's not what you think."

"Uh-huh," she says, clearly not buying it. "Sure it's not. Here." She tosses me a collared shirt from the lost and found bin. "Wear this. Unless you want Sandy to see it and start asking questions."

I catch the shirt and duck into the bathroom to change. The fabric scratches against my skin, but it's better than the alternative. When I come back out, Cindy's still grinning, but she doesn't say anything else. For now.

The rest of the shift drags on, every second feeling like an eternity. I can't stop thinking about last night, about Lanz, about the way he looked at me like I was the only thing in the universe that mattered. But then there's the hickey, the mark on my neck that feels like a neon sign flashing "BAD GIRL" for the whole world to see.

I catch my reflection in the mirror while I'm drying off a schnauzer, and for a second, I don't recognize the girl staring back at me. She's different, changed. And I'm not sure if I'm ready for what that means.

The clock finally hits noon, and Cindy grabs her purse, slinging it over her shoulder with a dramatic flair. “Lunch break. Let’s go before Sandy finds another dog to shove at us.”

I follow her out the door, the sun hitting my face like a warm blanket. We head to the little park across the street, where we usually eat on the bench under the oak tree. Cindy unwraps her sandwich, but I just sit there, picking at the edge of my Tupperware.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Okay, spill,” she says, mouth half-full. “You’ve been weird all morning. And not just ‘I’m tired’ weird. More like ‘I just had my world flipped upside down’ weird.”

I sigh, staring at the grass. “I don’t know who I am anymore, Cindy. Yesterday, I was... me. Naive, boring, predictable me. And now? Everything’s different. I’m different.”

Cindy stops chewing for a second, then swallows hard. “Different how? Because you had sex? Tyler, the world didn’t change. You did. And that’s not a bad thing.”

“But what if I don’t like who I’m becoming?” I blurt out, my voice cracking. “What if I’m not the same person who loves peanut butter fudge and rainy days and curling up with a book? What if I’m just... someone else now?”

Cindy sets her sandwich down and turns to face me, her expression serious for once. “Listen to me. You’re still you. You’re still the girl who makes the best fudge in Sunny Cove and reads romance novels like they’re going out of style. Having sex didn’t erase any of that. It just... added a new chapter. That’s all.”

I blink at her, surprised by the sincerity in her voice. “You really think so?”

“I know so,” she says, grinning again. “You’re still Tyler. You’re just Tyler 2.0 now. Upgraded. With bonus features.”

I laugh despite myself, the tension in my chest easing a little. “Thanks, Cindy. I needed to hear that.”

“Anytime,” she says, picking her sandwich back up. “So, are you seeing Alonzo again?”

I nod, my cheeks heating up. “Yeah. He’s picking me up after nine.”

Cindy raises an eyebrow, her grin turning wicked. “Well, at least you’ve got the day off tomorrow. You can have a sleepover at his place. Maybe even breakfast in bed.”

I groan, shoving her lightly. “You’re impossible.”

“And you’re welcome,” she says, taking another bite of her sandwich. “Now eat your lunch before I start asking for details.”

I roll my eyes but finally open my Tupperware, the smell of leftover pasta reminding me that, yeah, I’m still me. Just... with a few new layers.

The shop is slow after lunch, and Sandy sends us home an hour early. I’m eager to catch a nap so I’m ready for my date with Lanz later tonight.

I flop onto my bed, the springs creaking under me like they’re judging my life choices. My head hits the pillow, but my brain’s still running laps, replaying last night on a loop. Lanz. And then there’s the whole alien thing. Red scales, golden eyes, the kind of strength that could probably bench press a car. But honestly? That’s not the part that’s keeping me up.

It’s the voices in my head. The ones that sound suspiciously like my parents. “Pride is a sin, Tyler. Modesty is a virtue. Good girls don’t...” Ugh. I bury my face in the pillow, trying to drown them out. But they’re persistent, like a song you can’t get out of your head.

I roll onto my back, staring at the ceiling. The fan spins lazily, and I count the

rotations, hoping it'll lull me to sleep. No such luck. My body's still humming from last night, like I've been plugged into an outlet and can't unplug. I want more. I want to explore this new side of me, the one that feels alive in a way I've never felt before. But every time I think about it, there's this little voice whispering, "What would your parents think?"

I groan, throwing an arm over my eyes. "Shut up," I mutter to no one in particular.

The silence of my room feels heavy, like it's pressing down on me. I need to do something, anything, to quiet the noise in my head. My hand drifts to the nightstand drawer, fingers fumbling for the little silicone toy I keep tucked away. It's not like I use it often—okay, maybe more often than I'd admit—but right now, it feels like the only way to shut off my brain.

I pull it out, the smooth surface cool against my skin. My heart's already racing, and I haven't even turned it on yet. I hesitate, the voices in my head getting louder. "Good girls don't..."

"Good girls don't what?" I snap, sitting up. "Don't feel good? Don't enjoy their own bodies? Screw that."

I lock my bedroom door with a decisive click, the sound sealing me in my own little world. The soft flicker of scented candles fills the room, the scent of lavender and vanilla wrapping around me like a warm blanket. Cindy's out, probably on some Tinder date, but I'm not taking any chances. This is my time.

I flop back onto the bed, the mattress bouncing a little as I settle in. My hand reaches for the vibrator on the nightstand, its smooth surface cool against my palm. My heart's already racing, but it's not just anticipation. It's something deeper, something I've been trying to push down for weeks. Or maybe years. Tonight, though? Tonight, I'm done holding back.

I close my eyes and let my mind wander, and of course, it goes straight to Lanz. Not Alonzo Ramone—the billionaire facade—but Lanz. The alien with the golden eyes and scales that shimmer like liquid fire. I think about the way he looked at me last night. The memory is electric.

But then, my thoughts take a turn. I imagine him standing over me. “You’ve been naughty, Tyler,” he’d say, and just like that, I’m over his knee. The first spank is sharp, a jolt of heat that makes me gasp. The second one is harder, and I can almost feel my skin turning red under his hand. It’s not pain—it’s something else. Something that makes my whole body hum.

I press the vibrator against me, the buzz low but steady. My free hand clutches the sheets as I imagine Lanz’s voice in my ear. “You’re mine, Tyler. Say it.”

“I’m yours,” I whisper, my voice trembling. The vibrations build, and I’m right on the edge, teetering there like I’m about to fall. And then I do, the orgasm crashing over me like a wave, dragging me under and leaving me breathless.

For a moment, I just lie there, my chest rising and falling as I come back to myself. Normally, this is the part where guilt creeps in, where I start second-guessing everything. But not tonight. Tonight, I feel... good. Really good.

I yawn, my body heavy with satisfaction, and roll onto my side. The candles are still burning, their soft glow casting shadows on the walls. There are still a few hours before Lanz picks me up. A smile tugs at my lips as I close my eyes, already imagining what’s next.

### CHAPTER 10

#### LANZ

The water's scalding—just the way I like it. The shower's steam curls around me as I scrub my scales, buffing them to a high shine even though Tyler won't see them tonight. The image inducer will do its job, projecting that smooth, human skin she's so fond of. I linger under the spray, my mind wandering to her. Her laugh, her eyes, the way she trembles when I touch her. It's been too long since I've felt anything like this. Too long since someone didn't see me as just a weapon.

I step out, the water dripping off me as I reach for the towel. My reflection in the mirror catches my eye, the faint shimmer of my holographic disguise flickering at the edges. I adjust the settings, making sure it's flawless. Tonight, I'm Alonzo Ramone. Billionaire. Playboy. The man who can give her the world.

The dark grey suit slides on like a second skin, tailored to perfection. I fasten the diamond cufflinks, the gold chain around my neck settling just right. The earrings I picked out for her—simple, elegant, deadly expensive—rest in my pocket. A gift. A reminder. She's mine.

I'm halfway to the garage before it hits me. I didn't plan anything. No yacht, no private chef, no orchestra. Just me. For a moment, panic claws at my chest. What if it's not enough? What if she expects more? Then I shake it off. No. I'll improvise. I've faced worse than a second date without a plan.

The car purrs to life, the engine a low growl as I pull out onto the street. The sun's

setting, the sky painted in shades of orange and pink. It's almost poetic. Almost.

Her apartment building looms ahead, unassuming and quaint. I park and pull out my phone, firing off a quick text. I'm here.

Nothing. Not a single buzz in response. My grip tightens on the phone. She's never ignored me before. Something's wrong.

The thoughts come unbidden. The Golgotha. What if they saw us together? What if they've taken her? My heart pounds, a rare flicker of fear coursing through me. I can't lose her. Not now. Not ever.

I'm out of the car in an instant, moving with purpose. The lock on her door is laughably easy to pick, my tools slipping into place with practiced ease. The door creaks open, and I step inside, my senses on high alert.

"Tyler?" My voice is low, controlled, but there's an edge to it I can't hide.

The apartment's quiet, too quiet. I scan the room, my eyes catching every detail. The couch, the coffee table, the TV still on some cooking show. No signs of a struggle. No signs of her.

I step further in, my boots silent on the carpet. "Tyler, if you're playing a game, it's not funny."

Still nothing. My jaw clenches. I move toward the bedroom, the door slightly ajar. I push it open, ready for anything.

I push the bedroom door open, and there she is. Tyler, curled up in her bed, her blonde hair splayed across the pillow like a halo. She's asleep, her chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. The oversized shirt she's wearing rides up just enough to



reveal the curve of her thigh, and my body can't remember how to breathe.

I stand there, frozen, the tension in my chest unraveling. She's safe. She's fine. I overreacted. The thought hits me like a punch to the gut. Since when do I overreact? Since when does anyone get under my skin like this? I'm a Vakutan, for stars' sake. I've faced down armies, assassinated warlords, and yet here I am, panicking because a human woman didn't answer her phone.

I back out of the room, careful not to make a sound. The door clicks shut behind me. I feel off. This isn't me. This isn't who I'm supposed to be. But the thought of her in danger—it's like a knife twisting in my chest.

I step outside, closing the apartment door behind me, and knock. Three sharp raps, loud enough to wake her. I hear movement inside, the soft padding of feet on the carpet, and then the door opens.

Tyler stands there, sleepy-eyed but smiling. Her hair's a mess, and she's still wearing that oversized shirt, the hem brushing the tops of her thighs. She's barefoot, her toes curling against the cool floor.

"I'm so sorry," she says, her voice thick with sleep. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. I must look like a mess."

I shake my head, my eyes tracing the lines of her legs, the way the fabric clings to her curves. "You look perfect," I say, the words slipping out.

She blushes, her cheeks turning a soft pink. "You're just being nice."

"I'm not." I step closer, my hand brushing against hers. "I'm happy to see you, Tyler. But I feel bad for waking you. I can leave, let you rest."

“No,” she says quickly, her fingers wrapping around my wrist. Her grip is firm, insistent. “Please, stay. Just give me a moment to pull myself together.”

I nod, letting her tug me inside. The apartment smells like her—vanilla and something sweet, like sugar cookies. It’s comforting, familiar. I watch as she disappears into the bedroom, the door closing softly behind her.

I stand there, my heart still racing, and realize something I’ve been trying to ignore. My desire goes far beyond the physical realm. Nothing less than total possession of Tyler will do. Heart, mind, body, and soul. All must be mine, or it’s not enough.

I knock on her door, the sound sharp and insistent. My claws tap against the wood, a rhythm that’s more demand than request. I don’t wait for an answer. I don’t need to. The door creaks open, and there she is, standing by her closet, still in that oversized shirt that hangs off her like a curtain. Her eyes widen when she sees me, her lips parting in surprise.

“Lanz...” she breathes, her voice trembling. “What are you doing?”

I step inside, the door closing behind me with a soft click. My eyes lock onto hers, and I can see the flicker of something in her gaze—fear, curiosity, maybe even a hint of excitement. I don’t give her time to think. I stalk over to her, my movements deliberate, predatory. With one swipe of my clawed hand, I rip the shirt right off her body. The fabric tears like paper, falling to the floor in tatters.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:18 am*

Tyler gasps, her hands flying up to cover herself. But I'm faster. I grab her wrists, my grip firm but not painful, and pull her arms away from her body. She's exposed now, her skin glowing in the soft light streaming through the window. Her breasts rise and fall with each quick breath, her nipples hard and begging for attention. My eyes travel lower, to the curve of her hips, the soft swell of her stomach, and finally to the glistening wetness between her thighs.

"So..." she says, her voice shaking but with a note of something else—something that makes my blood run hot. "I guess I'm not allowed to wear clothes tonight?"

I smirk, my golden eyes narrowing as I lean in closer. "No," I say, my tone rough. "You're not."

I push her against the wall, pinning her arms above her head with one hand. Her body is warm against mine, her skin soft and smooth. I can feel her heart racing, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps. She's scared, but there's something else there too—something that makes my own pulse quicken.

I kiss her then, my lips claiming hers with a hunger that surprises even me. She moans into my mouth, her body arching against mine. Her hands twist in my grip, not to pull away but to hold on, to anchor herself as I take what I want. My tongue slips past her lips, exploring, tasting, claiming. She's sweet, so sweet, and I can't get enough.

When I finally pull back, she's panting, her eyes wide and shining. Her lips are swollen, her cheeks flushed. She looks up at me, her expression a mix of fear and desire, and I know I've got her. She's mine, and she knows it too.

Her wrists are so small in my hand, delicate and warm against my scales. I pin them to the wall above her head, my grip firm but not enough to hurt her. She gasps, her eyes wide, her chest rising and falling with each quick breath. I can smell her arousal, sweet and heady, and it drives me wild. My other hand fumbles with my fly, the fabric giving way as I free myself. She's already wet, her body trembling with anticipation as I press against her.

"Lanz," she whispers, her voice trembling. "What if?—"

I cut her off with a growl, my lips brushing against her ear. "No what ifs. Just me and you."

I push into her slowly, savoring the way she tightens around me, the way her breath quickens in her throat. She's so warm, so tight, and I can't hold back. I thrust into her, hard and deep, my hips slamming against hers with a force that makes the wall shake. She moans, her legs wrapping around my waist, pulling me closer, deeper.

"Yes," she gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders. "Don't stop."

I don't. I can't. My inner beast is loose, and I'm lost in the feel of her, the sound of her, the way she clings to me like I'm the only thing keeping her grounded. Her moans grow louder, more desperate, and I know she's close. So am I.

The sound of the front door opening cuts through the haze of pleasure. Tyler freezes, her eyes wide with panic.

"Cindy's back," she whispers, her voice barely audible.

I don't stop. I can't. I reach out with one long arm, slamming the bedroom door shut with a force that makes the walls tremble. My hand clamps over her mouth, muffling her moans as I thrust into her harder, faster. She's trembling, her body on the edge,

and I can feel her tightening around me, her climax building.

“Tyler, are you awake?” Cindy’s voice is tentative, unsure.

I press my forehead against Tyler’s, my golden eyes locking onto hers. “Don’t make a sound,” I whisper.

She nods, her eyes wide, her body trembling as I push her closer to the edge. Her moans are muffled by my hand, her nails digging into my shoulders as she clings to me. I can feel her climax building, her body tightening around me, and I know she’s close. So am I.

“Tyler?” Cindy’s voice is closer now, just on the other side of the door.

Tyler’s body convulses, her scream muffled by my hand as she comes, her nails digging into my shoulders. I can’t hold back any longer. I thrust into her one last time, my own climax crashing over me as I fill her, my body trembling with the force of it.

The sound of Cindy’s footsteps fades as she leaves, the apartment falling silent once more. I pull back, my hand slipping from Tyler’s mouth as I catch my breath. She’s trembling, her body still pulsing with the aftershocks of her climax, her eyes wide and shining.

“Lanz,” she whispers, her voice trembling. “That was...”

I smirk, my golden eyes narrowing as I lean in closer. “Mine, You’re mine.”

Her words strike something deep inside me, a primal chord I didn't know existed. The way she looks at me, so trusting, so willing - it awakens something both tender and fierce. I lean in to claim her lips again, to seal this moment with a kiss.

But then I see them. Small indentations around her mouth, red marks where my scales pressed too hard against her delicate skin. My blood runs cold.

"Did I hurt you?" The words come out sharp, urgent. Fear grips me - not of her answer, but of myself. Of what I am. Of what I could do to her without meaning to.

But Tyler... she surprises me. Her small hands wrap around my wrist, her grip surprisingly firm. Before I can pull away, she guides my hand back to her mouth, pressing my palm against her lips. Her eyes meet mine, bright and defiant and full of something that makes my heart stutter.

I feel her smile against my palm, her breath warm on my scales. The message is clear - she's not afraid. She wants this. Wants me. All of me.

The restaurant reservations, the carefully planned evening - none of it matters anymore. Not when she's here, looking at me like that, accepting every part of me without hesitation.

"I guess we're staying in," I murmur, my free hand already sliding down her back.

### CHAPTER 11

#### TYLER

His voice is low, a rumble that vibrates through my chest as he says, “I could taste you all night. Sweet, perfect.”

My cheeks burn so hot I’m sure they could melt candle wax. I bury my face in the crook of his neck, the smoothness of his scales cool against my skin.

He laughs softly, his chest shaking beneath me. “Why are you so shy, Tyler? It’s just us.”

“It’s... hard,” I mumble, my fingers tracing the ridges of his collarbone. “Talking about it. I don’t know how.”

“It’s fun,” he says, his golden eyes locked on mine. “Talking like this. Makes it hotter. You ever play with yourself?”

My eyes dart to the nightstand. Shit.

His gaze follows, and I see the spark of realization in his eyes. “Ah,” he says, a sly grin spreading across his face.

“You’re not going to open it, are you?” I blurt out, my voice tight with nerves.

He shakes his head, his expression calm but predatory. “No. You are. Show me

what's in there, and I'll teach you it's nothing to be ashamed of."

I hesitate, my heart racing. The drawer feels like a Pandora's box, but the way he's looking at me—like he's already seeing all of me—makes it impossible to say no.

I sit up, pulling the blanket around me for a shred of modesty, and reach for the drawer. My fingers tremble as I pull it open, revealing the little collection I've been too embarrassed to even look at lately.

His hand is on my back, warm and steady. "Go on," he says, his voice soft but firm.

I pull out the vibrator first, its sleek pink body looking absurdly innocent in the dim light. Then the small bottle of lube, fuzzy handcuffs, a pair of my panties, and finally, the satin blindfold..

Lanz doesn't laugh. Instead, he picks up the vibrator, turning it over in his hands like it's a precious artifact. "Good choices," he says, his tone approving. "You've got taste."

"It's... not like I use them all the time," I stammer, my face burning again.

"Why not?" he asks, setting the vibrator down and picking up the blindfold. "Nothing wrong with knowing what you want."

"It's just... I don't know. It feels... selfish?"

He chuckles, leaning in close. "Selfish is good sometimes, Tyler. You're allowed to take what you need."

His lips brush against my ear, and I shiver. "Now," he murmurs, his breath hot against my skin, "show me how you use these. Teach me what you like."



I swallow hard, my pulse racing. “You want me to...?”

My hands tremble as I pick up the panties, the soft fabric brushing against my lips. I glance at Lanz, his golden eyes locked on me, unblinking. The intensity of his gaze makes my stomach twist, a mix of fear and something hotter, something I can’t quite name. I shove the panties into my mouth, the taste of cotton and my own scent filling my senses. His lips curve into a smirk, and I feel my cheeks burn, but I don’t look away. I won’t.

“Good girl,” he murmurs. “Keep going.”

I fumble with the handcuffs, the cold metal biting into my wrist as I click it into place around the bedframe. The blindfold comes next, the satin smooth against my skin as I pull it over my eyes. The world goes dark, but I can still feel him there, watching, waiting.

My fingers find the vibrator, the cool plastic sending a shiver up my spine. I press it against myself, the buzz starting low, teasing. I bite down on the panties, a muffled moan escaping as the vibrations build. My hips move on their own, chasing the sensation, and I can hear his breathing, heavy and uneven.

“That’s it,” he says, his voice closer now. “You’re so fucking beautiful like this. The sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

His words hit me like a shockwave, and I’m gone, my body arching off the bed as the orgasm crashes over me. The panties fall from my mouth, and I scream, the sound raw and unfiltered. My vision whites out behind the blindfold, and I’m still trembling when he pulls it off, his face inches from mine.

“Look at me,” he commands, and I do, my eyes wide and dazed. He’s holding himself, his cock hard and glistening, and I whimper, my hips lifting off the bed in

silent plea.

His hand wraps around my left wrist, the grip firm but not painful. I don't resist, my breath hitching as he pulls the necktie from around his neck and loops it around my wrist. The silk slides against my skin, cool and smooth, before he ties it to the bedframe. The knot is tight, secure, and the moment he tugs on it to test the hold, I feel a jolt of electricity shoot through me. My body arches off the bed, a moan escaping my lips.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:19 am*

“You like that, don’t you?” he murmurs. His golden eyes lock on mine, and I can’t look away. “Being tied up. Helpless. At my mercy.”

I nod, my throat too tight to speak. My heart thrums in my ears, and my skin feels like it’s on fire. This is it—this is the fantasy I’ve played out in my head a thousand times, only better because it’s real. Because it’s him.

He doesn’t waste time. His hands slide down my body, leaving trails of heat in their wake, and then he’s positioning himself between my legs. I feel the thick head of his cock press against me, and I whimper, my hips lifting off the bed in silent plea. He chuckles, a low, dark sound, and then he’s pushing inside, slow and deliberate, until he’s buried to the hilt.

“Fuck,” I gasp, my nails digging into the sheets. He’s so big, so impossibly big, and it’s all I can do to hold on as he starts to move. His thrusts are deep and steady, each one hitting a spot inside me that makes my vision blur. I wrap my legs around his waist, clinging to him like he’s the only thing keeping me grounded.

“That’s it,” he growls, his hands gripping my hips as he drives into me. “Take it. Take all of it.”

I’m already close, so close, and when he pulls the blindfold back over my eyes, the darkness only heightens the sensation. My world narrows to the feel of him inside me, the sound of his breathing, the way his body moves against mine. And then his hand is over my mouth, muffling my cries as the first orgasm hits me like a tidal wave.

I'm still trembling when the second one starts to build, his thrusts relentless, each one pushing me higher and higher. My body feels like it's on fire, every nerve alight with pleasure, and when the third one hits, I'm screaming into his hand, my body convulsing around him.

He doesn't stop, doesn't slow down, and I'm lost in the sensation, my mind blank except for the feel of him, the sound of his voice, the way he's claiming me, body and soul.

His lips brush my ear, sending. "This is only the beginning, Tyler. Only the start of your journey. I am so privileged to accompany you."

The words catch in my throat. All those romance novels hidden under my bed, the secret fantasies I'd never dared voice - he's made them real. But doubt creeps in, that old familiar friend. "You don't think I'm weird?"

"Tyler, I know you are perfect."

His kiss is different this time - tender, sweet, like I'm something precious to be savored. My doubts dissolve under the gentle pressure of his lips, under the way his hands cradle my face like I'm made of glass. For tonight at least, I believe him. For tonight, I am perfect.

## CHAPTER 12

LANZ

My compad buzzes again, and I glance down at the screen. Another text from Tyler.

"I can't stop thinking about last night. When can I see you again?"

A warmth spreads through my chest, something I'm not used to feeling. I've had plenty of women in my life, but none of them ever made me feel like this. None of them ever made me want to feel like this.

I tap out a quick reply. "Soon. I'll make time for you, Tyler. You're worth it."

The response is almost immediate. "You're worth it too, Lanz. I mean, Alonzo. Sorry, I'm still getting used to the whole secret identity thing."

I chuckle, leaning back in my chair. The office is quiet, the hum of the city far below a distant murmur. My desk is cluttered with intel on Fishy Joe's Cannery—blueprints, surveillance footage, and a list of known Grolgath operatives. But my mind keeps drifting back to her. To the way she looked at me last night, the way she trusted me enough to let me in, both physically and emotionally.

Another buzz. "I have to get back to work. Lunch break's over. But I'll be thinking about you."

I set the compad down, running a hand over my face. Focus, Lanz. You've got a mission. But it's hard to concentrate when all I can think about is the way she moaned my name, the way her body felt against mine.

I force myself to look at the intel spread out before me. The cannery's defenses are formidable—automated turrets, motion sensors, and a network of cameras that make it nearly impossible to approach undetected. I've already tried a direct assault, and that didn't end well. I need a new strategy.

My compad buzzes again, smile. "Just one more thing—I've never felt this way about anyone before. I just wanted you to know that."

I stare at the message for a long moment, my chest tightening. This is dangerous. I'm

not supposed to get attached. But Tyler... she's different. She's not just another conquest, another part of the playboy persona I've crafted. She's real. And she's making me feel things I haven't felt in centuries.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I need to focus. The Grolgath are a threat, and I can't let my personal feelings get in the way of my mission. But as I stare at the blueprints, my mind keeps drifting back to her. To the way she looked at me, the way she trusted me.

I pick up the compad and type out a quick reply. "You're special, Tyler. More than you know. I'll see you soon."

I set the compad down and force myself to focus on the task at hand. The cannery's defenses are formidable, but I'm a Vakutan warrior. I've faced worse. I just need to find a way in. And I will. For Tyler, and for the mission.

I stare at the ceiling. Fishy Joe's Cannery is a fortress, and I'm not stupid enough to charge in again without a plan. But I can't exactly hire a human contractor to scope it out. The last thing I need is some PI stumbling onto Grolgath tech and blowing the whole "aliens from the future" secret wide open. No, I need someone who already knows the score. Someone who won't ask too many questions. Someone who's already neck-deep in this mess.

And that means Gordo.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:19 am*

I groan, rubbing my temples. Gordo. The Fratvoyan is a walking disaster—loud, obnoxious, and perpetually drunk. But he’s also one of the few extraterrestrials in Sunny Cove who’s not actively trying to kill me. Plus, he’s got that Fratvoyan indestructibility going for him. If anyone can survive poking around Fishy Joe’s, it’s him.

I grab my jacket and head for the door. “Hold my calls,” I tell my assistant as I stride past her desk. “And if Pyke checks in, tell him I’m... handling something.”

She nods, already used to my vague excuses. I don’t bother with the elevator—I take the stairs, my boots echoing in the concrete stairwell. The dock district isn’t far, but it’s a world away from the polished glass and steel of Truth-1. Down here, the air smells like salt and rust, and the streets are lined with dive bars and pawn shops. Perfect hunting ground for a Fratvoyan.

I hit the first bar, a dimly lit hole called The Rusty Anchor. The bartender, a grizzled human with a face like a crumpled paper bag, gives me a once-over as I step inside. “Looking for someone?” he asks, wiping down a glass with a rag that’s seen better days.

“Short guy. Bald spot. Probably drunk,” I say, scanning the room.

The bartender snorts. “You just described half my clientele. But if you’re talking about Gordo, he was in here earlier. Tried to pay his tab with a handful of bottle caps. I kicked him out.”

“Charming,” I mutter, tossing a twenty on the bar. “Thanks.”

The next bar is a step up—or maybe a step down, depending on your perspective. The sign outside reads The Salty Dog, and the interior is a chaotic mix of neon lights and sticky floors. I spot Gordo almost immediately. He’s slumped over a table in the corner, a half-empty bottle of whiskey in one hand and a cigarette dangling from his lips. His human disguise is slipping—his bald spot is more pronounced, and his pot belly looks like it’s about to burst out of his shirt.

“Gordo,” I say, sliding into the seat across from him.

He looks up, squinting at me through bloodshot eyes. “Lanz? That you, big guy? Or am I hallucinating again?”

“It’s me,” I say, resisting the urge to grab the whiskey bottle and pour it over his head. “I need your help.”

He laughs, a wheezing sound that turns into a cough. “My help? What, you finally realize you’re not invincible? Need someone to hold your hand while you go pick a fight with the Grolgath?”

“Something like that,” I say, leaning forward. “Fishy Joe’s Cannery. I need intel. And you’re the only one I can trust not to get yourself killed.”

Gordo takes a long swig from the bottle, then sets it down with a thud. “You’re not wrong about that last part. But what’s in it for me?”

“Name your price,” I say, already regretting this.

Gordo leans back in his chair, the wood creaking under his weight, and takes another swig of whiskey. He sets the bottle down with a thud, his eyes narrowing as he looks at me. “A job,” he says, his voice steady despite the alcohol. “That’s my price. A real job. Permanent. With benefits and everything.”



I blink, caught off guard. “I’m giving you a job,” I growl, leaning forward. “You’re helping me with Fishy Joe’s. That’s your job.”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. His bald spot glints under the dim bar light. “I mean a real job. Something that doesn’t end when you’re done using me. Something I can count on.”

I snort, leaning back in my chair. “Gordo, there’s no place in my company for an unreliable drunk. You’re not exactly what I’d call a model employee.”

His face darkens, and for a moment, I think he’s going to throw the bottle at me. Instead, he slams his fist on the table, making the glasses rattle. “You just asked this unreliable drunk for his help,” he snaps, his voice rising. “You think I’m good enough to risk my ass for you, but not good enough to work for you? That’s rich, Lanz. Real rich.”

I wince, realizing I’ve crossed a line. “Alright, alright,” I say, holding up a hand. “I’m sorry. That was... uncalled for.”

He glares at me for a moment longer, then slumps back in his chair, the fight draining out of him. “Why do you want a job, Gordo?” I ask, my tone softer now. “You’ve never been the hustle and grind type. What’s going on?”

He looks down at the table, his fingers tracing the rim of the whiskey bottle. “I’m tired, Lanz,” he says quietly. “Tired of living in the gutter. I came to Earth to escape my problems, but they just followed me here. I’m stuck in this... this cycle. Drinking, fighting, scraping by. I need a change. A new lease on life.”

I watch him, the weight of his words sinking in. Gordo’s always been a mess, but there’s a sincerity in his voice now that I’ve never heard before. “Surely there’s something you need done,” he continues, looking up at me. “Even if it’s just working

in the mailroom or scrubbing toilets. I'll take anything. I just... I need a chance, Lanz."

I lean back, crossing my arms over my chest. I've never seen Gordo like this—vulnerable, almost desperate. It's unsettling. But it's also... honest. And I can't deny that I feel a pang of guilt for the way I've treated him.

"Alright," I say finally, nodding. "You've got a job. I'll find something for you. But you're on probation, Gordo. One screw-up, and you're out. Got it?"

He looks at me, his eyes wide with surprise, then breaks into a grin. "Got it," he says, raising the whiskey bottle in a mock toast. "You won't regret this, Lanz. I promise."

I hope he's right.

"This had better be worth it," Gordo grumbles, shifting in the passenger seat. "My liver needs a break, not a nature hike."

I pull up to the curb, a good half-mile from Fishy Joe's. "Stealth, Gordo. Remember?"

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:19 am*

“Stealth? You’re parking a block away! I’m not exactly built for marathons, Lanz. My legs are shorter than a Grolgath’s attention span.”

“Consider it a warm-up for your new job,” I say, cutting the engine. “Besides, you’re practically indestructible. A little walk won’t kill you.”

He grumbles something about unfair labor practices, but he gets out of the car. He fumbles with his image inducer for a second, then drops the human disguise. His furry form, a bizarre mix of ape and anteater, fills the space he previously occupied. The transformation never ceases to amuse me.

“Don’t forget about the motion sensors,” I remind him.

“Relax, big guy. With my height and fur, they’ll think I’m a deer. Or maybe a mountain lion.”

“Mountain lion is a bit of a stretch,” I mumble.

“What was that?”

“I said, go get ‘em, Lion.”

Gordo grins, showing off rows of sharp teeth. “Go get ‘em? I thought you just wanted me to look around, but I’m always up to snap some Grolgath necks.”

I stifle a laugh. Gordo, a cold-blooded assassin? The image clashes violently with his usual persona of drunken buffoon.

“Just look around, please,” I clarify. “I need a general layout of the defenses. And an idea of how many Grolgath are holed up in there. Intel, Gordo. That’s the mission.”

“You got it,” he says, and starts creeping toward the cannery, his short legs surprisingly stealthy. He melts into the shadows, a furry blur against the rusting metal of the abandoned factory.

I tap my fingers against the steering wheel, checking my watch for the tenth time. Gordo's been gone twenty minutes. To distract myself, I pull out my compad and browse through an upscale chocolatier's website.

Tyler deserves something special. The finest Belgian truffles catch my eye - dark chocolate with hints of sea salt and caramel. I add two dozen roses, deep red ones that'll match the blush that spreads across her cheeks when she's flustered.

The delivery address pulls up Tyler's apartment automatically. My finger hovers over the confirm button, but I pause. Cindy. That spitfire roommate of Tyler's has been surprisingly supportive of our relationship. I add another box of chocolates to the order, these filled with champagne cream.

"Thank you for being such a good friend to Tyler," I type in the gift message."- Alonzo"

I'm just finalizing the delivery time when something slams into the passenger door hard enough to rock the whole car.

"Drive!" Gordo's voice cracks with panic as he yanks the door open and dives inside. "Drive!"

I don't ask questions. The engine roars to life and I slam the accelerator, tires squealing against pavement. In my rearview mirror, two black SUVs burst through

the cannery gates, their engines growling as they accelerate after us.

"What did you do?" I demand, taking a hard right onto the coastal highway.

"Less talking, more driving!" Gordo yelps, gripping the dashboard as we fishtail around a curve.

My supercar's engine screams as I push it harder, the speedometer climbing past a hundred and twenty. The coastal road twists ahead like a serpent, each curve more treacherous than the last. In my rearview mirror, the SUVs maintain their distance, their heavy frames better suited to these mountain switchbacks.

"What kind of defenses are we dealing with?" I ask through gritted teeth, wrestling with the steering wheel as we take another hairpin turn.

"The plasma guns?" Gordo's claws dig into the leather dashboard. "Those are just on the first level. Window dressing."

"Window dressing?" The back end fishtails and I counter-steer, tires squealing. "Those nearly took my head off last time."

"That's nothing compared to what's inside." Gordo's voice drops. "There's at least two hundred Grolgath in there, Lanz. Maybe more."

My blood runs cold. "Two hundred?" The wheel nearly slips from my grip. "That's impossible. They never gather in those numbers. The risk of detection-"

"Well, they have." Gordo glances back as one of the SUVs gains ground. "I counted them myself. Three levels of the cannery, packed with shape-shifting lizards. They're planning something big."

My mind races faster than the car. Two hundred Grolgath. An army. This is way beyond what I can handle alone. The thought of calling in Veritas, of admitting I need help, tastes bitter in my mouth. But if I survive the next ten minutes, I might not have a choice.

## CHAPTER 13

TYLER

The clock on the wall ticks closer to closing time, and I'm just finishing up brushing out a particularly stubborn mat on a Shih Tzu's ear when the bell above the door jingles. Cindy's head snaps up from the counter where she's been scrolling on her phone, and she groans.

"No. No way. We're closing in ten minutes. Tell them to come back tomorrow."

I glance over my shoulder. A man stands in the doorway, holding a leash attached to a poodle that looks like it's been rolling in flour. He's average height, average build, average everything—except for the way he moves. It's... off. Like he's not quite used to his limbs. He steps inside, and the door swings shut behind him with a soft click.

"Hi there," I say, forcing a smile. "What can we do for you?"

"Nails," he says, his voice flat, like he's reading from a script. "Just the nails."

Cindy groans again, louder this time. "Tyler, I'm not staying late for this. I've got plans."

"It's fine," I say, though my stomach twists a little. There's something about this guy that makes my skin crawl. "I'll take care of it."

Cindy narrows her eyes at me, then at the man. "You sure? He looks... weird."

“Cindy,” I hiss, shooting her a look. She shrugs, unapologetic.

“I’m just saying. He’s got that ‘I might be a serial killer’ vibe. You know, like that guy from the true crime podcast we listened to last week.”

“Cindy!” I snap, my face heating up. I glance at the man, but he’s just standing there, staring at us with an expression that’s somehow both blank and intense at the same time.

“What? He’s not even reacting. That’s creepy, right? Normal people would at least laugh or something.”

“Can you just... go take out the trash or something?” I mutter.

Cindy rolls her eyes but grabs the trash bag from behind the counter. “Fine. But if you get murdered, I’m telling the cops I told you so.”

She disappears into the back, and I turn back to the man, forcing another smile. “Sorry about that. She’s... a lot. Let’s get your pup taken care of.”

He nods, still not saying anything, and hands me the leash. The poodle waddles over to me, its tail wagging lazily. It’s a sweet dog, at least, and I kneel down to give it a quick scratch behind the ears.

“What’s his name?” I ask, trying to make conversation.

“Fluffy,” he says, his tone still flat.

“Cute.” I stand up and lead the poodle over to the grooming table. “This won’t take long. Just a quick trim, and you’ll be on your way.”



He follows me, standing a little too close for comfort. I can feel his eyes on me as I lift Fluffy onto the table and start clipping his nails. The silence stretches, thick and uncomfortable, and I find myself babbling just to fill it.

“So, do you live around here? I don’t think I’ve seen you before.”

“No,” he says, his voice clipped.

“Oh. Just visiting, then?”

“Yes.”

I glance up at him, but he’s staring at Fluffy, his expression unreadable. There’s something about the way he’s standing, the way he’s not blinking, that makes my stomach churn. I focus back on the poodle, my hands moving quickly.

I’m just finishing up Fluffy’s nails when the man—Bob, he’d said his name was—leans in a little too close. His breath smells faintly metallic, like he’s been chewing on pennies. I try not to wrinkle my nose as I set the clippers down and give Fluffy a quick pat.

“So,” he says, deliberately, “I’ve seen you around town with that business tycoon. Alfonso Ramone.”

I freeze for a second, my hand still on Fluffy’s back. The way he says it isn’t casual. It’s like he’s testing me, probing for something. I force a laugh, though it comes out a little strained.

“Yeah, I’ve been seeing him socially,” I say, keeping my tone light. “Guess dating a billionaire makes me tabloid fodder, huh?”

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:19 am*

Bob doesn't laugh. He doesn't even smile. He just stares at me with those unblinking eyes, and I feel like a bug under a microscope. My skin prickles, and I busy myself with unclipping Fluffy's leash from the table.

"Are you sexually active with him?" he asks, his voice flat, like he's asking about the weather.

My head snaps up, and I glare at him. "Excuse me? That's not an appropriate question."

He doesn't even flinch. Just keeps staring at me, his expression blank. I half expect him to apologize, but instead, he tilts his head slightly, like he's considering something.

"Do you think Mr. Ramone cares about you deeply?" he asks, his tone unchanged.

I blink, caught off guard. The question feels like a punch to the gut, and I don't know how to answer. My mind races, trying to figure out what he's getting at, why he's asking these things. I take a step back, putting some distance between us.

"I... I don't see how that's any of your business," I say, my voice sharper than I intended. "Look, Fluffy's all set. You can take him now."

I hand him the leash, but he doesn't take it right away. He just stands there, staring at me, and for a moment, I wonder if he's even human. There's something off about him, something I can't quite put my finger on. Finally, he takes the leash, his fingers brushing against mine. His skin is cold, and I pull my hand back quickly.

“Thank you,” he says, his voice still flat. He turns and walks toward the door, Fluffy trotting beside him. Just before he leaves, he pauses and looks back at me. “Be careful, Miss Wilcox.”

The door closes behind him, and I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. My heart’s pounding, and I feel like I’ve just been through an interrogation. I glance at the time. Five minutes to closing. I can’t wait to get out of here.

I pull out my phone the second the door closes behind Bob, my fingers trembling as I dial Lanz’s number. It rings once, twice, then goes straight to voicemail. His smooth, confident voice fills my ear, but it’s not him. It’s just a recording.

“Hey, it’s me,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “Something weird just happened at work. This guy came in, and he was... off. He asked me about you. About us. I don’t know, it freaked me out. Call me when you get this, okay?”

I hang up and stare at the screen for a moment, half expecting him to call back immediately. When he doesn’t, I shove the phone into my pocket and get back to work. Cindy’s already gone, and I’m left alone with the hum of the fluorescent lights and the faint smell of wet dog.

By the time I finish closing up, the sun’s dipping low in the sky, casting long shadows across the street. I step outside, locking the door behind me, and glance around. Everything looks normal—tourists snapping photos, locals hurrying home, the usual buzz of Sunny Cove’s downtown. But the back of my neck prickles, like someone’s watching me.

I scan the crowd, but no one stands out. Just faces, all of them blending together. Still, I can’t shake the feeling. I stick to the busiest streets, weaving through groups of people, my heart pounding with every step. Every time someone brushes past me, I flinch.

When I finally reach my apartment building, I'm almost running. I'm halfway up the stairs when I hear voices—Cindy's laugh, high and bright, and then a deeper, familiar tone. My stomach drops.

I round the corner, and there he is. Bob. Standing at my door, talking to Cindy like they're old friends. Cindy's leaning against the doorframe, her arms crossed, grinning like she's in on some joke.

"Tyler!" she says, spotting me. "This guy says he knows you. He's been waiting for, like, ten minutes. I was just keeping him company."

Bob turns to look at me, his expression blank. "Miss Wilcox," he says, his voice flat. "We need to talk."

My mouth goes dry. "What are you doing here?"

He doesn't answer right away. Just stares at me with those unblinking eyes. Cindy glances between us, her grin fading.

"Uh, should I... go?" she asks, her voice uncertain.

"No," I say quickly, my voice sharper than I mean it to be. "Stay."

Bob tilts his head slightly, like he's considering something. "This is a private matter," he says, his tone unchanged.

"Yeah, well, I don't know you," I snap, my heart racing. "And I don't want to talk to you. So whatever it is, you can say it in front of her."

Cindy raises an eyebrow, looking from me to Bob and back again. "Uh, okay. What's going on?"

Bob doesn't take his eyes off me. "I'm here to warn you," he says. "About Alonzo Ramone."

My stomach twists. "What about him?"

"He's not who you think he is," Bob says, his tone flat. "And if you continue to associate with him, you'll be in danger."

Cindy snorts. "Danger? What, is he, like, a mob boss or something?"

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*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:19 am*

Bob doesn't laugh. He doesn't even smile. He just keeps staring at me, his expression unreadable.

"I'm serious," he says. "You need to stay away from him."

I take a step back, my heart pounding. "Who are you?"

He doesn't answer. Just turns and walks away, his footsteps echoing down the hall. Cindy watches him go, her mouth hanging open.

"What the hell was that?" she asks, turning to me.

I don't answer. I can't. My mind's racing, trying to make sense of what just happened. All I know is that I've never been more scared in my life.

## CHAPTER 14

### LANZ

The plasma bolt sizzles past the car, close enough to make the air crackle with heat. Gordo lets out a whoop, slapping the dashboard like he's just won the lottery.

"They missed!" he crows, his voice dripping with triumph.

I grip the wheel tighter, my scales itching under my human disguise. "No, they didn't."

The plasma round detonates on the road ahead, a fiery explosion that sends chunks of asphalt flying. The shockwave rattles the car, and for a split second, I'm blinded by the glare.

"Hold on," I bark, yanking the wheel hard to the left and pulling the handbrake. The tires screech, rubber burning as the car fishtails. I'm aiming for the edge of the crater, hoping to drift around it before the Grolgath catch up.

Gordo's claws dig into the seat. "You're gonna kill us before they do!"

"Shut up and let me drive."

The car slides in a perfect half-circle, skirting the edge of the crater. The heat from the blast sears through the windows, sweat dripping down my back. Behind us, the SUVs slow to a crawl, their drivers hesitating at the gaping hole in the road.

Gordo lets out a low whistle, leaning back in his seat. "Nice driving, Vin Diesel."

I glare at him, my golden eyes narrowing. "If I'm him, then you must be one of my annoying sidekicks."

He grins, his human disguise flickering for a moment to reveal his natural Fratvayan form—furry, with a snout that's way too long for his face. "Annoying? I'm the comic relief. You'd be lost without me."

"I'd be quieter without you," I mutter, flooring the gas. The engine roars, and we shoot down the road, putting distance between us and the SUVs.

Gordo glances over his shoulder, his grin fading. "They're not giving up, you know. Those Grolgath are like bad habits—hard to shake."

“I noticed,” I snap, checking the rearview mirror. The SUVs are gaining again, their headlights cutting through the smoke and debris.

“So, what’s the plan? Or are we just winging it?”

“We’re winging it,” I admit, swerving around a parked car. “But if you’ve got any bright ideas, now’s the time.”

The SUVs are closing in, and I can see the Grolgath leaning out the windows, their plasma launchers glowing.

“Buckle up,” I say. “This is about to get messy.”

Gordo grins, his teeth glinting in the dim light. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Open the glove box,” I bark, my eyes flicking between the road and the rearview mirror. The SUVs are gaining, their headlights like twin suns burning into my retinas. “Hand me the laser pistol inside.”

Gordo fumbles with the latch, his stubby fingers clumsy in his panic. The glove box pops open, and he pulls out the weapon, his eyes widening as he takes in the sleek, alien design. “A Pan Galactic Bargleblaster? It’s a war crime to use one of these!”

I snatch the gun from his fingers, my grip firm. “Only if you use it on a sapient life form.”



*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:19 am*

I roll down the window, the wind whipping through the car. The cliffside looms on our left, jagged and unforgiving. I aim the Bargleblaster, the barrel steady despite the car's jolting movements. The weapon hums as I pull the trigger, a beam of energy slicing through the rock. The cliffside groans, then collapses in a cascade of boulders and dust.

The first SUV swerves, narrowly avoiding the rockslide. The second isn't so lucky. A massive boulder slams into its hood, sending it spinning off the road and tumbling down the steep incline into the valley below. The explosion echoes in the distance, a fiery punctuation to their demise.

"One of them is still on us," Gordo says, his voice tight. "Use it again!"

I shake my head, my eyes scanning the terrain ahead. "I'm fresh out of cliffside. We're on level ground now." I glance at him, my expression grim. "Besides, we're moving into a populated area. I can't use alien weaponry around humans."

Another plasma blast sizzles past the car, close enough to make the air crackle. I jerk the wheel, the tires screeching as we swerve to avoid it. The Grolgath aren't playing around.

"You want to tell the Ataxians that?" Gordo asks, his tone dripping with sarcasm. He gestures wildly at the rearview mirror, where the remaining SUV is closing in fast. "Because they don't seem to care about your rules."

I grit my teeth, my mind racing. The city lights are just ahead, a glittering sprawl of humanity. I can't risk exposing myself—or them—to the Grolgath's wrath. But if I

don't do something soon, we're both dead.

"Hold on," I say, my voice low. "I've got an idea."

I wrench the wheel hard, yanking up the handbrake. The world spins, tires screaming against asphalt. My stomach lurches as we whip around, the g-forces pressing me back into my seat. The car completes its 180, and now we're staring down the approaching SUV, their headlights blazing like demon eyes.

My foot slams the gas pedal. The engine roars, tires finding purchase. We rocket forward, straight at the oncoming vehicle.

"What are you doing?" Gordo's voice cracks with terror.

"I'm playing Pheasant."

"Playing Chicken, you mean." His claws dig deeper into the seat. "And that's suicide! They're bigger than we are!"

A fierce grin splits my face, my golden eyes reflecting the approaching headlights. "So they are."

"The odds of them turning before we do are slim to none."

I grab the shifter, ramming it into top gear. The engine screams as we hurtle toward certain death. "Never tell me the odds."

I hit the button to release Gordo's seat belt, the click barely audible over the roar of the engine. The SUV's headlights are blinding now, filling the car with a harsh, white glare.

“I’m going to miss this car,” I say wistfully, my fingers tightening on the wheel. The leather feels warm under my palms, the scent of polished wood and expensive upholstery filling my nostrils. It’s a shame, really. This car was a masterpiece.

“What are you doing?” Gordo sputters, his voice rising an octave. “Why did you take off my?—”

The impact cuts him off. Metal screams, glass shatters, and the world becomes a blur of violence. The force of the collision slams me into the steering wheel, but my scales absorb the worst of it. Gordo, however, isn’t so lucky—or maybe he is, depending on how you look at it.

He flies through the windshield like a furry cannonball, his human disguise flickering as he crashes into the front seat of the SUV. The Grolgath driver stares at him, stunned, his reptilian frills twitching in confusion. Gordo doesn’t waste any time. He leans over and vomits all over the guy, the acidic stench of his explosive bile filling the air.

I tear myself free from the wreckage, my claws ripping through the twisted metal like it’s paper. The car groans as I push the door open, the hinges protesting with a metallic screech. I grab Gordo by the scruff of his neck and yank him out of the SUV, his fur matted with bile and glass.

“Move!” I bark, dragging him toward the ditch. The heat from the wreck is intense, the flames licking at the edges of my vision. We dive into the ditch just as both cars explode, the fireball lighting up the night sky. The shockwave hits us like a freight train, the force pressing us into the dirt. The heat is unbearable, the air thick with the acrid smell of burning fuel and melted metal.

Gordo rolls onto his back, coughing and sputtering. His fur is singed, and his human disguise is completely gone, revealing his natural Fratvoyan form. He glares at me,

his beady eyes narrowing.

“This fucking job better come with a corner office and a nymphomaniac secretary!” he growls, his voice hoarse.

I smirk, brushing dirt off my suit. “You’ll get a desk and a coffee machine. Be grateful.”

He sits up, shaking glass out of his fur. “A coffee machine? That’s it? I just got launched through a windshield, puked on a Grolgath, and nearly got incinerated, and all I get is a damn coffee machine?”

I shrug, my golden eyes glinting in the firelight. “You’re alive, aren’t you? That’s more than I can say for them.” I jerk my head toward the burning wreckage, the flames casting long shadows across the road.

Gordo mutters something under his breath, something that sounds suspiciously like a curse in his native tongue. He stands, brushing himself off, and glares at me again. “Next time, you’re the one flying through the windshield.”

I grin, my sharp teeth gleaming. “Deal.”

### CHAPTER 15

#### TYLER

Cindy's voice is a whisper, but it cuts through the dark apartment like a knife. "Get in the pantry. Now."

I don't argue. My heart's already thumping so hard I'm surprised Cindy can't hear it. The pantry door creaks as I slip inside, the smell of canned soup and stale cereal enveloping me. I grip the hockey stick tight, my palms slick with sweat. The pantry's tiny, and I'm hunched over, my knees brushing against boxes of rice and pasta.

"Lights off," Cindy hisses from somewhere in the living room. The room plunges into darkness, and I hear her shuffling across the floor.

"You still there?" I whisper, my voice trembling.

"Shut up, Tyler!" Cindy snaps. "If it's Bob, we're jumping him. No questions."

I press my back against the shelves, the hockey stick held awkwardly in front of me. My breath comes in short, shallow bursts. The pantry's too warm, too tight. My nightshirt clings to my skin. I keep thinking about Bob's milky white eyes, how they seemed to pierce right through me. Was he really one of those Grolgath things Lanz mentioned? The thought sends a chill through me.

The sound of the car pulling up outside grows louder, then cuts off. My stomach twists. I strain to listen, but all I can hear is the blood rushing in my ears.

“Do you hear that?” Cindy whispers.

“Hear what?” I mouth the words, barely audible.

“Footsteps.” Her voice is tight, panicked. “Someone’s coming up the stairs.”

My heart skips a beat. I grip the hockey stick tighter, the wood digging into my palms. The pantry door feels flimsy, like it won’t stop anything—let alone an alien.

I’m crouched in the pantry, my heart slamming against my ribs, when the knock comes. My mouth goes dry. Before I can even whisper, “Should we answer?” the door swings open with a creak that makes my skin crawl. A dark shape steps inside, silhouetted against the hallway light. I can’t make out who it is, just the broad shoulders and the way it moves, deliberate and smooth.

“Charge!” Cindy shouts, her voice sharp and wild.

I burst out of the pantry, swinging the hockey stick with everything I’ve got. It connects with a sickening crack, the impact reverberating up my arms and leaving them numb, tingling. The stick splinters in my hands, and I stumble back, clutching the jagged end. Cindy’s standing frozen, her golf club bent like a pretzel, her face pale.

“How rude!” Lanz’s voice cuts through the chaos, his tone light, almost amused.

I blink, my vision finally adjusting to the dim light. There he is, Alonzo Ramone in his cream suit, looking like he just walked off a yacht, not like someone who just took a hockey stick to the head. He’s smiling, but his golden eyes flicker to Cindy, and for a split second, I see it—the realization dawning on him. He’s just shown off his Vakutan durability in front of a human who shouldn’t know he’s anything but a wealthy playboy.

“I mean, ow,” he says suddenly, his voice shifting, his hand flying to his forehead like he’s in a bad soap opera. He winces dramatically, his face contorting in exaggerated pain. “That hurt. I may need medical attention.”

Cindy’s grip on the golf club tightens, her knuckles white. She’s staring at him like he’s grown a second head—which, considering what I know, isn’t far off. “What the hell?” she mutters, her voice shaky. “I hit you with everything I had, and you’re just... standing there.”

Lanz glances at me, his expression softening. “Tyler, darling,” he says, his voice smooth, but there’s a warning in his eyes. “Would you mind explaining to your friend here why I’m not currently unconscious?”

I swallow hard, my mind racing. “Uh... he’s got a really hard head?” I offer weakly, shrugging. “Like, freakishly hard. Maybe he’s part brick.”

Cindy narrows her eyes, her gaze darting between me and Lanz. “Yeah, no. That’s not it. What are you not telling me, Tyler?”

I exchange glances with Lanz. He gives me a slight nod, then turns back to Cindy, a strange glint in his golden eyes. “Are you the type of person who pulls band-aids off quickly, or slowly?” he asks, his voice calm, almost conversational.

Cindy cocks an eyebrow, her grip on the bent golf club loosening slightly. “Quickly,” she says. “Why prolong the agony? But I don’t see what this has to do with?”

Her voice trails off as Lanz drops his holographic disguise. The air shimmers for a second, and then there he is, seven feet of red-scaled Vakutan, ridges prominent on his face, golden eyes glowing in the dim light. Cindy’s mouth opens and closes a few times, like a fish out of water. Then, she points a shaky finger at him.

“Oh, I get it,” she says, her voice a little higher pitched than usual. “You had one of those weird surgeries that only super-rich people can afford to make yourself capable of living on Mars. Listen, is there a discount program? Because I’d love to have impenetrable scales. I’d never need oven mitts again.”

“Cindy,” I say carefully, trying to keep my voice steady. “Alonzo... Lanz isn’tgoingto another planet. He’s, um, he’sfromanother planet.”

Cindy nods slowly, as if this is all perfectly casual, perfectly normal. “Oh, okay. Cool. Which planet?—”

Her eyes roll back in her head, and she crumples to the floor like a discarded marionette. Lanz catches her before she hits the ground, his movements surprisingly gentle for someone his size. He looks down at her unconscious form, a flicker of amusement in his eyes.



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“Well, that was easier than I expected.” He glances at me, one eyebrow raised. “Perhaps your friend isn’t quite as quick with the band-aids as she claimed.”

I grab my vanilla-scented candle from the bathroom while Lanz lifts Cindy into the armchair like she weighs nothing. His scales catch the light as he moves, and I still can't believe this is my life now.

I wave the lit candle under Cindy's nose. Her face scrunches up.

"Ugh, I hate vanilla," she mutters, eyes fluttering open.

"I know, but I didn't have any smelling salts." I set the candle aside, watching her face carefully.

Cindy stares at Lanz, her mouth dropping open again. But this time she stays conscious, though her knuckles are white where she grips the chair arms.

"So..." I clear my throat. "Remember those sci-fi movies you always make fun of me for watching? Turns out they weren't so far off. There are aliens - good ones like Lanz here, and bad onestoo. The Grolgath are trying to mess up our future, but Lanz and his people are protecting us."

"I get the whole intergalactic war thing, and preserving the sacred timeline," Cindy says, her voice steadier than I expected. "But why pretend to be a billionaire?"

Lanz's golden eyes gleam with amusement. "I don't pretend to be a billionaire. I actually am one. And my chief goal is to fund Veritas. We're not exactly the March of

Dimes." His expression shifts to something more serious. "Now...why is it exactly that you attacked me?"

My fingers twist nervously in the hem of my nightshirt. "Lanz, there's something I need to tell you. Bob came by the groomer's today. He was... weird. Asked a lot of questions. Like if we were dating, if we'd slept together, if you cared about me. Then he showed up here, talking to Cindy, and warned us to stay away from you. Said it was dangerous."

Lanz's golden eyes narrow, the ridges on his face sharpening as his expression hardens. The air in the room feels heavier, like a storm's about to break. "He asked if we'd slept together for a specific reason," he says, his voice edged with something I can't quite place.

"What's that?" I ask, my stomach twisting.

"Bob knows our disguises are only illusory. Any... intimate relations would, of course, result in the discovery of my scaled skin, by tactile senses if not visual ones," Lanz explains, his tone matter-of-fact but his eyes still burning with intensity.

Cindy, who's been sitting quietly in the armchair, perks up. "So, Bob was trying to figure out if we knew you were really an alien?" she asks, her voice tinged with disbelief.

"Yes, Cindy," Lanz says, his gaze flicking to her. "You catch on quickly."

Cindy gives him a sarcastic snort and a glare that could melt steel. "I catch on quickly, but you're pretty dense. I mean, if you want to have sex and hide your scaly skin, you just dress yourself and your date in those full-body latex suits. Problem solved!"

I rub the bridge of my nose, feeling a headache coming on. "Cindy, how would that even work if you're wearing full-body suits?" I ask, my voice strained.

"Well, there's these zippers that—" Cindy starts, her hands gesturing wildly as if she's about to launch into a detailed explanation.

Lanz cuts her off with a sharp wave of his hand. "We're getting sidetracked from the main point. Cindy, Tyler, you could be in great danger. Bob's probing means he's assessing how much you know—and how much of a threat you are to him."

The room falls silent, the weight of his words settling over us like a heavy blanket. I glance at Cindy, who's gone pale, her earlier bravado evaporating. My heart pounds in my chest, the reality of the situation crashing down on me. This isn't just about me and Lanz anymore. Cindy's involved now, and I can't let anything happen to her.

I turn to Lanz, my heart pounding. "What are we going to do? If the Grolgath can look like anyone, how can we keep ourselves safe?"

Lanz's golden eyes gleam with determination. "I will contact Veritas immediately and have agents posted for protection detail. They will be disguised, so you'll never even know they're there."

Cindy scoffs, crossing her arms over her chest. "Protection detail, huh? No offense, but I don't want some giant alien following me around and cramping my style."

Lanz fixes her with a steady gaze. "You will never notice they are there, or likely even see them as they will be disguised," he says firmly. "Besides, you have no choice in the matter. Your safety is paramount."

I bite my lip, considering his words. The idea of having protection is reassuring, but Cindy's right - the thought of a hulking Vakutan shadowing us everywhere isn't

exactly appealing. "Is there anything else we can do?" I ask. "Something that doesn't involve bodyguards?"

Lanz's lips curve into a sly smile. "As a matter of fact, there is." He pauses, his gaze sweeping over us. "How do you feel about getting a dog?"

Cindy raises an eyebrow. "A dog? What's that going to do?"

"Dogs can detect Grolgath, no matter their disguise," Lanz explains. "Their senses are far more acute than a human's. A canine companion would be an invaluable early warning system."

I nod slowly, warming to the idea. "That could work. But our landlord doesn't allow pets."

Lanz's smile widens. "Not a problem." He steps out into the hallway, pulling out his compad. "Give me a moment."

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Cindy and I exchange a puzzled glance as we listen to Lanz's muffled conversation. After a few minutes, he returns, looking pleased with himself.

"There, it's all taken care of," he announces. "I've bought the building, changed the rules about pets, and even reduced your rent to nothing."

Cindy's jaw drops. "You what? How the hell did you manage that?"

Lanz's golden eyes sparkle with amusement. "I have my ways," he says cryptically. "Now, shall we go dog shopping?"

I can't help but smile, the tension in my shoulders easing slightly. Lanz's quick thinking has given us a sense of security, and the prospect of getting a furry protector is strangely comforting. As we head out the door, I glance back at Cindy, who still looks a bit bewildered.

"This is all so crazy," she mutters, shaking her head. "But I guess if we're going to be caught up in an intergalactic war, we might as well do it in style, right?"

I chuckle, linking my arm through hers. "That's the spirit," I say, feeling a newfound sense of determination. Whatever challenges lie ahead, I know Lanz will be there to help us navigate them. And with a loyal canine by our side, maybe we can even give those Grolgath a run for their money.

## CHAPTER 16

LANZ

The pet store smells like kibble and fresh pine shavings, the kind of earthy scent that makes you feel like you're in a forest full of tiny, yapping predators. Tyler's already halfway down the aisle, her hands pressed against the glass of a puppy pen, her face lit up like she's just discovered the meaning of life.

"Oh my God, Lanz, look at this one!" she squeals, pointing at a ball of fluff that's currently trying to eat its own tail. "It's so tiny! And look at its little ears! They're like little triangles!"

I lean against the pen, arms crossed, watching her. "That's a Chihuahua. They're basically rats with delusions of grandeur."

She gasps, mock-offended, and swats my arm. "Don't be mean! He's adorable. Look at his little face!" She crouches down, making cooing noises that would probably summon a pack of wolves if we were in the wild. The Chihuahua wags its tail so hard it looks like it's about to take flight.

"Adorable," I deadpan. "If you're into creatures that could fit in a teacup and still have room for a biscuit."

She sticks her tongue out at me and moves on to the next pen, where a golden retriever puppy is flopped on its back, paws in the air, looking like it's auditioning for a doggy yoga commercial. "Oh, this one! Look at his belly! It's so round!"

I raise an eyebrow. "You're not picking a dog based on its ability to double as a beanbag chair, Tyler."

She ignores me, reaching her fingers through the bars to let the puppy lick them. "But he's so sweet! And look at his eyes! They're like little pools of melted chocolate."

"Melted chocolate," I repeat, deadpan. "You're really leaning into the poetic

descriptions today.”

She grins up at me, her cheeks pink. “I’m just excited, okay? I’ve never had a puppy before. My parents always said they were too much work.”

“They’re not wrong,” I say, but I can’t help the smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. Watching her like this, all wide-eyed and giddy, is... refreshing. Like seeing the world through a lens I didn’t know existed.

She moves on to the next pen, where a pug is sitting like a little Buddha, its wrinkled face scrunched up in what can only be described as existential despair. “Oh. My. God.” She turns to me, her eyes shining. “This one. This is the one.”

I glance at the pug, which is currently snorting like it’s trying to clear its sinuses. “You’re sure? It looks like it’s judging us.”

“Yes!” She claps her hands together, bouncing on her toes. “Look at his little face! He’s perfect. I’m naming him Chop Suey.”

“Chop Suey,” I repeat, trying not to laugh. “Because...?”

“Because he’s wrinkly and adorable, like a little dumpling!” she says, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. She turns back to the pug, who’s now wagging its tail so hard its entire body is wiggling. “Aren’t you, Chop Suey? Yes, you are!”

I shake my head, but I can’t stop smiling. “Alright, Chop Suey it is. Let’s get him before he starts quoting Nietzsche.”

She beams at me, a, I forget about the Grolgath, the mission, the fact that I’m an alien in a human suit. All I see is her, holding that ridiculous little dog like it’s the most precious thing in the universe.

On the way back to her apartment, she cradles Chop Suey in her arms, whispering nonsense to him like he's a baby. The pug snorts in response, his tongue lolling out of his mouth like he's trying to catch flies. I watch her out of the corner of my eye, something warm and unfamiliar spreading through my chest.

“You're really happy, aren't you?” I ask, my voice softer than I intended.

She looks up at me, her smile so bright it could power a small city. “Yeah. I am. Thanks for this, Lanz. It means a lot.”



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I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Everything feels fine as it is. And it's all because of her.

I pull up to Tyler's apartment, the engine of the car purring like a contented beast. Chop Suey is snoring in her arms, his little pug face scrunched up like he's dreaming of chasing squirrels. Tyler's smiling down at him, her fingers absently scratching behind his ears. It's a good look on her—relaxed, happy, unburdened. I like it.

“You sure you don't want me to come up?” I ask, leaning across the console. My hand brushes her knee, and she shivers, her cheeks flushing.

“I'm sure,” she says, but there's a flicker of hesitation in her eyes. “You've got work to do, right? Alien stuff?”

“Alien stuff,” I confirm, smirking. “But it can wait.”

She shakes her head, her smile softening. “No, it can't. You're protecting me, remember? Go do your thing. I'll be fine.”

I glance around the street, my eyes catching on the subtle signs of Veritas agents—a man reading a newspaper on a bench, a woman walking a dog that's too well-trained to be just a pet. They're good. Almost too good. But I spot them, and it eases the tightness in my chest.

“Alright,” I say, leaning in to kiss her. She meets me halfway, her lips warm and sweet. Chop Suey lets out a snort of protest, squished between us, and we both laugh.

“Be careful,” she whispers against my mouth, her breath hitching. “Promise me.”

I pull her closer, the puppy and all, and press my forehead to hers. “I promise. Nothing’s going to happen to you. Not while I’m around.”

She nods, her eyes searching mine for a moment before she pulls away. “I’ll see you later?”

“Count on it,” I say, watching as she gets out of the car and heads up the steps to her apartment. She turns at the door, waving, and I wait until she’s inside before driving off.

The office is quiet when I get there, the hum of the city muted by the thick glass walls. I head straight for the holocom room, the door hissing shut behind me. The air shimmers as the connection establishes, and Pyke’s face materializes in front of me, his red scales catching the light.

“Lanz,” he says, his voice gravelly. “Status?”

“Tyler’s safe,” I say, leaning against the console. “Veritas agents are in place. But we’ve got a problem.”

“The Cannery,” Pyke says, nodding. “I’ve moved all the agents I can spare into the area, but it’s less than twenty. A direct assault isn’t an option.”

“No kidding,” I mutter, running a hand through my hair. “We’re outnumbered ten to one. We need a different approach.”

“Agreed,” Pyke says, his golden eyes narrowing. “Bob’s been active. He’s left a trail, even if he doesn’t know it. Find it. Figure out what he’s planning.”

“Legwork,” I say, sighing. “My favorite.”

Pyke’s lips twitch, the closest he gets to a smile. “You’re good at it. And Lanz—don’t get cocky. This isn’t just about you anymore.”

I nod, the weight of his words settling on my shoulders. “I know. I’ll keep her safe.”

“See that you do,” Pyke says, and the connection cuts out, leaving me alone in the dimly lit room. I stare at the empty space where his hologram had been, my mind already racing. Bob’s out there, and he’s not going to stop until he gets what he wants. But neither am I.

"Computer, activate city-wide surveillance protocol alpha-seven."

The wall of screens flickers to life, flooding my office with a blue glow. Data streams across multiple displays - traffic cameras, cell tower pings, social media posts, credit card transactions.

"Track subject designation: Bob. Last known appearance at Doggone Elegance pet grooming."

The AI compiles the data, building a movement pattern. Red dots appear on the city map, tracking Bob's path through Sunny Cove over the past 48 hours.

"Interesting." I lean forward, studying the cluster of points. "He's visited both the St. Mary's and Good Shepherd homeless shelters."

The Grolgath have always had a weird relationship with charity. Their religious texts preach about uplifting the downtrodden, which leads to some surprisingly humanitarian behavior from a race hell-bent on temporal manipulation.

But this doesn't feel right. Bob's not the type for random acts of kindness.

I pull up my compad and dial Gordo's frequency. His furry face appears, bloodshot eyes suggesting he's nursing another hangover.

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"I need you to do some recon. Bob's been sniffing around the homeless shelters. Find out why."

"You want me to play homeless?" Gordo's nose wrinkles. "I'll need hazard pay."

"Done. Just get in there and figure out what he's up to."

"Fine. But you owe me a case of Fratvuyan ale for this one."

I end the call and turn back to the monitors. What are you planning, Bob? The homeless population would make perfect cover for infiltrating Grolgath agents. Nobody looks too closely at the people society tries to ignore.

I pull out my compad. The screen lights up, and I tap out a quick message to Tyler.

How's the puppy settling in?

The reply comes almost instantly. He's great! Cindy's obsessed with him too. She's been carrying him around like a baby all afternoon.

I smirk, imagining the scene. Chop Suey probably looks like a tiny, wrinkled dictator holding court over Tyler and Cindy.

Good to hear. Sounds like he's already running the place.

Her next message makes me pause. It's been a while since I spent the night, though.

I raise an eyebrow, my scales shifting slightly as I grin. Subtle, Tyler. Very subtle.

I've got meetings until late, but I'll send a car for you after 9. Be ready.

The response is immediate, and it's not a text. My compad buzzes, and I open the attachment. It's a photo—Tyler, naked, her skin glowing in the soft light of her bedroom. She's lying on her side, one hand resting on her hip, the other holding the phone. Her lips are parted, her eyes half-lidded, and the look she's giving the camera is pure sin.

I feel my body react instantly, a low growl rumbling in my chest. My scales ripple, the heat of arousal spreading through me. I stare at the image, my mind already racing with all the things I'm going to do to her tonight.

You're playing a dangerous game, little human, I type, my fingers moving quickly. I hope you're ready for the consequences.

Her reply is teasing. I'm counting on it.

I set the compad down, forcing myself to focus on the task at hand. Gordo's report should be coming in soon, and I need to be ready to move the moment it does. But my mind keeps drifting back to Tyler, to the way she looked in that photo, to the way she's going to look when I have her in my bed tonight.

Soon, I'll make all of her dreams come true. And mine, too.

As long as the Grolgath don't kill us first.

## CHAPTER 17

### TYLER

The pug puppy, Chop Suey, flops onto his side on the living room rug, his little belly rising and falling in a contented rhythm. Cindy scoops him up with a laugh, cradling him like a baby.

“Look at you, you little menace,” she coos, scratching behind his floppy ears. “Three hours of chaos and now you’re out cold. You’re lucky you’re this cute.”

“You’re really taking him to bed with you?” I grin, leaning against the arm of the couch. “He’s supposed to be my dog, you know.”

Cindy shoots me a playful glare. “Oh, please. You’re ditching him tonight to go play space princess with your alien boyfriend. Someone’s gotta keep him company.”

“Space princess?” I snort, even as my cheeks heat up. “That’s not a thing.”

“It is now.” She adjusts Chop Suey in her arms, his tiny tongue lolling out in his sleep. “Besides, you’ve got that glow. You know, the ‘I’m getting laid by a literal alien who looks like a billionaire supermodel’ glow. I’m just saying, if I were you, I wouldn’t be hanging around here either.”

I roll my eyes but can’t fight the smile tugging at my lips. “You’re insufferable.”

“And you’re adorable.” She heads toward her room, calling over her shoulder, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. Wait, no—do everything I wouldn’t do. Have fun, space princess.”

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The apartment falls quiet after her door shuts, save for the faint snores of Chop Suey drifting from Cindy's room. I sink into the couch, my fingers drumming restlessly on my knee. My mind drifts to Lanz, to the way he looks at me like I'm the only thing in the room, the way his hands feel on my skin, the way he makes me feel like I'm not just Tyler—I'm his Tyler.

It's ridiculous, really, how much he's changed me. A month ago, I was just a dog groomer who spent her nights reading spicy romance novels and wondering if I'd ever find someone who made me feel the way those heroes made their heroines feel. And now? Now I'm here, waiting for a car to pick me up so I can spend the night with a seven-foot-tall alien who somehow manages to be both terrifying and the sweetest person I've ever met.

I glance at the phone. The car should be here soon. My stomach twists with anticipation, a mix of excitement and something deeper, something I'm not quite ready to name. I've never been one to rush into things, but with Lanz, it feels different. Like I'm not rushing at all—like this is exactly where I'm supposed to be.

My phone buzzes on the coffee table, and I practically lunge for it. Lanz's name lights up the screen, and my heart skips a beat. I swipe open the message.

Your ride will be here within the hour. There's a package waiting outside your door.

I'm on my feet before I even finish reading. A package? My mind races—more chocolates? Jewelry? Something extravagant, knowing him. I pad to the door, barefoot, and swing it open. There it is: a flat, satin-covered box, sleek and unassuming. No clues, no labels, just a silent promise of something... interesting.



I scoop it up, the weight light but the anticipation heavy. Back inside, I set it on the couch and hover over it for a moment, my fingers tingling. I lift the lid, and my breath catches.

The red teddy is the first thing I see, the fabric so soft it feels like liquid under my fingertips. It's daring, with strategic cutouts that make my cheeks flush just imagining wearing it. Beneath it, a pair of leather bow ankle bracelets—adorable and sexy at the same time. But it's the last item that stops me cold.

A sleek, silicone-covered vibrator, elegant and mysterious. I pick it up, turning it over in my hands. No buttons, no controls, nothing. How does it even work? My curiosity wars with the heat creeping up my neck.

My phone dings again, snapping me out of my thoughts. Another text from Lanz.

Did you get the gifts?

I bite my lip, my fingers flying over the screen. I send back a devil girl smiling emoji, my heart pounding.

His reply comes almost instantly. Good. You're only allowed to wear the contents of the box until I drop you off tomorrow morning.

I stare at the message, my stomach doing a little flip. Only allowed to wear the contents of the box? My gaze flicks back to the teddy, the bracelets, the vibrator. A shiver runs through me, equal parts nerves and excitement.

"Okay, Tyler," I mutter to myself, clutching the box to my chest. "You're in deep now."

I glance at the clock. Less than an hour. My pulse quickens as I head to the bedroom,

the box in hand. Time to see if I can pull this off.

I stand in front of the mirror, my reflection staring back at me like a stranger. The red teddy clings to my curves, the cutouts leaving nothing to the imagination. My breasts are exposed, the cool air brushing against my nipples, making them harden. The fabric barely covers my pussy, and my ass is completely bare. The leather bow ankle bracelets are cute, the little ribbons fluttering as I shift my weight. I slip on the strappy red heels, the click of the heels on the floor making me feel powerful, even as my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

My phone rings, and I jump, my heart racing. I grab it, Lanz's name flashing on the screen. I answer, my voice trembling. "Hello?"

"Put it on video mode."

I swallow hard and switch to video, holding the phone up so he can see me. His golden eyes widen, and a low growl rumbles through the phone. "Fuck, Tyler. You look... exquisite."

I blush, my fingers fidgeting with the hem of the teddy. "Thank you."

"Set the phone down," he orders, his tone leaving no room for argument. I place it on the dresser, the camera angled to capture my entire body. "Now, pick up the vibrator."

I reach for the sleek, silicone-covered vibrator, my fingers trembling as I hold it. "I can't turn it on," I say, confusion lacing my voice.

"That's because I'm in full control of it," he replies, a smirk in his voice. The vibrator buzzes to life in my hand, and I squeal in surprise, nearly dropping it.

“Lanz!” I gasp, my body already reacting to the sensation.

“Now, do as I say,” he purrs. “Start with your nipples. Tease them with the vibrator.”

I bring the buzzing toy to my breast,. I circle my nipple, my breath hitching as pleasure courses through me. “Good girl,” Lanz murmurs. “Now, move it down. Slowly.”

I drag the vibrator down my stomach, the sensation making me squirm. I reach my pussy, the vibrations so close but not quite where I need them. “Lanz, please,” I whimper.

“Patience, Tyler,” he chides. “Now, press it against your clit. Gently.”

I do as he says, the vibrations sending waves of pleasure through me. I moan, my hips bucking against the toy. “That’s it,” Lanz growls. “Keep going. You’re so close, aren’t you?”

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“Yes,” I gasp, my body trembling on the edge of orgasm.

Suddenly, the vibrations stop, and I cry out in frustration. “Lanz!”

“You’ll have to wait to cum until I decide you can,” he says, his voice firm but laced with amusement.

The idea of him controlling my orgasms sends a jolt of arousal through me, and before I can stop it, I’m cumming, my body convulsing with pleasure. “Lanz, I—I couldn’t help it,” I pant, my cheeks burning with embarrassment.

He chuckles, the sound dark and delicious. “You’re going to be punished for having an orgasm without my permission.”

The thought of his punishment makes me cum again, my body writhing as pleasure overtakes me. Lanz’s laughter fills the room. “We’re in for a long night, Tyler.”

The phone buzzes in my hand, Lanz’s voice cutting through the haze of my post-orgasm daze. “Your ride’s here. Keep the phone on. Go.”

I glance out the window, my heart pounding. The street is eerily quiet, the kind of late-night stillness that makes every sound feel amplified. The limo sits across the street, sleek and black, its windows tinted to an impenetrable darkness. My stomach twists. He’s going to make me walk out there like this, isn’t he? Exposed, vulnerable, completely at his mercy.

“Lanz,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “There’s a car coming. What if someone sees

me?”

“Then they’ll see how beautiful you are,” he replies, his tone calm, almost amused. “Now go.”

The cool night air hits my skin as I step outside, the red teddy clinging to me like a second skin. My heels click against the pavement, the sound echoing in the empty street. I feel like I’m in a dream—or maybe a nightmare—every step a mix of terror and exhilaration.

The headlights of the approaching car grow brighter, closer. My pulse races, my legs moving faster. I reach the limo and yank at the door handle, but it doesn’t budge. “Lanz!” I hiss, panic rising in my chest. “It’s locked!”

“Is it?” he says, his voice dripping with mock innocence. The headlights are almost on me now, the engine’s low rumble filling the air. I yank at the handle again, my breath coming in short, frantic gasps.

The door clicks open just as the car passes, and I practically throw myself inside, slamming the door shut behind me. My chest heaves as I collapse onto the plush leather seat, the cool surface a stark contrast to my overheated skin. I glance around, my heart still racing. The limo is empty—no driver, no Lanz, just me and the hum of the engine.

“Where’s the driver?” I ask, my voice shaky.

“You don’t need one,” Lanz replies, his voice smooth and confident. “The AI’s got it covered. And don’t worry—you can scream as loud as you want. No one’s going to hear you.”

I frown, my confusion quickly turning to alarm as the vibrator in my hand suddenly

springs to life, buzzing with an intensity that makes me gasp. “Lanz!” I squeal, my body jerking as the vibrations ripple through me.

“You didn’t think I’d let you off that easy, did you?” he purrs, his tone dark and teasing. “You’ve been a very naughty girl, Tyler. And naughty girls get punished.”

I bite my lip, my body already responding to the relentless vibrations. “Lanz, I—I can’t?—”

“You can,” he interrupts, his voice firm. “And you will. Now, be a good girl and show me how much you’re enjoying your punishment.”

I moan, my hips bucking against the seat as the vibrations grow stronger. The limo glides through the empty streets, the city lights blurring outside the window. My breath comes in short, ragged gasps.

“Lanz,” I whimper, my voice barely above a whisper. “Please...”

“Not yet,” he says. “You’re going to wait until I say so. And when I do, you’re going to scream for me.”

I nod, my fingers digging into the leather seat as I try to hold back the wave of pleasure threatening to overwhelm me. The limo turns a corner, the vibrations intensifying with every passing second. I close my eyes, my body writhing as I fight to obey his command.

“Good girl,” Lanz murmurs, his voice a dark promise. “Now, let’s see how loud you can be.”

“Lanz,” I gasp, my voice breaking as the vibrations intensify. “I can’t—I can’t hold on anymore.”

“You can,” he says, voice rock steady, like he’s coaxing a wild animal. “You’re stronger than you think, Tyler. But if you need to let go, I’m here. I’ve got you.”

His words are the final push I need. My back arches off the seat, my fingers clawing at the leather as the orgasm crashes over me like a tidal wave. I scream, the sound raw and unfiltered, my throat burning as the pleasure rips through me. Wave after wave, each one more intense than the last, until I’m certain I’m going to pass out. My vision blurs, my body convulsing, and for a moment, I’m weightless, untethered, floating in a sea of pure ecstasy.

When I finally come back to myself, I’m panting, my chest heaving, my skin slick with sweat. The vibrator falls from my hand, landing on the seat with a soft thud. I feel like I’ve been run over by a truck, but in the best possible way.

“Good girl,” Lanz murmurs, his voice warm and approving. “You did so well, Tyler. I’m proud of you.”

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:19 am*

I smile, my cheeks flushing with pride. It's ridiculous how much those two words mean to me, how they make my chest swell with a strange, giddy satisfaction. I did what he asked. I pleased him. And that feels... incredible.

I lean back against the seat, my body still trembling with aftershocks. My mind drifts, and I realize something that makes my heart skip a beat. I love this. I love him. Not just the sex, though that's mind-blowing. I love the way he looks at me, like I'm the only thing that matters. I love the way he challenges me, pushes me out of my comfort zone. I love the way he makes me feel—seen, wanted, needed.

“Lanz,” I start, my voice soft, hesitant. I want to tell him. I want to say the words, to let him know how I feel. But before I can, the vibrator in my hand buzzes back to life, and all coherent thought flies out the window.

“Oh, God,” I moan, my body jerking as the vibrations start all over again. My hips buck against the seat, my fingers digging into the leather. “Lanz, please?—”

“Not yet,” he says, his voice dark and teasing. “We’re not done yet, Tyler. You’re going to keep going until I say stop.”

I whimper. The limo glides through the city streets, the world outside a blur of lights and shadows. Inside, it's just me and Lanz's voice, his commands, his control. I writhe and moan, my body on fire, my mind a haze of pleasure and need.

“That's it,” he murmurs, his voice a low growl. “You’re doing so well, Tyler. Just a little longer.”



I nod, between ragged gasps. My body feels like it's on the edge of another orgasm, but I hold on, waiting for his command. The vibrations grow stronger, more intense, and I bite my lip to keep from screaming.

"Now," he says, his voice firm. "Let go, Tyler."

I do. The orgasm hits me like a freight train, my body convulsing, my voice breaking as I scream his name. The pleasure is overwhelming, all-consuming, and for a moment, I'm lost in it, completely and utterly his.

When I finally come back to myself, I'm panting, my body trembling, my skin slick with sweat. The vibrator falls from my hand, landing on the seat with a soft thud. I feel like I've been run over by a truck, but in the best possible way.

"Good girl," Lanz murmurs, his voice warm and approving. "You did so well, Tyler. I'm proud of you."

I smile, my cheeks flushing with pride. It's ridiculous how much those two words mean to me, how they make my chest swell with a strange, giddy satisfaction. I did what he asked. I pleased him. And that feels... incredible.

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"Oh, God," I moan, my body jerking as the vibrations start all over again. My hips

buck against the seat, my fingers digging into the leather. “Lanz, please?—”

“Not yet,” he says, his voice dark and teasing. “We’re not done yet, Tyler. You’re going to keep going until I say stop.”

The limo glides along,, the world outside a blur of lights and shadows. Inside, it’s just me and Lanz’s voice, his commands, his control. I writhe and moan, my body on fire, my mind a haze of pleasure and need.

“That’s it,” he murmurs, his voice a low growl. “You’re doing so well, Tyler. Just a little longer.”

I nod, my breath coming in short, ragged gasps. My body feels like it’s on the edge of another orgasm, but I hold on, waiting for his command. The vibrations grow stronger, more intense, and I bite my lip to keep from screaming.

“Now,” he says, his voice firm. “Let go, Tyler.”

I do. The orgasm hits me like a freight train, my body convulsing, my voice breaking as I scream his name. The pleasure is overwhelming, all-consuming, and for a moment, I’m lost in it, completely and utterly his.

## CHAPTER 18

### LANZ

The elevator doors slide open as my private limo pulls into the garage. Perfect timing. My heart pounds as I stride toward the sleek black vehicle, already picturing Tyler inside.

"Welcome home, beautiful." I open the door and my breath catches.

Tyler sprawls across the leather seat, chest heaving, skin flushed and glistening. The red lace lingerie I chose clings to her curves. Her eyes flutter open, glazed with pleasure.

"Lanz..." Her voice comes out as a whimper that shoots straight through me.

Something shifts in my chest as I drink in the sight of her - vulnerable, trusting, mine. The realization hits like a physical blow. I love her. The depth of feeling terrifies me more than any battlefield.

"You look perfect." I keep my voice steady despite the emotion threatening to overwhelm me. Now isn't the time to burden her with declarations that could destroy us both.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:19 am*

"I can't get out here..." Tyler tugs at the hem of her negligee. "I'm practically naked."

"This garage connects directly to my private elevator. No one else has access. You're safe with me."

She bites her lip, then reaches for my outstretched hand. I help her from the car, steadying her trembling legs. Unable to resist, I pull her flush against me and capture her mouth in a searing kiss. Her soft moan vibrates through me as she melts into my embrace.

Mine. The possessive thought burns through my blood even as another whispers: And I am hers.

I spin Tyler around, her back pressing against my chest. She gasps, her body tensing for a moment before she relaxes into me.

"What are you doing?" she asks, her voice a mix of curiosity and anticipation.

"Whatever I desire, little Pet," I purr, my lips brushing against her ear. "You still have punishments to serve for cumming without my permission."

She shivers, a soft moan escaping her lips. "Yes, Lanz," she says, her voice trembling with excitement. "Whatever you say."

I reach for the Vakutan Love Harness, the leather cool in my hands. I fasten the padded collar around her neck, the strap descending down her back. Her wrists lock into the cuffs behind her, the harness snug but not uncomfortable. She's completely at

my mercy, and the thought sends a surge of heat through me.

Tyler shifts, her fingers brushing against the front of my trousers. I didn't tell her to do that, but I'm not about to stop her. Her touch is tentative, exploratory, and it's driving me wild.

"This is hard while I'm tied up," she laughs, her fingers fumbling with my zipper. "The straps keep getting in the way."

"There's nothing in the way of your mouth," I say helpfully.

She freezes for a moment, her cheeks flushing a deep red. Then, a sly smile spreads across her face, and she sinks to her knees before me. Her eyes lock with mine as she leans in, her tongue tracing the outline of my growing hardness through the fabric.

I groan, my hands tangling in her hair as she works her magic. She's eager, her movements growing more confident with each passing second. The warmth of her mouth, the way she looks up at me with those wide, innocent eyes—it's intoxicating.

"That's it, Pet," I murmur, my voice rough with desire. "Show me how much you want to please me."

She doesn't need to be told twice. Her tongue flicks against me, teasing and tantalizing, until I'm hard as a rock. The sight of her, bound and kneeling, her mouth working me over, is almost too much to bear.

I tighten my grip in her hair, guiding her movements, and she moans around me, the sound vibrating through my core. She's perfect, completely and utterly perfect. And she's mine.

Her mouth is a revelation—warm, wet, and so damn eager. I thread my fingers

through her hair, guiding her rhythm as she takes me deeper, her tongue swirling in ways that make my knees weak. Who knew the shy, blushing girl I first met could turn into this? A goddess of pleasure, unashamed and utterly intoxicating. I'm the luckiest man alive, and I don't care if that sounds like some sappy romance novel line. It's the truth.

"That's it, Pet," I growl, my voice rough with need. "You're perfect. Absolutely perfect."

She hums around me, the vibration sending a jolt of pleasure up my spine. I'm so close, teetering on the edge, when she suddenly pulls back, her lips leaving me with a softpop. I blink down at her, stunned.

"What the hell, Tyler?" I demand, my voice a mix of frustration and disbelief.

She grins up at me, her tongue darting out to lick her lips. "It's a little trick I learned from you," she says, her tone dripping with mischief. "Stopping right before I orgasm."

I burst out laughing, the sound echoing through the garage. "You're a menace," I say, shaking my head. "A beautiful, brilliant menace."

Her grin widens, and she tilts her head, feigning innocence. "Oh, am I?"

"You are, and you're about to learn what happens when you tease me."

I step back, leaving her kneeling on the floor, and move to the trunk of the limo. Inside, I've got a collection of toys that would make even the most experienced submissive blush. I pull out a ball gag, the centerpiece a real diamond that glints in the dim light, and a sleek black collar with a matching leash.

“Open,” I command, holding the gag in front of her.

She hesitates for a moment, her eyes flicking to the gag, then back to me. “Lanz...” she starts.

“You wanted to play, Pet. Now you’re going to learn the rules.”

She opens her mouth, and I slide the gag in, securing it behind her head. Her eyes widen as I fasten the collar around her neck, the leather cool against her skin. I attach the leash and give it a gentle tug.

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“Up,” I say, and she rises to her feet, her body swaying slightly. I lead her toward the private elevator, her bound hands brushing against my arm. She leans into me, her breasts pressing against my side.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” I ask, my voice teasing.

She nods, her eyes sparkling with mischief, and I chuckle. “Good. Because we’re just getting started.”

The elevator doors slide open, and I guide her inside, her body pressed against mine. She rubs her breasts against my arm, her movements deliberate and teasing. I groan, my resolve wavering for just a moment.

“You’re going to be the death of me, Pet,” I mutter, pulling her closer.

Tyler’s gaze is filled with a mix of innocence and desire, and I know I’m completely, utterly lost.

The elevator doors close, and I can’t hold back any longer. I spin Tyler around, her bound body pressed against the wall, her back arching as I yank her hips toward me. Her pussy is already wet, ready, and I’m throbbing, desperate to be inside her. I don’t care about the punishment I was supposed to give her. I don’t care about the game. All I care about is her.

I shove my cock into her with a growl, her tight heat enveloping me in a way that makes my knees weak. She gasps around the ball gag, her eyes wide for a moment before they narrow with that sly, knowing look. She knew exactly what she was



doing when she teased me. She knew I'd break. And damn it, she's right.

"You're a menace," I growl, my hands gripping her hips as I thrust into her, hard and deep. "A beautiful, brilliant menace."

She moans, the sound muffled by the gag, but her eyes are laughing at me. She's won this round, and she knows it. But as I feel her clench around me, her body trembling with pleasure, I can't help but feel like I've won too. She's mine. Completely, utterly mine.

I slam into her again and again, the sound of our bodies colliding echoing in the small space. Her bound hands brush against my arm, her fingers curling as if she's trying to touch me, to hold me. I lean down, my lips brushing against her ear.

"You're perfect," I whisper, my voice rough with need. "Absolutely perfect."

Her moans grow louder, her body tightening around me as she gets closer. I can feel it too, the pressure building, the heat coiling in my gut. I'm so close, so damn close.

"Tyler," I groan, my thrusts becoming erratic. "I love you."

I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest. But then she's coming, her body convulsing around me, and I'm right there with her, spilling inside her with a growl that's half pleasure, half relief.

I pull the gag from her mouth, my hands trembling as I undo the harness. She gasps for air, her chest heaving, and then she's kissing me, her lips soft and desperate against mine.

"I love you too," she whispers between panting breaths, her hands tangling in my hair. "I love you, Lanz."

I kiss her back, my heart swelling with something I can't quite name. She's mine. And I'm hers. Completely, utterly hers.

## CHAPTER 19

### TYLER

Chop Suey snores softly on my lap, his little pug body rising and falling with each breath. I scratch behind his ears absentmindedly, staring out the window at the city lights. Cindy plops down on the couch next to me, a bowl of popcorn in hand. She shoves a handful into her mouth, crumbs scattering everywhere.

"So," she says, mouth still full, "how was the Netherlands? Did you two do the whole windmills-and-tulips thing, or was it more of a 'stay in the hotel and bang like rabbits' kind of trip?"

I roll my eyes but can't help the smile tugging at my lips. "It was fantastic, as always. Lanz was wonderful, too. He took me to this little café by the canals, and we?—"

"Yeah, yeah, he's perfect, blah blah blah," Cindy interrupts, waving her hand dismissively. "But something's off with you. Spill."

I sigh, my fingers stalling on Chop Suey's head. He lets out a little grunt of protest, so I start scratching again. "It's just... things are moving really fast with Lanz. Faster than I expected."

Cindy raises an eyebrow, her green eyes narrowing. "How fast are we talking? Like, 'he's already picking out china patterns' fast, or 'he's got a ring hidden in his sock drawer' fast?"

"Neither," I say quickly, though the thought of Lanz with a ring makes my stomach

do a little flip. “It’s just... it’s only been two months since our first date. Two months. And it feels like we’ve been together forever, but also like it’s only been a week. Does that make sense?”

Cindy shrugs, tossing another handful of popcorn into her mouth. “Sounds like you’re in love. So what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, my voice soft. “I guess I’m just... scared. What if I’m not ready for this? What if I mess it up?”

Cindy snorts, leaning back against the couch. “Girl, if he’s not getting it done in the bedroom, that’s one thing. But from the way you’ve been glowing lately, I’m guessing that’s not the issue.”

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I feel my cheeks heat up, and I look down at Chop Suey to avoid Cindy's knowing smirk. "No, that's... that's definitely not the issue."

"Then what's the problem?" Cindy asks, her tone softening. "You love him, right?"

I nod, my throat tightening. "Yeah. I do."

"And he loves you?"

"I know he does."

"So, again," Cindy says, throwing her hands up in mock exasperation, "where's the problem? Unless you're just freaking out because you're not used to being happy. Which, by the way, is *ayouproblem*, not *ahimproblem*."

I open my mouth to argue, but she's right. I'm not used to this—to feeling this happy, this secure. It's like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop, for something to go wrong. But maybe... maybe it doesn't have to. Maybe I can just let myself be happy.

Chop Suey lets out a little snort, his tail thumping against my leg. I smile down at him, then look back at Cindy. "You're right. I'm overthinking it."

"Damn right you are," Cindy says, grinning. "Now, tell me more about this café. Did they have stroopwafels? Because if they did, I'm booking a flight tomorrow."

"So, I left my stroopwafel on top of my coffee mug to warm it up," I say, leaning back into the couch. Chop Suey shifts in my lap, his little pug face scrunching up in

his sleep. “But the steam made it all soft and gooey, and it just... plopped right into the cup. I drank it anyway. Tasted like oatmeal, honestly.”

Cindy bursts out laughing, her purple and pink hair bouncing as she throws her head back. “Only you, Ty. Only you would turn a perfectly good stroopwafel into soggy coffee sludge.”

I grin, but it doesn’t last. My smile fades, and I stare down at Chop Suey, his warm little body grounding me. “I don’t know, Cin. I’m starting to feel... weird about all this. Lanz pays for everything. The trips, the dinners, the clothes. I mean, what do I even bring to the table?”

Cindy stops mid-laugh, her green eyes narrowing as she looks at me. “Girl, are you kidding me? You bring yourself to the relationship, and that’s enough. Besides, what’s wrong with being a pampered pet? The Cinner would kill for that life.”

I chuckle, but my cheeks burn. Pampered pet. Yeah, that’s one way to put it. Lanz has a way of making me feel like his most prized possession, especially when we’re alone. Cindy’s only guessed at the tip of the iceberg when it comes to our... dynamic. The thought makes me squirm, and I quickly change the subject.

Before I can say anything, my phone buzzes on the coffee table. I glance at the screen—Sandy, my manager from Doggone Elegance. It’s almost 10 PM. What could she want this late?

“Uh, hold on,” I say, reaching for the phone. Chop Suey grumbles as I shift him off my lap, and he waddles over to Cindy, who immediately starts scratching his ears.

I answer the call. “Hey, Sandy. Everything okay?”

“Tyler, thank God you picked up,” Sandy’s voice is tense, almost panicked.

“Sandy, what’s wrong?” I ask, my voice tight with concern. Chop Suey perks up at the tone, his little pug ears twitching.

“I—I locked myself in the storage room,” Sandy stammers, her voice shaky. “The door jammed, and I can’t get out. I’ve been trying for an hour, Tyler. I’m freaking out.”

“Oh my God, are you okay?” I’m already on my feet, grabbing my purse off the counter. Cindy raises an eyebrow, her hand still buried in Chop Suey’s fur.

“I’m fine, just... stuck,” Sandy says, her voice cracking. “Can you come let me out? Please? I don’t know who else to call.”

“Of course, I’ll be right there,” I say, already heading for the door. “Do you want me to call the police or something? They could probably?—”

“No!” Sandy cuts me off, her voice sharp. “No police. If the owner finds out I locked myself in the storage room, he’ll lose it. He’s already on edge about the budget. Just... just come, okay?”

“Okay, okay, I’m on my way,” I say, slipping on my shoes. “Hang tight, Sandy. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Thank you,” she says, her voice softer now. “I’m so sorry, Tyler.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I say, grabbing my keys. “I’ll see you soon.”

I hang up and turn to Cindy, who’s watching me with a mix of curiosity and amusement. “What’s the deal? Boss lady in distress?”

“Sandy locked herself in the storage room at work,” I explain, shoving my phone into

my purse. “I need to go let her out.”

Cindy snorts, leaning back on the couch. “Classic Sandy. Can’t even handle a closet without needing a rescue. The Cinner would’ve kicked the door down by now.”

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“Yeah, well, not all of us are as resourceful as The Cinner,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Can you watch Chop Suey? I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Sure thing,” Cindy says, scooping the pug into her lap. “But if you’re not back in an hour, I’m calling Lanz. He’s got that whole ‘alien super strength’ thing going on. He’d probably rip the door off its hinges.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” I say, heading for the door. “Thanks, Cin.”

“Anytime, Ty,” she calls after me. “And tell Sandy to invest in a crowbar. Just saying.”

I’m out the door before she can add anything else, my mind racing as I hurry to my car. The streets are quiet this late at night, the glow of the streetlights casting long shadows on the pavement. I can’t help but feel a little nervous—Doggone Elegance isn’t exactly in the best part of town, and it’s not like I’m armed or anything. But Sandy needs me, and I’m not about to let her down.

The drive feels longer than it should, my hands gripping the wheel a little too tightly. When I finally pull into the parking lot, the shop is dark except for the faint glow of the emergency exit sign. I grab my keys and head for the back door, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Sandy?” I call out as I unlock the door and step inside. “It’s me, Tyler. I’m here.”

“Thank God,” her voice echoes from somewhere in the back. “Hurry, please. It’s so dark in here.”



I flick on the lights and make my way to the storage room, my footsteps echoing in the empty shop. The door is slightly ajar, but it's clear it's jammed—Sandy's been trying to push it open from the inside, but it's not budging.

“Okay, I'm here,” I say, grabbing the handle. “Let's get you out of there.”

I'm about to yank the storage room door open when the front door of the shop bursts open with a loud crash. A teenager with a skateboard under one arm stumbles in, his chest heaving like he's just run a marathon. His eyes lock onto mine, and something about them makes my skin crawl—they're too sharp, too calculating, like they don't belong in a kid's face.

“Don't open that door!” he shouts, his voice cracking with panic. “She's not who you think she is!”

My hand freezes on the door handle.. The kid's eyes—there's something off about them. They're too bright, almost glowing in the dim light of the shop. Grolgath. It has to be. Lanz warned me about this. They can look like anyone, even a kid with a skateboard.

“Tyler?” Sandy's voice comes from behind the door, soft and pleading. “Please, let me out. It's so dark in here.”

The kid takes a step forward, his skateboard clattering to the floor. “Don't do it! She's one of them!”

My mind races. If Sandy's a Grolgath, why would she lock herself in the storage room? But if the kid's a Grolgath, why would he warn me? I don't have time to think. I yank the door open.

Sandy steps out, her face pale and her hair disheveled. She smiles at me, but it's not

her usual warm smile. It's cold, predatory. "Thank you, Tyler," she hisses.

Then I see it. Her eyes—they blink, but not like a human's. Three sets of eyelids slide open and shut in rapid succession. My stomach drops. Before I can react, Sandy pulls something from her pocket—a sleek, futuristic-looking pistol that hums with a faint red glow.

"Sandy, what—" I start, but she's already raising the gun.

The kid doesn't even have time to scream. Sandy fires, and a red laser blast tears through his chest. He stumbles back, his eyes wide with shock, and collapses to the floor. The smell of burnt flesh fills the air, and I gag, covering my mouth with my hand.

Sandy lowers the gun, her expression calm, almost bored. "You really should be more careful, Tyler," she says, her voice dripping with mock concern. "You never know who you can trust."

I'm frozen in place, my mind struggling to process what just happened. The kid—he's just a kid. Or was. And Sandy... she's not Sandy. She's one of them. A Grolgath.

"Why?" I manage to choke out, my voice trembling. "Why did you do that?"

Sandy tilts her head, her smile widening. "Because he was in the way," she says simply. "And now, so are you."

She raises the gun again, and I don't think—I just move. I dive behind the counter, my heart hammering in my chest. The laser blast hits the wall above me, sending a shower of plaster raining down. I scramble to my feet, my hands shaking as I fumble for my phone. I need to call Lanz. I need to get out of here.

But before I can dial, Sandy's voice cuts through the air, cold and mocking. "Running won't help, Tyler. You're already in too deep."

## CHAPTER 20

### LANZ

The chair clatters to the floor behind me as I surge to my feet, my heart pounding like a war drum. Something's wrong. I can feel it in my bones, a gnawing, twisting sensation in my gut that screams danger. Tyler. It's her. I don't know how I know, but I do. The bond—if it's real, if she's my Jalshagar—it's pulling me to her like a magnet. I don't have time to question it. I don't have time to think.

I slam my hand against the hidden panel in the wall, and the armory slides open. My jetpack gleams under the fluorescent lights, and I strap it on with practiced ease. The window shatters as I barrel through it, the city sprawling below me. I don't need coordinates. I don't need a map. I just know where she is.

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The wind whips past me as I cut through the sky, the buildings blurring into streaks of gray and glass. Doggone Elegance comes into view, and the pull in my chest intensifies. I kill the engines and drop like a stone, the ground rushing up to meet me. I land in a crouch, the pavement cracking beneath my boots. The front door of the groomer's is wide open, and the air smells sharp, metallic—ozone. Someone fired a laser weapon here. Recently.

“Tyler!” I bellow, my voice echoing down the empty street. No answer. I step inside, my scales bristling, my senses on high alert. The place is a mess—overturned chairs, scattered grooming tools, and a faint trail of blood leading toward the back. My stomach churns. If they’ve hurt her...

I follow the trail, my fists clenched so tight my claws dig into my palms. The back room is dark, the only light coming from the flickering fluorescent bulb overhead. And there she is. Tyler, crouched behind the counter, her face pale, her eyes wide with fear. Relief floods through me for a split second—until I see the figure standing over her.

Sandy. Or whatlookslike Sandy. But the way she’s holding the laser pistol, the way her eyes gleam with a cold, alien malice—that’s not Sandy. That’s a Grolgath.

“Stay back, Lanz,” the Grolgath snarls, pressing the barrel of the pistol against Tyler’s temple. “Or I’ll blow her pretty little head off.”

Tyler whimpers, her hands trembling as she clutches the edge of the counter. “Lanz, I’m sorry, I didn’t know—she just?—”

“Shut up,” the Grolgath snaps, yanking Tyler to her feet. “You’re coming with me, human. And if your boyfriend tries anything, he’ll be scraping your brains off the floor.”

I take a step forward. “Let her go. Now.”

The Grolgath smirks, her grip tightening on Tyler. “Or what? You’ll kill me? Go ahead. But she dies first.”

I glance at Tyler, her eyes pleading with me, tears streaming down her cheeks. My chest tightens. I can’t risk it. I can’t lose her. Not now. Not ever.

“Fine,” I say, raising my hands in surrender. “Take me instead. You want a Vakutan? You’ve got one. Just let her go.”

The Grolgath hesitates, her eyes narrowing as she studies me. “You’d really trade your life for hers?”

“In a heartbeat,” I growl, my gaze never leaving Tyler’s. “She’s mine. And I protect what’s mine.”

The Grolgath laughs, a cold, hollow sound. “How noble. But I don’t think so. I think I’ll take you both. The Alliance will pay a fortune for a Vakutan and his little pet.”

I clench my jaw, my mind racing. I need a plan. I need to get Tyler out of here. But before I can move, the Grolgath’s finger tightens on the trigger.

“Say goodbye, Lanz,” she sneers.

And then the world explodes.

The laser bolt sizzles past my ear, close enough to singe the scales. I don't think—I move. My foot snaps out, and the pistol goes flying, clattering across the floor. Tyler scrambles backward, her eyes wide, her breath coming in short, panicked gasps.

“Stay down,” I bark, not taking my eyes off the Grolgath.

The creature smirks, its form shimmering like heat waves on asphalt. “Big, strong Vakutan,” it taunts, its voice dripping with mockery. “But can you catch me?”

It lunges, and I meet it head-on. My fist connects with its face, but the impact feels wrong—like punching water. Its head liquefies, my hand passing straight through. The Grolgath reforms, laughing, and swings at me with an arm that morphs mid-swing into a viper, fangs bared.

I twist, narrowly avoiding the strike, and grab for its wrist. My fingers close around it, but the limb shifts again, turning to liquid and slipping through my grip.

“You can't hurt me,” it sneers, dancing back, its form flickering between human and something far more alien. “But I can hurt you. And then, I'm going to take your human mate and fill her belly with healthy, strong Grolgath children.”

Rage burns through me, white-hot and primal. My scales bristle, and I lunge again, this time aiming for its midsection. It shifts, but I'm ready. I feint left, then pivot, driving my elbow into its side. The Grolgath stumbles, its form solidifying for a split second.

“You talk too much,” I growl, pressing the advantage. I grab its arm again, this time twisting it into a joint lock. It hisses, its free hand morphing into a blade, but I'm faster. I slam it into the wall, the impact cracking the drywall.

“You think you're clever,” it spits, its face contorting into something grotesque. “But

you're just a brute. A relic. The Coalition will crush you, and your little human pet will?—”

I cut it off with a punch to the throat, and it gurgles, its form flickering. But it's not enough. It's never enough with these things.

“Lanz!” Tyler's voice cuts through the chaos, and I glance over just long enough to see her scrambling to her feet.

“Stay back!” I snap, but the Grolgath uses the distraction to its advantage. Its body shifts, turning to liquid again, and it slips free of my grip.

It reforms a few feet away, its grin wide and vicious. “You're out of your depth, Vakutan. You can't win this.”

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I bare my teeth, my claws flexing. “We’ll see about that.”

The Grolgath laughs, its form shimmering as it prepares to strike again. But I’m done playing its game. I charge, my body a blur of red scales and raw fury. This time, I’m not holding back.

The Grolgath’s taunts are cut short as something small and metallic whizzes past my head and smacks it square in the back of the skull. It doesn’t hurt the thing—nothing short of a plasma blast will do that—but it’s enough to make it flinch. I glance over my shoulder and see Tyler, her arm still extended, holding the other half of the electric fur trimmer like a weapon. Her face is pale, but her eyes are fierce.

“Nice shot,” I say, grinning despite the chaos.

The Grolgath snarls, its form rippling as it turns to face her. “You little?—”

I don’t let it finish. I surge forward, my fist slamming into its chest with enough force to send it flying. It hits the back wall with a wet splat, its body flattening like stretched-out chewing gum. It writhes, trying to reform, but I’m already moving. I scoop up the laser pistol from the floor, my fingers curling around the grip.

“This ends now,” I growl, leveling the weapon at the Grolgath.

It sneers, its face contorting into something grotesque. “You think you’ve won? You’re just delaying the inevitable. The Coalition will?—”

I pull the trigger. The laser bolt hits it square in the chest, and the Grolgath lets out a



guttural scream as its body disintegrates into ash. The air smells of ozone and burnt flesh, and for a moment, the room is eerily silent.

I drop the pistol and turn to Tyler. She's still crouched behind the counter, her hands trembling, her eyes wide with shock. I cross the room in two strides and pull her into my arms, holding her tight against my chest. Her heart is racing, her breath coming in short, panicked gasps.

"I've got you," I murmur, stroking her hair. "You're safe now. I've got you."

She clings to me, her fingers digging into my scales. "Lanz, I—I thought it was going to kill me. I thought?—"

"Shh," I whisper, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I love you, Tyler. I love you so much. I'll never let anything happen to you. Not ever."

She pulls back slightly, her eyes searching mine. "How did you know? How did you know I was in danger?"

I cup her face in my hands, my thumbs brushing away her tears. "I just knew. I felt it. Like a pull, deep in my chest. I couldn't ignore it."

She frowns, her brow furrowing. "But how? How could you just know?"

I smile, my heart swelling with a warmth I've never felt before. "Because you're my soul mate, Tyler. My Jalshagar. Two bodies, one soul. I'll always know when you're in trouble. I'll always come for you."

Her eyes widen, and for a moment, she just stares at me, her lips parted in surprise. Then she smiles, a soft, trembling smile that makes my chest ache. "Lanz, I?—"

I don't let her finish. I kiss her, long and deep, pouring everything I feel into it. She melts against me, her hands sliding up my chest to wrap around my neck. When we finally break apart, she's breathless, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shining.

"I love you too," she whispers, her voice barely audible. "I don't know what that means yet, but I know I do."

I pull her close again, resting my chin on top of her head. "We'll figure it out together. I'm not going anywhere, Tyler. Not ever."

## CHAPTER 21

### TYLER

I'm pacing the living room of Lanz's penthouse, the hardwood floor cool under my bare feet. The city lights outside the floor-to-ceiling windows blur into streaks as I turn sharply, my arms crossed tight over my chest. Lanz sits on the edge of the sleek charcoal sofa, his golden eyes tracking my every move. He's in his human disguise, but I can still feel the weight of his Vakutan intensity.

"I'm not just going to sit here and do nothing," I say, stopping mid-pace to face him. "Gordo's missing, and you're stuck because the Grolgath can sniff you out. But they don't know me. Not really."

Lanz leans forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "They know your face, Tyler. They know you're with me. It's too risky."

"And what, you're the only one allowed to take risks?" I shoot back, my voice rising. "You're out there every day, putting yourself in danger, and I'm supposed to just... what? Stay here and look pretty?"

He stands, his towering frame casting a shadow over me. “You’re not just ‘looking pretty.’ You’re safe. That’s what matters.”

“Safe?” I step closer, tilting my head back to meet his gaze. “Safe doesn’t mean anything if I’m just sitting around waiting for something bad to happen. I’m not a damsel in distress, Lanz. I can help.”

His jaw tightens, and I can see the conflict in his eyes. He wants to protect me, but he also knows I’m right. I press my advantage.

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“Look, I’m not saying I’m going to storm the cannery or anything. But I can go to the shelters, ask around. Disguise myself. I’ll be careful.”

He exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair. “You’re not trained for this. If something goes wrong?—”

“Then you’ll come get me,” I interrupt, placing a hand on his chest. “You’ve done it before. And if I don’t do this, if I just sit here, I’ll go crazy. I need to feel like I’m doing something. Anything.”

He stares at me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then, finally, he nods. “Fine. But you follow my rules. No improvising. No taking unnecessary risks. And if anything feels off, you get out. Immediately.”

I grin, relief flooding through me. “Deal.”

He pulls me into his arms, his grip firm but gentle. “You’re going to be the death of me, you know that?”

I laugh, burying my face in his chest. “You love it.”

“I do,” he murmurs, his lips brushing the top of my head. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to worry.”

I pull back, looking up at him. “I’ll be careful. I promise.”

He nods, but I can still see the tension in his shoulders. “We’ll get you a disguise.

Something that'll make you unrecognizable. And I'll be nearby. Just in case."

"Deal," I say again, feeling a surge of determination. "Let's find Gordo."

I stand in front of the mirror, staring at the ragged old woman staring back at me. The holographic disguise Lanz gave me is flawless—wrinkles etched deep into my face, a hunched posture, and a ratty shawl draped over my shoulders. I can't help but grin, which looks bizarre on this face.

"Well, hello there, young man," I croak, my voice raspy and trembling. I hobble over to Lanz, who's leaning against the wall, arms crossed, watching me with an amused smirk. "Got any spare change for an old lady?"

He chuckles, shaking his head. "You're enjoying this way too much."

"Oh, come on," I say, dropping the act for a moment. "When else am I going to get to play dress-up like this? Besides, I'm nailing it."

"You are," he admits, his golden eyes twinkling. "But let's not forget why we're doing this. You're not going to a costume party."

"Right, right," I say, waving a hand dismissively. "Grolgath, shelters, Gordo. Got it."

I shuffle back to the mirror, adjusting the shawl. "So, how am I getting to the shelter? You're not exactly going to cruise up in your sports car and drop off a homeless woman. That'd raise some eyebrows."

Lanz frowns, his brow furrowing. "You're not walking. It's too far, and it's not safe."

I turn to him, hands on my hips—or at least, where my hips would be if I weren't hunched over. "Honey, you and I both know you don't do discrete."

He laughs, a deep, rumbling sound that makes my chest warm despite the tension. “Fair point. But I’m not letting you walk. I’ll figure something out.”

He disappears into the bedroom for a moment and returns with a wad of cash so thick it could double as a paperweight. “Come on,” he says, gesturing toward the door.

I follow him out of the penthouse and into the elevator, my disguise holding steady. The ride down is quiet, but I can feel the gears turning in Lanz’s head. When we step out onto the street, he scans the area like a predator sizing up its prey.

“There,” he says, nodding toward a dilapidated blue Volkswagen van parked a few feet away. A man in a faded flannel shirt is leaning against it, smoking a cigarette.

Lanz strides over, and I shuffle behind him, doing my best to stay in character.

“How much for the van?” Lanz asks, cutting straight to the point.

The man raises an eyebrow, taking a long drag from his cigarette. “You serious?”

“Dead serious,” Lanz says, pulling out the wad of cash. “Ten thousand. Right now.”

The man’s eyes widen, and he stubs out his cigarette. “Deal.”

He hands over the keys, and Lanz tosses him the cash. The man walks off, shaking his head like he can’t believe his luck.

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I climb into the passenger seat, the van's interior smelling faintly of stale coffee and old socks. "Well," I say, buckling my seatbelt, "this is definitely more your speed."

Lanz smirks as he starts the engine. "Discrete enough for you?"

"Perfect," I say, grinning.

The van rattles and groans as Lanz pulls up to St. Mary's Shelter, the engine sputtering like it's on its last legs. I glance at him, raising an eyebrow. "You sure this thing's not going to explode?"

He smirks, cutting the engine. "It's got character. Besides, it's not like I'm taking you to a gala."

"Fair point," I mutter, adjusting the ratty shawl around my shoulders. I grab the cane Lanz handed me earlier—props, apparently, are key to selling the disguise—and shuffle out of the van. The cold air bites at my face, and I hunch over further, leaning heavily on the cane.

The shelter's front door creaks as I push it open, and the smell of stale coffee and disinfectant hits me like a wall. A nun with a clipboard greets me, her smile warm but tired. "Welcome, dear. Are you here for a bed?"

I nod, doing my best to sound frail. "Yes, ma'am. Just need a place to rest my bones for a bit."

She hands me a clipboard with a stack of paperwork. "Fill this out, and we'll get you

settled.”

I take the clipboard and shuffle over to a row of plastic chairs, sitting down with a dramatic groan. The moment the nun turns her back, I ditch the clipboard under the chair and start my search.

The shelter’s main room is a sea of cots and sleeping bags, the air thick with the sound of snores and murmured conversations. I move slowly, my cane tapping against the floor, scanning every face for Gordo. Nothing.

I spot a man in a tattered jacket sitting on a cot, rolling a cigarette between his fingers. I hobble over, leaning on my cane. “Excuse me, sir. You seen a fella around here? Short, stocky, kind of a... well, let’s just say he’s got a face only a mother could love.”

The man looks up, squinting at me. “You mean Gordo?”

“That’s the one,” I say, trying to keep the excitement out of my voice.

“Yeah, he was here a couple days ago,” the man says, lighting his cigarette. “Asked a bunch of nosey questions, then took off. No skin off my nose, though. I hate that prick.”

I nod, forcing a smile. “Thanks, sir. You’ve been a big help.”

I move on, asking a few more people, and the story’s the same—Gordo was here, poking around, and then he left. I’m about to head back to the van when a sharp voice stops me in my tracks.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Where do you think you’re going?”



I turn to see the nun from earlier, her arms crossed and her expression stern. “I, uh, was just?—”

“You didn’t fill out the paperwork,” she says, her tone leaving no room for argument. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she’s already ushering me toward the door. I shoot her a glare, but it’s hard to look intimidating when you’re disguised as a geriatric.

Back in the van, Lanz raises an eyebrow as I climb in. “Well?”

“No Gordo,” I say, pulling off the shawl and tossing it into the backseat. “But he was here a couple days ago. Asked a bunch of questions and then left.”

Lanz nods, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Good work.”

“Good work?” I repeat, frowning. “I didn’t find him.”

“True,” he says, starting the engine. “But you found out valuable intel—Gordo’s not in this shelter, but he was a few days ago. That likely means we might find him at the other shelter.”

I lean back in my seat, crossing my arms. “So, what’s the plan now?”

“Now,” he says, pulling away from the curb, “we head to Good Shepherd and see if our furry friend left any more breadcrumbs.”

The van sputters to a stop outside Good Shepherd Shelter, and I glance at Lanz. “This place looks... friendlier.”

He smirks, leaning back in the driver’s seat. “Less nuns, more chaos. Go on, but keep

your eyes open.”

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I adjust my shawl, grab my cane, and shuffle toward the entrance. No one stops me this time. The door swings open to reveal a room buzzing with activity—people chatting, playing cards, and a few dozing on cots. I hobble over to a man with a scruffy beard and a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. He's nursing a cup of coffee that smells like it's been reheated one too many times.

"Excuse me," I croak, leaning on my cane. "You seen a fella around here? Short, stocky, kind of... well, let's just say he's got a face only a mother could love."

The man looks up, squinting at me. "You mean Gordo?"

"That's the one," I say, trying to keep the excitement out of my voice.

"Yeah, he was here," the man says, taking a sip of his coffee. "Got lucky, though. Landed a job at the cannery. They come by every day, pick up anyone who wants to work. Jobs, housing, even health insurance. Can't beat that."

I raise an eyebrow. "The cannery, huh? That's... interesting."

The man nods, then gestures to his leg, which is wrapped in a makeshift bandage. "Bad leg keeps me out of the running. But if I could, I'd be on that bus in a heartbeat."

I force a smile. "Thanks, sir. You've been a big help."

I shuffle back to the van, my mind racing. Lanz is leaning against the hood, arms crossed, his golden eyes narrowing as I approach. "Well?"

“Gordo’s at the cannery,” I say, dropping the old lady act. “They’ve got a bus that comes by every day, picks up workers. Jobs, housing, the works.”

Lanz’s jaw tightens. “That’s their recruitment strategy. Clever.”

“So, what’s the plan?” I ask, crossing my arms. “I’m guessing you’re not just going to let me waltz in there.”

He looks at me, his expression unreadable for a moment. Then he says, “Actually, I think you should get on that bus.”

I blink, caught off guard. “Wait, what? You’re not going to argue? Tell me it’s too dangerous?”

He steps closer. “Of course I’m worried about your safety. But I’ve also learned to trust you. The whole world has underestimated you your whole life, Tyler. I’m not going to make that mistake.”

My throat tightens, and I feel a tear slip down my cheek. I wipe it away quickly, but the warmth in my chest doesn’t fade. “You’d better come rescue me if I get in trouble,” I say, my voice trembling.

He pulls me into his arms, his grip firm but gentle. “Always,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against my forehead.

I bury my face in his chest, breathing in the scent of him—spice and something metallic, like the air before a storm. For a moment, I let myself believe that everything will be okay. That we’ll find Gordo, stop the Grolgath, and come out of this together.

But then I pull back, squaring my shoulders. “Alright,” I say, forcing a smile. “Let’s

do this.”

Lanz nods, his golden eyes gleaming with something I can't quite place. Pride, maybe. Or determination. Either way, it's enough to make me feel like I can take on the world. Or at least a bus full of Grolgath.

## CHAPTER 22

### LANZ

The amphibious assault craft bobs gently on the dark waves, the low hum of its engine barely audible over the sound of the ocean. I grip the edge of the craft, my claws digging into the reinforced metal. The cannery looms in the distance, its silhouette jagged against the cloudy sky. My scales itch with impatience, and I force myself to stay still. Waiting is the hardest part of any mission, but this time it's worse. Tyler's in there, alone, and every second feels like an eternity.

“You're going to dent the hull if you keep that up,” one of the warriors mutters from behind me. I glance over my shoulder. It's Krel, his blue scales glinting faintly in the dim light. He's leaning casually against the side of the craft, his plasma rifle slung over his shoulder.

“Maybe I'll dent your face next,” I snap, but there's no real heat behind it. Krel grins, showing off a row of sharp teeth.

“Relax, Lanz. Your human's got this. She's tougher than she looks.”

“She's not my human,” I growl, though the words feel hollow. Tyler's more than that. She's... I shake my head, refusing to finish the thought.

“Sure she's not,” Krel says, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “That's why you've been

pacing this boat like a caged animal for the past hour.”

I glare at him, but he just chuckles. The other warriors exchange amused glances, but they know better than to join in. Krel’s always been the one with the big mouth.

“Focus,” I bark, turning back to the cannery. “We’re not here to chat. The second we get the signal, we move. No mistakes.”

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“Yes, sir,” Krel says, still grinning. “But if you’re so worried, why’d you let her go in alone?”

I clench my fists, my claws digging deeper into the metal. “Because she’s capable,” I say through gritted teeth. “And because she insisted.”

“Sounds like she’s got you wrapped around her little finger,” Krel teases.

I spin around, grabbing him by the front of his armor and lifting him off his feet. “One more word, Krel, and I’ll throw you overboard.”

He raises his hands in mock surrender, still grinning. “Alright, alright. I’ll shut up.”

I drop him back onto the deck and turn back to the cannery, my heart pounding. The link between Tyler and me is faint, but it’s there. I can feel her nervousness, her determination. She’s scared, but she’s holding it together. That’s my girl.

“Any minute now,” I mutter, more to myself than anyone else.

The warriors shift behind me, their weapons at the ready. The tension is thick enough to cut with a knife. We’re all waiting, every muscle coiled like a spring.

“You think she’ll pull it off?” Krel asks, his voice quieter now.

“She’ll pull it off,” I say, my voice firm. “She has to.”

The words hang in the air, heavy with unspoken fear. I stare at the cannery, willing

the signal to come. Every second feels like an eternity, but I'll wait as long as it takes. Tyler's in there, and I'm not leaving without her.

The cannery's lights snap off like someone flipped a switch, plunging the entire structure into darkness. My heart skips a beat, then kicks into overdrive. "That's the signal," I growl. "All right, soldiers. We're outnumbered, and outgunned, but we never let that stop us before. We beat the Grolgath in the future. Now we're going to beat them in the past."

Krel cracks his neck, his grin sharp enough to cut glass. "I'm gonna hit those Grolgath so hard, their children will be hatched dizzy."

I pivot toward him, my golden eyes narrowing. "No cowboy bullshit, Krel. This isn't Horus IV. This is surgical. Myjalshagaris in there."

The word hangs in the air like a thunderclap. Krel's grin falters for a second, his eyes widening. He glances back at the other warriors, who exchange solemn nods. The mood shifts instantly—no more jokes, no more bravado. This just got personal for all of us.

Krel steps forward, his voice steady. "The Grolgath will not harm so much as a hair on her head. Not while we draw breath. She is the bravest of us all."

"Also the prettiest," I add with a smirk.

The amphibious craft skims across the black water, the roar of the engine drowned out by the pounding of my heart. I grip the edge, my claws leaving faint grooves in the metal. The cannery looms ahead, a hulking shadow against the night sky. We blast our way up through the floor, the sound of the explosion echoing through the empty space. The interior is dark, and seemingly deserted.



"Spread out, teams of two," I say softly. "Watch your six and don't pull the trigger unless you're sure."

Krel falls in beside me, his plasma rifle at the ready. "You think they're hiding in the shadows, waiting to jump us?"

"Wouldn't put it past them," I mutter, scanning the darkness. "Stay sharp."

We move through the cannery, our footsteps silent on the cold concrete. The air smells of salt and rust, and the faint hum of machinery echoes in the distance. My scales prickle with unease. Something's not right.

"Lanz," Krel whispers, his voice tense. "You feel that?"

I nod, my grip tightening on my weapon. The air is thick with the scent of Grolgath, but there's no sign of them. "They're here. Somewhere."

We press on, the tension mounting with every step. The cannery is a maze of corridors and machinery, and every shadow could be hiding an enemy. The faint link to Tyler pulls me forward. She's close. I can feel it.

"Stay with me," I mutter to Krel. "We're not splitting up."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he replies, his voice tight with tension.

We round a corner, and there, in the dim light, I see her. Tyler, crouched behind a stack of crates, her eyes wide with fear. Relief floods through me, but it's short-lived. Behind her, the shadows shift, and a Grolgath steps into the light, its milky white eyes fixed on her.

"Tyler!" I shout, raising my weapon.

She turns, her eyes meeting mine for a split second before the Grolgath lunges.

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I squeeze the trigger, and the plasma bolt hits the Grolgath square in the chest. Its body convulses mid-air, scales sizzling as the energy rips through it. The smell of burnt flesh fills the air as it crumples to the floor, twitching once before going still.

Tyler doesn't hesitate. She bolts toward me, her eyes wide but her steps steady. I catch her as she throws herself into my arms, her small frame trembling against mine. Her hands clutch at my armor, and I can feel her heart racing through the thin fabric of her shirt.

"You're okay," I mutter, more to myself than to her. My claws brush against her back, careful not to scratch her. "You're okay."

She pulls back just enough to look up at me, her blue eyes searching mine. "I knew you'd come," she says, her voice shaky but firm.

Before I can respond, the crackle of gunfire echoes through the cannery, followed by a panicked voice over my comms. "Lanz! We're pinned down on the factory floor! They've got us surrounded!"

I curse under my breath, my grip tightening on Tyler. "Stay behind me," I order, pulling her close as I turn toward the sound of the battle. "And don't let go."

She nods, her fingers gripping the edge of my armor as we move. The factory floor is chaos—plasma bolts lighting up the darkness, the sharp tang of ozone mixing with the metallic scent of blood. My team is huddled behind a stack of crates, their weapons trained on the shadows where the Grolgath are hiding.

“Lanz!” Krel shouts, ducking as a bolt whizzes past his head. “They’ve got us cornered!”

I step forward, my plasma rifle raised. “Hold your fire!” I bark, my voice cutting through the din. The weapons fall silent, the sudden quiet almost deafening.

“Bob!” I shout, my golden eyes scanning the darkness. “I know you’re here. Let’s talk.”

For a moment, there’s nothing. Then, a figure steps into the light. Bob, his green scales glinting faintly. He’s calm, almost casual, as if this is just another day at the office.

“There you are, Lanz,” he says, his voice smooth and unhurried. “I was wondering when you’d show up.” He tilts his head, his frills twitching slightly. “Now, I’m not going tonegotiate with a Vakutan, but if you wish to surrender, I might be persuaded to let you and some of your men live.”

I feel Tyler’s grip tighten on my armor, her breath hitching. I don’t take my eyes off Bob. “Funny,” I say. “I was about to make you the same offer.”

Bob smirks, that infuriating, smug twist of his lips that makes my scales itch. I don’t hesitate. I squeeze the trigger, and the plasma bolt blasts through his chest, leaving a smoking hole where his heart should be. He crumples to the floor, his milky white eyes staring blankly at the ceiling.

“One down,” I mutter.

But then another Grolgath steps into the light, and my stomach drops. It’s Bob. Again. Same green scales, same smug smirk, same milky eyes.

“What the—” I growl, my grip tightening on my weapon. “More shapeshifting tricks? I’ll kill Grolgath no matter what they look like.”

I fire again. The second Bob drops, his body twitching as it hits the floor. But before I can even take a breath, a third Bob walks into the light. I shoot him too. And then another. And another.

The dead Bobs start piling up, their bodies creating a grotesque mound in the center of the room. The new ones have to climb over their fallen brethren, their movements eerily calm, like this is just another day at the office. My plasma rifle grows hot in my hands, the power cell draining with every shot.

“Lanz,” Tyler whispers behind me, her voice trembling. “What’s happening?”

“Stay behind me,” I snap, my eyes never leaving the next Bob as he steps into view. I fire again. He falls. Another takes his place.

My weapon beeps—a warning. Low power. I curse under my breath, my claws digging into the grip. One more shot. I take it. The Bob in front of me collapses, but another is already climbing over the pile of bodies.

My rifle dies with a soft click. I toss it aside, my golden eyes narrowing as the latest Bob steps onto the mound of his own corpses. He adjusts his tie, his smirk widening.

“Not shapeshifting,” he says, his voice smooth and unhurried. “Cloning technology. I’m not sure you have enough shots to take all of me down.”

"So that's why Gordo saw so many Grolgath here," I say. My golden eyes scan the pile of Bob clones, their green scales glinting faintly in the dim light. "They were all your clones. Where is Gordo, anyway?"

Bob laughs, a sound that grates against my scales like nails on glass. He steps forward, his smirk widening. "Oh, he's down in the bowels of the cannery," he says, his tone casual, like we're discussing the weather. "With the other test subjects. It takes a lot of raw material to make clones this quickly."

My stomach churns, bile rising in my throat. I look at the mound of dead Bobs, their lifeless bodies sprawled across the floor. Each one came at the expense of a human life. My claws flex, the sharp tips digging into my palms. "You're a monster," I growl, my voice trembling with rage.

Bob shrugs, adjusting his tie like he's just finished a business meeting. "Necessary sacrifices," he says, his tone dismissive. "You of all people should understand that, Lanz. Or do you think your hands are clean?"

I throw my laser pistol down, the clatter of metal against concrete echoing through the room. My claws extend, the sharp tips glinting in the dim light. "You shouldn't watch this, Tyler," I growl. "It's not a side of me I like people to see."

"Lanz—" she starts, her voice trembling, but I give a sharp shake of my head.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:19 am*

"Stay back," I snap, my golden eyes never leaving Bob. "This is between me and him."

I launch myself at Bob, my claws slashing through the air with deadly precision. The first clone goes down in a spray of green blood, his body crumpling to the floor. Another steps forward, and I tear through him too, my claws ripping through scales and flesh with savage fury.

"Come on, Lanz," Bob taunts, his voice echoing through the room. "You're going to have to do better than that."

I don't respond. I don't have the breath to waste on words. My claws are a blur, slicing through clone after clone, their bodies falling to the floor in a grotesque heap. Blood splatters across my scales, the metallic tang filling my nostrils. My muscles burn, my lungs heaving with the effort, but I don't stop. I can't stop.

"Lanz!" Tyler's voice cuts through the chaos, but I don't look back. I can't. If I do, I'll lose focus, and that's exactly what Bob wants.

The clones keep coming, their milky white eyes fixed on me, their smirks identical. I tear through them, my claws ripping through flesh and bone, my body moving on instinct. The pile of dead Bobs grows higher, the floor slick with blood, but still they come.

My arms ache, my legs trembling with exhaustion, but I don't stop. I can't. I'll tear through every last one of them if I have to. I'll rip Bob apart with my bare hands if it's the last thing I do.

At last, the room falls silent. The last clone collapses to the floor, his body twitching once before going still. I stand knee-deep in the dead, my chest heaving, my scales slick with blood. My claws drip with green ichor, my body trembling with exhaustion, but I'm still standing.

"Lanz," Tyler whispers, her voice barely audible over the sound of my ragged breathing.

I turn to her, my golden eyes meeting hers. "It's over," I say, my voice hoarse. "For now."

But even as the words leave my mouth, I know it's not true. This is far from over. And as long as Bob's still out there, Tyler's not safe. Neither is anyone else.

"Krel, take a team and secure the perimeter. The rest of you, with me. We need to find the prisoners." I can still smell Grolgath, faint but acrid, clinging to the air. Not Bob's clones. Something...different. Older.

We move deeper into the cannery, the silence broken only by the rhythmic thud of our boots against the concrete floor. The air grows heavy, thick with a metallic tang that makes my scales prickle. The stench of blood is stronger here, mingled with something else... something sickly sweet.

We find them in a vast, underground chamber. Humans, dozens of them, strapped to metal tables, their eyes vacant, their bodies pale and emaciated. Tubes snake from their arms, connected to humming machinery that lines the walls. The air shimmers with a faint, green haze, the source of that sickeningly sweet smell. Cloning vats, row upon row of them, filled with a viscous, green fluid.

"By the Precursors..." Krel whispers, his voice hushed with horror.



I clench my fists, my claws digging into my palms. This is worse than I imagined. Far worse. “Get them out of here,” I bark, my voice tight with barely suppressed rage. “Now.”

The warriors move quickly, their faces grim as they work to free the prisoners. I scan the room, my golden eyes searching for any sign of Gordo.

“Lanz!” a weak voice calls out.

I spin around, my heart leaping into my throat. Gordo, slumped against a far wall, his fur matted with blood, his breathing shallow. Relief washes over me, so potent it almost buckles my knees.

“Gordo!” I rush to his side, kneeling beside him. “Are you alright?”

He coughs, a weak, rattling sound. “Peachy,” he rasps, his voice strained. “Just a little...lightheaded.”

I help him to his feet, my arm supporting his weight. “We’ll get you out of here,” I promise, my voice thick with emotion. He’s alive. He’s alive.

Later, after the prisoners are safe and the cloning technology secured, I find Tyler standing on the loading dock, watching as the last of the equipment is loaded onto a Veritas transport. The rising sun paints the sky in shades of pink and orange, casting a warm glow over her face.

I walk toward her, my heart pounding in my chest. “It’s over,” I say, my voice still rough with exhaustion. “You did it.”

She turns to me, her blue eyes shining with a mixture of relief and something else...something that makes my scales tingle. “We did it,” she corrects, her voice

soft.

I reach out, gently cupping her face in my hand. “No,” I say. “You did it. The future, the present... they both owe you a debt. Anything you want, Tyler. If it’s in my power, it’s yours.”

She looks at me for a long moment, her eyes searching mine. Then, a slow smile spreads across her face, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Okay,” she says, her voice playful. “I want you to keep me as your special pampered pet, forever.”

I laugh, the sound echoing through the morning air. I pull her close, my lips finding hers in a kiss that’s both tender and fierce. “Forever,” I whisper against her mouth.

“I love you, Lanz,” she murmurs, her voice barely audible.

“I love you too, jalshagar,” I reply, my voice thick with emotion. Now and forever.

### CHAPTER 23

#### TYLER

Lanz's hand is warm and firm around mine as he leads me down the hall toward the playroom. The anticipation coils in my stomach, tight and electric. I've been thinking about this all night, all week, really. The playroom is my favorite place in the condo, and tonight feels... different. Special. Like it's not just another night, but something more.

He stops at the door, his golden eyes locking onto mine. "Ready, pet?"

I nod, my throat too dry to speak. He opens the door, and the soft, warm glow of the room spills out. The velvet-lined walls seem to shimmer in the low light, and the air smells faintly of leather and something sweet, like vanilla. My skin prickles with excitement.

Lanz steps inside, pulling me with him. He turns to face me, his hands sliding up my arms, leaving a trail of goosebumps. "You were stunning tonight," he says. "Every eye in the room was on you, but all I could think about was getting you here. Alone."

I blush, my cheeks burning. "You're just saying that."

He tilts my chin up with one finger, forcing me to meet his gaze. "I don't say things I don't mean, Tyler. You're beautiful. And you're mine."

The way he says it—so possessive, so sure—makes my knees weak. He steps closer,

his body heat radiating against me, the faintest brush of his scales through his shirt. My breath hitches.

“Let’s get you out of this dress,” he murmurs, his hands moving to the zipper at the back of my gown. He pulls it down slowly, the sound of the fabric parting sublime. The dress pools at my feet, leaving me in nothing but my heels and a pair of lace panties.

Lanz steps back, his eyes raking over me. “Perfect,” he says, his voice thick with desire. He kneels in front of me, his hands sliding up my legs to the straps of my heels. He undoes them one by one, his touch deliberate, almost reverent. When he’s done, he stands, his hands moving to my hips. He hooks his fingers into the waistband of my panties and pulls them down, leaving me completely bare.

I feel exposed, vulnerable, but in the best way. Lanz’s gaze is intense, and I can see the hunger in his eyes. He steps closer, his hands sliding up my sides, and I shiver.

“You’re trembling,” he says, a smirk tugging at his lips. “Excited?”

I nod, my voice barely a whisper. “Yes.”

He leans in, his lips brushing against my ear. “Good. Because I have one more gift for you.”

He steps back, reaching for a rectangular box wrapped in silver and gold paper. My hands shake as I take it, the weight of it solid in my grasp. I tear the paper away, my breath catching as I open the box.

Inside is the pet gear—the headband with the pink ears, the gloves, the boots, the tail. My heart skips a beat. I look up at Lanz, my eyes wide.

“You... you got me this?”

He smiles, that slow, predatory smile that always makes my stomach flip. “I did. I thought it was time we took things to the next level. What do you think?”

I can’t speak. I just nod, my hands trembling as I reach for the headband. Lanz takes it from me, his fingers brushing against mine, and places it gently on my head. The ears are soft, the fur tickling my skin.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, his hands moving to the gloves. He slides them onto my arms, lacing them up with practiced ease. When he’s done, he steps back, his eyes dark with desire.

“Now the boots,” he says firmly, but lovingly.. I sit on the edge of the bed, my legs shaking as he kneels in front of me. He slides the boots onto my feet, the leather cool against my skin. When he’s done, he stands, his hands moving to my hips.

“And finally,” he says, his voice a whisper, “the tail.”

I lick my lips as he picks it up, the pink, upward-curling tail with its anal plug.

“Bend over, pet. Present yourself to me.”

My heart races as I obey, my hands gripping the edge of the bed for support. The cool air brushes against my skin, and I hear the soft click of a bottle opening. The scent of lubricant fills the air, and I bite my lip, anticipation coiling in my stomach.

“Relax,” he murmurs, his hand resting on the small of my back. His touch is firm, grounding, and I take a deep breath, letting my muscles loosen. I feel the slick warmth of his finger as he teases my entrance.

“That’s it,” he says, his voice a soothing rumble. “Just let me take care of you.”

He presses his finger inside slowly, carefully, and I gasp at the sensation. It’s strange, unfamiliar, but not unpleasant. He works his finger in and out, stretching me gently, dancing with vulnerability and trust. I’m completely at his mercy, and I love it.

“You’re doing so well,” he praises, his voice warm with approval. “Just a little more, pet.”

“Okay,” I mumble.

He adds a second finger, and I whimper, the stretch more intense now. But he’s patient, taking his time, and I feel myself relaxing into it. The sensation is strange, but there’s a hint of pleasure there, too, and I squirm.

“Almost there,” he murmurs, his fingers moving with practiced ease. “You’re taking me so well, Tyler.”

I blush at his words, my cheeks burning. I’ve never done anything like this before, but with Lanz, I feel safe. He knows what he’s doing, and I trust him completely.

Finally, he withdraws his fingers, and I hear the soft clink of the anal plug. I glance over my shoulder, watching as he slicks it with lubricant. I’m so excited I can’t stand it.

“Ready?” he asks, his golden eyes locking onto mine.

I nod, my voice barely a whisper. “Yes.”

He presses the plug against my entrance, and I try to relax. He pushes it in slowly, carefully, and I gasp at the sensation. It’s strange, but not painful.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, his hand resting on my hip. “You’re doing so well.”

I feel the plug settle inside me, novel and firm. It doesn’t feel strange at all, it feels...nice. So nice..

“Look at yourself,” he commands, his voice low and smooth.

I turn my head, my eyes widening as I catch sight of my reflection in the mirrored wall. I’m wearing the pet gear—the headband with the pink ears, the gloves, the boots, the tail. I look... different. Sexy. Confident. A year ago, I would have been too inhibited to wear something like this, even in the privacy of my own home. But now, I feel a strange sense of pride. I’m open to new experiences, and I trust Lanz to guide me on this journey.

“You’re stunning,” he says, his voice thick with desire. “Absolutely breathtaking.”

I blush, my cheeks burning, but I can’t help but smile. I feel beautiful, desired.

Then he reaches for the remote, and I feel a jolt of electricity as he turns on the vibrating plug. I squeal, my body jerking at the sudden sensation. It’s intense, overwhelming, and I twist about with ecstasy.

“Lanz!” I gasp, my hands gripping the edge of the bed for support.

He chuckles, his hand resting on my hip. “Relax, pet. Just let it happen.”

I obey, groaning as it all washes over me.

“Good girl,” he says, warm with approval. “Just let go.”

I close my eyes, letting the sensations wash over me. The vibrations are intense.

“Lanz,” I whimper, my body trembling with need.

“I’ve got you, pet,” he murmurs, his hand resting on my hip. “Just let go.”



I can't help but moan softly. I close my eyes, letting the sensations wash over me..

"Lanz," I whimper, my body trembling with need.

The clamps hit the floor with a softclink, the chain pooling like liquid silver against the hardwood. My breath catches, and I feel a rush of heat flood my cheeks. Lanz's voice is low, commanding. I love it.

"Fetch, Pet."

I drop to all fours, the cool floor pressing against my knees and the padded gloves. My tail—well, the plug—curls upward, teasing me with the weight of it, the slight vibration still humming faintly. I know he's watching me, his golden eyes tracking every movement, and I want to make him proud. I want to be good for him.

I crawl forward, my hips swaying deliberately, the tail wiggling with each movement. The chain glints in the soft light of the playroom, and I t feel a thrill of excitement. This is new, this ishisidea, and I'm eager to please. I reach the clamps, but my gloved hands are useless, the leather paws unable to grip. I hesitate for a moment, then lower my head, my teeth closing gently around the chain. It's cool against my tongue, and I can taste the faint metallic tang.

I turn back toward him, crawling slowly, the chain dangling from my mouth. My heart is pounding. I'm hyper-aware of every movement, every sound—the soft creak of the floor, the faint hum of the plug, the way my breath comes in shallow gasps.

When I reach him, I sit back on my heels, looking up at him with what I hope is an expression of eager obedience. He takes the chain from my mouth, his fingers brushing against my lips, and I feel a jolt of electricity at the contact.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:19 am*

He pets my head, his hand sliding over the pink ears of the headband, and I lean into his touch. It's so easy to let go, to let him take control.

But then his hands move lower, his fingers brushing against my nipples, and I gasp. He works them slowly, teasing them until they harden, the heat building, the pleasure coiling in my stomach. When he finally applies the clamps, the sharp pinch makes me cry out, but it's mixed with pleasure, a strange, intoxicating combination.

I'm on the edge, my body trembling, the orgasm building, but his voice stops me.

"Not yet, Pet," he says, his tone firm but gentle. "You don't have my permission."

I nod, biting my lip to hold back the moan that threatens to escape. I'm desperate, aching, but I want to be good for him. I want to obey.

The collar clicks shut around my neck, the cool metal pressing against my skin. I can feel the weight of it, the slight tug as Lanz adjusts the leash. My heart races, and I shiver with anticipation. The ball gag slips into my mouth, the leather straps tightening behind my head. I can't speak, can't do anything but obey, and the thought sends a rush of heat through me.

Lanz tugs on the leash, and I follow him out of the playroom, my bare feet padding softly against the hardwood floor. The living room is dimly lit, the floor-to-ceiling windows offering a view of the city below. The cool air brushes against my skin, the plug still vibrating faintly inside me.

We step out onto the balcony, the night air cool against my skin. The city stretches

out below us, the lights twinkling like stars. I know no one can see us up here, but the thought that someone might sends a thrill through me. I feel like an animal, completely at Lanz's mercy, and I love it.

"You've been a very good pet," Lanz says. He ties the leash to the balcony railing, the metal clinking softly. "And good pets deserve rewards."

I turn around as he commands, my hands gripping the railing for support. I can feel his presence behind me, his body heat radiating against my skin. His claws dig into my hips, and I gasp, the sensation sending a jolt of electricity through me.

He thrusts into me hard, his scaled cock filling me completely. The plug vibrates in time with his movements, the dual sensations driving me insane. I can't speak, can't do anything but moan around the gag, the sound muffled but desperate.

"Cum, little Pet," he commands, his voice rough with desire.

I scream around the gag, my body convulsing as the most intense orgasm of my life crashes over me. I can feel him filling me with his seed, the heat of it sending me over the edge again. I writhe against the railing, lost in the throes of ecstasy, my body trembling with pleasure.

Lanz slowly sets me free, his hands gentle as he removes the gag and collar. I collapse against him, my body still shaking, and he holds me close, his arms strong and reassuring.

"You're perfect, Tyler."

I smile, my heart swelling with affection. I feel safe, loved, and completely his.

## CHAPTER 24

LANZ

I lean back in my chair, the leather creaking under my weight, and stare at the holographic report floating above my desk. Dead Bobs. Dozens of them. Each one a perfect replica, each one a dead end. My jaw tightens, the scales along my neck bristling. I hate loose ends. They itch like a splinter under my skin, and I'm not the kind of Vakutan to let an itch go unscratched.

I flick the report to the side, and it dissolves into a shower of pixels. My fingers drum against the desk, the sound sharp and impatient. I need answers, and I'm not getting them sitting here. I activate the holocom, and Pyke's face materializes in front of me, his red scales catching the light, his expression as unreadable as ever.

"Pyke," I say. "I need permission to go after Bob. I need to confirm if he's dead or not."

Pyke raises an eyebrow, his golden eyes narrowing. "Denied."

I lean forward, my claws digging into the edge of the desk. "Why not?"

He tilts his head, a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. "You really want to know?"

"I'm asking, aren't I?" My voice rises, the frustration bubbling over.

Pyke chuckles, a deep, rumbling sound that only makes my scales itch more. "I think you and your jalshagar should have a talk before you go cavorting around the world looking for a man who may already be dead."

The holocom blinks out before I can respond, leaving me staring at empty air. My fist slams into the desk, the wood splintering under the force. "What the hell is that

supposed to mean?" I mutter to myself.

I push back from the desk and stalk across the room, my tail flicking in irritation. Pyke's words echo in my head, and I can't shake the feeling that he's holding something back. Something important. I stop in front of the window, the city sprawling out below me, and let out a growl.

"Talk to Tyler," I mutter, repeating Pyke's words. "What does she have to do with this?"

I turn on my heel and head for the door, my mind racing. If Pyke thinks Tyler has something to say, then I'll hear it. But I'm not waiting around for answers. I'll get them myself, one way or another.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:19 am*

The door to my office swings open, and Tyler strides in, her arms straining under the weight of a massive paper bag. The smell of smoked meat hits me like a freight train, and my stomach growls in response. She's got that grin on her face—the one that says she's up to something but isn't ready to spill yet. She drops the bag on my desk with a thud, then pulls out a six-pack of my favorite beer, setting it down with a clink.

“What's the occasion?” I ask, leaning back in my chair, my tail flicking lazily behind me. My eyes narrow as I study her. She's too cheerful, too deliberate. Something's going on.

She hops up onto the edge of my desk, her legs swinging like a kid on a playground. “Who says there's an occasion?” she says, her voice light and teasing. Her blue eyes sparkle with mischief, and I can't help but smirk.

“You're a terrible liar, you know that?” I say, standing up and circling the desk. She doesn't move, just keeps grinning at me like she's got the upper hand. I grab her by the waist and pull her off the desk, spinning her around and plopping her down on my lap. She lets out a squeal, and I give her a playful spank, the sound sharp in the quiet office.

“You know I love this, right?” she says between giggles, squirming in my lap.

“I know you do,” I say. I wrap my arms around her, pulling her close. “Just like I know you're up to something. Spill it, Tyler. What's going on?”

She twists in my lap to face me, her hands resting on my shoulders. Her grin falters for a moment, and I see something flicker in her eyes—nerves, maybe? She bites her

lower lip, and I can feel her heart racing under my hands.

“Lanz,” she starts, her voice trembling just a little. She takes a deep breath, like she’s steadying herself, and then she says it. “I’m pregnant.”

The words hang in the air between us, heavy and final. My hands freeze on her waist, and for a moment, I can’t breathe. Pregnant. The word echoes in my head, while emotions—shock, pride, fear—all tangled up in a knot in my chest. I stare at her, my golden eyes searching hers for any sign that she’s joking, but all I see is raw honesty.

“Pregnant,” I repeat. My hands move to her stomach, my claws brushing against the fabric of her shirt. There’s a life growing inside her—our life. A child. My child. The thought sends a jolt through me, and I pull her closer, my forehead resting against hers.

“Are you sure?” I ask, my voice rough with emotion.

She nods, her lower lip trembling. “I took three tests. They all said the same thing.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding, and then I kiss her. It’s not gentle or sweet—it’s fierce, possessive, full of all the things I can’t put into words. She’s mine, and now there’s a part of me growing inside her. The bond between us feels stronger than ever, and I know, without a doubt, that this is what it means to be jalshagar.

“It’s wonderful news,” I say, my voice steady but warm, my hands still resting on her stomach. I can feel the tension in her body, the way she’s holding her breath, waiting for my reaction. I tilt her chin up so she’s looking at me, her blue eyes wide and uncertain. “Tyler, this is... incredible.”

She exhales sharply, like she’s been holding that breath for hours, and her shoulders slump in relief. “You’re not... upset? I mean, I know we haven’t talked about this, and it’s so soon, and?—”

I cut her off with a kiss, my lips pressing against hers, firm and reassuring. When I pull back, her cheeks are flushed, and she's staring at me like I've just handed her the stars. "Upset? Tyler, I can't wait to be a father. To our child." My voice drops, low and possessive, and I feel her shiver in my arms. "You're mine, and this baby is mine. There's nothing in this galaxy that could make me happier."

She melts against me, her arms wrapping around my neck, and I pull her closer, my tail curling around her waist. Her heart is racing, and I can feel the warmth of her skin through her shirt. She's so small, so fragile, and yet she's carrying something so powerful, so precious. My child. Our child.

"Lanz," she whispers, her voice trembling. "What if... what if it's not safe? I mean, you're Vakutan, and I'm human. What if our bodies aren't... compatible?"

I chuckle, the sound deep and rumbling in my chest. "Tyler, the Precursors made sure of that. They designed us—all of us—to be able to interbreed. Our child will have the best of both of us. Your strength, your resilience, your kindness. And my... well, everything else." I grin, and she laughs, the sound light and musical.

"You're so full of yourself," she teases, poking me in the chest.

"And you love it," I shoot back, catching her hand and pressing a kiss to her palm. "But seriously, Tyler, there's nothing to worry about. Our child will be perfect. Just like you."

Her eyes soften, and she leans into me, her forehead resting against mine. "I love you, Lanz. So much."

"I love you too, Tyler," I say, my voice rough with emotion. "More than anything."

Our lips meet again, this time softer, slower, and I pour everything I'm feeling into that kiss—my love, my pride, my protectiveness. She's mine, and I'm hers, and now



there's a part of us that will live on forever.