



My Big Fat Fake Alien

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Category: Fantasy

Description: .She needs a fake husband. Too bad for her — I don't do fake.

Raven thinks I'm just another rich, powerful, and devastatingly handsome billionaire looking for a business deal. Cute. She has no idea who she's dealing with.

I'm Karc. A warrior. A prince. A damn menace when someone dares to defy me.

She walked into my world asking for a pretend marriage to keep her safe. Fine. I'll play along. But the moment I slide that ring onto her finger?

She's mine.

She wants boundaries? Broken.

She wants no touching? Too late.

She wants to escape? Try me, little human.

Because the second I saw her, I knew the truth — she's not just my fake wife. She's my fated mate.

And I'll burn the whole galaxy before I ever let her go.

Read on for: A laugh out loud science fiction alien romance that will have you chuckling along as you fall in love all over again. While this romance may be out of this world, the feelings will bring out something from deep inside you. HEA guaranteed!!

Total Pages (Source): 24

CHAPTER 1

RAVEN

The bass from the speakers pulses through the floor, rattling my bones as I weave through the crowd with a tray of cocktails. My goth schoolgirl skirt swishes with each step, the straps of my corset digging into my shoulders. The air smells like sweat, expensive cologne, and desperation. A guy in a wrinkled suit reaches out to grab my waist as I pass, but I pivot just in time, his fingers grazing nothing but air.

“Hands to yourself, champ,” I toss over my shoulder without breaking stride. He mutters something I don’t catch—probably not flattering—but I’m already on to the next table.

“Kristal for the gentlemen,” I announce, setting the bottle down with a practiced flourish. The table erupts into cheers, their ties loosened, their faces flushed from too much whiskey and entitlement. One of them, a guy with a Rolex that probably costs more than my rent, shoves a wad of cash into my hand. His grip tightens before I can pull away.

“You’re coming home with me tonight,” he says, his voice low and possessive, like he’s already decided I’m his.

I plaster on my best customer-service smile and pull my wrist free. “Sorry, I’m working late.”

His eyes narrow, the kind of look that makes my skin crawl. “I’m not used to not

getting what I want.”

I tilt my head, feigning innocence. “Then this will be an opportunity for growth.”

His buddies roar with laughter, slamming their glasses on the table. He glares at me, but I’m already gone, melting back into the chaos of the club. My wrist throbs where he grabbed me, and I rub it absently as I head for the bar.

“Another table of charmers?” my coworker Max asks, handing me a fresh tray of drinks.

“Just your average Tuesday,” I reply, rolling my shoulders to shake off the unease. The guy’s eyes linger in the back of my mind, the kind of stare that makes me check over my shoulder when I leave work. But for now, I push it down. There’s too much to do, too many thirsty assholes to keep up with.

I adjust my corset, take a deep breath, and dive back into the fray. The night is young, and so am I—but not young enough to fall for that bullshit twice.

I grab the champagne bottle by the neck, my practiced fingers cradling it like it’s a weapon. The elevator ride to the fourth floor is brief but stifling, the mirrored walls reflecting my tired eyes and the faint sheen of sweat on my forehead. The higher floors are quieter, the air heavier with money and secrets. I’ve been up here enough times to know the vibe—power, arrogance, and the kind of entitlement that makes my skin crawl. But tonight feels different. Maybe it’s the way the bass from the lower floors hums through the floor, or the way the ceiling seems to press down, daring me to dream about what’s above it. The fifth floor. The forbidden zone. I’ve never been up there, and the staff who work it act like they’ve taken a vow of silence. I’ve always wondered what goes on up there. Private parties? Drugs? Or something darker? My lips curve into a smirk. Maybe one day I’ll find out—just to satisfy my curiosity.

I step off the elevator and head for the table at the far end of the room, my heels clicking against the polished floor. The man sitting there is massive, his broad shoulders straining against the expensive fabric of his suit. He's leaned back in his chair, his posture relaxed but far from casual. His eyes—blood orange, like the sky just before a storm—snap to me as I approach, and for a moment, I forget how to breathe. His gaze rakes over me, slow and deliberate, and I feel it like a physical touch, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Dom Pérignon,” I say, my voice steady despite the sudden heat pooling in my stomach. I set the bottle down with a flourish, my fingers brushing the ice bucket as I pull away. “Your evening just got classier.”

His lips curl into a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. “Class is overrated,” he says, his voice deep and smooth, like whiskey. “But you're not.”

I raise an eyebrow, crossing my arms over my chest. “Smooth. Real smooth.”

He chuckles, the sound low and rich. “I'm not trying to be smooth. I'm just stating a fact.”

I tilt my head, studying him. Most guys at these tables reek of desperation or arrogance, but this one... he's different. There's a quiet confidence in the way he holds himself, like he's not trying to impress anyone. And those eyes—I've never seen anything like them. They're unsettling, but in a way that makes my pulse quicken.

“You're not from around here,” I say, more to myself than to him.

He leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. “What gave it away?”

“The suit. The accent. The... everything.” I gesture vaguely, trying to keep my tone

light. “You’re not exactly blending in.”

He laughs again, and this time it feels genuine. “Fair enough. But neither are you.”

I glance down at my outfit—the corset, the skirt, the fishnets. “It’s called a uniform.”

“It’s called distracting,” he counters, his gaze lingering on my legs a little too long.

I feel my cheeks heat, but I keep my expression neutral. “Flattery won’t get you a discount.”

“I’m not looking for a discount,” he says, his tone shifting, growing more serious. “I’m looking for you.”

I blink, caught off guard. “Excuse me?”

He leans back again, his smile returning. “You’re not like the others here. You’re... real.”

I swallow hard, my usual defenses faltering. “Real? In this place? That’s a first.”

He doesn’t respond, just watches me with those impossible eyes, and for the first time in a long time, I feel seen. Not ogled, not objectified—seen. It’s terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

“Well,” I say, my voice softer than I intended, “enjoy the champagne.”

I turn to leave, but his voice stops me. “Raven.”

I freeze, my heart skipping a beat. How does he know my name? Slowly, I turn back to him.

“How do you?—?”

“I make it a point to know what’s important,” he says simply, his gaze never leaving mine.

I give him a small smile, my mind racing. “You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea,” he says, and there’s a hint of something in his voice—something dangerous—that quickens my pulse.

I leave the table, my legs unsteady, my thoughts a jumbled mess. Who is this guy? And why does he make me feel like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff, ready to fall?

I know I should get back to work, but my feet feel like they’re rooted to the spot. His presence is magnetic, pulling me in even as my brain screams danger. I tug nervously at the spiked collar around my neck, the metal cool against my fingertips. It’s always been a statement piece, not a damn invitation.

“You must be a very dominant woman,” he says.

I bark out a laugh, louder than I mean to. “What makes you think that?”

He gestures to my collar, his fingers tracing the air like he’s sketching the spikes. “It’s the mark of a dominant to wear spikes like that.”

My cheeks burn, and I’m suddenly hyper-aware of the collar digging into my skin. “Oh, I don’t know anything about that,” I say, waving a hand like I can bat the words away. “But since you know my name, it’s only fair you tell me who you are.”

He leans back, that same unreadable smile playing on his lips. “Kirk Stephens.”

The name nags at me, like I've heard it somewhere before, but I can't place it. I narrow my eyes, trying to piece it together. "Football player?"

He shakes his head, amused.

"Pro wrestler?"

Another shake.

I cross my arms, pretending to be annoyed. "Okay, Mr. Mystery, what do you do if you're not out there tackling people or body-slamming them through tables?"

He leans forward, resting his elbows on the table, his eyes never leaving mine. "I do a lot of things. I travel, see exotic places, meet interesting people. I make obscene amounts of money, and—" He pauses, his gaze intensifying. "When I'm lucky, I get to make love to a beautiful woman like yourself."

My stomach bottoms out, and for a split second, I'm dizzy. But then it hits me—that familiar warning bell in the back of my mind. Don't fall for it. I've been down this road before—the charm, the promises, the inevitable crash and burn. Love bombing, gaslighting, abuse. Not again. Never again.

"I have to go," I say quickly, turning away before I can change my mind.

"Stay."

The word is a command, not a request, and it stops me in my tracks. His voice carries a kind of authority that makes my knees weak, and I hate how much I want to obey. I hesitate, my back still to him.

He pats the seat next to him, not saying another word. I turn around, my resolve

crumbling as I meet his gaze. My legs feel like jelly as I take a step back toward the table.

“Sit,” he commands, and my legs betray me before my brain can catch up. The chair is cool against the back of my thighs as I sink into it, my pulse thrumming like the bassline from the club below. I cross my arms, trying to hold onto some semblance of control. “I really should get back to work,” I say, but the words sound weak, even to me.

He tilts his head, that infuriatingly confident smile never wavering. “Hush now, Raven. You’re a customer service specialist, yes? Well, I’m a customer. Service me.”

My jaw tightens, and I lean forward, my elbows digging into the table. “Hey buddy, I don’t know what kind of transaction you think you made, but all you bought was a bottle of champagne.”

He chuckles, the sound warm and low, like he’s indulging a child’s temper tantrum. It pisses me off, but at the same time, there’s a part of me that wants to claw my way into his good graces just to prove I’m worth the trouble.

“Relax,” he says, raising his hands in mock surrender. “I would never presume anything more than your company—which does, more or less, come with the bottle of champagne.”

He’s right, and I hate that he’s right. My job description includes entertaining the guests, keeping them in their seats, and making them spend more money on drinks. Half the girls here sit and flirt their way into bigger tips. But this? This isn’t just business. I shift in my seat, acutely aware of how close he is, how his presence fills the space between us like static electricity.

“What kind of man are you into, Raven?” he asks, his voice cutting through the

tension. His eyes lock onto mine, and I can't look away.

"You don't beat around the bush, do you?" I reply, my tone sharper than I intend.

He takes a long sip of his champagne, his gaze never leaving mine. The bubbles cling to the inside of the glass like tiny pearls, and for a moment, I'm jealous of how effortlessly calm he seems.

"Answer me, Raven," he says, and there's an edge to his voice now, a command that makes my stomach twist in a way I don't want to examine too closely.

I lean back in my chair, trying to play it cool, but my fingers fidget with the hem of my skirt. "You want a checklist? Because I've got a few dealbreakers. Narcissists, manipulators, and guys who think buying a drink means they've bought me."

He smirks, setting his glass down with deliberate precision. "And here I thought I was just making conversation."

"Conversation is one thing. Interrogation's another."

He leans forward, resting his forearms on the table, and the intensity in his gaze makes my breath catch. "Then let's call it curiosity. I want to know what makes you tick, Raven. What you want. What you need."

I swallow hard, my defenses rising like walls. "And what makes you think you're qualified to know?"

His smile softens, and for the first time, it feels genuine. "Because I'm asking. And because I think you're worth knowing."

The words hit me like a punch to the chest, and for a moment, I'm too stunned to

speaking. The club hums around us, the music and laughter blending into a distant buzz, but all I can focus on is him—his eyes, his voice, the way he makes me feel seen in a way I haven't in years.

I open my mouth to respond, but the words falter on my tongue. Because deep down, I know this is more than just curiosity. And that scares the hell out of me.

The words tumble out of me before I can stop them. "I just want a man who won't break my heart, or break me."

My hand slaps over my mouth like it's trying to shove the confession back in. Heat floods my cheeks, and I can't even look at him. What the hell is wrong with me? I don't do this. I don't spill my guts to some guy in a suit who probably thinks vulnerability is a good look on a bottle girl.

Kirk's silence is worse than anything he could say. I'm frozen, afraid to move, afraid to breathe. The air between us feels charged, like the moment before a thunderstorm. My heart hammers in my chest, and I can't decide if I want to run or stay.

"If I knew the villain who hurt you," he finally says, roughly, "I would tear him in half."

My head snaps up, and I meet his gaze. Those eyes—they burn with something I can't quite place. Anger, yes, but it's more than that. It's protectiveness, a fierceness that makes my stomach twist. I believe him. I believe he could do it.

"Thanks," I mumble, because what else is there to say? My voice sounds small, foreign to my own ears. I'm used to being sharp, guarded, but right now I feel like I've been stripped bare.

He leans in, his hand brushing mine on the table. The contact is electric, sending a

jolt through me. “I would never break your heart, Raven. Or break you.”

My breath catches, and for a moment, I let myself believe him. There’s a tenderness in his voice that cuts through all my defenses. But then I remember—this is how it always starts. The promises, the charm, the slow erosion of everything I am until I’m left with nothing.

Before I can stop myself, I’m leaning in too. His lips meet mine, and it’s like the world stops. The noise of the club fades into the background, and all I can feel is him. His hand cups the back of my neck, gentle but firm, and I melt into it. It’s been so long since I’ve been kissed like this—like I matter, like I’m something worth savoring.

But then the doubts creep in, whispering in the back of my mind. This is too good. Too easy. And when things are too good, they always turn to shit. It’s a rule of my life, written in blood and heartbreak.

I pull away, my chest heaving. Kirk looks at me, confusion flickering across his face. “Raven?—”

“I have to go,” I blurt out, already standing. My legs feel like jelly, but I can’t stay here. Not when I feel this exposed.

I turn and walk away, my heels clicking against the floor. My thoughts are a tangled mess, and I don’t even remember to grab my tip. All I know is that I need to get out of here, away from him, before I do something I’ll regret.

CHAPTER 2

KARC

The bartender's words hit me like a jab to the ribs. She punched out early. Raven's gone, and the taste of her still lingers on my lips, a ghost of something I can't quite pin down. Duty wars with instinct—find Giscard or find her. The club hums around me, bass thumping, bodies swaying, but my focus narrows to a single, relentless thought: She's in danger.

I'm halfway to the elevator when a voice stops me, smooth and greasy as oil. "Mr. Stevens. Leaving so soon?"

Giscard. Of course.

I turn, forcing a practiced smile. "Even billionaires need their beauty sleep, Lalonde."

He stands there, pristine in a tailored suit, his pale face unreadable. "Surely not. The night's just beginning. I'd hate for you to miss the real entertainment." His eyes flicker, something reptilian in their stillness.

"Another time." My jaw tightens. Every second I waste here feels like a noose tightening.

He steps closer, his presence oppressive. "You seem... distracted. Something on your mind, perhaps?"

I meet his gaze, my voice ice. "Personal matters. Nothing that concerns you."

He smiles, thin and sharp. "Everything concerns me. Especially in my club."

The elevator doors slide open, and I step in without another word. His eyes follow me, cold and calculating, until the doors seal shut.

The descent feels agonizingly slow. My pulse hammers, a low drumbeat in my ears. She's in danger. The thought won't let go, a primal pull I can't ignore. The doors open, and I'm out, scanning the street. Neon lights blur as I move, my long strides eating up the pavement.

Her voice cuts through the night. "Let go of me!"

A pack of suits circles Raven like wolves, their leader's meaty hand yanking her purse strap. "Hey darling, I'm trying to be nice. If you don't stop being a cold bitch, I'm going to be not so nice."

Red bleeds into my vision. My feet eat the pavement in three strides. The human's face registers shock as my fist connects with his jaw - pulled at the last microsecond from lethal to merely devastating. He crumples like wet paper.

"Holy shit!" One of his cronies launches a wild haymaker.

Their fists bounce off my concealed scales, tearing threads in my Armani. Five against one - pathetic odds. For them.

"Get him!"

The pack swarms, all flailing limbs and drunken rage. I let them wear themselves out for exactly three seconds before launching them all back with a sweep of my arms.

Bodies scatter across concrete.

One tries crawling away. Another rushes me with a broken bottle. A third fumbles for his phone. The fourth just stands there, pants darkening.

I take my time. The bottle wielder gets his arm twisted until something snaps. The crawler receives a precise kick to the ribs. The phone fumbler tastes pavement.

The last one breaks into a sprint. My hand finds an orange safety cone. Perfect. The cone spins through the air like a missile, catching him between the shoulder blades. He face-plants with a satisfying thud.

Five unconscious suits litter the sidewalk. My suit is ruined. Worth it.

I'm at her side in an instant, my instincts screaming to check for injuries. She's holding her torn outfit together with both hands, her knuckles white, her shoulders hunched. The bruises on her heart are worse than anything those bastards could've done to her skin.

"Here." I shrug out of my blazer, draping it over her shoulders. It swallows her, hanging down to mid-thigh like a trench coat. She looks smaller in it, vulnerable in a way that makes my jaw clench.

"Are you all right?" My voice is calm, but it takes effort. I want to go back and finish what I started with those men.

She nods, her eyes flicking to the ground. "It's my fault. I should've taken a cab. I was being cheap."

"No." The word comes out sharper than I intended. I temper it, softening my tone. "It's not your fault. The only ones responsible are the ones who tried to hurt you."

She glances up at me, her dark eyes wide, searching. There's something there—fear, maybe, or the ghost of it. She's not used to kindness from men like me. That realization sticks in my chest like a blade.

“Let me call you a ride,” I say, pulling out my phone. She doesn't argue, just nods again, her shoulders slumping like she's carrying the weight of the world. Her expression makes my chest ache. She looks like someone who's been kicked too many times and expects the next blow.

The car arrives quickly, sleek and black, blending into the night. She hesitates before sliding into the back seat, clutching my blazer around her like armor.

“Here.” I slip a business card into her hand. “Call me anytime. Day or night.”

She looks down at it, her fingers trembling slightly. “Thanks,” she murmurs, her voice barely above a whisper.

I shut the door and watch as the car pulls away, taillights disappearing into the dark. The ache in my chest doesn't fade. If anything, it deepens.

Back inside the club, the air feels heavier, the music louder. I scan the room, but Giscard's nowhere to be seen. I approach the bar, catching the bartender's eye.

“Where's Lalonde?” I ask, my tone casual but my focus razor-sharp.

“Retired for the night,” he says, not looking up from the glass he's polishing. “Sixth floor.”

Of course. The forbidden floor. No invitation, no access. My frustration simmers beneath the surface, but I keep my expression neutral.

I leave the club, the cool night air doing little to clear my head. The drive back to my Greenwich Village condo is a blur of neon and shadows. My mind's already spinning, plotting the next move, but beneath it all, there's a single, unshakable thought: She's not safe.

I'm back in the penthouse, pacing. The city's sprawl stretches below me, lit up like a carnival, but I'm not seeing it. My mind's locked on two things: Giscard's sixth floor and Raven. The sixth floor is a fortress—impenetrable without an invitation. And Raven's caught in the crossfire just by being at that damned club. Women vanish from Area 51 like ghosts, and Giscard's always there, smooth and unreadable, his hands clean of blood but dripping with suspicion.

My phone buzzes on the counter. I snatch it up.

“Kirk.” It's Jareth, my tech guy, his voice crackling through the line. “Got some intel on Lalonde. You're not gonna like it.”

“Try me.”

“He's been making a lot of trips internationally. Russia, China, a few stops in the Middle East. All places with high-level defense contracts. And get this—every time he returns, another girl goes missing. Five in the last six months. All staff from Area 51.”

My grip tightens on the phone. “Pattern?”

“Too clean to be coincidence. He's targeting them, Kirk. And your girl Raven's been working there, what? A month? She's on borrowed time.”

“She's not my girl.” The words come out sharper than I intend. “She's a liability.”

“Bullshit. You kissed her. You don’t kiss liabilities.”

“It was a maneuver.”

“Right. A maneuver.” Jareth’s tone is dry. “Look, I get it. You’re the Iceman. Emotions are for lesser beings and all that. But if she’s got Giscard’s attention, she’s in deep. You either pull her out or protect her. Either way, make a call.”

I exhale, the tension in my chest tightening. “What about the sixth floor?”

“Still nothing. That place is locked down tighter than Fort Knox. No heat signatures, no audio. Whoever’s running their security is a goddamn wizard. You’re not getting in without an invite.”

“Then I’ll get an invite.” My voice drops, cold and determined. “Lalonde’s throwing a private event tomorrow night. By invitation only.”

“You think he’ll bite?”

“He’ll bite. He’s too curious about me to ignore me now. But that’s not all. I need eyes on Raven. She’s not going back to that club.”

“You want me to babysit her?”

“No. I want you to make sure she doesn’t do anything stupid. She’s stubborn, scrappy. If she thinks she’s being watched, she’ll bolt.”

“Understood. But Kirk—be careful. Giscard isn’t just any player. He’s Grolgath. That means he’s got resources, and he’s not above disappearing people himself.”

“I know.” My eyes narrow, the city lights blurring into streaks of gold. “That’s why

I'm ending this."

As I hang up, my gaze lands on the business card I gave her. It's still sitting on the counter, untouched. She didn't call. Not that I expected her to. Trust isn't in her vocabulary, and after tonight, it's even less likely. But that doesn't change the fact that she's in danger because of me.

Two missions now. Expose Giscard and the Grolgath's operation. And keep Raven safe from them. Both are tangled together, a knot I'll have to cut through one way or another. But first, I'll need to get closer to Giscard. Close enough to see the scales beneath his skin.

And if he so much as looks at Raven the wrong way, I'll rip him apart.

Page 3

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CHAPTER 3

RAVEN

I slam the door behind me, my hands trembling so hard I can barely get the key out of the lock. The air in the apartment feels too thin, and I lean against the wall, trying to steady my breathing. My heartbeat thuds in my ears, loud enough that I almost miss the sound of Madison's voice.

"Raven?" she calls from the kitchen, her voice muffled by a mouthful of something crunchy. I hear the rustle of her snack bag as she rounds the corner, barefoot and in nothing but a tank top and underwear, her bowl of chips balanced precariously in one hand. "Whoa. You look like you just saw a ghost. What happened?"

"Some guys," I start, my voice shaking. I swallow hard, trying to force the words out. "They tried to... I don't know, grab me or something. Outside the club."

Madison's eyes widen, and she sets the bowl down with a clatter. "Are you serious? Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

"No, I'm fine," I say, hugging myself tightly. "Someone... someone stepped in. He stopped them."

"Who? A cop? Security?"

"No," I say, my mind flashing back to Kirk. The way he'd moved, like he was made of something harder and faster than flesh and bone. The way his hands had felt when

he'd kissed me, like they were the only thing holding me together. "It was Kirk Stevens. That billionaire guy that's always in the news."

Madison scrunches her nose. "Kirk Stevens? That name sounds familiar."

"Tech billionaire. Always in the business news." My fingers twist in the hem of my shirt. "He was in the VIP section tonight."

"And he just happened to save you?" Madison plops onto our ratty couch, patting the cushion beside her. "Come on, spill. There's more to this story."

I sink down next to her, pulling my knees to my chest. "Giscard assigned me to his table."

"And?"

"And nothing. He ordered champagne." The memory of his intense gaze sends me on a hot spiral. "He asked me to sit with him."

"Did you?"

"Yes." Heat creeps up my neck. "I don't know why. There was something about him. Like gravity pulling me in."

Madison leans forward, eyes sparkling. "Was he hot?"

"That's not—" I press my lips together. "He was... different. Powerful. Not like the other rich jerks."

"Different how?"

"Just different. Commanding. But gentle too." My chest tightens. "Look, can we not?—"

"I still don't get why he saved you, or why you left work early in the first place."

The words burst out before I can stop them. "He kissed me, okay? And it was amazing. Like nothing I've ever felt before. But I got scared and ran away."

Madison's jaw drops. "He WHAT?"

"He kissed me," I repeat in a little girl voice. "One thing just kind of led to another, we were talking, and...he kissed me."

Madison's eyebrows shoot up. "Wait, wait, wait. The same guy who was flirting with you at the club is the one that saved you?"

"Yeah. He... he just showed up out of nowhere. He took them down like they were nothing. One second they were coming at me, and the next they were on the ground. I've never seen anyone move like that."

"Okay, hold up," Madison says, holding up a hand. "Are we talking, like, action movie moves here? Was he doing flips and shit? Did he have a sword?"

"No, it wasn't like that," I say, trying to piece it together in my head. "It was... it was like he didn't even have to try. He was just faster. Stronger. Those guys didn't stand a chance."

Madison whistles low. "Damn. Sounds like he's into you. Like, really into you. What did he say? Did he ask for your number? Please tell me he asked for your number."

"He gave me his card," I admit, pulling it out of my pocket. The glossy black

rectangle feels heavier than it should, like it's carrying the weight of everything that's happened tonight.

Madison snatches it out of my hand, inspecting it like it's a rare artifact. "Raven, this guy's a billionaire. He's hot, he's powerful, he's apparently a martial arts god, and he's into you. What the hell are you waiting for? You should be calling him right now."

"It's not that simple," I say, my voice sharp. "I don't even know him. He's... he's intense. Like, too intense. And he kissed me, Maddy. And I... I ran."

Madison stares at me like I've just announced I'm giving up breathing. "Let me get this straight. A handsome, sexy billionaire who wants you, bad, kisses you... and your move is to run away from this person?"

"I panicked, okay?" I snap, pulling the card back from her. "I don't know what I'm doing."

Madison throws up her hands. "Well, I do. I'm calling the psych ward because you've lost your goddamn mind, Raven."

"I told you I don't want to call the police," I say, rubbing my temples.

"Who said anything about the police?" she retorts, grabbing her phone off the counter. "I'm calling someone to come and check your head for loose screws. This is insane."

"Okay, hold up," Madison says, snatching her laptop off the coffee table and plopping herself back onto the couch. Her fingers fly across the keyboard, and within seconds, she's typing Kirk Stevens into the search bar. "Let's see what Mr. Billionaire Savior is all about."

I sink down next to her, my nerves still frayed. My hands twist the hem of my shirt as I watch the screen fill with results. The usual stuff pops up first—business deals, buyouts, paparazzi shots of him at fancy events with supermodels on his arm. Madison clicks through them with the intensity of a detective on a deadline.

“Big surprise,” she mutters, scrolling past a photo of him stepping out of a Maserati. “Rich guy does rich guy things. Let’s dig deeper.”

She types Kirk Stevens controversy into the search bar, and that’s when things get weird. The first link takes us to a forum thread titled Kirk Stevens: A Modern-Day Villain? My stomach tightens as I read the first post.

“What the hell is this?” Madison squints at the screen. “No childhood photos? Zero? That’s... sketchy.”

“Maybe he’s private,” I say, my voice sounding unconvincing even to me.

Madison gives me a sideways glance. “Private, or nonexistent? Because according to this, the guy just popped into existence in his mid-twenties with a billion dollars and no backstory.”

I bite my lip, my mind racing. Kirk’s face flashes in my head—those sharp, almost too-perfect features, the way he moved with inhuman speed and strength.

The way he kissed me like he’d been waiting his whole life to do it.

My pulse quickens, and I force myself to look back at the screen.

Madison clicks another link, and this one’s worse. “Okay, listen to this,” she says, reading aloud. “Wherever Kirk Stevens goes, chaos follows. Industrial plants explode. Oil platforms sink. Entire companies go bankrupt. Coincidence?”

“Stop,” I say, my voice sharper than I intended. “You’re making it sound like he’s some kind of supervillain.”

“I’m not saying he’s a supervillain,” Madison says, closing the laptop and turning to face me. “But he’s definitely not just a hot billionaire with a white knight complex. There’s something off about him, Raven.”

I don’t answer. I know she’s right—Kirk is too intense, too mysterious, too everything . But I can’t shake the memory of the way he looked at me, like I was the only person in the world who mattered. Or the way he’d whispered, “I’d rip them in half if I could.” I believed him. I still do.

“Look, I’m not telling you what to do,” Madison says, softer now. “But maybe... maybe you should be careful with this guy. You’ve been burned before. I don’t want to see that happen again.”

I nod, but I don’t say anything. My thoughts are a tangled mess, and I can’t untangle them, no matter how hard I try. Madison’s words echo in my head as I stare at the black business card still clutched in my hand. Careful. But careful feels like the last thing I want to be.

I stare at the blank wall of our apartment, my mind racing. The more I think about it, the more it fits. Kirk just happens to be there when those guys come at me? He swoops in, saves the day, and now he’s the hero? No. That’s too convenient.

“What if...” I start, my voice low, almost hesitant. “What if he paid them? What if he set it up just to look like the hero?”

Madison pauses mid-chip crunch, her brow furrowing. “You think he’s that much of a bastard?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, pacing the room. My fingers tug at the hem of my shirt, twisting the fabric. “But it’s not impossible, right? Rich guys like him... they think they can buy anything. Even people.”

She tilts her head, considering. “Okay, yeah. That’s messed up. But it’s not out of the realm of possibility. Dude’s shady. You saw the forums.”

I stop pacing, my jaw tightening. “If he thinks he can mess with me, he’s got another thing coming.”

Madison grins, her eyes lighting up. “Blackbird4VR?”

“Blackbird4VR,” I confirm, a smirk tugging at my lips. The thought of hitting back, of leaving my mark on his pristine, over-the-top office, makes my pulse quicken. “His office was in that article. The one with the stained glass windows. I can get in.”

“Climbing again?” she asks, already knowing the answer.

“There’s a building next to it. Still under construction. Scaffolding up the side. It’s perfect.”

Madison leans back on the couch, her smirk widening. “Be careful, though. If he’s as shady as you think, he’s not gonna take kindly to someone tagging his space.”

“Don’t worry,” I say, heading to my room. My hands are already moving, gathering my gear—spray cans, gloves, my black hoodie. “I’ll make it quick. In and out.”

“Don’t get arrested,” she calls after me as I shove my supplies into a backpack. “I can’t afford to bail you out.”

“I won’t,” I say, pulling the hoodie over my head. The fabric settles over my

shoulders, familiar and grounding. I grab my mask, black cotton, and tuck it into my pocket. “Blackbird doesn’t get caught.”

She laughs, but there’s a hint of worry in it. “Just... be smart, okay? I don’t want to have to explain to your mom why you’re in jail for vandalizing a billionaire’s office.”

“Smart is my middle name,” I shoot back, slipping the backpack over my shoulders. I head for the door, my hand hesitating on the knob. “See you in a bit.”

“Good luck,” she says, her voice softer now. “Kick his ass, Raven.”

I don’t reply, but the determined set of my shoulders says it all. As I step into the night, the cool air hits my face, sharp and bracing. The city hums around me, alive and indifferent. I pull my hood up, my hands brushing against the cans in my bag.

Blackbird4VR is back. And Kirk Stevens? He’s about to learn what happens when you mess with the wrong girl.

The night air hits my face as I hop onto the electric scooter, the hum of its motor vibrating through my body. I swipe the prepaid card, and the display flashes green. Let’s go.

New York at night is a different beast—a mix of neon lights and shadowed alleys, the kind of place where you can feel alive and terrified in the same breath. I weave through the streets, dodging late-night pedestrians and the occasional cab that doesn’t bother to signal. The city smells like roasted nuts and exhaust, and the wind carries the faint sound of a saxophone playing somewhere nearby. It’s beautiful in its chaotic way.

But my jaw tightens as I think about Kirk. That smug, too-perfect face. That kiss . He’d made me feel something, something I hadn’t felt in a long time. And then he’d

turned around and orchestrated that attack ? What kind of sick bastard does that, just to play hero and get into my pants? My hands grip the scooter's handlebars harder, the plastic biting into my palms.

I turn a corner, and there it is—Kirk's brownstone. The bottom floors look like any other building on the block, blending into the city's fabric like it's trying not to be noticed. But the top two floors? Those are all him. The stained glass windows catch the streetlight, throwing colors onto the sidewalk below. It's pretentious as hell, and it screams money .

"Figures," I mutter, parking the scooter in a shadowed corner. I sling my backpack over one shoulder and duck into the construction site next door. The fence is easy enough to climb, my boots finding purchase on the chain links. I drop down into the yard.

The skeleton of the skyscraper looms above me, its steel girders exposed and waiting. I've done this a hundred times, but tonight feels different. Maybe it's the anger simmering in my veins, or maybe it's the weight of the spray cans in my bag. Either way, I'm not backing down.

I start climbing, my hands gripping the cold metal, my movements steady and deliberate. Eight floors up, I pause, crouching on a beam to catch my breath. The city stretches out below me, a sea of lights and noise. Then I focus on the ledge of Kirk's building, just a few feet away but a world apart.

I take a running start, my boots slamming against the steel before I leap. For a second, I'm weightless, the wind rushing past my ears. Then I hit the ledge, tucking into a roll to absorb the impact. My shoulder stings as I come to my feet, but I ignore it, crouching low to stay out of sight.

I unzip my bag, checking the cans. All intact. Good. Blackbird's ready to leave her

mark.

I crouch on the ledge, my boots barely making a sound against the concrete. The balcony doors ahead are massive, floor-to-ceiling glass with intricate metalwork framing them. No locks, no alarms, no fancy security. Guess when you're ten stories up, you don't expect intruders. Joke's on you, Kirk.

I slip inside, the cool air of the office hitting my face. The monitors on his desk cast a faint glow, illuminating the space just enough to see. My eyes adjust, and I spot it—the perfect target. A full-sized portrait of Kirk Stevens on the cover of Time Magazine, all smug and polished. Man of the Year. Yeah, right. More like Man of the Hour until I'm done with him.

I pull out my cans, shaking them with practiced ease. The hiss of the spray fills the quiet room as I go to work. Fangs, hollowed cheeks, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth. I turn him into a vampire, greedily sucking money from the air around him. It's chef's kiss perfect. You can still tell it's him, but now he's a caricature of his own greed. Blackbird strikes again.

I step back to admire my work, a smirk tugging at my lips. But before I can bask in the glory, a deep, gravelly voice shatters the silence.

“What are you doing here?” it growls.

I freeze. The voice is familiar—lower, rougher, but that same commanding tone. Slowly, I turn around.

And then I see him.

Standing in the shadows is a monster. Seven feet tall, covered in red scales that gleam faintly in the dim light. His face is angular, reptilian, with ridges running down

his cheeks and a pair of sunset orange eyes that lock onto mine. Those eyes. I'd know them anywhere.

"Kirk?" My voice comes out as a squeak. It's him—or some twisted version of him. The same orange eyes, the same intense gaze. But this? This is not human.

"Did the Grolgath send you?" he demands, taking a step forward. His claws click against the marble floor, and I swear I can feel the ground vibrate under his weight.

My brain short-circuits. Grolgath? What the hell is he talking about? All I know is that I'm face-to-face with a giant lizard-man who looks like he's two seconds away from ripping me apart.

"Stay back!" I yelp, fumbling for the can in my hand. I don't think—I just act. I point it at his face and press the nozzle. A stream of paint hits him square in the eyes.

He roars, staggering back, clawing at his face. "What is this?!"

I don't stick around to explain. I bolt for the balcony doors, my heart pounding so loud I'm sure he can hear it. I don't look back. I don't think about how he's probably twice as fast as me.

I just run, leaping onto the ledge and launching myself toward the scaffolding on the building next door.

I hope I make it.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:05 am

CHAPTER 4

KARC

Paint fumes burn my nostrils and eyes. The acrid chemical stench masks any scent that might identify my quarry as friend, foe, or Grolgath infiltrator. My scales itch beneath the remnants of my holographic disguise, and I wipe futilely at the neon green paint dripping down my face.

The figure in black darts to the edge of my office. No hesitation. No fear. Just a perfect, graceful leap across the void between buildings.

"Impossible."

My heart pounds against both sets of ribs. No human would attempt that jump. This proves Giscard's people have found me. Why else would a Grolgath break in just to deface my office?

The black-clad form lands on a steel girder ten stories up the construction site next door. Such fluid grace. Such perfect balance. I catch myself admiring the athletic display instead of giving chase.

"Not this time, shape-shifter."

I launch myself across the gap. My enhanced muscles propel me through the chill night air. The girder groans under my weight as I land. The entire framework shudders.

My quarry stumbles, loses footing. A feminine yelp of surprise echoes off the bare concrete and steel. She catches herself on a cable, dangling precariously over the drop.

Wait. She?

The feminine curves beneath that black outfit catch my eye. No Grolgath would choose such a form - their kind lacks the finesse to properly replicate the female shape. A fact that's caused more than one infiltrator to fail their mission.

Her fingers slip on the cable. A gasp of genuine terror escapes her lips. The drop wouldn't kill one of my enemies - they'd just reshape on impact and slither away. But this intruder's fear rings true, raw and primal.

My claws flex. Every warrior instinct screams to seize her, to demand answers about her intrusion. But the defaced portrait gives me pause. What spy wastes time on petty vandalism when they could access classified files or plant surveillance devices?

The steel girders creak as I shift my weight. Her body tenses at the sound, muscles straining to maintain her grip. No shape-shifter would show such weakness. This must be human work - probably some activist making a statement about corporate greed.

The night wind whips her clothes against her frame. Such a small, fragile thing. My rage cools despite the insult to my office. Whatever her purpose here, she's no threat to Project Veritas.

I stride to the edge of the girder, my clawed feet gripping the steel with ease. Below me, the woman dangles, her gloved hands slipping on the cable. Neon city lights reflect off her black bodysuit, turning her into a shadow against the glittering urban sprawl.

"Looks like you could use a hand," I say, my voice dripping with condescension. I crouch, bringing my scaled face level with her masked one. "If I pull you up, are you going to be a good girl and behave yourself?"

Her shoulders tense. Even through the mask, I can feel her glare. "Okay, okay," she mutters, deliberately pitching her voice lower. Amateur mistake - Grolgath would never need to disguise their voices.

"All right, but if you're not good, I'll have to spank you," I warn, extending a clawed hand.

"Don't you wish," she growls, grabbing my wrist.

In a flash, she's using my arm as a ladder. Her boots dig into my scales, an odd mix of pain and sensation, as she scrambles up my arm and shoulder. Before I can react, her sneakers push off the top of my head in a move that would be insulting if it weren't so impressive.

She lands on the girder above with the grace of a cat, already darting along the narrow beam. I'm momentarily frozen, both impressed and irritated by her audacity. That move... it's almost Vakutan in its precision and disregard for danger.

I leap to the next level, the entire steel framework groaning under my weight. She glances back, her masked face unreadable, then increases her pace. The night air whips her long braid as she navigates the maze of steel and concrete with the ease of someone who's done this a hundred times.

"Just hold still!" I bark, frustration creeping into my voice as I give chase. My claws scrape against steel, sending sparks into the night. She's fast, but I'm stronger - and I have centuries of combat training. This little game was about to get serious.

I can't help but smirk as she darts across the girder, her movements fluid, almost too human. She's good, I'll give her that. Fast, agile, and fearless. But she's still human. And I'm Vakutan . This chase is entertaining, sure, but it's already over. I'm just letting her tire herself out.

I lunge forward, claws scraping against the steel frame as I close the gap. She's right there, just a step away, her hoodie flapping in the wind like a flag of surrender. I reach out, ready to grab her and end this little game.

And then she jumps.

My claws close on empty air as she leaps into the void. For a split second, I freeze, watching her plummet toward the ground. My heart skips a beat—no, both of my hearts skip a beat. The audacity of it shocks me. She's not hesitating, not second-guessing. She just jumps .

Her body stretches out, arms reaching for the anchor rope dangling from the scaffolding above. She grabs it with practiced ease, sliding down the rope like a damn acrobat. I'm momentarily impressed despite myself. Only a lunatic or a professional would attempt that.

"Not so fast," I growl, my voice echoing off the concrete and steel around us. I don't waste time watching her descend. If she wants to play this game, fine. I'll show her how it's done.

I step off the girder without hesitation, letting gravity take me. The wind rushes past my scales, sharp and cold, as I plummet the hundred feet to the ground. The ground rushes up to meet me, but I've done this a thousand times before. I land in a crouch, my claws digging into the pavement to absorb the impact. The concrete cracks beneath me, sending a spray of gravel scattering across the street.

She's just landed, her boots barely touching the ground when I straighten up, looming over her. Her hoodie shifts as she looks up, and I catch a glimpse of her mask—black, sleek, with a small bird emblem over one eye. It's almost cute. Almost.

"Nice jump," I say, my tone dry as I step closer. "But you're not getting away that easily."

She takes a step back, her body tense, ready to bolt again. But there's nowhere left to run. I've got her cornered.

"Yeah, well," she says, her voice low and breathless. "You're not as scary as you think you are, lizard boy."

I chuckle at that, a deep rumble in my chest. "Lizard boy? That's the best you've got?"

She doesn't respond. Instead, she takes another step back, her hand reaching for something on her belt. I don't give her the chance. I close the distance between us in one long stride, my clawed hand wrapping around her wrist before she can pull whatever stunt she's planning.

"Let's try this again," I say, pulling her closer. "Who are you, and why were you in my office?"

Her eyes narrow behind the mask, and I swear I can see the wheels turning in her head. This one's a fighter, no doubt about it. But she's out of her league, and she knows it.

She doesn't answer, and I tighten my grip just enough to make sure she feels it. "Talk," I growl. "Or this gets a lot less fun for you."

Her hand darts toward her hoodie pocket, and I see the glint of a spray paint can. Memories of neon green burning my eyes flash through my mind.

Not again!

I grab her other wrist before she can pull the trigger, my claws tightening just enough to make her wince. She lets out a sharp hiss, like a cornered cat, and twists in my grip. For a human, she's got strength—enough to make me work for it. I pin her arms behind her back, pressing her body against mine. The heat of her struggles radiates through her clothes, and even through my scales, I can feel the rapid pulse of her heart.

"Stop squirming," I growl, my voice low and edged with irritation. "You're not going anywhere."

She doesn't listen, of course. Her hips buck, her legs kick, and her elbows jab uselessly into my ribs. It's like trying to hold onto a live wire. I yank my tie free with one hand, wrapping it around her wrists in a quick, practiced motion. She lets out a frustrated snarl, but I've got her. At least, I think I've got her.

"Let's see who you really are under there," I say, reaching for her mask.

Big mistake.

Her wrists twist, and somehow, she slips free of the tie. How? I don't know. Humans shouldn't be able to do that. The spray can comes up, and before I can react, I'm blinded again. Neon yellow this time, burning through my vision like acid.

"Damn it!" I roar, swiping at my face. The paint clings stubbornly, and I can feel it seeping into the spaces between my scales.

Her laughter echoes through the construction yard, light and mocking. "I'm not impressed with your bondage skills, Lizard Boy," she calls out, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

I wipe at my eyes, catching a glimpse of her retreating figure as she vanishes into the maze of steel and concrete. Her boots scrape against the gravel, and her hoodie billows behind her like a cape.

"You're not getting away from me!" I shout, but she's already gone.

I grit my teeth, claws flexing at my sides. I should've tied her up better. I should've seen that coming. But no, I let my guard down because she's human, because she's small, because she's just a street artist with a grudge.

Next time, I won't make the same mistake.

The water from the spigot rushes over my face, sluicing away the neon paint that clings stubbornly to my scales. I exhale sharply, the cold water soothing the sting in my eyes. My claws scrape against my cheek as I wipe at the last remnants of the paint. My vision clears, but the image of her—lithe, nimble, and utterly fearless—lingers in my mind like a ghost.

"Incredible," I mutter under my breath, shaking the water from my face. No human should move like that. She's too fast, too agile. There's something... other about her. Maybe she's got Vakutan blood somewhere in her lineage. It would explain a lot. Or maybe she's just one of those rare humans who push their limits beyond what's reasonable. Either way, she's not like anyone I've ever encountered.

A pang of guilt hits me as I think about Raven. I shouldn't be this fascinated by another woman. Not when I've already felt the pull of attraction toward her. But Raven's... different. She's not some masked vigilante defacing my office and leaping

off buildings like she's auditioning for a cosmic circus. She's real. Grounded. And yet, there's something about this Blackbird that's impossible to ignore.

I let out a low growl, frustrated with myself. It doesn't matter. The woman in black is gone, and I'll likely never see her again. She's just another anomaly in a city full of them.

Then it hits me like a plasma blast to the chest.

"Damn it," I hiss, my claws clenching into fists. She saw me. My true form. No hologram, no disguise. Just golden scales and sunset eyes. If she talks—if she exposes me—Giscard will know exactly who Kirk Stevens really is. The entire mission could be compromised.

I storm back to my office, my mind racing. The security system beeps as I enter, and I ignore the defaced portrait on the wall, focusing on the task at hand. I pull up the Veritas database on my compad, my claws tapping rapidly on the holographic interface. It takes only moments to find the file I'm looking for.

Blackbird.

Alias: Unknown.

Activities: Graffiti artist, activist.

Threat Level: Low.

Assessment: Minimal disruption to timeline. No direct action required.

"Low threat, huh?" I mutter, my lips curling into a sardonic smile. "Well, you're a threat now, aren't you, my little bird."

I open the bottom drawer of my desk, rifling through the assortment of Vakutan artifacts until my claws close around the familiar leather of the Vakutan Love Harness. The supple material feels cool against my palm, and I run my thumb over the intricate stitching. It's a relic from a different time, a different life. But right now, it feels... fitting.

"Next time," I say softly, my voice low and dangerous, "you're not going to get away from me so easily, Blackbird."

The thought of her—slippery, defiant, and utterly infuriating—bound in the harness sends a bolt of heat racing through me. My cock stirs, pressing against the confines of my scaled skin. I shouldn't feel this way. She's a threat, a liability. And yet...

And yet, the image of Raven in the harness flashes through my mind, and the heat intensifies. Her dark eyes wide, her lips parted, her body completely at my mercy. The thought is intoxicating, but it's also dangerous. I can't afford distractions, not now. Not when so much is at stake.

I close the drawer with a sharp click, forcing the thoughts from my mind. Focus, Karc. Find Blackbird. Stop her before she exposes you. Everything else is secondary.

But as I sit back in my chair, the harness still in my hand, I can't shake the feeling that this little game is far from over.

CHAPTER 5

RAVEN

I burst through the apartment door, my lungs burning, sweat dripping down my spine. My hoodie clings to me like a second skin, and I'm pretty sure I left my dignity ten stories up on a scaffolding. Madison's perched on the couch, controller in hand, but she freezes mid-button mash when she sees me.

"What the hell happened to you?" she asks, her eyes wide. "You look like you just lost a fight with a gym and a dumpster."

I slump against the door frame, gasping for air. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me." She drops the controller and gets up, grabbing a bottled water from the fridge. She hands it to me with a raised eyebrow. "Start talking."

I twist the cap off and down half the bottle in one go. The cold water hits my throat like a lifeline. "Okay, so. Remember how I went to Kirk Stevens' office?"

"Yeah. To vandalize his stupid Time Man of the Year portrait. Which, by the way, is iconic. But go on."

"Right. So, I'm in there, spray paint in hand, ready to make a statement, when suddenly—" I pause, trying to figure out how to phrase this without sounding insane. "There's a lizard man. Like, a full-on, seven-foot-tall, golden-scaled lizard man with

sunset orange eyes. And it's just standing there, staring at me."

Madison blinks. Once. Twice. "A lizard man."

"Yes."

"In Kirk Stevens' office."

"Yes."

She tilts her head, her expression a mix of disbelief and concern. "Raven, did you maybe... I don't know, fall off something and hit your head? Because this sounds like a concussion talking."

"I'm not concussed!" I snap, throwing my hands up. "I know what I saw. It wasn't a hallucination. It wasn't a costume. This thing had scales, Madison. And claws. And it tried to grab me with its freaky lizard hands."

She folds her arms, leaning back against the kitchen counter. "Okay, let's say, hypothetically, I believe you. Why would Kirk Stevens have a lizard man in his office? Is he, like, running a zoo for mythical creatures? Or is this some rich guy's idea of exotic security?"

"I don't know!" I pace the room, my thoughts spinning. "But listen, it gets weirder. The eyes. The lizard man had the same eyes as Kirk."

Madison's brow furrows. "Wait. You think Kirk Stevens is a lizard man?"

"I don't know what I think anymore," I admit, running a hand through my tangled hair. "But something's not right. Either Kirk's got a pet lizard man, or he's hiding something. And I'm not sticking around to find out which."

She studies me for a long moment, then sighs. “Okay, crazy theory aside, are you hurt? Did it—he—whatever it was, did it hurt you?”

“No. I mean, I almost fell off the building trying to get away, but that’s beside the point.” I collapse onto the couch, suddenly feeling the weight of the night pressing down on me. “I just... I don’t know what to do. I saw something I wasn’t supposed to see. What if he comes after me?”

Madison sits beside me, nudging my shoulder with hers. “Hey. You’re the Blackbird. You don’t let anyone push you around, remember? Lizard man or not, you’ll figure this out.”

I groan, leaning my head back against the couch. “Easy for you to say. You didn’t almost get caught by a giant golden lizard.”

She smirks. “Sounds like the start of a really weird fanfic. But seriously, Raven, you’re okay. That’s what matters. We’ll deal with the rest later.”

I nod, but the unease in my gut doesn’t fade. Something’s out there—something big, something dangerous. And I have no idea what to do about it.

The hot water pelts my skin, washing away the sweat, the grime, the fear. I scrub until my skin’s raw, but I can’t scrub away the memory of those sunset orange eyes—his eyes. The lizard man’s. Or maybe Kirk’s. My brain’s a jumble, and my body’s buzzing with leftover adrenaline.

I collapse into bed, pulling the sheets up to my chin. My eyelids feel like lead, and I drift off almost instantly.

The dream starts like a nightmare. I’m running again—always running—through a maze of scaffolding and beams. The city’s a blur below me. I glance over my

shoulder, and there he is: the lizard man, golden scales gleaming under the moonlight. He's faster than I am, his powerful legs closing the distance.

I trip. My heart's in my throat as I tumble, but instead of hitting the ground, I'm caught. His arms are like steel bands, holding me against his chest. I struggle, but it's half-hearted. Something about him—about this—feels different.

His breath's hot on my neck as he presses his lips to my skin. My body betrays me, shivering with something that isn't fear. His claws tear through my clothes, and I should be terrified, but I'm not. I grind against him, feeling the hard length of him pressing into me. His hands are everywhere, possessive, demanding, and I can't help but respond.

His mouth finds mine, and the kiss is savage, claiming. I moan into it, my fingers digging into his scales. He growls, low and primal, and the sound sends a shock of heat straight to my core.

Then, just as the dream reaches its peak, he changes. The scales melt away, replaced by smooth skin. Kirk Stevens stares down at me, those same sunset eyes burning with intensity. He smirks, and I wake up gasping, my body throbbing with want.

The sheets are tangled around me, my skin damp with sweat. My heart's racing, and I can still feel his hands on me, his mouth on mine. I slide my hand under the sheets, my fingers finding the heat between my legs. I bite my lip, stifling a moan as I touch myself, replaying the dream in my mind.

It's him—the lizard man, Kirk, whoever he really is—that I'm imagining. His hands, his mouth, his body. I come with a muffled cry, the pillow stuffed into my mouth to keep Madison from hearing.

I'm panting, my body limp, but my mind's still racing. What the hell is wrong with

me? I should be scared, repulsed, but instead, I'm... turned on.

I roll onto my side, staring at the wall. Madison's soft snoring drifts through the apartment, and I envy her for a moment. At least she's not wrestling with her own damn psyche.

I close my eyes, willing sleep to come again, but I know it won't. Not after that.

"This is so messed up," I mutter to the empty room, pulling the sheets tighter around me.

I stare up at the ceiling, trying to force my brain to work. Kirk Stevens—if that's even his real name—is hiding something huge. A seven-foot-tall lizard man in his office isn't exactly subtle. My fingers twitch, itching to grab a spray can and tag something, anything, to work through the chaos in my head. But that's not going to cut it this time. I need a plan.

The business card. I sit up, fumbling through the pockets of my hoodie until I find it. The thick cardstock feels heavy in my hand, embossed with Kirk's name and number. I trace the edges, thinking. He gave me this after saving me from those creeps outside Area 51. He was charming, intense, and... God, he kissed me. My fingers brush my lips, and the memory sends a shiver down my spine.

But no. I shake my head, forcing myself to focus. This isn't about the kiss, or the way he made my heart race. This is about survival. If there's a giant lizard man running around, and Kirk's connected to it, I need to expose him before he decides I'm a liability. But how?

I can't go back to his office. He'll be expecting that, especially after I tagged his precious Time Man of the Year portrait. Security's probably tighter than a drum by now. I don't have the skills to hack into his systems—that's Madison's domain—but

I've got something she doesn't: Nightbird.

The thought makes me sit up straighter. Nightbird's not just a graffiti artist; she's a persona, a mask I can hide behind. If I can use that to get close to Kirk without him knowing it's me, maybe I can find out what he's hiding. But how do I get him to trust a masked vigilante?

I glance down at the card again, tapping it against my palm. Kirk's interested in me, not Nightbird. But if I play this right, maybe I can use that to my advantage. The idea feels slimy, like I'm setting a trap for myself as much as for him. But what other choice do I have? Wait around until he decides I've seen too much and comes after me? No. I'm not that kind of girl.

I grab my phone, pulling up the notes app. My fingers hover over the screen as I start jotting down ideas. I need to lure him somewhere public but isolated, somewhere I can control the environment without raising suspicion. Maybe set up a meeting as Nightbird, then watch from the shadows and see what he does. If he slips up, if I can catch him with that lizard man, I'll have proof.

But even as I type, a little voice in the back of my head pipes up. What if he's not the bad guy? What if that lizard man—whatever it is—isn't dangerous? I shut the thought down fast. Doesn't matter what I want to believe. I saw what I saw, and I can't afford to be wrong.

"This isn't a job for Raven," I mutter, tossing the card onto the nightstand. "This is a job for Nightbird."

Now all I need is a plan to make it work.

CHAPTER 6

KARC

The secret elevator hums softly as it descends deeper than any human-built subway. I tap the control panel, shutting off the image inducer. The smooth human facade melts away, revealing my golden scales. The air smells faintly of brine and ozone as the elevator slows to a stop. The doors slide open, revealing the sleek, bullet-shaped shuttle waiting on its magnetic track.

I step inside, the shuttle's interior lights flickering to life. The controls are familiar—centuries of training make it second nature. I punch in the coordinates for Veritas Base Alpha, and the shuttle lurches forward, accelerating to speeds no human vehicle could match. The tunnel blurs past, a streak of light and shadow.

Minutes later, the shuttle slows, and the tunnel gives way to the vast, shimmering dome of Veritas Base Alpha. The city beneath the waves is a masterpiece of Vakutan engineering—glass-like spires rise from the ocean floor, glowing with bioluminescent light. Ships glide through the water with the ease of fish, and the dome hums with energy. It's been too long since I've been here.

The shuttle docks seamlessly, and I step out onto the platform. The air is cool, tinged with the faint tang of saltwater. I stride through the bustling corridors, my scales catching the light as I pass. Heads turn, salutes are offered, and I return them with a curt nod.

Captain Pyke's office is at the heart of the base, a command center with a view of the

entire city. The door hisses open, and I step inside.

Pyke stands by the panoramic window, his red scales gleaming in the soft light. He turns as I enter, his eyes narrowing slightly. “Karc. You’re late.”

“Not my fault the shuttle doesn’t break the sound barrier,” I reply, crossing my arms.

He grunts, gesturing to the chair across from his desk. “Sit.”

I don’t. “What’s so urgent you dragged me away from Giscard?”

Pyke leans on the desk, his voice low. “We believe Giscard’s onto you. He’s suspicious of your human cover.”

“Suspicious doesn’t mean he knows,” I counter, leaning against the wall. “I’ve been careful. He’s got nothing concrete.”

Pyke’s eyes narrow. “Careful? You let Blackbird see your true form.”

I bristle, my scales prickling. “She’s resourceful. I didn’t expect her to break into my office.”

“And yet she did,” Pyke says, his tone sharp. “We can’t afford mistakes like that. If Giscard finds out who you really are, the entire operation is compromised.”

“I can handle it,” I snap, my voice a low growl. “Giscard’s arrogant. He’ll underestimate me.”

Pyke’s gaze hardens. “Your confidence is noted, but orders are orders. I’m pulling you from the operation.”

My fists clench at my sides. “You’re making a mistake. I’m close to uncovering his plans.”

“Then tell me how you plan to convince Giscard you’re just another human businessman,” Pyke demands, crossing his arms.

I push off the wall, stepping closer. “By playing the part. Humans are greedy, opportunistic creatures. I’ll make him think I’m in it for the money, nothing more. He’ll buy it.”

Pyke studies me for a long moment, then sighs. “Fine. But one slip, and you’re out. Understood?”

I nod, my jaw tight. “Understood.”

I find Jareth in his lab, hunched over a workbench scattered with circuit boards and holographic projectors. The smell of ozone and burnt circuitry fills the air.

"Need a favor," I say, tossing my image inducer onto his desk.

Jareth's yellow scales catch the light as he turns. "The great Karc needs my help? Must be serious."

"I need more power. The inducer has to simulate injuries."

His red eyes narrow. "Planning to get hurt?"

"Planning to pretend to get hurt. In front of Giscard."

Jareth picks up the device, examining it with practiced ease. "Interesting strategy. Show weakness to throw him off?"

"Exactly. Can you boost the power enough to fake bruises, cuts, maybe some blood?"

"Of course." His fingers dance over the device, making adjustments. "But the power drain will be significant. You'll have maybe four hours before it needs recharging."

"That's enough time."

He hands the modified inducer back. "Test it."

I activate the device, and my golden scales shimmer into human flesh. A touch of the controls, and an ugly bruise blooms across my jaw. Another adjustment adds a split lip, complete with realistic blood.

"Perfect." I deactivate the injuries. "This'll work."

Jareth crosses his arms. "Just one concern."

"What's that?"

His lips twitch in amusement. "Are you going to be able to swallow your pride and let yourself be beaten up by a lowly human?"

I bare my teeth in what humans would call a smile. "For the greater good? Of course. Won't enjoy it, but that's the job."

The bullet shuttle hums beneath me as I lean back in the seat, the faint vibration of the magnetic track sending a low thrum through my bones. The image inducer rests in my pocket, ready to do its job. I flick the switch as the shuttle slows, my golden scales melting into the smooth, tanned skin of Kirk Stevens. I adjust the cufflinks on my black suit, straightening the tie that feels like a noose. Humans and their ridiculous formalwear.

The elevator to the street level dings open, and I step out into the crisp evening air. Area 51 looms ahead, its neon lights casting a sultry glow over the sidewalk. I stride inside, the thrum of bass-heavy music hitting me like a wall.

The bar is already crowded, the kind of place where the air smells like expensive whiskey and desperation. I order a double scotch, neat, and down it in one swallow. The burn hits my throat, but it does nothing to dull my senses—thanks to my Vakutan biology. I order another, then another, slamming them back as the bartender raises an eyebrow. I need Giscard to see this.

I start stumbling, letting my words slur just enough to sell the act. I bump into a guy in a suit, spilling his drink. He shoves me, and I stumble back, crashing into a table. Glass shatters, and I land hard on the floor, wincing as I tweak the image inducer to display a bruise blooming on my cheek.

“Watch it, asshole!” the guy growls, his face red with anger.

“Sorry, man,” I mutter, slurring my words. “Didn’t... didn’t see ya there.”

He grabs me by the collar and hauls me to my feet. I let him, my body going limp. He swings, and I let the punch connect—not too hard, but enough to sell the damage. I stagger back, clutching my jaw as the image inducer kicks in, showing a split lip. Blood trickles down my chin.

Security descends, pulling the guy off me. I slump against the bar, breathing hard, pretending to be dazed. Across the room, I catch Giscard’s eyes. He’s watching, his expression unreadable. Good. He bought it.

“Mr. Stevens,” Giscard says, striding over. His voice is smooth, apologetic. “I’m terribly sorry about this. Are you all right?”

I dab at the blood with my sleeve, wincing for effect. "Just a scratch. Kinda used to it."

He nods, his pale eyes assessing me. "We don't tolerate that kind of behavior here. Let me make it up to you."

"If you want to make it up to me," I say, dabbing at my split lip, "how about access to the VIP section upstairs?"

Giscard's pale eyes glitter with amusement. "Ah, the exclusive floor. I would be happy to grant you access—if you were married."

My heart rate spikes, but I keep my expression neutral. Damn. Should have seen this coming.

"It's a very special club, for people with special proclivities," Giscard continues, his voice oily smooth. "So I have a rule to keep the degenerates out: Married people only may join the Hellfire Club."

Vakutan curses flash through my mind. This could derail everything. But then an image of Raven flashes in my mind, and suddenly I know exactly what to say.

"Funny you should mention that," I reply, letting a small smile play across my lips. "Because I'm engaged. I'm getting married soon."

Giscard's eyes light up with interest. "Engaged? My, my. You've been holding out on us, Kirk."

"I like my privacy." I dab at the fake blood on my lip.

"Of course, of course. Tell you what—bring your lovely fiancée tomorrow night. I'll

make an exception to our married-only rule, just this once."

My stomach clenches. I hadn't planned on involving Raven in this mess. But the chance to infiltrate Giscard's inner circle is too valuable to pass up.

"Deal. Now if you'll excuse me, I should probably get this looked at." I gesture to my face.

"Please, let Area 51 cover any medical expenses." Giscard's voice drips with false concern.

I laugh, the sound echoing through the bar. Reaching into my wallet, I pull out a crisp thousand-dollar bill and toss it onto the polished wood.

"For the damages," I say, straightening my tie. "See you tomorrow, Giscard."

"Don't forget your bride to be," Giscard calls after me.

CHAPTER 7

RAVEN

The skirt of my slutty cheerleader costume barely covers my bottom, by design, as I maneuver through the throng of sweaty, leering patrons. Their comments bounce off me like raindrops on a windshield—something about bounce, something about pom-poms. I'm not hearing it. My mind is elsewhere, stuck in a loop of how to expose Kirk Stevens for whatever the hell he's hiding.

He's too much. Too magnetic, too present. Even when he's not in the room, I can feel him. The memory of his kiss lingers like a brand I can't scrub off. But I can't just walk up to him and demand answers. Not without risking losing myself in him again.

Nightbird, though. Nightbird could do it. But hacking into his Upper East Side mansion? Yeah, right. I'm not some high-tech spy. I'm a street artist with a can of spray paint and a knack for scaling fire escapes. His security's probably got lasers and shit.

I'm so deep in my own head that I don't see the step in front of me. My heel catches on the edge, and I pitch forward, arms flailing like a damn cartoon character.

Strong hands catch me before I faceplant into the polished floor. My heart thuds against my ribs as I look up into those sunset-orange eyes.

"Careful," Kirk murmurs, his voice low and smooth, like whiskey over ice. "You're too delicate to be falling like that."

Delicate. I almost snort. If only he knew.

“Thanks,” I mutter, pulling away. His grip tightens for a split second before he lets go, and I swear I feel the ghost of his touch linger on my skin.

“You’re distracted tonight,” he says, tilting his head. His gaze sweeps over me like he’s cataloging every detail—the way my breath freezes in my chest, the way my pulse jumps in my throat.

“Just tired,” I lie, forcing a smile.

“Hmm.” He doesn’t buy it, but he doesn’t push. “Let me buy you a drink. Something to perk you up.”

“I’m working,” I say, though my voice sounds weaker than I’d like.

“Five minutes,” he counters, leaning in just enough to make my stomach twist. “You owe me, remember?”

He’s got me there. I nod, and he guides me toward the bar with a hand on the small of my back. His touch is firm, possessive, and I hate how much I like it.

We sit at the bar and I force myself to meet his gaze. Those sunset orange eyes draw me in like a magnet, making my stomach flutter. No. Focus.

"Look," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. "You're just not my type, okay? I'm grateful you saved me, and I do owe you for that. But I'm not going to date you."

His jaw tightens, a muscle ticking beneath his skin. My eyes catch on a cut on his lip, partially healed but still visible. The same place where I sprayed paint at the lizard creature on the construction site. My pulse quickens as pieces click into place.

The eyes. The commanding presence. The impossible strength. Could Kirk Stevens and that scaled monster be the same person?

The cut can't be coincidence. Either he's working with the creature, or...

His fingers drum on the bar top, drawing my attention to hands that could easily pin me down. Hands that had gripped steel beams like they were nothing. A shiver runs through me that has nothing to do with the club's air conditioning.

"I see," he says, voice dropping to a dangerous purr. "And what exactly is your type, little bird?"

The pet name hits me like ice water. Only one other person has called me that recently - the lizard man on the girders. My suspicions crystallize into certainty.

My heart pounds against my ribs as I stare at the polished wood of the bar. Those sunset-orange eyes feel like they're burning into my skin. Does he know? The pet name can't be coincidence, but admitting I recognize it would expose everything.

"I like..." My voice catches. What can I say that won't give me away? "Simple guys. Normal guys."

"Liar." His fingers brush my chin, tilting my face up. "Your pulse is racing. You're attracted to power. To danger."

The worst part is he's right. Even now, knowing what he might be, my body betrays me with a shiver of want. His touch sends electricity dancing across my skin.

"I'm not lying." But the words come out breathy, unconvincing.

"Then look me in the eyes and say it again."

I can't. Those eyes will undo me. They're the same ones that watched me dangle from the construction site, that gleamed with predatory interest as I ran. The same ones that haunt my dreams.

"I should get back to work." I start to stand but his hand closes around my wrist. Not tight enough to hurt, but firm. Commanding.

"Tell me what you want, little bird. The truth this time."

The pet name again. My heart skips. He has to know. Has to be playing with me. But I can't admit I know his secret without revealing my own.

"I just want a man to love me." I say,, my eyes fixed on the polished bar top. "Like, really, really love me absolutely. I want to be his number one favorite person in the world. I want to know what that feels like..."

Oh god. I did it again. Opened up to him like some lovesick teenager. My cheeks burn hot enough to melt steel. What is wrong with me? Here I am, trying to expose whatever secrets he's hiding, and instead I'm practically begging him to love me.

And who says stuff like that anyway? 'His number one favorite person.' Like I'm five years old asking Santa for a pony. My stomach twists into knots as the silence stretches between us.

"Does that make me conceited?" My voice comes out barely above a whisper. I still can't look at him, can't bear to see whatever expression those sunset-orange eyes might hold.

"Not at all," Kirk says, his voice gentle. "That's a very normal thing to want. Sometimes, I think that I..."

The words fade away. His sunset-orange eyes fix on some distant point beyond the bar's polished surface. Beyond the walls, maybe beyond Earth itself. What memories play behind those alien eyes? What far-off world haunts his thoughts?

My heart thuds against my ribs. For a moment, I glimpse something ancient and lonely in his expression. Something that makes me want to reach out, to comfort him despite everything I suspect about what he really is.

Then he blinks, and the mask slides back into place. Those predator eyes lock onto mine with laser focus.

"I have a proposition for you, Raven. A business proposition."

The words hit like a physical blow. My throat closes up as tears spring unbidden to my eyes. How stupid could I be? Here I was, opening my heart about wanting real love, and he just sees me as... what? A transaction?

Hot anger mixes with the hurt, burning away the stupid fantasy I'd built up around him. Of course the billionaire playboy just wants to buy me. That's what men like him do. They see something they want and throw money at it until it's theirs.

"No." My voice cracks as tears spill down my cheeks. I shake my head hard enough to make my vision blur. "No, I don't do that."

I burst through the balcony doors, gulping in the crisp night air. The chill bites at my exposed skin, but I welcome it. Anything to cool the burning shame and anger.

"Raven, wait!" Kirk's voice carries over the muted thrum of club music. "Please, let me explain."

"Explain what?" My voice cracks. "That I'm for sale?"

"No! God, no." His footsteps stop behind me. "I would never... that's not what I meant at all. I've handled this terribly."

Something in his voice makes me turn. The mask of confident billionaire playboy has slipped, revealing genuine distress underneath.

"Then what did you mean?"

"I think Giscard is planning something. Something bad." Kirk runs a hand through his perfect hair, messing it up. "People could get hurt. A lot of people."

My anger falters. This isn't what I expected. The internet painted him as some heartless corporate raider, but the worry in his voice sounds real.

"What kind of something?"

"I don't know yet. That's why I need access to the VIP floor - the Hellfire Club. But there's a catch. Only married couples can join."

Understanding dawns. "And you want me to..."

"Pretend to be my fiancée." He steps closer, those sunset-orange eyes intense. "Just for show. Just long enough for me to figure out what he's planning."

I grip the balcony rail, trying to process this twist. Part of me wants to laugh at the absurdity. The man I suspected of being a literal monster wants me to play pretend girlfriend to stop the bad guy?

"Why me?"

"Because you're smart. Observant. And something tells me you've got secrets of your

own that make you perfect for this."

If he only knew.

"So... how much am I getting paid for this little charade?"

Kirk's lips quirk up. "Name your price."

I snort, because this whole situation is ridiculous. Me, pretending to be engaged to a billionaire who might secretly be a lizard man? Sure, why not. "Ten million dollars."

"Done. I'll transfer it into your account immediately."

My jaw drops. The world tilts sideways as my brain tries to process what he just said. Ten million dollars. That's... that's my art studio. That's never having to wear this stupid cheerleader costume again. No more dodging grabby hands or cleaning up spilled drinks. No more choosing between rent and groceries.

"Are you serious?" My voice comes out squeaky.

"Dead serious." Those sunset-orange eyes lock onto mine. "Do you accept?"

"Yes." My heart pounds against my ribs like it's trying to escape. "But just so we're clear?—"

"You're not going to sleep with me." His lips twitch. "I can put that in writing if you want."

A laugh bubbles up from my chest, sharp and slightly hysterical. What else can I do? This is insane. My life has officially jumped the shark. I'm standing on a balcony with a maybe-lizard-man who just casually offered me ten million dollars to play pretend.

The balcony door creaks open behind me and my spine stiffens. Giscard's polished leather shoes click against the concrete, and my stomach drops. My boss - my maybe-evil boss if Kirk isn't lying - is the last person I need to see right now.

"Sorry about this," Kirk whispers, his breath warm against my ear.

"What-"

His lips capture mine before I can finish the thought. My body goes rigid, caught between fight and flight. Then my brain kicks in - we're supposed to be engaged. This is just an act. Just pretend.

I force my shoulders to relax, let my hands rest on Kirk's chest. His kiss is gentle, almost chaste. Such a gentleman, keeping it PG for the audience.

But then something shifts. Maybe it's the way his hand cups my face, or how his chest rumbles against my palms. The pretense melts away like ice in summer heat. My fingers curl into his shirt as need floods my system.

Kirk's kiss turns hard, possessive. His tongue traces my bottom lip and I open for him with a moan I couldn't hold back if I tried. His grip tightens, pulling me flush against him as he claims my mouth like he owns it. Like he owns me.

"I'm so sorry to have interrupted," Giscard says, amusement dripping from every word.

I break away from Kirk's kiss, letting my eyes drop to the floor in what I hope passes for embarrassment. My cheeks burn - that part's real enough. The kiss left me dizzy, my lips tingling like I've been shocked.

"Mr. Giscard, I'm so sorry I took a break without clocking out first." My voice comes

out breathless, which only adds to the act.

He waves his hand, dismissing my apology with a flourish. His silver rings catch the light from the club's neon signs.

"Technically, my dear, you are performing your job. It just so happens the guest you are, ahem, entertaining is your husband to be."

Giscard shakes his head, a theatrical sigh escaping his lips. His eyes glitter with something that might be envy, or might be hunger. I can't quite tell in the dim light.

"Oh, to have but a spark of the fiery passion you two share." His gaze slides to Kirk.
"Come see me when you have a moment, Mr. Stevens."

Those predatory eyes swing back to me, accompanied by a grin that makes my skin crawl.

"Do take your time," he says. "And welcome to the Hellfire Club."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:05 am

CHAPTER 8

KARC

My heart pounds as we share a nervous laugh, the tension crackling between us like static electricity. Her dark eyes sparkle with mischief and something deeper, more dangerous.

"That was close"

"Yes it was. You were magnificent, by the way." Heat floods through me as I remember the sweet taste of her lips, the way she melted against me. My scales itch beneath the holographic disguise.

"So were you"

We drift closer, like magnets drawn together. The pretense falls away - there's no audience now, no need to maintain our cover story. But I want to kiss her again, to lose myself in her softness. Her breath catches as I lean in...

"Raven! Help! We're slammed!" The bartender's panicked voice shatters the moment.

She pulls back, duty calling. But reluctance shows in every line of her body.

"Go on. It's fine." I wave her toward the bar, though everything in me rebels at letting her slip away.

"Call me when your shift ends, little bird."

The sultry smile she gives me sets my blood on fire. Is it real or just exceptional acting? I can't tell anymore where the pretense ends and truth begins.

I stride through the club, my eyes scanning the crowd for any sign of Giscard. But the sleek-haired Grolgath is nowhere to be seen. Frowning, I make my way to the exit, dodging the grabby hands of inebriated patrons.

Once outside, I pause, weighing my options. I could pursue Giscard directly, but that would risk blowing my cover. No, better to regroup and solidify my ruse with Raven first.

I slide into the driver's seat of my sleek, black hovercar and activate the onboard computer. Time to get to work.

The office is dimly lit when I arrive, the only illumination coming from the multiple screens on my desk. I settle into my chair, fingers flying across the keyboard as I access the Veritas network.

"Alright, let's make this look convincing," I mutter, pulling up Raven's social media profiles. With a few keystrokes, I begin seeding our feeds with images and videos of us together - sharing a meal, strolling through a park, even a few carefully staged shots of us in more intimate embraces.

I pause, staring at the last image. Raven's face is flushed, her dark eyes shining with a vulnerability I haven't seen before. My chest tightens, an unfamiliar sensation.

"Focus, Karc," I growl, shaking off the distracting emotions. I need to keep a clear head if I'm going to pull this off.

My compad chimes, jolting me from my thoughts. I glance down to see a message from Raven. I tell her I will come to pick her up immediately.

"Why are you coming to get me?" she asks.

I tap out a reply. "Because it is what your fiancé would do. And we have some details to work out. Like I should know what your favorite color is, for example."

Her response is a laughing emoji. "I'll be waiting in the employee parking lot."

I can't help the small smile that tugs at my lips. "Clever girl," I murmur, already heading for the door. Time to solidify this ruse.

The sight of her waiting in the parking lot steals my breath. Moonlight catches in her dark hair, making it shine like polished obsidian. I grip the steering wheel harder, my claws threatening to emerge through my human disguise. Focus. This is business, nothing more.

"My hero," she says, sliding into the passenger seat. Her scent fills the car - jasmine and something uniquely her. My scales ripple beneath the hologram.

"Hungry?" I manage to ask, though what I really want is to taste those perfect lips again.

"Starving."

I take her to an all-night diner, one of those chrome and neon places that dot the city. Over coffee and pancakes, we construct our fictional romance.

"So we met here at the club six months ago?" She taps her fork against her plate. "That works. Simple enough to remember."

"Is there anything else I should know about you?"

Her eyes narrow. "Like what?"

"Well..." I lean forward, dropping my voice. "Any tattoos in interesting places?"

"How is that relevant to our pretend relationship?"

"It might come up in conversation."

"How in the hell would that ever come up in conversation?" Her laugh rings out, bright and genuine. It draws an answering smile from me before I can suppress it.

I watch her sip her coffee, memorizing the way her nose crinkles when she smiles. Her wit, her fire - it's intoxicating. For a moment, I let myself imagine this is real. That we're just a normal couple sharing a late-night meal.

But we're not. And I need to remember that.

A flash of light catches my attention. Through the diner's front window, I spot at least a dozen photographers with expensive cameras. The paparazzi found us.

"Welcome to the downside of dating a billionaire." I keep my voice low, meant only for her ears. "Even just for pretend."

Her laugh sends electricity down my spine. "Then let's really give them a show."

Before I can react, she shrugs off her coat. The cheerleader uniform from Area 51 makes my mouth go dry - all bare legs and taut stomach. My hands clench as she crawls across the table, sending our coffee cups clattering.

She slides into my lap like she belongs there. Her lips find mine and coherent thought vanishes. Camera flashes explode like fireworks through my closed eyelids. The taste of her overwhelms my senses - coffee and syrup and that indefinable something that is purely Raven.

I kiss her back, my fingers tangling in her hair. The photographers outside go wild, their cameras clicking like insects. But I barely notice them anymore. All I can focus on is the soft warmth of her body against mine, the way she melts into me as if we were made to fit together.

For this moment, I let myself forget it's all pretend. I let myself believe she wants this as much as I do.

The diner's door bangs open and a wiry man with steel-gray hair charges out, brandishing a broom like a weapon.

"Get outta here, you vultures! Leave my customers alone!"

The paparazzi scatter as the owner swings his makeshift weapon, sending them scrambling backward. Their expensive cameras bounce against their chests.

"And stay out!" He shakes the broom at their retreating backs.

Raven's laughter rings out, pure and bright. I can't help joining in, the sound bubbling up from deep in my chest. For a moment, I forget about missions and covers and just enjoy her warmth against me.

The drive to her apartment passes too quickly. I walk her to her door, watching as she fumbles with her keys. The moonlight catches in her hair, making my fingers itch to touch it again.

"You're a great kisser," I whisper, moving closer.

"I'm a good actress." But there's a tremor in her voice that makes me think she's lying.

"Maybe there's more to this than just fakery." I lean in, drawn to her like a magnet.

"Maybe we shouldn't be afraid to explore that possibility."

"Or maybe we should." She slips inside her apartment before I can stop her.

The drive home feels endless. I grip the steering wheel too tight, my claws threatening to emerge through my human disguise. This unfamiliar ache in my chest - I don't know what to do with it.

Women have always come easily to me. A smile, a touch, that's all it usually takes. But Raven... she's different. She makes me feel things I've never felt before.

I park in my garage and stare up at my empty house. For the first time in centuries, I know what I want - really want. And I'll do whatever it takes to win her heart.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:05 am

CHAPTER 9

RAVEN

"S o ten million dollars?" Madison's jaw drops as she flops onto our worn couch. "Like, actual millions?"

"He didn't even blink. Just said 'done deal' like it was pocket change." The memory of Kirk's casual acceptance still stuns me.

"And what does this Giscard guy have planned that's worth that kind of money to investigate?"

I pace our tiny living room. "Kirk wouldn't say exactly. Just that it could hurt people."

"How do you know Kirk isn't the bad guy here?" Madison leans forward. "I mean, he could even be working with that lizard creature you saw."

The thought sends a chill down my spine, but... "You didn't see how gentle he was with me at the diner. When no one was watching, he dropped the whole billionaire act."

"Oh my god." Madison's eyes go wide. "You actually like him."

"I do not." The denial comes too fast.

"Please. Your face lights up every time you say his name."

"You're imagining things."

Madison pulls out her phone. "Then prove it. He sent you access to his place, right? Go snoop through his medicine cabinet."

"He'd just hide anything suspicious if I told him I was coming over."

A wicked grin spreads across Madison's face. "So don't tell him. Send Nightbird instead."

"You know what? That's actually brilliant." I tap my chin. "If I get caught though..."

"Then your whole graffiti artist thing gets exposed." Madison waves her hand. "So don't get caught."

Two hours later, I'm stepping out of a taxi in front of Kirk's Upper East Side mansion, my black outfit blending with the shadows. The digital key card he gave me earlier beeps against the security panel, granting access.

My heart pounds as I take the private elevator to his floor. The doors open silently into a marble foyer.

I ease his front door open a crack. A news anchor's voice drifts from somewhere inside, discussing the day's market fluctuations. Most of the house lies dark and still.

Holy shit. The entryway alone probably costs more than I'll make in ten lifetimes. Crystal chandeliers catch what little light filters through massive windows. Original artwork adorns walls covered in what looks like actual gold leaf.

A curved staircase sweeps up to the second floor, its mahogany railings gleaming. To my right, floor-to-ceiling windows reveal a private garden. To my left, a formal

dining room bigger than my entire apartment.

Focus, Raven. I'm not here to admire the decor.

But as I slink deeper into the shadows of Kirk's palatial home, reality hits me - this place is huge. Six floors of luxury to search, and I have no idea where to start looking for evidence linking Kirk to that lizard creature.

This is going to take way longer than I thought.

A low, guttural groan echoes down the hallway, pulling me like a moth to a flame. My pulse quickens as I follow the sound, my boots silent on the plush carpet. The noise grows louder, more rhythmic. What is he doing in there?

I peer around the corner into a massive bedroom that looks like something out of a billionaire's wet dream. The bed is the size of a small island, draped in black silk. My eyes dart to the source of the noise?—

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

The lizard man sprawls across the bed, completely naked. Golden scales glint in the low light, his ridged chest rising and falling with each powerful breath. His clawed hand pumps his enormous cock, the tip slick with precome.

And on the wall-sized TV—me.

A slideshow cycles through pictures of me from my social media: me painting at Hudson River Park, a selfie after a shift at Area 51, even one of me in my Nightbird outfit tagged from an anonymous street art account.

This is Kirk. It has to be. Those same sunset orange eyes, the commanding

presence—it's him, his true form. My legs wobble as I clutch the doorframe for support.

I should run. I should grab my phone, snap a photo, and expose him to the world. But I'm frozen, transfixed. The way his tongue flicks out as he strokes himself, the way his hips buck with each pass of his hand?—

Heat pools between my thighs. I press my legs together, the friction sending a jolt through me. My fingers twitch, itching to touch myself. I'm already wet, my panties soaking through.

The lizard man—Kirk—growls my name, the sound vibrating through the room. "Raven," he whispers, his voice thick with desire. "My Raven."

My hand slips into the waistband of my pants before I can stop it. My fingers brush against my clit, and I stifle a moan. I'm playing with fire, but I can't help myself.

The TV shifts to a candid shot of me laughing, my head thrown back. Kirk speeds up his strokes, his claws digging into the sheets as he nears the edge. My other hand clutches the doorframe, my knuckles white.

I'm supposed to be finding evidence, uncovering the truth. Instead, I'm here, fingering myself while I watch him wank to the sight of me.

What the hell is wrong with me?

But I can't stop. My hips roll against my hand, the pressure building. Kirk's breaths come faster, his voice a low rumble as he says my name over and over like a mantra.

And then he comes, thick ropes of come painting his scaled abs. My body clenches around my fingers, my own orgasm crashing over me in waves.

I bite my lip to keep from crying out. My legs shake as I pull my hand free, my mind racing.

What the fuck just happened?

Kirk collapses back onto the bed, his chest heaving. I take a shaky step back, my heart pounding. I need to get out of here before he notices me.

My legs finally remember how to move. Just in time too - Kirk rises from the bed, his scaled form rippling as he stretches. I dart back down the hallway, my heart threatening to burst from my chest.

The alcove near the grand staircase catches my eye. Perfect. I scramble up into the shadowed space, pressing myself against the cool marble. Please don't look up here.

Kirk's footsteps pad across the floor below. His nose twitches as he inhales deeply, and a low chuckle escapes him. What's so funny? Then he starts singing, his voice surprisingly melodic:

"Me and my shadow, walking down the avenue..."

Is he... is he actually singing and dancing around his mansion naked? The golden scales of his body catch the light as he practically skips into his kitchen. I hold my breath, willing my racing heart to quiet.

The clink of crystal and ice cubes echoes up to my hiding spot. He's fixing himself a drink like nothing's wrong. Maybe he didn't notice me watching him after all?

My muscles cramp from holding still. When he moves toward his living room, I take my chance. I drop silently to the floor and creep after him, keeping to the shadows.

Kirk settles into a leather recliner with his drink. "There. Nice and cozy."

Then he laughs - a dark, predatory sound that makes my skin prickle.

"You're thinking 'if I just keep very quiet he won't know I'm here,' right?"

"Oh shit," I whisper. My stomach drops through the floor.

Kirk rises from his chair, his scaled form gleaming in the low light. My heart hammers against my ribs as I back away.

"Looks like we're going to do this dance again, little bird." His nostrils flare as he inhales deeply.

Is he... is he smelling me like a bloodhound? My feet move before my brain catches up. I sprint for the front door, but Kirk appears in front of me with impossible speed. My breath catches in my throat.

"Why don't you take off that mask, sit down, and have a drink with me?" His voice carries that same commanding tone that made my knees weak at Area 51.

"Go to Hell." I pitch my voice low, trying to disguise it.

"Then would you prefer I call the NYPD and tell them you broke in and defaced my portrait?"

The threat stops me cold. Kirk's laugh echoes through the air.

"Why don't you put on some clothes?" I snap, trying to hide how his naked form affects me.

"Oh, does my nakedness bother you?" He stalks closer, backing me into a corner. His scales catch the light with each fluid movement. "It did not seem to trouble you earlier, when you were watching me."

"Shut up," I say, but the words sound hollow even to my own ears. My cheeks burn, and I can feel the heat spreading down my neck.

Kirk leans in, his golden eyes glinting with a predatory amusement. "I know you were touching yourself," he purrs, his voice low and dripping with satisfaction. "I can smell your pussy on your fingers."

My breath stops, and I turn my head away as he reaches for my hoodie. His fingers brush against the fabric, and I jerk back, but he's relentless. He laughs, a deep, resonant sound that echoes in the space between us.

"Keep your secrets...for now," he says, his voice smooth and teasing. "But you won't be able to hide from me forever."

Before I can protest, his hands grip my waist, and I'm hauled up onto his shoulder like a sack of flour. His scales are cool against my skin, but the strength in his body is overwhelming. I squirm, but it's useless—his grip is ironclad.

"Put me down, you overgrown gecko!" I snap, kicking my legs uselessly.

He doesn't respond, just laughs again as he strides toward the bedroom. His hand comes down on my ass with a sharp smack, and I gasp, the sound caught somewhere between outrage and something far more indecent. Another slap lands, and this time, I can't stifle the moan that escapes me.

"Good girl," he rumbles. "You're already so close, aren't you?"

"Go to Hell," I mutter, but even I can hear the lack of conviction in my voice. My body betrays me, responding to his touch in ways that make my head spin. The ache between my legs is almost unbearable, and I bite my lip to keep from begging him to do more.

He carries me into the bedroom and unceremoniously dumps me onto the bed. I scramble to sit up, but he's already climbing onto the mattress, his massive form looming over me. His eyes lock onto mine, and for a moment, I can't look away.

I twist my wrists against the strange, supple leather binding them behind my back, but the Reaper's Lingerie holds firm. Every movement sends a thrill through me, the restraint both infuriating and exhilarating. My breath comes in short, sharp bursts as I squirm, my body hyper-aware of Kirk's scaled form looming over me.

"Let's see if the legendary Nightbird can escape from Reaper's Lingerie," Kirk says, his voice dripping with amusement.

I glare up at him, though there's no heat behind it. "This doesn't count. You cheated. This thing's... alien tech or something."

"Maybe," he purrs, crawling on top of me. His scaled body presses against mine, the coolness of his skin sending shivers through me. His weight pins me to the bed, and I can feel the hard length of him against my thigh. "Maybe I should let you out... if only to test my skills against yours with more restraint."

The idea of him restraining me with something less advanced, something more... personal, sends a jolt of heat straight to my core. I bite my lip, trying to hide the way my body responds to him.

"You could take this off," I say, twisting around enough to show him my bound wrists. My voice is steady, but there's a breathless edge to it that I can't quite hide.

"Or you could take off my clothes instead."

Kirk's eyes darken, his sunset orange gaze locking onto mine. His clawed fingers trail down my side, and I shiver under his touch. "Such a tempting offer," he murmurs, his voice low and rough. "But I think I like you just where you are. Vulnerable. At my mercy."

"You're such a sadist," I mutter, but there's no real bite to my words. My heart races as he leans down, his lips brushing against the sensitive skin of my neck.

"Only for you," he whispers, his warm breath sending a wave of heat through me. His tongue flicks out, tasting my skin, and I arch against him, the friction sending sparks through my body.

I should hate this. I should be fighting him, screaming, demanding he let me go. But instead, I'm melting into him, my body betraying me at every turn. My hips grind against his, seeking more of that delicious friction, and a low moan escapes me.

"Still mocking my bondage skills?" he teases, his clawed hand sliding up my thigh and under the edge of my hoodie.

"Yes," I gasp, my voice shaky. "This... this is cheating, remember?"

"Cheating?" He chuckles, the sound sending vibrations through me. "Or just... making sure you can't run away this time?"

I can't help the laugh that escapes me, despite the heat pooling in my core. "You're a torturer," I mutter, my breath hitching as his fingers skim the edge of my panties.

"And yet," he says, his voice a low rumble, "you're not exactly trying to get away, are you?"

He's right. I'm not. I'm already lost in him, in the way he makes me feel, in the way he's breaking down all the walls I've built around myself. But I'm not ready to admit it—not yet.

I'm still writhing against the restraints, my body trembling, when Kirk's scaled hands slide down my sides. His claws are gentle, but the sensation is electric, sending shivers through me. I watch as he lowers himself between my legs, his golden eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that makes my breath hitch.

"What are you—?" I start to ask, but the words die in my throat as his tongue flicks out, long and prehensile, brushing against my inner thigh. My back arches as the textured ridges of his tongue drag against my skin, teasing me in ways I've never imagined.

"Relax, little bird," he murmurs, his voice low and rough. "Let me take care of you."

His tongue moves higher, and I gasp as it finds my clit, the ridges sending jolts of pleasure through me. My hips buck against his mouth, but his hands hold me steady, his strength overwhelming. I've never felt anything like this—his tongue is everywhere at once, teasing, licking, probing with a skill that leaves me trembling.

"Oh my God," I moan, my voice trembling as pleasure coils tight in my core. My wrists twist in the restraints, but there's no escape, not that I want one. Every flick of his tongue pushes me closer to the edge, and I'm helpless to do anything but ride the wave of sensation.

Kirk growls against me, the vibrations sending me spiraling higher. His tongue delves deeper, exploring me in ways no human ever could, and I'm lost in the sensations, my moans echoing through the room.

"Kirk," I gasp, my voice breaking as pleasure crashes over me. My body convulses,

and I scream as I come, my hips bucking against his mouth. But he doesn't stop, his tongue relentless as he pushes me through the first orgasm and straight into a second.

My vision whites out as I squirt, the force of it taking my breath away. Kirk doesn't flinch, his tongue lapping at me as I writhe against the bed, my body shaking with the intensity of it. He doesn't stop, each stroke of his tongue sending me higher, until I'm trembling with overstimulation, my body too sensitive to take anymore.

Finally, he pulls back, his golden eyes gleaming with satisfaction. My chest heaves as I struggle to catch my breath, my body still trembling from the aftershocks.

"Still mocking my skills?" he teases, his voice low and rough.

I groan, my cheeks flushing as I try to catch my breath. "You're... cheating," I manage, my voice shaky.

Kirk laughs, the sound deep and resonant. "Maybe," he says, his claws trailing up my side. "But you didn't seem to mind."

Before I can respond, his hands are on my hoodie, lifting it up. I tense for a moment, but he's gentle, his claws careful as he flips it up, revealing my face.

"Oh, come on, Raven," he says, his voice amused. "I know it's you. Of course, I recognized your scent right away. I had my suspicions you were the mysterious Nightbird."

I sigh, relief washing over me. The hoodie was sweaty after all those orgasms, and I'm suddenly glad he's not pulling it off completely.

"Well, I had my suspicions you were the mysterious lizard boy," I say, my voice shaky but defiant. "Now that you've caught the legendary Nightbird, what are you

going to do with her?”

Kirk shrugs his scaled shoulders, his eyes glinting with amusement. “Keep her all night and see how many times I can make her squirt,” he says.

I groan, my cheeks flushing as I squirm against the restraints. “Oh boy,” I mutter, my voice shaky. “Really glad I got caught.”

Kirk laughs, the sound deep and resonant, as he leans down, his tongue flicking out to tease me again. I moan, my body responding instantly, and I know I’m in for a long, unforgettable night.

CHAPTER 10

KARC

I stand at the top of the grand staircase, my golden scales catching the dim light as they shimmer faintly under the silk ropes that bind her. Raven dangles from the railing, suspended in a shibari masterpiece I've spent centuries perfecting. Her body is a living sculpture, folded and restrained in my suspension tie, her arms bent at sharp angles behind her back, her ankles tied to her thighs in a frog tie that accentuates the curves of her hips. The ropes around her chest squeeze just enough to make her gasp for breath, her skin flushed and gleaming with sweat.

The twin vibrating plugs inside her—one in her pussy, the other in her ass—are secured with a crotch rope that keeps them firmly in place. She shudders, squirming against the ropes, her body convulsing as another orgasm rips through her. Her lips part in a silent scream, and the ropes creak slightly under her movement.

"Two minutes, little bird," I say, my voice low and teasing as I begin my slow descent down the stairs. The sound of my footsteps echoes through the high-ceilinged foyer. "Then you must admit not only defeat, but that you are, in fact, impressed with my bondage skills."

"Not fair," she gasps, her voice trembling. Her body strains against the ropes, the muscles in her thighs and abdomen flexing as she fights the sensations overwhelming her. "Can't concentrate with...with..."

Her words are cut off as she arches her back, her body convulsing again. A stream of

liquid sprays out around the dildo tied into her pussy, splattering onto the hardwood floor below. She lets out a strangled moan, her head falling back as she hangs there, helpless.

I smile, "Impressive. I didn't think you'd squirt again so soon. You're full of surprises, aren't you?"

"Go to hell," she breathes, her voice hoarse but still dripping with defiance. Her dark eyes lock onto mine, even as her body trembles from the aftershocks of her orgasm.

"I've been to hell," I reply, stopping a few feet away from her. I tilt my head, studying her as she dangles like a prize waiting to be claimed. "It's overrated. No silk ropes, no vibrating plugs. Just a lot of paperwork."

She lets out a choked laugh, despite herself. "You're such an asshole."

"And yet, here you are," I say, gesturing to her bound form. "Tied up, squirming, and completely at my mercy. Who is in control here, really? Me or you?"

She glares at me, but there's no real heat in it. Her lips quirk into a smile, despite her best efforts to keep a straight face. "Maybe both."

I step closer, reaching out to brush a strand of her dark hair away from her face. My clawed fingers linger on her cheek, feeling the warmth of her skin. "You're beautiful like this, you know."

She shivers under my touch, her breath hitching as she tries to maintain her composure. "Flattery won't get you out of this, lizard boy."

"Good, because I'm not trying to get out of it," I reply, my voice dropping to a growl. "I'm exactly where I want to be. And so are you."

She opens her mouth to retort, but I press a clawed finger to her lips, silencing her. "Two minutes, Raven. Then we'll see if you're still as clever with your tongue as you think you are."

Her eyes narrow, but she doesn't say anything. Instead, she glares at me, her chest rising and falling as she tries to catch her breath. I step back, folding my arms across my chest as I watch her struggle against the ropes, her body trembling with every vibration.

"Time's up," I say, stepping closer to her suspended form. The ropes creak slightly as she squirms, her body glistening with sweat under the soft light of the chandelier. Her chest rises and falls with shallow breaths, and her dark eyes lock onto mine with a mix of defiance and something I can't quite place—anticipation, maybe.

She groans, her head falling back as she let the words tumble out, however reluctantly. "Okay, you win."

I arch a scaled brow, a smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth. "That's not the bet we agreed on."

She rolls her eyes, her chin jutting out in that stubborn way of hers. "Fine. You're impressive ," she says, dragging out the word like it's a personal insult. Then, with a flicker of mischief, she sticks her tongue out at me.

I tilt my head, considering her. "Oh, little bird, you're playing with fire." My clawed fingers reach for the remote in my pocket, and with a single click, I turn the vibrators inside her up to their highest setting. Her body jerks, a surprised squeak escaping her lips before I'm already pressing the ball gag into her mouth, securing it tightly behind her head.

Her eyes widen, but there's no fear in them. Instead, they're dark with something

else—something hungry. She lets out a muffled moan, her body writhing against the ropes as the vibrations pulse through her.

I step back, folding my arms across my chest as I watch her struggle. She's a vision like this—bound, gagged, completely at my mercy, and yet still daring to challenge me. She leans forward as much as the ropes allow, her gagged mouth pressing against my chest. Her eyes meet mine, and the look in them is unmistakable. She's enjoying this.

But she's not getting off that easy.

I let my claws trail down her spine, watching her shiver at the touch. "You thought sticking your tongue out at me was clever, didn't you?" I say, my voice low and teasing. My hand lands on her ass with a light slap, the sound sharp in the quiet of the room. She jerks, a muffled yelp escaping the gag.

I start slow, the slaps light but deliberate. Her skin flushes under my touch, and her muffled cries grow louder with each strike. I can feel the heat radiating from her skin, the way her body trembles as the vibrations inside her build.

But I'm not content to just spank her. Between each slap, my fingers find her clit, swollen and sensitive beneath the crotch rope. I tease her, my claws gentle but insistent, drawing out gasps and whimpers that only fuel my desire.

She thrashes against the ropes, her cries growing more desperate. When I can see her nearing the edge, I pause, pulling out a velvet cloth from my pocket. I press it against her heated skin, soothing the sting of the spanking. She lets out a shuddering breath, her body trembling as I alternate between punishment and tenderness.

"Still think you're in control, little bird?" I murmur, my claws grazing her clit again. She arches against the ropes, a choked moan escaping the gag. Her eyes meet mine,

and in them, I see the truth—she's mine, and she knows it.

I land another slap, harder this time, and her body convulses, her orgasm ripping through her as she hangs there, helpless and trembling.

I lean in, my lips brushing against her ear. "This isn't over yet."

I step around behind Raven, my claws brushing against the soft skin of her inner thighs as I untie the crotch rope. The rope slips free, and I carefully remove the vibrator from her pussy, leaving the one in her ass still humming softly. She lets out a muffled whimper, her body trembling as the head of my cock presses against her entrance. Her hips jerk, trying to squirm her way onto me, but the ropes hold her in place.

"Oh yeth," she moans behind the gag, her words slurred but desperate. Her pussy is wet, hungry for me, and I can't hold back any longer. I thrust into her in one smooth motion, my length stretching her open. Her body clamps down around me, tight and wet, and I have to grit my teeth to keep from coming right then and there.

My claws dig into the suspension rope as I hold myself steady, my breath coming in ragged gasps. I can feel the heat building inside me, the urge to let go almost overwhelming, but I'm determined to make her come first. I pull her head back by her hair, her neck arching as she lets out a muffled scream. Her pussy clenches around me, tighter than a vice, and that's it—I can't hold back anymore.

I thrust into her hard, my cock pulsing as I come, filling her with my cum. Her body convulses, her own orgasm crashing over her as she screams into the gag, her pussy milking every last drop from me. I stay buried inside her, my breath heavy, my body trembling with the force of my release.

"You're mine, little bird," I growl, my voice low and rough. My claws tighten in her

hair as I pull her even closer, my cock still deep inside her. She lets out a muffled whimper, her body shaking as she comes down from the high. I can feel her heartbeat through the ropes, fast and frantic, and it only makes me want her more.

I carefully untie each knot, letting the silk ropes slide away from Raven's body. My claws trace the faint marks they've left behind, and I press gentle kisses to each one. She trembles under my touch, but not from fear or pain.

"Let me take care of you," I whisper, lifting her into my arms. She nods, resting her head against my chest as I carry her to the master bath.

The hot tub fills with steaming water and lavender-scented bubbles. I settle in first, then draw her against me. She fits perfectly in my arms, her back against my chest, her head tucked under my chin. The water soothes away any lingering aches, and I feel her muscles relax.

We don't speak. We don't need to. My claws comb through her hair, massaging her scalp. She sighs contentedly, her fingers intertwining with mine beneath the water.

Something shifts inside me as I hold her. A truth I've been avoiding crashes over me like a wave - I'm in love with her. Not just attracted, not just fond. Love. The kind that makes centuries-old warriors write poetry and contemplate forever.

"Stay," I murmur against her hair. "Stay the night."

She stiffens slightly in my arms. "I can't. Madison will worry."

I help her out of the tub, wrapping her in a plush towel. She dresses quickly while I try to find the right words to express what I'm feeling.

At the door, I catch her arms gently, looking into those dark eyes that have bewitched

me so completely. "Raven, I?—"

Her finger presses against my lips, silencing me. "What we did tonight, what we had—that was amazing. Special. I don't regret it one bit. And our getting...close to each other will make the fake relationship easier to pull off."

Raven's eyes well up with tears, and her face becomes a mask of misery.

"But I'm not looking for...I can't...I just can't, Karc! Don't ask more of me than I can give you, please."

She slips from my grasp and through the door. I stand there, my heart aching, watching her disappear into the night.

I slump against the door, my claws scraping against the wood. The ache in my chest burns deeper than any battle wound I've endured in centuries of combat. My scales ripple with tension as I struggle to contain the raw emotion threatening to overwhelm me.

But I am Vakutan. We do not wallow in self-pity.

I straighten, my jaw set with determination. "Prepare yourself, little bird," I growl, my voice echoing in the empty foyer. "I will not stop until I've proven that you can trust me with your heart. I will not give in until I win your love!"

The words ring true in my soul. I've seen the spark in her eyes, felt the connection between us that goes beyond mere physical attraction. When she let her guard down in the hot tub, the way she melted against me spoke volumes. That trust, however brief, was real.

My hand presses against my chest where an unfamiliar warmth blooms. This feeling -

it's more than just love. It's the sacred bond our ancestors spoke of, the connection that defies scientific explanation.

I close my eyes, offering a silent prayer to the Precursors. After all these centuries, could they have led me to my jalshagar here, on this primitive world? The timing seems impossible, yet I've never been more certain of anything in my long life.

The bond between us is undeniable. Now I just have to help her see it too.

CHAPTER 11

RAVEN

The lights of Manhattan twinkle below me like fallen stars. My legs dangle over the edge of the brownstone as a cool breeze whips my hair around my face. Up here, eight stories above the street, the city noise fades to a distant hum.

"What am I doing?" The words escape in a whisper.

My fingers trace over the rough concrete ledge, remembering how Karc's scales felt under my touch. The memory of his hands on my body, his mouth claiming mine, sends heat rushing through me. But the warmth quickly turns cold.

"Not going there again." I pull my knees up to my chest. "Not letting another man inside my walls."

Marcus had seemed perfect too, until he convinced me I was worthless as an artist. Jason made me believe I was lucky he even looked at me. And Derek... Derek almost destroyed everything I'd built.

A bitter laugh escapes my throat. Here I am, worried about letting a seven-foot-tall alien lizard man break my heart, when his otherworldly nature is the least of my concerns. The fact that he comes from another planet? Whatever. The superhuman strength? No big deal.

But the way he looks at me like I'm precious? The gentle way he touched me, even

while binding me in that alien sex harness? That terrifies me more than any of his inhuman traits.

Madison helped piece me back together after the others. Reminded me daily that I had value beyond what any man saw in me. Helped me find my voice again through my art.

I rest my chin on my knees, watching the city lights blur through tears I refuse to let fall. "I can't do it. I won't survive having my heart ripped out again."

The fire escape rattles under my boots as I slide down the downspout to street level. My hands burn from the friction, but I've had worse. The city swallows me up as I blend into the late-night crowd, keeping my hood low and my face hidden. My body is still humming from everything that happened, and my mind is a chaotic mess of emotions I don't know how to untangle.

By the time I reach our apartment, the adrenaline's worn off, and I'm just tired. I fumble with my keys, but Madison throws the door open before I can even get them out.

"Where the hell have you been?" she demands, her voice sharp with worry. Her hair's a mess, and she's still in her gaming pajamas. "I was about to call the cops, Raven!"

"Calm down, Maddy," I mutter, stepping inside. "I'm fine."

She squints at me. "Fine? You're paler than a ghost and—" Her eyes catch the marks on my neck, the faint red lines from the ropes still visible on my wrists. She freezes. "Holy hippo spit, Raven. You slept with him, didn't you?"

My face flushes. "I—no! I mean, it's not?—"

“Don’t even try to lie to me.” She grabs my arm, pulling me into the light. “Look at you! Hickeys, scratches, and... are those rope burns? Raven, what happened ?”

“It’s not what you think,” I stammer, pulling my jacket tighter around me. But the memory of Karc’s hands on my skin, his voice low and commanding, flashes through my mind, and I can’t stop the flush that spreads across my cheeks.

Madison’s eyes widen. “Oh my god. You did . Not only did you sleep with him, but it looks like he showed you a really good time.” She pauses, then adds, “Frankly, I’m jealous.”

“Maddy!” I protest, but the heat in my face gives me away. I can’t help it—the memories come rushing back, and a stupid, giddy grin tugs at the corners of my mouth.

“You are !” she shrieks, pointing at me. “Look at you! You’re glowing! So, how was it? Like, on a scale from one to ‘oh my god, I think I swallowed my tongue,’ how good was it?”

I groan, covering my face with my hands. “You have no idea how good,” I admit, my voice muffled.

Madison squeals, bouncing on her toes. “Details, Raven! I need details! Did he—wait, is this about that alien thing? Oh my god, are you going to have his babies ?”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. My grin falters, and the weight of everything crashes back down. The fear, the doubt, the terror of letting someone in again. My chest tightens, and I can’t meet her eyes.

“I’m going to bed,” I mumble, turning toward my room.

“Raven—” Madison’s voice softens, and she reaches out to touch my arm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean?—”

“It’s fine,” I say quickly, pulling away. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m just... tired.”

She watches me go, her expression a mix of concern and guilt, but I don’t have the energy to reassure her. I close my bedroom door behind me and sink onto the bed, my head in my hands. The warmth of Karc’s touch still lingers on my skin, but the storm in my heart isn’t going anywhere.

My phone's alarm jerks me awake with its angry buzz. Noon already? The memories of last night flood back, making my cheeks burn. I grab my phone to silence it and spot a text from work about the charity car wash.

"You're not seriously going to that, are you?" Madison leans against my doorframe, her arms crossed. "I mean, washing cars in a bikini for tips seems beneath someone worth ten million dollars."

I sit up, rubbing sleep from my eyes. "I haven't touched the money."

"What? Why not?"

"It doesn't feel real." I pull my knees to my chest. "Like any minute now someone's going to tell me it was all a mistake. Besides, if I suddenly quit, Giscard will know something's up. He thinks Kirk and I are actually engaged."

Madison's face softens. She crosses the room and wraps me in a tight hug. "You're an idiot, you know that?"

"Yeah, well..." I squeeze her back. "Takes one to know one."

"Come on." She pulls away, heading for the kitchen. "I'm making poached eggs on toast, and you're going to eat something before you go shake your money maker for Manhattan's elite."

"You don't have to-"

"Shut up and let me feed you." The sound of pots clanking punctuates her words. "That's what friends are for."

After breakfast, I pull on yoga pants and a t-shirt over my skimpy G-string bikini, the one required uniform for the charity car wash. My fingers hover over my phone as I open the banking app where the money Karc had transferred sat untouched, a string of zeroes that made my head spin.

"Guess I'm not materialistic or greedy," I mutter, tapping the screen to make a donation to the homeless shelter hosting the car wash. The payment goes through without a hiccup. I check the balance again, half-expecting it to have disappeared like some cruel joke. Nope. Still there. Still real.

I take a cab to the car wash, my stomach in knots. The driver's radio blares some pop song I can't focus on. My mind keeps drifting back to last night, to the way Karc had looked at me, to the way he'd touched me. And then, to the way I'd shut him down. I flinch at the memory.

When I arrive, the parking lot is buzzing with volunteers in tiny swimsuits, hoses in hand, laughing as they soap up luxury cars. I head to the check-in table, but my manager cuts me off before I can grab a sponge.

"Raven," she says, her tone clipped. "Your services have been purchased. For the day. All day."

I blink. “What? By who?”

“Some VIP. He’s in spot twelve.”

My blood boils. This reeks of some rich creep trying to buy me like I’m a damn commodity. My fists clench as I storm over to spot twelve, ready to give whoever it is a piece of my mind. But when I see the McLaren, my anger falters.

Karc’s leaning against the hood, a massive bouquet of roses in one hand. He’s in a crisp white shirt and dark jeans, his golden eyes locking onto mine as I approach. The smirk on his face is infuriating. And irresistible.

“What are you doing here?” I demand, crossing my arms.

“Purchasing your services,” he says, his voice smooth, like he’s savoring every word. “For the day.”

“And what exactly do you think you’re getting for that?”

His smirk widens. “Your company. Maybe a car wash if you’re feeling generous.”

I glare at him, but I don’t really mean it.

He holds out the roses. “For you.”

I hesitate, then take them, the scent of roses wrapping around me like his arms had the night before. “You’re not just trying to buy me, are you?”

His expression softens, the smirk fading into something more sincere. “No, Raven. I’m trying to earn you.”

My heart skips a beat, but I force myself to stay grounded. “And what if I’m not for sale?”

“Good thing I’m not shopping.” He steps closer, his voice dropping. “I’m courting.”

I swallow hard, my resolve wavering. “You’re playing a dangerous game.”

“Only because you’re worth the risk.” He reaches out, his fingers brushing mine. “So, what’ll it be? Are you washing my car, or am I washing yours?”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t suppress the grin tugging at my lips. “First of all, I don’t own a car. Second, you’re paying for this, so you’re getting the deluxe package.”

He laughs, the sound sending a warmth through me I can’t ignore. “Looking forward to it.”

I peel my yoga pants down and step out of them, tossing them onto the hood of Karc’s McLaren. The cool breeze brushes against my bare legs, and I tug my t-shirt off next, revealing the tiny bikini underneath. Karc’s eyes lock onto me, and I swear I see his pupils dilate. Good. Let him squirm.

“You know,” I say, bending over to grab the sponge from the ground, making sure to take my time, “you could’ve just asked me to wash your car. You didn’t have to buy the whole day.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” he replies, his voice a little rougher than usual. I glance over my shoulder and catch him staring. Got him.

I wet the sponge and start scrubbing the hood, working the soap into a lather. Karc leans back against the car, arms crossed, trying to look casual. But I can see the way his jaw tightens, the way his eyes track every move I make. I smirk and drag the

sponge slowly along the windshield, making sure to arch my back just a little.

“You’re enjoying this,” he says, his tone accusing but with a hint of amusement.

“Me? Never,” I say, grinning as I squeeze water from the sponge down my body. I glide the hose between my legs, mimicking the crotch rope he’d tied me in last night. The water trails down my skin, and I shiver, not just from the cold. Karc’s eyes darken, and I swear I see his claws flex.

“You’re asking for more punishment, little bird,” he growls.

“Oh, am I?” I turn to face him, leaning back against the car. “I thought we were just washing your car. Or is there something else you’d like me to do, Mr. Stevens?”

Karc takes a step closer, and for a moment, I think he’s going to kiss me right here, in front of everyone. But he stops just short, his golden eyes blazing. “You’re teasing me,” he says.

“And you don’t like it?” I tilt my head, feigning innocence.

“I like it too much,” he admits, his gaze dropping to my lips. “But don’t think for a second I won’t return the favor.”

“Promises, promises,” I murmur, pressing the sponge into his chest. He grabs my wrist, his grip firm but not painful, and for a moment, we’re locked in a silent battle of wills. The tension between us is electric, and I can feel my pulse racing. I’m playing with fire, and I know it, but I can’t stop. Something about this man—this alien—makes me want to push him, to see how far I can go before he snaps.

And then, in the middle of it all, it hits me like a thunderbolt. This isn’t just a game. It’s not just teasing or revenge for last night. I’m falling for him. Hard. The thought

terrifies me, but it's undeniable.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath, pulling my hand free and turning back to the car. My heart's pounding, and my knees feel weak. I can't do this. I can't let him in. But as I glance at him over my shoulder, the look in his eyes tells me it's already too late. I'm in deep, whether I like it or not.

Page 12

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CHAPTER 12

KARC

I wrap the towel around Raven's dripping form, unable to resist trailing my fingers along her skin. Her flesh pebbles under my touch. The scent of her arousal mingles with the soap and water, driving my Vakutan senses wild.

My lips crash against hers, claiming her mouth in a deep kiss that makes her moan. Breaking away, I growl, "Get in the car."

"Where are we going?"

The defiant sparkle in her eyes demands a response. My hand connects with her barely-covered ass in a firm spank. The sound echoes across the parking lot.

Her squeal of delight shoots straight to my groin. "Get in the car, little bird."

"Okay." Her voice comes out soft, submissive. Not good enough.

"Say Yes Sir ." The commanding tone comes naturally after centuries of military service.

"Yes, Sir." Her voice drips like honey, smoky and seductive. By the Precursors, no human has ever affected me this way.

I open the passenger door of my Tesla, watching as she slides into the leather seat.

Her wet bikini clings to every curve. My hands grip the door frame, claws threatening to emerge and shred the metal.

The line between reality and fantasy blurs. Is she playing a role, or does she truly submit to me? Right now, with desire clouding my thoughts, I cannot bring myself to care.

“We’ve been invited to Giscard’s Hellfire Club tonight,” I say, leaning against the car as Raven adjusts her towel. The fabric clings to her damp skin, and I force my eyes to stay on hers. Barely.

“In a towel?” she asks, raising an eyebrow. Her tone is dry, but the corner of her mouth twitches like she’s holding back a laugh.

I pull the card from my wallet, holding it up between two fingers. The metallic glint catches the sunlight. “No one’s going to complain when I whip this out.”

She squints at it. “That’s not black. Or gold. What is it?”

“Uranium.”

Her eyes widen. “Does it have actual uranium in it?”

I chuckle, sliding it back into my wallet. “I sincerely hope not.”

She follows me to the car, towel and all, and we drive to the most exclusive boutique in Manhattan. The kind of place where the air smells like money and the salespeople don’t bother with price tags.

A designer in a tailored suit greets us by name, his eyes flicking to Raven’s damp hair and bare shoulders. If he’s judging her, he’s smart enough to keep it to himself.

“Something for the evening?” he asks, already sketching on a tablet.

“Something...” I glance at Raven, my gaze lingering on the way her towel drapes over her curves. “Unforgettable.”

Forty-five minutes later, Raven emerges from the dressing room in a black dress that looks like it was poured onto her. The neckline plunges, the slit climbs, and the fabric clings to every inch of her like it was made for her. Because it was.

She twirls, the skirt flaring slightly. “Well?”

“Perfect,” I say, my voice low.

She smirks, adjusting the hem. “I just realized... I can’t wear panties with this. It’s too tight.”

I step closer, my hand sliding to her waist. “Your point?”

She doesn’t pull away. “Just saying. It’s... impractical.”

“Practicality is overrated.” I lean down, my lips brushing her ear. “Besides, I like the idea of you bare beneath that dress.”

Her cheeks flush, but she doesn’t argue. Instead, she tilts her head, her lips curving into a sly smile. I step back, gesturing to the sleek gown. “Ready to play the part of my bride-to-be?”

She smooths the fabric, her expression softening. “For ten million dollars.”

“For the mission,” I correct, though the way she looks at me makes it hard to focus on anything else. “And because I like seeing you in something besides a towel.”

She laughs, the sound light and genuine. “You’re paying for the shoes too, right?”

“Done.”

As we leave the boutique, her arm linked with mine, I think she’s the only thing in this world that’s truly priceless. But I’ll keep that to myself—for now.

My hand rests on the cool leather of the limo door as I slide in beside Raven. The scent of her perfume—something floral with a hint of spice—fills the space, but the weight of what I’m about to say dulls even that distraction.

I turn to her, my expression serious. “Raven, if Giscard is connected to the Grolgath, this could get dangerous. More dangerous than you realize. If you want to back out, I’ll understand. And you’ll still get the ten million.”

She arches an eyebrow, her lips quirking into a half-smile. “What, you think humans can’t be brave like Vakutan?”

I tilt my head, surprised by her defiance. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

“You sure? Because it sounds like you’re underestimating me.” She leans back against the seat, her eyes locking onto mine. “I became Nightbird because I wanted to make the world better, Karc. Not just with my art but with my actions. Now I have a chance to help the entire human race. Yeah, it might be dangerous, but so is slipping in the shower.”

I chuckle despite myself, the tension in my chest easing slightly. “You’re not wrong. But this isn’t a slip in the shower. This is Grolgath. They’re brutal, cunning, and they won’t hesitate to kill you if they find out what you’re doing.”

“And?” She crosses her arms, her chin lifting in defiance. “I’m not going to back

down just because it's scary. I've been scared before. I've been hurt before. But I'm still here, still fighting. So don't tell me I can't handle this."

I study her, my admiration growing with every word. She's tougher than she looks, braver than most soldiers I've fought alongside. And she's got a fire in her that could rival any Vakutan warrior.

"Raven, I—" The words catch in my throat. I want to tell her how I feel, how she's become more than just a mission to me. But before I can continue, she presses a finger to my lips, silencing me.

"Wait," she whispers, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I can't...I'm not ready to..."

I nod, understanding her unspoken words. The pain in her eyes isn't new. It's old, weathered, and deeply rooted. She's been hurt before, and she's not ready to trust again, not fully. Not yet.

I press a kiss to her forehead, my arms wrapping around her as she leans into me. Her tears dampen my shirt, but I don't care. I'll hold her as long as she needs, for as long as it takes for her to heal.

"It's okay," I murmur, my hand stroking her hair. "Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

I've seen battles fought on battlefields, in the stars, and in the shadows. But the fiercest fight of all is the one within oneself. Raven's fighting that battle right now, and I'll be here to help her win it—when she's ready.

CHAPTER 13

RAVEN

I sit there, swaddled in Karc's impossibly warm embrace, his scaled chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm beneath my cheek. The limo glides through the city, the hum of the engine a faint backdrop to the storm raging in my head.

His hand strokes my hair, slow and deliberate, like he's trying to smooth out the jagged edges of my thoughts. It's infuriating. He's infuriating. How can someone so... other feel so right?

"I don't deserve you," I mumble into his chest, my voice muffled but loud enough for him to hear. The words sound bitter and raw.

His hand stills for a moment, then resumes its rhythmic motion. "You're wrong," he says, his voice low but firm, like he's stating a fact as undeniable as gravity.

I pull back slightly, just enough to glare up at him. His golden eyes meet mine, steady and unflinching. "I'm not," I insist, my voice cracking. "You're this... this warrior, this alien prince or whatever the hell you are, and I'm just... me. Broken, messed-up me. I can't even let you say you love me. I'm a disaster, Karc. A walking, talking dumpster fire."

He doesn't laugh. He doesn't even smirk. Instead, he cups my face in his hand, his touch warm and impossibly gentle. "You're wrong," he repeats, his voice softer now. "You're not broken, Raven. You're strong. So damn strong. You've been hurt, but

you're still here. You're still fighting. That's not weakness. That's strength."

I want to argue, to tell him he's full of it, but the words stick in my throat. His eyes bore into mine, and for a second, I can almost believe him. Almost.

He brushes a strand of hair from my face, his fingertips lingering on my cheek. Nothing more needs to be said in this moment. God, I wish I had the guts to tell him what's inside my heart. I'm afraid to even think it to myself.

The limo pulls up to Kirk's mansion, and he guides me inside with a gentle hand at the small of my back. My muscles ache from the emotional roller coaster of the day.

"Let me take care of you," he says, leading me to his master bath.

The tub fills with steaming water and fragrant bubbles. I sink into the warmth, letting it seep into my bones. Through half-closed eyes, I watch Karc move around the bathroom, setting out fluffy towels and lighting candles.

He returns with a tray of cheese, fruit, and charcuterie, along with a glass of crisp white wine. My hands drip with bathwater, but he doesn't hesitate to feed me by hand - a grape here, a slice of prosciutto there. The intimacy of it makes my heart flutter.

"Time for your massage," he says after I'm done soaking. He helps me from the tub, wrapping me in the softest towel I've ever felt.

The massage table waits in an adjoining room. His scaled fingers work magic on my muscles, finding knots I didn't even know I had. When he reaches my left shoulder - the one I'd messed up during a particularly ambitious parkour run - I almost cry with relief as the six-month-old tension finally releases.

"Sleep now," he whispers, helping me into his bed. The sheets feel like clouds against

my skin.

No grabby hands. No suggestive comments. No expectations. Just pure care and consideration. My chest tightens as I realize no man has ever treated me like this before.

I drift off to the most peaceful sleep I've had in years. When I wake, the rich scent of coffee pulls me from my dreams. Red golden light streams through the windows - I must have slept for hours.

I find the white silk robe hanging over a chair and slide it on before joining Karc in the kitchen. He turns at my approach and smiles.

"Sugar or cream?" he asks.

"Yes," I reply, leaning against the counter as he busies himself with the coffee maker. The rich aroma fills the space, mingling with the faint scent of his scales—something earthy and warm that's uniquely him. "Karc, you're amazing."

He shrugs his massive shoulders, the robe straining slightly with the movement. "I know," he says, deadpan, his golden scales glinting in the morning light streaming through the windows.

I laugh, the sound bubbling out of me before I can stop it. He joins in, his deep chuckle a low rumble that vibrates through the air. For a moment, it's easy to forget the weight of everything—the danger, the secrets, the fear. It's just us, sharing coffee in his kitchen like any other couple.

He hands me a mug, his fingers brushing mine in a way that sends a spark up my arm. I take a sip, the bitterness tempered by the sugar and cream he added just the way I like it. "You're really good at this," I say, gesturing to the coffee and the kitchen in

general.

"Centuries of practice," he says with a smirk, leaning back against the counter. "You learn a thing or two when you've been around as long as I have."

I raise an eyebrow. "Centuries, huh? You're really not just saying that to impress me?"

He snorts. "Trust me, if I wanted to impress you, I'd tell you about the time I wrestled a Tiranosauron on my homeworld. Bare-handed."

My jaw drops. "You're kidding."

"Would I lie to you?"

"Depends," I say, narrowing my eyes playfully. "Are you trying to impress me?"

He laughs again, and the sound is so warm, so genuine, that it makes my chest ache. "Maybe a little," he admits.

I take another sip of coffee, then set the mug down on the counter. "What's your home planet like? Dangerous, right?"

He nods, his expression growing more serious. "Brutal. Stark landscapes, but beautiful in their own way. My people live in harmony with the environment, the way the Precursors intended. Much of it remains undeveloped, untouched. It's... stark, but sacred."

"The Precursors," I echo, remembering the term from our late-night conversation. "Who—or what—are they?"

Karc hesitates, his golden eyes flickering with something I can't quite place. "They're... complicated. Enigmatic. We Vakutans believe they engineered all life in the galaxy, including us, the Grolgath, even humans. They're like... God-ancestors, I suppose you could say."

I tilt my head, studying him. "You don't sound too sure about that."

He shrugs again, but there's tension in the movement this time. "It's not something we talk about lightly. The Precursors are... sacred. Their designs are beyond our understanding. Some say they're still guiding us, even now, in ways we can't see."

I let that sink in, the enormity of it making my head spin. "That's... a lot to take in," I admit.

He reaches out, his hand brushing mine. "It is. But it's also why I'm here. Why I do what I do. The Precursors' designs—they're bigger than any one of us. And if we're lucky, we get to play a small part in them."

I stare at him. There's something in his voice, in his eyes, that makes me feel like he's talking about more than just the Precursors. About us. About me .

But before I can respond, he straightens, his expression shifting back to that easy, confident smirk. "More coffee?" he asks, holding up the pot.

I nod, holding out my mug. "Sure. And don't think I've forgotten about that Tiranosauron story."

CHAPTER 14

KARC

The rich, earthy aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the solarium as Raven and I sit across from each other, the morning light filtering through the oversized windows. Her fingers curl around her mug, her dark eyes catching mine with a question lingering in them.

My phone buzzes on the marble countertop. The screen flashes with a single word: Company. I glance at Raven, her brow furrowing as she watches me. I tap the image inducer at my wrist, the golden scales of my skin shimmering and fading into the smooth, human tan of Kirk Stevens.

"Why did you put on your human disguise?" she asks, setting her mug down with a soft clink.

"Because we're about to have company," I reply, my voice calm but edged with anticipation.

A knock echoes through the house, sharp and precise. I stride to the door, my shoes clicking against the hardwood. When I open it, a quartet of fashionistas stands on my doorstep, their presence as polished as their leather portfolios. Each one is a walking masterpiece—sleek hair, impeccable makeup, outfits that scream money.

"Mr. Stevens," the lead one greets, her voice smooth as silk. "We're here for Ms. Raven."

Raven's already on her feet, her arms folded across her chest like a shield. "What's this about?"

I gesture toward the group. "This is your team. They're here to get you ready for tonight."

Her eyes dart between me and the fashionistas, a flicker of unease crossing her face. "The last time someone did my hair for me, I was eight."

One of the women steps forward, a warm smile on her face. "Consider this a reintroduction to luxury."

Raven hesitates, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. I step closer, my voice low but firm. "Luxury only feels strange because you're not used to it, little bird. Embrace the pampering."

She looks up at me, her lips curling into a shy smile. "Yes, Sir," she says, letting the words slip with a teasing lilt that makes my chest tighten. She turns to the team, lifting her chin with a newfound resolve. "Let's do this."

The women usher her toward the master bathroom, their heels clicking in unison. I watch them go, a small smile tugging at my lips. Then I head to the living room, pulling out my suit for the evening. The fabric feels heavy in my hands, the weight of what's coming settling over me.

An hour passes. Then another. The house is quiet except for the faint hum of chatter from the bathroom. I'm halfway through polishing my shoes when I hear the sound of heels on marble.

I look up, and the air leaves my lungs.

Raven stands at the entrance to the living room, transformed. Her hair cascades in soft waves, her makeup accentuating the sharpness of her cheekbones and the depth of her eyes. The dress—black, sleek, and utterly devastating—clings to her frame like it was made for her. She's radiant, but it's more than that. There's a confidence in her stance, a glow that wasn't there before.

Her eyes meet mine, and for a moment, the world narrows to just her. Beautiful doesn't begin to cover it.

"I guess I look all right," Raven says nervously, her fingers brushing against the sleek fabric of her dress. She shifts her weight, her eyes darting to me for reassurance.

I step closer, my gaze lingering on her. "All right? Raven, two centuries ago, I witnessed a nebula in deep space. It was a massive swirl of colors, blues and purples and pinks, stretching across light-years. It looked like a rose blooming in the void. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen." I pause, my voice softening. "Until now."

Her expression shifts, a flicker of something passing over her face. For a moment, she's unreadable, her lips parting slightly as if the words are caught in her throat. Then she speaks, her voice tight, controlled, like every syllable is a struggle. "You know," she says, her eyes locked on mine, "everything you say to me, everything you do...it's working. So don't give up, okay?"

She turns her head away, a flush creeping up her neck, staining her cheeks. The vulnerability in her voice hits me like a blow to the chest. I close the distance between us in two strides, pulling her into my arms. She doesn't resist, her body molding against mine as she rests her head on my chest. I can feel her heartbeat, steady but quick, like a bird's.

When I tilt her chin up to kiss her, she places a hand on my chest, stopping me. "You

just spent a lot of money painting my face, and now you want to smudge it?"

I chuckle low in my throat, my hand sliding to her waist. "Silly little bird," I growl, my lips brushing against hers. "I specifically paid extra for the most premium smudge-proof cosmetics...so I can ravish your mouth the whole way to the club."

Her laugh is soft, almost breathless, and she leans into me, her fingers curling into the fabric of my suit. I press my forehead to hers, my voice dropping to a whisper. "Impossible for anyone but you," I say before capturing her lips in a kiss that sets my blood on fire.

I escort her down to the waiting limousine, my hand resting lightly on the small of her back. The black dress clings to her curves, and the sight of her like this—confident, radiant, dangerous—makes my chest tighten. I've seen nebulas that couldn't compare to her.

The driver holds the door open, and I slide in beside her. The partition between us and the driver clicks shut, sealing us in a bubble of leather and quiet. The city rushes by outside, a blur of neon and shadows.

"I've been waiting a long time to get access to the sixth floor," I say, my voice low. "But as this is our first time at the club, we mustn't be too...overt in our investigations. Giscard will no doubt be watching us closely."

Raven leans back, her fingers drumming lightly against her thigh. "So, basically, we're going to a wild Eyes Wide Shut party, and we need to watch out for anything Grolgath related while making it look like that's not what we're doing?" She smirks, her dark eyes glinting. "Piece of cake."

I chuckle, the sound rumbling in my chest. "You have a warrior's heart, Raven."

She scoffs, waving a hand dismissively. "Warrior's heart? I'm just trying not to get caught breaking into a sex dungeon. Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"Warriors don't always fight with force of arms," I say, my tone serious now. "You might believe you're just my method of gaining entry to the party, but I've come to value your perceptiveness and insight. I'm relying on you as much as you're relying on me tonight."

Her grin softens, and her eyes grow distant for a moment, like she's weighing my words. Then the fire returns, and she leans in, her voice a whisper. "Shut up, Karc, we don't have time to fuck before we reach the club."

Her words hit me like a charging beast, and I can't help the laugh that escapes me. The sound fills the back of the limo, and she joins in, her laughter light and infectious.

"Fair enough," I say, my voice rough with amusement. "But don't think I'll forget that little remark."

"Looking forward to it," she shoots back, her smile wicked.

The limo slows as we approach the entrance of Area 51, the building's sleek facade looming ahead. I watch her, the way her confidence settles over her like armor. She's ready for this—even if she doesn't fully believe it yet.

So am I.

The limousine glides to a stop in front of Area 51's gleaming entrance. My hand reaches for the door, but it swings open before I can touch it. Giscard stands there, resplendent in a black tuxedo, his smile wide and welcoming.

"Kirk! And the lovely Raven. Welcome, welcome." His voice carries the practiced warmth of a consummate host.

My scales itch beneath the image inducer. Something feels off about this personal greeting.

"Giscard. I didn't expect you to meet us personally."

"Nonsense! Your first night at the Hellfire Club deserves special attention." He extends his hand to Raven, helping her from the car. "My dear, you look absolutely stunning. That dress is exquisite."

Raven's fingers tighten on his offered hand. "Thank you, Mr. Lalonde."

"Please, call me Giscard." He guides us through the main floor toward a private elevator tucked behind an ornate panel. "I simply cannot wait to show you both everything the club has to offer. The amenities are... extraordinary."

The elevator ascends smoothly. At the sixth floor, the doors part with a soft chime. Giscard reaches into his jacket pocket and produces two domino masks - one black, one gold. He holds them out to us.

"What are the masks for?" I ask, studying the intricate designs.

Giscard's smile widens as he dons his own silver mask. "Oh, my dear Mr. Stevens, we all wear masks here." He turns, gesturing us to follow him down a hallway lined with Roman columns and red velvet drapery.

"We all wear masks?" Raven whispers beside me, her voice tight with concern. "Is he messing with us?"

"Perhaps," I murmur back, my warrior's instincts screaming warnings. "Be on your guard."

The doors to the Hellfire Club swing open, and the scene that unfolds hits me like a plasma blast to the chest. The room is a cacophony of sound, color, and movement, a symphony of decadence that makes my scales itch beneath my human disguise. Giscard steps aside with a flourish, gesturing us forward like a ringmaster introducing the main act.

Raven's hand tightens around mine as we step inside, her grip betraying the tension she's trying to mask. The air is thick with the scent of expensive perfume, sweat, and something metallic—like the faint tang of blood. My instincts sharpen, my senses on high alert. This place is a hunting ground, and we've just walked into the lion's den.

The main lounge is a sprawling expanse of marble floors and velvet drapery, dotted with clusters of masked guests sipping champagne and engaging in hushed conversations. But it's the other guests that catch my attention—the ones who aren't content to simply talk. Scattered across the room, couples are locked in various states of intimacy, their masks doing little to conceal the raw hunger in their eyes. A woman in a feathered mask straddles her partner on a leather chaise, her moans mingling with the soft strains of a string quartet. Nearby, a man in a silver mask kneels before his lover, his hands bound with a silk scarf as she strokes his hair.

Raven's fingers dig into my arm, pulling my attention back to her. Her dark eyes are wide, her lips parted in a mixture of shock and fascination. I lean down, my lips brushing her ear.

"We can leave if this upsets you," I murmur, my voice low enough that only she can hear.

Her response is a breathy whisper.. "Trust me, Karc. Feeling upset is not the problem

I'm having right now."

I pull back to look at her, and the heat in her gaze is enough to make my own mask feel suffocating. Her cheeks are flushed, her chest rising and falling with quick, shallow breaths. For a moment, the room fades away, the noise and spectacle replaced by the sound of her heartbeat and the faint tremor in her voice. I can't help myself—I close the distance between us, my lips crashing into hers with a hunger that surprises even me.

Raven melts into the kiss, her hands sliding up to grip the lapels of my jacket as if she's afraid I'll pull away. The taste of her is intoxicating, a mix of champagne and something uniquely her that sets my blood on fire. Our masks press together, the cool metal a stark contrast to the heat building between us.

A low chuckle breaks the spell, and we pull apart to find Giscard watching us with an approving smile. "Oh, you're going to fit right in here," he says, his tone dripping with amusement.

Raven's cheeks flush a deeper shade of red, but she doesn't drop her gaze. Instead, she squares her shoulders and gives Giscard a look that could melt steel. "Glad to hear it," she says, her voice steady despite the storm I can see raging behind her eyes.

Giscard gestures for us to follow him toward the buffet table, and I keep Raven's hand firmly in mine as we weave through the crowd. Her fingers are warm, her grip a silent promise that she's not going anywhere. And neither am I.

Giscard leads us through the club like a proud homeowner showing off his estate. The swimming pool area hits us first - a symphony of splashing water and passionate moans. Bodies writhe in and around the pool, their masks glinting in the low light.

Raven's breath catches beside me. Her fingers tighten on mine, but she doesn't look

away.

The dungeon is mercifully empty when we reach it. Chrome and leather gleam under spotlights - whips, crops, and more exotic implements I recognize from my centuries of experience. Raven's eyes linger on a Saint Andrew's cross, her pupils dilating behind her mask. I file that reaction away for later.

A plain door in the corner catches my attention. It's out of place among the carefully curated decadence.

"What's through there?"

"Just maintenance." Giscard's smile doesn't waver, but his eyes narrow fractionally. "Nothing interesting, I assure you."

My warrior's instincts surge. That micro-expression tells me everything I need to know. Whatever lies behind that door, it's far from mundane.

But Giscard's already steering us back toward the main room, his hand hovering possessively at Raven's elbow. The crowd has gathered in a circle, their attention focused inward on something we can't yet see.

"Ah, we're just in time." Giscard's smile widens. "I've prepared a special entertainment just for our two newest members."

CHAPTER 15

RAVEN

My heart hammers against my ribs, each pulse echoing in my ears as I stand beside Karc, his warmth radiating through the thin fabric of my dress. The room feels electric, the air thick with the scent of sweat and expensive perfume, mixed with something darker, primal. The crowd around us is a sea of masks and silk, their eyes glittering with hunger as they focus on the couple in the center of the circle.

The tattooed man moves with a deliberate slowness, his hands gliding over the woman's skin as he peels away the scraps of fabric that barely cover her. She shivers under his touch, her breath hitching as he cinches the leather sleeve around her arms, pinning them behind her back. The pony mask he slides over her head transforms her into something otherworldly, a creature of pure submission. He hooks the bridle to her mask, and she steps forward, her movements jerky, controlled. The crowd murmurs, a low hum of approval and arousal.

I should be horrified. I should be turning away, demanding we leave. But I can't. My body betrays me, heat pooling low in my belly, my breath coming faster.

Karc's hand slides up the back of my neck, his fingers tangling in my hair. He pulls my head back, and his mouth crashes into mine. The kiss is brutal, possessive, and I melt into it, my hands clutching at his shoulders. His tongue slips past my lips, claiming me, and I moan, the sound swallowed by him. The world shrinks to the feel of his mouth on mine, his body pressed against me, the taste of him flooding my senses.

When he finally pulls away, I'm dizzy, my lips swollen, my body thrumming with need.

"You okay?" he murmurs, his voice low, rough.

I nod, unable to speak, my thoughts a jumbled mess.

The tattooed man is leading the woman around now, the bridle tight in his grip, her movements exaggerated, almost theatrical. The crowd is loving it, their laughter and cheers rising like a Greek chorus.

The tattooed man takes the pony-hooded woman from behind, and something inside me snaps. My breath comes in shallow pants, my body betraying me as heat floods my core. I can't tear my eyes away, even though I know I should. My cheeks burn, and I'm suddenly hyper-aware of the mask covering my face, the silk of my dress clinging to my skin. I grab Karc's arm, my fingers digging into his sleeve, and turn to him with a look I don't even fully understand. Pleading? Desperate? Both?

"Go ahead, Kirk," Giscard purrs, his voice slithering into my ears like smoke. "Take your fiancé and give her what she so obviously needs."

His words hit me like a slap, and I jerk back, my face burning hotter beneath the mask. I'm glad it's there, hiding the shame that must be written all over me. The pony-hooded woman screams out an orgasm around her gag, the sound raw and primal, and Giscard's laughter echoes through the room, low and mocking.

"You see, you're not being rude," Giscard says, gesturing at the spectacle in the circle. "The show has already reached its...climax."

He assures us with a smile that we'll have the utmost privacy in the dungeon. Maybe, he adds, in time, we'll learn to share our passion with the other club members. But

that's for another time.

Karc's hand is firm on my lower back as he leads me away from the circle, my legs trembling with every step. I lean in close, my lips brushing his ear as I whisper, "I know what you're thinking, Karc, but you can't go through that door yet."

He quirks an eyebrow, his golden eyes narrowing. "Why not?"

I glance around, making sure no one's close enough to hear. "Because if you go through that door and there is a Grolgath base behind it, it's going to get violent. And some of these people—" I gesture subtly to the crowd—"might be innocent bystanders."

He stops, turning to face me fully. The intensity in his gaze makes my knees weak. "Then what do you propose we do?" he asks, his voice a low rumble that vibrates through me.

We've reached the dungeon door, and I arch a brow, smirking despite the chaos inside me. "Why are you asking me? I'm not the one in charge."

The tension in my shoulders eases slightly, but it's replaced by something else—something hot and simmering as Karc's hand slides down my arm, his fingers intertwining with mine. He leads me deeper into the dungeon, and I wonder just how much of this is an act for him—and how much of it is real.

I want to ensure you don't miss key details and end too early or too late. That door has been haunting Karc's attention ever since we walked into this den of sin, his sunset eyes flicking toward it every few seconds like a compass needle drawn to magnetic north. It's suspicious as hell, plain and unadorned, standing out like a sore thumb in this palace of opulence. But he's been holding back, playing the part of the dutiful fiancé, his fingers twitching with restraint.

Not anymore.

I slide in front of the door, my back pressing against it as I flash him a wicked smile. My heart's racing, but this time it's not fear driving it—it's excitement, danger, and something far more primal.

"Eyes on me, big boy," I tease, my voice low and sultry. "You can do it. For the greater good."

Karc's gaze snaps to me, his golden eyes narrowing, the heat in them unmistakable. He steps closer, his voice a low growl that sends shivers down my spine. "For the greater good. But be careful not to fly too close to the sun, little bird."

I chuckle, the sound giddy and unrestrained. "What happens if I do? You gonna catch me?"

"I'll always catch you," he says, his voice resonating with a command that makes my knees weak. He's undoing his cufflinks now, his movements deliberate, his eyes never leaving mine. "Strip. You must be naked before I finish undoing my cufflinks."

I laugh again, crossing my arms over my chest. "What happens if I'm not?"

"Then you'll be punished," he replies, his voice dark with promise. "I've already finished this sleeve."

The challenge in his eyes sets my blood on fire. I don't hesitate, shimmying out of my dress and panties in record time, the fabric pooling at my feet. I stand before him, naked and unashamed, my breath quickening as his eyes rake over me.

"I win," I say, tilting my chin up, daring him.

"You lose," he counters, his lips curling into a smirk as he finishes the second cufflink.

"What? You're not seriously going to count the mask, are you?" I pout, though the corner of my mouth twitches with a smile.

"No," he says, his voice dropping to a low purr. "But I'm going to count the shoes."

I glance down at my feet, still clad in strappy heels, and let out a groan of mock frustration. "You're impossible."

"Come here," he commands, his voice brooking no argument.

I start to move toward him, but he stops me with a single word. "No. Crawl to me, Raven."

The room seems to narrow, the world shrinking to just him and me. My breath catches, my pulse racing as I drop to my knees. The cool floor beneath me contrasts with the heat building inside, and I move slowly, deliberately, my eyes never leaving his. Every inch forward feels like an eternity, my body trembling with anticipation.

Karc watches me with a predator's intensity, his chest rising and falling with each measured breath. His shirt's off now, and I can see him as he truly is—his golden scales, the faint ridges along his torso, the power coiled in every muscle. He's breathtaking, and I admire him. I've learned to see through his human disguise, and I'm surprised to find I prefer him like this—raw, untamed, and utterly alien.

"Good girl," he murmurs as I reach him, his hand caressing my cheek, his touch sending sparks through me.

I look up at him, my body humming with need, and whisper, "What now?"

Karc's kiss is electric. His lips crash into mine with a fire that burns through everything else—the noise, the crowd, the swirling chaos of the Hellfire Club. My hands claw into his shoulders for balance, my legs trembling as I'm swept into it. When he pulls back, his golden eyes burn into mine. "Trust me, Raven."

Those words shatter something inside me, but there's no time to untangle it. All I can do is nod, my voice stolen by the weight of his touch. Something about him makes me feel safe even when the rest of the world feels like a minefield I'm trying to navigate blindfolded. I wonder if trusting him with my heart would feel this easy, or if it's just my body that's already surrendered fully to him.

He leads me to the St. Andrew's cross, and the leather cuffs glint under the dim light. I don't even hesitate. I'm stepping into the frame before he says a word. He secures my wrists first, his scales brushing against my skin in a way that sends shivers up my spine. Every clasp of the cuff ratchets my arousal higher, and by the time he's at my ankles, I'm squirming against the restraints.

"Still with me?" he rasps, his voice low and rough, his breath warm against my ear.

"I'm here," I breathe, my voice shaky but clear.

He leans in, his lips brushing against the curve of my neck. "Good girl."

The blindfold comes next, and the world vanishes behind the silk. Every sound, every touch becomes sharper, more vivid. His hands glide over my body, the scales on his palms surprisingly soft. When they brush over my nipples, I gasp, arching into his touch. Without warning, his nails rake down my sides, sharp and deliciously cruel.

The sensation sends a jolt through me, and I yelp. "Careful, Kirk," I tease. "I might start to think you like this."

“Oh, I do,” he rumbles, his claws grazing my thigh. “But not as much as you, little bird.”

My retort dies on my lips as his hands cup my breasts, kneading them with a firmness that leaves me breathless. His tongue flicks against my nipple, and I moan, my head falling back against the cross. Another orgasm looms on the horizon already, and this game we’re playing is only making it harder to hold back.

“Fuck, Kirk...” I groan, the words slipping out like a desperate plea.

He chuckles, the sound vibrating against my skin as his lips trail down my stomach. “Such filthy language from a lady. I think someone needs to be taught a lesson.”

Before I can think of a witty reply, he’s on his knees, his face buried between my thighs. His tongue is wicked, curling inside me with a skill that leaves me gasping. One hand keeps me pinned to the cross, the other plays with my clit until I’m shaking, teetering on the edge.

“Hold it back,” he orders, his voice commanding even as he laps at me like a starved man. “You’ll come when I tell you.”

“Kirk— I can’t—” My words dissolve into a whimper as his fingers thrust into me, merciless and unyielding.

“You will,” he growls, his voice leaving no room for refusal.

My orgasm hits me like a wave, crashing through every nerve in my body. I squirt, the flood of pleasure so overwhelming that I nearly black out. Karc drinks it eagerly, his groan muffled against my skin.

When I finally come down, trembling and breathless, he stands, wiping his mouth

with the back of his hand. His grin is feral. “Good girl.”

Karc releases my ankles from the cross, his hands firm but gentle as he unbuckles the leather cuffs. The moment my feet hit the floor, he’s on me, lifting my thighs with ease and pressing me against the cross. His scaled cock brushes against my entrance, and I gasp, my body arching into his.

“Karc—” I start, but the words dissolve into a moan as he thrusts into me, filling me completely. His scales press against my inner walls, a sensation unlike anything I’ve ever felt. My nails dig into his shoulders as he begins to move, each stroke sending waves of pleasure through me.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he growls, his voice low and commanding.

I obey without hesitation, locking my ankles behind his back. His hands grip my hips, his claws pressing into my skin as he picks up the pace. Every thrust is deliberate, calculated to drive me wild, and it’s working. My breath comes in short, sharp gasps, my body trembling with the intensity of it all.

“Fuck, Karc,” I moan, my head falling back. “You feel incredible.”

“Good,” he rumbles, his breath hot against my neck. His teeth graze my skin, sending a shiver down my spine. “Let go, Raven. Come for me.”

The command sends me over the edge, my body convulsing with pleasure as I cry out his name. He follows me moments later, his seed flooding me as he buries himself deep inside. I cling to him, my body still trembling with aftershocks as he slowly lowers me to the floor.

“Best covert operation ever?” I ask, my voice dreamy and sated.

He laughs, the sound warm and rich as he pulls me into his arms. “The best ever.”

I rest my head against his chest, his heartbeat a steady rhythm beneath my ear. For the first time in what feels like forever, I’m completely at peace, wrapped in the warmth of his embrace.

“We should probably get out of here before someone walks in,” I murmur, though I make no move to leave his arms.

“Probably,” he agrees, his hand stroking my hair. “But just a few more minutes.”

I smile, leaning into his touch. For now, everything is perfect, and I’m not ready to let it go just yet.

CHAPTER 16

KARC

"The girl was right." Pyke's hologram flickers above my desk. "We can't risk civilian casualties."

"Glad you agree. I was starting to think I'd gone soft."

"Speaking of soft..." Pyke's ridged face creases with concern. "This human female. Are you certain she's not compromising your judgment?"

My scales bristle. "Raven helped us avoid a potential disaster. And Giscard invited me to lunch today - could be my way to his inner circle."

"Just remember this isn't Horus IV or the Badlands. Your shoot-first-think-never approach won't work here."

"I've mellowed with age, Captain." I lean back, boots on the desk. "Now I shoot first, then think about it after."

"This isn't a joke, Karc." Pyke's image wavers as he leans forward. "The Grolgath have gone dark recently. We can't get any intel on their plans. Giscard is our only lead - don't screw this up."

"When have I ever let you down?"

"Should I list chronologically or alphabetically?"

I wave away his sarcasm. "That was centuries ago. I'm practically civilized now."

"Just be careful. And Karc?" Pyke's expression softens. "Watch yourself with the human girl. Jalshagar bonds are dangerous things."

The transmission ends before I can tell him he's wrong about Raven. But the empty ache in my chest when I think of her tells a different story.

I'm lost in thought the whole way to the restaurant. Giscard hasn't skimmed that's for certain.

The waiter leads me to Giscard's private dining room at Bella Luna. Crystal chandeliers cast rainbow sparkles across white tablecloths and gleaming silverware.

"Kirk, my friend!" Giscard rises, clasping my hand. "The '82 Bordeaux is breathing. Please, sit."

I settle into the plush chair, noting the exits and angles of attack out of centuries of habit. "This is quite the welcome."

"Only the best for New York's most innovative tech genius." Giscard pours deep red wine into Waterford crystal. "Your recent acquisition of Quantum Dynamics was inspired."

"Sounds like you're buttering me up for an investment."

His laugh echoes off marble walls. "Most perceptive, Kirk. Most perceptive indeed."

Giscard leans forward, and something feral glints in his eyes. "What if I told you that

the annihilation of human society as we know it is inevitable, but there's a way to preserve the best parts of it so we can rebuild even better?"

"How could you possibly know-"

He cuts me off with a wave. "The how and why aren't important. The when is what matters. And the when is happening soon." His smile stretches wider. "For just one billion dollars, you and your lovely Raven can have guaranteed seats on the Ark Project."

Ice forms in my gut. This is far worse than expected. The Grolgath aren't just meddling anymore - they're planning to reshape humanity itself.

I raise an eyebrow at Giscard, swirling the wine in my glass. "A billion dollars is a steep price tag for a seat on your yacht, even if it is a spaceship."

His laugh fills the room, rich and knowing. "Oh, Kirk. You're a man of vision, aren't you? Surely you understand the value of a vision like this. But I'd be disappointed if you didn't demand to see what you're investing in. A man like you doesn't get where he is by being reckless with his money."

"That's one way to put it," I say, leaning back in my chair. "Let's cut the sales pitch, Giscard. Show me the goods."

His smile tightens, and he downs the last of his wine. "Follow me."

We leave the restaurant and head back to Area 51. The club is quieter now, a few stragglers nursing drinks in the dimly lit corners. Giscard leads me through the dungeon, past the St. Andrew's cross and the suspension rigs, to the unassuming maintenance door. He waves his hand over a hidden scanner, and the door clicks open, revealing a sleek metal elevator.

The ride down is long, the air growing colder with every passing second. The elevator finally stops with a soft ping, and the doors open to a cavernous underground chamber. My breath catches.

Before us stands a Grolgath space cruiser, its metallic hull gleaming under the harsh artificial light. It's a beast of a ship, bristling with weapons and armored plating. Even without its superluminal drive, it's a sight to behold.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Giscard says, his voice full of pride. "This will take us into orbit, where a fully-functional space station awaits. From there, we can wait out the catastrophe below and rebuild the Earth when it's safe to return."

I let out a low whistle, keeping up the act. "Christ, Giscard. Did you steal this from a Star Wars set?"

He chuckles, but there's an edge to his voice. "Oh, my dear Kirk. This is no prop."

His form shimmers, the human facade melting away to reveal his true Grolgath self. Seven feet of black and white scales, sharp claws, and a serpentine gaze. His voice drops to a hiss. "This is no prop, Mr. Stevens."

I let my jaw drop, feigning terror. My eyes widen, my breath quickens, and I take a step back, my hand flying to my chest. "What the hell are you?"

"Your salvation," he replies, his forked tongue flicking between his teeth. "Welcome to the future, Kirk."

Giscard's scales ripple and fade as he shifts back to human form. His expensive suit materializes without a wrinkle. "I've selected Earth's finest minds. Scientists, artists, visionaries - all chosen for their potential to rebuild civilization."

"Sounds exclusive." "These bastards plan to destroy everything humanity has built."

"Indeed. Which brings me to one final detail." Giscard straightens his tie. "The Ark Project is for married couples only. No exceptions."

My stomach drops. "But Raven and I-"

"Have a week to make it official." His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Consider it a test of commitment. To the cause, of course."

The elevator ride back up feels longer than the descent. We emerge into Area 51's dungeon, now empty of patrons. The St. Andrew's cross casts strange shadows on the wall.

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to attend the ceremony." Giscard claps my shoulder. "Business overseas. But do send photos."

I force a smile. "Wouldn't dream of excluding you completely."

My hands shake with suppressed fury as I drive back to the office. The Grolgath aren't just planning to meddle with the timeline anymore - they're going to decimate Earth's population and handpick who survives.

I need to contact Pyke immediately. And figure out how to tell Raven we need to get married in a week.

The thought of marriage brings unexpected warmth to my chest, despite the circumstances. But I push those feelings aside. There's no time for romance when the fate of humanity hangs in the balance.

"A space station." Pyke's hologram paces my office. "And a cruiser beneath Area 51."

This is worse than we feared."

"At least we know their endgame now." I rub my scales where the image inducer chafes. "They plan to handpick Earth's survivors."

"The Ark's presence tells us something else." Pyke's face hardens. "Whatever method they'll use to destroy humanity, it's not beneath the club. They wouldn't risk their escape vehicle."

The logic clicks. "Which means Giscard won't trigger doomsday until everyone's safely in orbit."

"Precisely." Pyke nods. "And that gives us an advantage. Get yourself and Raven onto that station. Find out how they plan to reshape Earth's future."

"I might need to marry her first. Giscard insists all passengers must be wedded couples."

"Then do what needs to be done." Pyke's expression softens. "I'm activating every Veritas agent worldwide. We'll work on finding their weapon while you infiltrate from within."

"And if we can't stop them in time?"

"Then you'll be our last line of defense." Pyke's hologram flickers. "The fate of humanity rests on this mission, Karc. Don't let personal feelings cloud your judgment."

"When have they ever?" But my chest aches at the thought of using Raven this way.

"Just remember what's at stake." Pyke's image fades. "The entire Project focuses on

this threat now. Nothing else matters until we stop whatever the Grolgath have planned."

CHAPTER 17

RAVEN

I 'm sprawled on the couch, my feet propped up on the coffee table, when Madison bursts in from her room, a bag of chips in one hand and her phone in the other. She plops down next to me, crunching loudly.

“So,” she starts, her voice dripping with faux casualness, “how was the Hellfire Club ? Give me all the juicy details. Did they have, like, a literal fire pit? Or was it more metaphorical? Because I'm picturing Dante's Inferno but with champagne and leather whips.”

I laugh despite myself, tucking my legs under me. “No fire pit. Just a lot of rich people doing things they'd never admit to in public. Honestly, it was... weirdly classy. Marble floors, columns, murals of naked gods. And yeah, a dungeon. Complete with spectators.”

Madison's eyes widen, and she leans in closer. “Dungeon? As in... dungeon dungeon? With chains and stuff?”

“Chains, whips, St. Andrew's crosses—the whole nine yards,” I say, trying to sound nonchalant, but my cheeks burn just thinking about it. “It was... intense.”

“Intense? Girl, you're underselling it. I would've died. Or at least passed out from sheer excitement,” Madison says, popping another chip into her mouth. “So, did you and Kirk, y'know... join in on the fun? Or were you too busy playing detective?”

I groan, running a hand through my hair. “We didn’t join in . We were there to figure out what Giscard’s up to, not role-play as BDSM enthusiasts.”

Madison raises an eyebrow. “But you’re not denying that you thought about it.”

“I’m not not denying it,” I mutter, which makes her cackle.

“Okay, but seriously,” she says, her tone shifting to something softer. “How are you feeling about Kirk? Like, for real. I saw the way you looked at him when he picked you up. You’re not fooling anyone with that ‘it’s just a fake engagement’ act.”

I bite my lip, staring at the wall. My chest tightens, and I can’t quite find the words. Madison knows me too well. She’s seen me through every heartbreak, every bad decision, every time I swore off men forever. But Kirk... he’s different. And that terrifies me.

“I don’t know, Maddy,” I finally say, my voice barely above a whisper. “He’s... not like anyone else. But I can’t—I can’t let myself fall for him. Not again. Not after everything.”

Madison reaches over and squeezes my hand. “Hey, I get it. Trust me, I do. But maybe this time it’s different. Maybe he’s different.”

Before I can respond, my phone buzzes on the table. I pick it up, and my stomach does a backflip when I see Kirk’s name on the screen. I swipe to answer.

“Hey,” I say, trying to sound casual.

“Raven,” his deep voice rumbles through the phone, sending a shiver down my spine. “I was wondering if I could pick you up for dinner tonight. I... need to talk to you.”

My heart skips a beat. “I... yeah. I guess. I mean, we are engaged,” I add with a weak laugh, trying to lighten the mood.

There’s a pause on the other end, and I can almost feel the weight of whatever he’s not saying. “Good. I’ll be there in an hour.”

He hangs up before I can reply. I stare at the phone, my stomach in knots.

“Well?” Madison asks, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“He wants to take me to dinner,” I say, my voice shaky. “To talk.”

Madison whistles low. “Sounds serious. You good?”

I nod, but I’m not sure I believe it myself. My head’s a mess, and my heart feels like it’s about to burst out of my chest. Whatever Kirk wants to talk about, I don’t know if I’m ready to hear it. And I definitely don’t know if I’m ready to admit, even to myself, how much he’s already gotten under my skin.

I’m standing on the sidewalk outside my apartment building, fidgeting with the strap of my bag, when the sleek silver Aston Martin pulls up. The engine purrs like a contented panther, and I roll my eyes. Of course, Kirk would drive something that screams look at me. The door swings open, and there he is—Kirk Stevens, billionaire industrialist, alien warrior, and the man who’s been screwing with my head since the moment I met him.

He steps out of the car, all confidence and sharp angles, and my stomach does a little flip. He’s wearing that stupidly perfect suit again, the one that makes him look like he stepped out of a magazine. His golden eyes lock onto mine, and before I can even think to say hello, he’s pulling me into a kiss that’s just soft enough to make me forget, for a second, why I’m so mad at him.

“Hi,” he says when he finally pulls back, his voice low and warm.

I blink up at him, my heart racing. “Hi. Uh, what was that for?”

He smirks, his hand still on my waist. “Just keeping up appearances. You never know who’s watching.”

“Right,” I mutter, though the heat in my cheeks says otherwise. I slide into the passenger seat, and he closes the door behind me with a solid thunk. The interior smells like leather and something faintly metallic—alien tech, probably. I lean back, trying to calm my nerves, as he gets behind the wheel and peels away from the curb.

We drive in silence for a while, the city lights blurring past. I’m about to break the quiet with some sarcastic remark when he pulls up to a chic little fusion restaurant in Soho. The name—Nebula—is spelled out in glowing letters above the door.

“This your place?” I ask as he steps out and opens my door.

“One of them,” he says, offering me his hand. I take it, trying to ignore the way his fingers feel against mine. “I thought we could talk somewhere private.”

Inside, the restaurant is all sleek lines and soft lighting. The hostess gives Kirk a knowing smile and leads us to a secluded booth in the back, away from prying eyes. The table is already set with plates of food I didn’t order—sushi, noodles, some kind of curry that smells amazing.

I slide into the booth, eyeing him warily. “Okay, spill. What’s going on? You’re being even more mysterious than usual, and that’s saying something.”

He sits across from me, his expression serious. “Giscard’s plans are worse than we thought.”

“Worse than a secret alien sex dungeon?” I quip, but the look on his face shuts me up.
“Okay, what is it?”

“He’s building a space station,” Kirk says, his voice low. “A refuge for the elite when the catastrophe hits.”

I freeze, a piece of sushi halfway to my mouth. “Catastrophe? What catastrophe?”

“The one that’s going to wipe out civilization as we know it,” he says, like he’s talking about the weather. “Giscard’s planning to trigger it, and his little Ark ship is the only way off this rock.”

I gape at him, my stomach churning. “Space stations? A catastrophe that’s going to wipe out civilization as we know it? And Giscard really is a shape-shifting alien after all?” My voice pitches higher with every word. “Wow. That’s... a lot.”

“I’m afraid I’m not done,” Kirk says, leaning closer. “We need to get married by the end of the week if we want a chance to stop him.”

I almost drop my chopsticks. “Married? As in, married married?”

He nods, his golden eyes boring into mine. “It’s the only way I can get on that Ark ship and stop this before it starts.”

I sit back, trying to process what he’s saying. My mind is racing, but all I can focus on is the way he’s looking at me—like I’m the only thing that matters in the entire galaxy.

“Kirk,” I say slowly, “do you even hear yourself right now? This is insane.”

“I know,” he says, reaching across the table to take my hand. “But it’s the only way.

And... I need you, Raven. I can't do this without you."

This is insane. Absolutely insane. But then again, so is everything else that's happened since I met him. And somehow, looking into his eyes, it doesn't feel like a question.

It feels like the only thing that makes sense.

But then it hits me. If we're going to pull this off—if we're going to convince Giscard that Kirk Stevens and Raven Silver are the real deal—there's one glaring problem we haven't addressed. I lean forward, my chopsticks hovering over a piece of sushi I've completely forgotten about.

"All right, if we're doing this, we're going to have to do it right," I say, my voice steady. "I mean, Giscard is going to want to make sure that we're being authentic, isn't he? Even if he's not on the guest list?"

Karc chuckles, the sound low and rumbling. "I'm more than willing to open my wallet and spend on a lavish wedding."

I give him a look, one that says don't be an idiot. "Don't be stupid. I'm not talking about that. It's a fake wedding anyway." I pause, biting my lip. "What I mean is our families. We need to meet each other's families."

The words hang in the air, and I can feel the dread creeping in. My parents. God, my parents. Just the thought of introducing Karc to them makes me want to crawl under the table and hide. I shudder, and it's not because of the restaurant's air conditioning.

"And believe me," I add, my voice dropping to a mutter, "I wish I was an orphan right about now."

Karc raises an eyebrow, his golden eyes narrowing slightly. “Why would you say such a thing?”

I sigh, leaning back in the booth and crossing my arms. “My parents are... let’s just say unsophisticated. Unkind people might call them hillbillies.”

His lips twitch, and for a second, I think he’s going to laugh. But then he leans forward, his expression serious. “Raven, I’m sure I’ll get along with your parents just fine.”

I snort, shaking my head. “Famous last words,” I warn him. “You’ve met Giscard’s kind of rich and sleazy. You’re about to meet my kind of rich and sleazy. Trust me, it’s a whole different level of awkward.”

His hand reaches across the table, his fingers brushing against mine. The contact is light, but it’s enough to make my heart skip a beat. “I’m not worried,” he says, his voice soft but firm. “If they’re your family, they can’t be all bad.”

I give him a wry smile. “Oh, they’re bad,” I mutter. “But hey, if you survive dinner with the Silvers, you can probably handle anything Giscard throws at you.”

CHAPTER 18

KARC

The limo glides through the streets of New York, the city's neon glow flickering through the tinted windows. Raven's sitting next to me, her fingers drumming nervously on her thigh. She's been quiet since we left her apartment, which is unusual. Normally, she's got something sharp or sarcastic to say. But not today. Today, she's wound tight, her tension almost palpable.

"How will I know it's them?" I ask as the limo pulls up to the terminal. I'm not exactly versed in human family dynamics, but I'm pretty sure "meet the parents" is supposed to be a big deal.

Raven glances out the window, then back at me with a look that's half amusement, half dread. "Oh, believe me, you'll know."

Before I can press her further, the car door swings open, and chaos spills in. Two figures barrel toward us, their voices carrying over the din of the airport crowd. The man is tall and wiry, his skin weathered like old leather, and he's wearing a plaid shirt that looks like it's been through a wood chipper. The woman is shorter, with a straw hat perched precariously on her head and a banjo slung over her shoulder.

"Well, I'll be damned," the man booms, his voice like gravel tumbling down a hill. "You sho nuff a big fella." He thrusts a calloused hand toward me, and I shake it. His grip is surprisingly strong for a human. "You richie rich, is that right?"

"What?" I blink, caught off guard. "I thought you said your parents spoke English, Raven."

She pinches the bridge of her nose, her cheeks flushing. "They do. That is English. Sort of."

"Aw, don't mind Terry," the woman says, her voice warm and twangy. She steps forward and pulls me into a hug that smells faintly of moonshine and hay. "I'm Sandy. Raven's mama. And you're the fella who's takin' our little girl off our hands, ain't ya?"

"Mom!" Raven hisses, her face turning red.

Sandy just laughs, a sound like a banjo string snapping. "Oh, hush, darlin'. Ain't no shame in it. He's a looker, I'll give ya that."

Terry claps me on the shoulder, his grin revealing a gold tooth. "So, what's the plan, big guy? You takin' us to one o' them fancy restaurants where they charge ya a hundred bucks for a plate o' lettuce?"

I glance at Raven, who's now staring at the ceiling as if she's praying for it to swallow her whole. "Actually, yes. I thought we could..."

But Terry's already climbing into the limo, his boots tracking mud on the leather seats. "Well, hell, what're we waitin' for? Let's get this show on the road!"

Sandy follows him, still clutching her banjo, and Raven mutters something under her breath that sounds like "kill me now."

As the limo pulls away from the curb, Terry leans forward, his elbows on his knees. "So, Kirk, is it? What's your story, son? You one o' them tech billionaires? Or did ya

inherit your fortune from some fancy-pants family?"

"Terry!" Raven snaps, her voice sharp. "Can you not interrogate him for five minutes?"

"Aw, c'mon, darlin'. I'm just makin' conversation. Ain't that right, Kirk?" He winks at me, and I find myself grinning despite myself.

"I built my own company," I say, which isn't entirely a lie. Veritas is technically my company, even if it's not exactly a human one.

Terry nods approvingly. "Good for you, son. Nothin' wrong with a little elbow grease. Ain't that right, Sandy?"

Sandy's strumming a tune on her banjo, her head bobbing along. "Mhm. Gotta earn your keep in this world. Money don't grow on trees, y'know."

Raven groans, sinking lower in her seat. "Please don't start with the life lessons."

Sandy stops playing and points the ban neck at Raven. "Now, you listen here, missy. You might think you're all grown up now, but you'll always be our little girl. And we've got every right to give you advice, whether you like it or not."

"Especially when it comes to marryin' rich," Terry adds with a chuckle.

Raven buries her face in her hands. "This is a nightmare."

I reach over and squeeze her hand, my scales brushing against her skin through my image inducer. "It's going to be fine," I say, though I'm not entirely sure I believe it myself.

Terry notices the gesture and raises an eyebrow. "Well, look at that. You got my daughter blushin'. That's a first."

Sandy grins, her eyes twinkling. "I like him already."

Raven groans again, muttering, "I'm gonna need a drink."

The limo pulls away from the Four Seasons, and Raven slumps against me with a heavy sigh. Her tension melts, replaced by visible relief.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" I squeeze her hand.

"Easy for you to say. You didn't grow up with them." She straightens her dress. "I hope your family is easier to deal with."

My throat tightens. The words catch, and I stare straight ahead at the partition between us and the driver.

"Karc?"

I focus on a spot on the leather upholstery.

"Kaaaaarc." Raven's voice rises with concern. "What aren't you telling me? You're not already married are you?"

"No!" The word explodes from my chest. "No, nothing like that. It's just... my father, Vrahmin. He's... curmudgeonly and traditional."

"Traditional how?" She turns to face me fully. "Come on, spill it. How bad can he be?"

"There's no way to prepare you for my father." I shake my head. "He's..."

My phone chirps with an incoming message. The screen lights up with Vrahmin's contact photo - a scowling face that matches his personality perfectly. My stomach drops as I read the message.

"I believe the human phrase is, speak of the devil and he shall appear." I show Raven the screen. "My father is at my office, waiting to meet us."

The lobby of my office building is a sleek, modern space, all glass and steel. Raven and I step inside, and I immediately spot my father. He's holding court near the reception desk, a crowd of wide-eyed Vakutan fawning over him as he regales them with some exaggerated war story. His human disguise is impeccable—tall, broad-shouldered, with a shock of silver hair and a jawline that could cut glass. But his voice, booming and irreverent, is unmistakably Vrahmin.

"And there I was," he's saying, gesturing wildly, "knee-deep in Grolgath guts, my plasma rifle jammed, and I thought, 'Well, this is it. Time to go out in a blaze of glory.' So I grabbed the nearest one by the tail?—"

"Grolgath don't have tails," I mutter under my breath, but no one hears me over the sound of Vrahmin's laughter.

He spots us before I can steer Raven in the opposite direction. His eyes light up, and he abandons his audience, striding toward us with all the subtlety of a charging rhino.

"Karc!" he bellows, his arms spread wide. "My boy! Come here, give your old man a hug."

I hesitate a split second too long. That's all he needs.

Vrahmin's knee connects with my groin with ruthless precision. The air leaves my lungs in a wheeze, and I double over, clutching myself. Raven gasps, her hand flying to her mouth.

"Oh my god!" she cries out.

"You're too slow!" Vrahmin cackles, slapping his thigh like it's the funniest thing he's ever seen. "You starting a farm, boy? Because I just gave ya a couple of ACHERS."

"Raven," I manage to groan, still bent over. "Meet Vrahmin, my father."

She looks from me to him, her expression a mix of horror and disbelief. "What the hell was that?"

"A Vakutan greeting," Vrahmin says, still grinning. "Don't worry, I won't give you one." He takes her hand, bowing slightly as he presses a kiss to her knuckles. "You must be Raven. My son's taste is finally improving. You're the most beautiful human I've ever seen."

Raven blinks, caught off guard. "Uh... thanks?"

"If my boy ever pisses ya off too much and you divorce him, give me a call," he adds with a wink.

"Father!" I straighten up, my face burning. "Would you stop?"

Raven bursts into laughter, the sound ringing through the lobby. "Oh my god, I think I like him."

Vrahmin chuckles, slapping me on the back hard enough to make me stumble. "See?"

She's got a sense of humor. Keep this one, Karc. She's a keeper."

"Yeah, yeah," I mutter, glaring at him. "Can we take this upstairs before you embarrass me any further?"

"Embarrass you?" Vrahmin snorts. "Boy, I'm just getting started."

CHAPTER 19

RAVEN

The white dress mocks me in the mirror's reflection. My fingers tug at the lace sleeves, adjusting them for the hundredth time.

"Stop fidgeting," Madison says. "You'll get sweat stains all over that expensive fabric."

"We all know you didn't belong in a white dress anyway." Madison winks at me through the mirror.

"Madison!" Mom's scandalized gasp echoes through the dressing room. "Don't say such things about my baby girl."

The flash from Mom's phone blinds me. Again. "Mom, please. You must have taken a thousand pictures already."

"Only three hundred and twelve," Madison says, peering over Mom's shoulder at the phone. "But who's counting?"

My stomach churns as Mom snaps another photo. The guilt gnaws at me - this whole ceremony is built on lies. Mom's dreamed of this day since I was little, planning every detail. And here I am, turning it into some cosmic joke.

But what choice do I have? The fate of the world hangs in the balance. That has to

count for something in the grand karmic scheme, right?

My eyes drift to the window, where clouds drift past. Somewhere out there, Karc is getting ready too. My heart skips at the thought of him, and I shove those feelings back down where they belong. I can't examine them too closely. Not now. Not when everything depends on keeping my head clear.

The wedding planner bursts in, her clipboard clutched to her chest like a shield. “Darling, it’s time! The bridal march will start any moment now.” Her eyes glisten with excitement, and she clasps my hands, nearly crushing the bouquet of lilies I’m holding. “Your future husband looks absolutely divine in his tuxedo. Like he stepped out of a GQ spread, I swear. You’re a lucky girl.”

I force a smile, my lips trembling. Divine? If only she knew the truth. My stomach churns, guilt twisting like a knife. My mom’s been snapping photos all morning, her face glowing with pride. Dad’s been beaming, bragging to anyone who’ll listen about his “little girl” marrying a billionaire. Madison’s been cracking jokes to keep the mood light, but I can see the worry in her eyes. She knows this isn’t real. She knows I’m lying to everyone I love.

The planner claps her hands, snapping me out of my spiral. “Madison, darling, you’re up! Jareth’s waiting at the end of the aisle. Don’t keep the poor man waiting too long—he looks like he’s about to faint.”

Madison smirks, adjusting her maid-of-honor dress. “Oh, I’m sure Jareth can handle it. That guy’s built like a brick house. I’m more worried about him breaking the aisle in half when he walks.”

The planner laughs, but I don’t miss the way Madison’s eyes flicker to me, filled with unspoken questions. She knows Jareth’s not exactly human. Hell, after everything I’ve told her about Karc and the Vakutan, I’m surprised she’s still holding it together.

But if anyone can handle this insanity, it's Madison.

As Madison heads out, Mom steps up, her straw hat perched perfectly on her head like always. She hugs me carefully, her hands trembling. "You look beautiful, sweetheart. Just beautiful." Her voice cracks, and she wipes a tear from her cheek. "I'm going to take my seat now. You take your time, okay? Let's make sure your father hasn't passed out from all the excitement."

She leaves, and I'm alone for a moment, the weight of the lies pressing down on me like a leaden blanket. The door creaks open, and Dad steps in, his eyes already misty.

"Raven," he says, his voice thick with emotion. He takes me in, his gaze lingering on the dress, the veil, the flowers. "You look like a damn princess. I always knew you'd grow up to be something special, but this? Marrying a man like Kirk Stevens? I never would have imagined it."

I bite my lip, fighting the urge to cry. "Dad, I?—"

He holds up a hand, cutting me off. "Now, don't you go getting all emotional on me. I'm the one who's supposed to cry at weddings, not the bride." He chuckles, but there's a sadness in his eyes that hits me like a punch to the gut. "I just... I want you to know how proud I am of you. You've always been so strong, so independent. I know I haven't always been the best dad, what with the moonshine and the redneck nonsense, but?—"

"Dad," I interrupt, stepping forward and hugging him tightly. "Stop. You're the best dad I could've asked for. I'm not embarrassed of you. Not ever. You and Mom? You're my family. That's all that matters."

He hugs me back, his arms tight around me. "I love you, kiddo."

“I love you too, Dad.”

The wedding planner’s voice cuts through the moment, sharp and insistent. “Time for the march of the bride! Are we ready?”

Dad pulls back, offering me his arm. “Ready to get hitched, kiddo?”

I take a deep breath, my heart pounding in my chest. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

The doors swing open, and my heart slams against my ribs like it’s trying to escape. I’m pinned under the weight of a thousand eyes, but it’s Karc’s gaze that nearly brings me to my knees. He stands at the altar, a tower of elegance in his tailored tuxedo, his orange eyes burning through me like a laser. There’s something raw in that look, something that makes my knees wobble and my breath halt.

“Easy, kiddo,” Dad mutters under his breath, his arm tightening around mine. “You got this.”

I swallow hard, forcing one foot in front of the other. The chapel is a cathedral of decadence, all marble floors and gilded arches, with sunlight streaming through stained glass windows. The air smells like lilies and anxiety, and every step feels like walking through molasses. My dress swishes around my legs, the train trailing behind me like a ghost of the life I’m leaving behind.

Karc’s eyes never leave mine. Not once. His human disguise is flawless, but I know what’s beneath it—scales, strength, a heart that beats with the rhythm of a warrior. His smile is soft, but there’s a shadow in it, a sadness that twists my insides. He’s not just playing a part anymore, and neither am I. This isn’t just about the mission.

“Dad,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “What if I’m making a mistake?”

He stops mid-step, turning to face me. His eyes are glassy, but he grins, his big, gruff voice cutting through the tension. “Raven, you’re the smartest person I know. If you’re doing this, there’s a damn good reason. And besides,” he adds, nodding toward Karc, “that guy? He looks at you like you’re the only thing in the room worth seeing. That’s something, kiddo.”

I blink back tears, squeezing his arm. “Thanks, Dad.”

We keep walking, and with each step, Karc’s presence grows stronger, pulling me toward him like a magnet. My stomach churns, my hands clammy inside my gloves. I want to scream. I want to stop this whole charade, to tell everyone the truth. But I can’t. The world’s counting on us, and I’m not going to let it down.

When I finally reach the altar, Dad places my hand in Karc’s, his grip warm and steady. “Take care of her,” he says, his voice thick with emotion.

“Always,” Karc replies, his voice low and certain. He squeezes my hand, and I swear I feel his scales beneath the disguise, the faintest hint of the alien strength hidden beneath his skin.

The reverend clears his throat, smiling at us like we’re just another happy couple. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join this man and this woman in the bonds of matrimony...”

Karc leans in, his lips brushing my ear. “You look stunning,” he murmurs, his breath warm against my skin. “But you always do.”

I glance up at him, my heart racing. “You clean up pretty good yourself,” I whisper back, trying to keep my voice light. But inside, I’m a mess. His hand tightens around mine, and for a moment, everything else fades away. It’s just him and me, the altar, and the weight of what we’re about to do.

The reverent continues, his voice a distant hum. Karc's thumb brushes over my knuckles, and I realize I'm shaking. He doesn't say a word, but his eyes tell me everything I need to know. He's here. He's not going anywhere. And somehow, that makes it harder, because this isn't real. Not for him. Not for me. Not yet.

My heart's pounding so hard it feels like it's going to burst through my chest. The reverent's voice drones on, blending with the muffled coughs and whispers of the guests. I'm frozen, staring at Karc—Kirk—who's looking at me like I'm the only thing in the room. His grip on my hand tightens, and I feel the faintest hint of his scales beneath the illusion of his human disguise.

Then, out of nowhere, he interrupts the reverend. "I'm sorry, everyone," Karc says, his voice smooth and confident, like he does this at every wedding. "I wouldn't be Kirk Stevens if I didn't put my own stamp on things."

The crowd laughs, and for a moment, the tension eases. But then he leans in, his lips brushing my ear as he whispers, "The wedding may be fake, but my love for you is not. I love you, Raven."

My breath hitches, and I'm pretty sure my jaw hits the floor. Did he just—? No, he couldn't have. I mean, I knew he cared about me, but love? That's not part of the script. That's not part of the deal. My body trembles, my knees threatening to buckle, but Karc's already retreating, nodding to the reverend to continue like he didn't just drop a bomb on me.

The room swims, and I'm barely aware of the reverend asking Karc if he takes me as his wife. His "I do" is firm, unwavering, and it sends a shiver through my core. Then it's my turn, and the words stick in my throat. Everyone's staring at me, their faces a blur of expectation and impatience. The reverend clears his throat, and the silence stretches, awkward and suffocating.

I glance at Karc, his orange eyes burning with something I can't quite name. I grab the lapels of his tuxedo, hauling myself up on my tiptoes so I can whisper in his ear. "Nothing about today is fake."

His eyes widen, and for the first time since I've known him, Karc looks speechless. I drop back down, my lips quirking into a small smile. Then I turn to the reverend. "I do, sorry," I say, my voice steadier than I feel.

The guests laugh, the tension dissolving into applause, but I'm still reeling. This isn't just about the mission anymore. This isn't just about the world ending or the Grolgath or any of it. This is about him . About me . About us .

And for the first time, I let myself believe it might be real.

"You may kiss the?—"

I surge forward, meeting Karc halfway as his mouth crashes into mine. His lips are soft but demanding, and I melt into him like I've done this a thousand times before. His hand slides down my back, cupping my ass through layers of white silk, and the crowd erupts in whoops and cheers.

I should be embarrassed. I should care that my conservative aunt is probably having a heart attack in the third row, or that Dad's definitely turning red as a tomato. But I don't. Not with Karc's tongue sliding against mine, not with his heart thundering against my palms where they're pressed to his chest.

When we finally break apart, I'm dizzy and breathless. Karc's eyes are molten orange, burning with promises that make my toes curl inside my white satin heels.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the reverend announces, "I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Kirk Stevens!"

Karc takes my hand, and we turn to face our guests. The applause is deafening, but all I can focus on is the way my cheeks ache from smiling. When was the last time I smiled like this? Not the practiced customer service smile from Area 51, or the careful mask I wore after Tommy broke my heart. No, this is different. This is real.

We practically float down the aisle together, rose petals raining down around us. My face hurts from grinning so wide, but I can't stop. Won't stop. It's like rediscovering a part of myself I thought was lost forever, buried under years of heartbreak and disappointment.

Maybe I forgot how to truly smile somewhere along the way. Maybe those jerks who used me and left me took that ability with them when they walked out. But here, now, with Karc's hand warm in mine and his love burning in my chest, I've found it again.

CHAPTER 20

KARC

The music swells, a slow, sultry beat that wraps around us like a warm embrace. My arms tighten around Raven's waist, drawing her closer as we sway on the dance floor. The reception hall is alive with laughter, clinking glasses, and the occasional drunken shout from the wet bar where Terry Silver and my father, Vrahmin, are holding court. Those two are a match made in chaos—Terry with his moonshine-fueled charm and Vrahmin with his obnoxious, boisterous humor.

Raven's head tilts slightly, her gaze flicking over my shoulder toward the corner of the room. "Madison's been slow dancing with Jareth all night," she murmurs, her fingers tracing idle patterns on the back of my neck. "She's not exactly being subtle."

I glance over, catching sight of Jareth's yellow-scaled form hunched awkwardly over Madison's petite frame. "He's out of his depth," I say with a chuckle. "Your roommate might be too much for poor Jareth to handle."

Raven snorts, her breath warm against my chest. "He's going to need therapy after this."

The smile slips from my lips as I look down at her, my hand cupping her cheek. "We must speak at some point, Raven."

She sighs, her body tensing for a moment before she relaxes again, leaning her head against my chest. "I know. But today has been a lot, so can we just... not for a little

while longer?”

My thumb strokes her jawline, my voice softening. “As if I could ever refuse you anything, little bird. I am, as always, utterly at your mercy.”

Her lips curl into a smirk, though her eyes stay closed. “I don’t think you were at my mercy when you had me strapped to the St. Andrew’s Cross.”

I lift her chin with a finger, capturing her lips in a slow, deep kiss that leaves her breathless. My voice is a low growl as I pull back just enough to speak. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” she pants, her cheeks flushed. “Guess I do.”

The dance ends, and Raven excuses herself with a soft smile. “Powder room,” she says, slipping her hand from mine. I watch her go, the sway of her hips in that dress doing nothing to calm the protective fire in my chest.

Before I can follow, my father clamps a hand on my shoulder, dragging me toward the bar. His laughter booms, a sound that’s equal parts fondness and exasperation. “Karc, my boy,” he says, slapping the counter. “You’ve done well. A human jalshagar. Who would’ve thought?”

I grit my teeth, forcing a smile. “She’s more than that, Father.”

He waves a hand, already halfway into his third glass of something amber and potent. “Of course, of course. But let’s not forget where you come from, eh? You’re a Vakutan warrior, not some lovesick human.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” I say, my voice tight. I’m scanning the room, counting the minutes Raven will take, and growing uneasy at the time passing. “Father, I need

to?—”

“Nonsense,” he barks, shoving another drink into my hand. “You’ve spent enough time chasing after her. Sit. Drink. Tell your old man about the space station.”

I down the drink in one gulp, the burn doing little to ease the growing tension in my chest. “Raven’s been gone too long.”

“Bah,” he says, but I’m already moving, pushing past him. My father follows, his laughter dying as he sees the set of my jaw.

The scent of Raven—jasmine and something uniquely hers—leads me outside. The cool night air hits my face, but it’s the sight that chills me to the bone. Three Grolgath, their true forms barely concealed in the dim light, are dragging Raven toward a black car.

Her scream tears through the night, and I can’t tell if it’s panic or pain. It doesn’t matter. The sound ignites something primal in me, something that has no place for reason or restraint.

I roar, a sound that shakes the ground beneath my feet, and charge. One of the Grolgath turns, his scales glinting, but I’m already on him. My fist connects with his jaw, and his head snaps back with a sickening crack. He stumbles, but I don’t give him a chance to recover. My hands are on his throat, squeezing until I feel the bones give way.

Behind me, my father’s voice rises, sharp and commanding. “Karc! The car!”

I let the lifeless Grolgath drop and turn just in time to see the car roaring away, Raven’s face pressed against the window. My father is already chasing it, his old legs moving faster than they should.

I sprint after him, my breath coming in ragged gasps. The car disappears around a corner, and when I round it, I skid to a stop. My father is lying in the street, clutching his chest, his face pale and drawn.

“Father!” I’m at his side in an instant, my hands on him, searching for wounds. “What happened?”

He coughs, a wet, rattling sound. “Got too close,” he manages, his voice weak. “Bastards hit me with something. My hearts—Karc, they’re failing.”

My own hearts pound in my chest, panic clawing at my throat. But I force it down, reaching for the comm unit on my wrist. “Pyke,” I bark, the word sharp and desperate. “I need medics. Now.”

My father grabs my arm, his grip surprisingly strong. “Don’t let them take her, Karc. She’s your jalshagar. You fight for her. You understand me?”

I nod, my vision blurring. “I won’t let her go, Father. I swear it.”

"Father," I choke out, my hands gripping his shoulders, feeling the tremors running through his body. His skin is pale, his breaths shallow and labored. "Hold on. The medics are coming. Just hold on."

His hand clamps around my wrist, his grip still stronger than it should be. His voice is a rasp, but there’s no mistaking the command in it. "Go. Raven—she’s your jalshagar. You don’t let them take her. You hear me, boy? You fight for her. Fight like a Vakutan."

I hesitate, torn between the man who raised me and the woman who owns my soul. His eyes, sharp and unyielding, lock onto mine. "Go, Karc. Now."

With a roar of frustration, I release him and sprint down the block, my feet pounding the pavement. The black car is just ahead, its taillights a blur. Raven's face is pressed against the window, her eyes wide with terror. My hearts hammer in my chest, a drumbeat of fury and fear.

The car begins to rise, hovering a foot off the ground, then two. They're not just driving—they're flying. My mind races, calculating distances, angles, possibilities. I leap onto the hood of a parked sedan, the metal buckling under my weight, and then onto the next car, my movements fluid, desperate. The car ascends faster, but I'm gaining, my legs pumping, my focus razor-sharp.

I make the jump.

My hand closes around the car's axle, my body slamming against the undercarriage. The force nearly rips my arm from its socket, but I hold on, gritting my teeth as the ground falls away. The wind whips around me, tearing at my clothes, my hair. The city blurs below, a sea of lights and shadows. My grip tightens, my muscles screaming, but I don't dare let go.

A head leans out of the passenger side window, scales glinting in the moonlight. The Grolgath grins, a predator's smile, and raises a weapon.

"Well, well," he sneers, his voice carrying over the roar of the wind. "Looks like we've got a stowaway."

I swing my legs up, hooking them around the axle, and pull myself closer to the car. "You've got my jalshagar," I snarl, my voice low and dangerous. "You're going to regret that."

The Grolgath laughs, a sound that grates against my nerves. "Big talk for a man hanging off a car a mile in the sky. Let's see how long you last."

The weapon levels at me, and I tense, my mind racing. One shot at this height, and even a Vakutan might not survive the fall. But I don't have time to think, only to act. I swing my body again, using the momentum to kick the weapon out of his hand. It spins away, disappearing into the void below.

The Grolgath curses, pulling back into the car, but I don't give him a chance to regroup. I haul myself up, my fingers digging into the grooves of the car's undercarriage, my muscles burning with the effort. The wind howls in my ears, the city a distant memory beneath me. My eyes lock onto the open window, and I pull myself closer, inch by agonizing inch.

Raven's face appears in the window, her eyes wide with relief and fear. "Karc!"

"I'm coming, little bird," I growl, despite the chaos around us. "Hold on."

CHAPTER 21

RAVEN

The Grolgath's head snaps back as my heel connects with the base of his skull. He hisses, a sound that's more annoyed than pained, and rounds on me. His eyes narrow, slit pupils focusing on me like a predator spotting its next meal. I shrink back against the car seat, the leather cool against my skin, and glance out the shattered window. Karc's golden scales glint in the sunlight as he pulls himself closer, his claws digging into the car's undercarriage.

"Hey now," I say, holding up my hands. "Your boss Giscard wants me alive, remember? Killing me would be bad for your career."

The Grolgath's tongue flicks out, tasting the air. "Yesss, but accidentssss do happen," he says, drawing out the sibilants like he's auditioning for a bad horror movie.

I can't help it. I laugh. "Oh, come on, dude. You don't have to lean into the whole reptilian thing so hard. Giscard doesn't sound like a snake with a lisp. He's got class. You're just trying too hard."

The Grolgath freezes, his expression shifting from menace to something almost...embarrassed. "That'sss not fair," he says, his voice quieter now. "I have a sssspeech impediment."

I blink, my laughter dying in my throat. "Wait, are you serious? Oh, shit. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to?—"

Before I can finish, Karc's arm shoots through the broken window, his clawed hand gripping the Grolgath by the neck. The lizard-man's eyes widen as Karc yanks him out of the car like he's pulling a weed. The Grolgath flails, his claws scrabbling at Karc's arm, but it's no use. With a roar, Karc hurls him into open air.

"Sssssshit—" The Grolgath's scream is cut off as he plummets toward the ground, his voice swallowed by the wind.

I lean out the window, my stomach lurching as I catch a glimpse of the city far below. "Did you just?—?"

"Focus," Karc growls, his voice sharp but steady. He swings himself into the car, his claws digging into the frame for balance. The car wobbles, the engine sputtering beneath us. "We need to land this thing before it explodes."

"Explodes?" I yelp, scrambling to buckle myself in. "Why didn't you lead with that?"

"Because you were busy making friends with the Grolgath," he snaps, sliding into the driver's seat. His scaled hands grip the wheel, his claws ripping through the leather as he wrestles the car into a controlled descent.

"I was distracting him so you could climb in!" I protest, clutching the seat for dear life as the car dips sharply. "It worked, didn't it?"

"It worked," he admits grudgingly, his gaze fixed on the horizon. The city skyline rushes up to meet us, the buildings growing larger with terrifying speed. "But next time, maybe try not to insult the enemy's speech patterns. It's rude."

"Rude?" I choke out a laugh, even as my heart hammers in my chest. "Says the guy who just tossed him out of a moving car!"

Karc's lips twitch, the closest thing to a smile I've ever seen from him. "I'm sure he can shapeshift his arms into wings or something."

The engine sputters again, and the car jerks violently. My stomach lurches as we drop another few hundred feet. "Karc?—"

The car jerks to a sudden stop, hanging motionless in mid-air. My heart skips a beat as I look at Karc. His golden scales shimmer under the sunlight streaming through the windshield, but his expression isn't reassuring.

"It wasn't me," he says.

A shadow falls over us, and I crane my neck to look up through the broken window. My mouth goes dry at the sight. A massive dark shape hovers above, sleek and alien. Blue-white light bathes our car in an ethereal glow.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"They're taking us into the ship," Karc says, his voice tight.

The car rises slowly, drawn upward by what has to be a tractor beam. My stomach does flip-flops as we ascend into a cavernous metal bay. The wedding dress rustles around my legs, and I almost laugh at how absurd this is. Here I am, still in my bridal gown, being abducted by aliens.

The car settles onto the hangar floor with a gentle thud. Cold, recycled air hits my face through the broken window. The metallic tang makes my nose wrinkle.

Twenty reptilian figures emerge from behind crates and vehicles, their rifle barrels trained on us. Their scales glisten under harsh overhead lights, a rainbow of colors from emerald to obsidian. The rifles in their clawed hands pulse with an ominous red

glow.

"Don't move," Karc whispers. "Let me do the talking."

Karc throws his head back and laughs, the sound echoing off the metal walls of the hangar bay. My heart skips - I've never heard him make that sound before.

"You fools," he says, "you fell right into my trap. This car contains a powerful explosive device."

I bite my lip to keep from smiling. The remote in his hand is just for the car's sound system - I recognize it from our drives together. But the Grolgath don't know that.

The reptilian soldiers exchange glances, their scaled faces uncertain. A few take tentative steps forward.

Karc brandishes the remote. "Not one step closer, or we all go to meet our respective gods."

The Grolgath freeze, their weapons wavering. One of them hisses something in their native tongue that makes the others back away slightly.

The click of boots on metal draws my attention to a familiar figure striding across the hangar. Giscard. He's in his human form, immaculate in a tailored suit despite the late hour.

"What seems to be the situation here?" Giscard asks, his voice smooth as silk.

Karc waves the remote. "One press and this whole ship goes up in flames."

Giscard's lips curl into an amused smile. "Go ahead then." His eyes lock with Karc's.

"I'm calling your bluff."

My stomach drops as Giscard turns to his soldiers. "If he tries to leave the vehicle, shoot the woman."

The ship reeks of sterile air and something faintly metallic, like blood that's just started to rust. My wedding dress is a lost cause, the white fabric smudged with grease and what I hope isn't Grolgath spit. Karc sits beside me, his golden scales flickering faintly under the ship's harsh lighting. His eyes—those sunset orange eyes—are scanning the room like he's already planning how to take this place apart.

The walls shudder as the ship docks with the space station, and the hatch hisses open. Giscard steps through, still in his human facade, that smug smile plastered on his face. "Welcome," he says, sweeping his arm toward the station's interior.

I step out, and my breath catches. The station is... insane. On one side, it's a jagged, cratered asteroid, like something ripped straight out of a sci-fi movie. But the other side—holy hell. It's a city, sleek and glowing under a translucent dome. Buildings rise like crystal spires, their surfaces shimmering with iridescent light. The streets are alive with movement—Grolgath in their true forms, their scales catching the light in a kaleidoscope of colors.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Giscard says, his voice dripping with pride. "All for the glory of Ataxia."

I can't help it. I laugh. "Glory? You're planning to wipe out billions of people, and you're calling it glory?"

"They won't die," he says, like he's explaining basic math to a child. "They'll be reborn. As Grolgath. It's a gift."

“A gift?” I snap. “Who the hell are you to decide who lives, dies, or gets scaly? Your god’s got some serious issues if this is his idea of a favor.”

Karc steps forward, his claws flexing at his sides. “How are you planning to do it?”

Giscard’s smile widens. “Patience, my dear Kirk. Soon, you’ll see for yourself.” He gestures for us to follow, and we’re ushered down a gleaming corridor.

I lean closer to Karc, keeping my voice low. “You think he’s actually going to show us the big bad weapon?”

“Doubtful,” Karc murmurs, his eyes still scanning every detail. “But he’ll let something slip. Arrogance always does.”

“Great. So we’re blindfolded on a spaceship, and the only plan is ‘watch the bad guy monologue.’ Super reassuring.”

His lips twitch, the closest thing to a smile I’ve seen from him in hours. “Trust me. I’ll get us out of this.”

“Trust you?” I mutter. “You tossed a guy out of a flying car. I’m not sure ‘trust’ is the right word.”

He glances at me, his gaze softening for a split second. “You came back, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, well, don’t let it go to your head.”

Giscard stops at a massive window overlooking the city. He spreads his arms like he’s about to sing an aria. “This is the future, my friends. A new dawn for the galaxy.”

I cross my arms, raising an eyebrow. “You sure about that? Because from where I’m standing, it looks like a really expensive death trap.”

Karc steps closer to the window, his reflection rippling in the glass. “You’re not the first to try this, Giscard. And you won’t be the last to fail.”

Giscard chuckles, a low, dangerous sound. “We’ll see.”

The floor beneath us hums faintly, and I can’t shake the feeling that we’re running out of time.

Giscard's smile turns predatory as he gestures to the massive asteroid section visible through the window. "Beautiful, isn't it? Nature and technology in perfect harmony."

My blood runs cold as the implications hit me. "That's not just decoration, is it?"

"Very perceptive." He taps the glass. "This entire section can be launched. Right at the Yellowstone caldera. One impact, and..." He makes an explosive gesture with his hands. "The supervolcano will do the rest. Earth enters a new dark age."

My knees buckle. I grab his pant legs, the expensive fabric bunching in my desperate grip. "Please, you can't. There are children down there. Innocent people."

"My dear girl." His hand pats my head, gentle like he's soothing a frightened pet. "Don't distress yourself. They won't suffer long. And afterward, they'll be reborn into something greater."

Tears blur my vision. "I'll do anything. Just don't?—"

"There, there," he soothes, still stroking my hair. "All will be welcome to Ataxia's breast?—"

Karc's fist connects with the back of Giscard's head with a satisfying crack. The Grolgath leader crumples to the floor like a marionette with cut strings.

I wipe my eyes, glaring at Karc. "What took you so long?"

"I needed him distracted." He offers me a hand up. "Let's stop him from launching the asteroid."

CHAPTER 22

KARC

The corridor stretches ahead, a maze of steel and glowing conduits, but the real obstacle isn't the layout—it's the horde of Grolgath blocking our path. More than a hundred of them, scales glinting under the harsh artificial light, armed with blades, staves, and spiked gauntlets. Their hisses echo off the walls, a cacophony of reptilian menace.

Raven's grip tightens on my arm. "Why don't they have guns?"

"Projectile weapons are ill-advised on space stations like this one," I say, my voice steady despite the adrenaline surging through my veins. "They might knock a hole in their atmospheric dome. But don't underestimate them. Those weapons in their hands are just as deadly."

She gives me a sideways glance, her dark eyes narrowing. "Then why are you smiling?"

"Because I am far more lethal."

The rage I've been holding back since seeing my father collapse on the street boils over. My vision tints red, and I charge into the fray like a hurricane. The first Grolgath swings a spiked mace at me, but I catch its arm mid-swing, twist, and snap the bone with a sickening crunch. The sound fuels me.

“Stay close!” I bark at Raven, but she’s already darting to the side, using her agility to avoid the chaos. Smart girl.

I grab a Grolgath by the throat and hurl it into three others, sending them sprawling. Another lunges at me with a serrated blade, but I sidestep and drive my elbow into its scaled face, feeling the crunch of cartilage under the impact. Its weapon clatters to the ground, and I snatch it up, using it to parry a swing from a Grolgath wielding a double-headed axe.

“Karc!” Raven’s voice cuts through the din. I glance over just in time to see her duck under the swing of a Grolgath limb and kick the back of its knee, sending it crashing to the ground. She grabs a dropped dagger and jams it into the creature’s side. It lets out a guttural howl and falls.

I grin despite myself. “Not bad, Blackbird.”

She smirks, though there’s a flicker of fear in her eyes. “I’m full of surprises.”

The Grolgath swarm me again, and I focus on the fight. I’m a blur of motion, my fists and feet a whirlwind of destruction. I rip a staff from one’s hands and use it to shatter the jaw of another. A blade grazes my shoulder, but I barely feel it. The pain is nothing compared to the fire burning in my chest.

But they keep coming. A spiked gauntlet slams into my ribs, and I grit my teeth against the sharp, searing pain. Another strike to my thigh, and I feel the warm trickle of blood. They’re wearing me down, but I can’t stop. If I do, Raven dies.

I let out a roar, a primal sound that echoes through the corridor, and redouble my efforts. I grab two Grolgath by the skulls and smash them together, the impact sending them crumpling to the ground. A third tries to tackle me, but I pivot and drive my knee into its gut, sending it sprawling.

Raven's by my side again, breathing hard but still standing. "How many of these things are there?"

"Too many," I grunt, blocking a swing from a battle axe. "But I won't let them touch you."

She meets my gaze, and for a moment, there's something unspoken between us. Fear, determination, and something else—something that makes my heart clench. But there's no time for it. The next wave of Grolgath is already closing in.

My body screams as I slam another Grolgath back with the flat of my hand, its scaled face crunching under the force. My legs wobble, my arms burn, and I can feel the sting of a dozen shallow cuts across my torso. Blood drips from a gash on my temple, obscuring my vision. I swipe it away with a growl, but it's no use. They're closing in.

"Raven," I bark, my voice hoarse. I don't even know if she can hear me over the chaos. "Run!"

She doesn't run. Of course she doesn't. Instead, she grabs a fallen stave from the ground and swings it into the back of a Grolgath's knees, dropping it with a satisfying thud. "Not a chance, Scales," she shouts back, her voice steady even though I can see the fear in her eyes. "You're not dying on me."

I want to argue, but I don't have the breath. Another Grolgath lunges at me, and I barely manage to sidestep, driving my elbow into its ribs. The sound of cracking bone is drowned out by a sudden roar. It's not from the Grolgath.

A blur of golden scales barrels into the fray, a whirlwind of fists and fury. The newcomer grabs two Grolgath by the necks and slams their heads together with a sickening crack. A third tries to flank him, but he spins, delivering a kick that sends the creature flying into the wall. The impact shakes the corridor.

I blink through the blood and sweat. “Who the hell?—?”

The figure turns, and my jaw drops as recognition hits me like a charging bull. “Father?”

Vrahmin grins, his fangs glinting in the harsh light. “About time you showed up, boy. I was starting to think I’d have to do all the heavy lifting myself.”

I’m too stunned to speak. My father—my dead father—is standing here, alive and kicking Grolgath ass like it’s a Tuesday night at the tavern. I shake my head, trying to process the impossible. “How? You were... you were on the street. Your hearts?—”

“Medics?” he interrupts, cackling like a hyena. “I don’t need no fucking medic! I just dragged myself over to a street light, kicked it until it fell over, and then jammed my tongue into the light socket like I was giving an odex a rim job! Kick-started my own hearts.”

Raven’s eyes go wide. “Is... is that what really happened?”

Vrahmin winks. “Maybe. Let’s go stop this Armageddon so we can get back to the party!”

The Grolgath recover from their shock and close in again, but with my father at my side, the tide turns. He fights like a demon unleashed, his movements precise and brutal. For every strike I land, he lands two. Together, we clear the hallway, leaving a trail of crumpled bodies in our wake.

When the last Grolgath falls, I turn to my father, still struggling to believe my eyes. “You’re... you’re really here.”

He claps me on the shoulder, his grip firm. “Damn right I am. Now quit gawking like

a hatchling and let's finish this. That asteroid's not gonna stop itself."

Raven steps up beside me, her stave still clutched in her hands. "I like your dad," she says, a smirk tugging at her lips. "He's batshit crazy, but I like him."

Vrahmin laughs, deep and booming. "I like her too, boy. She's got spine. Now let's move!"

The control room is a sprawl of flashing lights, holographic displays, and enough buttons to give a Pi'Rell engineer a migraine. The air smells like ozone and desperation. The asteroid launch sequence is already underway, the countdown ticking away on a massive screen. Red letters scream **INITIALIZATION IRREVERSIBLE** at us like we're idiots.

I slam my fist against the console. "It's locked out. We can't stop it."

"Of course we can't," Raven mutters, already scanning the room. Her eyes dart from panel to panel, zeroing in on a smaller display tucked in the corner. "But we don't need to stop it. We just need to redirect it."

My father, ever the optimist, grunts. "And how, exactly, do you plan to redirect a million-ton rock hurtling toward Earth?"

"Easy," she says, fingers flying over the keyboard. "We use the station's maneuvering jets to flip the whole thing around. Point the asteroid into deep space instead of Yellowstone."

I blink. "That's... actually not insane."

She smirks. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Scales."

“Don’t get cocky, girl,” my father barks, though there’s a hint of approval in his tone. “Just make it happen.”

Raven’s hands are a blur, her focus razor-sharp. The consoles chirp and beep in protest, but she doesn’t flinch. “Thrusters are coming online. Brace yourselves.”

The station lurches violently, throwing me into the wall. My shoulder takes the brunt of the impact, and I wince. Raven grabs onto the console for dear life, her knuckles white. My father, ever the show-off, plants his feet wide and rides it out like he’s surfing a gravity wave.

“You did warn us,” he says, grinning like a madman.

The station groans, a deep, metallic sound that makes my scales crawl. The holographic display shifts, showing the asteroid’s trajectory curving away from Earth, out into the void. The red letters on the screen flicker and change: LAUNCH SUCCESSFUL. TARGET RELEASED.

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “We did it. We actually did it. We saved the world.”

Raven turns to me, arms crossed, one eyebrow arched. “What do you mean we ? It was my idea. All you guys know how to do is smash stuff.”

My father almost falls over himself laughing, his booming voice echoing through the control room. “What a mate, boy,” he says, slapping me on the back hard enough to make me stumble. “You did good.”

I glare at him, but there’s no heat in it. “Thanks, Father. Really inspiring.”

Raven’s smirk softens into a smile, and for a moment, the weight of everything we’ve

been through lifts. She saved the world. Hell, she saved me . And now, standing here in the dim light of the control room, with my father's laughter ringing in my ears, I realize something.

I wouldn't want anyone else by my side. Not now. Not ever.

CHAPTER 23

RAVEN

The limo pulls up to the towering gates of Karc's Upper East Side manor, the kind of place that screams "I could buy your entire neighborhood and still have petty cash." The gates swing open silently, and we glide up the cobblestone drive. My stomach's doing flips, and not just from the car's motion. Karc's been quiet since we left the city, his golden eyes fixed on me like he's trying to solve a puzzle. Or maybe he's already solved it, and he's just waiting for me to catch up.

The car stops, and Karc steps out, offering me his hand. His palm is warm, slightly rough against mine, and I don't pull away immediately like I might have a week ago. We walk up the steps to the massive double doors, and he doesn't let go until we're inside.

"So," I say, breaking the silence as the door clicks shut behind us, "no honeymoon plans, huh?"

He shrugs, his image inducer flickering slightly as he shifts his weight. "Didn't think we'd get the chance. Figured we'd be too busy saving the world. Again."

"Fair point." I glance around the grand foyer, trying to distract myself from the lump forming in my throat. It's all marble and chandeliers, but there's something strangely... intimate about the place. Maybe it's the way the light catches on the golden scales of his neck when the human disguise wavers.

“We need to talk,” we both say at the same time, and the tension snaps like a rubber band. I laugh first, a nervous, breathless sound, and Karc’s deep chuckle joins in. For a moment, it’s just us, standing there in the silence of his too-big house, laughing like idiots.

He gestures toward the living room, and I follow, my heels clicking against the polished floors. He sits on the edge of a leather sofa, and I perch on the armrest across from him, my heart hammering in my chest.

“You first,” I say, crossing my arms like a shield.

He leans forward, his elbows on his knees, and looks up at me with those piercing orange eyes. “Raven, you’re the bravest, noblest, smartest, and most beautiful woman in the galaxy. I love you. Now and forever more.”

The words hang in the air like a challenge, and I feel my breath catch. My arms drop to my sides, and I slide off the armrest, taking a step toward him. “Karc, I...” My voice cracks, and I swallow hard. “I love you. Now and forever more.”

He stands, closing the distance between us in one stride. His hands find my waist, pulling me close, and I can feel the warmth of his scales through the fabric of my dress. His lips meet mine, and it’s not just a kiss—it’s a promise. I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer, letting myself believe, for the first time, that this is real.

When we finally break apart, he’s grinning like he just won the lottery. “So,” he says, “where do you want to go for our honeymoon? Paris? Bora Bora? The moon?”

I smirk, running a hand down his chest, feeling the slight ridge of his scales under my fingers. “How about upstairs? I’m thinking the bedroom has everything we need.”

His grin widens, and he sweeps me off my feet, heading for the stairs without another word.

Karc lays me down on the bed, his golden scales glinting in the soft light filtering through the windows. His human disguise flickers, then fades completely, leaving the raw, powerful form of a Vakutan. I run my fingers over the ridges of his chest, feeling the warmth radiating from his skin. His claws trace delicate patterns on my arms, sending a rush through me.

His lips meet mine, slow and sweet, like he's savoring the taste of me. His tongue explores my mouth, leaving me breathless. He pulls away, just enough to whisper, "I've wanted this since the moment I saw you."

"Prove it," I challenge, my voice shaking with anticipation.

His grin is all teeth, sharp and dangerous. "Gladly."

His kisses trail down my neck, each one leaving a mark, a claim. I gasp as his claws slice through the fabric of my dress like it's tissue paper. Cool air hits my skin, but his hands are warm, rough and insistent as they grip my hips. He buries his face between my legs, and the first touch of his tongue has me arching off the bed.

"Karc!" I moan, my fingers tangling in his short, spiked hair. He groans against me, the vibration sending waves of pleasure through my body. He's relentless, his tongue exploring every inch of me, driving me closer and closer to the edge.

"You taste so fucking good," he growls, his breath hot against my skin. "I could do this all night."

"Don't stop," I plead, my voice breaking as the first orgasm hits me like a tidal wave. I cry out, my body trembling as he continues, refusing to let me come down. Another

wave crashes over me, and another, until I'm sobbing his name, my nails digging into his shoulders.

He pulls back, his mouth smeared with my juices, and looks up at me with those piercing orange eyes. "You're beautiful when you come apart for me," he says, his voice raw with desire.

Before I can respond, he dives back in, and this time, I feel the pressure building, building, until I can't hold it back any longer. I scream as I squirt all over his face, my body writhing uncontrollably. He licks his lips, savoring the taste, and I collapse back onto the bed, utterly spent.

He climbs up next to me, pulling me into his arms. "How's that for proof?" he murmurs, his breath warm against my ear.

I laugh, a weak, breathless sound. "I think you've made your point."

"Not yet," Karc says. "You need to be reminded of who's in charge, little bird."

I laugh, giddy and breathless, as he grabs a silk rope from the bedside table. The soft fabric brushes against my skin as he ties my wrists behind my back, his movements deliberate and unhurried. I feel the rope tighten, secure but not painful, as he loops it around my ankles, pulling them up to meet my wrists. The position is restrictive, but the thrill of being at his mercy makes my heart race.

He blindfolds me with a swath of black silk, and the world disappears into darkness. My breath comes in ragged gasps as the last sliver of light fades, leaving me adrift in sensation. I hear him move, the soft rustle of fabric, and I strain to track him, my body tense with anticipation.

"Find me," he says, his voice close, but not close enough. I squirm, the silk ropes

digging into my skin as I try to shift toward him. My chin bumps against something warm and firm, and I hear his low chuckle. “Warmer, little bird.”

I nudge forward, my lips brushing against something smooth and hot. I open my mouth, eager to taste him, but he pulls away, leaving me with nothing but the faint scent of his skin. I groan, frustration and desire warring in equal measure.

“Come on,” I whine, trying to arch my body toward him. “Stop teasing.”

“Teasing?” His voice is rich with amusement. “This isn’t teasing. This is teaching you patience.”

I feel the tip of him brush against my lips, and I lunge forward, only to have him pull away again. My face burns as I hear him laugh, the sound warm and indulgent. “Eager, aren’t you?”

I feel the weight of his cock against my cheek, and I turn my head, trying to catch him, but he’s gone again. My breath comes in short, shallow gasps as I twist and turn, trying to find him.

Finally, he relents, pressing himself against my lips. I open my mouth, taking him in, and the taste of him floods my senses. He’s warm, slightly salty, and I moan around him, my tongue working to please him. I feel his hands on my head, not pushing or guiding, just resting there, a reassuring presence.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, and the praise sends a surge of warmth through me. I redouble my efforts, eager to hear him say it again. His breathing quickens, his muscles tensing as he nears the edge. I feel him swell in my mouth, and then he’s coming, hot and thick, filling me with his seed.

I swallow as much as I can, but some escapes, trickling down my chin. He pulls

away, and I hear the soft sound of him reaching for something. Before I can react, he's sliding a gag into my mouth, the smooth, phallic shape a reminder of what's to come.

"Just to be sure," he says, his voice tinged with amusement. I can't respond, my mouth full and my body humming with the afterglow of his release. The ropes around my wrists and ankles keep me immobile, but it's not restraint I feel—it's surrender. And for once, I'm okay with that.

Karc's claws gently untie the silk ropes around my ankles, the rough pads of his fingers brushing against my sensitive skin. I shiver at the touch, my body still vibrating from the orgasm he wrung out of me moments ago. He spreads my thighs wide with his clawed hands, and I feel the cool air hit my most intimate places. My heart pounds in anticipation, the gag still filling my mouth, muffling any sounds I might make.

"Relax, little bird," he murmurs, his voice low and teasing. "You're going to enjoy this."

Before I can even process what he's saying, I feel his tongue against me, hot and wet, teasing at a place I hadn't expected. I gasp around the gag, my body tensing as his tongue presses against my anus, probing gently. My back arches off the bed, a muffled moan escaping my lips. It's a sensation I've never experienced before, and I'm surprised at how much I enjoy it.

Karc's tongue works me with precision, each flick and press sending waves of pleasure through my body. I squirm against the ropes that bind my wrists, my hips bucking uncontrollably. The gag mumbles something incoherent, but I'm sure he gets the gist: Don't stop.

His claws grip my hips, holding me steady as his tongue delves deeper, teasing and

penetrating in a way that has me trembling on the edge. I feel the pressure building, building, until it bursts, and I come with a muffled scream, my body convulsing with pleasure.

Before I can catch my breath, I feel the head of his scaled cock pressing against my pussy, hot and slick with my own arousal. I arch my back, inviting him inside, a needy whimper escaping my gagged mouth. Karc doesn't hesitate, thrusting into me with the full force of his Vakutan might. I moan around the gag, the sensation of his scaled cock filling me completely overwhelming.

He grabs my hips, pulling me onto him with each thrust, his rhythm steady and relentless. I feel his claws dig into my skin, just enough to send a shiver of pleasure-pain through me. My body responds to his dominance, yielding to him completely. Every movement, every thrust, sends me higher and higher, until I'm teetering on the edge of another orgasm.

"That's it, little bird," he growls, his voice rough with desire. "Come for me."

And I do. My orgasm crashes over me like a tidal wave, my body clamping down on his cock with powerful spasms. I scream into the gag, my vision going white as pleasure consumes me. Karc cries out, his thrusts faltering as he comes with me, his body collapsing on top of mine.

For a moment, we lie there, breathing heavily, our bodies still pressed together. He nuzzles into the crook of my neck, his breath warm against my skin.

"I'm yours, Raven," he whispers into my ear. "Now and forever."

I try to tell him the same, but the gag muffles my words, making them unintelligible. Karc chuckles, pulling back to look at me with those piercing orange eyes.

“What’s that?” he teases, a wicked grin spreading across his face. “You want me to spank you now? Okay, you’re in charge.”

I squeal as he unties me, flipping me over and drawing me across his lap. My protests are half-hearted, drowned out by laughter and the anticipation of what’s to come. Clearly, I’m not getting any sleep tonight.

Just like it's supposed to be on my wedding night.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:05 am

The gallery is all glass and sharp angles, the kind of place where the art feels secondary to the way the light bounces off the polished floors. I'm in my Kirk Stevens disguise, standing in front of one of Raven's pieces, a riot of colors and abstract shapes that somehow still feels grounded, like it's pulling at something primal. The kind of thing that makes you stop and stare, even if you're only here to schmooze.

A man in a too-tight suit sidles up next to me, adjusting his glasses like they're a shield against the world. He's got that look—the kind of guy who thinks the more he talks, the smarter he sounds.

“Kirk Stevens,” he says, extending a hand like he's handing me a gift. “I didn't expect to see you here. Are you familiar with the artist's work?”

I shake his hand, my grip firm enough to make him wince. “A little bit, yeah.”

He launches into it like he's been waiting for an audience. “This piece,” he says, gesturing to the canvas with the kind of flourish that makes me think he practices in the mirror, “is a masterful juxtaposition of modern man's inability to reconcile his tortured past. It's a commentary on the existential dread of our time, don't you think?”

I tilt my head, letting my grin spread slow and easy. “Actually, it represents rampant consumerism and the need for empathy.”

He freezes, glasses slipping down his nose. “Oh? And how can you be so sure you know what's in the artist's head?”

I lean in, just enough to make him squirm. “Because I’m married to her.”

The look on his face is worth every second of this conversation—a mix of shock, embarrassment, and the sudden realization that maybe he’s been talking out of his ass this whole time. He stammers something about needing to find the restroom and practically bolts.

I chuckle under my breath, turning back to the painting. It’s one of my favorites of Raven’s work, partly because it’s so her —bold, unapologetic, and layered with meaning. The colors seem to shift as I look at it, like they’re alive.

“Do you always scare off the critics, or is that just a special talent of yours?”

I turn to see Raven walking toward me, her heels clicking against the floor. She’s wearing a dress that hugs her curves, black with a slit up the side that makes it impossible not to stare. Her hair’s down, falling in soft waves over her shoulders, and her lips curve into that wicked smile she saves for when she’s about to tease me.

“Depends on the critic,” I say, catching her hand and pulling her close. “Some of them deserve it.”

She laughs, the sound warm and low, and leans into me. “You’re terrible.”

“Terribly charming, you mean.”

Raven’s fingers intertwine with mine as we stroll through the gallery, her hand warm and familiar in mine. The place is buzzing—art snobs, critics, and her fans all crammed into this sleek, white-walled space. They’re staring at her work like it’s some kind of alien artifact. To be fair, they’re not entirely wrong. Her art is otherworldly.

“They’re all so... into it,” I murmur softly, nodding toward a woman in oversized

glasses who's practically pressed her nose against one of Raven's canvases.

Raven chuckles, her free hand brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "Yeah, it's weird. I'm used to people ignoring my stuff or calling it vandalism. This is... a lot."

I squeeze her hand. "You deserve it. Every bit of it."

She looks up at me, her dark eyes soft but a little uncertain. "I mean, I wouldn't have been able to pull this off without you. You pushed me to do this. You believed in me when I didn't even believe in myself."

I wave her off, my grin widening. "Don't give me too much credit. I just threw money at the problem. You're the one who made it happen. Nothing's too good for my jalshagar."

Her cheeks flush, and she looks away, but not before I catch the smile tugging at her lips. "You're such a sap, you know that?"

"Only for you," I say, brushing a kiss against her temple.

We're interrupted by the sound of Sandy's unmistakable laugh. I turn to see her and Terry approaching, Sandy in her ever-present straw hat and Terry looking somehow both proud and awkward in a suit that's a size too big.

"Hey, you two!" Sandy beams, pulling Raven into a hug that looks more like a bone-crushing wrestling move. "This place is amazing! Your art's got people talking, girl. Even I had to ask Terry what some of it meant."

"And I had no clue," Terry adds with a smirk, clapping me on the shoulder. "But it looks fancy, so that's all that matters, right?"

Raven rolls her eyes, but she's smiling. "Thanks, Dad. Real supportive."

Terry chuckles, then turns to me. “So, where’s your old man? I was looking forward to seeing him again. He’s a hoot.”

I grimace. “Yeah, about that. He’s in Vegas. Met a Fratvuyan woman at a casino last week and, well... let’s just say he’s ‘indisposed.’”

Terry’s brow furrows. “Fratvuyan? Is that, like, an Eastern European thing or what?”

I stifle a laugh. “Close enough.”

Sandy pipes up, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “So, Karc, how’s it feel knowing you’re gonna be a dad soon?”

The air between us freezes. I blink, my brain short-circuiting. “What?”

Raven’s eyes go wide, and she elbows her mom hard in the ribs. “Mom! I told you not to say anything yet!”

Sandy’s hands fly to her mouth, her face turning bright red. “Oh, sweetie, I’m so sorry! It just slipped out!”

Terry’s eyes dart between us, his expression shifting from confusion to realization. “Wait. You mean...? You’re pregnant, Raven?”

Raven groans, burying her face in her hands. “Yes. But it was supposed to be a surprise .”

I stare at her, my mouth still hanging open. My brain finally catches up, and I grab her shoulders, turning her to face me. “You’re pregnant? Seriously?”

She peeks at me through her fingers, her cheeks flushed. “Yeah. I was going to tell you tonight, after the gallery. I didn’t expect my mom to blurt it out in the middle of a

crowd.”

I feel like my heart’s about to beat out of my chest. I pull her into my arms, my voice dropping to a whisper. “This is... this is incredible. I mean, I thought I was already the luckiest man in the galaxy. But this? This is...”

She looks up at me, her eyes searching mine. “You’re not mad that I didn’t tell you right away?”

“Mad? I’m...” I trail off, shaking my head with a laugh. “I’m just... happy. So happy.”

Sandy is still apologizing profusely in the background, and Terry’s grinning like he just won the lottery, but I’m too focused on Raven to care about anything else. My jalshagar. My wife. And now, the mother of my child.

The gallery, the art, the crowd—it all fades into the background. All I see is her.

Terry’s hand lands on my shoulder with the kind of weight that suggests he’s about to drop a bombshell. I turn, raising an eyebrow at him. He’s grinning like he’s just won the lottery, his weathered face lit up with mischief.

“You know, Terrence is a great name,” he says, his voice dripping with fake seriousness.

I blink, my brain short-circuiting for a second. “What if it’s a girl?” I ask, playing along because, well, Terry’s Terry. You don’t argue with Terry unless you’re ready for a fight.

“Terrence is gender neutral,” he says, puffing his chest out like he’s just delivered the most profound wisdom of our age.

From beside me, Raven groans, pinching the bridge of her nose like she's trying to ward off a headache. "Dad, shut up or I'll name the baby after your least favorite second cousin."

Terry's grin falters, his face going pale. "You wouldn't dare name him Seabus!"

Raven smirks, crossing her arms over her chest. "Don't push your luck."

I laugh, pulling Raven into my arms. She fits perfectly against me, her warmth radiating through the fabric of my shirt. I cup her face in my hands, my eyes meeting hers. They're dark and endless, and right now, they're filled with a mix of exasperation and affection. I brush my thumb over her cheek, and she leans into the touch, her lips curving into a small smile.

"I haven't told my folks yet," she whispers, her breath warm against my ear. "But we're having twins."

My heart stutters in my chest, my brain scrambling to process the words. "T-wins?" I manage to choke out, my voice barely above a whisper.

Raven nods, her eyes searching mine for a reaction. Her hands slide up my chest, gripping the front of my shirt like she's bracing herself. I can feel the tension in her body, the way she's holding herself tight, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I pull her closer, my arms wrapping around her like I'm trying to shield her from the world. My mind races, images flashing through my head—two tiny figures with Raven's dark eyes and my golden scales, laughing as they chase each other through the halls of our home. Two lives I'll protect with everything I have, just like I'll protect her.

"Twins," I breathe, the word feeling strange and wonderful on my tongue. I press my forehead to hers, my voice soft but steady. "We're having twins."

Raven's eyes glisten with unshed tears, and she nods again, her lips trembling into a smile. "Yeah," she whispers. "We are."

Terry clears his throat, breaking the moment. "Well, I guess that means you'll need two Terrences."

Raven groans, burying her face in my chest as I laugh, the sound reverberating through my chest. Sandy smacks Terry's arm, her straw hat tilting precariously as she shakes her head.

"Leave them alone, you old fool," she says, though there's no real heat in her words.

I hold Raven tighter, my heart swelling with a joy I didn't know was possible. Twins. Our children. Our family.