



Wrecked By My Alien Mentor

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I'm a seven-foot alien warlord disguised as a billionaire.

She thinks she's my intern.

She has no idea she's the key to saving Earth.

Cora Daniels is brilliant. Defiant. A little reckless.

She doesn't belong in my world—but fate just made her mine.

I was ordered to train her.

What I wasn't told? Shes the one piece the enemy can't afford to lose.

Now shadow operatives are hunting her.

And if they capture her, the future of humanity burns.

She doesn't know what I am.

She doesn't know what she is.

But every day she stays by my side—every time she says Yes, Sir with those soft green eyes—I fall harder.

And when the truth comes out?

I'll break every oath I've ever sworn...

To protect what's mine.

Even if it starts a war.

Read on for: alien mentors, human apprentices, hidden identities, found family, and a possessive alien warrior who teaches his girl how to survive the galaxy—and submit to him.

HEA guaranteed. One-touch only. Absolutely not safe from obsession.

Total Pages (Source): 20

CHAPTER 1

CORA

The St. Louis Public Library is my sanctuary. The high ceilings and quiet hum of the HVAC system make it easy to focus. My table is a fortress of legal tomes and notebooks, my hair shoved into a messy bun with a couple of pencils sticking out like antenna. Yoga pants and an oversized sweatshirt—perfection. No one here cares if I look like I just rolled out of bed, so long as I don't spill coffee on the books.

I'm elbow-deep in a case from 1983 about corporate liability when a shadow falls across the table. I glance up, expecting a librarian or maybe someone asking if the seat's taken. Instead, it's a man—short, balding, with a smile that's either genuine or practiced so well it doesn't matter.

"Hello, Ms. Daniels." His voice is higher than I'd expect, almost chipper. "My name is Robbie Dalton, and I'm here to make you a job offer."

I blink. He hands me a business card: Orion Enterprises. The logo is familiar—a sleek silver constellation against a deep purple background. I've seen their building downtown, all glass and steel, towering over the skyline.

"I don't remember applying to Orion Enterprises." My tone is flat, but my brain is already running through the possibilities. Scam? Pyramid scheme? Some kind of corporate espionage thing?

"Oh, you didn't." Robbie's smile doesn't waver. "Mr. Weller, my boss, keeps a close

eye on recent graduates. Your performance at university—perfect grades, high honors—caught his attention."

I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms. "So, what, you just... track people down in libraries now? Seems a bit desperate."

Robbie chuckles, hands raised in mock surrender. "Desperate? No. Efficient? Absolutely. We're not in the business of waiting for talent to come to us. We find it."

"And you think I'm talent?" I raise an eyebrow. "With just a bachelor's degree? No master's, no internship at a top firm, no?—"

"A 4.0 GPA from a top-tier university," he interrupts, tapping the table for emphasis. "And a knack for outthinking the competition. That's what we're interested in."

I let the silence hang for a moment, studying him. He doesn't flinch. Either he's a fantastic liar, or he's telling the truth. Either way, my stomach growls, reminding me I haven't eaten since breakfast.

"Is this legit?" I ask, half-expecting him to pull out a brochure about multi-level marketing.

"Totally legit." He spreads his hands like a magician showing there's nothing up his sleeves. "How about I buy you lunch, and we can discuss the details? My treat."

I glance at the stack of books in front of me, then back at him. Lunch sounds good. Free lunch sounds even better. And if this turns out to be a scam, well, I've wasted worse afternoons.

"Alright," I say, shoving the books aside. "But if this is some pyramid scheme, I'm ordering the most expensive thing on the menu."

Robbie laughs, a high, tinkling sound. "Deal."

Robbie leads me to a steakhouse just a few blocks from the library. The place smells like seared meat and butter, and the dim lighting gives it a cozy yet upscale vibe. We're seated in a corner booth, and Robbie immediately orders enough food to feed a small army—appetizers, sides, and two steaks. For a guy his size, he's either got a hollow leg or a death wish for his cholesterol levels.

I'm not about to let this opportunity go to waste. I order the ribeye with endless shrimp, because why not? When the waiter asks if I'd like a drink, Robbie cuts in. "Iced tea for both of us. Work calls for a clear head."

The waiter nods and leaves, and Robbie leans forward, elbows on the table. "So, Cora, let me lay it out for you. Orion Enterprises is offering you a paid internship. Not the kind where you fetch coffee and file paperwork, either. This is hands-on, high-level work. You'll be working directly with Mr. Weller himself. Think of it as a crash course in becoming the best version of yourself."

I take a sip of iced tea, the condensation cold against my fingers. "Directly with Weller? As in, the billionaire who owns half of downtown?"

"The very same." Robbie's smile is smug, like he's just handed me the keys to a Lamborghini. "It's a rare opportunity. Most people would kill for this kind of access."

I set my glass down, leaning in. "Let's cut to the chase. How much does it pay?"

Robbie laughs, a high-pitched sound that makes the couple at the next table glance over. "I like you, Cora. No beating around the bush. The exact compensation package will be discussed when you meet with Mr. Weller, but let's just say... it's in the six-figure range."

I nearly choke on my tea. "Six figures? For an internship?"

"Don't act so surprised. Orion Enterprises doesn't do things halfway." He spreads his hands, like he's presenting me with the world on a platter. "You're not just any graduate, Cora. You're the kind of talent we invest in."

The shrimp arrives first, and I start picking at them while my brain processes what he just said. Six figures. For an internship. Either this is the best day of my life, or Robbie's about to hand me a timeshare pitch.

"Okay," I say, dipping a shrimp in cocktail sauce. "I'll meet with Weller."

Robbie's grin widens. "Perfect. Be at the Orion Building tomorrow at seven sharp. Don't be late—Mr. Weller doesn't tolerate tardiness."

The rest of the meal passes in a blur of steak and small talk. Robbie pays the bill, tipping the waiter enough to make his eyes widen. As we step out into the late afternoon sun, I can't shake the feeling that this is too good to be true. But hey, if it's a scam, at least I got a free steak out of it.

The front door sticks when I push it open, the weight of my library books making me fumble the key. I stagger inside, arms full, only to freeze mid-step.

"Jesus Christ, Dad!" The stack of books almost slips from my grasp. My father, Joe, is standing in the middle of the living room, one hand on his hip, the other flexing a bicep like he's auditioning for a Bowflex commercial. And he's naked. Completely naked. Except for a sock.

"Hey, Cora," he says, unfazed. "The lighting is better in here for your mom's painting."

"Can't you do that in the bedroom?" I wave a hand in his general direction, careful to keep my eyes locked on the ceiling. The last thing I need today is a mental image of my dad's "artistic expression."

"My man cave doesn't have the right angles," he says, shifting his pose with a casualness that makes me want to bleach my brain. "And anyway, it's just a body, Cora. I have a sock over my?—"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" I bolt for the stairs, books bouncing against my chest. I can hear my dad chuckling behind me, but I don't stop until I'm safely in my room, door slammed shut. I drop the books on the floor and collapse onto the bed, letting out a groan that's half exhaustion, half existential despair.

A knock at the door interrupts my wallowing. "Cora?"

"Come in," I say, without thinking.

The door opens, and I regret it instantly. My mom, Maggie, steps inside. She's wearing nothing but a paint-splattered apron and a smile.

"Mom, why are you naked too?" I bury my face in my hands.

"Oh, it makes your father more comfortable," she says, like this is the most normal thing in the world. "I just wanted to tell you that a Mr. Robbie Dalton called for you a while ago. I told him you were at the library."

"Thanks," I mutter, not looking up. She lingers for a moment, then shrugs and closes the door behind her.

I flop back onto the bed, staring at the ceiling. "I've got to get my own place," I mutter to myself, "before they drive me insane."

I stare at my phone, my mother's words sinking in. Robbie called the house and hunted me down at the library? That's not just persistence—that's borderline stalker behavior. My stomach knots as I open my phone and type out a quick message to my group chat, a collection of sarcastic, over-caffeinated friends who've been my lifeline since college.

Me: So, some guy named Robbie Dalton tracked me down at the library today to offer me a job. Called the house first. Thoughts?

The responses come fast and merciless.

Jenna: Is he hot? If not, red flag.

Marcus: Sounds like a cult recruitment. Did he mention free protein powder?

Sam: If he didn't mention a pyramid scheme, it's probably a trap.

Me: He works for Orion Enterprises. Like the billionaire Orion Weller.

Jenna: Oh, that guy. Wear a hidden camera in case they try to induct you into the Illuminati.

Marcus: Or the Justice League. Either way, get footage.

Sam: Go. Worst-case scenario, you walk out with a story. Best-case, you're rich.

I smirk at my phone, but the unease doesn't fade. They're right, though. Walking away without even hearing the offer feels...stupid. I set my phone down and stare at the ceiling, the same one I've stared at for as long as I can remember. The cracks in the plaster form a map of possibilities, each one leading to a different version of my life. One of those paths could lead to Orion Weller, to a six-figure internship, to a

future that doesn't involve my parents' eccentricities or the soul-crushing monotony of entry-level jobs.

I close my eyes and let myself imagine it—walking into that skyscraper downtown, stepping off the elevator into a glass-walled office with a view of the city. Mr. Weller nodding as I lay out a brilliant idea, him saying, "You're exactly what this company needs." The fantasy grows sharper, more vivid, until I can almost taste the success.

But then my dad's voice drifts up the stairs, muffled but unmistakable. "Maggie, do you think the sock is too much?"

I groan and yank a pillow over my face. Reality crashes back in. Naked parents, no job, and a meeting with a billionaire who might be a scam artist or a genius. Or both.

I sit up, tossing the pillow aside. "Screw it," I mutter to the empty room. "I'm going. If nothing else, it'll make a hell of a story."

I grab my laptop and start researching Orion Weller, determined to walk into that meeting with more than just blind optimism. If this is my shot, I'm not wasting it.

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CHAPTER 2

ORION

The crisp evening air bites at my face as I stride out of Orion Plaza, the towering glass fortress gleaming under the city lights. My reflection in the polished doors stretches to an absurd length, a deliberate illusion of a man I'm not, but I don't mind. The limo idles at the curb, my driver standing at attention, ready to open the door. I take one step toward it when the sound of sneakers slapping concrete interrupts the quiet hum of the city.

"Hands up, Weller." The voice is gruff, muffled by a black ski mask. A gun gleams in the dim light, pointed directly at my head. Behind him, another masked figure steps into view, gripping a second pistol. "Get in the van. Now."

I glance over my shoulder. A black van's side door slides open, revealing three more figures, their faces obscured, their postures tense. My lips twitch. Amateur hour. The guns are cheap, the grip on them too tight, the way they shift their weight too uncertain. I could dismantle them in seconds if I wanted to.

But where's the fun in that?

"I'll do what you want," I say, my voice smooth, calm, like I'm ordering coffee. "Please, don't hurt me."

The two in front exchange a glance, their confusion palpable even through the masks. One jerks the gun toward the van. "Move."

I raise my hands in mock surrender and stride toward the van, the kidnappers scrambling to keep up with my long gait. Inside, the three waiting men tense as I duck into the cramped space. One of them fumbles with a pair of handcuffs, the metal clinking as he steps toward me.

“Put these on.”

I extend my wrists, narrowly suppressing a laugh as he freezes, realizing the cuffs won’t even come close to fitting. His eyes flicker up to mine, uncertainty flashing behind the mask. “Uh...”

“Problem?” I ask, leaning back against the van’s wall, my tone light. The van lurches forward, the engine growling as it peels away from the curb.

The man with the cuffs steps back, muttering something under his breath. The others shift uneasily, their eyes darting between me and each other.

“Can we stop at Imo’s Pizza?” I ask, breaking the tense silence. “I’m peckish for a Canadian bacon extra large.”

One of the kidnappers lets out a nervous laugh, quickly stifled by a sharp elbow to the ribs. The others just stare at me, their confusion deepening.

I lean back, crossing my arms, and smile. This might just be the most entertaining thing I’ve done all week.

“Search him,” one of the thugs barks, the mask muffling his voice but not the edge of panic creeping into it. “Get his phone.”

The guy closest to me—skinny, reeking of cheap cologne—steps forward with the confidence of a man who’s watched too many action movies. His hands paw at my

pockets, fingers clumsy and damp with sweat. I don't move. He finds the silver pen—my image inducer—and yanks it out like he's just uncovered the crown jewels.

"I wouldn't mess with that if I were you," I say, my voice low, calm, like I'm commenting on the weather.

He sneers, holding it up like a trophy. "What are you gonna do to stop me?"

His thumb flicks the pen's button. The hologram flickers, then dissolves, and the van suddenly feels a lot smaller. I see the moment it hits them—their eyes widen, their grip on their weapons tightens, and the air turns thick with terror. Seven feet of red-scaled Vakutan warrior doesn't exactly fit the aesthetic of their cheap suits and ski masks.

"I warned you," I say, my voice now a low growl, the kind that vibrates through your bones.

One of them, the one with the shaky hands, pulls the trigger. The bullet hits me square in the face. It stings, but it's like getting flicked in the forehead by a toddler. I blink, my scales barely registering the impact, and tilt my head. "That's it?"

The van erupts into chaos. I grab the closest guy by the collar and slam him into the van's ceiling, the metal denting under the force. Another tries to swing at me with the butt of his gun. I catch his wrist, twist, and hear the satisfying pop of bone before tossing him into the third thug like a bowling ball. The last one scrambles for the sliding door, but I yank him back by his belt, his legs flailing uselessly as I hurl him into the pile.

The driver—smartest of the bunch—takes one look in the rearview mirror and bails. The van swerves, the wheel spinning wildly as he jumps out into the street. I lean forward, my massive frame barely squeezing through the gap, and grab the wheel.

The van groans as I guide it to the side of the road, the tires screeching against the asphalt.

Silence settles, broken only by the groans of the thugs crumpled in the back. I glance at the pen, now lying on the floor, and pick it up, flicking it back on. The hologram wraps around me, turning me back into the illusion of Orion Weller. I straighten my tie, step out of the van, and dust myself off.

“Next time I say I want a pizza,” I mutter to the groaning pile of idiots, “then get me a fucking pizza!”

I kick the van for good measure, flipping it onto its side with a metallic groan. The thugs inside groan louder, but I’m already walking away. Let them explain to the police how a seven-foot monster trashed their plan. No one’s going to believe them anyway.

My limo pulls up moments later, the driver giving the overturned van a sideways glance but saying nothing. I slide into the backseat, plucking a bit of debris from my suit. Orion Weller, corporate titan, wouldn’t be caught dead with van shrapnel on his tailored lapels. The image inducer hums softly, restoring the illusion of my human form.

I check my Compad for missed messages. There’s one from Robi. Of course there’s one from Robi. I groan, leaning back against the leather seat. Him and Pyke have been on my case for months about mentoring some human intern. Apparently, this one’s a “prodigy with potential.” Yeah, sure. I’ve heard that line before.

The limo glides to a stop outside my riverboat manor, the Mississippi shimmering under the moonlight. I step out, adjusting my tie, and there he is—Robbie Dalton, standing on the gangplank with his usual cheerful grin. His pudgy human disguise looks especially ridiculous next to the grandeur of the riverboat.

“Evening, Oriyn,” he chirps, his voice high-pitched but annoyingly chipper. “How was the kidnapping?”

I raise an eyebrow. “You know about that?”

He taps his Compad with a flourish. “Veritas monitors everything. You really should’ve called it in.”

“And ruin the fun? No thanks.” I stride past him onto the boat, the polished wood creaking under my weight. “What do you want, Robi?”

He scurries after me, his short legs struggling to keep up. “It’s about the apprentice.”

“No.”

“Oriyn—”

“No.”

“You haven’t even met her.”

“Don’t need to.” I stop at the grand staircase, turning to face him. “Humans are fragile, erratic, and easily distracted. I’m not babysitting another one.”

Robbie’s smile doesn’t waver. “She’s not like the others. Cora’s sharp, resourceful, and?—”

“Let me guess,” I interrupt, holding up a hand. “She’s got a ‘keen mind for business’ and a ‘bright future’ ahead of her. Heard it all before.”

He sighs, pulling up a holo-profile on his Compad. “Just look at her file. Pyke’s

already approved her.”

“Of course he has,” I mutter, snatching the Compad. The hologram shows a young woman—late twenties, glasses, messy hair. She looks like she’d faint if I so much as growled at her.

“Great,” I say, handing the Compad back. “She’s perfect for Pyke. Let him train her.”

“Oriyn, we need fresh blood. The Grolgath are getting bolder.”

“So train her yourself.”

“I’m not a warrior.”

“Neither am I,” I snap, my voice sharp enough to make him flinch. “Not anymore.”

He doesn’t respond, just stands there with that infuriating, hopeful look on his face. I turn away, heading up the stairs. “Good night, Robi.”

“Oriyn—”

“Don’t make me throw you in the river.”

He sighs but doesn’t follow. I can feel his eyes on my back as I disappear into the boat’s opulent interior.

The sharp rap on my door makes my claws twitch.

"Oriyn, I know you can still hear me." Robbie's annoying squeak of a voice spills through the wood. "Look, Captain Pyke told me to tell you this is an order. You don't get a choice. She'll be in your office at seven AM sharp tomorrow."

I'm at the door before he finishes breathing, yanking it open so hard the hinges groan. "And what exactly am I supposed to teach her?" My voice drops to a growl even through the disguise. "I can't even mention Veritas, or grolgath, or my real face without proper vetting."

Robbie adjusts his cheap polyester tie. "Yeah, well..." He shrugs, the motion making his human disguise's jowls wobble. "It's up to you how much you reveal and when. But Pyke thinks?—"

"I know what Pyke thinks." My fingers dent the doorframe. "He thinks this will be good for me. That I'm isolating myself."

"You are." Robbie says it without flinching for once. The little furball's got Vakutan stubbornness in him today. "It's been decades since Brakkus. Not every student turns traitor, you stubborn?—"

I slam my palm against the wall, the impact cracking plaster. "Shut your mouth before I drop you. Make Pyke very unhappy."

Robbie swallows but holds his ground. "So you'll do it?"

"Fine," I growl, my voice low enough to make the air vibrate. "Tell Pyke I'll do my duty for Veritas and the sacred human timeline. But if she quits, it's on him, not me."

Robbie's face lights up like a neon sign, his human disguise's jowls jiggling as he grins. "Great! You won't regret this, Oriyn. Cora's sharp, I'm telling you. She's?—"

"Leave," I cut him off, my tone sharp enough to slice steel. He falters, then scurries off the gangplank, his short legs moving comically fast. I wait until he's out of sight before shutting the door with a slam that rattles the riverboat's frame.

Inside, I stride to my study, the room a fortress of dark wood and leather. My favorite chair groans as I sink into it, the weight of the last few decades pressing down harder than usual. Mentoring. The word tastes bitter, like burnt coffee. I haven't trained anyone since Brakkus, and the last time I did, it ended in betrayal—a student turned traitor, siding with the Ataxian Coalition. I swore I'd never make that mistake again.

But here we are. Pyke's orders. Veritas needs fresh blood, and apparently, I'm the one who's got to bleed it out of this Cora Daniels.

I lean back, steepling my fingers. If she's going to be my problem, I'll do it my way. No coddling, no hand-holding. I'll throw her into the deep end and see if she sinks or swims. Maybe if she sinks, Pyke will leave me alone.

A smirk tugs at the corner of my mouth as I start plotting. First, I'll test her nerve. See if she panics under pressure. Then, her adaptability—how quickly she can pivot when the plan goes sideways. And if she survives that, I'll throw her into something so far out of her depth, she'll either quit or prove she's got what it takes.

The clock on the wall ticks loudly, the only sound in the room. Seven AM sharp, Robbie said. She'll be in my office at Orion Plaza, probably nervous, trying to make a good impression. Let's see how long that lasts.

I grab my Compad and pull up her file again. Cora Daniels. Five-foot-three, brown hair, green eyes. Business degree with a perfect GPA. Likes dry wine and jazz. Couldn't be more ordinary if she tried. But Veritas doesn't recruit ordinary, which means there's something Pyke and Robbie see that I don't. Yet.

I'll find out soon enough. For now, I'll let her think this is a normal internship. Let her believe Orion Weller is just a corporate tycoon with eccentric habits. She'll learn the truth soon enough—if she lasts that long.

“Cora Daniels,” I mutter, my voice echoing in the empty study. “Welcome to Veritas. Hope you’re ready.”

CHAPTER 3

CORA

The clock on my phone flashes 5:45 a.m. as I stand in front of the full-length mirror, my reflection staring back at me with a mix of determination and nerves. The charcoal blazer hugs my shoulders just right, and the off-white blouse underneath is crisp, but my gaze keeps dropping to the skirt versus trousers debate playing out on my bed.

“Skirt or no skirt. That is the question.”

I step closer to the mirror, smoothing the fabric of the blazer. “Orion Weller. Billionaire. Ruthless. Not the type to care about fashion but definitely the type to notice if you’re not sharp.”

I glance at the trousers again, and that’s when I see it—a tiny stitch out of place near the hem. My stomach sinks. “Great. Just great. Orion’s probably the kind of guy who inspects every thread on his employees’ clothes. One mistake and he’ll fire me on the spot.”

My eyes flick back to the skirt. It’s professional but flirty, and I can’t deny the strategic advantage of showing a little leg. “Fine. Skirt it is. If he’s distracted by my legs, maybe he won’t notice if I mess up something important.”

I snort at my own reasoning, but I slide the skirt on anyway, adjusting the waistband and pulling the hem down just enough to feel confident. I grab my bag, double-

checking that I've got everything—notebook, pens, phone, the works—then tiptoe out of my room.

The house is silent except for the faint hum of the refrigerator. I pause at the top of the stairs, listening for any sign that my parents are awake. Mom's voice echoes in my head. "Cora, honey, why don't you ever take risks? You're too cautious!"

"Well, Mom," I whisper to myself, "today's a risk."

I pad down the stairs, my heels in one hand so they don't click against the hardwood. The front door creaks when I open it, and I freeze, waiting for the sound of footsteps or a groggy voice calling out. Nothing. I slip outside, the cool morning air hitting my face, and pull the door shut behind me with a soft click.

The cab's already waiting at the curb, the driver scrolling through his phone. I shove my heels on and climb into the backseat, giving him the address for Orion Plaza.

"Big day, huh?" he says, glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

"You could say that. Either I'm about to start the best job of my life or get fired before lunch."

He chuckles. "Good luck with that."

I lean back in the seat, staring out the window as the city lights blur past. Orion Plaza looms in the distance, its glass facade catching the faint glow of the rising sun. My stomach twists, but I push the nerves down.

"Skirt or no skirt," I mutter under my breath. "Let's see if this gamble pays off."

I hand the cab driver a crumpled twenty and step out onto the curb, craning my neck

to take in the full height of Orion Plaza. The building looms over me like a steel-and-glass monolith, its mirrored surface reflecting the faint pink streaks of dawn. My stomach twists, but I square my shoulders and stride toward the entrance.

The lobby is a cathedral of modern design—three stories of gleaming marble and glass, with a massive chandelier hanging like a frozen waterfall. The reception desk sits in the center, a sleek, circular island manned by a woman with a perfectly coiffed bun and a smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

“Cora Daniels,” I say, my voice steady despite the knot in my chest. “I have an appointment with Mr. Weller.”

She taps at her keyboard, her nails clicking like tiny hammers. “Elevator to the top floor. He’s expecting you.”

The elevator ride feels like it takes forever, the numbers ticking up with agonizing slowness. When the doors finally slide open, I step into a dimly lit office that smells faintly of leather and something metallic. The space is vast, with floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panoramic view of the city. But my attention is immediately drawn to the man sitting at the desk, his face illuminated by the cold glow of his computer screen.

Orion Weller.

His eyes lock onto mine, sharp and unyielding, like he’s already dissecting me. I freeze in the doorway, my hand still gripping the strap of my bag.

“Do you speak?” His voice is deep, resonant, and carries an edge that makes my spine stiffen.

I flinch, my mouth dry. “Y-yes?”

“Are you asking me a question, Ms. Cora Daniels?” The way he says my name—slow, deliberate—makes it sound like a challenge.

“No,” I blurt out, my voice firmer this time. I straighten my posture, refusing to let him see how much he’s rattling me.

He rises from his chair, and I swear the room feels smaller as he steps out from behind the desk. The shadows cling to him like a second skin, but as he moves into the light, his features become clear. He’s massive—broad shoulders, towering height, and a presence that feels like a physical weight. His black hair is slicked back, and his purple eyes bore into me with an intensity that makes my pulse quicken.

“First lesson,” he growls, his voice low and commanding. “You will address me as Mr. Weller or Sir when you speak to me. This includes when you respond to a question. Is that clear?”

"Yes, Sir, Mr. Weller," I say, the words slipping out before I can stop them. My voice sounds foreign, like it belongs to someone else—someone who doesn’t mind being talked down to. My cheeks burn, but it’s not just from humiliation. There’s something else, something hot and electric that coils low in my stomach. I hate it. I hate him. And yet, I can’t look away.

Orion grunts, a sound that’s more dismissal than acknowledgment. He steps closer, his presence looming over me like a storm cloud. I can feel the heat radiating off him, the faint scent of leather and something sharp, like ozone, filling my lungs. He starts to circle me, his boots clicking against the polished floor. Each step feels deliberate, calculated, like he’s mapping out my weaknesses.

I stand frozen, my hands clenched at my sides. My heart pounds so loudly I’m sure he can hear it. His gaze sweeps over me, and I feel it like a physical touch—heavy, invasive, and impossible to ignore. My skin prickles, and I have to fight the urge to

fidget. I've never felt so exposed, so... small.

"Mr. Robbie Dalton speaks highly of your qualifications, Ms. Daniels," he says, his voice low and smooth, like velvet wrapped around steel. "He says that you possess a keen mind, flexibility of thought and perception, and creatively applied ambitions that made you a standout at University."

"Thank you, Sir," I reply automatically, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Don't thank me," he snaps, and I flinch, my gaze dropping to the floor. His tone is like a whip, sharp and cutting, and it leaves a sting that lingers. My stomach churns, a mix of anxiety and something else I can't quite name. The thought of displeasing him makes my chest tighten, and I hate how much it bothers me. "Thank him. Or perhaps, you should offer no thanks, because he has placed you here. In the palm of my hand."

His words hang in the air, heavy and suffocating. I swallow hard, my throat dry. My mind races, trying to find a way to regain some control, but all I can focus on is the way he's looking at me—like I'm a puzzle he's already solved.

I force myself to meet his gaze, my chin lifting in defiance. "And what are you going to do with me, Sir?" The question comes out bolder than I feel, and I can't tell if it's bravery or stupidity.

His knuckles graze my cheek, rough and deliberate, and I flinch at the touch—not because it's harsh, but because it's electric. My heart slams against my ribs, a chaotic rhythm that drowns out all rational thought. He's close enough that I catch the faint scent of his cologne, something dark and earthy, like a storm rolling in.

"Sir," I manage to whisper, but the word feels inadequate, like a pitiful attempt to claw back some control. Control I don't have. Control I'm not sure I even want.

His hand cups my chin, tilting my face up to meet his gaze. Those purple eyes bore into me, and I can't look away. I don't want to. There's something hypnotic about the way he studies me, like he's peeling back every layer of my carefully constructed facade.

"Now that I have you," he murmurs, his voice low and dangerous, "what am I to do with you?"

The question hangs in the air, thick and heavy, and I feel my face flush. My skin burns where his fingers touch, and I'm painfully aware of every inch of space between us. His dominance should terrify me—hell, it does terrify me—but there's a thrill in it too, a forbidden heat that coils in my stomach and spreads like wildfire.

"Sir," I start again, but my voice wavers, betraying the storm of emotions churning inside me. Anger at his arrogance. Humiliation at how easily he's reduced me to this trembling mess. And something else—something I don't want to name but can't ignore. Attraction. Raw, unrelenting attraction.

His lips curve into a faint smirk, as if he can see straight through me.

"You're full of potential, Ms. Daniels," he says, his tone almost taunting. "But potential is worthless without discipline. Without direction."

He releases my chin and steps back, his gaze lingering on me as if he's assessing a piece of art. I take a shaky breath, my mind racing. He's testing me. Pushing me. But for what?

"Sir," I say, my voice steadier this time, "I'm here to prove myself. However you see fit."

His smirk widens, and there's a glint in his eyes that sends a fresh wave of heat

through me.

“Good. Then let’s begin.”

Orion walks away from me, his movements deliberate, almost predatory. He stops by his computer, his broad shoulders blocking the screen for a moment before he glances back at me. His eyes narrow, and I feel like prey caught in the gaze of a predator.

“Come.” The word is a command, low and rumbling, and my body moves before my brain can catch up. His fingers snap, sharp and demanding like a whip crack. I’m at his side before I even realize I’ve taken a step.

“Yes, Sir, Mr. Weller,” I say, the words tumbling out in a rush. My cheeks flush as I fumble over the titles, my tongue tripping over itself.

“It’s Sir or Mr. Weller,” he says, his tone laced with something that might be amusement if it weren’t so sharp. “You don’t have to use both.”

“Sorry, Sir.” I can’t meet his gaze, my eyes darting to the screen instead. The spreadsheet displayed there is a labyrinth of numbers, formulas, and projections. I take it in at a glance, my mind already racing to piece together the puzzle. “Is this the financial projections for second quarter, Sir?”

His silence stretches for a beat too long, and I glance up to see him studying me. His expression is unreadable, but there’s something in the way his eyes narrow, a flicker of something that might be approval. He’s impressed. I can feel it, and it sends a jolt of pride through me, even as I force myself to stay focused.

“I suspect an error has been made on this Excel document,” he says finally, his voice a deep rumble that seems to vibrate in my chest. “I want you to find it and fix it.”

He doesn't move, his massive frame looming over the desk, so I squeeze in beside him, my arm brushing against his as I reach for the keyboard. His presence is overwhelming, his height and breadth making the space feel impossibly small. I can smell his cologne—something dark and earthy, like a storm brewing on the horizon.

My fingers fly across the keyboard, pulling up linked financial documents, cross-referencing numbers, and verifying equations line by line. His closeness is distracting in ways I don't want to admit, but I force myself to focus on the task at hand. I won't let him see how much he's getting under my skin.

Orion sighs, the sound impatient and gravelly. I glance up at him, my fingers pausing mid-keystroke.

"It's easier to concentrate when you sit down," he says, his tone clipped.

"I'm fine," I reply, my voice steady despite the way my pulse quickens under his gaze. I want to prove myself, to show him I don't need to be coddled.

His eyes narrow, and before I can react, his hand is on my shoulder, firm and unyielding. He pushes me into the office chair, the motion rough but not painful. The leather seat is warm from where he'd been sitting, and I feel a shiver run down my spine as my body sinks into it.

"Sit when you are told to sit," he commands, his voice low and firm.

"Yes, Sir," I reply, my voice softer than I'd like. My thighs squeeze together involuntarily, a warmth spreading through me that I'm not ready to examine. Being manhandled by him—even in such a small way—stirred something deep inside me, something I'll have to unpack later.

Much later. In the privacy of my bedroom, late at night when I can't sleep and the

memory of his touch lingers like a ghost.

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CHAPTER 4

ORION

Pyke leans back in his chair, the metallic frame groaning under his weight. His red scales catch the light from the holoscreen behind him, giving him an almost luminescent glow. His grin stretches wide, showing just a hint of fang.

"She doesn't entirely displease you, huh?" He drums his thick fingers on the desk, the sound echoing like a drumbeat. "That's practically a love letter coming from you, Oriyn. Should I start planning the wedding?"

I glare at him, crossing my arms over my chest. The hologram of "Orion Weller" flickers faintly, a reminder of the human disguise I wear like a second skin. "Your humor is as subtle as a plasma cannon, Pyke. I said she doesn't displease me, not that I'm ready to carve her name into my armor."

"You're defensive. That's new." He cocks his head, his eyes narrowing with amusement. "Tell me, does she know yet? About what we are? About why we're here?"

"No." The word comes out sharper than I intend. "And I don't see the need to rush that particular revelation. She's still adjusting to the idea of taking orders without questioning every single one. If I tell her I'm not even human, she'll either run screaming or start writing a memoir about alien overlords."

"She hesitated, you said. How bad was it?"

I shrug, though the memory prickles. "She stood there for a full three seconds when I told her to sit. Three seconds. That's an eternity in a firefight. And when I'm close, she stumbles over her words like she's never seen a commanding officer before."

Pyke laughs, a deep, rumbling sound that fills the room. "You're towering over her in a hologram that makes you look like some kind of corporate titan. Of course she's nervous. Have you considered that maybe it's not fear? Maybe it's... admiration?"

"Don't." My voice drops, all humor gone. "I'm not here to play mentor or idol. I'm here to make sure she doesn't get herself killed when the Grolgath come sniffing around."

"And yet," Pyke leans forward, resting his elbows on the desk, "you didn't say yes when I asked if you wanted to let her go. Why is that?"

I pause, my jaw tightening. "Because she's sharp. Quick. She caught a coding error in a spreadsheet that had been overlooked for weeks. If she can focus, if she can learn to act without hesitation, she might actually be useful."

"Useful," Pyke repeats, drawing out the word like he's tasting it for the first time. "Is that all?"

"I don't need her to be anything else," I snap.

The room falls silent for a moment, the hum of the base's systems the only sound. Pyke leans back again, his grin softening into something more contemplative.

"Three weeks, Oriyn. Give her time. You're not an easy man to impress—or to please—but she's not a cadet at Brakkus. She's a human, and she's in over her head. Cut her some slack."

I don't respond. Instead, I turn on my heel and head for the door, the hologram flickering briefly as I step into the brightly lit corridor. Pyke's laughter follows me, a low rumble that grates against the edges of my focus.

Useful. That's all she needs to be. Anything more is a distraction.

The shuttle hums beneath me as I approach St. Louis, the cloaking device shifting the exterior to mimic a sleek, black helicopter. The city skyline looms in the distance, Orion Plaza cutting through the clouds like a blade. My hands tighten on the controls. I've done this a thousand times, but this time feels different. Cora's waiting.

The helipad glimmers as I descend, the faint shimmer of the cloaking field dissolving as the shuttle—now a helicopter—touches down. The rotors slow, and I kill the engine, the silence sudden and heavy. I step out, the image inducer making me look like Orion Weller, the human mogul, not Oriyn, the Vakutan warrior. The disguise feels heavier today.

She's there. Cora stands by the door to the office suite, a cup of coffee in one hand, a tablet tucked under her arm. Her brown hair catches the sunlight, and she smiles when she sees me. It's genuine, warm—something I'm not used to. My chest tightens.

"Mr. Weller," she says, her voice steady despite the flicker of nerves in her eyes. "Welcome back. I brought you coffee—black, no sugar. Just the way you like it."

I take the cup, our fingers brushing. Her skin is soft, and I have to force my hand not to linger. "Thank you, Ms. Daniels. You're efficient as always."

She shrugs, the movement casual, but there's pride in it. "I try. How was your meeting?"

"Productive." I take a sip of the coffee, the bitterness grounding me. "And here? Any fires to put out?"

She falls into step beside me as I stride toward the office, her shorter legs working double-time to keep up. "Nothing major. I caught a discrepancy in the quarterly report—something the accounting team missed. I flagged it and sent it back for correction. Should be handled by end of day."

I pause, turning to look at her. Her green eyes meet mine, and for a moment, I forget what I'm supposed to say. She's sharp, observant, and she doesn't back down. It's infuriating and intoxicating all at once.

"Good work," I say finally, the words coming out gruffer than I intend. "That kind of attention to detail is exactly what I expect from you."

Her cheeks flush, and she looks down, but there's a small smile tugging at her lips. "Thank you, sir."

I open the door to the office, letting her step in first. The room is all glass and steel, the city sprawled out below us. She sets her tablet on the desk and turns to me, her hands clasped in front of her like she's bracing for something.

"Is there anything else you need from me today?" she asks.

I want to tell her. I want to tell her there's a hundred things I need from her, none of which have to do with spreadsheets or quarterly reports. But I don't. I can't.

The hum of the computer fills the room as Cora stands beside me, her brow furrowed in concentration. Her fingers hover over the keyboard, hesitating as she struggles to click on the tiny icon that's been giving her trouble. I can feel the tension radiating off her, sharp and electric.

“Here,” she mutters, leaning closer to the screen. “If I just... angle it right...”

Her efforts are futile, and her sigh of frustration is sharp enough to cut glass. Then, without warning, she drops onto my knee, her weight settling against me as she reaches for the mouse. My breath catches in my throat, my pulse roaring in my ears like a starship engine. Her perfectly formed, curvaceous bottom presses against my thigh, and I clench my fists so hard my nails dig into my palms. The image inducer hides the way my scales ripple with tension, but it can't mask the way my body reacts to her closeness.

“There,” she says, her voice triumphant as the icon finally clicks. “All done, Sir.”

She stands up, her movement casual, like she didn't just turn my world upside down with the simple act of sitting on my knee. My jaw tightens as I force myself to look away, to focus on the screen instead of the way her hips sway as she steps back.

“Punch out for the day,” I say, my voice rougher than intended.

She blinks, her green eyes widening in surprise. “It's... early. We usually work late.”

“It's a thank you,” I say, standing abruptly to put some distance between us. My chair scrapes against the floor, the sound grating. “For your hard work.”

She hesitates, then nods, a small smile playing on her lips. “Thank you, Sir. I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” I repeat, my voice clipped. The moment the door closes behind her, I'm on my feet, pacing the room like a caged predator. My skin feels too tight, my veins burning with a need I can't ignore. I mutter to myself, “Cold shower. Now.”

I take the stairs two at a time, the sound of my heavy footsteps echoing through the

empty upper floor. The water is icy when I step under the spray, the sharp sting of it doing little to ease the fire in my blood. My hands grip the edge of the shower, my knuckles white as I try to focus on anything other than the memory of her body against mine.

But it's no use. The image of Cora—her curves, her scent, the way she looks at me with a mix of respect and defiance—floods my mind. My control shatters, and my hand moves of its own accord, gripping myself with a desperation that borders on madness. I imagine her here, in my arms, her body pressed against mine as I claim her with a ferocity that matches the fire in my veins. The roar of the water drowns out the sound of my harsh breaths, but it can't silence the storm inside me.

When it's over, I lean against the wall, the cold water doing nothing to calm the heat that lingers. My thoughts are a tangled mess, and I know one thing with absolute certainty: this is going to be a problem.

CHAPTER 5

CORA

The glow of the computer screen casts a pale light across the desk, the numbers from the Asian markets finally aligning into something coherent. My fingers hover over the keyboard, double-checking the last cell. Done. I lean back in Orion's chair, the leather creaking under my weight, and stretch my arms above my head. The office is quiet, too quiet.

"Two days," I mutter to myself, spinning the chair slightly. "Two days, and it feels like he's been gone for a month."

The silence presses in, heavy and unfamiliar. I've gotten used to the sound of his voice, the way it rumbles through the room like a storm rolling in. Even when he's not speaking, his presence is a constant—commanding, intense, impossible to ignore. Now, the absence of it feels like a void.

I glance at the clock. Midnight. The thought of going home to my parents' house makes my skin crawl. Last time, I walked in on my dad posing like some Renaissance painting, and my mom wielding a paintbrush like it was a weapon. No thanks.

"Sofa it is," I say, pushing myself up from the chair. My legs protest, stiff from hours of sitting. I grab my bag and head for the stairs that lead to the upstairs apartment.

The second floor is dimly lit, the kitchenette gleaming faintly in the moonlight streaming through the windows. I toss my bag onto the counter and head for the sofa,

pulling the throw blanket off the back. It smells faintly of Orion—something sharp and clean, like cedar and ozone.

I flop onto the cushions, the exhaustion of the day finally catching up to me. My mind drifts back to him, as it always does. The way he looks at me sometimes, like he's trying to solve a puzzle. The way his hand felt on my shoulder that first day, firm but not unkind. The way he's started to let his guard down, just a little, when it's just the two of us.

"Stop it, Cora," I whisper, pulling the blanket up to my chin. "He's your boss. That's it."

But the thought lingers, stubborn and insistent. I close my eyes, the image of him filling my mind—his sharp jawline, those piercing purple eyes, the way he towers over me like some kind of god.

The sharp clatter of something hitting the floor jolts me awake, the sound echoing up the stairs from the office below. I sit up, my heart pounding, the blanket slipping off my shoulders. The office is silent again, except for the faint hum of the air conditioner.

"Orion?" I call out, my voice soft but hopeful. Maybe he's back early. I swing my legs off the sofa and pad to the top of the stairs, peering down into the dimly lit office.

Instead of Orion, I see a man in green overalls, a bucket and mop in hand, standing near the desk. He's tall, wiry, and his face is obscured by the shadow of his cap. My stomach tightens. Something's off. For one, I've never seen this guy before, and Orion Plaza maintenance staff wear brown overalls. And for another, who cleans a seventy-story office building at midnight?

I step back slowly, my mind racing. My phone is upstairs, on the kitchen counter. I'll call security, maybe the police. Better to be safe than sorry. I turn to head back up the stairs, but the squeak of my sock on the step betrays me.

"Hey, don't let me stop you," I say, forcing a casual tone I don't feel. "I'll just hang out up here until you're done with the floor."

His head snaps up, and I catch a glimpse of his eyes—too bright, too sharp. I turn and climb the stairs, trying not to break into a run. My pulse thunders in my ears. At the top, I glance back. The man is gone. Vanished. My breath hitches.

I sprint for the kitchen, my fingers fumbling for my phone on the counter. I grab it, but before I can unlock it, a voice behind me makes me freeze.

"Who could you possibly have to call at this hour?"

I whirl around. The man is there, leaning against the doorway, his cap tilted back. His face begins to shift, the skin rippling like water. His features contort, elongating into a horrifying reptilian mask—green scales, slit pupils, and a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth.

I stumble back, my phone slipping from my hand. My back hits the counter, and I can't breathe, can't think. The creature—the thing—takes a step closer, its forked tongue flicking out to taste the air.

"What's the matter?" it hisses, its voice scraping like nails on glass. "Never seen a Grolgath in his true form before? I thought all of you Veritas agents were taught about us."

I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out. My mind scrambles to process what he's saying—Grolgath? Veritas? None of it makes sense. All I know is the

danger, the way my body screams at me to run even though there's nowhere to go.

My heart hammers in my chest as I bolt down the stairs, the Grolgath's laughter echoing behind me. It's a sound that crawls up my spine, mocking and predatory.

"Oh yes, do run away," he calls, his voice dripping with amusement. "It's no fun to hunt unless my prey struggles."

The corded phone on Orion's desk is my only lifeline. I skid to a stop, yanking the receiver off the cradle. Silence. My stomach sinks as I glance over my shoulder. The Grolgath stands there, the severed end of the phone line dangling from his scaled fingers.

"No fair, trying to ruin my fun," he hisses, his slit pupils narrowing. "I was going to play with you a little longer, give you a precious few moments of life, but I don't think you'll offer much sport."

He takes a step forward, his movements fluid and unnerving, like a snake coiling to strike. I back away, my hands groping behind me for anything—anything—I can use as a weapon. My fingers brush against something cold and solid. The fire extinguisher mounted on the wall.

"Oh, that's better," the Grolgath purrs, his forked tongue flicking out. "Is it heavy? Good, you might actually be able to damage me with it?—"

I don't wait for him to finish. I yank the fire extinguisher off the wall, fumbling with the pin. My fingers are shaking so badly I almost drop it. The Grolgath laughs again, low and guttural, like he's enjoying this.

"Oh, little human, do you really think?—?"

I pull the trigger, and a blast of freezing foam hits him square in the face. He stumbles back, hissing and clawing at his eyes. The foam sprays everywhere, coating his scaled skin, sticking to the floor. He chokes out something in a language I don't understand, and I drop the extinguisher, its weight suddenly too much.

I don't look back. I sprint for the elevator, my breath coming in ragged gasps. The Grolgath's enraged screech echoes through the office, but I don't stop. My fingers slam against the elevator button, the doors sliding open with a soft chime. I dive inside, slamming the button for the ground floor.

The last thing I see before the doors close is the Grolgath shaking off the foam, his reptilian eyes locked on me, glowing with fury. The elevator jerks into motion, and I sag against the wall, my legs trembling.

The elevator lurches, and I stumble, my back slamming against the wall. A heavy thud reverberates above me, and I freeze, my breath catching in my throat. The ceiling groans, metal screeching as something tears through it. I look up just in time to see a clawed hand rip through the panel, the talons glinting in the dim light.

I scream, the sound raw and panicked, and my fingers fly to the control panel, mashing every button in sight. The elevator jerks to a stop, and the doors slide open on the twentieth floor. I bolt out, my legs moving before my brain can catch up. Behind me, the Grolgath hisses, a sound that sends shivers down my spine. The doors start to close, and I turn just in time to see him lunging forward, his reptilian face twisted in fury. The doors shut with a soft ding, cutting him off.

I don't stop to breathe. I sprint down the hallway, my shoes slapping against the polished floor. The offices here are dark, the glass walls reflecting the faint glow of emergency lights. I skid into the first open door I see, my heart pounding so hard it feels like it might burst.

The office is small, cluttered with papers and a desk that looks like it hasn't been used in weeks. I grab the phone on the desk, my hands shaking so badly I can barely dial. The line rings once, twice, and then a calm voice answers.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"There's—there's a monster," I stammer, my voice breaking. "A snake man. He's chasing me. He's going to kill me."

There's a pause on the other end, and I can almost hear the operator's skepticism. "A snake man," she repeats, her tone flat.

"Yes! He's—he's real. He's in the building. Please, you have to send someone!"

"Ma'am, someone could be dying while you're making a crank call," the operator says, her voice sharp. The line goes dead.

I stare at the phone, my chest heaving. My fingers hover over the buttons, but I don't dial again. Outside the office, I hear footsteps—slow, deliberate, and getting closer. The sound of claws scraping against the floor makes my stomach churn.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," the Grolgath taunts, his voice echoing down the hallway. "I can smell you. I know you're close. I think I'll leave your head as a present to Oriyn."

I drop to the floor, crawling under the desk. The phone slips from my hand, and I catch it before it can clatter against the tile. My breath comes in shallow gasps, and I press a hand over my mouth, trying to muffle the sound. My heart is pounding so loudly I'm sure he can hear it.

The footsteps stop just outside the office. I can see his shadow through the glass wall,

his silhouette distorted but unmistakable. He's massive, his shoulders hunched, his head tilted as if he's listening. I squeeze my eyes shut, willing myself to be invisible.

"Little human," he purrs, his voice low and menacing. "You can't hide forever."

I don't move. I don't breathe. The only sound is the blood rushing in my ears and the faint creak of the Grolgath's claws as he flexes them. He takes a step into the office, and I press myself further under the desk, my back against the wall. The phone is still in my hand, but I don't dare dial. Not now. Not when he's so close.

The desk flips like it's made of cardboard, the wood splintering as it crashes against the wall. I scramble backward, my back hitting the floor, my hands splayed out in front of me like a shield. The Grolgath looms over me, his scales glinting under the fluorescent lights, his claws extended and dripping with something dark and viscous. His slit pupils narrow, and his forked tongue flicks out, tasting the air.

"Pathetic," he sneers, his voice a low hiss. "You're not even worth the effort."

I don't have time to scream. I don't have time to think. His arm swings down, claws aimed straight for my throat. I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing for the pain.

It never comes.

Instead, there's a deafening crash, the sound of something massive colliding with the Grolgath. I open my eyes just in time to see a blur of gold and red as a larger figure slams into him, sending him sprawling across the room. The Grolgath snarls, his claws slashing wildly, but the golden-scaled figure—bigger, broader, and radiating sheer power—grabs him by the throat and slams him into the wall.

The impact shatters the drywall, dust raining down as the two reptilian beings grapple. The golden one moves with a precision that's almost terrifying, his every

motion deliberate and calculated. He slams the Grolgath into the floor, then the ceiling, then the floor again, each impact making the room shake. The Grolgath lets out a guttural roar, struggling to break free, but it's no use. The golden figure grabs him by the arm and hurls him across the room.

The Grolgath crashes through the window, the glass shattering into a thousand glittering shards. For a moment, he hangs in the air, his eyes wide with shock, and then he's gone, his scream fading as he plummets twenty stories to the ground below.

I'm frozen, my breath coming in shallow gasps, my heart pounding so hard it feels like it might burst. The golden figure straightens, his chest rising and falling with each heavy breath. His scales shimmer in the dim light, and his purple eyes—those piercing, familiar purple eyes—lock onto mine.

“Are you all right...” he starts, his voice deep and resonant, then stops, as if catching himself. “Miss?”

I stare at him, my mind struggling to process what I'm seeing. The scales, the height, the sheer presence—it's all alien, and yet... there's something about his face, something I recognize. The sharp jawline, the intensity in his gaze, the way he carries himself like he owns every room he walks into. It's him.

“I'm not hurt,” I manage to say, my voice trembling. “Mr. Weller. Sir.”

CHAPTER 6

ORIYN

Cora sits in my office, my blazer draped over her shoulders like a makeshift shield. She cradles the coffee cup in her hands, steam curling up to her face. Her green eyes are sharp, curious, not the wide, panicked stare I expected after a run-in with a grolgath. She's tougher than she looks. I like that.

"So, you're not really a businessman at all?" she asks, her tone light but probing. She's testing the waters, trying to figure out how much she can push.

"I'm as much a businessman as I am a soldier," I say, leaning back in my chair. The leather creaks under my weight. "Veritas needs money to function. Someone has to make sure the coffers don't run dry. That's me."

She tilts her head, her brown hair brushing against the collar of my blazer. "And the grolgath? They're the bad guys, right?"

"From humanity's perspective, yes. They're here to manipulate your timeline, to ensure Earth falls under their control in the future. Veritas is here to stop them."

She laughs, a short, incredulous sound. "Well, that's a lot to unpack. So, in the future, Earth and Vakuta are allies?"

"Yes." I nod, my golden scales catching the light. "And if we do our jobs right, it stays that way."

She takes a sip of her coffee, her eyes never leaving mine. “Alright, Mr. Weller. Sir. If you’re really an alien working for a secret organization protecting Earth’s timeline... what do you want with me?”

I lean forward, resting my elbows on the desk. My voice is low, deliberate. “You’re sharp, Cora. Smarter than most humans I’ve met. Veritas needs people like you—people who can think on their feet, who don’t panic when the world turns upside down. You proved that today.”

She raises an eyebrow, a small smirk playing on her lips. “So, what? I’m your new recruit?”

“You’re a potential recruit,” I correct her. “This isn’t a decision to make lightly. If you join Veritas, your life changes. Permanently.”

She sets the coffee cup down on the desk, her fingers drumming lightly against the surface. “And if I say no?”

“Then you walk away. But you’ll never know what you could’ve been a part of.”

She leans back in her chair, her gaze thoughtful. “You’re not exactly selling it, you know.”

“I’m not here to sell it,” I say, my voice firm. “I’m here to give you the truth. The choice is yours.”

She’s quiet for a moment, her fingers still tapping rhythmically. Then she looks up at me, her green eyes steady. “Alright, Mr. Weller. Sir. I’m in.”

I keep my face neutral, but inside, something loosens in my chest. She’s still here. She’s staying. I don’t know why that matters so much, but it does.

“This isn’t a game,” I rumble, my voice low and steady. “It’s life and death. What you experienced tonight, with a grolgath attempting to kill you? It will likely happen again. Many times.”

She purses her lips, her fingers tightening around the edge of the desk. For a moment, I think she’ll back out. But then she squares her shoulders and meets my gaze head-on. “I’m still in.”

“Very well,” I say, nodding once. “Welcome to Veritas.”

Her eyes narrow, and she leans back in her chair, crossing her arms. “That’s it? You aren’t going to teach me a secret handshake or anything? What happens now?”

“Now,” I say, standing and moving around the desk, “we continue much as we did before. We still have a business empire to run, in order to keep Veritas and other altruistic projects funded. But your duties will...expand.”

Her face lights up, and she leans forward, her green eyes sparkling. “Do I get a raygun? Or a jetpack?”

I can’t help it—I laugh, a deep, rumbling sound that surprises even me. But then I force my expression back into something stern. “You do, in fact, need to learn to use weaponry if you’re going to serve the cause.”

She grins. “Rayguns it is, then.”

“Not so fast,” I say, walking over to the far wall where I’ve set up a dartboard. I grab a set of darts and hold them out to her. “This will help you build the hand-eye coordination necessary to wield a plasma weapon.”

She raises an eyebrow but takes the darts, bouncing one in her palm like she’s

weighing its potential. “Darts? Really?”

“Start small,” I say, crossing my arms. “Accuracy is accuracy.”

She steps up to the line I’ve marked on the floor, her brow furrowed in concentration. She takes a deep breath, pulls her arm back, and throws the dart. It hits the wall two feet to the left of the board, ricochets off, and bounces off my head.

I blink, the sting barely registering. She claps a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry!”

I pluck the dart from the floor and hold it up, my expression deadpan. “Or maybe we could just skip the darts.”

Cora rubs her stomach with a dramatic groan. “I might be able to throw better if I weren’t so hungry. Just saying.”

I glance at her, one eyebrow raised. “Are you blaming your terrible aim on your stomach now?”

She grins, unapologetic. “Absolutely. Food first, darts later.”

I stand, gesturing toward the door. “Fine. Let’s get you fed.”

The elevator ride down to the ground floor is quiet, but I can feel her watching me from the corner of my eye. She’s trying to figure me out, piece by piece. I don’t mind. Let her try.

When the doors open, my cherry-red Ferrari is waiting at the curb, its sleek lines gleaming under the city lights. Cora whistles low and long. “What part of driving fancy cars helps save the timeline?”

I chuckle, unlocking the car with a press of the key fob. “One must keep up appearances.”

She slides into the passenger seat, running her hand over the leather upholstery. “You must be really good at appearances, then.”

“I try,” I say, settling into the driver’s seat. The engine roars to life, a low growl that vibrates through the car. I glance at her. “Buckle up.”

She does, but the grin on her face tells me she’s ready for whatever I throw at her. I hit the gas, and the car leaps forward, weaving through the city streets with precision. The city blurs around us, and I show off a little, taking the turns sharp and fast.

Cora laughs, gripping the door handle. “You drive like my parents drive fifty-five miles an hour everywhere.”

I glance at her, my lips curling into a smirk. “Do I look like your father?”

She tilts her head, her grin widening. “No, but you look like you could be my Daddy.”

My foot slips off the accelerator for a split second, the car jerking slightly before I regain control. I glance sharply at her, but she’s staring out the window, her face serene except for the shit-eating grin tugging at the corners of her mouth.

“Cora,” I say, my voice low and careful, “are you messing with me?”

She turns to face me, her green eyes glinting with mischief. “I don’t know, Mr. Weller. Sir. Am I?”

I don’t answer, focusing on the road instead. But the air between us feels charged,

like she's just thrown a spark into dry tinder. And neither of us is sure if it's going to catch fire or fizzle out.

The diner buzzes with the hum of conversation and the clatter of plates. Cora is already halfway through a basket of wings, her fingers slick with sauce, when she turns to me with a question that makes me pause mid-sip of my coffee.

"So, are there, like, girl Vakutans?" she asks, her mouth half-full.

I set the cup down, wiping the steam off my hand. "Yes. Male and female, like most galactic species. Though I'll admit, the concept of gender isn't a universal constant across the cosmos."

Her eyes widen, and she leans forward, ignoring the smear of sauce on her cheek. "Wait, how many alien species are out there?"

"Hundreds of thousands," I say, leaning back in the booth. The vinyl creaks under my weight. "And probably ten times that number yet to be discovered. The universe is... vast."

She stares at me, her wings forgotten. "That's... insane. I mean, I knew you weren't from around here, but... hundreds of thousands? That's mind-blowing."

"It is," I agree. "And humanity is just one thread in a much larger tapestry."

She wipes her hands on a napkin, her expression thoughtful. "Do you have any family? Like, back home?"

"My mother is alive," I say, turning my coffee cup in my hands. "My father died in the Centuries War, shortly after I was born. I never knew him."

Her hand reaches across the table, her fingers brushing mine. “That must be hard.”

I squeeze her hand, the warmth of her touch grounding me. “He died honorably. That counts for something.”

She nods, her green eyes soft with understanding. But then she tilts her head, her curiosity piqued again. “So, just your parents? No other family?”

“No,” I say, my voice steady. “Just them.”

She pokes at the remaining wings in the basket, not looking at me. “Nobody at all in your life? Nobody... special?”

I feel the weight of her question settle between us, heavy and unspoken. My heart aches, a deep pang I haven’t felt in centuries. I stare at her. “There might be.”

Her head snaps up, her eyes sharp and searching. “Who?”

I hold her gaze, my chest tight. “Can’t you guess?”

The diner fades around us, the noise of the world muffled. Her lips part, but no words come out. The air between us crackles, electric and unspoken. She doesn’t look away, and neither do I.

I leave a stack of hundreds on the table without fanfare, the bills crisp and unceremonious. Cora’s eyes flick to the money, then to me, one brow arched. “You know that’s excessive, right?”

“I don’t do things by halves,” I say, standing and extending my hand to her. She takes it without hesitation, her palm warm against mine. We walk out of the diner, the night air cool and alive with the hum of the city. Her hair’s a little disheveled, and I can’t

resist smoothing it back, my fingers brushing against her temple. She looks up at me, her green eyes sharp, expectant.

“What?” she asks, her voice soft but edged with curiosity.

I don’t answer with words. Instead, I lean down, my lips meeting hers in a kiss that starts tender, almost hesitant. But the moment her hands grip the front of my shirt, pulling me closer, something in me snaps. The kiss deepens, turns hungry, her mouth hot and insistent against mine. My hands slide to her waist, pulling her flush against me. She’s smaller than me, so much smaller, but she meets me with a fierceness that makes my head spin.

We break apart briefly, both of us gasping for air, but then her lips are on mine again, her fingers threading through my hair. I can’t think, can’t breathe, can’t do anything but kiss her like she’s the only thing anchoring me to this world. My hands roam her back, her hips, pulling her impossibly closer. She’s all heat and softness, and I’m drowning in her.

“Excuse me!” A sharp voice cuts through the haze, and we both jerk apart. The diner’s manager stands a few feet away, arms crossed, her expression a mix of disapproval and amusement. “This is a family establishment. Take the, uh, enthusiasm somewhere else.”

Cora bursts out laughing, her cheeks flushed, and I chuckle too. “Sorry,” I say, though I don’t mean it, not really. Cora’s still giggling as I guide her to the car, my hand resting on the small of her back.

The drive to her house is quiet, the air between us charged. I can still taste her on my lips, feel the weight of her hands on my shoulders. She glances at me, her smile soft and knowing.

“So,” she says, breaking the silence, “when can I see you again?”

“You’re going to see me tomorrow at work,” I reply, keeping my eyes on the road.

She rolls her eyes, her grin widening. “That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

I glance at her, my lips twitching. “I guess you’ll have to wait and see.”

Her laugh fills the car, light and unburdened, and it’s the best sound I’ve heard in centuries. We pull up to her house, and she unbuckles her seatbelt, turning to face me. “Goodnight, Mr. Weller. Sir.”

“Goodnight, Cora,” I say, my voice low.

She leans in, pressing a quick, teasing kiss to my cheek before slipping out of the car. I watch her walk up to the house, her hips swaying slightly, and I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face. The memory of her lips on mine lingers all the way home, a spark I can’t—and don’t want to—extinguish.

CHAPTER 7

CORA

The wooden planks of the dock creak beneath our feet as we walk, the soft lapping of the river water mingling with the distant hum of the city. Orion's hand rests on my back, his touch steady and warm even through the fabric of my dress. He's in his human disguise tonight, but I can't help stealing glances at him, imagining the red scales and sharp ridges hidden beneath the hologram. The tuxedo fits him perfectly, though. Tailored, crisp, and just the right amount of intimidating.

"When you said you lived on a houseboat, I was expecting something more...rustic," I admit, glancing toward the massive vessel moored ahead.

Orion's chuckle rumbles deep in his chest. "Rustic? Ms. Daniels, I'm wounded. Do you think so little of me?"

"I think you're full of surprises," I shoot back, tilting my head to meet his gaze. His purple eyes—human for now—narrow with amusement.

"You haven't even seen the inside yet."

We step onto the gangplank, and he offers me a hand. I take it, my fingers dwarfed by his as we ascend. The riverboat looms above us, its polished wood gleaming under the soft glow of string lights. It's massive, more mansion than boat, with a grandeur that feels straight out of a bygone era.

“This is incredible,” I murmur, stepping onto the deck. The air smells faintly of polished wood and the river, but there’s an undercurrent of something else—something clean and metallic, like the scent of a high-tech lab.

“Wait until you see the inside.” He leads me through a set of double doors, and I’m met with a sight that makes me stop in my tracks. The interior is a masterclass in luxury: plush carpets, gleaming chandeliers, and rich mahogany paneling. It’s Gatsby-esque, but with a subtle futuristic edge. The furniture is sleek and modern, and there’s a faint hum of energy in the air that makes me think this place is more than it seems.

“Orion, this is...wow.”

“Impressed?”

“More like speechless.”

He steps closer, his hand sliding from my back to my waist. “Good.” His voice is low, the kind of tone that makes my stomach flip.

I glance up at him, feeling the weight of his gaze. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Enjoying what?”

“Showing off.”

“Maybe.” His lips quirk into a grin. “Or maybe I just like watching your reactions.”

“Well, keep talking like that, and I might start blushing.”

“I’m counting on it.”

He leans in, and my breath catches. His hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing my lower lip. I tilt my face up, my heart pounding, but before our lips can meet, a sharp, insistent tone cuts through the air.

Orion freezes, his brow furrowing as he pulls out his phone. The screen flashes with the Veritas emblem, and he sighs.

“You have to take it,” I say, placing my fingers on his lips before he can argue.

“You dare?” His mock incredulity makes me smile.

“So discipline me for insubordination later,” I tease. “Take the call from Pyke now, it could be important.”

He catches my wrist, pressing a kiss to my fingertips before releasing me. “I’ll hold you to that.”

As he steps away to answer the call, I take the opportunity to explore. The riverboat is a maze of luxury, each room more opulent than the last. I trail my fingers along the polished banister as I ascend a spiral staircase, the carpet soft beneath my heels.

The upper deck opens into a lounge area with floor-to-ceiling windows that offer a stunning view of the city skyline. The Arch glimmers in the distance, its silhouette sharp against the night sky. I step closer to the glass, marveling at the view.

Orion’s voice drifts up from below, his tone sharp and businesslike. I can’t make out the words, but I know that tone—something’s happened. My stomach twists, but I push the unease aside, focusing instead on the room around me.

A sleek, modern bar sits in one corner, its shelves stocked with bottles that look expensive but lack labels. I run my hand along the smooth surface of the counter, my

mind wandering back to Orion and the way he looked at me moments ago.

The bedroom is as opulent as the rest of the riverboat, but there's a certain intensity to it that feels uniquely Orion. The massive bed dominates the space, its dark mahogany frame carved with intricate patterns. The satin sheets are a deep crimson, and I can't resist running my hand over them. They're cool and smooth, and I feel a flash of heat at the thought of what they might feel like against my skin later.

My eyes land on the sleek black remote on the nightstand. I pick it up, pressing the power button to turn on the large screen TV mounted on the wall. Instead, there's a soft whirring sound as a panel in the wall slides open, revealing a hidden door. My heart skips a beat.

"Okay, Veritas command center, here we go," I mutter under my breath, stepping closer. I flip the light switch, and the room illuminates.

But it's not a high-tech command center.

My jaw drops.

The walls are lined with shelves, and every inch is filled with...well, let's just say it's not the kind of gear I was expecting. Leather whips, riding crops, ropes, restraints, and—is that a ball gag? I stare at the array of BDSM toys, my mind racing.

"Holy crap," I whisper, stepping inside. The air smells faintly of leather and something earthy, like sandalwood. My initial shock begins to fade, replaced by a growing curiosity.

I reach out, my fingers brushing against a sleek black riding crop. It's lighter than it looks, the leather supple and smooth. I tap it against my palm, the sensation sending a shiver up my spine.

“Does...does Orion want to use all this stuff on me?” I wonder aloud. The thought should probably terrify me, but instead, I feel a weird mix of excitement and intrigue.

I pick up a pair of leather cuffs, turning them over in my hands. The buckles are solid, the craftsmanship impeccable. “Well, someone’s got expensive taste,” I mutter, a small smile tugging at my lips.

Next, I grab a ball gag from a hook on the wall. It’s made of soft silicone, with small holes for breathing, and the straps are lined with velvet. I hold it up, cocking my head as I examine it.

“Restricted speech and a sense of helplessness, huh?” I say to myself, my voice wry. “Yeah, that tracks with the whole ‘Yes, Sir’ thing.”

I set it back on the hook and move deeper into the room. There’s a chest against the far wall, and I kneel to open it. Inside, I find more ropes, neatly coiled, and a few items I can’t quite identify. My cheeks flush as I pull out a leather harness, its straps intricate and purposeful.

“Okay, Orion’s definitely been holding out on me,” I say, shaking my head. I’m not repulsed—far from it. The more I explore, the more my curiosity grows. The possibilities are endless, and yeah, maybe a little intimidating, but also...exciting.

I creep out of the hidden room, my bare feet silent on the polished wood floor. Orion’s voice drifts up from the lower deck, sharp and commanding, but I can’t make out the words. He’s still on the call with Pyke.

My heart races as I slip back into the hidden room. I tell myself to close the door, to pretend I never saw anything, but my hands betray me. I reach for the ball gag again, the smooth silicone cool against my skin.

I slide it into my mouth, the straps brushing my cheeks as I pull them tight. The sensation sends a shiver down my spine. I imagine it's Orion's hands instead of my own, his fingers brushing my neck as he fastens the buckle. I lean back against the wall, my breath quickening as I slide my hand under my dress.

The soft hum of the vibrating egg intensifies as I press it against my clit, my legs trembling. I moan softly into the gag, the sound muffled and desperate. I'm so close, but it's not enough. I need more. I need him .

I strip out of my dress, the fabric pooling at my feet. The cool air brushes my skin as I pick up the Reaper's Lingerie. The leather collar is smooth against my fingers as I fasten it around my neck. The strap trails down my back, and I fumble with the cuffs, my breath hitching as I lock them around my wrists.

I didn't mean to pull them so tight. My heart skips a beat when I realize I can't get them off. My arms are pinned behind my back, the straps digging into my skin. I'm trapped, and it's equal parts terrifying and exhilarating.

"Cora!" Orion's voice echoes through the riverboat, sharp and commanding. "I've concluded my report. Where have you gotten off to?"

Oh, fuck.

The vibrating egg hums louder, and I bite down on the gag to stifle a moan.

My breath hitches as I press myself deeper behind the thick velvet curtain, the fabric brushing against my bare skin. The cool air of the riverboat's living room makes my nipples pebble, and I bite down harder on the ball gag to stifle a moan. The egg is still buzzing relentlessly between my legs, and I twist my wrists in the Reaper's Lingerie, testing the bonds. No luck. Whoever designed this thing knew what they were doing.

“Cora?” Orion’s voice echoes through the corridors, low and smooth, like he’s savoring this. “I don’t know what game we’re playing, but I like it.”

I freeze, my heart pounding so loud I’m sure he can hear it. The curtain sways slightly, brushing against my body, and I clench my thighs together to suppress the ache building inside me. My dress and underwear are still in that room— his room—and I’m stark naked except for the collar, the cuffs, and the damn gag.

Footsteps. Slow, deliberate. He’s coming this way.

“You left the door open,” he continues, his voice closer now. “I have to admit, I’m curious. What exactly were you doing in there?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing myself to disappear. The curtain feels like my last line of defense, and I press my back against the wall, hoping the fabric doesn’t betray me.

“You know,” he muses, his tone conversational, “most people would think twice before snooping around a Vakutan’s private collection. But you? You’re not most people.”

I hear the creak of the floorboards as he steps into the room. My pulse thunders in my ears, and I hold my breath, my fingers twitching behind my back.

“I could smell it as soon as I walked in,” he says, his voice dropping to a growl. “Your scent. All over my things.”

Oh, God. My cheeks burn, and I’m grateful for the gag because I’m pretty sure I’d be stammering an apology right now. Instead, I stay silent, listening to the sound of his footsteps circling the room.

“You know what I think?” he continues, his voice low and dangerous. “I think you’ve been very naughty.”

I wince at the word, a shiver running down my spine. My body betrays me, a warm flush spreading through me despite the guilt gnawing at my stomach. I shouldn’t have been in there. I know I shouldn’t have. But the curiosity—God, the curiosity—it was too much.

“Did you know,” Orion’s voice cuts through the silence, smooth and deliberate, “that one of my remote control vibrators is missing? I wonder where it could be?”

My cheeks blaze with heat, and I press my thighs together tighter, the buzzing between my legs suddenly feeling impossible to ignore. The damn thing is still humming, relentless and unyielding, and I bite down on the gag to stifle a whimper.

“Maybe I’ll just use the remote to turn up the power?” he muses, his tone casual, like he’s discussing the weather.

Before I can even process the threat, the intensity spikes. My back arches involuntarily, and a deep, guttural moan escapes around the gag. My legs quiver, and I sink lower against the wall, the sensation so overwhelming I can barely think. I’m right on the edge, teetering, when the velvet curtain is yanked aside.

I blink up at him, dazed and breathless, the sudden brightness making me squint. And then I see him. Really see him.

The hologram is gone.

Orion stands there in all his Vakutan glory, completely bare. His golden scales catch the light, smooth and flawless, tracing the contours of his chiseled frame. His broad shoulders taper down to a narrow waist, his muscles defined but not bulky. My eyes

travel lower, and my breath catches.

His cock is...alien, but there's no other word for it. The heart-shaped head, the ridge of scales, the raised line along the shaft—it's unlike anything I've ever seen. And yet, it's perfect. It's him. My heart skips a beat, a strange mix of shock and admiration flooding me. It's so right, so natural on him, and I can't look away.

“Ms. Daniels,” he rumbles, his voice low and filled with authority. “You’re playing with toys that don’t belong to you. You’ll have to be disciplined.”

My eyes widen, and I make a small, confused noise behind the gag. Disciplined? The word sends a thrill through me, a heat that settles deep in my core. I'm not sure if I should be scared or turned on—maybe both.

He points to the floor, his gaze unwavering. “On your knees.”

The vibrator buzzes louder, the intensity cranked up so high my legs give out. I slide to the floor, my knees hitting the wood with a soft thud. I would've obeyed anyway because the command, the way he says it, is so fucking hot I can't resist.

I kneel before him, my arms still bound behind my back, the collar snug around my neck. My breath comes in shallow pants, and I look up at him, my green eyes meeting his purple ones. The air between us crackles with tension, and I can feel the weight of his dominance pressing down on me.

Orion steps closer, his scales glinting in the light. He tilts my chin up with one finger, his touch firm but not harsh. “Do you understand why you’re being punished?” he asks in a growl.

I nod quickly, the ball gag making it impossible to speak. My heart races, and I can feel the heat of his body so close to mine.

“Good,” he says, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. “Because this is just the beginning.”

His hand tightens in my hair, yanking me to my knees. The pull is firm, deliberate, but not cruel. My scalp tingles as he drags me forward, the ball gag muffling any sound I might make. I shuffle awkwardly, my knees scraping against the polished wood floor, but I don’t resist. There’s something almost exhilarating about this—about being entirely at his mercy.

“Move,” he growls, his voice low and commanding. I can hear the edge of amusement in it, like he’s enjoying watching me struggle. My cheeks burn, but I don’t stop. I keep going, even when my knees start to ache, even when the cuffs dig into my wrists. I want to please him. I want to show him I can take it.

We reach the hidden room, and he releases my hair, shoving me forward. I stumble but catch myself, my breath hitching as I take in the space. The padded leather bench sits in the center, waiting for me. My stomach twists, a mix of nerves and anticipation.

“Bend over,” Orion commands, his tone leaving no room for argument. I hesitate for just a moment before obeying, lowering myself over the bench. The leather is cool against my skin, and I shiver as he steps behind me.

The first spank lands hard, the sound echoing through the room. I jerk forward, a muffled yelp escaping around the gag.

“One!” I manage to choke out, the word garbled and barely intelligible.

He doesn’t miss a beat. “Good girl,” he purrs, and the praise sends a thrill through me. Another spank, harder this time.

“Two.” My voice shakes, but I force the number out, focusing on the rhythm. Three. Four. Five. Each strike sends a jolt of pain mixed with something dangerously close to pleasure. My skin burns, but I don’t want him to stop.

“Eighteen.” My voice is ragged now, my body trembling. The cuffs keep my arms pinned, and I’m powerless to do anything but take it.

Nineteen. Twenty.

That’s when it happens. The vibrator slips out, the buzzing suddenly silenced as it hits the floor with a soft thud. My body convulses, the orgasm crashing over me like a wave. I cry out, the sound muffled by the gag, my thighs trembling as I come undone.

Orion doesn’t give me a moment to recover. His hands grip my hips, spreading me open, and then his tongue is on me, licking and probing with a precision that leaves me gasping. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt—hot, wet, and ridged, tracing every inch of me. My back arches involuntarily, my hands clenching behind me as I’m pushed over the edge again.

I lose count of how many times he makes me come. My body jerks and shakes, my breath coming in short, desperate gasps. Every touch, every lick, every stroke pushes me higher, until I’m floating in a haze of pleasure.

When he finally releases me, I collapse against the bench, my body spent. His hands are gentle as he unfastens the cuffs and removes the gag, the sudden freedom making me shiver.

He pulls me up, his mouth crashing into mine in a kiss that’s equal parts claiming and tender. His tongue flicks against mine, and I melt into him, my hands finding his scales as I kiss him back with everything I have.

This is where I belong. With him. His.

CHAPTER 8

ORIYN

The numbers on the screen blur together, a sea of digits and decimals that refuse to make sense. I rub my temples, the weight of overseas holdings pressing down on my skull. My hand reaches for the coffee mug out of habit, but it's empty. Again.

"Ms. Daniels," I bark, my voice sharp enough to cut glass. "Where is my coffee?"

"Coming, Sir!" Her voice carries from the kitchen, light and teasing, like she's been waiting for this moment.

I lean back in my chair, fingers drumming on the desk. The sound of her heels clicking against the floor grows louder, and then she's there, standing in front of me with the coffee carafe in hand. Or rather, trying to hold it. Her arms are bound in the secretary yoke, the metal bar forcing her wrists up and away from her body. The leather cuffs hug her skin, the sheepskin lining soft against her wrists. She's wearing that pencil skirt again, the one that hugs her curves like it was made for her.

"You're late," I say, my tone flat, but my eyes rake over her.

"Apologies, Sir." She bends at the waist, her ass brushing against the edge of my desk as she pours the coffee. The scent of her arousal hits me like a punch to the gut, sharp and intoxicating. My cock twitches, straining against the fabric of my trousers.

She straightens up, her smile smug. "There you go, Mr. Weller. Fresh and hot, just

like you like it.”

“Good girl,” I murmur, and her eyes flutter shut, a soft sigh escaping her lips. My hand moves on its own, sliding up her leg, the fabric of her skirt bunching under my fingers. When I reach her inner thigh, she gasps, her body jerking. A single drop of coffee spills onto my hand.

“I spoke too soon,” I growl, my voice low and dangerous. “I suppose you must be disciplined.”

She chuckles, her green eyes sparkling with mischief. “Whatever you say, Mr. Weller, Sir. Though we’re not getting much work done like this.”

I silence her with a kiss, my hand gripping the back of her neck to pull her closer. Her lips part for me, and I taste the sweetness of her, the heat of her breath mingling with mine. The yoke keeps her arms pinned, but her body presses against me, her hips grinding into my lap.

“Work,” I mutter against her lips, “can wait.”

I hike Cora’s skirt up with one hand, the fabric bunching around her waist. Her breath hitches as my other hand finds the waistband of her panties. I rip them off in one swift motion, and she moans into my mouth, the sound muffled but desperate. Her hips buck against my leg, seeking friction she’s not going to find there.

“Eager,” I mutter against her lips, my hands moving to her shirt. I pinch her nipples through the fabric, and she gasps, her body arching into the touch. “Stand up.”

She obeys, her movements shaky as she rises from the desk. Her arms are still bound by the yoke, her wrists held high and away from her body. The position leaves her vulnerable, exposed, and I take full advantage. My fingers unzip my fly, and I free

my cock, the thick, scaled length already hard and ready for her.

“Get on me,” I command, my voice low and rough. My hands grip her hips, guiding her as she straddles my lap. Her pussy brushes against the tip of my cock, and she shivers, her breath coming in short, uneven gasps. “Now.”

She sinks down onto me, her body taking me in inch by inch. The feel of her around me is electric, her warmth, her tightness, her wetness—I groan, my head falling back as she settles fully onto my lap. My hands move to her nipples again, pinching and rolling them between my fingers. She whimpers, her body trembling, but she doesn’t stop.

Her eyes meet mine, and there’s a challenge there, a spark of defiance that shouldn’t be there. Not now. Not with her arms bound, her body completely at my mercy. But Cora’s never been one to back down, and I can see it in the way she grinds against me, her hips moving in slow, deliberate circles.

“Someone’s feeling bold,” I growl, my grip on her nipples tightening just enough to make her gasp. “You think you’re in charge here, Ms. Daniels?”

She doesn’t answer, not with words, but her hips don’t stop. She’s testing me, pushing me, and I’ll be damned if I let her win. My hands tighten on her hips, pulling her down harder onto my cock. She cries out, her pussy clenching around me, but she doesn’t stop moving.

“You want to play, Cora?” I ask, my voice rough with need. “Then let’s play.”

I thrust up into her, hard and deep, and she moans, her body arching as she takes me. Her movements become more erratic, her hips grinding against mine with a desperation that only fuels my own. The sound of her moans, the feel of her around me, the way her body responds to my every touch—it’s too much, and I can feel

myself getting close.

“Come for me,” I command, my voice harsh, broken. “Now.”

Her body obeys, her pussy clenching around me as she comes, her cries filling the room. I follow her over the edge, my own orgasm crashing over me with a force that leaves me breathless. My hands grip her hips, holding her against me as I spill inside her, her body milking me for every drop.

When the waves finally subside, I loosen my grip on her, my hands moving to her back to steady her. Her breath is ragged, her body trembling, but her eyes are bright, her lips curved in a smug smile.

“Do I get a bonus for fucking Sir so well?” she asks, her voice teasing, her tone light. But there’s a challenge in her eyes, a dare that I can’t ignore.

Oh, she’s testing me, all right. But not to assert dominance. No, Cora wants me to remind her who’s in charge. And I’m more than happy to oblige.

“I think you need to remember your place, Ms. Daniels,” I say, my voice stern, my grip on her tightening just enough to make her shiver. The way her pussy convulses around my cock lets me know exactly how much she enjoys the idea.

“Ms. Daniels,” I say, my voice firm and low, “go to the wardrobe by my desk. Fetch the deluxe vibe and the discipline hood.”

Cora’s green eyes widen for a moment, but she doesn’t protest. She turns on her heel, her arms still bound in the secretary yoke, and starts toward the wardrobe. The metal bar between her wrists keeps her movements awkward, her steps deliberate as she navigates the space. I watch her closely, my hand lazily stroking my cock as she struggles to open the wardrobe door. She fumbles a bit, her fingers brushing against

the smooth wood, but she finally gets it open. Her shoulders shift as she reaches inside, her movements hindered but determined. She pulls out the deluxe vibe first, her cheeks flushing as she holds it awkwardly.

“Good girl,” I murmur, my voice rough. “Now the hood.”

She hesitates, her eyes flicking to the black vinyl hood in the wardrobe. For a moment, I think she might balk, but she takes a deep breath and reaches for it. Her fingers fumble with the straps, but she manages to grab it and turn back to me, her arms full with the items. She walks back slowly, her steps careful, her gaze fixed on me. There’s a faint tremble in her hands, but she doesn’t stop until she’s standing before me.

“Are you scared, my little apprentice?” I ask, my voice softer now as I reach out to stroke her cheek. Her skin is warm under my fingertips, her breath quick and shallow.

She nods, her eyes darting nervously to the hood in her hands. “Yes, Sir. A little.”

“I will not let anything bad happen to you, ever,” I say, my fingers tracing the line of her jaw. “Do you believe that?”

Her lips part, and she nods again, more firmly this time. “Yes, Sir. I believe you.”

“Are you my brave girl?” I ask, my other hand moving to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Yes, Mr. Weller, Sir,” she replies, her voice steady despite the faint tremor in her body.

She holds still as I take the hood from her, her breath hitching as I secure it over her head. The vinyl slides smoothly into place, and I adjust the blindfold, making sure it’s

snug but not too tight. She's panting heavily already, her chest rising and falling as I buckle the straps. The hood fits her perfectly, her face framed by the smooth material, her lips parted.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, my voice low and calm as I step back to admire her.

"Good, Sir," she replies, her voice muffled slightly by the hood. "Very good."

I let my hand drift down her body, my fingers brushing over the curve of her hip before slipping between her legs. She's soaking wet, her arousal slick against my fingers. A soft moan escapes her lips, her hips shifting, searching for more contact.

"Is the hood more fun than you thought it would be?" I ask, my voice teasing as I stroke her gently.

"Yes, Sir," she gasps, her body trembling under my touch.

I release her for a moment, picking up the penis gag and securing it in her mouth. She moans softly around it, her head tilting back as I move behind her. I take the deluxe vibe, the TPE smooth and soft in my hand, and press it against her entrance. Her body arches as I slide it inside, her moans growing louder as I turn it on. The vibrations reverberate through her, her legs buckling as she falls back against me. I hold her easily, my hands gripping her hips, keeping her upright as the vibe does its work.

Her body shakes with pleasure, her moans muffled but insistent, and I press her closer against me, her back to my chest. "That's it, my brave girl," I murmur into her ear, my voice rough with my own need. "Let it take you."

I guide Cora's bound body over the edge of my desk, her skirt hiked up to expose her soft, round ass to me. My hands knead her cheeks, spreading them apart as my long, prehensile tongue darts out to tease her tight little hole. She shudders, her muffled

whimpers vibrating through the hood.

“Relax,” I murmur, my voice low and commanding, as my tongue works her open with slow, deliberate strokes. “Let me take care of you, Ms. Daniels.”

Her body trembles, her hips shifting as if she’s trying to pull away, but I keep her firmly in place. I take my time, savoring every sound she makes, every twitch of her muscles as I explore her with my tongue. Her asshole is tight, but I’m patient, coaxing her to relax as my fingers continue to knead her cheeks.

“You’re doing so well,” I say, my breath hot against her skin. “But we’re not done yet.”

I straighten up, my hands moving to the ring on top of her hood. I pull her upright, her arms still bound by the yoke, and guide her to stand. My finger slips into her ass, the tight ring of muscle clenching around me as I begin to work her open.

“Let’s go,” I say, my voice firm as I cup her ass with one hand, my finger buried deep inside her. I force her to walk, the vibrator still buzzing inside her pussy, the sensation vibrating through my finger in her ass.

She stumbles slightly as we climb the stairs, her legs shaky, but I keep her moving, my grip on her firm and unyielding. Every step draws another moan from her, the sound muffled by the gag, but I can feel her body trembling with pleasure.

“Every time you cum before we reach the bed,” I say, my voice cool and measured, “you’ll get a spanking. Do you understand me, Ms. Daniels?”

Her head bobs in a nod, and I can feel her body tense as if she’s trying to hold back, but it’s no use. The vibrator is relentless, and with my finger buried in her ass, it’s impossible for her to resist. She cums again, a soft cry escaping her hood as her body

convulses, and I smirk.

“That’s one,” I say, my voice low and husky as I guide her up the steps. “Keep going, my brave girl.”

By the time we reach the bedroom, she’s come three times, her body trembling with each orgasm. I push her facedown on the bed, her legs spread wide, her asshole ready for my cock. I don’t waste time, my hands gripping her hips as I guide myself to her entrance.

“Relax,” I murmur, my voice a soft command, as I push into her, inch by slow inch. She moans, her body arching as I fill her, the sound guttural and desperate.

I spank her ass, the sharp sound of my hand meeting her flesh echoing through the room, and she cries out, her body jerking as she cums again. I thrust into her, each movement deep and deliberate, alternating between spanking her and filling her until her body is shaking with pleasure.

Her orgasm hits hard, the deluxe vibe shooting out of her pussy amid a spray of squirt, and I groan, my own release crashing over me as I cum deep inside her ass. I collapse on top of her, my body pressing her into the mattress, her helpless form writhing and groaning beneath me as the aftershocks of her pleasure ripple through her.

I unbuckle the secretary yoke first, the leather cuffs sliding free from her wrists with a soft hiss. Her arms fall limp at her sides, and I run my fingers along the faint red marks the cuffs left behind. She shivers under my touch, her body still humming from the intensity of what we’ve just done. Next, I carefully remove the deluxe vibe, her soft whimper muffled by the discipline hood. I set it aside on the nightstand, its quiet hum now silent.

The hood, though—I leave it on. I’ve seen the way it centers her, the way it makes her surrender to the sensations I give her. I brush a hand over the smooth vinyl, my fingers tracing the curve of her jaw where it peeks out beneath the material. Her breathing is steady now, her body relaxed, and I can’t help but pull her closer. I curl around her, my chest flush against her back, my arm draped over her waist. She shifts slightly, nestling into me, her head tilting as if to listen to the steady rhythm of my heartbeat.

“Comfortable?” I murmur, my voice low, almost a whisper.

She makes a soft sound, something between a hum and a sigh, muffled by the gag. It’s enough of an answer for me. I tighten my hold on her, my hand splayed across her stomach, feeling the rise and fall of her breath. Her skin is warm, even through the hood, and I press a kiss to the back of her head, the vinyl cool against my lips.

She drifts off quickly, her body melting into mine as sleep takes her. I watch her for a moment, the way her chest rises and falls, the way her fingers twitch slightly as if she’s dreaming. It’s strange, this feeling in my chest. It’s not just desire, though there’s plenty of that. It’s something deeper, something I haven’t felt in decades—if ever.

I care about her. More than I should. More than I ever thought I would.

The realization hits me like a fist to the gut. I’ve sworn oaths to Veritas, to the Trident Alliance, to the mission that keeps humanity’s future intact. But if it came down to it—if I had to choose between her and the cause—I’m not sure I could sacrifice her. The thought terrifies me. I’ve never been this vulnerable, this... attached. Cora has a power over me that no commander, no oath, no duty has ever had.

“I will keep her safe,” I think, the words sharp in my mind. “No matter what it takes.

I love her.”

The warmth in my chest grows, spreading through me like a slow, steady fire. I pull her closer, my arm tightening around her waist. She shifts in her sleep, her body pressing even more firmly against mine.

“I love her,” I think again, the words softer this time, more certain.

I close my eyes, letting the rhythm of her breathing lull me toward sleep. For now, she’s safe. For now, she’s mine. And for now, that’s enough.

CHAPTER 9

CORA

I 'm sprawled on my bed, the afternoon sun filtering through my curtains, my phone glowing in my hands. Orion's latest text makes me bite my lip to stifle a laugh.

"Send me a picture of your pussy, I miss it."

Typical Orion—straight to the point, no preamble, no wasted words. I glance toward my bedroom door, listening for footsteps, but the house is quiet. Mom's probably in her studio downstairs, and Dad's likely bench-pressing his body weight in the garage. Safe enough.

I tug down my yoga pants, the cool air hitting my skin as I angle the phone just right. The click of the camera feels loud in the quiet room. I send the picture with a follow-up text.

"Here you are, Mr. Weller, Sir. Though I think maybe it's YOUR pussy. After all, you're in charge."

His reply is instantaneous. "If you were in arm's reach, I'd already have you naked."

I laugh, twisting a strand of hair around my finger. But before I can type a response, the door bursts open.

"Cora!" Mom's voice is bright, her paint-splattered smock flaring as she strides in. I

yank my pants up so fast I nearly give myself whiplash, my face burning.

“Mom! Do you ever knock?” My voice cracks, and I shove my phone under a pillow like it’s incriminating evidence.

Her eyes sparkle with mischief. “Oh, honey, I knocked. You were just... preoccupied.” She gestures vaguely toward the pillow, and I groan, slumping back against the headboard.

“It’s a private conversation,” I mutter, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Sexting and sending nudes are signs of a healthy relationship,” she says cheerfully, like she’s quoting a self-help book. “Though, you might want to invest in a lock for your door.”

“Mom!” My voice hits octaves I didn’t know I could reach.

She laughs, waving a hand as she backs out of the room. “I’m just saying! You’re an adult, Cora. Own it.”

The door clicks shut, and I bury my face in my hands, groaning. My phone buzzes again, and I fish it out from under the pillow.

“You could always just move in with me.”

I stare at the screen, my breath catching. It’s not the first time he’s floated the idea, but it’s the first time it’s felt... real. My fingers hover over the keyboard.

“Maybe, but I need to explain to my parents first.”

The “Sent” notification appears, and I exhale, staring at the ceiling. How do you tell

your parents you're moving in with your literal alien boss who also happens to be your dom? I'm not sure there's a Hallmark card for that.

I'm in the kitchen, an apron tied around my waist, the rich aroma of beef stroganoff filling the air. The bottle of wine Orion gifted me sits on the counter, the label sleek and foreign, a reminder of his otherworldly taste. I pour three glasses, the deep red liquid catching the light, and set them on the dining table just as Mom and Dad wander in.

"What's all this?" Dad asks, his eyebrows lifting as he eyes the spread. The stroganoff is in its final simmering stage, creamy and fragrant, and I've even tossed together a side salad because, hey, I'm not a total amateur.

"Dinner," I say, shrugging like it's no big deal. "Thought I'd treat you."

Mom's already at the table, inspecting the wine. "This is fancy. Did you rob a wine cellar or something?"

"Orion gave it to me," I admit, stirring the stroganoff one last time before turning off the stove. "He's... well, he likes to spoil me."

"Spoil you?" Dad echoes, taking his seat. "Sounds like a keeper."

I snort, plating the food and bringing it to the table. "Let's just eat before it gets cold."

The first few bites are quiet, the kind of comfortable silence that only family can bring. Mom hums appreciatively, and Dad practically inhales his portion, which is about as close to a compliment as I'll get from him. I sip my wine, nerves starting to tangle in my stomach as I brace myself for the conversation I've been dreading.

“So,” I say, setting my fork down, “there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Mom’s eyes narrow, and she leans forward, elbows on the table. “You’re not pregnant, are you?”

“Mom!” My face flushes, and I shake my head emphatically. “No. It’s not that.”

Dad chuckles, swirling his wine. “Let her talk, Maggie.”

“I’m moving out,” I blurt, the words tumbling out. “Orion and I have been talking about me moving in with him.”

Mom doesn’t even blink. “Oh, is that all this is about? You want to move in with your boyfriend?”

“And here we thought you were pregnant or something,” Dad adds, smirking into his glass.

I groan, dropping my face into my hands. “You’re impossible.”

“Cora, honey,” Mom says, her voice softening, “you’re an adult. You don’t need our permission.”

Dad nods, his expression serious for once. “We just want you to be happy. And if this Orion guy makes you happy, then that’s all that matters.”

“Besides,” Mom adds with a wink, “if he makes you dinners like this, we might just start inviting ourselves over.”

I laugh, the tension in my chest easing. “Thanks, you guys. I was worried you’d freak out.”

“Freak out?” Dad scoffs. “You’re our daughter, not our prisoner. You’ll always have a home here, but you need your own space too.”

Mom stands, patting my shoulder. “Now, since you cooked, your dad and I will handle the dishes.”

I protest, but they wave me off, shooing me out of the kitchen. I head upstairs, my phone already in hand as I type out a message to Orion.

“So when do you want me to move in?”

His reply is instant. “Tomorrow.”

I grin, my heart racing. Tomorrow.

I sit cross-legged on the floor of my childhood bedroom, surrounded by cardboard boxes and the scattered remnants of my life. The room smells faintly of lavender and old paper, a scent that’s been here as long as I can remember. My hands hover over a dusty shoebox, and I pull it open, grinning when I see the tiny gold soccer trophy inside.

“Next stop, FIFA World Cup,” I mutter, reading the engraving on the base. Dad’s handwriting is unmistakable, all caps and slightly crooked. I laugh, shaking my head. “One season, and he thought I was the next Mia Hamm.”

I set the trophy aside, my fingers brushing against something else under the bed. It’s a small, leather-bound journal, its cover worn and soft. I flip it open, the pages yellowed with age, and my breath catches. Junior high Cora’s handwriting stares back at me, loopy and uneven.

“Dear Diary,” I read aloud, my voice soft. “Today, I decided what my perfect man

would be like. He'd be tall enough that I could lean my head on his shoulder when we dance. He'd take care of me, make me feel special. He'd challenge me but also support me no matter what. And he'd love me the way I need to be loved."

My throat tightens, and I blink back tears. I trace the words with my finger, the ink smudged in places where I must have cried while writing. It's like I'm looking at a map of my heart, one I didn't even realize I'd been following.

"Orion," I whisper, the name slipping out before I can stop it. He's tall—so tall I have to crane my neck to look at him. He takes care of me in ways I didn't even know I needed. He challenges me, pushes me to be better, but he's also my biggest supporter. And the way he loves me... it's everything I ever wanted, even if I didn't know it at the time.

I hug the diary to my chest, a warmth spreading through me that I can't quite explain. It's like a puzzle piece clicking into place, a truth I've been avoiding finally coming into focus.

"I'm in love with Oriyn," I say, the words soft but sure. A laugh bubbles up, giddy and light, and I press the diary to my face, hiding my smile. "I'm in love with an alien. Who would've thought?"

The room feels different now, like the walls are holding their breath, waiting for me to catch up. I set the diary down gently, my hands trembling just a little. I'm not sure what happens next, but for the first time in a long time, I'm not scared to find out.

CHAPTER 10

ORION

"I wish I had more interesting fare for our conversation, Captain," I say, leaning back in the chair across from Pyke's desk. My scales catch the soft blue light of the holographic readouts floating above his workspace. "But what can I say except it's quite boring—profits are up, costs are down, and we've successfully created ten thousand new living wage jobs this quarter alone."

Pyke's crimson scales shimmer as he grins, his sharp teeth gleaming. "Boring is good, Orion. Boring means stability. Stability means we're winning. You've done excellent work."

"Excellent work," I echo, my voice dry. "I'm sure the Trident Alliance will sing songs of my spreadsheets one day."

He chuckles, leaning forward, his massive frame making the desk seem absurdly small. "Spreadsheets win wars, my friend. No empire ever fell because someone crunched the numbers too hard."

"Poetic," I deadpan, crossing my arms. "Anything else, or can I get back to my thrilling paperwork?"

Pyke's grin fades, replaced by a somber expression that sets my scales prickling. "Actually, there is something. It's time to step up Cora's Veritas training. I need you to instruct her in hand-to-hand combat, small Vakutan firearms, and basic starship

controls."

I freeze. "What for? Human agents don't get combat training unless they're going into the field. Is that what this is? You're sending her out?"

Pyke doesn't flinch. "We've received intel. Luhr's active in the St. Louis area. He's sniffing around, looking for someone close to Orion Weller. He suspects you're with Veritas. We want to use Cora as bait to draw him out."

My claws dig into the arms of the chair. "No."

"Orion—"

"No." I stand, my voice a low, guttural growl. "You're not putting her in danger. She's not a pawn. She's?—"

"She's a recruit," Pyke interrupts, his tone calm but firm. "And if she's going to survive in this war, she needs to know how to fight. You know that."

I slam my fist into the desk, the impact sending a crack through the synthetic material. Pyke doesn't even blink. "I won't risk her like this. She's not ready."

"She's tougher than you think. And if you can't train her, I'll assign her to someone else."

The words hit like a plasma blast to the chest. My claws curl into fists, and I let out a roar of frustration, flipping the desk over with a crash. Papers scatter, holographic screens flicker out, and Pyke's coffee mug shatters on the floor.

He doesn't move. Just sits there, watching me with those calm, calculating eyes. "Are you done?"

I'm breathing hard, my chest heaving. My scales flare a deeper red, the heat of my anger radiating off me. "You're asking me to choose between my duty and the woman I?—"

"Love?" Pyke finishes for me, raising an eyebrow. "Yes, I am. And I know it's not an easy choice. But this is the job, Orion. If you can't do it, I'll find someone who can."

I glare at him, my jaw clenched so tight it feels like my teeth might crack. But I know he's right. If I don't train her, someone else will. And I'd rather die than let someone else take her from me.

"Fine," I snarl. "I'll train her. But if anything happens to her?—"

"You'll be the first to know," Pyke says, his tone softening. "And the first to act. Now, go. And try not to destroy any more furniture on your way out."

I fly back home to the riverboat, my mind lost in how I'm going to tell Cora the news. I have to tell her she's going to put her life in danger. It's not that I think she will refuse that bothers me.

It's that I know she's going to say yes.

I disguise the shuttle as a chopper and land at Orion Plaza. Then I take the Lexus to the riverboat, prepared to tell Cora the news.

I step onto the riverboat, the scent of burnt tuna casserole hitting me like a plasma blast to the face. My scales twitch in revulsion. Cora's parents are here, standing in the middle of the living room, beaming like they've just discovered a new planet. Maggie holds a casserole dish in her hands, the contents of which look like they've been through a supernova.

“Orion!” Maggie chirps, thrusting the dish toward me. “I made this for you. A little housewarming gift. Tuna casserole—my specialty.”

I force a smile, my teeth grinding together. “How... thoughtful.”

Cora’s dad, Joe, claps me on the shoulder with a hand that feels like it could crush a grolgath skull. “Maggie’s been talking about this all week. You’re in for a treat.”

I glance at Cora, who’s standing behind her parents, biting her lip to keep from laughing. Her green eyes sparkle with mischief. She knows. She knows .

“Well,” I say, taking the dish with the kind of caution one might use when handling a live grenade, “I’m sure it’s... delicious.”

Maggie beams. “Oh, it is! I added extra cheese this time. And a secret ingredient.”

“Secret ingredient?” I echo, my voice strained.

“Love,” she says, clasping her hands together.

“Right. Love. Of course.” I glance out the window, spotting a barge passing by. “Oh, look at that! A barge. You don’t see those every day.”

Maggie and Joe turn to look, and I seize the moment. I dart into the kitchen, dump the casserole into the trash, and return to the living room before they can blink.

“So,” I say, licking my fingers with exaggerated enthusiasm, “that was incredible. Truly. Best tuna casserole I’ve ever had.”

Maggie’s eyes widen. “You already ate it?”

“Couldn’t help myself,” I lie smoothly. “It smelled too good to resist.”

Cora steps closer, her voice a whisper in my ear. “You might think you’ve won, but now Mom will just bring you a tuna casserole every. Time. she. Visits.”

I stifle a groan. “I’ve cut my own throat, haven’t I?”

She grins. “Absolutely.”

After what feels like an eternity, Cora’s parents finally leave, waving goodbye from the dock. I collapse onto the couch, rubbing my temples. Cora sits beside me, her expression shifting from amused to curious.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

I take a deep breath. “Pyke’s ordered me to train you. Hand-to-hand combat, small Vakutan firearms, starship controls. The works.”

Her eyes widen. “Why? I thought I was just handling spreadsheets and... other things.”

“Luhr’s in the area. He’s sniffing around, looking for someone close to Orion Weller. Pyke wants to use you as bait to draw him out.”

Cora’s face pales, but she doesn’t flinch. “Okay. When do we start?”

I stare at her, my chest tightening. “You’re not scared?”

“Terrified,” she admits. “But if this is what it takes to keep us safe, I’ll do it. Besides, I’ve got you to teach me, right?”

I reach for her hand, my scales brushing against her soft skin. “Always.”

I feel the words clawing their way up my throat, a truth I can’t hold back any longer. My chest tightens, my scales bristling with the weight of it. I pull her closer, my massive frame dwarfing hers, and the words tumble out, raw and unfiltered.

“I love you, Cora.”

She freezes in my arms, her body stiffening like she’s been hit with a stun blast. She pulls back, her green eyes wide, searching mine. “Do you?” she asks, her voice soft, almost fragile.

The vulnerability in her tone guts me. I take her face in my hands, my claws careful not to scratch her delicate skin. “Of course I do. You’re brilliant, brave, and you’ve got more character in your little finger than I’ve got in my entire body. How could I not love you?”

Her lips curve into a smile, slow and luminous, like a sunrise breaking over a battlefield. “Good,” she says, her voice steady now, “because I love you too.”

I don’t give her a chance to say more. I tilt her head up, closing the distance between us, and kiss her with everything I’ve got. It’s rough, possessive, and full of the heat that’s been building between us for weeks. Her hands grip my shoulders, her fingers digging into my scales, and I can feel the shiver that runs through her.

When I finally pull back, her eyes are dark, her breath coming in short gasps. “Orion,” she breathes, and my name on her lips is the sweetest sound I’ve ever heard.

I sweep her up into my arms, her legs locking around my waist instinctively. She laughs, a low, husky sound that sends a jolt of heat straight to my core. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you to bed,” I growl, my voice rough with need. “Unless you’ve got an objection.”

She grins, her teeth grazing my neck in a playful nip. “Not a single one.”

I carry her up the stairs, her weight nothing to me, her laughter echoing through the riverboat. When we reach the bedroom, I set her down gently, but she doesn’t let go, her arms still wrapped around my neck. Her eyes meet mine, and there’s no fear, no hesitation—just hunger.

“You’re sure?” I ask, because I have to. Because even now, with her body pressed against mine, I need to know she’s with me, that she’s chosen this—chosen me.

“Always,” she whispers.

CHAPTER 11

CORA

The shuttle glides through the water, the ocean a dark, endless expanse outside the reinforced glass. I press my face against the window, my breath fogging the surface as Veritas Base Alpha comes into view. It's like something out of a sci-fi movie—a massive, glowing dome that seems to hum with energy, its translucent surface shimmering like a mirage. Inside, I can see the faint outlines of towering structures, their lights twinkling like stars in an underwater sky.

“Focus, Cora.” Orion’s voice cuts through my awe, sharp but not unkind. His scaled hands move over the control panel with practiced ease, the red of his skin catching the soft blue light of the shuttle’s interior. “You’re going to need to know how to do this yourself.”

I tear my eyes away from the view and lean closer to the console. The symbols on the buttons are familiar—I’ve been studying the Vakutan language in my spare time, though it’s slow going. “That’s the docking sequence, right?” I point to a cluster of symbols. “And that one’s for stabilizing the thrusters.”

Orion’s purple eyes flicker with something I can’t quite place—approval, maybe. “Not bad. You’re picking it up faster than I expected.”

“Well, I am a quick study.” I grin, though my heart’s still racing from the sheer scale of the base. “But, uh, maybe let’s not test that theory today. I’d rather not crash into the side of that dome.”

He snorts, a low, rumbling sound. “Fair enough. But next time, you’re flying.”

The shuttle slips through the dome’s permeable surface, and suddenly we’re inside. The base is even more breathtaking up close—gleaming towers, bustling walkways, and ships of all shapes and sizes moving through the air like fish in a coral reef. Orion guides the shuttle into a docking bay with the precision of someone who’s done this a thousand times before.

Once we’re docked, he leads me through the base, his massive frame cutting a path through the crowd of Vakutans and humans alike. I try not to gawk, but it’s hard—everything here is so alien, from the architecture to the technology to the people. Orion doesn’t seem to notice my wide-eyed wonder, or if he does, he’s too polite to mention it.

We reach the holo-gym, a vast, empty chamber that hums with potential. Orion taps a few commands into a console on the wall, and the room shifts, transforming into a crumbling urban landscape. The air smells like smoke and ash, and the sound of distant gunfire echoes in my ears.

“Urban combat simulation,” Orion says, handing me a sleek, futuristic-looking pistol. “Your objective is to survive. The Grolgath are your adversaries. Don’t die.”

“Don’t die. Got it.” I grip the pistol, my palms already sweating. “Easy.”

The first time, I don’t even make it five minutes. A Grolgath—its scales shifting to blend into the rubble—ambushes me from behind, and I’m dead before I can even turn around. The second time, I manage to take one down before another gets me. By the third attempt, I’m starting to get the hang of it—moving cautiously, using the environment to my advantage, keeping my back to the wall.

“Better,” Orion says after my fourth attempt, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

“But you’re still too predictable. Think like a predator, not prey.”

I wipe the sweat from my brow and nod, determined. The fifth time, I finally make it through, my heart pounding as I take down the last Grolgath with a well-placed shot. I turn to Orion, grinning despite the ache in my muscles. “I did it.”

“You did.” He steps closer, his towering frame casting a shadow over me. “But that was the easy version. Now let’s take off the training wheels and do the real simulation.”

“Again?” I groan, slumping back against the wall of the holo-gym. My arms feel like jelly, and my legs aren’t much better. “Orion, I just survived your so-called ‘real’ simulation. Can’t I at least bask in my victory for five minutes?”

His lips twitch, and for a moment, I think he’s going to smile. But he schools his expression into his usual stoic mask. Almost. The corners of his mouth are still fighting it.

“You’re not smiling, are you?” I narrow my eyes at him, pointing an accusatory finger. “Don’t you dare smile right now. You’re the worst.” I step closer and punch him lightly on the shoulder. It’s like hitting a brick wall, but it’s the principle of the thing.

He laughs—a deep, rumbling sound that fills the room and makes my knees go weak for entirely different reasons. “Fine. You passed. But there’s always room for improvement.”

“Improvement?” I throw my hands up. “I’m a human, Orion. Not one of your tireless Vakutan warriors. I need rest. And food. Mostly food.”

He crosses his arms, his red scales catching the light. “Food, huh? What’s in it for me

if I indulge you?”

I smirk, leaning in a little closer. “Well, I won’t complain if you take me to that little Italian place I love. You know, Eleven Eleven? My favorite. Ever since I was a kid.”

His eyes soften, and he nods. “You’ve earned it. Let’s go.”

We head back to the shuttle bay, and this time, Orion gestures for me to take the controls. My stomach flips. “Seriously? You’re letting me fly this thing?”

“You’ve been studying. Time to put it to the test.” He stands behind me, his imposing presence both comforting and slightly intimidating.

I slide into the pilot’s seat, my hands trembling as I grip the controls. The shuttle jerks as I take off, and I let out a nervous laugh. “Okay, okay. I’ve got this.”

Orion’s hands hover near the controls, ready to take over if needed, but he doesn’t interfere. Slowly, I find my rhythm, the shuttle gliding smoothly through the water. As we pass through a school of bioluminescent creatures, I can’t help but gasp. The water glows with soft blues and greens, the creatures swirling around us like living stars.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper, my heart soaring.

Orion’s voice is soft behind me. “It’s like seeing it for the first time all over again. Through your eyes.”

I glance back at him, catching the warmth in his gaze. For a moment, I forget about the controls, and the shuttle dips slightly. Orion chuckles, reaching over to steady us. “Eyes forward, pilot.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, my cheeks heating.

As we leave the ocean and soar into the sky, Orion takes over the controls, guiding the shuttle effortlessly. The ride from Alpha Base to the helipad on Orion Plaza is seamless, the Vakutan technology making the journey feel like a blink.

“Twenty minutes,” I mutter, shaking my head. “If only commercial flights were this fast.”

Orion smirks. “Humans will get there. Eventually.”

I roll my eyes, but I’m smiling as we land. My stomach growls, reminding me of the promise of a delicious meal. “So, Eleven Eleven?”

“Eleven Eleven,” he confirms, his voice low and warm. “Let’s see if their pasta lives up to your glowing reviews.”

Orion’s hand is massive, his scaled fingers dwarfing mine as we step into the elevator. His grip is firm, possessive in the best way, and I can’t help but feel a flutter in my chest as the doors close behind us. The descent is smooth, but the tension in the air is anything but.

“So,” I say, breaking the silence, “how does it feel to be whisked away by a human to her favorite restaurant?”

His lips twitch, that almost-smile I’ve come to adore. “I’ll let you know after I’ve tasted this pasta you’ve been raving about. If it’s half as good as you say, I might have to reconsider my opinion of Earth’s cuisine.”

“Oh, it’s better than half as good,” I shoot back, leaning into his side. “Just wait. You’re about to have your scales blown off.”

The elevator doors slide open, and Orion's limo is waiting, sleek and black, with a driver who nods respectfully as we approach. Orion opens the door for me, his hand lingering on the small of my back as I slide in. The interior smells like leather and something faintly spicy—him, I realize. It's intoxicating.

The drive to Eleven Eleven is short, but it feels like an eternity as I try to guess what Orion saw in my diary. He's quiet, his gaze fixed on the passing city lights, but there's a glint in his eyes that makes me think he's enjoying my impatience.

When we arrive, the hostess greets us with a smile and leads us to our table—a secluded corner with a view of the restaurant's garden. The candles on the table flicker, casting a warm glow over the polished wood and white tablecloth. It's perfect.

I waste no time ordering my favorites: the burrata with heirloom tomatoes, the truffle fettuccine, and a bottle of dry red. Orion watches me with amusement, his purple eyes gleaming in the dim light. "You're not holding back, are you?"

"Life's too short for bad food," I say, grinning. "And trust me, you're about to thank me."

He raises an eyebrow. "We'll see."

The meal is, as always, incredible. Orion's reactions are priceless—his eyes widen slightly at the first bite of the burrata, and he's halfway through his second plate of fettuccine before I've finished my first. "Okay," he admits, leaning back in his chair. "You were right. This is... impressive."

"Told you," I say, smug. "But the best is yet to come." I signal the waiter for dessert—a decadent chocolate torte—and then pull my old diary from my bag. "So, about that surprise..."

He sets his fork down, his full attention on me now. I open the diary to the page I'd marked earlier and slide it across the table. "I wrote this when I was twelve. It's... well, you'll see."

Orion takes the diary, his massive hands careful as he flips through the pages. His expression softens as he reads the description of my "perfect man," his eyes flicking up to meet mine. "Tall enough to lean on. Takes care of you. Challenges you. Loves you the way you need to be loved." His voice is low, almost reverent. "You think I fit that?"

"Are you kidding?" I say, my cheeks warm. "You are that. Every single word."

He smiles—a real, full smile this time—and flips to the end of the diary. His eyes scan the page, and then he freezes, his expression shifting to something I can't quite read. He closes the diary carefully and hands it back to me, that grin returning. "I'll tell you in the limo."

"What? No, tell me now!" I protest, but he's already standing, his hand extended to help me up.

"Patience, Cora," he says, his tone teasing. "Some things are worth waiting for."

Orion calls for the check with a nod to the waiter, his eyes never leaving mine. There's a glint in his gaze, something playful yet predatory, and it sends a shiver down my spine. I've seen that look before—it usually ends with me in some deliciously compromising position. But tonight, it feels different. Softer. Warmer.

We step into the waiting limo, the cool night air giving way to the plush interior. Orion slides in beside me, his massive frame taking up more than his fair share of the seat. He holds out his hand, palm up. "The diary."

I hesitate for a moment, my cheeks already heating at what he's about to see. But I hand it over anyway, because when Orion asks for something, I have a hard time saying no. He flips through the pages with deliberate care, his sharp eyes scanning the words and sketches. Then he stops, his finger tracing one of the drawings.

"Here," he says, amused. "It appears that your mother is not the only artist in the family."

I peek over his arm, and my stomach drops. There it is—a drawing of myself as an adult version of Little Red Riding Hood. The hood is all I'm wearing, and the wolf... well, the wolf is massive, muscular, and very clearly interested in more than just the contents of my basket. I groan, covering my face with my hands.

"Oh god, I forgot I drew those pictures. You must think I'm really pathetic."

"On the contrary," Orion says, his tone light but sincere. "I really like your art. It's... creative. And surprisingly accurate." He flips to another page, and I catch a glimpse of the wolf chasing me through the woods, his claws outstretched. I let out a strangled laugh, wishing I could disappear into the limo seat.

"Accurate?" I squeak, peeking at him through my fingers. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He smirks, leaning back against the seat. "Well, I do like to hunt. And I am the big bad wolf, aren't I?"

My face burns hotter, but I can't help the laugh that bubbles up. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"Impossible to resist, maybe," he teases, his hand finding mine. He laces our fingers together, his grip warm and reassuring. "I'm willing to play the role of the wolf

anytime, Cora. Just say the word.”

I shake my head, but I’m smiling. “You’re not going to let me live this down, are you?”

“Not a chance,” he says, his smile softening. “But I want you to know something. All of this—your art, your kinks, your quirks—it’s part of who you are. And I love every part of you.”

My heart swells at his words, and I lean into him, resting my head against his shoulder. “You mean that?”

“Always,” he says, his voice steady and sure. “Now, what do you say we get out of here? I think it’s time for the wolf to take his Red Riding Hood home.”

I laugh, feeling lighter than I have in weeks. “Lead the way, big bad wolf.”

CHAPTER 12

ORION

Cora's body squirms against mine, her laughter vibrating through my chest as she tries to wriggle free. Her fingers dig into my forearm where it's wrapped around her throat, but her technique is clumsy, half-hearted. She's not even trying. Again.

I tighten the hold just enough to make her gasp. "Focus, Cora," I growl, my voice low and rough. "You're not going to laugh your way out of this."

"Can't help it," she chokes out, still giggling. "The naked strangle ? Seriously?" She wriggles again, her backside brushing against me in a way that's far from accidental. "You're telling me that's what they call it in martial arts? Sounds like something I'd find in your secret stash of toys."

Her fingers trail down my forearm, sending a jolt of heat through me even as I keep her pinned. "Cora," I warn, my voice tight. "This isn't a game."

"Isn't it?" Her hand slips lower, skimming over my hip, and then—damn her—she closes her fingers around me through the thin fabric of my training shorts. I hiss, my grip faltering for just a second as her thumb slides over the growing hardness. "Because it feels like you're the one playing now."

My arm tightens again, and I press my lips to her ear, my breath hot against her skin. "You're supposed to be learning how to escape, not trying to distract me."

“Who says I’m not escaping?” Her voice is a purr now, all mischief and confidence. She shifts her hips, grinding back into me, and I feel her smirk without even seeing her face. “Seems like it’s working.”

I groan, my resolve cracking under the weight of her audacity. Damn this woman. She’s impossible. Infuriating. Perfect. I release the hold, spinning her around to face me. Her cheeks are flushed, her green eyes gleaming with triumph, and I can’t decide whether to kiss her or throw her back onto the mat.

“You’re cheating,” I accuse, my voice rough with frustration—and something else.

She grins up at me, her hands sliding up my chest. “You’re the one who said I should use every weapon at my disposal. I’m just following orders, Sir .”

I catch her wrists, pinning them above her head as I lean down, our faces inches apart. “If you’re going to play dirty, Ms. Daniels, you’d better be prepared for the consequences.”

Her breath hitches, her body arching into mine. “Promises, promises.”

One second, I’m towering over her, my grip firm on her wrists, and the next— what the hell? Her leg hooks around mine, her body twisting with a fluidity that catches me completely off guard. My balance falters, and before I can react, I’m on my back, the mat slamming into my spine.

Cora straddles me, her knees pinning my arms to the floor. Her chest heaves, her workout top clinging to her skin, and she leans down, shoving her breasts in my face with a smirk that’s equal parts smug and irresistible.

“Now who’s the boss?” she teases, her voice dripping with satisfaction.

I blink up at her, my mind still catching up to the fact that she just took me down with a dragon screw. A dragon screw . I've trained soldiers twice her size who couldn't pull that off. "Where the hell did you learn that?"

Her grin widens. "YouTube. You're not the only one who can do research, Sir ."

I growl, my body surging with a mix of frustration and something far more primal. In one smooth motion, I twist my hips, flipping her beneath me. Her breath hitches as I pin her wrists above her head, my body pressing hers into the mat.

"Cute trick," I murmur, my lips brushing against hers. "But you're still mine."

I kiss her hard, my tongue claiming her mouth as she arches into me. Her moan vibrates against my lips, and I can't get enough. I trail kisses down her neck, her collarbone, her chest, until I reach the hem of her top. With a sharp tug, I tear it away, the fabric giving way with a satisfying rip.

Her breasts spill free, and I take one nipple into my mouth, sucking hard as she gasps. My hands slide down her sides, gripping her hips as I move lower, kissing a path down her stomach. Her breath comes in short, shallow bursts, her body trembling beneath me.

When I reach her waistband, I don't hesitate. I tear her leggings apart, the sound of fabric ripping filling the room. Her pussy is bare, glistening, and I bury my face between her thighs without preamble.

Her taste floods my senses, sweet and intoxicating. I suck her outer lips into my mouth, my tongue flicking over her clit as she cries out. My hands grip her thighs, holding her open as I delve deeper, my tongue sliding inside her.

"Orion," she gasps, her fingers tangling in my hair. "Please—I need?—"

I don't let her finish. My tongue finds her G-spot, pressing against it with firm, deliberate strokes. Her hips buck against my face, her moans growing louder, more desperate. I suck her clit into my mouth, my tongue circling it as she writhes beneath me.

"Can I—please, can I—" she begs, her voice breaking.

"Yes," I growl against her, my breath hot on her skin. "Cum for me, Cora."

Her body shudders, her orgasm crashing over her in waves. I don't let up, my tongue relentless as she cries out, her thighs clamping around my head. I keep going, pushing her higher, until she's trembling, her body spasming with pleasure.

"Again," I command, my voice rough.

She doesn't argue. Her second orgasm hits her harder, her back arching off the mat as she screams my name. I don't stop until she's a quivering mess, her body limp and spent beneath me.

"Good girl," I murmur, pressing a kiss to her inner thigh. "Now, let's see if you can take me."

I grab a fistful of Cora's hair, the strands soft but unyielding in my grip, and drag her to her knees. She doesn't resist, her green eyes wide and glinting with that mix of defiance and submission that drives me wild. My cock is already hard, throbbing with need, and I slap it against her cheek, the sound sharp in the quiet room. Her lips part, a soft gasp escaping her, and I feel her breath hot against me.

"You're learning," I growl, my voice rough with desire. "But let's see how well you've been paying attention."

Her hands rise, delicate but sure, and wrap around my shaft. Her fingers work me with a confidence that surprises me, her touch firm but not rushed. She leans in, her lips brushing the crown, and I groan, my hips jerking forward involuntarily. Her tongue flicks out, teasing the sensitive tip, and I tighten my grip in her hair, pulling her closer.

“Good girl,” I mutter, my voice strained. “But don’t stop.”

She doesn’t. Her mouth closes around me, warm and wet, and she takes me deeper, her tongue swirling as she moves. My breath hisses out of me, my body tensing as pleasure surges through me. She’s always been a quick study, but this—this is something else entirely. Her hands slide lower, cupping my balls, and I hiss, my knees nearly buckling.

“Where did you learn that?” I demand, my voice a low growl.

She pulls off just enough to smirk up at me, her lips glistening. “I’m full of surprises, Sir.”

I groan, my control slipping as she takes me back into her mouth, her hands and tongue working in perfect harmony. She’s relentless, her pace steady, and I can feel the pressure building, my release coiling tight in my gut. I try to hold back, to maintain some semblance of control, but she’s too good, too damn good.

“Cora,” I warn, my voice rough. “I’m close.”

She doesn’t stop. If anything, she doubles down, her eyes locked on mine as she sucks me deeper, her tongue pressing against the underside of my cock. I can’t hold back anymore. My hips jerk forward, and I come hard, my release spilling into her mouth. She doesn’t flinch, doesn’t pull away. She takes it all, her throat working as she swallows every drop.

When I finally finish, my legs trembling, she pulls back, her lips curved in that sweet, innocent smile that belies the wickedness in her eyes. “Did I pass the test, Mr. Weller, Sir?”

I exhale sharply, my body still thrumming with the aftershocks of my orgasm. “Good girl,” I manage, my voice hoarse. “Very good girl, Cora. I am most pleased.”

Her smile widens, and she tilts her head, her tone dripping with faux innocence. “Then will Sir please give me his cock?”

I laugh, a low, rumbling sound, and pull her to her feet. “You’re insatiable.”

“Only for you,” she purrs, her hands sliding up my chest. “Always for you.”

I grab Cora’s ankles, my hands engulfing them as I pull her legs apart. Her green eyes widen, her lips parting in a gasp as I fold her in half, her knees pressed up near her shoulders. Her body is pliant, trusting, and it drives me wild. I position myself at her entrance, the head of my cock pressing against her slick folds. She’s drenched, her pussy glistening and ready, and I can’t wait any longer.

“Hold on, Ms. Daniels,” I growl, my voice thick with desire. “This is going to be rough.”

She bites her lower lip, her eyes locking with mine. “Promise?” Her voice is breathless, teasing, and it’s all the encouragement I need.

I slam into her, burying myself to the hilt in one brutal thrust. Her back arches off the mat, a sharp cry tearing from her throat as she claws at the air. I don’t give her a moment to recover. I pull out almost entirely and thrust back in, hard and relentless, setting a punishing pace that leaves her gasping for air.

“Orion—ah!—Sir, it’s too much—” she whimpers, her hands flailing before they find purchase on her own thighs, gripping them for stability.

“You can take it,” I snarl, my hips pistoning into her. Her pussy clenches around me, tight and hot, and I feel her body start to tremble. “You’re mine, Cora. You’ll take everything I give you.”

Her moans turn into screams as I angle my thrusts, hitting that sweet spot inside her with unerring precision. Her nails dig into her thighs, her body writhing as pleasure overtakes her. “I—I’m going to?—”

“Cum,” I command, my voice a low growl. “Now.”

Her body obeys, convulsing around me as her orgasm rips through her. Her pussy milks my cock, her tight walls clamping down as she screams my name. I don’t let up, driving her through it, pushing her higher until she’s sobbing, her body twitching with the aftershocks.

“Again,” I demand, my voice rough and unyielding. I shift my angle slightly, hitting that spot even harder, and I feel her body tighten, her resistance crumbling as another orgasm builds.

“Orion—please—I can’t—ah!” Her words dissolve into incoherent cries as I pound into her, relentless and unmerciful. Her pussy spasms around me, her second orgasm crashing over her like a tidal wave. Her body shakes, her legs trembling as she clings to her thighs, her knuckles white from the effort.

I’m not far behind, my own release building as I drive into her again and again. Her name tears from my throat, rough and raw, as I finally let go, my hips jerking as I spill myself inside her. Her body clenches around me, milking every last drop, and I collapse forward, catching myself on my hands as I hover over her, both of us

gasping for air.

Her green eyes meet mine, hazy and unfocused, her lips curved in a dazed smile. “You’re... relentless, Sir.”

“Cora,” I gasp, my voice ragged, my body still buried deep inside her. Her legs lock around my waist, her ankles pressing into the crook of my back, and I feel her walls clench around me in a way that makes my head spin. I can’t think straight. I can’t breathe. All I know is that I need her—not just now, but always. “Be my mate. Now and forever.”

Her laughter cuts through the haze of my desire, soft and breathless. “What?” she asks, her green eyes glinting with amusement as she blinks away the sweat clinging to her lashes. “Are you asking me to marry you? Now? While you’re balls deep inside of me?”

I freeze, my mind scrambling for words. This wasn’t how I’d planned it. Not that I’d planned it at all—the thought had just burst out of me, raw and unguarded. I’d never been one for grand declarations, but with Cora, everything feels different. She tilts her head, a smirk playing on her lips, and I’m completely at a loss.

Her hand reaches up, her fingers brushing against my cheek with a tenderness that makes my chest ache. “Do some research on Earth marriage proposals,” she says, her voice teasing but kind. “No offense, Orion. I love you, but I’d prefer if the setup were more romantic before I give my answer.”

Romantic. Right. I’m a Vakutan warrior, not a poet. But for her, I’ll learn. For her, I’ll do anything. I open my mouth to say as much, but she tightens her legs around me, pulling me even closer. My hips jerk involuntarily, and I feel her shiver beneath me.

“You can research later,” she murmurs, her voice soft and dreamy. Her hands slide down my back, her nails scraping lightly against my scales, and I groan, my control slipping. “Right now, I just want you to stay. Right here. Like this.”

I can’t argue with that. Not when she’s looking at me like I’m the only thing that matters in the universe. Not when her body is warm and pliant beneath mine, her heartbeat echoing in my ears, her scent swirling around me like a siren’s call. I lower my head, my lips brushing against hers in a kiss that’s as soft as it is desperate. She responds instantly, her tongue sliding against mine, her body arching into me.

“Cora,” I murmur against her mouth, my voice barely more than a whisper. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

She laughs, the sound low and throaty. “But what a way to go, right?”

I can’t help but smile. She’s impossible. Infuriating. Perfect. And she’s mine. For now, that’s enough. I’ll figure out the rest later. For now, I lose myself in her, in the way she wraps herself around me, in the way she whispers my name like it’s a prayer.

CHAPTER 13

CORA

Orion strides down the sleek, metallic corridor of Veritas Base Alpha, the black leather duffel bag slung over his shoulder. The bag looks heavy, but he carries it like it's nothing—because, of course, it's nothing to him. I'm trailing behind, trying to keep up with his long strides, my curiosity buzzing like a bee trapped in a jar.

“What's in the bag? Some kind of Vakutan lightsaber? Plasma whip? A gun that shoots tiny black holes?” I ask, half-joking, half-desperate to know.

He doesn't even glance back. “Patience, Cora.”

“Patience is overrated.” I quicken my pace to walk beside him. “Come on, just a hint. Is it dangerous? Explosive? Does it glow?”

“You'll see.” His tone is infuriatingly calm, but there's a glint in his purple eyes that tells me he's enjoying this.

We reach the holo-gym, and Orion punches in the access code. The doors slide open with a soft whoosh, and I step inside. The transformation is immediate—instead of the sterile, high-tech room I expected, we're standing in the middle of a dense forest. The air smells like pine and damp earth, and the sound of rustling leaves and distant bird calls fills the space. It's so real, I half expect to see a squirrel dart across the moss-covered ground.

“What kind of training program is this?” I ask, glancing around. “Wilderness survival? Are we going to wrestle a bear? Because I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”

“Not exactly.” Orion’s voice is low, and there’s an intensity in his gaze that makes my stomach do a little flip. “In fact, training isn’t what I had in mind.”

I laugh, trying to lighten the mood. “You could’ve just told the holodeck to generate a bed, you know. Saved us both the walk.”

He doesn’t laugh. Instead, he sets the duffel bag down and unzips it with deliberate slowness. My eyes dart to the bag, expecting something flashy or intimidating to emerge. But what he pulls out is... a bundle of fabric. He tosses it to me, and I catch it mid-air, the soft material unfolding in my hands.

It’s a cloak. A scarlet red hooded cloak, just like the one from my diary drawings.

My fingers trace the luxurious fabric. It’s smooth, almost silky, but with a weight that feels grounding in my hands. I look up at him, my heart pounding. “What is this?”

“Put it on.” His voice is a command, no room for question.

I start to drape the cloak over my shoulders, but before I can even get it settled, his hand catches me off guard— smack . The sharp sting on my backside makes me yelp, and I spin around to glare at him.

“Put it on the right way,” he says, his tone firm but with a hint of amusement.

I bite my lower lip, a mix of annoyance and arousal bubbling under my skin. “Fine,” I mutter, starting to strip off my clothes. His eyes don’t leave me as I peel off my shirt, then my pants, folding them neatly and setting them aside. The forest air is cool against my skin, but his gaze is hot enough to make up for it.

Finally, I slip the cloak on, pulling the hood up over my head. The fabric brushes against my bare skin, soft and warm, and I feel a little thrill run through me. “Happy now?” I ask, my voice a little breathless.

“Very.” He crosses his arms, leaning back against a tree. “Where’s your costume?” I tease, tilting my head. “Or are you just going to watch me wander around the woods like Little Red Riding Hood?”

He doesn’t answer right away. Instead, he reaches into the duffel bag again and pulls out something that makes my eyes widen. It’s a mask—a wolf mask, carved and painted with such detail it looks almost real. He slips it on, and suddenly, he’s the Big Bad Wolf.

My breath catches. “Well,” I say, my voice shaky but teasing, “I guess I should start running.”

“Three minutes,” Orion says, his voice low and teasing, as he starts to strip. I lose myself for a moment, my eyes wandering over him like they’ve been magnetized. His body is unreal—broad shoulders, defined muscles, scales that catch the dappled light filtering through the trees. He’s all power and grace, and I stare. “Your time already started,” he adds, slipping the wolf mask over his face. His voice is muffled now, but still commanding. “Grandma’s house is at the end of that trail. Good luck.”

“You’re such a cheat,” I mutter with a grin, sticking my tongue out at him before I turn and start jogging down the path. The forest feels alive around me—the cool, earthy scent of humus fills my lungs, and the sunlight spills through the canopy, casting shifting patterns on the ground. I can’t believe how real it all feels. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear we were actually in the middle of nowhere, not in some high-tech holo-gym.

I hear the faint rustle of underbrush behind me, and my heart skips a beat. I glance

over my shoulder but don't see him. Still, I can feel him, his presence like a shadow just out of reach. It's thrilling and terrifying all at once. My pace slows almost instinctively, my body betraying me as I think about what he's going to do when he catches me. I laugh softly to myself. I'm not motivated to run faster—I'm motivated to run slower.

"You're not even trying," his voice calls out, deep and taunting. It's somewhere to my left, but I still can't see him. "I thought you were smarter than this, Little Red."

I stop, planting my hands on my hips and scanning the trees. "Maybe I'm just not scared of the Big Bad Wolf," I shoot back, my voice steady despite the way my pulse is racing. "Maybe I want to get caught."

A low growl rumbles through the air, and I spin around, my breath catching. Still nothing. "Cheap tricks," I mutter, but I'm grinning as I start walking again. The path winds deeper into the forest, the trees thickening around me. Every snap of a twig, every rustle of leaves makes my skin prickle. I know he's out there, stalking me, and the anticipation is intoxicating.

I pause by a large oak, leaning against it as I catch my breath. "You know," I call out, my voice echoing slightly in the stillness, "if you're trying to be scary, you might want to actually show yourself. This whole lurking-in-the-shadows thing is getting old."

"Patience," comes his voice, closer this time. I whirl around, and there he is—partially hidden by the trees, the wolf mask making him look otherworldly. He steps forward, his movements fluid and predatory. "I was just enjoying the view."

I swallow hard, my body buzzing with adrenaline. "Well, enjoy it from a distance," I tease, pushing off the tree and breaking into a run. I don't get far before I hear him behind me, his footsteps light but impossibly fast. I cut to the right, weaving through

the trees, my cloak flaring out behind me. It's a game now, and I'm determined to make it as fun as possible—for both of us.

The cottage comes into view, its weathered wood and crooked chimney like something out of a fairy tale. I'm so close I can practically taste victory. My legs burn from running, but the adrenaline keeps me moving. "I wonder what prize I get for winning the game?" I call out, my voice laced with playful defiance. I'm ten feet from the door, my hand already reaching for the rusty handle, when he strikes.

Orion tackles me from the side, his body slamming into mine with enough force to knock the air from my lungs. We hit the ground hard, the damp grass cushioning our fall. "Gotcha," he growls, his voice low and rough through the wolf mask. I let out a startled yelp, squirming under his weight, but he's got me pinned. His hands are quick, yanking the scarlet cloak up and over my head. The fabric wraps around my upper body, cocooning my arms and blinding me. I'm trapped, helpless, and the thrill of it intoxicating.

"Hey!" I protest, my voice muffled by the cloak. "That's cheating!"

"Cheating?" he scoffs, his tone dripping with mock offense. "Little Red, the wolf doesn't play fair." He flips me over, the rough edge of his mask brushing against my cheek as he smacks me firmly on the ass. The sharp sting makes me gasp, and I can't help the laugh that bubbles up. "Keep going," he taunts, his voice a purr in my ear. "You're so close."

I squirm, trying to wriggle free, but the cloak holds me tight. He grabs me by the back of the head, his fingers tangling in my hair as he guides me to my feet. My bare legs brush against the cool grass, and the contrast between the warmth of the cloak and the chill of the forest air is maddening. He pushes me against the cottage wall, the rough wood biting into my skin. My upper body is bound, exposed, while my lower half is completely at his mercy. It's a dizzying sensation, vulnerability and anticipation

coiled tight in my chest.

I hear the rustle of his clothes as he positions himself behind me, his hands firm on my hips. “You’re mine, Cora,” he growls, the words sending a jolt of heat through me. There’s no preamble, no teasing—just the sharp, searing pleasure of him filling me in one swift motion. I cry out, the sound muffled by the cloak, my body arching against his. He fucks me like he’s claiming me, every thrust hard and relentless, his hands gripping my hips to keep me in place.

The world narrows to the sensations—the scrape of his scales against my skin, the rhythmic slap of his hips against mine, the way the cloak traps my arms and muffles my cries. I’m lost in it, every nerve on fire, until he sinks his teeth into my shoulder with a feral growl. The pain is sharp, immediate, but it mingles with the pleasure until I can’t tell where one ends and the other begins. “You’re mine,” he repeats, his voice raw and possessive, and I feel him spill inside me, hot and claiming.

I want to say yes sir , to tell him I’m his, always his, but the words are lost in the wave of pleasure that crashes over me. My body convulses, my knees buckling as I come apart in his arms. He holds me up, his grip firm, his breath hot against my neck. For a moment, there’s nothing but the sound of our breathing and the distant rustle of leaves in the wind.

The cloak falls away from my body, pooling around my feet like a scarlet puddle. I blink up at Orion, the sunlight filtering through the trees casting dappled shadows across his face. He pulls off the wolf mask, tossing it aside, and his purple eyes lock onto mine. There’s a softness there, something that makes my chest tighten.

“You’re a menace,” I say, my voice still a little breathless. “You know that, right?”

He smirks, the kind of smirk that makes my knees go weak even when they’re already jelly. “A menace who just made you scream.”

I roll my eyes, but I can't help the laugh that escapes me. "Barely. You're slipping, Weller."

He steps closer, his hand brushing a strand of hair from my face. "Are you complaining?"

"Never." I lean into his touch, my skin still humming from the intensity of what just happened. His other arm wraps around me, pulling me against his chest, and I let out a contented sigh. The warmth of his scales against my bare skin is electric, grounding and thrilling all at once.

We're quiet for a moment, just standing there under the shade of the tree, the forest alive around us. I tilt my head back to look at him, and he's already watching me, his expression unreadable but intense. "How does every day with you keep getting better?" I ask, my voice soft.

"I was going to ask you the same thing," he says, his thumb brushing over my cheek. His tone is casual, but there's something in his eyes that makes my stomach flip.

I press my lips together to hide a smile. "Maybe I'm just a terrible influence on you. Turning you into a hopeless romantic."

He snorts, a low, gruff sound that makes my heart skip. "Hopeless? I'd say I'm doing pretty well."

"Oh, you're definitely hopeless," I tease, reaching up to poke his chest. "You're so far gone, it's almost tragic."

He catches my hand, his grip firm but gentle. "If that's the case, then I'm fine with it." His voice is steady, but there's a warmth there that makes my breath catch.

I settle into his arms, resting my head against his chest, his heartbeat steady and strong beneath my ear. The forest feels like it's holding us in this moment, the air sweet with the scent of pine and earth. I close my eyes, letting myself just be here with him. The chaos of Veritas, the danger of the Grolgath—all of it fades into the background. Right now, it's just us.

“Tomorrow's going to be a mess, isn't it?” I murmur, my voice muffled against his chest.

“Probably.” His hand strokes my back, his touch reassuring. “But we'll handle it. Like we always do.”

I tilt my head up to look at him again, my lips curving into a smile. “You mean you'll handle it, and I'll try not to get in the way.”

He raises an eyebrow, his expression shifting to that mock sternness I've come to love. “You're not in the way, Cora. You're the reason I'm still standing.”

My cheeks warm, and I bury my face in his chest again, hiding the grin that spreads across my face. “Sap,” I mutter.

He chuckles, the sound rumbling through me. “Only for you.” His arms tighten around me, and I feel a sense of peace settle over me. Maybe tomorrow will bring danger, maybe it'll bring chaos. But for today, I'm exactly where I want to be—wrapped up in the arms of the man I love.

CHAPTER 14

ORION

I sit at the sidewalk café, a cup of black coffee cooling in front of me. The St. Louis Public Library looms across the street, its granite facade catching the afternoon sun. My eyes lock onto Luhr, his human disguise impeccable—sharp suit, slicked-back hair, the picture of a man who’s used to getting what he wants. He’s leaning against a lamppost, pretending to scroll through his phone, but I know better. He’s waiting for her.

Cora steps out of the library, arms laden with books. She’s playing her part perfectly, the studious intern with a curious mind. My earpiece crackles to life as I tap it.

“Luhr is stalking you,” I say, my voice low. “Just like we hoped.”

Her response is a whisper, barely audible over the street noise. “Let’s see if I can pull this off. Hope my acting is up to par.”

“You’ll do fine. Just remember, don’t seem too eager. Make him persuade you to take the job. Going to comm silence for now.”

I watch as Luhr approaches her, his movements smooth, calculated. He’s good, I’ll give him that. But Cora’s better.

“Need a hand with those, miss?” Luhr’s voice is smooth, almost too smooth. I can hear it through the earpiece, every word crisp.

Cora hesitates, just long enough to sell it. “Uh, sure. Thanks.” Her tone is cautious, guarded. Perfect.

He takes the books from her, his hands brushing hers just enough to make it seem accidental. “Heading to your car?”

“Yeah, it’s just over there.” She gestures toward the parking lot, and they start walking. I keep my eyes on them, sipping my coffee like any other patron.

When they reach her car, Luhr sets the books in the backseat. “You know, I couldn’t help but notice you’ve been in the library a lot lately. Researching something important?”

Cora shrugs, playing it cool. “Just work stuff. My boss is... demanding.”

Luhr chuckles, a sound that’s meant to be disarming. “Sounds like a real taskmaster. How about a cup of coffee? My treat.”

She raises an eyebrow, feigning suspicion. “I’m not looking for a boyfriend.”

He holds up his hands in mock surrender. “Neither am I. Just thought you might like a break. And maybe... I could use your help with something.”

“My help?” Cora crosses her arms, leaning against her car. “What kind of help?”

Luhr’s expression turns serious, his voice dropping. “Something far more dangerous than you’re used to. I need someone smart, someone who can think on their feet. Someone like you.”

Cora laughs, a light, dismissive sound. “You’re kidding, right? What, are you some kind of spy?”

“Not exactly.” He steps closer, his voice low. “But your boss, Orion Weller... he’s not who you think he is. He’s been lying to you from the start.”

I smirk, leaning back in my chair. Luhr’s taking the bait, hook, line, and sinker.

Cora hesitates, then nods. “One cup of coffee. That’s all the time you get to explain yourself.”

“Fair enough.” Luhr gestures toward a nearby coffee shop, and they start walking. I stand, tossing a few bills on the table, and follow at a distance, blending into the crowd. This is where it gets interesting.

I watch from the café as Cora and Luhr sit at the coffee shop, their conversation playing through my earpiece. My jaw tightens when Luhr slides a photo across the table. I can’t see it, but I know what it is—me, in my Vakutan form, taken decades ago. Damn Grolgath and their meticulous record-keeping.

“This could be AI,” Cora says, her tone skeptical. Her fingers tap lightly on the table, a nervous tic I’ve come to recognize. “Or Photoshop. People fake stuff like this all the time.”

Luhr leans forward, his voice smooth but firm. “Check the timestamp. That photo was taken in the early ‘80s. Photoshop didn’t exist. Neither did AI.”

She picks up the photo, her eyebrows knitting together as she studies it. “So what, you’re saying my boss is some kind of... alien?”

“Not just any alien. Vakutan. A species of warriors who’ve been infiltrating Earth for years.” He pulls a small packet of coffee creamer from his pocket and slides it toward her. “This will dissolve his disguise. Use it somewhere public. Expose him.”

Cora's laugh is sharp, almost mocking. "And why would I do that? How do I know this isn't just some elaborate scheme to poison a business rival?"

He leans back, spreading his hands. "You don't. But ask yourself—why would I go to all this trouble just to take him out? He's dangerous, Cora. You're helping, whether you realize it or not."

I mutter under my breath, my fingers tightening around my coffee cup. Don't overplay it, Cora. Don't push him too far.

She drums her fingers on the table again, her expression thoughtful. "So, what, I just pour this in his coffee and watch him turn into a lizard man? And if it's all fake, I end up looking like an idiot?"

Luhr smirks, a calculated move. "It's not fake. But if it'll ease your mind..." He picks up the creamer, rips it open, and pours it into his own coffee. He takes a sip, his eyes locked on hers. "See? Harmless to humans."

Cora glances at the creamer, then back at him. "Fine. I'll do it. But if this is some kind of stunt, I'm turning you into the cops. Got it?"

"Fair enough." He stands, smoothing his suit. "You'll thank me later."

I tap my earpiece as he walks away. "Cora, maintain radio silence. Two men are following you. Probably Luhr's lackeys."

She doesn't respond, but I see her tense as she picks up her purse and heads for the door. My eyes flick to the two men—bulky, nondescript, the kind of muscle Luhr would hire. They trail her at a distance, their movements casual but deliberate.

I finish my coffee, my mind racing. Cora's handling this better than I expected, but

she's walking a tightrope. One misstep, and Luhr will know she's playing him. I stand, tossing a few bills on the table, and follow her at a distance. If those goons so much as look at her wrong, I'll make sure they regret it.

Cora's in control—for now. But I'm not taking any chances.

I watch as Cora disappears into her parents' house, her two shadows lingering for a moment before sauntering off down the street. My instincts scream to follow her, to make sure she's safe, but I know better. She's playing her part, and I need to play mine. So I turn my attention to the thugs.

They're not subtle, these two. Big shoulders, heavier steps than they should have for guys trying to blend in. They head toward the Soulard district, and I'm half a block behind, my image inducer keeping me inconspicuous. The neon lights of a strip club flash ahead, and sure enough, they duck inside.

I follow, the bass of the music hitting me like a physical force. The place is dimly lit, the air thick with perfume and sweat. I slide into a shadowed corner, my eyes locked on the thugs as they settle into a booth. A few minutes later, Lars walks in, all slick smiles and an ice-cream-white suit that practically screams "I'm here to cause trouble."

I adjust my earpiece, activating the lip-reading program I've had installed since the '90s. It's not perfect, but it's close enough.

"She took the bait." Lars' voice is smooth, confident. "The creamer's in her hands. She'll use it."

One of the thugs leans forward, his voice a growl. "You sure she's not playing us? She's sharp, that one."

Lars smirks, swirling the drink in his hand. “Sharp, sure. But desperate. She’ll do it. And when she does...” He trails off, but the menace in his voice is thick enough to cut with a vibroblade.

My jaw tightens. They’re talking about poison, something deadly to Vakutans. Clever bastards. But they’re not clever enough to know we’re onto them. I’m about to slip out when a woman in a barely-there outfit slides into view.

“Hey, big guy,” she purrs. “You look like you could use some company.”

I glance at her, then at the booth where Lars and his goons are still talking. Drawing attention to myself is the last thing I need. “Sure,” I say, pulling out a wad of cash. “Just a dance.”

She leads me to a chair, her hips swaying like she’s practiced it a thousand times. She’s beautiful, I’ll give her that, but she’s not Cora. Nothing about this does anything for me. Still, I keep my eyes on Lars, my lips curling into a smirk as he laughs at some joke one of his thugs makes.

When the dance is over, I slip the woman an extra hundred and head for the door. The cool night air hits me like a relief, and I tap my earpiece. “Cora, status?”

Her voice comes through, sharp and amused. “Safe and sound. Apparently, so are you. How was the lap dance?”

I freeze, then groan. “You heard that?”

“Every grinding, awkward second of it.” Her tone is teasing, but there’s a warmth there that makes my chest tighten. “Don’t worry, big guy. Your secret’s safe with me.”

I can't help but chuckle. "Just part of the job. You're the only woman who can make me lose my cool."

"Good to know. Now get back here. I've got poison to pour into your coffee, remember?"

I laugh, the sound genuine despite the tension. "On my way."

CHAPTER 15

CORA

The holographic shimmer of Pyke's office walls flickers faintly, casting a soft glow over the three of us. Pyke leans back in his chair, the metal creaking under his weight, his red scales catching the light like polished copper. Orion stands beside me, his arms crossed, his jaw set in that stubborn way I've come to know too well. I can feel the tension radiating off him, like a storm about to break.

Pyke steeples his claws, his voice low and measured. "Luhr's been sniffing around too close. He's made Orion, and that's a problem. We need to pull you both out of St. Louis. Send in a hit squad to clean this up."

"I'm not a liability. I can handle myself. Send me with the squad."

Pyke's eyes narrow, a hint of frustration bleeding through his calm exterior. "You're too valuable to risk. And besides, you're compromised. Luhr knows who you are. If you're spotted, this whole operation goes sideways."

I step forward, cutting through the tension like a knife. "What if I go to Luhr instead?"

Both of their heads snap toward me. Orion's eyes narrow, a protective growl rumbling in his chest. "Absolutely not."

I hold up a hand, silencing him before he can spiral. "Hear me out. I'll tell him

Orion's dead. That I used the creamer on him. I'll say I finally realized he was right—that aliens are real, and I want to join his cause. We can use me as bait to draw him out."

"You're not trained for this kind of infiltration. It's too dangerous."

"I'm not exactly helpless," I shoot back, crossing my arms. "I've been training with you for weeks. And besides, this isn't just about Veritas. Luhr tried to kill you. That makes this personal."

Pyke leans forward, his piercing gaze locked on me. "It's a solid idea. Risky, but solid. We can monitor you the entire time. If things go south, we extract you immediately."

Orion steps closer, his towering frame looming over me. "You're not doing this. I won't allow it."

I tilt my head up, meeting his gaze without flinching. "You're not my keeper, Orion. This isn't your call."

He doesn't argue further. Pyke's low chuckle breaks the tension. "She's got a point, Orion. Besides, she's the best shot we've got at taking Luhr down without a full-scale confrontation."

Orion's shoulders tense, but he doesn't argue. Instead, he turns to me, his voice softer now. "You understand what you're walking into, right? Luhr's not some petty thug. He's dangerous."

I nod, my jaw set. "I know. But he's also arrogant. He'll underestimate me. That's his mistake."

Pyke leans back, a satisfied smirk playing on his lips. “Alright, then. We’ll prep you for the op. But remember, Cora—no heroics. We pull you out at the first sign of trouble.”

“Got it,” I say, my voice steady despite the knot of fear in my stomach. I glance at Orion, his expression unreadable but his eyes burning with something I can’t quite place. Worry? Anger? Maybe both.

Pyke claps his hands together, breaking the moment. “Good. Let’s get to work. Cora, you’re with me. Orion, I need you to prep the extraction team.”

Orion hesitates, his gaze lingering on me for a moment longer before he nods curtly and strides out of the room. I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what’s to come. Luhr doesn’t know it yet, but he’s about to meet his match.

Pyke leads me through the winding corridors of Veritas Base Alpha, the walls shimmering with a faint blue light that makes the whole place feel like something out of a sci-fi movie. The armory is tucked away in a nondescript section of the base, but the moment the doors slide open, it’s anything but ordinary. Rows of sleek, high-tech weapons line the walls, and a faint hum of energy fills the air.

“Alright, Cora,” Pyke says, his voice carrying that mix of authority and casual charm. “Let’s get you suited up.”

He hands me a small case, and I pop it open to find a pair of contact lenses. They look like the kind you’d get from an optometrist, but I know better. “These’ll transmit everything you see and hear back to us,” he explains. “Just pop them in, and we’ll be your eyes and ears.”

I nod, slipping them into place. They feel like regular contacts, but the moment they settle, a faint green light flickers in the corner of my vision. “Got it. I’m officially

your spy cam.”

Pyke grins, his sharp teeth glinting. “Exactly. Now, this—” He pulls out a small bottle of nail polish, the label unassuming. “—is your secret weapon. One swipe of this on a grolgath, and their shapeshifting ability is toast. But be careful. The effects are... dramatic. You’ll know when it works.”

I take the bottle, turning it over in my hands. “Dramatic how?”

“Let’s just say it’s not pretty,” he says with a shrug. “But it’s effective. Just make sure you’re ready before you use it. No second chances.”

I nod, tucking the bottle into my pocket. “Got it. No pressure.”

Pyke claps a hand on my shoulder, his grip firm but not unkind. “You’ve got this, Cora. Now, let’s go over your story.”

We move to a nearby table, and Pyke pulls up a holographic display of Luhr’s file. “You’re going to tell him you used the creamer on Orion. Describe the symptoms—convulsions, foaming at the mouth, the works. Make it graphic. He’ll eat it up.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You’re really leaning into the trauma angle, huh?”

“It’s believable,” he says with a shrug. “You’re supposed to be shaken up. Just don’t overdo it. Let him think he’s convincing you to join his cause. You’re not eager—you’re conflicted.”

I nod, committing the details to memory. “Got it. Traumatized, but not too traumatized. Conflicted, but not suspicious.”

Pyke smirks. “Exactly. You’re a natural at this.”

I roll my eyes, but there’s a hint of a smile on my lips. “Thanks, I guess. Anything else I should know?”

“Just remember,” he says, his tone serious now. “Luhr’s dangerous. Don’t let your guard down, even for a second. We’ll be watching, but if things go south, you need to be ready to act.”

I take a deep breath, squaring my shoulders. “I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

The cloaked shuttle hums softly as it glides over St. Louis, its transparent hull making the city below look like it’s suspended in midair. Pyke sits across from me, his scales catching the faint glow of the cockpit controls. His tail flicks lazily behind him, the only sign he’s even remotely relaxed.

“Remember,” he says, steady, “you’re not just selling the story. You’re selling you . Luhr needs to believe you’re desperate, angry, and—most importantly—vulnerable.”

“Got it,” I say, my fingers drumming against the armrest. “Desperate, angry, and just unstable enough to be useful.”

Pyke smirks, his sharp teeth glinting in the dim light. “Exactly. Play it up, but don’t overdo it. We’re counting on you, Cora.”

The shuttle lands silently on the roof of Orion Plaza, and Pyke steps out first, his massive frame scanning the area for threats. He gives me a nod, and I follow, my heart pounding in my chest. He heads inside to coordinate the extraction team while I make my way to the coffee shop, the weight of the mission settling heavily on my shoulders.

The cafe is quiet, the hum of low conversations and the hiss of the espresso machine filling the air. I take a seat at the same table as before, my hands trembling slightly as I pull out my phone. I text Lars, keeping my message short and frantic: Need to talk. Now.

Twenty agonizing minutes later, he walks in, his ice cream white suit pristine as always. His eyes lock onto me, and he slides into the seat across from me with the calm confidence of someone who's always in control.

"Cora," he says, his voice smooth and composed. "You look... distressed."

I exhale sharply, running a hand through my hair. "You were right. All along. Orion—he's not human. I didn't believe you, but I saw it. I saw what he really is." My voice cracks, and I let it, leaning into the performance. "He—he started convulsing. Foaming at the mouth. I thought he was dying, but then—" I cut myself off, rocking slightly in my chair. "How many of them are there? Anyone in this cafe could be one of them?—"

Lars leans forward, his expression unreadable but his voice calm. "Shh. You're safe now. But you're right to be afraid. This city, this world—it's not what you think."

I nod, my eyes wide and unfocused. "What do I do? I can't—I can't just ignore this. Not after what I've seen."

He smiles faintly, a hint of approval in his gaze. "Being afraid doesn't mean you can't fight back. There are others like you. Like me. People who know the truth and are ready to do something about it."

I hesitate, feigning skepticism. "What kind of people?"

"People who want to take back this planet from the invaders," he says, his voice low

and conspiratorial. “Come to a meeting. See for yourself.”

I bite my lip, nodding slowly. “Okay. I’ll come.”

He stands, straightening his suit. “Good. I’ll send you the details. Until then, stay safe.”

He leaves without another word, and I sit there for a moment, my heart racing. I glance around the cafe, half-expecting someone to jump out and reveal this was all a setup. But no one does. I grab my bag and head back to Orion Plaza, the weight of the mission still heavy but tinged with a flicker of hope.

Pyke meets me in the lobby, his sharp eyes scanning my face. “Well?”

“He bought it,” I say, my voice steadier than I feel. “He wants me to attend a meeting of ‘like-minded individuals.’”

Pyke grins, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “Good work. Now, we wait. And prepare.”

I nod, but my mind is already elsewhere. Orion’s face flashes in my thoughts, and I hope I’ll see him again soon. This mission isn’t just about Veritas anymore. It’s about him. And I’m not ready to lose him.

CHAPTER 16

ORIYN

The shuttle hums beneath my feet, the vibration of the engines a steady thrum that matches the pulse of my blood. Around me, a dozen Vakutan shock troops sit in silence, their scales glinting faintly in the dim light. The air is thick with anticipation, the kind that comes before a fight you've been waiting for. It's been too long since I've been in the thick of it, and my muscles ache for the release of combat. But first, Cora. Always Cora.

"Approaching St. Louis airspace," the pilot's voice crackles over the comms. "Cloak is holding steady."

I lean forward, my claws flexing against the armrests. "Keep it that way. We're not here to make a scene—yet."

The shuttle lurches suddenly, and I'm thrown back into my seat. "What the hell was that?"

"Commercial jet," the pilot snaps, his voice tight. "Came out of nowhere. Had to adjust course."

I frown, my ridges pulling low over my eyes. "Another one?"

"Yes, sir. And another—shit!" The shuttle jerks again, this time hard enough to send one of the troops sprawling. "They're everywhere. It's like they're being rerouted

right into us.”

My jaw tightens. “The Grolgath. They’ve broken our cloak.”

The pilot glances back at me, his yellow eyes wide. “How do you know that?”

“Because I taught that tactic at Brakkus Academy.” My voice is a low growl. “They’re using human aircraft as weapons. Clever bastards.”

The shuttle shudders again, and the pilot’s hands fly over the controls. “I can’t keep this up forever. If we hit one of these things?—”

“You won’t.” I stand, my head nearly brushing the ceiling. “Evasive maneuvers. Keep us in the air until we’re clear of the city.”

The troops exchange glances, their scales shifting in unease. One of them, a younger Vakutan with blue scales, speaks up. “Sir, if they’ve broken our cloak, they’ll know we’re coming. This could be a trap.”

“Of course it’s a trap.” I bare my teeth in something that’s not quite a smile. “But we’re not here to play their game. We’re here to win it.”

The shuttle jerks again, and the pilot curses under his breath. “Another one. They’re swarming us.”

“Then stop complaining and fly,” I snap. “Cora’s waiting, and I’m not about to let a bunch of overgrown lizards keep me from her.”

The troops chuckle, the tension easing just enough to keep them sharp. I settle back into my seat, my claws digging into the armrests. The shuttle weaves and dips, the pilot’s skill the only thing keeping us from becoming a fiery crater in the Missouri

countryside. My mind races, calculating the odds, the risks, the moves the Grolgath might make next. But beneath it all, there's one thought that keeps me grounded, focused, alive.

Cora.

The shuttle dips low, skimming just twenty feet above the ground, the Mississippi River a shimmering ribbon below us. The pilot's claws are tight on the controls, his scales flickering with tension. I can feel the hum of the engines vibrating through my chest, a low growl that matches my own.

"Keep it steady," I bark, my voice cutting through the tense silence. "We're not out of this yet."

"Trying, sir," the pilot snaps, his yellow eyes darting across the console. "But the Grolgath are rerouting every drone in the area. It's like they're trying to—shit!"

A flash of movement catches my eye, and I turn just in time to see a recreational drone slam into the shuttle's air intake. The impact jolts the entire vessel, and I'm thrown sideways, my shoulder slamming into the bulkhead. The engines sputter, a sickening whine filling the cabin.

"We're going down!" the pilot shouts, his voice tight with panic. "Brace for impact!"

"Not in the city," I growl, lunging for the controls. "Take us into the river. Now."

The pilot doesn't argue. He yanks the shuttle hard to the left, and we plummet toward the water. The Mississippi rushes up to meet us, a dark, churning abyss. For a moment, everything is chaos—the deafening roar of the engines, the hiss of water as it engulfs the shuttle, the metallic groan of the hull bending under the pressure.

Then, silence. The shuttle settles on the riverbed, the water lapping against the windows. The crew is silent, their breaths shallow, their scales muted in the dim light filtering through the water.

“Damage report,” I bark, my voice cutting through the stillness.

“Severe,” the pilot says, his claws dancing over the console. “Air intake’s shot. Propulsion system’s offline. We’re not going anywhere until we repair it.”

“How long?”

“Hours,” he admits, his voice tight. “Maybe more.”

Hours. The word hits me like a punch to the gut. Hours sprawled on the riverbed while Cora’s out there, exposed, vulnerable. My claws dig into the armrest, the metal groaning under the pressure. Every instinct screams at me to tear open the shuttle and swim to shore, consequences be damned. But I can’t. Not yet.

“Get to work,” I snap, my voice low and dangerous. “I want this shuttle operational in half that time.”

The crew springs into action, their voices a low murmur as they assess the damage and start repairs. I stay rooted to my seat, my mind racing. Cora’s meeting with Luhr. The Grolgath’s poison. Their plan to kill me—or worse, recruit her. Every minute we’re stuck here is a minute she’s in danger.

“Sir,” the blue-scaled trooper says, his voice hesitant. “What if the Grolgath come for us while we’re down here?”

“Let them,” I growl, my teeth bared. “They’ll regret it.”

But the words feel hollow. The Grolgath are clever, resourceful. They've already proven that. And Cora... Cora's alone. I glance at the console, at the flickering lights and sputtering readouts. The shuttle's a tomb, and I'm trapped inside, powerless to protect the one person I can't lose.

"Hurry," I mutter under my breath, my claws flexing. "Damn it, hurry."

I can't wait. Every second I'm down here is another second Cora's in danger. The shuttle's a tomb, the water pressing in on all sides, and my body vibrates with the need to act. I rise from my seat, the metal groaning beneath my weight. "Load me into the torpedo tube."

The pilot's head snaps around, his yellow eyes wide. "Sir, that's suicide. Even for you. The strain will?—"

"I'll survive," I cut him off, my voice sharp enough to silence the room. "I have to. Cora needs me."

The crew hesitates, their scales flickering with unease. The blue-scaled trooper steps forward, his voice steady despite the tension in the air. "Sir, with respect, we need you here. If you?—"

"Cora needs me," I repeat, my tone leaving no room for argument. "Now, load me in. That's an order."

They move, quick and efficient, but the tension in the air is thick enough to cut. I stride to the torpedo tube, my claws clicking against the metal floor. The tube is narrow, barely wide enough for my bulk, and the scent of oil and coolant burns my nose. I wedge myself inside, my scales scraping against the walls, and the crew seals the hatch behind me. The darkness is absolute, the only sound my own breathing and the faint hum of the shuttle's systems.

“Ready,” I growl, my voice echoing in the confined space.

The countdown begins. Three. Two. One.

The launch slams me against the tube’s walls, my body compressing under the force. Then, I’m shooting upward, the water rushing past me like a solid wall. The pressure is immense, crushing, and I grit my teeth against the pain. Muddy water forces its way into my nose, my lungs, my stomach, and every instinct screams to expel it, to breathe, but I can’t. I won’t.

The surface comes faster than I expect. I burst into the air with a roar, the force of the launch sending me arcing across the sky. The wind whips past my scales, the cold biting deep, and for a moment, I’m weightless, suspended in the open air. Then, gravity takes hold, and I’m plummeting back to earth.

I hit the ground hard, the impact driving the air from my lungs. My body tumbles through a pile of trash, the stench of rot and decay filling my nose, and I come to a stop in a heap of broken crates and discarded wrappers. My body is a ruin, my scales cracked and bleeding, my bones grinding against each other as they begin to knit themselves back together. I cough, water and bile spilling from my mouth, and my lungs burn with the effort to draw in air.

The pain is overwhelming, a white-hot agony that threatens to pull me under. But I can’t let it. I can’t. I focus on Cora, on the memory of her smile, the sound of her laugh. She’s out there, alone, and the thought of her in danger is enough to keep me conscious, to keep me breathing.

I drag myself to my feet, my body protesting every movement. My vision swims, the world tilting around me, but I force myself to stand. I can’t let the darkness take me. Not now. Not when Cora needs me. I take a step forward, then another, and another, each one a battle against the pain. I’ll make it to her. I have to.

CHAPTER 17

CORA

The basement of the sweatshop smells like mildew and desperation. The fluorescent lights flicker, casting shadows that make the rows of mismatched chairs and their occupants look like a surrealist painting. I sit near the back, clutching my bag like it's a lifeline. My palms are slick with sweat, but I keep my face calm, my posture relaxed. Lars—Luhr—stands at the front, his ice cream white suit glowing under the sickly light. He's too polished for this grimy setting, like a diamond in a dumpster.

"Thank you all for coming," he says, his voice smooth and commanding. The room falls silent, every gaze locked on him. "I know it took courage to be here. To face the truth, even when the world calls you crazy."

A man in a rumpled suit nods vigorously. A woman in a hoodie murmurs, "Amen." They're all here for the same reason: fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of the monstrous alien invaders Lars has painted as the enemy. My jaw tightens, but I force myself to stay still, to stay quiet.

"We've all seen the signs," Lars continues, pacing slowly. "The strange lights in the sky. The disappearances. The corporations that seem to control everything, even when they shouldn't. But here's the thing—" He pauses, letting the tension build. "We're not alone. There are those among the stars who stand with us. Who want to help us take back our world."

The room erupts into murmurs of hope and disbelief. I scan the crowd, noting the mix

of desperation and determination. These people are ripe for manipulation, and Lars knows it.

“But words are easy,” Lars says, raising a hand to quiet the room. “Deeds are harder. That’s why I’m thrilled to tell you that one of our allies is here tonight. One of the good ones. Someone who will show you that not all aliens are monsters.”

The door creaks open, and a man strides in wearing a futuristic red jumpsuit that looks like it was pulled straight out of a cheap sci-fi flick. His face is obscured by reflective sunglasses, and his posture screams confidence. Lars gestures to him like he’s unveiling a prize on a game show. “Everyone, this is J’on. He’s one of our... allies from beyond the stars.”

I narrow my eyes, my stomach churning. J’on? Really? That’s the best name they could come up with? And the jumpsuit? It’s like they’re not even trying to hide how fake this all is. But the crowd eats it up. A few people gasp, and one man in the front row actually claps. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. Or maybe it’s to keep from screaming.

“Thank you, Lars,” J’on says, his voice deep and smooth, like a late-night radio host peddling conspiracy theories. He removes his sunglasses, revealing oddly human eyes. I know better, though. I’ve seen what Grolgath really look like—scales, sharp teeth, and all. This guy’s just playing dress-up, and the sheep in this room are buying it wholesale.

“My people have watched Earth for a long time,” he begins, pacing the room like he’s delivering a TED Talk. “We’ve seen your struggles, your pain. The ruling class—those who hoard wealth and power—they’re not human. They’re invaders. Aliens, pretending to be one of you, controlling every aspect of your lives while you suffer.”

The room erupts in murmurs of outrage. A woman in a pink sweater shakes her head, muttering, “I knew it.” A man in a trucker hat cracks his knuckles like he’s ready to throw down. I clench my fists under the table, my nails digging into my palms. This is dangerous. They’re stoking a fire in people who’ve already got nothing left to lose.

J’on continues, his voice rising with passion. “But we’re here to help you take back your planet. To free humanity from their chains. Together, we can build a future where you are in control. No more lies. No more oppression. Just freedom.”

The applause is thunderous. Someone shouts, “Hell yeah!” and it’s quickly echoed by others. I scan the room, my chest tightening. These people are angry, scared, and now they’re being handed a target for their rage. It’s terrifying how easy it is to manipulate them. Lars and J’on stand at the front, basking in the adoration, and I think of everything Orion told me about the Grolgath. How they see humans as pawns, tools to be used and discarded. Tonight, I’m seeing it firsthand.

I force myself to stay calm, to keep my face neutral. Inside, though, I’m seething. These people don’t deserve this. They’re just trying to survive, and the Grolgath are preying on their fear. No wonder Veritas wants to stop them. The Grolgath don’t just lack morals—they revel in their cruelty.

Lars steps back to the makeshift table, the bottle of whiskey catching the flickering light as he pours a shot. “If you’re serious about joining the Revolution,” he says, deliberate, “you’ll take this oath. And this drink. Prove your commitment to humanity.”

The crowd shuffles forward, a mix of nervous energy and misplaced bravado. I hang back, watching. J’on stands to the side, that metal rod in his hand, his reflective sunglasses back in place. He’s scanning each person as they step up, the rod humming faintly as he points it at them. My stomach knots. What the hell is that thing?

I move closer, trying to get a better look. The man in the trucker hat steps up, takes the shot, and slams the glass down. “I pledge to protect Earth,” he says, his voice trembling with emotion. J’on waves the rod over him, and it beeps once. Clear.

Next is the woman in the pink sweater. She hesitates, then downs the whiskey with a grimace. “I pledge to protect Earth,” she whispers. The rod beeps again. Clear.

My turn’s coming. I need to stall. I step forward, my heart hammering, and motion to the rod. “What’s that thing J’on’s holding? It’s making a weird noise.”

Lars smiles, smooth as ever. “Just a precaution. We can’t have any of them sneaking in here, listening in. J’on’s making sure we’re all on the same side.”

The rod beeps again as the next person steps forward. I glance at it, then back at Lars. “So, what, it’s like a lie detector or something?”

“Something like that.” He chuckles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Don’t worry, Cora. It’s harmless. Unless you’ve got something to hide.”

I force a laugh, but my palms are slick with sweat. The rod’s not harmless. It’s a detector, and it’s going to catch me the second it scans me. My Veritas tech is tucked away, but who knows what that thing can pick up. I’ve got to get out of here.

“Bathroom,” I blurt, glancing toward the back of the room. “Where is it?”

Lars points to a door in the corner. “Over there. Don’t take too long. We’ve got a lot of people to get through.”

I nod and hurry off, my heels clicking on the concrete floor. The bathroom’s tiny, with cracked tiles and a flickering light. I slam the door shut and lock it, leaning against the sink. My reflection stares back at me, wide-eyed and panicked. No

windows. No way out.

I grab my bag and fumble through it, trying to think. There's got to be something I can do. My hands shake as I pull out my compact mirror, my lipstick, my phone. Nothing useful. I'm trapped.

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to think. Think, Cora. Orion's counting on you. Veritas is counting on you. You can't freak out now.

I stare at the door, then at my phone again. Maybe I can text Orion. But no—if I'm caught, that'll blow everything. My mind races. There's no time. Lars is going to get suspicious if I'm in here too long.

I splash water on my face, trying to calm down. Okay. New plan. I'll just have to face the rod and hope for the best. I've got to sell it. If I can just keep my cool long enough to get through the scan, maybe I can pull this off.

I open the door and step back into the basement, the hum of the rod louder than ever. Lars looks up, his eyebrows raised. "Better?"

"Better," I say, forcing a smile. "Let's do this."

I step into line, my pulse pounding in my ears. The rod's next. And so is my doom.

I step up to the table, the weight of the shot glass in my hand grounding me. The whiskey smells sharp, like pine and regret. Lars watches me with that infuriatingly calm smirk, and J'on stands to the side, holding that damn rod like it's a magic wand.

"I pledge to protect Earth," I say, my voice steady even as my heart tries to beat its way out of my chest. I down the whiskey in one go, the burn in my throat a welcome distraction.

The rod starts beeping immediately, a high-pitched whine that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. J'on's head snaps toward me, his stupid sunglasses glinting ominously. "She's compromised," he says, his tone flat but dangerous.

Lars blinks, his smirk faltering. "Are you sure it's not a false reading?"

"Positive," J'on replies, stepping closer to me.

I don't hesitate. I fling the whiskey left in the shot glass straight into Lars's face. He yelps, stumbling back and clawing at his eyes. The shot glass follows, smacking J'on right between the stupid sunglasses. He reels, and I'm already moving, shoving past the stunned attendees.

"Stop her!" Lars shouts, his voice cracking. "She's one of them !"

I bolt for the stairs, my heels slipping on the concrete. The crowd is shouting now, confusion turning to anger. I hit the first step and almost trip, catching myself on the railing. The door to the sweatshop floor is just ahead. I burst through it, the fluorescent lights blinding after the dim basement.

The workers don't even look up. They're hunched over sewing machines, faces blank, hands moving mechanically. I skid to a stop in front of a woman stitching sleeves onto what looks like a cheap t-shirt. "Help me! Please!" I pant, but she doesn't even flinch. Her eyes stay glued to her work, like I'm not even there.

The door slams open behind me, and the mob pours out, faces twisted in fury. I don't wait. I run deeper into the factory, weaving between rows of machines and racks of clothes. The cacophony of voices rises behind me, a wave of anger crashing in my direction.

"Orion!" I shout, dodging a cart piled high with fabric. My voice echoes off the metal

rafters. “If you’re listening, now is a really good time to come to my rescue!”

No answer. Just the pounding of footsteps and the growing roar of the mob. I spot a staircase leading to a catwalk and make a break for it, my lungs burning. The stairs rattle under my feet, and I hear someone shout, “She’s going up!”

I hit the catwalk and keep running, the metal grates clanging with every step. Below, the mob spreads out, trying to cut me off. I glance over the railing and see a man with a wrench starting up the stairs. Great.

“Come on, Orion,” I mutter under my breath, scanning the factory for an exit. “Don’t make me do all the work here.”

The catwalk ends at a door marked “Maintenance.” I shove it open and find myself in a narrow hallway lined with pipes. The door slams shut behind me, and I lean against it for a moment, catching my breath. Then I hear the handle rattle.

Time to move.

CHAPTER 18

ORION

The streets blur as I race forward, my legs pounding the pavement with enough force to crack it. My heart hammers—not from exertion, but from the thought of Cora in danger. The commotion grows louder, a cacophony of shouts and footsteps. When I turn the corner, there she is, sprinting down the alley with a mob hot on her heels. Her hair is wild, her face flushed with exertion and fear. She's holding her own, but they're gaining.

“Cora!” My voice booms like thunder, and her head snaps toward me. Relief floods her features, but there's no time for niceties. She ducks behind me as I step forward, shielding her with my body. The mob halts, a sea of anger and confusion, their eyes wide at the sight of me—Orion Weller, towering and furious.

“Stay behind me,” I growl, my voice low and dangerous. My hands flex, ready to tear through them one by one. I've fought worse. I've killed worse.

Cora's fingers grip my arm, her nails digging into my skin like a plea. “Orion, no! They're just people! They've been lied to—manipulated by Lars. They don't know what they're doing.”

I glance down at her, my jaw clenched so tight it aches. Her green eyes are wide, pleading, and for a moment, I'm torn. I want to crush these fools. I want to make them pay for daring to chase her. But Cora—she's looking at me like I'm the one who can fix this instead of escalating it.

“Fine,” I grit out, though it costs me. I turn back to the mob, my voice rising like a storm. “Stop!”

The word leaves my mouth with such force that it seems to ripple through the air. They freeze, stumbling over each other, their momentum broken. A few glance at each other nervously. It’s a temporary hold, but it’s enough.

“You!” I point to a man in the front—mid-forties, hollow eyes, desperation etched into every line of his face. “What’s your grievance?”

He stumbles over his words, caught off guard. “I—I lost my job! I’m about to lose my house! It’s these alien corporations—they’re rigging the system!” His voice cracks, a mix of anger and despair.

I snort, loud enough to cut through the tension. “That’s ridiculous. How much do you need?”

His face scrunches in confusion. “What?”

“Your mortgage,” I snap. “How much is it? I’ll pay it. And you’ll have a job waiting for you at Orion Industries tomorrow.”

The crowd murmurs, whispers spreading like wildfire. A woman steps forward, her face streaked with tears. “I’m drowning in medical bills! My son?—”

“Done.” I cut her off with a sharp nod. “Your son’s care is covered. You’ll work for me too.”

The mob shifts, their anger wavering as uncertainty takes its place. They’re not ready to trust me yet, but they’re listening. Cora peeks out from behind me, her hand still gripping my arm like she’s anchoring me to diplomacy instead of destruction.

“Listen to me,” I bark, my voice carrying the weight of command. “There are no aliens. No conspiracies. Just people who’ve fallen through the cracks. I’m here to make it right. Every single one of you will leave here with a job and a future. But this?” I gesture to the chaos around us. “This ends now.”

The silence that follows is heavy, a tentative truce. Cora’s fingers loosen their grip, and for the first time since I found her, she breathes.

Lars bursts through the remnants of the mob, his face twisted with rage. He shoves people aside, his voice a venomous hiss. “What are you doing? They’re the enemy! They’re the ones ruining your lives! Attack them!”

The crowd hesitates, their eyes darting between Lars and me. One man, the same one I just offered a job, steps forward. His face is hard, his jaw set. “You’re the one who’s been lying to us. You’re the one who’s been using us.”

Lars snarls, shoving the man back. “You’re weak! All of you! You’ll never?—”

The man shoves Lars back with a force that sends him sprawling to the ground. The crowd murmurs, their anger shifting from me to Lars. I step forward, looming over him, my lips curling into a grin. “You’ve lost this time, Luhr. No one will follow you anymore.”

Luhr glares up at me, his yellow eyes burning with hatred. He sneers, his voice dripping with venom. “Maybe I did lose, but so have you!”

Before I can react, his arm stretches out unnaturally, elongating like rubber. His hand closes around Cora’s throat, yanking her toward him. The mob scatters, their fear of the unnatural driving them away. In seconds, the street is empty except for the three of us.

Cora gasps, her hands clawing at Luhr's grip. Her face flushes red, her eyes wide with panic. I take a step forward, my fists clenched, but Luhr tightens his hold, his grin widening. "One more step, Orion, and I'll snap her neck."

I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest. Cora's eyes meet mine, and I see the fear there, but also the determination. She's not giving up, and neither am I.

"Let her go, Luhr," I growl, my voice low and dangerous. "This is between you and me."

Luhr chuckles, a cold, humorless sound. "Oh, but this is so much more fun. You care about her, don't you? I can see it in your eyes. You're weak, Orion. You've let this human cloud your judgment."

Cora's voice is strained, but she manages to speak. "He's not weak. He's stronger than you'll ever be."

Luhr's grip tightens, and Cora chokes, her words cut off. I take another step forward, my rage boiling over. "If you hurt her, I'll tear you apart piece by piece."

Luhr's grin widens, his yellow eyes gleaming with malice. "Promises, promises. But you're not in a position to make threats, are you? You're at my mercy now."

I clench my fists, my mind racing. I need to get Cora out of this, but one wrong move and Luhr could kill her. I can't risk it. I can't lose her.

"What do you want, Luhr?" I demand, my voice steady despite the storm raging inside me.

Luhr's grin turns into a smirk. "Oh, I think you know what I want. I want you to suffer. I want you to watch as I take everything from you, starting with her."

Cora's eyes meet mine again, and I see the unspoken message there. She's not afraid. She's ready to fight. And so am I.

Cora's nails rake down Luhr's arm, her poison nail polish sizzling as it disrupts his shapeshifting grip. His hand splinters, fragments of his form breaking off like shattered glass. He stumbles, his yellow eyes wide with shock. "What the?—?"

"That's for grabbing me, lizard boy!" Cora spits, kicking him in the shin for good measure before darting back.

I don't waste a second. My fist connects with Luhr's jaw, the impact sending him sprawling. He recovers fast, a blur of green scales and fury. He's quick—too quick. I barely register the first punch before it lands, a sharp crack against my ribs.

"You've gotten slow, Orion," Luhr hisses, his voice dripping with venom. "Too soft. Too human."

I grit my teeth, my claws extending as I swipe at him. He ducks, his laugh grating against my ears. "What's the matter? Can't keep up?"

Another blow, this time to my temple. My vision blurs, but I shake it off, lunging forward. I catch him by the arm, twisting hard enough to hear something pop. He snarls, his free hand slamming into my side. Pain flares, but I hold on, slamming him into the pavement.

"You're outmatched, Luhr," I growl, my voice a low rumble.

He grins, blood staining his teeth. "Am I? Or are you just too stubborn to admit you're losing?"

Cora's voice cuts through the chaos. "Orion, watch out!"

I turn just in time to avoid a kick aimed at my head. Luhr's speed is relentless—every move he makes is a blur. My body aches from the hits I couldn't dodge, but I force myself to stay focused.

He lands another blow, this time to my gut. I stagger, but I'm not done yet. I grab him by the throat, my claws digging into his scales. His eyes widen as I slam him into the ground once, twice, until the green of his scales is stained red with his own blood.

"Nobody threatens my Cora," I roar, my grip tightening. His claws scratch at my arm, but I don't let go.

Luhr chokes out a laugh, his voice weak but taunting. "You think this is over? You think you've won? I'll keep her as a pet until I get tired of her. Then I'll sell her on Gur...nice and cheap."

Rage burns through me, hot and consuming. I lift him again, bringing him down with all my strength. The ground shakes beneath us, and Luhr's body goes limp. His scales are almost completely red now, his breaths shallow and labored.

"You're done," I snarl, my voice like thunder. "You're never touching her again."

Cora runs to me, her small frame colliding with my chest like a storm breaking against a mountain. Her arms wrap around my waist, and I feel her trembling—not from fear anymore, but from the adrenaline crash, the sheer relief of being alive. My hand finds the back of her head, fingers threading through her soft brown hair. I press my lips to her forehead, inhaling the faint scent of sweat and the coffee she must've had earlier.

"You came," she whispers, her voice muffled against my chest. "I knew you'd come for me. I knew it."

My heart clenches, a strange, unfamiliar warmth spreading through me. “Always,” I say, my voice low but firm. “I will always be there for you.”

She pulls back just enough to look up at me, her green eyes searching mine. There’s a flicker of something unspoken there, a decision made in the heat of the moment.

“Fuck it,” she says suddenly, her voice steady despite the chaos around us. “Yes.”

I blink down at her, my brow furrowing. “Yes what?”

“Yes, I’ll be your mate. Marry you. Whatever.” She waves a hand dismissively, but there’s a fire in her eyes that tells me she means every word. “I don’t care what we call it, I just don’t want to be apart from you any longer.”

For a moment, I’m speechless. This isn’t how I imagined this moment—not that I’ve spent an unhealthy amount of time imagining it. But Cora, ever unpredictable, has a way of throwing me off balance in the best possible way.

“I thought you wanted the most romantic proposal ever?” I ask, my voice tinged with amusement.

She shakes her head, a small laugh escaping her lips. “Oriyn, you not only saved my life today, you saved the lives of every single person who was in that dreadful basement meeting with me.” Her hand rests on my chest, right over my heart. “I’m not sure if it gets much more romantic than that. At least, not for me.”

I cup her face with one hand, my thumb brushing across her cheek. “We’ll see about that,” I murmur, leaning down to capture her lips with mine. The kiss is slow, deliberate, a promise sealed without words. Her body molds against mine, and for a moment, the chaos of the world fades away.

When we finally break apart, she's smiling, that same mischievous glint in her eyes that always makes my chest tighten. "So," she says, stepping back and crossing her arms, "what's next, Mr. Weller?"

"Next," I say, my voice laced with determination, "we make sure Luhr can't hurt anyone ever again."

CHAPTER 19

CORA

The riverboat's polished wooden floors creak faintly under my heels as I step inside, the exhaustion from the shareholder meeting already melting away. The familiar scent of mahogany and something faintly metallic—Orion's scent—welcomes me. I drop my bag by the door, the weight of the day slipping off my shoulders.

"Orion, are you home yet?" My voice echoes through the grand foyer. The chandeliers catch the last rays of the setting sun, casting the room in a warm, golden glow. "I'm finally done with the meeting."

Out of the shadows, he steps forward, his golden scales shimmering like molten metal. The red light of the sun catches the edges of his ridges, making him look like something out of a dream—or a fantasy. His purple eyes lock onto mine, that sultry, predatory look that always makes my knees weak.

"On your knees." His voice, low and commanding, sends a shiver down my spine.

I don't hesitate. I sink to the floor, the cool wood pressing against my knees. The thrill of submission courses through me, my heart pounding in my chest. He strides forward, each step deliberate, until he's towering over me. His hand brushes through my hair, fingers tangling gently, possessively. I lean into his touch, my lips brushing against the fabric of his pants, feeling the heat of him, the growing hardness beneath.

"My girl did a good job today," he purrs, his voice dripping with approval.

I can't help but smile, my cheeks flushing. "Thank you, Sir," I murmur, nuzzling against him.

"So I'm taking you dancing."

My head snaps up, eyes wide. "Dancing?" The word comes out breathless, excited.

He chuckles, a deep, rumbling sound that vibrates through me. "Yes, dancing. But first—" His fingers tighten in my hair, pulling just enough to make me gasp. "We need to get you dressed."

He tugs me to my feet, not giving me a moment to steady myself. I stumble after him, his grip in my hair firm but not painful.

"Strip," he commands, his voice sharp, leaving no room for argument.

I fumble with the buttons of my blouse, my fingers trembling with anticipation. The fabric slides off my shoulders, pooling at my feet. My skirt follows, then my heels. His eyes never leave me, that intense stare making me feel like I'm the only thing in the universe that matters.

By the time we reach the bedroom, I'm down to my bra and panties, both of them black lace because I'd hoped this day would end like this. His hand releases my hair, and I turn to face him, my chest rising and falling with quick, shallow breaths.

"Good girl," he says, his voice softening just enough to make my heart swell.

"Turn. Hands on the wall." Orion's voice is low, commanding, and I obey without hesitation. The cool plaster presses against my palms as I brace myself, shivering as I feel the heat of him behind me. The rustle of leather fills the air, and then the smooth, firm touch of a corset encircles my waist. "Breathe in."

I inhale deeply, my ribs expanding as he tightens the laces. The pressure is firm, unyielding, but not painful—just enough to remind me of his control. My back straightens instinctively, the corset forcing my posture into something elegant, something refined. I feel the tug of each lace, the deliberate tightening, until I'm perfectly bound. "How does it feel?" His breath is warm against my ear.

"Perfect, Sir," I murmur, my voice shaky with anticipation. I can still move, still dance, but I'll be acutely aware of the constriction all night. Just as he intended.

He kneels behind me, his hands sliding down my legs as he rolls stockings up my thighs. The soft material clings to my skin, held in place by delicate garters. I hear the click of heels before I feel them, the straps wrapping around my ankles and calves. "These stay on," he commands. The sound of padlocks snapping into place sends a flush of heat to my cheeks. Most people won't notice, but those who do will understand exactly what it means.

His hands drift up to my neck, fastening a black leather choker with a red ruby pendant. The leather is snug, the weight of the jewel pressing just enough to remind me of his claim on me. "Now this." He holds the gown up, and I turn to face him. The fabric is sleek, black, and scandalously minimal. The plunging neckline and high slits on both sides leave little to the imagination. "Step in."

I do as he says, my heart racing as he helps me into the dress. The fabric glides over my skin, the corset and stockings hidden beneath the elegant exterior. Orion steps back to admire his work, his purple eyes raking over me with a possessive intensity. "You're flawless."

The limo is waiting outside, and he guides me to it with a hand on the curve of my back. The moment the door closes, his lips are on mine, his hands roaming over the exposed skin of my dress. I gasp as his fingers trace the edge of the corset, his touch sending jolts of electricity through me. He kisses me deeply, his tongue teasing mine

until I'm panting, my body aching with need.

"Simmer, little beauty," he whispers in my ear, his breath hot against my skin. I bite my lip, trying to calm the storm he's stirred inside me. The limo pulls up to the dance hall, and he takes my hand, leading me inside with the confidence of a man who knows he owns the room—and the woman on his arm.

The moment his hand settles on my back, I'm electrified. Orion's grip is firm, possessive, and his body against mine is intoxicating. The orchestra begins, the first strains of the tango filling the grand hall with a sultry rhythm that matches the pounding of my heart. He leads with confidence, his steps precise, his movements commanding. I follow, my body melding to his as if we've danced this way a thousand times before.

Our eyes lock, and the intensity in his gaze makes my breath catch. The press of his thigh against mine is deliberate, his dominance undeniable. I feel the hard muscles of his legs, the strength in his arms as he spins me, my body arching in perfect sync with his. The music builds, and so does the tension between us.

He dips me low, his hand sliding down to grip my thigh, the slit in my dress making the move scandalously exposing. I flush, the heat of embarrassment mixing with the thrill of his dominance. "Relax, Cora," he murmurs, his voice a low rumble that sends shivers down my spine. "Let them look. They'll never have what's mine."

The words ignite something deep inside me, and I lean into his hold, letting him guide me through the dance with abandon. He lifts me effortlessly, my body spinning through the air, the fabric of my dress catching the light and revealing far too much. I hear the sharp intake of breath from the audience, the whispers, the murmurs. Yet, I don't care. All I care about is the way he's looking at me, the way his hands feel on my skin, the way he's pushing me to the edge of control.

The music crescendos, and he dips me again, his lips brushing against my ear. “I’m going to fuck you hard, Cora. Right fucking now.”

My gasp is swallowed by the applause, the clapping and cheers echoing in my ears as he pulls me upright. His grip on my hand is firm, unyielding, and I stumble slightly as he drags me off the dance floor.

“Orion,” I whisper, my voice trembling with a mix of desperation and anticipation.

“Not here,” he growls. He pulls me through the crowd, his stride purposeful, his presence commanding.

The heat between us is unbearable, the ache in my body undeniable. I can’t wait to feel him, to give myself over to him completely. He stops briefly, his hand tightening around mine as he glances back at me, his eyes dark with desire.

“Ready, little beauty?”

“Always, Sir,” I reply, my voice steady despite the storm raging inside me.

He smirks, a predatory glint in his eyes, and pulls me forward again, leading us to whatever private sanctuary he has in mind. The promise in his words, the fire in his touch—I’m ready.

The alcove is cramped—just deep enough for coats and scarves, not meant for this. My back presses against a fur-collared winter jacket, the scent of cedar and old wool thick in the air. The muffled orchestra still hums through the walls, the distant chatter of guests barely audible over my hammering pulse.

"There's no door," I hiss as Orion crowds me against the wall. His hands are already pulling at the slit of my dress, shoving the fabric up my thighs.

His teeth scrape my neck. "Then you'll have to be quiet." The thrill of his words knots low in my stomach.

A laugh echoes from the hall. Close.. "Orion—someone could—mmph!"

The belt from a trench coat whips free in his hands, the leather cool as he loops it around my wrists. I test the restraint instinctively, but he knots it tight—just shy of painful.

"What are you—" The ball gag clicks between my teeth before I finish, its smooth rubber filling my mouth. The strap pricks at the nape of my neck as he fastens it.

He spins me to face the wall, one hand flattening between my shoulder blades. "Don't move." His voice is a dark promise.

The rasp of his zipper is obscenely loud. Then his fingers dig into my hips, yanking me back onto him with one brutal thrust. I choke around the gag, my knees buckling—but he holds me up, his grip iron. He doesn't pause, doesn't give me time to adjust, just fucks me like he's claiming territory.

Fabric rustles. Footsteps. I stiffen. "God—someone's—" The words dissolve into muffled whimpers as he slams into me deeper.

His palm slaps over my gagged mouth. "Breathe through your nose, little beauty." His hips snap forward again, forcing a broken noise from my throat. The heat of him, the stretch—every thrust vibrates through me like a live wire.

The footsteps pause just beyond the alcove. My entire body tenses, but Orion doesn't stop. His teeth sink into my shoulder, stifling my gasp. The intruder hesitates—then walks on.

Laughter bubbles in my chest, wild and giddy. He's going to kill me. Destroy me. And I'm grinning around the gag.

My climax rips through me suddenly, violently. My legs give out entirely, but Orion doesn't let me fall. He pins me to the wall with his body, still buried inside me, his breath ragged at my ear.

"You're in for a long night, Cora."

His fingers twist in my hair, tilting my head back. I'm still trembling, still wrecked, but all I can think is: Good.

The ball gag slips from my mouth with a soft pop , and I gasp, my jaw aching slightly. Orion's blazer drapes over my shoulders, the fabric warm and heavy, hiding the fact that my wrists are still bound behind my back. His arm snakes around me, possessive and protective, as he guides me out of the alcove and into the glittering chaos of the dance hall. The music swells, the crowd oblivious to the storm raging between us.

"Keep walking," he murmurs, his voice low and commanding, his hand firm on my shoulder. I do as I'm told, my legs still shaky, my body humming with the aftermath of what just happened. The slit in my dress shifts with each step, the fabric sliding dangerously low. I feel the cool air on my skin before I realize what's happened.

"Orion," I hiss. My left breast is exposed, the curve of it catching the light. I can't cover myself—my hands are still tied. I glance up at him, my cheeks burning, but he doesn't miss a beat. His eyes smolder, dark and hungry, but he doesn't stop to fix my dress. Instead, he keeps walking, his grip on me unyielding.

"Let them look," he growls, his voice a rumble that sends a shiver down my spine. "They'll never have what's mine."

I bite my lip, a mix of embarrassment and arousal twisting in my stomach. His hand slides down to my ass, groping me firmly as we reach the exit. The doorman gives us a polite nod, his eyes flicking to my exposed skin for just a moment before he looks away. Orion doesn't care. He doesn't stop. He just keeps moving, his dominance radiating off him like heat.

The limo is waiting, the door already open. Orion helps me inside, his hand lingering on my hip as I slide across the leather seat. He follows, the door closing behind him with a soft thud. The partition is up, the driver already knowing better than to look.

Orion unzips his fly, the sound sharp in the quiet of the limo. His cock springs free, already hard, and he looks at me with that same predatory gaze. "Get to work," he says, his voice rough with need.

I don't hesitate. I lean forward, my lips brushing the tip of him, tasting the salt of his skin. His hand tangles in my hair, guiding me, but I don't need it. I'm determined to give him the best head he's ever had, even with my hands bound behind my back. I lick his balls, savoring the way he groans, his hips twitching as I take him deeper.

"Good girl," he murmurs, his voice thick with pleasure. His fingers tighten in my hair, urging me on. I take as much of him as I can, my throat working around his length until I'm choking, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. He lets out a low growl, his release hitting the back of my throat, and I swallow every drop, my body trembling with the effort.

When I pull back, he's watching me, his eyes dark and satisfied. He caresses my cheek, his thumb brushing over my lips. "Good girl," he says again, his voice softer now. "Now that the preamble is done, we can get to the main event."

I grin up at him, my body still humming with anticipation. "I'm not getting any sleep tonight, am I?" I ask, my voice teasing but happy.

He smirks, his hand sliding down to my thigh. “Not a chance, little beauty.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:42 am

The bedroom is dimly lit, the soft glow of the bedside lamp casting long shadows across the plush carpet. Orion's hands are firm as he secures the cuffs around my wrists and ankles, the leather cool against my skin. My arms are stretched wide, tethered to the metal hooks on either side of the wall, and my legs are spread, anchored to the floor. I'm exposed, vulnerable, and it sends a thrilling shiver down my spine.

He steps back, his eyes roaming over me with a look that makes my breath hitch. "Perfect," he murmurs, his voice low and possessive. I tilt my head, giving him a coy smile, my hips swaying ever so slightly to entice him. I hear the soft, slick sound of him stroking his cock, and I swallow hard, my body already on fire.

Orion circles me slowly, his boots clicking softly against the floor. His gaze feels like a physical touch, and I arch my back, my breasts pushing forward in silent invitation. "You're trying to take charge here," he says, his tone teasing but laced with dominance. His hand slides along my side, the warmth of his palm leaving a trail of heat.

"Oh no, Sir," I say, my voice dripping with playful defiance. "I would never."

He chuckles, a deep, rumbling sound that vibrates through me. "We'll see about that." He picks up the leather corset, the laces dangling like a promise. I tense as he wraps it around my waist, the material cool against my skin. He pulls the cords tight, each tug stealing my breath, each knot making my head spin. My ribs feel compressed, my chest rising and falling with labored breaths. The sass drains from me with every pull, replaced by a sweet, submissive haze.

He steps in front of me, his hands sliding up to cup my breasts. My nipples harden instantly under his touch. “You’re mine,” he growls, his voice vibrating through me as he squeezes. I let out a soft moan, my body leaning into his hands, craving more.

The hood comes next. He places it over my head, and the world goes dark. The sound of my own breathing is muffled, my heartbeat loud in my ears. He adjusts the gag, and I whimper around it, the sensation of being so utterly under his control sending waves of pleasure through me.

His hands return to my breasts, kneading and teasing. I moan into the gag, the sound catching in my throat as he pinches my nipples, tugging just hard enough to make me squirm. His mouth replaces his fingers, his lips hot against my skin. I gasp when his teeth graze my nipple, the sharpness making me cry out. He chuckles, the vibrations of it sending another shiver through me.

He steps back, and I can feel the heat, the weight of his gaze even though I can’t see him. “Are you ready for my cock?” His voice is close, right next to my ear, and I nod frantically, the sound muffled by the gag. “Then beg for it.”

I try to form the words, but they come out as choked, gagged pleas. “Pl... pls, Sir... g’ girl... wan’ it...” It’s barely coherent, but he understands me.

“Very well,” he murmurs, his voice dripping with satisfaction. “You’ve been such a good girl tonight. You deserve my cock.”

The moment Orion slides inside me, I’m gone. My body arches against the restraints, every nerve on fire as his vakutan cock fills me completely. The ridges along his shaft ripple against my walls, sending jolts of electricity through me with every movement. I scream into the gag, the sound muffled but raw, the vibrations of it reverberating through my chest. His thrusts are relentless, each one driving me closer to the edge, each one making my breath hitch and my vision blur.

The corset is too tight, the hood too suffocating, and I can barely draw in enough air to keep from passing out. But that's the point, isn't it? The lightheadedness only amplifies the pleasure, making me dizzy, making me feel like I'm floating. My world narrows to the sensation of him inside me, pressing against mine, the sound of his low growls in my ear. I'm lost, completely and utterly lost in him.

When the first orgasm hits, it's like being struck by lightning. My body convulses, shaking uncontrollably as waves of pleasure crash over me. I cry out, the sound choked and desperate, and I feel Orion's hands grip my hips, holding me steady as he drives into me with even more force. The second orgasm follows almost immediately, and then the third, each one more intense than the last. I'm sobbing now, tears streaming down my face, my body wrung out but still begging for more.

Just when I think I can't take it anymore, Orion's hand slides over the hood, covering the air holes. My breath catches in my throat, panic flooding me as I realize what he's doing. "You're not allowed to breathe until I cum," he growls, his voice dark and commanding. I nod frantically, my body trembling as I force myself to hold still, to take it.

I fuck myself on his cock, my hips moving desperately as I chase the edge of oblivion. The lack of air makes everything sharper, more intense, and I can feel myself teetering on the brink of passing out. But then he groans, his hands tightening on my hips as he finally comes, filling me with his warmth. He releases the hood, and I gasp, sucking in air like I've been drowning. My head spins, my body collapsing bonelessly as he pulls out of me.

Orion removes the hood and the gag, his hands gentle now as he strokes my face. "Good girl," he murmurs, his voice soft and warm. I can't speak, my body still trembling with aftershocks, but I lean into his touch, my eyes fluttering closed. He kisses me then, his lips claiming mine with a fierce possessiveness that makes my heart race all over again.

When he releases me from the restraints, I collapse into his arms, my body limp and spent. He gathers me close, cradling me in his lap as we settle onto the bed. His arms wrap around me, his warmth seeping into my skin as I curl up against his chest. I can hear the steady beat of his heart, feel the rise and fall of his chest with each breath.

“You’re mine,” he whispers, his voice low and full of promise. “Always mine.” I nod, too exhausted to argue, too content to do anything but melt into him. His hand strokes my hair, his touch soothing and gentle after the intensity of what we just shared. I close my eyes, letting myself drift in the safety of his embrace.

His arms tighten around me, the heat of his body seeping into mine as I trace patterns along the edge of his scales. They’re smooth under my fingertips, ridged just enough to remind me of the alien strength coiled beneath. I tilt my head back, catching the faint glow of his purple eyes in the dim light.

“Will we go to your homeworld someday?” I ask, my voice soft, almost tentative. The idea of seeing where he comes from, of stepping into a world so alien yet so much a part of him, feels like a dream I’m afraid to voice too loudly.

He hums, a low, thoughtful sound that rumbles through his chest and into me. “Anything’s possible,” he says, his tone easy, but there’s a weight to it, a promise. His hand strokes my hair, fingers threading through the strands. “We’ve got the star’s own time to decide.”

I smile, though it’s small, a little fragile. “The star’s own time,” I repeat, testing the phrase on my tongue. It feels poetic, bigger than us, and I like the way it sounds. “What does that even mean?”

“It means,” he says, leaning down to brush his lips against my forehead, “that I’ll love you forever. Until the stars lose their shine. And even beyond that.”

I press closer, my cheek against his chest. His heartbeat is steady, a rhythm I’ve come

to know as well as my own. “That’s... a really long time,” I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Not long enough,” he replies, his mouth quirking into that half-smirk I’ve come to adore. “Not for what I feel for you.”

I laugh, the sound light and airy, even as my chest feels like it might burst. “You’re such a sap,” I tease, poking him lightly in the side. He catches my hand effortlessly, bringing it to his lips to press a kiss to my knuckles.

“Only for you,” he says, rough, and I swear I can feel it in my bones.

I sigh, melting into him completely. “I can’t believe I wrote the perfect man in my diary,” I say, my voice muffled against his chest. “And then he came true.”

His chuckle is warm, his fingers tilting my chin up so he can meet my eyes. “You wrote about me before you even knew I existed?”

“Well, not you specifically,” I say, my cheeks heating. “Just... what I wanted. Tall. Protective. Challenging but supportive. Someone who’d love me the way I needed to be loved.” I pause, my smile turning shy. “And then there you were. Like you’d stepped right out of my imagination.”

His expression softens, something tender and fierce all at once. “You’re my perfect match too, Cora,” he says, his voice wrapping around me like a blanket. “Every part of you.”

I bury my face in his chest again, my heart so full it feels like it might overflow. “Keep saying things like that,” I mumble, “and I’ll never let you go.”

“Good,” he says, his arms tightening around me. “Because I’m not planning on going anywhere.”