



Grumpy Alien Boss

Author: *Athena Storm*

Category: Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: He hired me to organize his life. I never expected him to unravel mine.

Darwin Rook is rich, powerful, and impossible to read. As Manhattan's most enigmatic billionaire, he built an empire from nothing. Landing a job as his personal assistant was supposed to be my big break—until I realized my boss isn't just intimidating.

He's not human.

The late-night disappearances. The impossible reflexes. The red scales I found in his office. I should have run the second I pieced it all together. Instead, I did something much more dangerous.

I fell for him.

Now, I'm trapped in a world I don't understand. He's not just my boss—he's a warrior from another planet, locked in an ancient war that threatens all of humanity. And I'm in the crossfire.

Loving him could doom me.

Leaving him might destroy us all.

Read on for: A sci fi romance that will take you out of this world by making you laugh and then make you sigh as you see the best love story in the galaxy. Get ready to escape this planet and travel through the Athenaverse. HEA guaranteed!

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CHAPTER 1

OLIVIA

"Revolution Rouge or Cincinnati Rose?" I hold up the two tubes of lipstick to my reflection. "What marketing genius came up with these names?"

The tubes mock me with their identical red hues. My hand trembles as I unscrew Cincinnati Rose. The more professional choice. Not that anyone would notice the subtle difference, but every detail counts today.

"You've got this." My reflection stares back, green eyes wide. "It's just an entry-level position at Rook Enterprises. No big deal."

Right. No big deal. Just the company I've dreamed of working for since I first read about their environmental initiatives in business school. The lipstick wavers as I trace the outline of my lips.

"Perfect." I cap the tube and toss it in my makeup bag. "Professional. Polished. Ready to change the world one spreadsheet at a time."

My tiny efficiency apartment barely fits a bed and dresser, but the rent eats half my savings each month. Worth it to be in Manhattan, where dreams are made. Or crushed. No, not going there.

Darwin Rook built his empire from nothing, turning a tech startup into a billion-dollar force for positive change. The man's a legend in sustainable business practices. His

latest initiative redirected 80% of corporate profits into rainforest preservation.

"Stop fangirling over the CEO." I smooth my blazer, checking for wrinkles. "You'll probably never even see him."

The subway screech filters through my window, a reminder that I need to leave soon. My stomach knots as I gather my portfolio. The interview's with HR, maybe a department manager if I'm lucky. Just the first step on a very tall ladder.

The bus rounds the corner just as I sprint up to the stop. My footsteps echo off the concrete canyons as I dash to catch it. Thank god the driver sees me waving.

SNAP.

My left heel catches in the top step as I climb aboard. The momentum pitches me forward, but I catch myself on the fare box.

"Oh great." I fish out my metro card and swipe while retrieving the broken heel. The glossy black spike dangles by a thread of plastic.

Two construction workers in orange vests wave me over to their seat.

"We can fix, señorita. Jose has tools."

Jose pulls a metal strip and some tiny bolts from his lunch box while his friend holds my shoe steady. Their skilled hands make quick work of the repair.

"Not pretty, but strong now."

The industrial-looking metal bracket ruins the sleek designer look, but at least I can walk.

"You got this, girl." The woman across the aisle nods approvingly. "Shows initiative, solving problems on the fly. That's what they want to see."

"Darwin Rook loves that kind of thinking," adds a man in a business suit. "Innovation under pressure."

My spirits lift as more passengers chime in with encouragement. Maybe this isn't a complete disaster after all.

"Thanks everyone, really." I stand to exit at my stop.

"Hold up, honey." A gravelly voice belongs to an elderly woman in the back. "If I were you, I'd unbutton that blouse some. No one's gonna look at ya shoes if they're staring at your sweater meat."

The doors hiss shut behind me as I stand frozen on the sidewalk, watching the bus pull away.

"Sweater meat? I was today years old when I heard that one."

I round the corner and freeze. Rook Tower pierces the sky like a gleaming sword of glass and steel. The morning sun turns each window into a softly shimmering mirror, creating a dazzling display that puts every other building to shame.

My reflection wavers in the tinted glass as I approach the entrance. The metal bracket on my heel glints, an ugly reminder of this morning's mishap. A flash of the old woman's words echoes in my head.

"What the hell?" My fingers work the top two buttons of my blouse. The hint of cleavage looks... professional enough. Right?

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The glass doors part with a soft whoosh. My heels click against polished marble as I step into an honest-to-god indoor forest. Water tumbles down a rock wall, its mist catching rainbows in shafts of sunlight. Ferns and tropical plants create natural walls between seating areas.

A stream cuts through the lobby floor, crossed by scattered stepping stones. Each stone lights up as my foot touches it, creating a path of soft blue light. Show-offs.

"Welcome to Rook Enterprises." The receptionist's smile could power Manhattan. "Interview candidates are gathering in room 114. Just follow the blue line."

My heart sinks as I push open the door to 114. Suits. Everywhere. Young, old, designer labels, off-the-rack - at least fifty people packed into a space meant for twenty. The buzz of nervous conversation fills the air with phrases like "MBA" and "six sigma certification."

The metal bracket scrapes against the floor as I find an empty spot against the wall. So much for standing out.

Two women in matching Chanel suits glance at my shoes. Their perfectly manicured hands cover glossy lips as they whisper and snicker. The metal bracket on my heel might as well be a neon sign screaming "doesn't belong."

The Harvard MBA next to me drones on about his thesis on sustainable economics. Another candidate mentions her summer internship at Goldman Sachs. My bachelor's from Eastern Illinois University feels like a participation trophy at the Olympics.

"Did you see her shoes?" The whisper carries just enough for me to catch it.

My cheeks burn. The resume in my portfolio suddenly reads like a bad joke. Student council president? Laser tag champion? What was I thinking including that?

The old familiar fire rises in my chest. The same one that got me kicked out of ballet for correcting the instructor's form. That had me organizing a protest when the school board tried to cut art funding.

A voice that sounds suspiciously like my mother's whispers: "Just smile and nod. Be agreeable. That's how you get ahead."

My fingers clench around my portfolio. The sharp edge of the leather digs into my palm.

No. That's not me. Never has been, never will be. I'd rather fail as myself than succeed as someone else.

The rent notice pinned to my fridge flashes through my mind. The dwindling balance in my checking account. The credit card bill from moving to the city.

Being true to yourself is great and all, but it doesn't keep the lights on.

The Chanel twins titter again. One of them points at my blouse with a perfectly sculpted eyebrow.

My spine straightens. Screw it. They can mock my shoes, my degree, even my "sweater meat." But they can't touch who I am.

The question is: will Rook Enterprises want who I am?

The door crashes open, making me jump.

Holy. Shit.

Darwin Rook fills the doorway, all six-foot-something of him. The pictures don't do him justice. That mohawk should look ridiculous on a CEO, but somehow it works with his sharp features and powerful build. His presence commands the room like a general surveying his troops.

Chanel Twin Number One practically leaps from her chair. She stretches her face into a smile as she grabs his hand.

"Mr. Rook, what an honor! I've followed your career since your first startup. Your work in sustainable technology is revolutionary. The way you've transformed corporate responsibility..."

He lets her ramble, his expression unreadable. One eyebrow arches slightly as she continues to gush about his achievements. The silence when she finally stops stretches just a beat too long.

"By standing up and talking before I even had a chance to speak, you're seeking to assert dominance and make yourself stand out from the other candidates. This and your heaping endorsements are all part of that plan, yes?"

The blood drains from her face. Her mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water.

He gestures to her abandoned chair.

"Sit down. I'm conducting this interview, not you."

That voice. Deep, commanding, with an edge that makes my thighs clench. She starts

to protest.

"You're not in charge." His eyes flash, hard as steel.

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She scurries back to her seat like a scolded schoolgirl. Those three words echo in my head. You're not in charge. My mind wanders to decidedly unprofessional places, imagining that voice whispering those same words in very different circumstances...

Personal assistant? My stomach drops through the polished marble floor. Not entry-level marketing like the job posting said. The Chanel twins' snickers feel like daggers in my back now.

I should leave. Just stand up and walk out before I embarrass myself further. My broken heel scrapes against the floor as I shift my weight.

No. I didn't come this far to quit. Mom always said my stubbornness would get me in trouble, but it's also gotten me everything I've ever achieved.

Rook's fingers dance across his tablet's screen, his red eyes scanning whatever's displayed there. The harsh overhead lights catch the sharp angles of his face.

"So many qualified candidates. Ivy league degrees. Internships at Fortune 500 companies. All so, so..."

"Impressive?" Some guy in an Italian suit preens, adjusting his Rolex.

"No." Rook's voice cracks like a whip. "Worthless! I can't get a measure of your fighting spirit from a resume! I don't want simpering sycophants, I want...no, I demand briefcase WARRIORS. Soldiers willing to march to my orders right into Hell and back."

The words bypass my brain and go straight to my mouth.

"Fuck yeah!"

Oh god. Did I just say that out loud?

Fifty heads swivel toward me like synchronized robots. The silence feels thick enough to cut with a knife. Rook's piercing gaze pins me to the wall, and I fight the urge to slide down it and melt into a puddle of mortification.

His finger points straight at me, and my heart stops. Those red eyes lock onto mine with an intensity that makes my skin tingle.

"Say that again."

My throat goes dry. "Um... fuck yeah?"

One dark eyebrow arches up, and something dangerous flashes in his expression. A challenge. My pulse quickens.

I square my shoulders, channeling every ounce of that fire that got me kicked out of ballet class.

"FUCK YEAH!"

The smile that spreads across his face is pure predator, all sharp edges and promises. My knees go weak, and I'm grateful for the wall supporting me.

"Good. Keep that fire for the challenge portion of the interview and you will succeed."

The Harvard MBA's hand shoots up like we're in grade school. "Challenge portion?"

The smile vanishes from Rook's face as if it never existed. He turns toward the door, his broad shoulders blocking the light.

"Follow me."

The command in his voice brooks no argument. The room erupts in squeaking chairs and shuffling feet as fifty candidates scramble to comply. I peel myself off the wall, my metal-bracketed heel clicking against the floor as I fall into line with the others.

Whatever this challenge is, I'm ready. Bring it on.

CHAPTER 2

DAR

The scent of her hits me first - vanilla and something spicy underneath. My scales itch beneath this human glamour as I lead the candidates to the lobby.

"Three lives each." I pick up a laser tag vest, letting the familiar weight settle in my hands. "Last one standing gets the job."

"This is ridiculous." The Harvard graduate's cologne reeks of desperation and overpriced mediocrity. "We're here for a business position, not some arcade game."

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"Harvard needs to up its game then." The words come out with more growl than I intend.

A musical laugh draws my attention. Olivia. The name blazes through my mind like wildfire. Her green eyes sparkle with barely contained excitement as she straps on her vest. My blood burns hotter at the sight of her clever fingers checking the sensor points.

The warrior in me recognizes a kindred spirit. She has the heart of a fighter beneath that professional facade. The way she stands, balanced on those ridiculously repaired heels, speaks of someone who refuses to back down.

I force myself to look away before my glamour slips. Before my true form emerges in response to the primal attraction coursing through my veins. I am Vakutan. We take what we want.

But not today. Not here. I have a cover to maintain.

"When the lights dim, begin." My voice remains steady despite the fire racing through my blood. "May the best warrior win."

I settle into my chair, watching the monitors as the lights dim in the arena below. The candidates scatter like frightened prey. All except one.

Olivia takes a defensive position behind a column, checking angles and sightlines. Smart. My claws flex beneath the glamour as I pull up her file on my tablet.

"Paris, Illinois?" The town's so small it barely registers on maps. Yet she moves like someone who's seen combat.

On screen, she drops and rolls, taking out two opponents with precise shots to their chest sensors. No wasted motion. No panic. Just clean, efficient strikes.

The Harvard grad tries to rally others against her.

"Get the redhead!"

"Wrong move." I grin as Olivia uses their grouped formation against them, picking them off one by one.

My scales ripple with appreciation as she claims victory. Not a single life lost. The other candidates sprawl around her, vests blinking in defeat. She stands tall despite that broken heel, laser tag gun held ready.

Nothing in her background explains this prowess. Student council president. Town laser tag champion. Wait...

"Computer, pull up Paris Laser Arena records."

Five consecutive years as champion. Started competing at age twelve. Over three hundred documented victories.

"Fascinating." I lean closer to the monitor where she's helping defeated opponents to their feet. Such deadly accuracy wrapped in professional silk and...

"And big..." My eyes drift to where she's adjusted her blouse. "Skills."

I clear my throat, forcing my gaze back to her impressive stats. This small town

warrior might be exactly what Veritas needs.

The remaining candidates circle Olivia like vultures. My claws itch to intervene as they coordinate their attack. Her skill proves insufficient against sheer numbers as sensor after sensor goes dark.

"Sorry, small town." Harvard's smirk makes me want to reveal my true form and show him what real fear looks like.

The moment Olivia's eliminated, they turn on each other with savage intensity. Pathetic. None of them grasp the point of this exercise.

Movement catches my eye. Olivia slips away while the others battle, her shoulders slumped in defeat. The scent of salt hits my nostrils - tears.

No. She can't leave.

"No!"

I bolt for the stairwell, ripping open the door. The elevator would take too long. Without hesitation, I vault over the railing, plummeting forty stories. The glamour strains to contain my true form as I fall.

Impact. The marble floor splinters beneath my feet. No time to care about property damage.

I burst through the lobby doors just as Olivia reaches for the bus handle.

"Stop!"

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My hands circle her waist, lifting her away from the closing doors. Heat blazes through my palms where they connect with her curves. The silk of her suit does nothing to mask the softness underneath. Every Vakutan instinct screams to claim, to possess.

With monumental effort, I set her gently on her feet instead of throwing her over my shoulder and carrying her to my lair like the beast I truly am.

My hands burn where they touch her waist. The silk of her blouse whispers against my palms, and her scent clouds my judgment.

"You're mine." The words escape, raw and possessive. Her eyes widen, pupils dilating. The rapid flutter of her pulse at her throat draws my gaze. I force myself to recover. "I mean, you're hired. You're my assistant."

"I am?" Her voice carries notes of disbelief. "But I lost."

The warrior spirit in her demands explanation. I give her truth.

"You found victory in defeat. The outcome wasn't the purpose of the contest. The contest was the purpose."

Her smile blazes brighter than any sun I've seen across multiple dimensions. My glamour strains against my control.

"That's a nice, pithy thing to say. Did your PR department come up with that?"

My pride flares.

"No. Do not believe for a moment I allow others to use their tongues to speak for me."

She stiffens, spine straightening into perfect posture. The scent of anxiety spikes in her blood.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rook. I know I have a lot to learn, but I promise I'll work harder than anyone you've ever hired."

The fire in her words matches the determination in her eyes. This small human with her broken heel and unbridled spirit possesses more raw potential than any candidate I've seen. Her beauty pales in comparison to the warrior's heart beating beneath that professional exterior.

My private elevator whispers upward, carrying us to the executive floor. The vanilla-spice of her scent fills the enclosed space, making my scales ripple beneath my human disguise. I need someone I can trust completely when duty calls me away to battle the Grolgath menace.

"Your duties will be extensive. I start at five AM sharp."

"That's not a problem."

"I often work until nine, sometimes later."

"I understand."

Her determination radiates off her in waves, but can she handle the truth of what I am? What this job really entails? Pyke will demand proof of her loyalty before

allowing a human so close to our operation.

The elevator doors open to my personal office. Floor-to-ceiling windows showcase the Manhattan skyline, but my attention stays fixed on Olivia as she takes in the space. Her broken heel clicks against marble floors that cost more than she'll make in a year.

"The pay is excellent, but the demands are absolute. When I give an order, I expect instant compliance."

"I can handle it."

"Can you?" I step closer, letting some of my true nature seep through the glamour. "You will obey my every command?"

She moves toward me, green eyes blazing with challenge. The warrior spirit I glimpsed earlier burns bright and fierce.

"Without question, Sir."

She clasps her hands behind her back, lifting one leg in an oddly demure pose that contrasts sharply with the fire in her gaze. The mixture of submission and defiance stirs something primal in my blood.

Her brows arch, a smile playing at the corners of those lush lips. My pulse quickens.

"However," Olivia's voice carries a note of challenge, "I wouldn't be a very good assistant if I thought you were making a mistake and didn't tell you."

A gasp escapes me before I can stop it. The audacity of this small human, to question my judgment. To assume she knows better than a Vakutan warrior. Anger wars with

admiration in my veins.

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"You will obey me, however." I step closer, letting my glamour slip just enough to reveal a glimpse of red in my eyes.

"Oh yes, Sir." Her voice drops to a husky whisper, eyes shining with a heat that matches the fire in my blood. "I'll always, always do what you tell me. But I reserve the right to tell you when I think you're wrong."

Bold. Brazen. Beautiful. Everything about her calls to the primal instincts I keep so carefully leashed. I want to conquer that defiant spirit, to feel her surrender beneath me.

"That is both acceptable, and commendable."

She stands close enough for me to feel the heat of her body, to catch the hitch in her breath. Alone in this elevator, every cell in my body screams to claim her. To crush those tempting lips beneath my own until she melts against me.

But I am here for Veritas. An ally, not a lover. When the elevator doors slide open, I am almost grateful for the interruption. The sexual tension crackles between us, a living thing that grows more dangerous with each shared breath.

I need to maintain control. I am Vakutan. I do not surrender to base urges like some primitive beast.

No matter how much I want to.

I lead Olivia through my office suite, watching her take in the stark modernist decor.

Her broken heel clicks against Italian marble as she follows me to a sleek glass desk positioned right beside my own.

"This will be your workspace." The words come out rougher than intended. Her proximity makes my scales itch beneath the glamour. "You'll handle my schedule, calls, and appointments from here."

I retrieve a lanyard from my desk drawer, the security badge gleaming with holographic encryption. My claws flex as I hand it to her.

"Full access to the Tower. Twenty-four seven."

Her fingers brush mine as she takes it. The contact sends electricity racing through my veins.

"And these are your network credentials." I slide a tablet across the glass. "Complete administrative privileges for all Rook Enterprise systems."

Her eyes widen. The scent of her surprise mingles with vanilla and spice.

"This is... a lot of trust to place in someone you just met."

"Trust must be given before it can be earned." The warrior's philosophy slips out before I can stop it. "The question is, can you handle the pressure that comes with such responsibility?"

She straightens her spine, chin lifting in that defiant pose that makes my blood burn. A fierce smile curves those tempting lips.

"I know I can."

The certainty in her voice resonates with something primal inside me. Yes. I chose well. This small human with her warrior's heart will either prove herself worthy or break under the weight of what's to come.

"Then let's begin."

CHAPTER 3

OLIVIA

The numbers blur together on my screen as I scroll through another financial projection. My shoulders ache from hunching over Dar—Mr. Rook's massive mahogany desk. The leather of his chair creaks as I lean back, rubbing my tired eyes.

"What the hell?"

The V-Truth holdings report flashes red, denying my access code. I double-check my credentials, but the system keeps blocking me. Strange. Mr. Rook gave me full clearance for everything related to the Asian market analysis.

A fresh coffee scent wafts from my mug, grounding me as I take a sip. Two weeks in, and I've already memorized which elevator brings the best pastries, learned three different coffee orders for Mr. Rook depending on his mood, and mastered the art of scheduling meetings across seventeen time zones.

My fingertips tap against the polished wood. The V-Truth data is the last piece I need for this report. The rest of the projections look solid—better than solid. Our Vietnamese tech startups are outperforming expectations by thirty percent.

"Add it to the list," I mutter, jotting down a note on my tablet. Mr. Rook returns from Singapore tomorrow, and I'll need to brief him on everything I've found. Or haven't

found, in this case.

The setting sun paints Manhattan's skyline in amber through the floor-to-ceiling windows. I've been at this for hours, but that's what it takes to keep up with Darwin Rook's pace. The man operates on a different frequency than normal humans—like a shark that never stops swimming.

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But I'm keeping up. More than keeping up. Every impossible task he's thrown at me, I've knocked out of the park. This V-Truth thing is just another puzzle to solve.

My phone chimes with a calendar alert. Shit. Mr. Rook's flight lands in thirty minutes. I spring up from his chair, my heart racing as I pull up the photo I took of his desk arrangement before I commandeered it.

"Okay, okay..." I shift the Mont Blanc pen exactly three inches from the laptop. The brass desk clock goes precisely between the family photo and the crystal paperweight.

Perfect. Not a single item out of place.

I scurry to his private bathroom, my reflection showing against the marble floor. The mirror reflects back a woman trying too hard to look professional while fighting a hopeless crush. I smooth down my blouse, adjust my pencil skirt.

"Get it together, Livvy."

But who am I kidding? Every time he walks into the room, my pulse skips. The way his presence fills the space, how his voice drops when we're alone going over reports...

And sometimes, when I'm focused on work, I catch his reflection in my computer screen. The intensity in those red-brown eyes as they follow my movements.

I fish my lipstick from my purse. One quick touch-up of Cincinatti Rose, and?—

A metallic glint catches my eye. Something small and red on the floor near the toilet. I bend down to investigate, picking up what looks like a guitar pick, but feels different. Smoother, almost like polished stone.

"Weird."

I toss it in the trash and head back to my desk. Mr. Rook will be here any minute, and I need those reports ready.

The door swings open and Mr. Rook's commanding presence fills the room. My heart does that stupid flutter thing as I grab his coffee and rush to meet him.

"Welcome back, Mr. Rook. Black coffee, fresh from carafe."

His fingers brush mine as he takes the mug, and his smile makes my knees weak. Those red-brown eyes crinkle at the corners, warming my insides like a shot of expensive bourbon.

"The Martinez contract came through yesterday. I had legal review the terms, made the suggested edits, and sent it back for signatures." The words tumble out as I follow him to his desk. "Oh, and I rescheduled the board meeting to accommodate Mr. Chen's travel delays."

God, listen to me babbling like an eager puppy. But I can't help myself - I want him to know how well I handled everything while he was gone.

"The quarterly projections are ready for your review, and I reorganized the Asian market portfolio based on last month's metrics." I tap my tablet, forwarding the files to his screen. "Though I did hit a snag accessing the V-Truth holdings data-"

Mr. Rook sets down his coffee, that slight smile still playing at his lips. My cheeks

burn. Here I am, practically tap dancing for his approval like some desperate kid showing daddy her straight-A report card.

But dammit, I worked my ass off these past two weeks. Every deadline met, every crisis managed, every detail perfect - just like he demands. I just need him to see that, to know he made the right choice hiring me.

"You have performed exemplary work, Ms. McGee."

My face splits into a grin before I can stop it. The praise washes over me like summer rain, and I have to physically plant my feet to keep from bouncing on my toes.

"What was that last item you mentioned? About V-Truth?"

"Oh, right." I pull up the file location on my tablet. "I found it buried in the Vietnamese holdings database while compiling the quarterly report. The access keeps getting denied even though I have full clearance for that sector."

Mr. Rook's expression darkens as he leans over my shoulder to look at the screen. His cologne tickles my nose - something spicy and expensive that makes my head swim. But the tension radiating from him snaps me back to focus.

His fingers fly across the keyboard, pulling up command prompts I've never seen before. The furrow in his brow deepens with each keystroke.

"In the future, if you find any more V-truth files, please contact me immediately." His voice drops to a dangerous octave. "And under no circumstances attempt to open, transfer, or delete the files. Is that clear?"

The shift in his demeanor sends a chill down my spine. Gone is the pleased boss from moments ago. This is something else - something that makes the air feel thick and

heavy. I manage a quick nod, shrinking back slightly.

"I said, is that clear?" The snap in his voice makes me jump.

Heat flushes through my body, my spine stiffening as that familiar McGee stubbornness kicks in. Before my brain can stop my mouth, the words spill out.

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"Crystal clear, Mr. Rook, Sir." I snap off a crisp military salute, ice dripping from every syllable. "Shall I flagellate myself for failing to answer properly?"

The temperature in the room drops ten degrees. Mr. Rook's massive frame seems to expand, filling the space between us until I'm drowning in his shadow. His nostrils flare, and those strange red-brown eyes narrow to dangerous slits.

"I'm sorry, Ms. McGee." The way he bites off my name makes my stomach clench. "But what did you just say to me?"

For a split second, my courage wavers. He towers over me like an angry god, all barely contained power and fury. But I didn't get where I am by backing down when things got tough.

"If V Truth files are off limits to me, I understand that...now." I lift my chin, meeting that burning gaze. "But the fact that I did not before is your failure, not mine, Mr. Rook. I will follow your instructions to the letter. Just like I have from the moment you hired me. But like I told you the first day we met, I'll never lie to you and always speak my mind. And in my opinion, you didn't have to snap at me."

My heart hammers as I watch the emotions play across Mr. Rook's face. First comes the shock - his eyes widening just a fraction, jaw tensing. No one must stand up to him like this. Then anger floods back, his massive frame seeming to grow even larger.

But something shifts in those strange red-brown eyes. The fury melts into... curiosity? His gaze rakes over me.

When his face finally cracks into that devastating grin, my knees go weak. The smile transforms his whole face, softening the sharp angles into something almost playful.

"You're right, Ms. McGee. There was no need for me to be rude in order to impress upon you the importance of this matter." His voice wraps around me like warm silk. "I apologize for not properly training you. Normally, I'm quite good at the administration of training and discipline."

Oh God. The way he says "discipline" sends a shiver straight down my spine. My mind races to very inappropriate places involving his massive hands and - No. Bad Livvy. He's your boss.

But my mouth has other ideas.

"Don't threaten me with a good time," I blurt out.

The words hang in the air between us. My face flames hot enough to melt steel. Did I actually just say that? To Darwin freaking Rook?

His deep laugh rolls through the office like thunder, making my toes curl inside my shoes. Mr. Rook moves behind his desk with fluid grace that seems impossible for someone his size.

"I do so look forward to our interactions, Ms. McGee. Sometimes I regret that..."

The words trail off, and something flickers across his face. His jaw tightens, those strange red-brown eyes darting away from mine. It's the first time I've ever seen him look uncertain about anything.

"You regret what?" The question slips out before I can stop myself.

"Nothing." His voice turns crisp and professional. "At least, with regards to my hiring you. Now, the Fiscal Auditor at my Hong Kong holdings has to have surgery tomorrow, so YOU will be handling the accounts until the middle of next week..."

My shoulders slump as he launches into a detailed explanation of Hong Kong's financial protocols. Classic deflection tactic - bury me in work so I'll forget what just happened.

And it's working. My tablet fills with notes as he outlines exactly what he needs from me. But beneath my professional exterior, questions burn like embers. What was he about to say? What does he regret?

Not that I can ask. When Darwin Rook changes the subject, that subject stays changed. Still, I file this moment away with all the other little mysteries about my enigmatic boss - like that strange red scale I found in his bathroom.

CHAPTER 4

DAR

The rotors whirl to life as I climb into the cockpit. Another day, another performance for the cameras below. Let them think Darwin Rook's ego demands he pilot his own aircraft. The truth would shatter their fragile minds.

"Clear for takeoff, Mr. Rook," the tower controller says through my headset.

"Roger that."

The disguised shuttle lifts smoothly from the pad. Below, smartphones point skyward, capturing footage of the eccentric billionaire's departure. If they only knew this "helicopter" could outrun their fastest jets.

Banking east toward the Atlantic, I punch through a layer of cotton-white clouds. Perfect cover. My fingers dance across the holographic controls, activating the cloaking field. The rotor sound fades to silence as the craft's true form emerges - sleek Vakutan engineering at its finest.

"Computer, plot course to Base Alpha."

The ocean stretches beneath me, an endless blue expanse concealing humanity's greatest secret. My thoughts drift to Olivia, to the file she discovered. To the way she stands up to me without fear. So much fire in such a small human.

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The navigation system chimes. I nose the shuttle down toward the waves. The dome of Base Alpha shimmers into view, its forcefield parting like liquid crystal as I descend into the underwater city.

"Welcome back, Captain," the AI greets as I touch down in the hangar.

Time to see what new Grolgath schemes need thwarting today. At least the endless war gives me something to focus on besides my growing feelings for my assistant.

The door to Pyke's office slides open with a soft hiss. My commander sits behind his desk, scrolling through holographic reports that paint his scales in an eerie blue glow.

"Another successful quarter at Rook Enterprises?"

"The humans remain none the wiser." I settle my bulk into the reinforced chair. "Though I'd rather be crushing Grolgath skulls than profit margins."

"Your financial work funds our entire operation."

"I'm a warrior, not an accountant." My frill bristles with frustration. "Warriors need battle, need the taste of victory. Not spreadsheets and board meetings."

"The Grolgath fight with subterfuge and manipulation. We must do the same."

"At least let me track down their agents. One good fight-"

"You'll have your battles soon enough." Pyke's expression hardens. "With those

shape-shifting bastards, there's always another war brewing. But for now, you serve Veritas best as a briefcase warrior."

"A what?"

"You fight for humanity's future with market strategies instead of plasma rifles. The pen is mightier than the sword, as these humans say."

I slam my fist on his desk, cracking the surface.

"Just one Grolgath. Give me one to pummel."

"Patience, old friend. Your time will come."

"Speaking of recruits," Pyke says, "tell me about this human assistant of yours. The one who found our secure files."

"Olivia?" My frill perks up. "She's remarkable. Quick mind, fierce spirit. You should see how she handles the corporate raiders. Like a true warrior facing down enemy battalions."

"Go on."

"She questions everything, challenges assumptions. Perfect Veritas material. And her tactical instincts - she organized our latest merger like a battlefield campaign."

Pyke's scales shift to a knowing purple hue. "You seem quite... enthusiastic about her qualities."

"Pure professional assessment."

"Really? No other factors influencing your judgment?"

"What? No!" I spring from my chair. "She's human! Smooth skin instead of proper scales. No battle ridges, no warrior's frill. Why would I be attracted to-"

The words die in my throat as my gaze falls on the hologram on Pyke's desk - him and his human mate Sarah at their bonding ceremony.

"I mean... not that there's anything wrong with... I wasn't suggesting..."

Pyke's rumbling laugh echoes off the walls.

"Sit down before you hurt yourself, old friend."

I slump back into the chair, my scales flushing dark with embarrassment.

"Permission to shut up now, sir?"

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"Fine. Combat assessment it is." I push away from Pyke's desk, my frill bristling with annoyance. "But I maintain my edge. Daily."

"Then you should pass with flying colors."

The training chamber hums to life as I enter. Blue light ripples across the walls, forming into combat drones. Their solid-light bodies flicker into existence - perfect replicas of various enemy combatants.

"Begin sequence," the computer announces.

The first drone charges. I sidestep, catching its arm and using its momentum to slam it into the floor. The satisfying crunch as it dissolves almost makes this worthwhile.

Two more attack from opposite sides. I drop and sweep, taking their legs out. A quick strike to each throat destroys them.

But even as I flow through the forms, muscle memory taking over, my mind drifts. To red hair and green eyes. To the way Olivia's face lights up when she masters a new skill. To her fierce determination when facing down corporate rivals.

My fist passes through another drone's chest. "Assessment complete. Score: 98.7%"

I barely notice. The attraction I felt at first was simple enough to handle. Aesthetic appreciation, nothing more. But now...

Now I catch myself watching the clock, counting minutes until our next meeting.

Planning projects that require her input. Finding excuses to work late, just to spend more time in her presence.

My life before her feels distant, incomplete. Like black and white footage compared to vivid color.

"Assessment recorded," the computer says. "Would you like to run another sequence?"

I shake my head, trying to clear these dangerous thoughts.

"No. End program."

The chronometer flashes red. Dawn approaches - time to return to my human masquerade.

Back in the disguised shuttle, I engage the rotor simulation and lift off. The dome of Base Alpha vanishes beneath the waves as I ascend through layers of dark water into pre-dawn skies.

Manhattan's skyline pierces through morning mist. I land atop Rook Tower just as the sun crests the horizon. Perfect timing.

The elevator deposits me on the executive floor. Through the glass wall of my office, I spot Olivia at her desk. She's already deep in work mode, fingers flying across her keyboard while she juggles three different calls.

"No, that won't work for Mr. Rook's schedule... Yes, I understand it's urgent... How about next Tuesday?"

Her efficiency sends a surge of pride through my chest. In just months, she's mastered

the art of corporate warfare. The way she wields that phone like a weapon, decimating would-be schedule-wreckers...

A paper slips from the fax machine, floating to the floor. Olivia bends to retrieve it, her skirt pulling tight across her...

By the seven moons of Vakuta. My body responds instantly, primitive urges surging through my carefully maintained human form. The transformation matrix wavers, threatening to reveal my true nature. I force my scales to stay beneath the surface, but certain... anatomical changes refuse to be denied.

"Mr. Rook!"

Olivia straightens, document in hand, and spots me lurking in the doorway. Her face lights up as she strides toward me, hips swaying with each step.

I grip my briefcase strategically in front of my waist, praying my suit jacket conceals the evidence of my inappropriate thoughts.

"Good morning! How was your trip to the Jersey Office?"

"It went fine," I say, trying to sidle around Olivia and get to my desk before she notices the effect she's having on me. My briefcase strategically placed, I attempt a casual stride, but my body is anything but casual right now.

Olivia, oblivious to my struggle, squints at me, her gaze zeroing in on my collar.

"Hold still, you've got something..." She gets on her tiptoes, reaching up to brush off whatever offending speck has caught her attention.

I freeze as she leans into me, her body pressing against mine in a way that would

normally be welcome. But right now, it's a torture of the sweetest kind. She leans right against my erection, her softness meeting my hardness, and I have to muster every ounce of self-control not to react.

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Olivia stiffens for a moment, her eyes widening as she feels the evidence of my arousal. But she recovers quickly, her face a mask of professionalism.

"There, got it," she says, brushing off my collar and stepping back as if nothing happened.

My heart stops as Olivia examines the translucent red object between her fingers. One of my scales. Damn this holographic disguise and its limited range. The projection only extends an inch from my true form, which means loose scales can fall through the illusion.

"What is this?" She holds it up to the light, her brow furrowed.

I struggle to keep my voice steady.

"Probably just a piece of plastic."

"It's too organic looking." She runs her thumb across its surface. "Almost like some kind of weird fish scale."

Before I can snatch it away, she tucks it into her blazer pocket. My scales flush dark beneath my human disguise. That scale contains my DNA, my alien signature. If she shows it to anyone with advanced scanning equipment...

I need to get it back. Now.

But how? I can't just reach into her pocket. The headlines would write themselves:

"Tech Billionaire Gropes Assistant."

Then inspiration strikes. Lunch. Public setting, perfect excuse for gentlemanly behavior. When I pull out her chair, I can slip my hand into her pocket and retrieve the scale in one smooth motion.

"Ms. McGee..." I clear my throat. "Olivia. Would you like to join me for lunch?"

Olivia reaches for her briefcase, already in efficiency mode. "Let me grab the Mendoza proposal. They wanted to discuss the merger over lunch, right?"

"No proposals today." I keep my voice steady despite the mounting urgency. That scale burns in my mind like a beacon. "Just lunch."

She pauses, briefcase half-lifted. "Just lunch? We never do that. If there's no meeting, we order in and eat at our desks."

"This time we're doing it differently." I adjust my tie, buying time to choose my next words carefully. "Unless my company is objectionable. You're free to turn me down."

Her cheeks flush pink, matching her hair. "Objectionable? No! Not at all! I mean..." She sets down her briefcase with a thunk. "Your company is completely objectionable. I mean unobjectionable."

She takes a breath, steadying herself. "What I mean is, I'd love to have lunch with you. Sir."

The way she says 'sir' sends an inappropriate shiver down my spine, making my frill itch beneath its holographic camouflage. Focus, warrior. The scale is the mission. Nothing else matters.

But watching her flutter about, trying to hide her enthusiasm while simultaneously broadcasting it to anyone with functioning eyes... it stirs something deeper than mere physical attraction.

No. I am a Vakutan captain on a vital mission to save humanity's timeline. I cannot afford such distractions. Even if she does look absolutely radiant when she blushes like that.

CHAPTER 5

OLIVIA

The elevator doors close with a soft whisper, trapping me in this tiny metal box with six feet plus of pure masculine energy. My skin prickles with awareness. I twist a strand of hair around my finger, avoiding Darwin's gaze while simultaneously hoping he's looking at me.

"Nice weather we're having.". Really, Livvy? Weather talk?

"Indeed." His deep voice sends shivers down my spine.

Another floor ticks by. The tension thickens. I sneak a glance at his reflection in the polished doors. He's watching me. Our eyes meet in the makeshift mirror and my cheeks heat.

That little stunt with the fax seemed like such a good idea ten minutes ago. Now? Not so much. Sure, mission accomplished - the bulge in his pants proved that. But what exactly was my endgame here?

The elevator dings past floor twenty. Nineteen more to go.

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I smooth my skirt, hyper aware of how it clings to my hips. The same skirt that rode up when I bent over. On purpose. God, what must he think of me?

"Something on your mind, Miss McGee?"

"Just hungry," I lie. Well, half-lie. I am hungry - just not necessarily for food.

My career goals flash through my mind like warning signs. I didn't move to New York and fight my way into this position just to become another office romance statistic. But the way he fills out that suit...

The elevator continues its descent, each floor bringing us closer to whatever this lunch actually is. A date? A meeting? A chance for him to fire me for being unprofessional?

His cologne teases my senses. I fidget with my hair again, catching another shared smile in our reflection. My stomach does a little flip that has nothing to do with hunger.

The elevator finally reaches the lobby. Thank god - any longer in that enclosed space with him and I might have spontaneously combusted.

His hand lands on the small of my back as we exit the building. The touch sends electricity shooting up my spine. Such a gentleman, guiding me to the waiting limo, but there's something possessive in the gesture that makes my knees weak.

The leather seat creaks as I slide in, hyper aware of Darwin settling next to me. Close.

Too close. His thigh brushes mine and my brain short-circuits.

"There's this fantastic place I've invested in - fusion cuisine, Italian-Mexican. Chef Garcia trained in Florence before bringing his unique vision to New York."

I try to focus on his words, but his proximity scrambles my thoughts. His hand is still radiating heat through my blouse where he touched me.

"That is, if such cuisine is of interest to you, we don't have to dine there."

"I'll do whatever you want."

Oh god. Did I actually just say that? Out loud? To my boss? Kill me now.

His eyebrow arches upward, but he doesn't comment. Thank heaven for small mercies. I fight the urge to fan myself as the limo pulls away from the curb. The air feels thick with unspoken implications.

The limo glides to a stop, and Darwin's hand finds mine as we exit. His touch sends sparks racing up my arm. The restaurant's entrance looms before us, all gleaming glass and polished brass, but I barely notice it. All I can focus on is the warmth of his palm against mine.

The maître d' leads us to a secluded corner booth. The menu swims before my eyes - a blur of Italian and Spanish words that might as well be ancient Greek. My hands shake as I try to make sense of it.

"Allow me?" Darwin's voice cuts through my fog. "The chef's specialties are quite remarkable."

I nod, grateful for the rescue. There's something thrilling about letting him take

control, about trusting him to choose for me.

"You know, Olivia, we spend countless hours together, yet I feel I barely know you."

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing about you."

"Me?" His laugh rumbles deep in his chest. "I'm hardly a mystery. Google my name - you'll find everything from my first business venture to my last breakup splashed across the internet."

I lean forward, the movement bringing our faces closer together. "That's just the surface stuff - the starlets, the business deals, the charity galas. I'm talking about the real you."

"The real me?"

"Yes. The man behind the empire. The one who notices when his assistant's heel breaks, or remembers how she takes her coffee."

His eyes lock onto mine, something dark and hungry flickering in their depths. The air between us crackles with tension.

"The real me," Rook says carefully, as if choosing his words with the utmost precision, "is the one that wants to ravish you."

A rush of heat washes over me in a molten wave. I quickly drop my gaze, blushing deep red, and take a sip of my lemonade to give myself time to think.

"I..." My tongue feels like lead as I lick my lips. "You—you sure don't beat around the bush when you want something, do you?"

"Nor when I want someone." His voice is smooth as silk. He reaches across the table and takes my hand. I lift my gaze to meet his, and it's almost too much. I squeeze my thighs together as my body betrays just how much I want him to make good on his threat. Or is it an offer?

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His thumb strokes over my knuckles, sending shivers racing up my arm.

My mouth goes dry. This is it. The moment of truth. I could laugh it off, pretend this is all just harmless flirting between a boss and his assistant. Or I could take the plunge, cross that line...

His eyes darken with hunger.

"Let's get out of here," he says.

We barely make it back to the limo before his lips are on mine, his hands sliding over my curves. I moan into the kiss, my fingers tangling in his hair. Weeks of pent-up tension explode in a frenzy of grasping hands and desperate kisses.

His lips claim mine with fierce intensity, and every fantasy I've had about this moment pales in comparison to reality. My fingers trace along his jaw, expecting the rough scratch of five o'clock shadow, but instead I find something... different. Smooth yet textured, like touching fine leather or...

"God, you're incredible," he growls against my mouth, and coherent thought vanishes.

His hands slide down my sides, settling on my hips and pulling me closer. The leather seat creaks beneath us as I arch into his touch. The strange texture of his skin becomes just another delicious sensation as his tongue sweeps into my mouth.

My whole body tingles with electricity. Every brush of his lips, every stroke of his

hands sets my nerve endings on fire. I've never felt anything like this before - this raw, primal need consuming me from the inside out.

The limo turns a corner, and I catch glimpses of the city flashing past the tinted windows. But New York could burn down around us right now and I wouldn't notice or care. All that matters is the way Darwin's mouth moves against mine, the way his fingers dig into my hips, the deep rumble of pleasure in his chest when I tug gently at his hair.

"Darwin," I gasp as his lips trail down my neck.

He responds by pulling me even closer, until I'm practically in his lap. The strange smoothness of his skin barely registers anymore - not when his kisses are making my head spin and my body melt.

His lips crash into mine with a ferocity that steals my breath. His hand grips my ass, fingers digging in, claiming me. A low growl rumbles through his chest, vibrating against my own. It's a primal sound, one that awakens something wild within me.

I'm pinned against the plush leather of the limo seat, his body a delicious weight atop mine. His lips leave mine, trailing a path of fire down my neck. Each kiss, each lick, each nip of his teeth sends me higher, until I'm a writhing mess beneath him.

"Oh Daddy," I hear myself moan. They're wanton and needy, but I can't bring myself to care. Not when he's making me feel like this.

His hands are everywhere, bunching up my skirt, gripping my thighs. He strokes me through the damp fabric of my panties, and I can't help but arch into his touch, seeking more. More friction, more pressure, more of him.

He obliges, his fingers working me with a practiced ease that has me seeing stars. I'm

so lost in the sensation, so caught up in the moment, that I don't realize what he's about to do until I hear the fabric tear.

Cool air hits my exposed sex, and then his fingers are inside me, filling me, stretching me. He strokes a spot deep within that has my vision whiting out. My orgasm hits me like a freight train, my body bowing off the seat as I cry out.

But he swallows the sound with his mouth, his hand clamping over my lips as I shatter around his fingers. Wave after wave of pleasure washes over me, until I'm limp and boneless beneath him.

He pulls back slightly, his eyes dark with lust as he gazes down at me. There's a possessive glint in his gaze that should scare me, but all it does is stoke the fire within me. I want him, all of him, in a way I've never wanted anyone before.

"You're mine now, Olivia," he says, his voice a low, sexy rumble.

And God help me, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

The limo glides to a stop in front of Rook Tower. Darwin's hands smooth my skirt, his touch still sending shivers through me. My hair's a mess, and I catch my reflection in the privacy divider - lipstick smeared, cheeks flushed.

"Here, let me help." His fingers thread through my hair, arranging it back into something presentable. The tender gesture makes my heart flutter.

He reaches down, picking up my torn panties from the floor. My breath catches as he brings them to his nose, inhaling deeply. His eyes darken with renewed hunger.

"A souvenir," he says, tucking them into his breast pocket. The possessive gesture makes heat pool low in my belly.

"We never ate lunch," I say with a breathless laugh. My body still hums from his touch, pleasure coursing through my veins.

"We skipped right to dessert." His voice drops to that growl that makes my toes curl. "And once we get up to the office, I plan on a second helping."

My pulse quickens at the promise in his words. Images flash through my mind - his desk, his chair, the conference room table...

The door opens, and reality crashes in with a wall of sound. Angry voices. Chanting. Signs wave in the air: "Save the Rainforest!" "Rook = Destroyer!" "Stop the Bulldozers!"

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Hundreds of protesters pack the plaza, their faces twisted with rage as they spot Darwin. My stomach drops as their shouts grow louder, more hostile.

"MURDERER!" someone screams. "YOU'RE KILLING THE PLANET!"

Darwin's jaw tightens, his earlier playfulness vanishing as he stares at the sea of angry faces before us.

CHAPTER 6

DAR

A half-empty coffee cup sails past my head. These protesters have terrible aim. I pull Olivia closer, shielding her with my body as we push through the angry crowd.

"Murderer!" A scruffy man in hemp clothing lunges at us.

"Back off." My voice carries enough threat that he retreats.

"Darwin, maybe we should-"

"Keep moving." I deflect a wadded-up newspaper before it hits her face. The smell of patchouli and unwashed bodies mingles with Olivia's lingering arousal. The combination makes my head spin.

We reach the front doors. Chains snake through the handles, secured with heavy padlocks. Two police officers stand guard, radioing for backup.

"Sorry Mr. Rook. Bolt cutters are on the way."

I grunt in acknowledgment. Olivia presses against my back, her breath warm on my neck. After what happened in the limo, having her this close is pure torture.

"You're destroying the planet!" Someone hurls an empty water bottle.

I catch it mid-air. "If you care so much about the environment, why are you throwing plastic?"

The protestor's face turns red. More shouts rise from the crowd. Signs wave in the air - "Save the Rainforest" and "Stop the Destruction."

"Darwin." Olivia's fingers dig into my arm. "What's this about? Did your company really destroy part of the rainforest?"

The hurt in her voice cuts deep. I want to explain that sometimes sacrifices are necessary, that there are bigger threats than deforestation. But I can't tell her the truth. Not yet.

"We need to focus on getting inside." I scan the crowd, looking for any real threats among the peaceful protestors. All I want is to get Olivia somewhere private and finish what we started. Instead, I'm stuck dealing with this mess.

The bolt cutters finally arrive. Metal screeches against metal as the officers work on the chains.

"How does it feel to murder Earth's lungs?" The protestor shouts as police drag him away. His dreadlocks whip around his face. "You're killing us all!"

"Darwin would never do that." Olivia steps forward, chin raised. "He donates

millions to environmental causes."

My chest tightens. The faith in her voice tears at me. The crowd goes quiet, waiting for my response.

"The story is true."

"What?" Olivia spins to face me. "But why?"

"Sometimes difficult choices must be made." The words taste like ash in my mouth. If only I could tell her about the fungal infection spreading through those trees, engineered by the Grolgath to devastate Earth's oxygen supply. About how we had to contain it before it spread beyond control.

Her green eyes cloud with disappointment. The same eyes that sparkled with passion in the limo just an hour ago. Now they pierce me like daggers.

A rock strikes the wall beside us. More projectiles follow. I pull Olivia against me, sheltering her from the barrage. Her safety matters more than her approval.

The thought hits harder than any debris. If she joins Veritas, she'll face far worse than angry protestors. She'll be a target for the Grolgath, forever marked as my ally in this secret war.

The police finally clear a path. I guide Olivia through the doors, my hand protective on her lower back. She doesn't pull away, but the distance between us has grown far wider than physical space.

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The elevator doors close with a soft ding. My heart pounds, but not from exertion. Olivia's disappointment cuts deeper than any weapon could.

"Olivia, allow me to explain?—"

"Explain that you're a hypocrite who only pretends to care about the environment?"
The venom in her voice makes me flinch.

Words fail me. How can I justify my actions without revealing everything? The weight of secrets presses down, threatening to crush what's building between us.

The elevator jerks to a stop. Wrong floor. I didn't press?—

Doors slide open. A man in a black ski mask levels a gun at us.

"The planet can't fight back, but I can!"

Time slows. The gun barrel aims at Olivia's chest. No choice. I dive in front of her as the shot cracks through the air.

The bullet strikes my chest with familiar pressure. Like a finger poking through fabric. My scales deflect it easily.

Pure instinct takes over. I launch forward, wrapping my arms around the gunman's waist. We crash to the floor together, his weapon skittering across polished tile.

Red haze clouds my vision. This worthless human dared to put Olivia in danger. My

claws itch to emerge, to tear his fragile flesh. To rip his head clean off his shoulders for threatening what's mine.

No. Control. I can't reveal myself. Can't kill him.

I backhand him with the barest fraction of my strength. His head snaps to the side. Teeth scatter across the floor like bloody dice. He slumps unconscious, jaw already swelling.

The rage subsides as I turn to Olivia. Her safety is all that matters.

"Are you all right?"

She rushes toward me. My arms open, expecting an embrace. Instead, her fingers fumble with my shirt buttons.

"Darwin, you were shot!"

"I'm fine, Olivia. Stop." I grasp her wrists gently, but she twists free.

"You took a bullet for me. Let me see!"

Her fingers work faster than I can safely stop her without risking injury. The holographic emitters need a fraction of a second to compensate for newly exposed skin. If she opens my shirt too quickly...

"Please, I just need to make sure you're-"

My shirt falls open. A gasp escapes her lips and my hearts stop. This is it. She's seen what I really am. Everything we've built together ends now in horror and rejection.

"I don't believe it."

I brace myself for her scream. For her to recoil in terror at the sight of my scales.

But instead, she holds something between her fingers. The flattened bullet that bounced off my armored hide, compressed into a disk of lead and copper.

"It's still warm," she whispers, eyes wide with wonder rather than fear. "How are you alive?"

Relief floods through me as I glance down at my still-concealed chest. The holographic emitters held. But now Olivia stares at me, waiting for an explanation about the bullet.

"Must have hit my tie clip." The lie tastes bitter on my tongue.

"You're not wearing a tie clip." Her eyes narrow, studying my exposed shirt.

Before she can press further, boots thunder down the hallway. Security rounds the corner, weapons drawn.

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"Mr. Rook! We got reports of-" The guard's eyes lock onto the unconscious gunman.
"Holy shit."

"Call the police," I order, grateful for the interruption. "And get medical attention for this waste of oxygen."

The next hours blur into a parade of uniforms and questions. Detectives document the scene while paramedics cart away our would-be assassin. Olivia and I give separate statements, never getting a moment alone to finish our conversation.

I watch her from across the room as she describes the attack to an officer. The bullet sits in an evidence bag, along with the gun. Her fingers keep drifting to her throat, a nervous tell I've noticed before.

When she finishes her statement, Olivia glances my way. Questions burn in her eyes - about the rainforest, about the bullet, about everything. I should go to her, try to explain. But what could I possibly say that wouldn't make things worse?

She gathers her purse and coat. My feet stay rooted to the floor as she walks to the elevator. Tomorrow. I'll figure out what to tell her tomorrow.

The doors close, taking her away. Taking with her all the warmth and light from my day.

CHAPTER 7

OLIVIA

The numbers blur together on my laptop screen as I scroll through another financial report. My eyes ache from staring at spreadsheets for hours, trying to make sense of the rainforest acquisition.

"This makes no sense." I shift on my couch, the leather sticking to my bare thighs. "No minerals, no oil, not even good lumber. Why level a hundred acres?"

My finger traces the edge of the red scale on my coffee table. The same scale I plucked off Darwin's collar before he... No. Focus.

Another search leads me to a locked V-Truth file. The same damn roadblock I keep hitting. My teeth grind as I type in another combination that fails.

"Fine. Let's see what the tinfoil hat brigade has to say."

Three conspiracy sites and two alien blogs later, my cursor freezes over an image. My breath catches. There, held between grimy fingers, sits an identical crimson scale.

The photo belongs to some guy named Hurst Popena. His website "Who are the Reds?" splashes across my screen in garish comic sans font. The scale in his photo gleams with the same iridescent sheen as mine.

"Holy shit."

I click through his rambling posts about red-scaled aliens. Most of it reads like the deranged manifesto of a basement dweller, but he has more photos. More scales. And they all look exactly like mine.

My fingers drum against the scale on my table. The one Darwin tried so hard to get back during lunch. The one he claimed was "nothing important" even as his eyes never left it.

A new tab opens and I type "Darwin Rook background" into the search bar. The usual puff pieces pop up - Forbes profiles, Wall Street Journal interviews, charity galas. But nothing before his arrival in the US.

"Okay, let's dig deeper."

Immigration records show he came from Munich at age twelve. Listed as an orphan from Sankt Maria's Home for Children. My German's rusty, but Google Translate helps me wade through old newspaper archives.

"What the hell?"

Sankt Maria's shut down right after Darwin turned eighteen. A suspicious fire gutted the building months later. The article mentions "total loss of records" and "investigation ongoing" but nothing after that.

My phone buzzes. A text from Darwin himself: "Working late tonight. Need anything before I go?"

The scale catches the light as I turn it between my fingers. Red. Iridescent. Definitely not plastic or metal.

"No thanks, all good here!" I type back, my hands shaking.

The coincidences pile up in my mind: The missing background. The mysterious V-Truth files. The scales. The rain forest demolition that makes zero business sense.

I hold the scale up to my desk lamp. Light refracts through it in ways that seem impossible, creating patterns I've never seen before.

"Who are you really, Darwin Rook?"

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The question hangs in the air of my silent apartment. I set the scale down next to my laptop and stare at the growing collection of open tabs and dead ends.

I have to know. Whatever it takes.

Sleep evades me as I toss and turn, my mind racing with possibilities. The scale sits on my nightstand, catching moonlight through the window. Every time I close my eyes, I see Darwin's face, those intense red eyes that sometimes seem to glow.

"This is insane." I grab my phone and pull up his schedule. "Jersey office tomorrow at 8 AM."

The helicopter pad sits on top of Rook Tower. Security's tight, but I know the rotation schedule by heart - I created it. A gap exists between shifts at 6:15 AM.

My fingers fly across the screen as I compose an email to the office manager.

"Meeting with Klein & Associates, 9 AM. Will be unreachable until noon."

There. My absence explained.

I set three alarms - 5:30, 5:35, and 5:40. No chance of oversleeping. The helicopter has storage compartments under the seats. Not comfortable, but big enough for someone my size.

"You better be worth all this trouble, Darwin Rook."

The scale gleams as I set it on my dresser. Whatever secrets he's keeping, I'll find them tomorrow. My hand shakes as I program the alarms.

"Time to get some answers."

The alarm pierces my dreams at 5:30 AM sharp. I silence it before the backup alarms can blare, already wide awake from a night of fitful sleep.

My hands shake as I button up my blouse. The scale sits on my dresser, catching the pre-dawn light. I slip it into my pocket and order my ride.

The streets of Manhattan blur past as we speed toward Rook Tower. My driver, sensing my mood, stays silent.

The express elevator whooshes up ninety floors. My stomach drops as the numbers tick higher. At the top, I step out onto the helipad observation deck.

New York spreads before me, a tapestry of twinkling lights slowly fading as dawn creeps over the horizon. Pink and orange paint the clouds. Any other morning, this view would take my breath away.

"Why did you have to lie?" I whisper, pressing my hand against the glass. The scale burns in my pocket, a constant reminder of Darwin's secrets.

The helicopter sits ready on the pad. I check my watch - 6:12 AM. Perfect timing.

I slip inside, searching for a hiding spot among the cargo compartments. My fingers brush metal that suddenly... ripples. The entire interior shimmers like heat waves off hot pavement.

"What the-"

The helicopter dissolves around me. In its place stands something straight out of a sci-fi movie. Sleek chrome panels line the walls. Strange symbols pulse with inner light across what must be control panels.

My hand hovers over one display. The characters shift and swirl, unlike any language I've ever seen. The pilot's seat looks sized for someone much larger than a normal human.

"Oh my God." The truth hits me like a physical blow. "Darwin isn't human at all."

My trembling fingers fumble with my phone as I snap photos of the alien controls. Each click of the camera feels deafening in the silent craft. The pulsing symbols cast an eerie blue glow across my screen.

"Come on, come on." I angle the phone to capture the oversized pilot's seat.

The screen freezes mid-shot. I tap it. Nothing. Hold the power button. Still nothing. The image of the alien controls remains stuck like a digital ghost.

"No no no." I jab every button combination possible. The phone stays dead, mocking me with its frozen display.

A mechanical whir cuts through my rising panic. The door I entered through slides shut with a pneumatic hiss.

"Hey!" I rush over and press my palms against the seamless metal. No handle. No control panel. Nothing but smooth, cold surface beneath my fingers.

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Heavy footsteps crunch on the helipad gravel outside. My heart leaps into my throat.

I dive behind one of the massive passenger seats, making myself as small as possible. The leather creaks as I wedge myself into the gap between seat and wall.

The footsteps grow closer. Closer. A shadow falls across the craft's window.

My hand clamps over my mouth to muffle my breathing. The dead phone digs into my hip where I've shoved it in my pocket.

Metal scrapes against metal as the door slides open. My heart pounds so hard I worry he'll hear it. Darwin's polished shoes click across the deck plating as he moves to the console.

A soft beep, and my phone buzzes back to life in my pocket. The frozen screen clears, showing the photos I managed to take.

"You might as well come out." Darwin's voice echoes in the confined space. "Whoever you are, I'm not going to hurt you, but I must insist you do not share the digital records of this craft."

My legs shake as I stand, gripping the seat for support. The morning light streams through the windows, casting strange shadows across Darwin's face.

"It's me, Mr. Rook." My voice comes out steadier than I expect. "If that is your real name."

The air around Darwin shimmers like a desert mirage. His human form melts away, revealing something both terrifying and beautiful. Red scales catch the light, gleaming like rubies. He towers over me now, his bone ridge casting shadows across features that are somehow still recognizably Darwin.

My hand flies to my mouth, but the scream stays locked in my throat. The scale in my pocket seems to burn against my leg, a physical connection to the truth I've suspected all along.

Those late nights when his shadow looked wrong on the wall. The way his eyes caught the light. How he always knew when someone was approaching before they entered the room. It all makes perfect sense now.

His reptilian features soften, becoming almost gentle despite their alien nature.

"Olivia, I should have known it was you. It is difficult to keep secrets from one as shrewd as you are."

My mouth feels dry. "What... what are you?"

"My true name is Dar. I am a Vakutan warrior." His voice remains the same rich baritone I know, even in this form. "We are locked in an eternal struggle against shape-shifting aliens called the Grolgath."

He explains about a galactic war spanning centuries between various alien races. The Grolgath want to alter Earth's timeline, make humanity choose the wrong side in some future conflict.

"So you're... you're one of the good guys?" The scale in my pocket seems to pulse with warmth.

"Yes. I use my business enterprises to fund an organization called Veritas. We protect Earth's timeline from Grolgath interference." He gestures at the alien craft around us. "This technology helps us track their movements."

My head spins as I process it all. Aliens. Time wars. Secret organizations. And Darwin - no, Dar - at the center of it all.

"That's why you destroyed the rainforest." The pieces click into place. "There was something there. Something alien."

"A Grolgath base, yes." He nods, the bone ridge catching the morning light. "We couldn't let them maintain a foothold so close to population centers."

"And now?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

"Now you have a choice, Olivia. Join us. Help protect humanity. Your skills, your determination - Veritas needs people like you."

CHAPTER 8

DAR

My talons rasp against the metal deck as I wait for her answer. The silence stretches, becoming a living thing between us. Her green eyes search my alien features, no doubt trying to reconcile them with the human mask she's known.

"I want to help." Olivia's voice rings with conviction. "If Earth's in danger, how could I not?"

The knot in my chest loosens. I won't have to erase her memories after all. Won't have to lose her.

"And hey, if I can help save the world with spreadsheets and quarterly reports, even better." She gives a shaky laugh. "That business degree has to be good for something, right?"

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"You've already proven invaluable." The words come out in a guttural rasping, my true voice rougher than my human one. "For now, continue as you have been. The business empire funds our operations, and you've shown remarkable aptitude for managing it."

Her smile doesn't quite reach her eyes. Something troubles her - the slight furrow between her brows, the way she worries her bottom lip with her teeth. Perhaps the weight of what I've revealed finally sinks in.

"This has all been a huge shock," I say, softening my tone. "Why don't we go to breakfast?"

"Breakfast?" She blinks. "Like this?" She gestures at my true form.

"I can shift back." My scales ripple, ready to take on my human guise again.

"The image inducer creates a photonic field that mimics human features." I tap the device at my throat. "Advanced holographic technology."

"So when that guy shot at you last month..."

A rumbling laugh escapes me. "The inducer didn't stop the bullet. Vakutan scales are naturally resistant to your primitive weapons."

"Primitive? I'll show you primitive." She pokes my chest playfully. "But seriously, that tech is amazing. Think how much time I could save in the morning! No shower, no makeup, just roll out of bed and flip a switch."

"Not quite that simple." My talons click against the device. "The power requirements are substantial. The smaller the disguise area, the more efficient. That's why I still need human clothing to cover most of my body."

"Still sounds pretty convenient." Olivia runs her fingers over my scales, sending shivers down my spine. "Better than spending an hour on makeup every morning."

The touch of her hand makes it hard to focus. I clear my throat. "I'll requisition a personal unit for you from Veritas. Captain Pyke owes me a favor."

Her eyes light up. "Really?"

"Consider it a signing bonus for joining the organization."

"Best job perk ever." She grins. "Now, about that breakfast?"

"Ray gun?" A deep chuckle rumbles in my chest. "One step at a time."

"Strap in." I gesture to the safety harness. "We're heading to breakfast."

"I thought we were going back to the office?" Olivia fumbles with the alien buckles.

"Tokyo has better sushi." I tap the navigation console, plotting our course through the stratosphere. "We'll be there in eight minutes."

Her eyes widen as the ship lifts vertically, breaking through the cloud cover. The curve of Earth spreads below us, a breathtaking vista of blue and white. Olivia presses her face against the viewport, drinking in the sight.

"This is incredible!" She traces patterns on the glass with her finger. "Look at those colors!"

Her childlike wonder warms something deep inside me. After centuries of space travel, it's easy to forget the simple joy of seeing your world from above for the first time.

The ship accelerates smoothly as we reach the upper atmosphere. Olivia's delight is infectious, her enthusiasm pure and unrestrained. But a shadow crosses my thoughts.

The memory of Agent Chen's death last month still haunts me. The Grolgath had torn through his combat armor like paper. If Olivia ever encountered one... My talons dig into the control yoke.

No. I won't let that happen. She'll stay far from the front lines, safe in her role managing the business empire. I'll make sure of it.

"Look, we're already over the Pacific!" Olivia points excitedly at the vast ocean below. "This is way better than first class."

The ship transforms with a whisper of hydraulics, folding into an elegant black Mercedes van. Perfect camouflage for Tokyo's crowded streets. I activate my human guise as we cruise past the neon signs of Shibuya.

"This is surreal," Olivia says. "An hour ago we were in New York."

I park near a quaint café with outdoor seating. The scent of grilled fish and miso wafts through the air. Even in human form, I tower over the locals. Phones appear, snapping pictures.

"Sumimasen," a young woman approaches. "Photo please?"

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I smile and pose with her, then with her friends. More people gather, fascinated by my height. The café owner brings out extra chairs to accommodate everyone.

"You're quite the celebrity," Olivia says between bites of tamago.

"Size has its advantages." I catch her admiring glance. "But don't get too comfortable with this friendly version of me. Tomorrow, it's back to business."

"Oh?"

"Veritas demands excellence. I'll push you harder than ever."

"Bring it on." Her chopsticks click against the plate. "I can handle anything you dish out."

That smile. Those bright eyes full of challenge. My pulse quickens at her fearlessness. She has no idea what she's getting into, yet she faces it head-on.

"We'll see about that." I lean back, studying her.

The flight back passes in comfortable silence. Back at the office, Olivia dives into her work with renewed vigor. Her fingers fly across the keyboard, managing our Earth-based empire while occasionally shooting me knowing glances.

Those glances set my blood on fire. Now that she knows what I am, there's no need to hide my strength, my power. When I lift a filing cabinet to retrieve a dropped pen, her breath catches. When I growl at an incompetent supplier over the phone, her pupils

dilate.

The tension crackles between us all day. Every brush of her hand, every whiff of her perfume, drives me wild. But we have responsibilities. The fate of Earth hangs in the balance. I can't let my desires compromise the mission.

The setting sun streams through the window, painting her in amber light. Her silk blouse clings to every curve, and my enhanced vision picks up the rapid flutter of her pulse at her throat.

"Olivia." My voice comes out rougher than intended. "Come here."

She rises from her desk, bottom lip caught between her teeth. Her steps toward me are slow, deliberate. Those green eyes peek up at me through her bangs, dark with desire.

"I want you. Now."

CHAPTER 9

OLIVIA

Dar's gaze holds me in place, his red eyes smoldering with an intensity that sends a shiver down my spine. The command is not stern or mean, but it's not a request either. "Take your hair down, Olivia." His voice is a low rumble, a sound that seems to resonate within me, igniting a heat that pools in my belly.

I hesitate for a moment, not out of fear, but out of a desire to draw out this moment, to savor the anticipation. Dar expects to be obeyed, that much is clear. But I'm not one to simply roll over and submit. I want to tease, to tantalize, to make him work for it.

"And if I don't?" I challenge, my voice barely above a whisper. I see the surprise flicker in his eyes, the slightest hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He likes the chase, the challenge.

My fingers tremble as I reach up to pull the pins from my French twist. Each metallic clink against Dar's mahogany desk sends shivers down my spine. His red eyes track every movement, burning hotter than the summer sun.

"You're beautiful," he says.

The last pin drops. My hair tumbles past my shoulders in waves. The scent of my shampoo fills the air between us.

"I've wanted you since that first 'fuck yeah' in the interview room."

His voice wraps around me like silk. But there's steel underneath - the voice of a commander, a warrior. An alien warrior. The thought should terrify me. Instead, it makes my knees weak.

"Come here," he says.

I walk across the floor unsteadily in my heels - the same heels that broke that fateful morning. I fixed them properly since then, but the memory remains. Just like I'll never forget discovering his true form.

I stop at the edge of his desk. "I want you too. But..."

"But?"

"This changes everything."

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"Only if we let it." His large hand cups my cheek. The heat of his skin burns through my professional facade. "Tonight, just be with me. No past. No future. Just now."

My heart pounds against my ribs. I've never been good at living in the moment - always planning, always thinking ahead. But when his thumb traces my bottom lip, my carefully constructed walls crumble.

"Just now," I whisper.

His eyes flash with triumph. The predatory gleam should frighten me. Instead, it sets my blood on fire.

Dar leans in close, his breath hot against my lips. My mouth parts in anticipation, ready to taste him. But he pulls back with a wicked smile, denying me the kiss I crave. The tease sends electricity crackling through my body.

"You so rarely wear your hair down, Olivia," he rumbles, his voice deep and rich like aged whiskey.

My scalp tingles where his fingers thread through my loose waves. No man has ever paid such careful attention to me before, drinking in every detail like I'm a masterpiece in a museum. I can't help preening under his intense gaze.

"Should I wear it down all the time, then?"

"Yes." His command is sublime. "Put your hands behind your head."

A laugh bubbles up from my chest - this feels so deliciously naughty, like we're playing at something forbidden. But the sharp crack of his palm against my bottom cuts my laughter short. His huge hand leaves a stinging heat that radiates through me, igniting something primal.

I lift my arms slowly, linking my fingers behind my head. My pulse races as I realize we're crossing into new territory. This isn't just flirting anymore - this is surrender, dominance, submission. And God help me, I want more.

"Turn. Slowly." His command sets my nerves tingling.

I pivot on my heels, keeping my fingers laced behind my head. The weight of his gaze caresses every curve as I make a full circle. A deep, rumbling sound of approval vibrates through the air - almost like a purr, but deeper, more primal. My silk blouse and pencil skirt might be office-appropriate, but the way they hug my body makes me feel deliciously exposed under his scrutiny.

My heart thunders against my ribs. I've never felt so... desired. So wanted. The heat of his stare makes my skin flush.

"Do you like what you see?" I say breathy and bold.

"What do you think?" His voice drops an octave lower.

My eyes drift downward, following the lines of his powerful body until... oh. My cheeks burn as I take in the obvious evidence of his arousal straining against his tailored slacks. The sight makes my mouth go dry.

But Dar's not done teasing yet. I can see it in the wicked gleam of his red eyes, the way his lips curl into that devastating smile that makes my knees weak.

"Take off your clothes, Olivia."

His words send lightning down my spine. This isn't a request - it's a command, delivered in that voice that brooks no argument. The voice that makes me want to obey, even as it makes me want to challenge him just to see what he'll do.

I arch an eyebrow and slowly unbutton my blouse. "Not man enough? Or should I say... not alien enough?"

"Or perhaps I fear if I release control for even a moment I will shred those garments right off of you." The growl in his voice makes my toes curl. "And you look so fetching in them."

My fingers pause on the third button. Note to self: hit the discount stores this weekend. The thought of those powerful hands ripping through silk and lace sends molten heat straight to my core. But for now, this \$200 Ann Taylor ensemble needs to survive the encounter.

I take my sweet time with each button, letting the silk whisper against my skin. His hands grip the arms of his chair tight enough to make the leather creak. Good. Let him squirm.

The blouse slides off my shoulders, floating to the floor in a whisper of fabric. I reach for the zipper of my skirt, drawing it down tooth by agonizing tooth. The rasp of metal fills the silence between us.

"Patience is a virtue," I tease, letting the skirt pool at my feet.

A muscle ticks in his jaw. "I'm not feeling particularly virtuous right now."

I step out of the skirt, now standing before him in nothing but a matching set of cream

lace and my heels. His gaze rakes over me like a physical touch, leaving fire in its wake.

"Should I keep going?" I reach for my bra strap with deliberate slowness.

"Keep going," Dar commands, his voice thick with desire. "Show me everything."

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My fingers tremble as I reach behind my back to unhook my bra. The lace falls away, and cool air kisses my exposed skin. I shimmy out of my panties, letting them join the pile of clothes at my feet.

Standing naked before him, vulnerability crashes over me like a wave. My arms move of their own accord, crossing over my breasts and between my legs.

"Don't." His voice softens. "You have no need to hide such beauty."

A nervous laugh escapes my lips. "Tell that to my arms. They're not listening to me right now."

"Would you like some help with that?"

Before I can ask what he means, Dar rises from his chair. Each step toward me feels like thunder in my chest. He towers over me, his presence filling every corner of the room.

His fingers work at his tie, the silk sliding free with a whisper. The buttons of his shirt follow, one by one, until he shrugs it off his shoulders.

My breath catches. His chest is a masterpiece of black and red scales, catching the light like polished obsidian. They flow across his muscles in perfect patterns, natural and exotic at once.

I can't resist reaching out with one hand, keeping the other pressed against my chest. My fingertips brush across his scales, and electricity shoots through my arm. They're

smooth and warm, with just enough texture to make my skin tingle.

"They're beautiful," I whisper, tracing the pattern where black meets red.

I shiver as Dar's fingers tangle in my hair, his grip firm but not painful. My heart races as he spins me around, and I catch a glimpse of his silk tie sliding from his neck. Before I can process what's happening, he's pulled my arms behind my back.

"Oh!" The silk whispers against my skin as he binds my wrists. The knot is tight enough to hold but not hurt - clearly he's done this before. The thought sends another wave of heat through my body.

When he turns me back to face him, I'm completely exposed. No way to cover myself, no way to hide. My nipples harden under his intense gaze, and I squirm, torn between embarrassment and arousal.

"Better," he purrs, circling me slowly. His scaled chest brushes against my bare back, and I gasp at the sensation. The texture of his scales sends tingles across my skin. "Now I can see all of you."

My cheeks burn as his eyes rake over my body. I've never felt so vulnerable, so exposed. But there's something intoxicating about it too - the way he looks at me like I'm the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

"You're blushing," he observes, his finger tracing my collarbone. "All the way down to here." His touch trails lower, between my breasts, and I arch toward him involuntarily.

"Can you blame me?" My voice comes out breathy. "I'm not exactly used to being tied up naked in front of alien warriors."

His laugh rumbles through me like thunder. "First time for everything."

The silk tie shifts against my wrists as I test the bonds. There's no give at all. "You seem... experienced at this sort of thing."

"Centuries of practice." His hand cups my breast, thumb brushing across my nipple. "But you're the first human I've wanted to tie up."

My knees go weak at his touch. "Lucky me."

His hand closes around my throat, not threatening but possessive, and his mouth claims mine in a searing kiss. I melt into him, my bound hands seeking behind my back until I find the hard length of him through his slacks. Even through the fabric, I can feel how huge he is. The thought makes me whimper into his mouth.

His tongue sweeps past my lips, tasting me, claiming me. The scales of his chest press against my bare breasts, the exotic texture sending sparks of pleasure through my sensitized skin. I arch into him, wanting more, needing more.

"Patience," he growls against my lips.

The world spins as he hoists me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing. My hair tumbles down, brushing against the intricate patterns of his scaled back. Blood rushes to my head, making me dizzy - or maybe that's just the effect he has on me.

"Before I take you, I must taste you."

His words send liquid heat pooling between my thighs. I squirm against his shoulder, but his arm holds me firmly in place as he strides toward the lounge area. The leather sofa comes into view, and my heart pounds with anticipation.

Dar's fingers slide into me with an ease that makes me gasp, my body arching against his shoulder. The silk tie binding my wrists digs into my skin, but the slight sting only heightens the pleasure coursing through me. His fingers are thick, filling me perfectly, and I can't help but squirm as he curls them just right, hitting that spot that makes my vision blur.

"Dar—" I choke out, my voice trembling. I'm so close already, teetering on the edge, but he doesn't let me fall. Instead, he pulls his fingers out, leaving me empty and aching. I whine in protest, but he doesn't give me a chance to complain. In one smooth motion, he lowers me onto the leather sofa, my back sinking into the cool material. My legs are shoved apart before I can even think to resist, not that I would. The way he looks at me, his red eyes blazing with hunger, makes me feel like I'm the only thing that matters in the universe.

"You're so wet for me," he growls, his voice low and rough. His hands grip my thighs, holding me open as he kneels between my legs. I can't see what he's doing, but I feel the heat of his breath against my skin, and I shiver in anticipation. Then his tongue—long, prehensile, and alien—slides through my folds, and I nearly scream.

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“Oh my God!” My hips jerk off the sofa, but his hands keep me pinned. His tongue is unlike anything I’ve ever felt, sinfully skilled and impossibly hot. It flicks against my clit, teasing and tormenting, before plunging deep inside me. I’m helpless, my hands still bound behind my back, completely at his mercy. And I love it.

“Dar, please—” I beg, my voice breaking. He doesn’t respond with words, but the way his tongue moves tells me everything I need to know. He’s in control, and he’s not going to stop until I’m a writhing, screaming mess. The sensations are overwhelming, every stroke of his tongue sending electric shocks through my body. I’ve never felt anything like this before, never been so completely consumed by pleasure.

“You taste incredible,” he murmurs against me, his voice vibrating through my core. His tongue flicks over my clit again, and I cry out, my back arching off the sofa. He doesn’t let up, his movements relentless, driving me closer and closer to the edge. I can feel it building, a pressure so intense it’s almost painful, and then?—

“I’m coming!” I scream, my body convulsing as the orgasm crashes over me. It’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced, waves of pleasure so intense they steal my breath. My vision whites out, and for a moment, I’m floating, weightless and boneless. When I finally come back to myself, Dar is still between my legs, his tongue lapping at me gently, drawing out every last shuddering aftershock.

“Dar,” I whisper, my voice hoarse. He looks up at me, his red eyes gleaming with satisfaction, and I can’t help but smile. “That was... incredible.”

“You’re incredible,” he replies, his voice soft but filled with heat. "But I don't recall

your asking my permission to come."

I gasp at his bold words, my body still trembling from the aftershocks. "You mean I have to ask your permission first?" My voice comes out breathless, incredulous. "When you're doing...that to me?"

Dar's crimson eyes gleam with a predatory light. "Yes, Olivia. You're not in charge." His tone is firm, unyielding, but there's a flicker of amusement in his gaze, like he's enjoying the way I squirm—both physically and mentally.

That phrase hits me like a lightning bolt. You're not in charge. It's the same thing he'd said to me the first time we met, when I'd tried to argue my way out of a mistake I'd made at work. Back then, it had annoyed me, sparked my stubborn streak. Now? It sends a jolt straight through me, winding me tighter than a coiled spring. My hips buck involuntarily, and another orgasm crashes over me, leaving me gasping for air.

Dar chuckles, a low, rumbling sound that vibrates through my chest. "Ah, my sweet, human pet," he murmurs, his claws—sharp and dangerous—trailing lightly down my thigh. "It seems you require a great deal of training and discipline."

I look up at him, my green eyes wide, my cheeks flushed. My heart is pounding so hard I can feel it in my ears. Training? Discipline? The words should make me bristle, but instead, they send a thrill racing through me. I've never been one to back down from a challenge, and this? This is the most exhilarating one yet.

"When can I start?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. There's a boldness in my tone, a challenge of my own. I'm not just submitting—I'm daring him to take me further, to push me harder.

Dar's lips curve into a feral smile, his sharp teeth gleaming. "Right now," he growls, his hand sliding up to grip my wrist. His touch is firm, commanding. "But first, you'll

learn to ask properly."

My breath hitches. "Properly?"

His free hand traces a line up my inner thigh, igniting a path of fire. "Beg, Olivia."

My pulse skyrockets. My mind races, torn between my natural stubbornness and the electric pull of his dominance. I bite my lip, hesitating, but the way he's looking at me—like he can see straight into my soul—breaks me.

"Please," I whisper, my voice trembling. "Dar, please."

He leans in, his face inches from mine, his breath hot against my skin. "Good girl."

CHAPTER 10

DAR

"The protests are getting worse, Rook. Three hundred people outside your building today."

"Nothing I can't handle." I drum my fingers on my desk, watching the crowd through my tinted windows. The scent of patchouli and unwashed humanity wafts up even to the fortieth floor. "Send in a team. We can shut down their leadership quietly."

"These aren't Grolgath insurgents." Pyke's voice crackles with static interference. "They're civilians exercising their constitutional rights."

"Rights that threaten our operation. That rainforest had to go."

"And explaining why would expose everything."

"So we remove the troublemakers." The crowd below starts another round of chanting. Their words blur together into white noise.

"Veritas doesn't target humans." Steel enters Pyke's tone. "We're protectors, not oppressors."

I bare my teeth, even though he can't see it. "Then what do you suggest?"

"We lie low. Let it blow over."

"While they damage my company's reputation?"

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"Your cover identity can weather this storm. Better than risking exposure by acting against them."

"This discussion isn't over," I say into the phone.

"Yes, it is. Stand down, Rook. That's an order."

The line goes dead. I set the phone down harder than necessary.

Pyke's orders burn in my gut. The man plays everything too safe. But orders are orders, even when they chafe against my warrior's instincts.

The door swings open, and my dark mood evaporates. Olivia saunters in, her lips curved in that knowing smile that drives me wild. The tailored black skirt hugs her hips, and those stockings make her legs look endless.

"Someone's in a good mood. Land that Mitchell account?"

"Maybe." She perches on the corner of my desk, crossing those magnificent legs. The hem of her skirt rides up just enough to torment.

I lock eyes with her and slide my hands up her thighs, pushing them apart. The glimpse of lace stockings and garters makes my pulse race.

Her legs snap shut, trapping my fingers between them. That defiant little grin of hers sets my blood on fire.

I force her thighs apart again, this time keeping my palms pressed firmly against them. She's not getting away that easily.

"Feeling bratty today?"

Her grin widens. "Maybe."

"When we first made love three weeks ago, I had no idea we would be doing so at least once a day, every day."

The words come out rougher than intended. My human form's throat tightens at the memory of that first time - her surrender, her passion.

"Someone should have warned you about Earth women. Especially redheaded ones."

Her scent fills my nostrils - jasmine and desire. The beast inside me stirs, wanting to claim her again. I reach for her waist, intent on pulling her into my lap.

But she's too quick. She twists away with a dancer's grace, leaving me grasping air as she leaps off the desk. The loss of contact burns.

"Take off your clothes. Come here." The command rumbles from deep in my chest.

"Make me." Her pink tongue darts out in defiance.

My gaze drifts to the stack of contracts awaiting my signature. Reports that need review. The quarterly projections...

To hell with it. Some things are more important than paperwork.

I push back from my desk, my chair scraping against the floor. The sound makes her

jump, but her eyes darken with anticipation.

I lunge, faster than she expects, and grab her wrist before she can dodge again. Her squeal of delight sends a jolt straight to my groin. In one smooth motion, I spin her around and pin her down on the leather sofa, her wrists trapped in my grip above her head. She struggles, but it's all for show—her breathing's already quickening, her chest rising and falling in shallow bursts.

“That’s twice today you’ve challenged me,” I growl, leaning in close enough to feel her breath hitch. “You’re playing a dangerous game, Olivia.”

Her grin is all defiance. “Or maybe I’m just enjoying the way you react when I push your buttons.”

I don’t waste time on a retort. My free hand makes quick work of the buttons on her blouse, popping them open one by one. The fabric falls away, revealing the delicate lace of her bra. My fingers trace the curve of her breast, feeling the way her nipple hardens under my touch. She arches into my hand, a soft gasp escaping her lips.

“You’re terrible at playing hard to get,” I murmur, dragging my thumb across the lace.

“Who says I’m playing?” Her voice trembles, but her eyes are full of fire. “I’m just... testing your patience.”

“Testing it, huh?” I lower my mouth to her neck, nipping at the sensitive skin just below her ear. She shivers, her squirming becoming less about escape and more about the tension building inside her. “Careful. You might not like the results.”

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I take my time stripping her, savoring every inch of her skin as it's revealed. The blouse falls to the floor, followed by her bra. My tongue traces the curve of her collarbone, earning a breathless moan. Her skirt slips down her hips, leaving her in nothing but her garters, stockings, and heels—a vision that makes my pulse race.

“Dar...” she whispers, her voice trembling with need.

“Not yet,” I say firmly, pulling back just as her body starts to tense. I can see the frustration flash in her eyes, but there's hunger there too.

Standing up, I gather her discarded clothing and stuff it into the locking briefcase beside my desk. The click of the lock is final, decisive.

“I'll hang on to these,” I say, my tone leaving no room for argument. Her eyes narrow, but there's a hint of a smile playing on her lips. She's enjoying this just as much as I am.

I stroke my chin, watching Olivia out of the corner of my eye as she saunters toward my desk. She thinks she's subtle, but I can see the glint of determination in her gaze. My lips twitch as her fingers brush the edge of the briefcase. She's testing me, and I love it.

“What do you think you're doing?” I ask, my voice low and deliberate.

She freezes for a split second, then recovers with a smirk. “Just retrieving my things. You can't expect me to walk around the office like this, can you?” She waves a hand at her nearly naked body—her garters, stockings, and heels the only remnants of her

outfit.

“I can, and I do.” My tone leaves no room for argument, but Olivia’s never been one to back down.

She reaches for the key, her fingers curling around it with a triumphant grin. That’s when I strike. My hand shoots out, grabbing her wrist with a firm grip. She gasps, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Congratulations on pushing my buttons,” I growl, my voice guttural. “I have ways of seeing that I’m obeyed, Brat.”

Her tongue darts out, a quick, defiant flick as she sticks it out at me. The audacity of this woman. It’s maddening. It’s irresistible.

With a swift movement, I pull her over my lap, her lithe body settling into the spanking position. Her breath hitches, but she doesn’t fight me. She knows this game too well. I pin one arm behind her back, her wrist held firmly in place. My other hand slides to the largest drawer on my desk—my new arsenal of toys.

“I’m in big trouble, aren’t I?” she asks, her voice a mix of anticipation and amusement.

“Yes,” I reply, my tone stern but laced with the promise of what’s to come.

“Good,” she says, and I can hear the smirk in her voice.

I yank the drawer open, the contents laid out like a treasure trove. Ropes, paddles, floggers—each one a tool for discipline, each one a means to draw out her submission. I let my fingers trail over the items, considering my options.

She shifts slightly, her body tense with anticipation. “What are you going to do?” she asks, her voice softer now, edged with curiosity and something deeper.

“You’ll see.”

I yank the Vakutan harness from the drawer, the leather cool and supple in my hands. Olivia’s eyes widen for a fraction of a second before she sets her jaw, that stubborn defiance I adore flashing in her gaze.

“Oh, this again?” she says, crossing her arms over her chest. “You think a little leather’s going to tame me?”

“Not little,” I say, stepping closer. “And not just leather.” I unfurl the harness, the cuffs dangling ominously. “Arms behind your back. Now.”

She hesitates, and I see the wheels turning in her head. “Make me.”

I lunge, faster than she anticipates, twisting her arms behind her before she can react. She struggles, her body writhing against mine, but I’ve got her. Her strength is nothing against mine, and I relish the way her breath hitches as I secure the cuffs around her wrists. The collar snaps into place with a satisfying click, the strap running down her spine.

“You’re such a brute,” she huffs, twisting uselessly against the restraints. Her bratty glare is almost enough to make me laugh. Almost.

“And you’re entirely too spirited,” I say, cupping her chin. “But don’t worry. I’ll tame that fire yet.”

She snaps at me, her teeth grazing my finger. I pull back, raising an eyebrow. “Biting? That’s new.”

“What can I say?” she smirks. “I’m full of surprises.”

I grab the specialized bedroom ring gag from the drawer, the soft silicone glinting under the office lights. Her eyes flick to it, and for a moment, I see a flicker of uncertainty. Good.

“Open,” I command.

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She hesitates, then parts her lips with a defiant tilt of her head. I slide the gag into place, the ring fitting snugly between her teeth. Her tongue presses against the silicone, her breath quickening. I fasten the strap behind her head, securing it with a firm tug.

“Mmmph!” she protests, her cheeks flushing as she tests the gag. Her moans are muffled, her lips wrapped around the ring. The sound sends a jolt of heat straight to my core.

“Better,” I say, leaning in to kiss her gagged mouth. Her lips are warm, and her muffled moan vibrates against mine. She squirms in my lap, her body pressing against me in ways that make it impossible to ignore my growing hardness.

“Still fighting?” I murmur against her lips. “You’re only making it harder for yourself.”

Her eyes meet mine, that fiery defiance still burning, but there’s something else there now—submission, surrender, and a hunger that matches my own.

The knock at the door is sharp, insistent. My head snaps up, and I glance down at Olivia, her naked body still bound and gagged in my lap. Her eyes widen, the defiance replaced with panic. There’s no time to untie her, no time to get her dressed. I act fast.

“Under the desk,” I whisper, my voice low but firm. She protests with a muffled sound, but I don’t give her a choice. I scoop her up—her skin warm against my hands—and slide her under the desk. She’s small enough to fit, but barely. I push my

chair in, trapping her in the confined space. Her breath is hot against my thighs.

“Come in,” I call, smoothing my expression into one of calm authority.

The door opens, and a nervous-looking manager I barely recognize steps inside. He’s clutching a stack of papers, his tie slightly askew. His eyes dart around the room like he’s expecting to find something incriminating.

“Mr. Rook, I—uh—I hope I’m not interrupting?” His voice cracks on the last word.

“Not at all.” I say, trying to ignore the warm breath brushing against my crotch. “What do you have for me?”

He shuffles forward, placing the stack of papers on my desk. “It’s the quarterly financials. I thought you’d want to review them before the board meeting tomorrow.”

“Of course.” I glance at the papers, but my focus is elsewhere. Olivia’s tongue—hot, insistent—licks across the base of my cock. I stiffen, my jaw tightening as I fight to keep my composure.

“Everything looks... uh, good so far,” the manager continues, oblivious. “Revenue’s up 15%, and we’ve managed to cut costs in logistics by?”

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. “Summarize it. I don’t have all day.”

He nods, swallowing hard. “Right. So, the highlights are?”

Olivia’s mouth closes around me, her lips taking me in deeper. The gag does nothing to slow her down; if anything, it amplifies the sensation. My fingers grip the edge of the desk, my knuckles whitening. I can feel her teasing me, her tongue swirling in a way that makes it impossible to think straight.

“—and we’re projecting a 20% increase in Q3,” the manager finishes, looking hopeful.

“Good,” I say, my voice strained. “Anything else?”

He hesitates. “Well, there’s the issue with the protestors. They’re picketing outside again. Security’s handling it, but I thought you should know.”

“I’ll deal with it.” My words come out sharper than I intended. Olivia’s tongue flicks against the sensitive spot just below the head, and I have to bite back a groan.

The manager looks uneasy. “Uh, is... everything okay, sir?”

“Fine.” I force a smile, but it feels more like a grimace. “You’re dismissed.”

He nods again, backing toward the door. “Of course. Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will.”

The door closes behind him, and I finally exhale, my body trembling with the effort of staying composed. Olivia doesn’t stop. If anything, she’s more determined now, her mouth working me with a rhythm that’s impossible to resist.

“Olivia,” I growl, my voice low and dangerous.

She looks up at me, her green eyes sparkling with mischief. Her muffled laughter vibrates against me, sending a shiver up my spine.

“You’re going to pay for this,” I warn, though the threat lacks any real bite.

She only hums in response, her tongue flicking over me again. My hand tangles in her hair, pulling her closer.

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The tension in my body coils tighter, an unstoppable pressure building until it finally bursts. My release surges into her mouth, and I can't tear my eyes away from hers. Those green depths hold me captive, more than any harness or tie ever could. She sputters slightly, but she doesn't pull away. She swallows, her gaze locked with mine, and I've never felt so vulnerable—so utterly at her mercy. A Vakutan warrior, laid bare by a human woman barely half my size. And yet, I've never felt more alive.

“Olivia,” I growl, pulling her up by her arms. Her breath hitches as I settle her onto my lap, her body warm and pliant against mine. She's still gagged, but her muffled whimper tells me everything I need to know. I guide myself into her, slow and deliberate, savoring the way she clenches around me as I push deeper.

Her hips move with mine, and she rides me with a rhythm that drives me wild. I grip her waist, holding her steady as I thrust up into her, each movement drawing a muffled moan from her lips. Her energy matches mine, our bodies moving in perfect synchronicity, as if we were made for this. For each other.

She leans back, her hands braced against my thighs, her hair wild around her face. Her eyes are pleading now, the defiance gone, replaced by something raw and desperate. She whines around the gag, a sound that shot straight to my core.

“What's that, Livvy?” I tease, my voice low and rough. “Can't quite understand you.”

Her eyes narrow, and she makes another muffled sound, her hips grinding down on me with urgency. I chuckle, the rumble in my chest making her shiver.

“You want something?” I ask, feigning innocence. “I need to hear you say it.”

She groans in frustration, her body trembling as she fights to hold back. The sight of her like this—so close, so desperate—undoes me. I reach up and pull the gag from her mouth, tossing it aside.

“Please, Dar,” she gasps, her voice breaking. “Let me come.”

The words hit me like a shockwave, and I can’t hold back any longer. “Come, brat,” I command, my voice sharp and full of authority.

Her body convulses, her scream echoing through the room as she clenches around me, her orgasm ripping through her with a force that takes my breath away. I follow her over that edge, my release crashing over me as I fill her, my body shuddering with the intensity of it.

I hold her close as we both come down, my hands running up and down her back, soothing her trembling form. Dimly, a thought flickers in the back of my mind—what if she’s carrying my child? The idea sends a strange mix of fear and possessiveness through me, but for now, I push it aside. There’s only her, here in my arms, her breath warm against my neck as she collapses against me.

“I love you,” I say. My chest tightens the moment they leave my lips, like I’ve just thrown a grenade into the room without checking the safety pin.

Olivia freezes in my arms, her breath catching. I feel her muscles tense, her body going rigid against mine. For a moment, there’s nothing but silence, heavy and suffocating.

“Do you?” she asks, her voice soft but laced with something I can’t quite place. Skepticism? Fear? I wait for her to say more, to fill the void with something—anything—but she doesn’t. No reciprocal declaration, not even a hint of reassurance. Just that question, hanging between us like a storm cloud.

I kiss her. It's desperate, clumsy, a last-ditch effort to push the awkwardness away. Her lips respond, but there's a hesitation there, a second too long before she melts into it. When I pull back, she looks at me, her green eyes searching mine for something I'm not sure I can give.

CHAPTER 11

OLIVIA

"You're getting sloppy with your downward dog." Mel's voice cuts through my concentration at the yoga studio. "Maybe if you showed up more than once every other month, you'd improve."

I stretch deeper into the pose, my muscles protesting. "Some of us have actual jobs."

"Please. I work sixty hours a week at the gallery." Mel transitions into warrior pose. "You're just avoiding me."

"Am not." The mat squeaks under my feet as I shift positions.

"When's the last time we had wine night? Or went shopping? Or did anything?"

"I've been busy with work."

"Oh really?" Mel's eyes zero in on my neck. "Looks like the 'work' leaves marks."

My hand flies to my collar. Damn it, I thought I'd covered that one up.

"Holy shit, it is a hickey! I knew it!" Mel's voice carries across the studio, drawing stares from other yogis. "Who is he? When did this happen? Why haven't you told me anything?"

"Keep your voice down." I tug my collar higher. "Yes, I'm seeing someone."

"I knew it! You've got that freshly-fucked glow about you lately."

"Mel!"

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"What? It's true. Now spill - who is this mystery man turning my best friend into a stranger?"

The instructor shoots us a stern look. I lower my voice to a whisper. "Can we maybe discuss this after class?"

"No way. You'll just run off to another 'meeting' like last time. Details. Now."

"It's... complicated."

"Translation: he's married."

"What? No!"

"Then what's the problem? Unless..." Mel gasps. "Oh my god. It's someone from work, isn't it? That's why you're being so cagey."

I focus very intently on my breathing, which only makes Mel more certain.

"It is! You're sleeping with someone from work!" She grabs my arm. "Please tell me it's that hot CEO. What's his name - Darwin Rook?"

I nearly fall out of my pose.

My face burns as I steady myself. "Keep your voice down!"

"It is him! Oh my god, Liv!"

"Yes, fine, it's Darwin. And before you start-"

"But you swore you'd never date a boss. Like, you made me pinky promise to slap you if you ever considered it."

I sink into child's pose, pressing my forehead against the mat. "I know, I know. But the chemistry... you don't understand. From day one, there was this electricity."

"Electricity? More like lightning, from the size of that hickey."

"Mel!"

"And let me guess - he pursued you? Rich guys always do."

"He can be... persuasive when he wants something."

Mel drops her voice lower. "Listen, if you're happy, I'm happy for you. But be careful, okay? Men like Darwin Rook-"

"Have reputations?"

I want to tell her she's wrong. That Dar isn't like other CEOs. That he's literally not even human. That he's fighting to save Earth from threats she can't imagine. But I just press my lips together and nod.

"Thanks, Mel." I smile at her concern. "I'll be careful."

After class, we grab green smoothies at the corner juice bar. The kale and spinach concoction tastes like lawn clippings, but Mel swears by them.

"So enough about my love life. What about yours? Still juggling the three amigos?"

"God, don't remind me." Mel stirs her smoothie with her straw. "Brad's sweet but boring, Tom's exciting but unreliable, and James... well, James is just arm candy."

"Living the dream, huh?"

"More like living the nightmare. Brad wants to talk about his stamp collection, Tom keeps standing me up for his band practice, and James can't string two sentences together."

"Sounds complicated."

"I'd trade all three of them for one decent guy." Mel takes a long sip. "Someone who actually gives a damn, you know? Like your Darwin seems to."

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The mention of his name makes my cheeks flush. "He does treat me well."

"He better. Because if he hurts you, I'll march right into that fancy office of his and smack him silly."

I nearly choke on my smoothie, picturing Mel's hand bouncing off Dar's armored scales. The mental image of her face when she realizes she just tried to slap an alien warrior makes me burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing." I wipe my mouth. "Just picturing you taking on Darwin. He's pretty... sturdy."

"Please. I took self-defense classes. I can handle one smug CEO."

If she only knew. The thought of Mel discovering Dar's true form makes me smile into my smoothie. Some secrets are better kept hidden.

We hit a few boutiques after our smoothies. Mel holds up a slinky red dress against herself in the mirror.

"How's your mom doing? Still trying to save you from the big bad city?"

I scroll through my phone. "Got three crime headlines just this morning. 'Woman stabbed in Central Park.' 'Gang violence erupts in Queens.' 'Tourist mugged near Times Square.'"

"Classic Helen. She'll never change."

"She means well." The excuse sounds hollow even to my ears. "She just worries."

"She smothers. Remember when she followed you to college orientation?"

"God, don't remind me. She tried to sleep in my dorm room that first night."

"You did the right thing moving here." Mel puts the dress back. "You needed space to grow. Look at you now - killer job, hot CEO boyfriend..."

"Yeah, about that job." I fidget with a rack of blouses. "The protestors are still camped outside the building. A hundred acres of rainforest, Mel. What if they're right?"

"Not touching that with a ten-foot pole." Mel holds up her hands. "I mean, I'm not some eco-terrorist, but that's a lot of trees."

"Tell me about it." My stomach churns thinking about it. If only I could explain the truth - that those acres housed an alien threat that could have destroyed half the planet. But I can't.

Mel suggests a ride to Coney Island for old time's sake. Getting a cab this time of day is tough but we manage.

The salt air hits my face as we step out of the cab at Coney Island. The familiar screech of the Cyclone's wheels mingles with gleeful screams.

"Remember sneaking out here during spring break?" Mel links her arm through mine.

"God, we thought we were so rebellious." I buy us both snow cones from a weathered

cart. "Mom would've killed me if she knew."

"You were such a good girl back then." Mel licks her blue raspberry cone. "Until Tommy Martinez corrupted you behind the Cyclone."

Heat floods my cheeks. "That was my first kiss. He tasted like cotton candy and cheap beer."

"At least you kept it PG. Unlike some of us." Mel waggles her eyebrows. "Jimmy Baylan and I got to third base on the Ferris wheel."

Cherry ice sprays from my mouth. "You what?"

"Right at the top! The operator kept the ride going an extra three rounds."

"Oh my god." I double over laughing, sticky red syrup dripping down my chin. "I can't believe you never told me!"

"Hey, a lady has to keep some secrets."

My laughter fades as thoughts of my own secrets surface. Mel must notice my change in mood.

"What's wrong, Liv?"

I stare at my melting snow cone. "Darwin told me he loves me."

"Holy shit." Mel grabs my arm. "When?"

"Yesterday. After we..." I clear my throat. "You know."

"And? What did you say?"

"Nothing really. I just asked 'do you?' and left it at that."

"Liv!"

"I know, I know." I toss my snow cone in a nearby trash can. "I just... I don't know how I feel about it. Or how I should feel."

Mel leans against the railing, watching the waves crash against the shore.

"You know what's funny? I keep waiting for this moment when I'll understand what love is. Like there's going to be some divine revelation that explains everything."

"And?"

"But I'm starting to think that moment never comes for anyone. I think that we're all just doing our best to muddle along and understand what our feelings mean." She turns to face me. "When you think of him, how do you feel?"

The salty breeze whips my hair around my face as I consider her question. "Like the weight of the world isn't so heavy anymore. When I'm with him, I can just... be me. All the weird, awkward, embarrassing parts I usually try to hide? He sees them and accepts them. More than that - he seems to love those parts best."

My fingers trace patterns in the weathered wood of the railing.

"Before Darwin, everything felt like a performance. Like I had to be this perfect, polished version of myself. But with him... I don't know. He makes my world better just by being in it."

I trail off when I notice Mel staring at me, her mouth slightly open.

"That's the best description of love I've ever heard, Livvy," she says softly. "Are you sure you don't know how you feel?"

"Thanks for blowing my mind, bitch." I pull Mel into a tight hug, breathing in her familiar vanilla perfume.

"Anytime, bitch." She squeezes back just as hard. "That's what best friends are for."

We flag down separate cabs - her uptown to the gallery, me downtown to my apartment. As my taxi pulls away from the curb, I watch her yellow cab merge into traffic until it disappears around a corner.

The ride home gives me time to process our conversation. My fingers absently trace the hickey on my neck as I replay Dar's words in my head. I love you. Three simple words that scared me speechless at the time.

But Mel helped put things in perspective. The way my heart races when Dar enters a room. How safe I feel when he takes control. The electricity that crackles between us

with just a look. The fact that I can be completely myself with him - both the fierce and submissive sides of my personality.

Maybe what I feel for my dominant alien boss is love after all. The thought should terrify me, but instead it fills me with a warm certainty.

The cab pulls up to my building and I hand the driver my fare. As I step onto the sidewalk, my phone buzzes with a text from Dar:

Missing you.

My heart skips a beat. Yeah, this is definitely love.

CHAPTER 12

DAR

The navigation console beeps as we pass over Montana. My claws tap against the controls, betraying my unease.

"Look at that sunset," Olivia says. "The clouds look like they're on fire."

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"Beautiful." But I barely glance out the viewport. My mind races with possibilities, none of them good. Pyke never requests meetings without purpose.

"Hey." Olivia's hand covers mine. "Your scales are doing that thing. The thing when you're stressed."

"What thing?"

"They get all spiky. Like a porcupine having a bad hair day."

A laugh escapes me despite my mood. "Porcupines don't have hair."

"See? I made you smile." She squeezes my hand. "Whatever Pyke wants, we'll handle it together."

My chest tightens. Together. Such a simple word, yet it carries so much weight. Humans are fragile. One plasma blast, one wrong move...

"Darwin Rook." She uses my full alias, the way she does when she means business. "Stop brooding."

"I don't brood."

"You're totally brooding. Your mohawk ridge is all droopy."

I check my reflection in the console. My bone ridge stands perfectly erect, thank you very much.

"Made you look." She grins.

The base appears on my scanner, hidden beneath an abandoned silver mine. Ten minutes until we land. Ten minutes until I know what Pyke wants with my Olivia.

"I can hear you thinking from here," she says.

"That's impossible. Vakutans are telepathically shielded."

"Then explain how I know exactly what's going through your head right now."

I raise an eyebrow ridge.

"You're worried about me." She traces the scales on my arm. "Don't be. I'm tougher than I look."

The docking clamps engage with a metallic thunk. Olivia's eyes go wide as she takes in the underwater base through the viewport. Schools of fish dart past, their silver scales catching the last rays of sunlight filtering down from above.

"Welcome to Atlantis," I say, powering down the engines.

"This is way cooler than the Jersey office."

We make our way through the curved corridors. My claws click against the metal floor while Olivia's heels echo behind me. The familiar scent of recycled air and ozone fills my nostrils.

Pyke's office door slides open with a soft hiss. The old warrior rises from behind his desk, his battle-scarred face breaking into a rare smile.

"Miss McGee." He extends his hand. "Welcome to Veritas."

"Captain." Olivia shakes his hand firmly. "Nice setup you have here."

"Please, sit." Pyke gestures to the chairs. "We have much to discuss."

The captain's expression turns grave as he explains about the protestors. My scales bristle at the mention of Grolgath involvement. Those shape-shifting vermin have discovered my identity, threatening everything I've built.

"The Grolgath are using public outrage as a weapon," Pyke says. "They hope to destroy Rook Enterprises and cripple our operations."

"So how do we stop them?" Olivia leans forward.

"You, Miss McGee. You're going to help us set a trap." Pyke's scarred face breaks into a predatory grin. "By betraying Dar to the press."

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My chest tightens at the thought of Olivia facing those monsters, even as part of a ruse. But when I look at her face, I see only determination and that familiar spark of defiance.

"When do we start?" she asks.

"We'll use Hurst Popenga," Pyke says.

My scales ripple with displeasure. That basement-dwelling conspiracy theorist?

"The 'who are the reds' guy?" Olivia's nose wrinkles. "That guy's a crackpot lunatic."

"Yes." Pyke's scarred face shows grim amusement. "But he's got the Grolgath's attention. They haven't made contact with him yet, but they are monitoring him in case he comes up with a real lead. You're going to go on his podcast and give him that lead by saying your boss might be an alien."

"Captain, this is madness." My claws dig into the armrests. "We can't risk-"

"I'll do it." Olivia's voice carries that steel I've come to both love and fear.

"No." I stand, towering over Pyke's desk. "Find another way."

"You wanted to bring her in, Dar." Pyke's good eye fixes on me. "Now she's in. Too late to do anything about it now."

"Darwin." Olivia's hand finds mine. "I'll be fine. This guy's harmless - he probably

lives in his mother's basement."

My chest constricts. She doesn't understand. One wrong move, one slip-up, and the Grolgath will...

"Trust me." She squeezes my hand. "I can handle this."

But I've seen what the Grolgath do to humans who get in their way. The memory of shredded flesh and splintered bone haunts me still.

"If she's going in, she needs equipment," I say. "Real equipment."

Pyke nods. "Follow me to R&D."

The labs sprawl beneath the ocean floor, a maze of chrome and glass. Dr. Krix, our lead scientist, bounces on his feet when he sees us coming. His frill quivers with excitement.

"Oh good, a new field agent to outfit! I have just the things."

He presents Olivia with a pair of sapphire earrings. "Communications devices. Tap twice to activate, once to deactivate."

"Pretty." Olivia puts them on.

"This nail polish becomes plastic explosive when it dries." Krix hands her a bottle of blood-red lacquer. "Just scratch the surface to detonate."

My scales prickle. Explosives? She could blow her hands off.

"And this..." Krix injects something under her index fingernail. "Will give any

Grolgath you scratch a nasty allergic reaction. Their shape-shifting abilities will glitch for hours."

"She needs a tracker," I say. "One of the subdermal implants."

"Absolutely not." Pyke's voice cuts through the lab. "The Grolgath scan for those now. It would compromise her immediately."

My claws dig into my palms. "Then how do we protect her? How do we find her if something goes wrong?"

"Darwin." Olivia takes my hand. "I've got this. These gadgets are more than enough."

But they're not. Not against creatures who can become anyone, anything. Who can tear a human apart with casual ease.

"Trust me," she says.

I do trust her. It's the Grolgath I don't trust. But I can't tell her about the bodies I've found, about the screams that still echo in my nightmares. I can't burden her with that knowledge, not when she needs to focus on staying alive.

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"Can we see the observation deck?" Olivia asks. "I want to see more fish."

"Go ahead with Pyke." My claws tap against my thigh. "I need a word with Krix first. Won't be long."

I watch them head down the corridor before turning back to the scientist. His frill perks up inquisitively.

"Something else you need?"

"A tracker." I lower my voice. "One the Grolgath won't detect."

Krix's eyes light up. He scurries to a workbench and starts rifling through drawers.

"I might have just the thing. Experimental, of course, but..." He holds up something between his claws that I can barely see. "Isotope transmitter. Size of a pinhead."

"Range?"

"Limited. Maybe half a mile in optimal conditions. But completely undetectable to Grolgath scanners. They're looking for our usual quantum signature. This operates on an entirely different principle."

I take the tiny device. "Perfect. Thank you, old friend."

"Just..." Krix's frill droops. "Be careful with her, Dar. Humans are so fragile."

"I know." The transmitter disappears into a pouch on my belt. "That's why I need this."

I stride down the corridor toward the observation deck, my steps lighter. The backup plan soothes my warrior instincts. I'll know where she is. I can protect her.

Because the thought of losing her tears at my hearts. Both of them.

CHAPTER 13

OLIVIA

"No, Mr. Peterson, the faucet is still dripping. Yes, even after you 'fixed' it last week." I pinch the bridge of my nose, fighting off a headache. "The water bill is going to be astronomical."

The leather seat creaks as Dar shifts beside me. His presence fills the back of the limo like a furnace - all that alien heat packed into his human disguise.

"You could just move in with me."

A laugh bubbles up before I can stop it. "Right. Because we don't spend enough time together at the office already?"

His large hand engulfs mine, those dangerous fingers threading through mine. The touch sends sparks racing up my arm. "That's not what I meant."

My breath catches. Of course I know what he means - a real home together, waking up in his arms every morning instead of sneaking out of the office after hours. The thought makes my stomach flutter.

"What happens if I move in?" The question comes out softer than I intended.

Dar's thumb traces circles on my palm. "Everything gets better." His voice drops to that growl that makes my toes curl. "We'll have sex all the time."

"The sex part sounds amazing, but there's other stuff to consider."

"Like what?" His fingers still their mesmerizing circles on my palm.

My mind goes blank. All those carefully considered reasons evaporate under his intense gaze. "I... just need to think about it more."

"Take your time." His voice softens, and he brings my hand to his lips for a kiss.

Back at the office, Dar pulls me into his private suite before I can return to my desk. "I have something for you."

My pulse quickens. Dar's gifts are always spectacular - whether it's flying me to Paris for lunch or that diamond tennis bracelet last month. "Is it sexy or practical?"

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"A bit of both." His smile holds secrets as he reaches into his desk drawer.

The velvet box he produces makes my breath catch. When he opens it, I gasp. A delicate silver choker gleams against black silk, but what draws my eye is the stunning red star ruby mounted at its center. The gem catches the light, sparkling with an inner fire that reminds me of Dar's true eyes.

"It's beautiful," I whisper, reaching out to touch the cool metal.

"It's beautiful," I whisper, reaching out to touch the cool metal. The ruby catches the light, its deep red glinting like liquid fire.

Dar's voice is low, that gravelly tone that always. "It's not just a necklace. There's an isotope embedded in the ruby that allows me to track you. The range isn't as extensive as the Vakutan subdermal chip, but it's more... elegant."

I raise an eyebrow, a flicker of irritation sparking. "So, you're putting a tracker on me now? I thought we were past the whole 'protective alien warrior' routine."

He steps closer, his presence overwhelming. His hand brushes my arm, heat radiating off him even through my blouse. "It's not about control, Olivia. It's about keeping you safe. Especially with what's coming."

I want to argue, but the sincerity in his eyes stops me. Instead, I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. "Fine. But if you're going to put a tracker on me, the least you can do is help me put it on."

A small, almost imperceptible smile tugs at the corner of his lips. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a sleek, alien-looking key, its surface etched with intricate patterns that seem to shift in the light.

“Turn around,” he says, his voice soft but commanding.

I hesitate for a moment before obeying, gathering my hair up and pulling it over my shoulder. The cool metal of the choker presses against my skin as Dar positions it around my neck. There’s a quietclickas he uses the key to secure it, the sound oddly final.

I turn back to face him, my fingers brushing over the smooth metal. “How do I take it off?”

“You don’t,” he says, his tone leaving no room for argument. He slips the key onto a chain and hangs it around his own neck, the metal glinting against his chest. “It’s not just a tracker. It’s a silent affirmation. A constant reminder that you’re mine, and that you’re pleased to obey.”

Heat floods my body, pooling low in my stomach and spreading outward. My breath hitches, the flush creeping up my neck. My fingers linger on the choker, the cool metal a stark contrast to the warmth of my skin.

“Yes, Sir,” I breathe, my voice throaty and low,. The air between us crackles with tension, and for a moment, neither of us moves.

Dar’s eyes darken, and I can see the way his chest rises and falls with each breath. His hand reaches up, his fingers brushing against the choker, his touch sending a jolt of electricity through me.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, the words sending a shiver down my spine.

His lips crash into mine, fierce and demanding. Papers scatter as he lifts me onto the desk, his hands gripping my thighs like iron. I barely have time to gasp before his mouth is on my neck, teeth grazing the sensitive skin, sending shivers down my spine.

“Dar—” I start, but his hand clamps over my mouth, muffling my words. His eyes blaze with that predatory intensity I’ve come to crave, and I feel myself melt under his touch.

“Quiet,” he growls, his voice low and commanding. His free hand hikes up my skirt, and with a sharp tug, my panties are pushed aside. I feel the heat of him, the throbbing length of his scaled cock pressing against me, and then he’s inside, filling me in one relentless thrust.

The sensation is overwhelming—scales flexing, stretching, driving me to the edge before I can even catch my breath. I arch into him, my hands clawing at his shirt as I scream, the sound half instinct, half desperation. His hand muffles most of it, turning it into a whimper that only seems to spur him on.

“That’s it,” he murmurs, his breath hot against my ear. “Take it. All of it.”

I’m trembling, already on the brink, when his phone rings, the shrill tone cutting through the haze of pleasure. He doesn’t stop, doesn’t even hesitate, just reaches for the phone with his free hand, his hips still driving into me with a rhythm that leaves me shuddering.

“Rook,” he barks into the phone, his voice steady despite the way he’s buried inside me.

I bite back a moan, the sound stifled by his hand, as another wave of pleasure crashes over me. My nails dig into his arm, muscles flexing under his skin, the power of him

holding me down, keeping me exactly where he wants me.

“Yes, she’s ready,” he says into the phone, his gaze locking with mine. There’s a flicker of something in his eyes—pride, maybe, or possessiveness—before he adds, “Bring it around front.”

He hangs up, tossing the phone aside, and releases his grip on my mouth. My breath comes in ragged gasps as he leans down, his lips brushing against mine in a way that’s almost tender.

“Your car is ready,” he says, his voice rough with need.

I barely have time to process the words before he thrusts into me again, hard and deep, and this time I can’t hold back the scream. His hand clamps down over my mouth again, muffling the sound, and I feel him pulse inside me as he comes, his body shuddering against mine.

For a moment, we’re both still, the only sound the ragged rhythm of our breathing. Then he pulls back, his hand falling away from my mouth, and I collapse onto the desk, boneless and spent.

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Dar steps away, adjusting his clothes with an ease that's infuriating, while I'm left trying to remember how to breathe. He glances at me, that smirk playing at the corner of his lips, and I can't help but glare.

"You're impossible," I mutter, though my voice is too shaky to carry any real venom.

He chuckles, the sound low and dangerous.

"And yet, you keep coming back for more."

My legs wobble as I make my way to the waiting limo. The choker feels heavy against my throat, a constant reminder of what just happened upstairs. Of what Dar does to me. Of how he owns me.

Focus, Olivia. This is about the mission. Not about how his hands felt on my body, or the way he?—

No. Mission. Right.

The limo glides through Manhattan traffic, and I try to review my cover story. But every time I shift in my seat, I feel the delicious ache between my legs, and my mind drifts back to Dar's office.

When the car stops, I blink in confusion. This can't be right. The strip mall looks like it's been here since the 70s, all faded signs and cracked concrete. Between a vape shop and a discount furniture outlet sits "Hurst Electronics & Repair."

A neon "OPEN" sign flickers in the grimy window. Behind it, rows of outdated computer parts gather dust on metal shelves.

This is where the infamous conspiracy theorist broadcasts from? The guy who claims to have "proof" of aliens walking among us runs his show from the back of an electronics repair shop?

I touch the choker, drawing strength from it. The cool metal grounds me, reminds me why I'm here. These people might seem ridiculous, but they're dangerous. The Grolgath are using Hurst's paranoid ramblings to further their agenda.

Time to play my part. The scared whistleblower, ready to expose her alien boss to the world.

I straighten my skirt, check my reflection in the limo window. I look properly nervous – though that has more to do with what happened in Dar's office than any acting on my part.

The bell over the door chimes as I step inside. A lanky man with wild gray hair bursts from behind the counter, nearly tripping over his own feet in his excitement.

"You came! You actually came!" Hurst's voice cracks with enthusiasm. "This is going to be huge for the show!"

I hold up my hand. "Remember our agreement. Complete anonymity."

"Of course, of course!" He nods so vigorously his glasses slip down his nose. "Voice modulation, no names, the works. I understand - you're risking a lot coming forward about your... employer."

"More than you know." I let my voice quaver. "If he finds out I'm here..."

Hurst ushers me through a beaded curtain into what looks like a converted storage room. Ancient sound equipment crowds the space, cables snaking everywhere like technological kudzu.

He hands me a headset that's seen better days. The foam padding gives off a distinct processed cheese aroma. I slip it on, trying not to think about how many conspiracy theorists have worn it before me.

"So tell me about the evidence you found," Hurst says, adjusting levels on his mixing board.

"Well, there was this strange scale-like thing in his office." I touch the choker at my throat. "Bright red, about the size of a quarter. At first I thought it was some kind of sequin..."

Hurst's eyes light up. "Red scales! I knew it! This confirms everything about the Reds infiltrating human society, manipulating our history from the shadows!"

If he only knew how close to the truth he is. The Vakutan are trying to change history - but only to stop the Grolgath from destroying humanity's future. Sometimes the good guys have to work in secret too.

The shop owner's voice cuts through Hurst's latest theory about lizard people controlling the Federal Reserve.

"Hey! Those computers aren't going to fix themselves! Get back to work!"

Hurst jumps like he's been shocked. "But Mr. Chen, this is important! We're exposing?—"

"What's important is paying rent. Now move!"

I slip off the headphones while Hurst scrambles to shut down his equipment. So much for the fearless truth-seeker. Just another conspiracy nut working a dead-end job, living in a fantasy world.

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What a waste of time. Dar will be disappointed – we were hoping to draw out the Grolgath through Hurst's show. But this guy couldn't attract flies to honey.

The autumn wind whips down the street as I step outside onto the cracked sidewalk. I dig in my purse for my phone to call the car.

Someone bumps into me hard, nearly knocking me off balance. "Hey, watch it!"

But they're already gone, vanishing into the crowd of people rushing past. Something feels off though. I reach into my coat pocket and my fingers brush against paper that wasn't there before.

My heart races as I unfold the crisp white sheet. One sentence in precise block letters stares back at me, along with what looks like a phone number:

WE BELIEVE YOU.

The paper trembles in my hand. Maybe this wasn't such a waste after all.

CHAPTER 14

DAR

"Your performance was exemplary, Miss McGee." Pyke's hologram flickers with approval. "The podcast has already gained significant traction."

My claws dig into the leather armrest. The silver tracking choker gleams around

Olivia's neck, a small comfort given what Pyke suggests next.

"Make contact with this group. Find out what they know."

"Like hell she will." The words escape my maw. "At least let me shadow her."

"Dar." Pyke's voice carries that edge of command. "You know better. The Grolgath's bio-sensors will detect any Vakutan presence within half a mile."

"Then we send in human agents-"

"Who lack the necessary clearance for this operation." Pyke cuts me off. "Miss McGee has proven herself more than capable."

Olivia straightens in her chair. That fierce determination I love blazes in her eyes. "I can handle this, sir."

"Excellent." Pyke's hologram winks out.

The silence weighs heavy. I shift back to human form, my scales melting away to skin. Olivia's perfume fills my nostrils - jasmine and vanilla mixing with her natural scent.

"Olivia." My voice cracks. I reach for her hand across the desk. "Promise me you'll be careful."

She threads her fingers through mine. "Darwin, I-"

"I'd die if I lost you." The words pour out raw and honest. "I love you."

"I love you too, you big scaly doofus." Olivia's voice trembles with emotion.

My heart stops. Then soars. I pull her into my arms and press my lips to hers, savoring her sweetness. The kiss remains gentle, tender - everything I feel for this remarkable woman poured into this moment.

Breaking the kiss, I cradle her face between my palms. "Promise me something."

"Anything." Her green eyes sparkle with mischief.

"No unnecessary risks. No playing hero." My thumb traces her bottom lip. "Come back to me, Olivia. You have to come back to me."

She rises on tiptoe and plants a soft kiss on my cheek.

"Face it, boss man. You're stuck with your bratty pet human now." Her fingers trail down my chest. "Nothing's gonna change that."

I force a smile, pretending her words ease the knot of dread in my gut. They don't. But hearing her say she loves me... that makes everything brighter. Better. Even as my heart races with fear for what's to come, it also swells with joy at finally having those words from her lips.

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Olivia pulls the crumpled note from her pocket. "Should I call now?"

Every instinct screams at me to wait, to plan, to protect her. But Pyke's orders echo in my head. We need results.

"Do it." The words taste like ash in my mouth.

"Shh." Olivia's finger presses against my lips as she dials. Her hand trembles slightly.

"They probably won't even answer-" Her eyes go wide. "Hello?"

My enhanced hearing picks up a faint voice on the other end, but the encryption scrambles it beyond recognition. I grip the edge of my desk, fighting the urge to snatch the phone away.

"Yes, that's right... No, I understand... Now? I can do that... The ferry terminal, got it."

Each word from her lips tightens the knot in my stomach. The silver choker catches the light as she nods, reminding me I can track her anywhere. Small comfort.

She ends the call and meets my gaze. "Staten Island Ferry. In one hour."

"Olivia-"

"Don't start. We both know I have to do this."

The determination in her voice only makes me love her more, even as it terrifies me. She's right, of course. Doesn't mean I have to like it.

"Take the Rolls," I say, tossing her the keys. "I'll tail you in the Lexus."

"A Lexus?" Olivia catches the keys with a snort. "Only you would think a hundred-thousand dollar car is 'discrete.'"

"It's the least conspicuous vehicle I own."

"True. Better than the Lambo or that ridiculous gold Bentley."

Her fingers trace the grolgath poison coating her manicured nails. The explosive polish gleams under the office lights. My stomach churns at how casually she handles deadly weapons.

"This is so cool." She grins, examining her nails. "Like being James Bond."

"This isn't a game, Olivia." The words come out sharper than intended. "The Grolgath are killers."

"Relax, big guy. I've got this." She taps her silver choker. "Besides, you'll be watching my every move."

"That's what worries me." I pull her close, inhaling her scent.

The elevator descends to my private garage. I grip the Lexus keys so hard they bite into my palm. Olivia slides into the Rolls Royce with practiced grace, and my heart clenches.

"Ancient Precursors, watch over her," I whisper in Vakutan. The words taste bitter -

prayers won't keep her safe from the Grolgath.

I force myself to wait until her taillights disappear before following. The drive to the ferry feels endless. Every fiber of my being screams to catch up, to snatch her away from danger.

I park the Lexus on South Street, scanning the crowd. Olivia's red hair catches the sunlight as she approaches a man in a neat business suit. My enhanced vision picks out the telltale signs - slightly too perfect posture, measured movements that betray military training.

Grolgath. Has to be.

The tracking choker's signal pulses steady on my wrist display. I watch them talk, keeping my breathing even. Everything seems fine until Olivia follows him toward the ferry gangplank.

No. She's supposed to make contact and leave.

I burst from the car, shouldering through the crowd. Tourists and commuters block my path like a living wall.

"Move!" I snarl, but more people flow between us.

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The ferry horn blasts. The gangplank starts to rise.

Without thinking, I sprint and leap. My fingers catch the railing as the ferry pulls away. Salt water sprays my face as I haul myself up, muscles straining.

I roll onto the deck, immediately shifting to blend with the crowd. But Olivia and the Grolgath are gone.

The choker's signal leads below deck. Time to hunt.

The isotope's faint radiation signature leads me deeper into the ferry's maintenance corridors. My boots echo on metal grating as I descend another level. The air grows thick with diesel fumes and salt.

Two figures materialize from the shadows. Their movements are too fluid, too precise. No human moves like that.

"Going somewhere?" The taller one's arm elongates, sprouting bone spikes.

I shift to Vakutan form, my clothes shredding as I grow. "Where is she?"

They attack in perfect sync. The shorter one's fingers stretch into whip-like tendrils that slash at my face. I block with my forearm, but the crystalline edges slice deep.

The taller Grolgath drives his bone spikes toward my gut. I grab his mutated arm and snap it, but he just laughs. The broken pieces melt and reform.

"The girl is none of your concern anymore." His face ripples, features flowing like wax.

I roar and charge, slamming him into a bulkhead. Metal crumples under the impact. The whip-fingered one wraps tendrils around my throat.

My claws rake across his chest, drawing alien blood. He screams but doesn't let go. The tendrils tighten.

The bone-spike warrior reforms his arm into a serrated blade. It plunges into my shoulder, grinding against Vakutan armor plates.

Pain fuels my rage. I grab the tendril-wielder and use him as a club, smashing him into his companion. They tumble together in a writhing mass.

Before they can separate, I tear into them with fang and claw. Their shape-shifting flesh tries to adapt, but I'm too strong, too furious.

Blood sprays across the walls. The Grolgath's death screams echo through the corridors.

When it's done, I lean against the wall, panting. Deep gashes cross my chest and arms. The shoulder wound throbs.

But Olivia's signal pulses stronger now. She's close.

CHAPTER 15

OLIVIA

Bob leads me down narrow metal stairs into the ferry's lower deck. The briny smell

of sea water mingles with diesel fumes. Each step of my heels echoes in the confined space.

"Just a bit further," Bob says, his voice oddly melodic.

Something's not right about the way he moves. His legs bend at weird angles, like a marionette with extra joints. His arms swing behind him instead of at his sides, reminding me of those nature documentaries showing lizards running on their hind legs.

The choker Dar gave me feels warm against my throat. At least he can track me if things go sideways.

We reach a dimly lit maintenance area full of pipes and electrical panels. Bob stops and turns to face me, his movements jerky and unnatural.

"What I'm about to tell you will shake the very foundations of your reality," he says, his eyes gleaming strangely in the low light.

I can't help myself. After everything with Dar, this guy's dramatic buildup is almost funny.

"What are you gonna tell me, that aliens are real?" I say with a smirk.

Bob stares at me, his gaze unblinking. The silence stretches uncomfortably long.

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"Not necessarily," he says.

My fingers trace the edge of Dar's choker as Bob launches into his story. The Grolgath - his people - are noble time travelers here to stop the evil Vakutans from corrupting human destiny. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. He's literally stealing Veritas's story and flipping the roles.

"Your boss, Darwin Rook?" Bob's voice drops to a whisper. "He's one of them. A Vakutan. We need your help to capture him."

The metal deck creaks under my feet as I shift my weight. "And how exactly would I help with that?"

"Lure him somewhere isolated. Somewhere we can take him without witnesses."

I cross my arms, channeling my best skeptical expression. "That's a pretty big ask. How do I know you're the good guys here?"

The tension in Bob's shoulders eases at my question. His strange, puppet-like movements become more fluid.

"Everything Hurst says about the reds is true. Every conspiracy, every theory." He spreads his hands. "That will have to be enough proof for now."

Heavy footsteps thunder down the metal stairs. Another man bursts into our space, his face flushed and sweating.

"There's a Vakutan on board!" he pants out.

Bob's whole demeanor changes in an instant. "Then it's time to go." He turns to me. "Mrs. McGee, I suggest you evacuate with us."

"What do you mean, evacuate?" My stomach drops at his tone.

"We've rigged charges throughout the ferry. When they detonate, the vessel will sink catastrophically."

The casual way he says it makes my blood run cold. "There are innocent people up there! Families with children!"

Bob shrugs. "Sacrifices must be made for the greater good."

That's all I need to hear. I lunge forward and grab his wrist, digging my treated fingernail deep into his flesh. The effect is instant - his skin bubbles and warps, flesh stretching and contracting like melting wax.

Bob screams, his human disguise dissolving into a mass of writhing tumors and twisted limbs. The sound that comes from him isn't human anymore - it's a wet, gurgling shriek that echoes off the metal walls.

The other Grolgath stumbles backward, his eyes wide with horror at what's happening to his companion.

"What... what did you do to him?" he gasps.

I bare my teeth in what might be a smile. "Want to find out?"

He bolts up the stairs so fast he nearly trips over his own feet. The sound of his retreat

fades quickly, leaving me alone with the thing that used to be Bob.

"Where are the bombs?" I demand, but Bob's face keeps shifting and melting. His mouth opens and closes, making wet squelching sounds instead of words.

Shit. The chemical was supposed to just reveal his true form, not... whatever this is. I back away from the writhing mass that used to be Bob. The other Grolgath could be setting off those charges any second now.

I race up the metal stairs, my heels clanging against each step. The sound echoes through the maintenance corridors as I follow the path the other alien took.

A flash of movement catches my eye down a side passage. I sprint after it, nearly slipping on something wet on the floor. When I look down, my stomach lurches - there's a trail of green blood leading around the corner.

I round the bend and stop dead. Two scaled bodies lie crumpled against the wall, their reptilian features twisted in death. Dar's handiwork, no doubt. The surviving Grolgath stands over them, his human disguise flickering like bad TV reception.

"Tell me where the bombs are," I say, taking a step forward. "You've seen what I can do."

The Grolgath's response is to pull out a sleek silver pistol and point it at my chest. His hand doesn't shake at all.

"That's close enough," he says. "I watched what you did to Bob. You're not getting within arm's reach of me."

A blur of motion drops from above. Dar lands behind the Grolgath in his full Vakutan glory, scales gleaming red and black in the dim light. Before the Grolgath can turn,

Dar wraps his massive arms around the alien's waist and lifts him off his feet.

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The gun clatters to the deck as Dar charges forward, using the Grolgath like a battering ram. They crash through the metal railing. The Grolgath's scream cuts off with a distant splash.

"Livvy!" Dar pulls me into his arms. His scales are smooth and warm against my skin.

I push away from his embrace. "There's no time. They've planted bombs throughout the ferry."

"Get topside," he orders. "I'll find them."

"No." I grab his arm. "You need my help. Two people searching means twice the chance of finding them all in time."

"It's too dangerous-"

"Trust me," I say, meeting his red-eyed gaze. "I'm not some damsel who needs protecting. I just melted a Grolgath's face off, remember?"

Dar's expression softens. He cups my face in his massive hand. "You're right. Where do we start?"

"Engine room. That's where they'd do the most damage." I kick off my heels - no time for fashion now. "Let's move."

We sprint down the corridor together, our footsteps echoing in perfect sync.

We find the first bomb hidden behind an access panel - a black disc about the size of a hockey puck, covered in blinking red lights. My heart skips a beat at the sight.

"Here." Dar's scaled fingers dance over the device. "Press these two lights simultaneously, then this sequence." The lights flicker from red to green. "See? Disarmed."

I nod, memorizing the pattern. "Split up?"

"Three minutes until detonation. We have to."

We race through the ferry's bowels, finding bombs in maintenance closets, behind panels, under seats. My fingers move faster with each device, muscle memory taking over. Green light after green light marks our progress, but there are so many.

"Thirty seconds!" Dar's voice echoes from somewhere ahead. "I've got two more here!"

I spot another red glow under a pipe. "One more here!" My hands shake as I input the sequence.

"Livvy, I'm sorry." Dar's voice cracks. "I never should have brought you into this."

The light stays stubbornly red. I try again.

"Don't you dare apologize." My fingers dance across the lights. "These past weeks with you - I finally know what perfect love feels like."

Ten seconds. The sequence isn't working. I take a deep breath, wipe my sweaty palms on my skirt, and try one more time.

"But nobody's dying today," I say with a wink as the final light turns green. "We made it."

CHAPTER 16

DAR

"What about this one?" The jeweler points to a gaudy monstrosity that would look more at home on a rapper's pinky finger.

"No. Show me something worthy of a warrior queen."

"Ah." His eyes light up. He unlocks a different case and brings out a tray of rings that sparkle like captured starlight. "These are our finest pieces."

My gaze fixes on one particular ring. The diamond catches the light like a prism, sending rainbow fragments dancing across the glass counter. Golden ivy leaves curl around the stone in an intricate embrace, reminding me of how Olivia's fingers intertwine with mine.

"That one."

The jeweler's hands tremble as he lifts it. "Excellent taste, sir. This is a five-carat..."

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I tune out his sales pitch. The ring speaks to me of strength and beauty combined - just like my Olivia. The woman who faced down grolgath without flinching deserves nothing less.

"Would you like to discuss our payment plans?"

"Payments?" I laugh. The concept seems absurd. "I'll pay cash."

His eyes widen as I pull out my wallet. The price tag might make most humans balk, but what's money compared to finding your true mate? Besides, Rook Enterprises earned enough last quarter to buy this entire store.

The ring box feels warm in my pocket. Soon it will be on Olivia's finger, marking her as mine in both human and Vakutan traditions.

The lobby sparkles with silver and gold decorations. My staff outdid themselves - though a few raises might be in order for keeping this secret. The ring box weighs heavy in my pocket as I check the time. Everything's perfect.

I pull out my phone and dial Olivia's extension.

"Mr. Rook, what a pleasant surprise." Her voice drips with playful insolence.

"I need you in the lobby. Immediately."

"Mmm, but I'm so comfortable up here. Make me."

Heat rushes through me at her bratty tone. She knows exactly what buttons to push.

"Olivia." I let a growl enter my voice. "Come down to the lobby. Now."

A soft moan travels through the phone, straight to my groin. "Yes, Sir."

The line goes dead and I adjust my tie, scanning the decorations one final time. Streamers cascade from the ceiling like a metallic waterfall. Balloons cluster in strategic corners, ready for their cue. The small fireworks are primed to spray harmless sparkles once she says yes.

If she says yes.

My hands aren't steady as I touch the ring box again. I've faced down entire squadrons of grolgath with less nervousness than I feel right now.

The elevator chimes. My warrior queen is coming.

The elevator doors slide open and Olivia steps out, her green eyes narrowing as she takes in the decorated lobby. Her lips part in surprise, but a knowing smirk plays at the corners of her mouth.

My heart pounds as I stride toward her. The ring box burns in my pocket like a plasma core about to breach containment. In one fluid motion, I drop to one knee before her.

Her eyes widen, glistening with unshed tears. The silence stretches between us as I pull out the box and open it. The diamond catches the light, throwing rainbow sparkles across her face. But she doesn't speak.

"Olivia, what are you doing?" I whisper, my voice rougher than intended. "You're

supposed to give me an answer."

"Maybe I'm just memorizing the sight of you, kneeling." Her voice carries that familiar teasing lilt. "Since I'll be the one on my knees for the rest of our marriage."

My breath catches. "So, you're saying yes?"

"Hmm." She taps her chin, pretending to consider it. Her eyes dance with mischief. "Oh, sure, why not?"

The balloons cascade down around us in a flurry of silver and gold, the streamers fluttering like ribbons of light. The small fireworks erupt in bursts of harmless sparkles, painting the air around Olivia in glittering fragments. She's radiant, her green eyes wide with wonder, her red hair catching the glow. I don't think I've ever seen her more beautiful.

I pull her into me, my hands cradling her face as I kiss her. Her lips are soft, eager, and I can feel her smile against mine. For a moment, everything is perfect. The world shrinks to just us, the sparkles raining down like stardust, the sound of the lobby fading into silence.

Then I smell it. Smoke.

I pull back just in time to see a stray firework catch the edge of a streamer. The flame licks up the paper, curling it black before spreading to the next one.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," I mutter.

Olivia's laughter bubbles up before I can even process what's happening. "Dar, your proposal's on fire."

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The sprinklers kick in with a vengeance, drenching everything in sight. Water pours down in icy sheets, soaking my suit, flattening Olivia's hair, and turning the balloon-strewn floor into a slippery, soggy mess. The lobby erupts into chaos as employees scatter, papers and decorations ruined.

Olivia's laugh is infectious, her shoulders shaking as she hugs herself against the cold. Her blouse clings to her skin, her mascara running down her cheeks in streaks. She looks like a drowned kitten, and I can't help but laugh with her.

"I'm so sorry," I say, trying to wring water out of my tie. "This is not how I imagined this going."

She grins, her teeth chattering but her eyes shining. "You? The great Darwin Rook, master planner, king of efficiency—this was your big romantic moment?"

"I'm better at defeating grolgath than planning proposals, apparently," I admit, shaking water from my hair.

She steps closer, slipping a little on the wet floor. I catch her by the waist, steadying her. "You know what?" she says, her voice teasing but warm. "This is perfect. It's us. It's messy, it's chaotic, and it's absolutely unforgettable."

"You're not mad?" I ask, brushing a wet strand of hair from her face.

"Mad?" She laughs, her arms sliding around my neck. "Dar, this is the most memorable marriage proposal I could've ever dreamed of. And trust me, I've dreamed of a lot of proposals."

Her lips find mine again, and I don't care about the water, the soggy decorations, or the ruined suit. All I care about is her, and the fact that she's mine.

"I've planned everything." My fingers trace over the travel itinerary on my tablet. "First class to Dubai. The Burj Khalifa's presidential suite is already?—"

Olivia's finger presses against my lips, silencing me. The touch sends electricity through my scales, even in human form.

"I just want us to spend time together," she says. "Preferably naked time. Why would I want to go on a trip when I've got a sexy scaled alien Dom who I just love to fuck with?"

The tablet slips from my fingers onto my desk. Heat floods my body at her words, at the way she bites her lower lip. My carefully laid plans scatter like leaves in a storm.

"You don't want to see the world?"

"I want to see you." She slides onto my lap, her skirt riding up her thighs. "All of you. Every. Single. Scale."

My hands find her hips, steadying her. The scent of her arousal fills my nostrils, making my head swim.

"The tickets are non-refundable."

"So?" Her fingers trail down my chest. "You're a billionaire. Besides, I'd rather explore your body than explore Paris."

"Bratty little human." I grip her harder, making her gasp. "Always challenging my decisions."

"Mmm." She grinds against me. "That's why you love me."

She's right. That's exactly why I love her. My warrior queen doesn't need fancy hotels or exotic locales. She just needs me.

And I need her.

CHAPTER 17

OLIVIA

"That's for after the wedding, not for getting engaged," I say as Dar reaches for me at our front door.

"Too bad." His red eyes flash with mischief. "I make the rules now."

Before I can protest, he hoists me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing. The world spins upside down, my hair dangling as he carries me across the threshold.

Smack!His palm connects with my bottom.

"Hey!"

"Been wanting to do that all day." Another playful spank makes me yelp.

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My heart races as he strides past the living room, past the kitchen, straight toward the special room we haven't christened yet. The anticipation builds with each step.

"Finally going to break in the play room?" I try to keep my voice steady despite my mounting excitement.

"Past time, don't you think?" His hand caresses where he spanked, sending shivers down my spine.

The door clicks open. Even upside down, I catch glimpses of leather and chrome in the dim lighting. All those delicious implements we picked out together but haven't had a chance to use, what with saving the world from shape-shifting aliens and all.

"Put me down, you brute." I squirm halfheartedly against his grip.

"As you wish." He sets me on my feet inside the room, steadying me as the blood rushes back to my head.

My breath catches as I take in the full view - the padded bench, the suspension rig, walls lined with floggers and cuffs and other wicked toys. The air feels charged with possibility.

"Tonight, I make you mine. Utterly." Dar's voice drops to a growl that makes my knees weak.

His scaled hands slide around my waist from behind, the warmth of his body pressing against my back. I tilt my head to the side as his lips brush the nape of my neck,

sending a shiver down my spine. My breath catches as his fingers trail up my sides, undressing me with deliberate slowness.

“You’re always in such a hurry,” I murmur, my voice already uneven as he peels my blouse away, his fingertips grazing my skin.

“And you talk too much,” he growls, his lips finding the curve of my shoulder. His tongue flicks against my skin, the sensation making me gasp.

I reach back, my fingers tangling in the thick ridge of his neck, anchoring myself as his hands work their way to the clasp of my bra. The cool air of the room hits my bare chest, and I let out a soft groan as his hands cup my breasts, his thumbs brushing over my nipples.

“You’re insufferable,” I say, though my voice is more breath than words.

“And yet, here you are.” His chuckle vibrates against my skin as he unfastens my skirt, letting it pool at my feet. His hands slide down my hips, his scales rough and smooth at once, a contrast that makes my skin hum.

I twist in his arms, breaking free of his grasp, and turn to face him. His red eyes glint with amusement as I reach for the buttons of his shirt. My fingers fumble slightly, but he doesn’t help, just watches me with that smug smirk of his.

“So impatient,” he teases as I finally get the shirt open and push it off his shoulders. His torso is a map of black and red scales, the muscles beneath rippling with even the slightest movement.

“You’re one to talk,” I shoot back, my hands moving to his belt. The leather slides free with a softclick, and I drop it to the floor. My fingers hook into the waistband of his trousers, and I glance up at him, my lips curving into a sly smile.

“What?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, nothing,” I say, dragging his pants down his legs. His cock springs free, and I don’t hesitate, dropping to my knees and taking the tip into my mouth. The taste of him is warm and salty, and I hear his sharp intake of breath above me.

“Liv,” he growls, his hand tangling in my hair.

I hum against his skin, teasing the sensitive crown with my tongue, and he lets out a low, rumbling sound that makes my whole body heat up. His grip tightens, and I know I’ve got him right where I want him—completely at my mercy.

His hips twitch, and he lets out a low, guttural growl as he spills into my mouth. I don’t pull back, don’t falter. Instead, I swallow every drop, my eyes locked on his. His red gaze burns into me, and I let him see it—the way I relish this, the way I crave him. His approval, his dominance, his everything.

“Good girl,” he rumbles, his voice rough and thick with satisfaction. His hand strokes my hair gently, and I shiver at the sound of those words. They always do something to me—unravel me, unravel my control.

I lean back on my heels, wiping the corner of my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Good girl? That’s all I get? No standing ovation? No medal?”

He chuckles, a deep, rumbling sound that vibrates through me. “Don’t get cocky, Liv. You’re good, but you’re notthatgood.”

I smirk up at him, tilting my head. “Oh, I’m not? Because from where I’m kneeling, you seemed pretty impressed.”

His fingers tighten in my hair, not enough to hurt, but enough to make me acutely

aware of his strength. “Impressed, maybe. But don’t think for a second you’re getting off easy tonight. You’ve still got discipline coming.”

I roll my eyes, though my heart skips a beat. “Discipline? Really? What did I do now? Breath too loudly? Exist too confidently?”

He drags me to my feet with a firm grip, his other hand already reaching for a length of rope coiled on the wall. “You’ve got a smart mouth, that’s what. And I’m going to make sure it’s put to better use.”

I snort, even as he starts looping the rope around my wrists, his movements precise and deliberate. “Better use? Like what? Singing your praises?”

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“Something like that,” he says, his voice a low purr as he pulls the rope taut, securing my arms behind my back. The rough texture of the hemp against my skin sends a thrill through me, but I keep my tone light, teasing.

“You know, I bet I can wriggle out of this if I really tried.”

He doesn’t respond, just starts weaving the rope around my torso, creating a complex harness that binds me snugly. I can’t help but admire his skill—every movement is calculated, practiced. It’s kind of hot, actually.

“You’re awfully quiet now,” I say, testing the limits of my restraints. “Getting shy? Or are you just running out of witty comebacks?”

He tugs the rope tighter, and I let out a soft gasp.

“Still talking, I see.”

“Always,” I shoot back, grinning. “You’re gonna have to try harder than that to shut me up.”

He pauses, his red eyes locking onto mine.

“Is that a challenge?”

Before I can answer, he grabs another length of rope—silk this time, smooth and cool against my skin. He trails it down my body, the soft fabric brushing over my breasts, my stomach, until it dips between my thighs.

I suck in a sharp breath as he drags the rope through my pussy, the sensation sending a jolt of pleasure through me. My snarky comment dies on my lips, replaced by a low, guttural moan.

Dar smirks, his fingers working the rope with agonizing slowness. “What was that? I didn’t catch it.”

I bite my lip, trying to hold back the sound, but it’s no use. The silk glides across my slick folds, and another moan escapes me. “Dar?—”

“Beg,” he commands, his voice rough and commanding. “Beg me to let you come.”

My knees wobble, the words tumbling out before I can stop them. “Please...”

"Come." Dar's command hits me like lightning, and my body obeys instantly.

The orgasm rips through me with devastating force. My legs shake and warmth gushes between my thighs, splashing onto the floor. The silk rope is drenched, clinging to my sensitive flesh.

My knees buckle but Dar's strong arms catch me before I fall. The room spins as he lifts me, cradling me against his scaled chest. The leather padding of the table feels cool against my heated skin as he lays me down.

Metal clinks and leather creaks as Dar fastens my ankles into the spreader bar. His red eyes gleam with wicked intent, and my heart races with anticipation.

A mechanical whirring fills the air. My world tilts as Dar works the crank, slowly lifting me until I'm suspended upside down. Blood rushes to my head, making everything feel dreamy and surreal.

"Is this all you've got?" I tease, testing the restraints. "Because honestly, this is just fun."

The position leaves me completely exposed and vulnerable, but I've never felt safer. Or more turned on.

The cool, smooth surface of the candle presses against my entrance, and I gasp as Dar pushes it inside me. The blunt end stretches me just enough to make my breath hitch, and I squirm in my restraints, the leather cuffs biting into my wrists and ankles. Every movement sends a jolt of pleasure through me, the sensation amplified by the helplessness of my position.

"Dar," I whimper, my voice trembling. "Please, let me come."

He chuckles, a low, rumbling sound that vibrates through me. "Not yet, brat."

The candle slides out of me, and I groan in frustration. Before I can protest, I feel the sharp sting of his hand against my pussy lips. The spanking sends a shockwave of pleasure through me, and I cry out as another orgasm crashes over me. My body convulses, and I feel the wetness gush out of me, soaking the candle and Dar's hand.

"It seems my brat requires the strictest of discipline," he says, his voice dripping with amusement.

I pant, trying to catch my breath, but he's already pushing the candle back inside me. The sensation is overwhelming, and I moan as he fills me again. Then I hear the distinct click of a lighter, and I feel a sudden flare of heat on my thighs.

"Did you just light the candle while it's inside of me?" I ask, my voice shaking not from fear but from sheer pleasure.

“Yes,” he says, his tone matter-of-fact.

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I can't help but laugh, the sound breathless and giddy. "You're insane."

"And yet, you love it," he replies, kneeling down in front of me.

His lips meet mine in a deep, possessive kiss. The angle is strange, upside down, but it's thrilling in a way I can't quite describe. His tongue invades my mouth, and I moan into the kiss, my body trembling with need. The heat from the candle inside me is intoxicating, and I can feel the wax beginning to melt, the sensation sending shivers down my spine.

"Dar," I whisper against his lips. "I need you."

"You'll get what I give you," he says, pulling back slightly. His red eyes bore into mine, and I can see the hunger in them. "And right now, I'm giving you this."

He starts to move the candle again, the slow, deliberate thrusts driving me wild. The heat from the flame licks at my thighs, wax dripping down, cooling as it touches my skin. The contrast between the heat and the coolness is maddening, and I writhe in my bonds, desperate for more.

"Please," I beg, my voice breaking. "I can't take it."

"You can," he says, his voice firm. "And you will."

His words send a thrill through me, and I moan as he continues to fuck me with the candle. The restraints make every sensation more intense, and I can feel myself teetering on the edge of another orgasm. But Dar is in control, and I know he won't

let me come until he's ready.

"You're mine," he growls, his lips brushing against mine. "And I'll take you however I want."

I nod, unable to speak, my body trembling with need. The candle moves inside me, the heat and the wax driving me closer and closer to the edge. And then, finally, he gives me the command I've been waiting for.

"Come."

The word is like a trigger, and my body obeys instantly. The orgasm crashes over me, and I cry out, my body convulsing as wave after wave of pleasure washes over me. Dar holds me steady, his hands firm on my hips as I ride out the intense sensations.

When it's over, I'm left panting, my body limp in the restraints. Dar pulls the candle out of me, and I feel the cool air against my sensitive flesh. He leans in, his lips brushing against mine in a soft, almost tender kiss.

"Good girl," he murmurs, his voice filled with satisfaction.

The ropes creak as Dar lowers me from the ceiling, my body swaying gently like a pendulum. My skin tingles where the restraints had bitten in, the sensation mixed with the lingering heat of the wax. I twist my wrists experimentally, testing the give, but the knots are as unyielding as Dar himself.

"Untie me, you overgrown lizard," I say, wriggling for effect. My voice is light, teasing, but there's an edge of need beneath it. I'm desperate to feel his hands on me again, even if it's just to free me.

Instead of untying me, I feel his palm connect with my ass in a sharp, stinging slap. I

yelp, more from surprise than pain, and hear his low, rumbling chuckle.

"Still mouthy, I see," he says, his voice thick with amusement. "Guess I'll have to do something about that."

Before I can retort, I feel something cold and rubbery pressed against my lips. A ball gag. I open my mouth to protest, but he slides it in before I can get a word out. The leather straps dig into the corners of my mouth as he fastens it behind my head. I feel the click of a padlock, and my heart skips a beat.

"This isn't exactly what I meant by 'untie me,'" I mumble around the gag, my words muffled but still coherent enough to sass him.

"Talking back, even when gagged. Impressive," he says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. I hear the rustle of fabric and feel a blindfold being tied over my eyes. The world goes dark, and suddenly, every other sense feels heightened. The warmth of his body, the scent of his skin—spice and something alien I can't quite place—fills my awareness.

"Now," he says, his voice close, making me shiver, "it's your turn. Make me come."

I tilt my head, trying to convey my confusion and skepticism through the gag. I can't use my arms, my mouth, or my eyes. What exactly does he expect me to do? Telekinesis?

"Isn't making it hard literally my job?" I try to say, though it comes out as a garbled mess. I'm sure he gets the gist, though, because I hear his low, rumbling laugh.

"Improvise," he says simply.

Alright, challenge accepted. I can't see him, but I can feel him. His body heat radiates

through the room, and I move toward it, guided by instinct. My rope-bound arms are useless, but my body isn't. I press my chest against him, feeling the hard plane of his scaled torso. I can feel his cock, hot and throbbing, against my abdomen. I rub my breasts against him, the rough rope adding an extra layer of sensation.

"You're trying," he says, his voice strained. "But you're going to have to do better than that."

I step back, frustrated but determined. I hear him shift, and then his voice comes from lower—he's sitting on the floor. His hands guide my hips, positioning me over him. I lower myself slowly, feeling the thick, scaled length of him press against my entrance. I sink down, gasping around the gag as I take him inside me.

I start to move, my hips grinding against him in slow, deliberate circles. His growl of approval sends a thrill through me, and I pick up the pace, riding him with all the ferocity I can muster. His hands grip my hips, guiding me, encouraging me.

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"God, Liv," he groans, his voice rough with need. "You feel incredible."

I wish I could tell him how good he feels, how he fills me completely, how every stroke drives me closer to the edge. Instead, I let my body speak for me, my movements becoming more frantic, more desperate.

"Please," I mumble around the gag, begging for release. "Can I...?"

"Yes," he growls, his voice breaking as he comes inside me. I feel his cock pulse, the hot rush of him sending me over the edge. My body convulses around him, the pleasure so intense it steals my breath.

As the waves subside, I slump against him, my body trembling. He holds me close, his chest rising and falling rapidly. I feel the gag being removed, the blindfold lifted. I blink up at him, my vision blurred, but I can still see the satisfaction in his red eyes.

"Good girl," he murmurs, his voice soft but laden with pride. I smile, my body limp but sated. Challenge accepted. Challenge conquered.

CHAPTER 18

DAR

The black latex hugs every curve of Olivia's body as she slides into the intricate lingerie. My claws dig into the leather armrests of my chair. The sight of her pale skin through the strategic cutouts makes my scales ripple with desire.

"Like what you see?"

Her emerald eyes catch mine in the mirror as she adjusts one of the straps across her breasts. My beautiful, fierce mate knows exactly what she does to me. The way she takes her time, making each movement a sensual dance, proves it.

A century ago, I'd never have believed a human could complete me so perfectly. Now I can't imagine existence without her fire, her passion, her unwavering loyalty. Veritas gained an exceptional agent, but I gained something far more precious - a true partner in every sense.

The thought of our future together makes my chest swell with pride. Centuries of adventures await us. Perhaps even... I picture a child with her spirit and my strength. The possibility thrills me more than I expected.

Olivia strikes a pose, one hand on her hip, latex gleaming in the low light. My breath catches at the sight of her exposed flesh framed by the black straps.

I beckon her closer with one clawed finger. She takes a step.

"No. Crawl to me."

Olivia drops to her knees, the black latex catching the light as she moves. Her green eyes lock with mine, a sly smile playing on her lips as she crawls toward me. Each deliberate shift of her body sets my pulse racing.

"That's it, my queen," I growl, my voice low and rough. "Take your time. Make me wait."

She pauses, tilting her head like she's considering defiance, but then she's moving again, swaying her hips with every inch she closes between us. The sound of her

palms pressing into the floor, the faint creak of the latex, the way her breath hitches as she gets closer—it's all she needs to say to make my blood burn.

When she's within reach, I don't hesitate. My hand snaps out, grabbing her wrist and yanking her into my lap. She gasps, her body landing hard against me. I can feel the heat of her through the latex, the way her heart pounds against her ribs. My claws trail along her thigh, the sharp tips barely grazing her skin.

"You've been teasing me all night," I murmur, my free hand landing on her ass with a sharp smack. She yelps, but it's half-laugh, half-moan. "Think that's funny, do you?"

Another smack, harder this time. Her breath catches, and she squirms in my lap, her body arching against mine. "Dar," she starts, but I cut her off with another sharp slap.

"Quiet," I command, my voice a low rumble. My palm lands again, the sound echoing in the room. Her skin flushes under the latex, the heat radiating through the material. I can smell her arousal, sweet and intoxicating, and I lean in to press my snout to the side of her neck, inhaling deeply.

"You're mine," I growl, my voice rough with need. I push her off my lap, guiding her to kneel on the floor instead. She doesn't resist, her body pliant and eager as I position her. My claws grip the waistband of her lingerie, and with a quick tug, the material tears apart. She gasps, her hands bracing against the floor as I spread her cheeks wide.

I don't wait. My tongue flicks out, tasting her, and she shivers under the touch. Her scent is overwhelming, sharp and sweet, and I can't get enough. My prehensile tongue curls and probes, working her until she's trembling, her breaths coming in shallow gasps.

"Dar," she moans, her voice breaking as I press deeper. Her hands clench into fists

against the floor, and I can feel her body tightening, her muscles coiling as I drive her closer to the edge.

"Let go," I command, my voice a low growl against her skin. And she does, her body shuddering as she crashes over the edge, her cry echoing through the room. I don't stop, not until her legs are shaking, and she's collapsing forward, spent and gasping.

I pull back, licking my lips, my own need burning hot and heavy. But for now, I'm content to watch her, my queen, my mate, utterly undone by my touch.

"Hands behind your head, Olivia. And spread those legs for me." My voice leaves no room for negotiation, but she still gives me that smirk, the one that says she's considering testing me. Her green eyes glint as she hesitates, her fingers twitching like she's debating defiance.

"Or what?" she fires back, tilting her head, her red hair cascading over her shoulders. The audacity. It's half the reason I adore her.

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“Or I’ll make you,” I growl, leaning in close enough that my breath stirs the fine hairs on her neck. She shivers, but her lips still curve in that infuriating, delicious way. I don’t wait for her to obey. My hands snap to her thighs, strong and unyielding, and I push them apart. She gasps, her body arching as I position her exactly where I want her.

“Brat,” I mutter, grabbing the sleek, remote-controlled vibrator from the table. I run my tongue along its length, the cool silicone humming faintly as I taste her lingering arousal on it. Her eyes widen, but she doesn’t look away. Good. I want her to see every second of this.

I press the vibrator against her slick entrance, the resistance giving way as I slide it inside. Her breath hitches, her hands gripping the edge of the table as she tries to steady herself. I tie the rope quickly, the rough texture contrasting with her soft skin, the knot snug and unyielding. She’s trapped now, completely at my mercy.

“Up,” I command, tossing the fur coat at her. She catches it with shaky hands, her cheeks flushed. “Put it on. No one gets to see what’s mine but me.”

She slips into the coat, the soft fur covering her from knees to neck, but the knowledge of what’s underneath makes my blood simmer. She’s entirely bare beneath it, the vibrator and rope hidden from view. Perfect.

“Walk ahead of me,” I say, pulling on my leather jacket and opening the door. She hesitates for a moment, then steps out into the hallway. I follow a step behind, close enough to catch her if she stumbles but far enough to watch her reactions.

The streets of Manhattan are alive with noise—cars honking, people chatting, the faint hum of the city that never sleeps. Olivia walks with her head high, her stride confident, but I know better. I pull the remote from my pocket and flick the vibrator on low. Her step falters for just a second, a tiny hitch in her rhythm, and I grin.

“Keep walking,” I murmur, my voice low enough that only she can hear. She glances over her shoulder, her eyes narrowing, but she doesn’t stop. I increase the intensity, and this time, she stumbles, her hand gripping the edge of a lamppost as she steadies herself.

“Dar,” she hisses, her voice strained, but I just chuckle, turning the vibration back down.

“You’re doing so well, my queen,” I say, my tone dripping with mock sweetness. “Don’t stop now.”

She huffs, regaining her composure, and continues forward. I let her walk for a few more steps before turning the vibrator up again, watching as she bites her lip, her steps faltering. The way she fights to keep her composure is exquisite—every twitch of her body, every sharp inhale, every furtive glance back at me. She’s mine, and she knows it.

The game’s just beginning.

Her breathing hitches, her pace faltering, and I know she’s close. The scent of her arousal is intoxicating, a heady mix that makes my scales throb. Without warning, I grab her arm and yank her into the shadowed alley. Her startled gasp is silenced as I press her against the brick wall, the fur coat slipping from her shoulders to pool at her feet.

“Dar!” she whispers, her voice trembling with both surprise and want.

“Quiet,” I growl, pulling the Vakutan harness from inside my jacket. The leather gleams faintly in the dim light as I secure the padded collar around her neck. Her wrists are caught in the cuffs before she can protest, locked into place at the small of her back. She’s mine, completely and utterly.

Her eyes widen as I pull the ball gag from my pocket, and she shakes her head. “No, Dar, not here?—”

But I silence her with the gag, securing it firmly behind her head. Her muffled protest turns into a moan as I tear away the latex lingerie, leaving her bare and exposed. The cool air makes her shiver, her nipples hardening instantly.

I turn her around, her back pressed against my chest, and remove the vibrator with a low growl. Her body bucks against me, desperate for more.

“You want it, don’t you?” I whisper, my breath hot against her ear. She nods frantically, her muffled whimpers driving me wild.

I don’t wait. My cock is already rock hard, pulsing with need. I thrust into her in one savage motion, her tight, wet heat enveloping me. She squeals behind the gag, her body arching against mine. I grip her hips, holding her steady as I pound into her, each thrust harder and faster than the last.

Her muffled cries echo in the alley, her body trembling with each movement. A couple of pedestrians glance our way, but the darkness shields us. They move on, oblivious to the raw passion unfolding just feet away.

I feel her clench around me, her body tensing as she reaches her peak. I let go, burying myself deep inside her as we come together in a wave of ecstasy. Her body shudders against mine, her muffled screams of pleasure music to my ears.

When the storm passes, I gently remove the gag, her gasps and moans filling the air. She turns to face me, her green eyes hazy with bliss. I crush her lips with mine, kissing her deeply.

"I love you," I murmur against her mouth.

She smiles, her voice soft but sure. "I love you, too."

"Remember that on the walk back to the condo," I growl, my voice rough with satisfaction.

I retrieve the vibrator from where it fell, sliding it back inside her still-quivering body. Her breath catches as I position it just right. The Vakutan harness keeps her arms locked behind her back, the leather collar snug against her throat. I wrap the fur coat around her shoulders, concealing her nakedness from prying eyes.

"Now you will be challenged even more not to come," I say, enjoying how her pupils dilate at my words. "Since I know how much it arouses you to be at my mercy."

Olivia rises on her tiptoes. "Never change, Dar."

I capture her lips with mine, kissing her deep and slow. My tongue claims her mouth as thoroughly as I claimed her body moments ago. She melts against me, surrendering completely. I reach through the coat to pinch her nipple, making her squeal into my mouth.

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I break the kiss and land a firm swat on her ass through the fur. "March, little brat."

"Yes, Sir," she replies, her tone dripping with playful sarcasm.

My mate's defiant spirit never fails to stir my blood. Tonight will be a long one, testing both our limits. But I wouldn't have it any other way.

CHAPTER 19

OLIVIA

I'm hunched over my laptop at the kitchen island, humming some half-remembered tune as my fingers fly across the keyboard. Spreadsheets. Glorious, calming spreadsheets. The numbers don't lie, don't judge, don't care that today is the day I'm supposed to be a blushing bride. They just sit there, neat and orderly, and I love them for it.

The sound of the front door slamming open makes me jump. Mel storms in, her arms crossed and her face a mix of exasperation and disbelief.

"Olivia McGee—soon to be Rook, I might add—what the hell are you doing?"

I don't even look up. "Crunching numbers. You know, the usual."

She marches over and slams my laptop shut. "It's your wedding day. You're supposed to be getting ready, not pretending you're in some corporate finance seminar."

“Mel, I’m fine. Spreadsheets are my happy place. They’re keeping me calm. You know, avoiding the whole ‘bridezilla’ thing.”

She narrows her eyes. “You’re not fooling anyone. You’re nervous, and instead of dealing with it like a normal person, you’re burying yourself in Excel.”

“Guilty,” I admit, standing up and stretching. “But it’s working, isn’t it? No tears, no tantrums, just... pivot tables.”

Mel groans, grabbing my arm and dragging me toward the door. “You’re impossible. Maurice is waiting, and if we’re late, he might actually combust. And trust me, no one wants to see that.”

I let her pull me into the hallway, where Maurice is pacing like a caffeinated peacock. His tailored suit is immaculate, and his hair is so perfectly coiffed it looks like it could deflect bullets. He stops mid-stride when he sees us, his hands flying to his hips.

“There you are! Do you have any idea how much time we’ve lost? Any idea at all? This is not a rehearsal, Olivia. This is the day. The day! And you’re—what? Playing accountant?”

“Spreadsheets,” I correct him, smirking. “And I’m fine, Maurice. Really.”

He throws his hands up in exasperation. “Fine? Fine is not the word I would use. Fine is for people who don’t have a timeline that’s tighter than a corset on a Victorian debutante. Now, move!”

Mel shoves me toward the elevator, and Maurice follows, muttering something in French that I’m pretty sure isn’t complimentary. The elevator doors slide open, and we step inside. Maurice immediately starts tapping his foot, his eyes darting to his

watch every two seconds.

“Relax, Maurice,” I say, leaning against the wall. “It’s not like Dar’s going to leave me at the altar if we’re five minutes late.”

He glares at me. “This is not about your fiancé, Olivia. This is about perfection. And perfection does not tolerate tardiness.”

The elevator dings, and we step out into the lobby. The limo is waiting, its black exterior gleaming under the morning sun. Maurice ushers us toward it, his hands fluttering like he’s herding cats.

“In, in, in!” he commands, opening the door and practically shoving us inside.

I slide into the plush leather seat, Mel beside me, and Maurice takes the seat opposite. He pulls out a tablet and starts scrolling through his schedule, muttering to himself.

Mel leans over and whispers, “You know, for someone who’s supposed to be calm, you’re stressing out the most high-strung man in New York.”

I grin. “Mission accomplished.”

The limo glides through Manhattan, the city a blur of steel and glass outside the tinted windows. Maurice is still muttering about timelines, his tablet glowing in his hands, but I tune him out. My stomach twists, and it’s not just wedding jitters. I glance at Mel, who’s fiddling with the hem of her dress, her brow furrowed like she’s trying to decide whether to say something.

“Spit it out,” I say, leaning back against the seat. “You’ve got that look on your face like you’re about to drop a bombshell.”

Mel hesitates, then sighs. “It’s about your mom, Liv.”

I stiffen. “What about her?”

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“Dar wanted to invite her, didn’t he?” Mel says, her voice soft. “You told him no.”

I cross my arms, staring out the window. “Yeah. So?”

“So... you’re sure about that? I mean, it’s your wedding. Don’t you want her here?”

“No,” I say, my voice sharper than I intend. “I don’t need her here. She made her choices, Mel. She chose to walk out when I was sixteen. She chose to ignore every birthday, every Christmas, every time I tried to reach out. She doesn’t get to waltz back in now that I’m about to marry a billionaire.”

Mel leans forward, her eyes searching mine. “I get it. I do. But... Dar doesn’t know her like you do. He probably thought it’d be a nice gesture, you know? Including her.”

I huff a bitter laugh. “Nice gesture? Sure. Let’s invite the woman who abandoned me to watch me get married. That’ll beadorable.”

“Liv,” Mel says gently, “it’s your wedding. Your day. If you don’t want her here, that’s your call. But you need to own that decision. Don’t let it eat at you.”

I turn back to the window, watching the city blur past. “It’s not eating at me. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” Mel says, rolling her eyes. “You’re Olivia McGee. You’re never fine. You’re always either furious or pretending you’re not.”

“Maybe I’m both,” I snap, then sigh, running a hand through my hair. “Look, Dar doesn’t get it. He’s all about family loyalty, even when it’s toxic. But he didn’t grow up with a mom who couldn’t be bothered to stick around. I did. And I’m not letting her ruin this for me.”

Mel nods, her expression softening. “Okay. Then don’t. You’re right—it’s your wedding, Liv. Your mom made her bed. She doesn’t get to crash your party just because she’s feeling nostalgic.”

I glance at her, a small smile tugging at my lips. “Thanks, Mel. For not pushing.”

She grins. “Hey, someone’s gotta be the voice of reason. And Maurice is too busy hyperventilating about roses or whatever.”

“I heard that!” Maurice snaps from across the seat, not looking up from his tablet.

Mel and I burst out laughing, the tension in the air dissolving. For a moment, I forget about my mom, about the wedding, about everything. For a moment, it’s just me and my best friend, laughing in the back of a limo. And for now, that’s enough.

The limo pulls up to Saint Patrick's Cathedral, and my heart skips. There, gleaming in the morning sun, sits Dar's silver Porsche 911. A week without seeing him, and just the sight of his car makes my pulse race.

"God, I've missed him," I say, pressing my face against the window like a lovesick teenager. "This whole 'week apart for tradition' thing is torture."

Mel snickers. "Need a cold shower before the ceremony?"

"Shut up," I laugh, but my cheeks flush hot. "I'm just saying, the wedding night is going to be..."

"TMI!" Mel holds up her hands. "Save it for your husband-to-be."

Maurice opens the limo door, and I step out into the crisp autumn air. The cathedral towers above us, all Gothic spires and pristine white stone. It's perfect. Everything is perfect.

Until I feel the tug on my sleeve.

I turn, expecting a well-wisher or maybe an early guest. Instead, I find myself staring into a pair of familiar green eyes—my own eyes, set in an older face.

"Mom?" The word comes out strangled. "What are you doing here?"

Elsie McGee stands before me in a powder blue dress, clutching her purse like a shield. "Olivia, honey..."

"Don't 'honey' me." I take a step back. "You can't just crash my wedding."

"Actually," Maurice interjects, his tablet already in hand, "Madame McGee is here at Monsieur Rook's personal invitation."

The world tilts sideways. Dar invited her? Without telling me?

"That's right," my mother says softly. "Darwin called me himself. Said every bride deserves her mother on her wedding day."

"Olivia, please," my mother says, her voice trembling like she's balancing on the edge of a cliff. "I know I've made mistakes. I know I should've believed in you. I should've been there. I should've done everything differently." Her hands are wringing the strap of her purse like she's trying to strangle it. "But I can't change the past. All I can do is try to make up for it now, if you'll let me."

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I cross my arms over my chest, my jaw tight. “You’re damn right you should’ve believed in me,” I snap, my voice sharper than I meant it to be. “You walked out, Mom. You walked out and didn’t look back. And now you’re here because of what? Some guilt? Because Dar called you? What’s the angle, huh?”

Her eyes glisten, and she shakes her head. “There’s no angle, Olivia. I just... I want to be here for you. For your wedding. For this moment. I don’t expect you to forgive me, but I’m asking—no, I’m begging—to be allowed to stay. Just for today.”

I stare at her, my chest tight. The anger’s there, bubbling under the surface, but so is this stupid, traitorous pit of sadness. She looks smaller than I remember, her red hair streaked with gray, her hands trembling.

Mel crosses her arms, giving me a sideways glance. “Liv, it’s your call. But... just so you know, if you kick her out, I’m totally buying you a drink later to celebrate.”

I let out a short, bitter laugh. “Thanks, Mel. Always got my back.”

Maurice clears his throat, tapping his tablet impatiently. “As much as I’d love to stand here and watch this delightful family drama unfold, we are on aschedule. So, if you could make a decision—preferably one that doesn’t involve sirens or tears—that would befantastic.”

I exhale sharply, running a hand through my hair. “Fine,” I say, my voice low. “You can stay. For the wedding. And the reception. But that’s it. No speeches, no mother-daughter dances, no... whatever. You’re here as a guest. That’s all.”

My mother's face crumples, but she nods, clutching her purse tighter. "Thank you, Olivia. That's all I'm asking for. Just... thank you."

I turn away before she can say anything else, my stomach churning. Mel gives me a quick squeeze on the shoulder, and Maurice herds us toward the cathedral doors, muttering about flower arrangements and timetables.

I don't look back at my mother, but I can feel her standing there, her presence like a shadow I can't shake. Today's supposed to be perfect, but now it's... complicated. And I hate that she's the one who made it that way.

"I need to see Dar," I tell Mel, my hands shaking. "Right now."

"But it's bad luck?—"

"Screw luck. Where is he?"

Mel sighs and leads me down a side corridor. She grabs a folding screen from somewhere and positions it between two marble columns. "Stay here. I'll get him."

Moments later, I hear his footsteps. My heart races just knowing he's on the other side of that screen.

"Livvy?" His deep voice sends shivers down my spine.

"You invited my mother?" The words come out sharp, accusatory. "Without telling me?"

"It's tradition among my people. The mother of the bride must attend to ensure the bloodline continues strong."

I press my palm against the screen. "Bull. That's not why you did it."

A low chuckle. "No, it's not. You need this, Livvy. You need to face her, even if just to say goodbye properly."

"I already said goodbye. Six years ago when she walked out."

"Did you? Or did you just let anger fill the void she left?"

I close my eyes, letting his words sink in. Damn him for knowing me so well. "I hate when you're right."

"I know." The screen shifts as he leans against it. "But that's why you're marrying me, isn't it? My stunning insight and wisdom?"

"Among other things," I say, smiling despite myself. "Your modesty, for instance."

"Livvy." His voice turns serious. "Whatever you decide to do about your mother, I'll support you. But don't let old wounds keep bleeding. Not today."

He's right. Of course he's right. "I'll see you at the altar," I whisper, touching the screen one last time before turning away.

Maurice's voice cuts through the air like a fire alarm. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is time! Everyone in position. Olivia, you're up in five. Five! Do not make me come over there."

I'm pacing in the small vestibule, the cathedral's stained glass casting a kaleidoscope of colors on my dress. My hands won't stop trembling. Mel adjusts the train of my gown for the hundredth time, her own nervous energy buzzing like a live wire.

“You look stunning,” she says, squeezing my shoulders. “Like, if Cinderella decided to run a Fortune 500 company. Dar’s gonna combust at the altar.”

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“Thanks, Mel,” I mutter, half-listening. My eyes keep darting to the other side of the room, where my mother stands, smoothing her dress and avoiding my gaze. She looks so out of place, like she doesn’t belong here. But here she is.

I take a deep breath, the weight of the moment pressing down on me. Before I can second-guess myself, I stride over to her. Her head snaps up, surprise flickering across her face.

“Olivia, I—” she starts, but I cut her off, wrapping my arms around her in a tight hug.

“I love you, Mom,” I say, my voice thick. “It just might take me a while to forgive you.”

She freezes for a moment, then her arms come around me, holding me like she’s afraid I’ll disappear. “Oh, sweetheart,” she whispers, her voice breaking. “You look beautiful. I’m so proud of you.”

I step back, blinking away the tears threatening to ruin my mascara. “Thanks, Mom. Let’s not make this awkward, okay? Just... walk me down the aisle.”

She nods, her eyes glistening, and takes my arm. The double doors swing open, and the organ begins to play. The crowd stands, their faces a blur as I lock eyes with Dar.

He’s at the end of the aisle, his red eyes blazing. His smirk is pure mischief, like he knows exactly what I’m thinking. God, I love him. I love him so much it hurts.

The walk feels like an eternity and a split second all at once. My mother squeezes my

arm as we reach the altar, then steps back, her place in my life both acknowledged and uncertain. Dar takes my hands, his grip firm, his touch sending a jolt of electricity through me.

“You’re late,” he murmurs, his voice teasing.

“Only because Maurice wouldn’t let me run,” I whisper back, a smile tugging at my lips.

The officiant clears their throat, and we turn to face each other. The vows are a blur, the words pouring out of me like water. My hands are steady now, my heart full. When Dar slides the ring onto my finger, it feels like a promise—a promise of forever.

And then he kisses me, his lips claiming mine with a fierceness that leaves no room for doubt. The world fades away, and for a moment, it’s just us. No past, no future. Just now. Just this.

When we pull apart, the applause is deafening. Dar’s grin is wild, his eyes shining with something that feels like pride. “Mrs. Rook,” he says, his voice low and dripping with satisfaction.

“Mr. Rook,” I reply, matching his tone. For the first time, I feel like there’s no limit to our happiness.

CHAPTER 20

DAR

The corridor of the Grolgath ship hums with the low, menacing whine of laser blasts ricocheting off the walls. My scales itch with the static of their energy, the heat of

each bolt as it zips past us. Olivia's powered armor glints under the alien lights, her movements sharp and precise despite the chaos. She's keeping up better than I expected—better than any human should.

“The path splits up ahead,” I say, just as she does.

We both pause, and she grins up at me, her green eyes flashing with that spark of defiance I've come to both adore and dread. “Isn't it cute we're in sync?” she asks, her voice light despite the situation.

I snort, shoving her gently toward the left side of the fork. “It would be cuter if the Grolgath weren't trying to kill us.”

She laughs, a bright, reckless sound that cuts through the tension. “You're such a romantic, Darwin. Always focusing on the negative.”

“Focusing on survival,” I correct, grabbing her arm and pulling her into a sprint as another volley of laser fire scorches the wall where we'd just been standing. “Less banter, more running.”

We barrel into the engineering section, the doors hissing shut behind us. I slam the manual override to barricade them, the metal groaning against the force of the Grolgath on the other side. Olivia's already at the control panel, her fingers flying over the alien interface like she was born to do this. She's got a knack for tech that still surprises me, even after all this time.

“Overloading the engines,” she announces, her voice steady. “Should make a nice little boom.”

“Too nice,” I growl, bracing myself against the door as it begins to buckle under the pounding from outside. “We need to be out of here before that boom happens.”

“Working on it,” she mutters, her brow furrowed in concentration. “These controls aren’t exactly user-friendly.”

The door creaks again, and I grit my teeth, pushing back with all my strength. For a split second, I consider shifting into my Vakutan form for the extra muscle, but the suit I’m wearing won’t handle the transformation. I’ll have to hold it as I am.

“Olivia,” I snap, “any day now.”

“Yeah, yeah, Mr. Impatient,” she shoots back, not looking up. “You try rewiring an alien engine while your boyfriend’s playing doorman.”

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“Boyfriend?” I raise an eyebrow, even though she can’t see it. “Is that what I am now?”

She pauses, glancing over her shoulder with that wicked smile of hers. “What do you want me to call you? Future husband? Alien overlord? Mr. ‘You’re Not in Charge’?”

I can’t help the smirk that pulls at my lips. “Keep talking like that, and you’re not getting a ring.”

The door shudders again, and I refocus, my muscles straining. “Olivia?—”

“Done!” she shouts, triumph in her voice. “Engines overloading in three... two...”

“Run!” I bark, shoving off the door and grabbing her hand.

We bolt for the nearest exit, the sound of the door groaning open behind us as the Grolgath break through. The ship lurches as the engines begin to destabilize, and I pull Olivia closer, shielding her body with mine as we race against the clock.

“You know,” she pants, her breath hot against my chest, “for a guy who hates banter, you sure do a lot of it.”

“Blame you for that,” I mutter, but there’s no real venom in it.

Because, damn it, she’s right.

"Know what tomorrow is?" I ask, watching her fingers dance across the alien control

panel.

"Kind of busy at the moment." Olivia's brow furrows as she concentrates on overloading the engines. "Unless you want this whole ship to explode with us still on it?"

"It's our wedding anniversary."

She pauses for a split second, those green eyes flickering to mine. "Our twentieth?"

"Our thirtieth." I can't help but grin, admiring the way her suit hugs her curves. "You look damn sexy for a fifty year old."

"I stopped counting at twenty nine." Her fingers tap out the final sequence. "All set here! We have five minutes until the engines blow."

"Time to go then." I grab her hand, my palm tingling at the contact even through our protective gear. We sprint down the corridor toward the hangar bay, our boots echoing against the metal floor.

We round the corner at full speed and screech to a halt. A Grolgath patrol blocks our path, their weapons trained on us with obvious delight. Their reptilian faces twist into grotesque smiles, scales gleaming under the harsh ship lighting.

A blur of red and black scales streaks past me, moving with lethal grace. My son Var tears through the Grolgath patrol like they're made of paper. His fighting style mirrors my own - precise, economical, deadly. Pride swells in my chest as I watch him dispatch the last enemy with a spinning kick that would make any Vakutan warrior proud.

"Mom, Dad, did you see?" Var's grin stretches wide across his face, those green eyes - so like his mother's - sparkling with excitement.

"We saw, son." I clasp his shoulder. "Now let's get to the shuttle before this ship goes boom."

We sprint through the corridors as a family, our footsteps perfectly in sync. The hangar bay doors slide open at our approach, revealing my ship waiting exactly where I left it. The sleek vessel practically hums with anticipation.

The ship's engines roar to life under my touch. Olivia slides into the co-pilot seat while Var straps himself in behind us. We blast out of the hangar just as the first explosions rock the Grolgath vessel. The fireball chases us through space, but my ship is faster.

As we descend through Earth's atmosphere, clouds part before us like a curtain. I steal a glance at Olivia, my heart swelling. Even after thirty years, she takes my breath away.

"I love you, Livvy."

She turns to me with that smile - the one that made me fall for her all those years ago. The one that still makes my pulse race.

"I'm pregnant, Dar."