

# Gorlak

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## Yukon Territory - Earth Year 2203

As the last of the caribou meat was packed in the freezer, Michael chirped me.

“Riley, I have something you need to see.” There was concern in his voice. I’d never heard that before, not in over two hundred years — ancient alien AIs, go figure.

“What is it?”

“US Senate hearings about the Mars rescue.”

Tossing aside the freezer mitts, I settled in to watch the creep show. Jasper and Jinks sat next to me on the couch. The boys were less interested in the video feed than my popcorn. They like it with extra butter. I tossed them each a kernel, snatched mid-flight, tails wagging their approval.

Breaking News splash-screen flashed; everything is breaking news to them. Dateline Washington DC. I popped a beer.

“Senator, we understand and appreciate your wanting to sort this out, but this was not a private corporation operation. Since we are investor-supported, there would be no benefit to having a secret base on Mars. If there were, that secret wouldn’t last very long. It’s plain to us; this was a military operation. The only voice communication recorded was from a man who

stated his name was Commander Jones. We don't have military rank in our companies."

I smiled at that. Commander Jones had been Michael's voice.

Senator Graddon leaned forward, fluffed up. "Mr. Franklin, as Chairman of the Mars Oversight Committee, I would know if there was a clandestine military base or operation of that type on Mars. There are exactly three American military officers stationed there. None of them are named Jones. That voice was American or Canadian. If your follow-on rescue team hadn't walked all over the scene, we might have recovered some forensic evidence or at least footprints. AND, might I point out, the air tanks and storage crates left behind by the unknown... ah, rescuers were your company's design. How do you explain that?"

"Sir, my company has sold tens of thousands of those to hundreds of companies for use in space and here on Earth, including to the government. As for the rescue team we sent out, we were more concerned with aiding the stranded geology team, not conducting a scientific survey. I'm sure you remember three people had already lost their lives in that accident."

"The Chair recognizes the Senator from Iowa. Senator Daniels, you have ten minutes."

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Franklin, your corporation has the largest operation on Mars, and you’re telling us you have no idea who or how or from where this remote assistance was launched? The American people and I find that hard to believe.”

“Madam Senator, as I have stated, my company had nothing to do with it. If we had, we would have completed the rescue instead of stabilizing the vehicles and dumping supplies, then disappearing. There would have been no purpose for us to carry out an operation like this. Satellite imagery didn’t show any other vehicles near the accident site. That supply dump just appeared, as if from nowhere. If any of our companies possessed that technology, we surely wouldn’t hide it.”

“And, sir, you have no idea who might have carried out the operation?”

This was getting boring. How many times were they going to ask the same question in ten different ways? “Jasper! Catch!” Launching into the air, his powerful jaws snapped at the flying kernel. “Yeah, you still got it, boy. Jinks, your turn.”

My ears perked up when the Mars Corp president said, “Senator, we may have some idea about the who.”

Senator Daniel’s voice dripped with disdain. “Well, would you be so kind as to share that information with us?”

“Ma’am, that information is classified.”

“Classified by whom, Mr. Franklin? I remind you; you are here by subpoena and have been sworn in for these proceedings.”

“Classified by the FSA, the Federal Security Administration, ma’am.” A flurry of off-mic side conversations fluttered among the senators. The politicians could smell a juicy sound bite. They all wanted to be the one to pull the cork. A recess was called.

Since this was recorded, I didn’t have to sit through what must have been an hour or longer tête-à-tête. I don’t see how people can watch these circuses. When the hearing resumed, an aide handed the Chairperson a document. The Senator waved it for the cameras.

“Mr. Franklin, I have here a classification release that permits you, within the bounds of the restrictions so stated, to answer the Senator’s question.”

Another aide handed copies to those undergoing inquisition and to their army of lawyers behind them. After looking over the document, Mr. Franklin’s lead attorney covered the microphone with one hand and used the other one to mask whispered advice to his client.

As the lawyer sat back, Mr. Franklin released his bomb. “Senator, we believe the operation was carried out by the same organization as the one seen on Mars back in 2028. The suit,

worn by the only person at the rescue, matched the worn by those who have been called the Mars Collectors.”

Oh, crap. Why can't people do what they're told? Those stranded geologists were supposed to have turned off their cameras. That had been the deal.

“Mr. Franklin, we have seen that video. It was almost pitch black. You can't see anything in those shots.”

“Senator, my company processed the raw footage you saw. Starlight and the slight sunlight reflected from Phobos were enough to bring out more detail. After processing the video, we turned it over to the FSA. It was immediately classified as top secret. The person in the footage is definitely a human. A female human. Body kinetic analysis in the video verified that.”

“And you couldn't tell who it was? Didn't see a face?”

The corporation lawyer leaned in for another whispered conference before Mr. Franklin answered. “Ma'am, by the terms of this disclosure agreement, I can't answer any more questions beyond what I have already shared.” I turned off the monkey show. Sometimes I wonder how human I really am.

“Riley, if they pursue this, there are sufficient public surveillance videos for a high probability match leading to you. I can try to dig into those primitive AIs, but the US government has quite a few off-line quantum computers. I can't be sure to get them all.”

“Well, at least they didn’t get a video of my ship. That would have scared the holy crap out of them. I think we need to implement Operation Clean House immediately.”

“That will be your decision. You have options available.”

Sure, all good with him. I was in the hot seat while he was four trillion miles away in the Oort Cloud, tucked in aboard our station.

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“Riley, we have visitors. The FSA matched your body kinetics from public videos to a ninety-three percent probability.”

“Here? Did our drones pick them up?”

“Relax, they’re still in town. Two agents. They’re an advance team sent to surveil the area before the full squad arrives. I’ve got mini-drones shadowing them.”

“Are they sanctioned by the Canadians?”

“No, they’re presenting themselves as hunters. They’ve booked a room at the hotel.

“So, a covert op. What sort of weapons? Do you have them IDed?”

“They brought hunting rifles, no ammo for those. Each is carrying a SW 403E handgun. They also packed a tranq gun. I’m sending you their FSA dossiers and other personal information.”

“Since their handguns are E-series, can you disable them?”

“Certainly, but I haven’t yet.”

“Well, we’ve discussed this. I can wait it out here, leave, or confront them. I hate to leave, and waiting doesn’t suit me. Besides, it’ll take time for the bots to sanitize what’s in and under my cabin. Did the Americans make any inquiries to the Canadian government?”

“No. Things are still frosty between the two countries since that trade dust-up. I doubt the US State Department will even listen to the FSA about breaching the border for quite some time. So, extradition proceedings are not in the cards. The Canadian public would scream bloody murder if one of their citizens was handed over without a lengthy due process. I doubt they know you were a US citizen two hundred years ago.”

“Let’s see: it’s 3 p.m. now. After I clean up, I can make the dinner hour at the hotel. Want to tag along?”

“I’ll be there, or rather a few of my combat drones will.”

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## **Klondike Hotel**

“Hello, Frank. Danny. How are your steaks?” Uninvited, I took a seat at their table. “I heard you were looking for me. Riley, Riley Wilson.” I stuck out my hand to shake whatever they might offer. Nothing was forthcoming. “Come on, fellas. Don’t

make this harder than it needs to be. What can I do for you? Frank? Danny? Anything ring a bell? I'd use your fake names, but that would be too easy." I let that stew in their guts for a few seconds. "Now, how can I help the FSA?" They could either deny everything or make a play to impress their bosses. It proved to be the latter.

"Ms. Wilson, if you would step outside with us, we can discuss this more openly. We would like your cooperation and some information."

"Sure, sure. But finish your meal. I might get something myself."

I motioned to Amy. "I'll have the filet, rare, just walk it by the stove... and lobster scampi, scattered potatoes, and a Greek salad... oh, and a bottle of white. You boys want anything to drink? Hmm...I suppose not, since you're on duty. Just one glass, please, Amy. These gentlemen are buying."

At two hundred forty years old, I know how to work a table. I wanted them unsure, antsy, and confused. Leaning back, I baited my trap.

"It's been so long since I've been entertained by such distinguished gentlemen from south of the border. Do you still have that president... Oh, what's his name? I don't follow the news much." Amy placed my salad in front of me. "You boys be sure to leave a big tip. Amy has two kids to support."

I stabbed my salad repeatedly, then poked the impaled wad of greens into my mouth, all dainty and ladylike. This would be my persona tonight. I wanted them to think, Surely, this idiot woman is not who we're looking for. Chewing open-mouthed like a cow, I pointed my dripping, loaded fork at Frank. "How's the wife and kids? Tommy's becoming quite a hitter on his baseball team... What's the name?... Oh yeah, the Pirates. And speaking of hitting, Danny, I don't see how you can afford to keep your girlfriend on the side in that apartment, having a wife and all." I twirled my fork for effect. "You're not taking bribes, are you? That wouldn't look too good on the ol' resume, ya know."

"Ms. Wilson—"

"Puh-leeze, call me Riley. I enjoy being on a first-name basis. We don't use last names up here; they smack of too much civilization. People want to get away from all that nonsense." Between shoveled bites, my fork continued to double as a conductor's baton.

"Ms. Wilson. Let's dispense with the chatter. Veiled threats will not work. You're in quite a bit of trouble. We might be able to help you."

I gave them my toothiest smile, hoping there were bits of black olive stuck in my front teeth—you can't get the real Greek olives up here.

“And they say chivalry is dead. Well, here’s proof positive it’s not.” Craning my neck, I shouted, “Amy, bring my new friends a whiskey. The quality stuff from the bar, not that watered-down hair tonic you keep in the kitchen.” Looking back to the men, I asked, “On the rocks or straight up? Never mind. You guys look like straight men... Oops, sorry, Frank. I forgot.”

The dining room was half full—I had everyone’s attention with that outburst. Frank was officially, unequivocally pissed. As best he could to hide it, he drew his weapon, showing it to me just above the table’s edge. In a very measured and soft voice, he intoned, “Ms. Wilson, we are leaving, and you are going with us whether you like it or not. Now get up slowly and walk to the door. I will not repeat myself.”

“No, thank you. I haven’t had my dinner yet. Perhaps afterward? Danny, would you be so kind as to pass the salt?” From their personal files, I learned they had limited hand-to-hand training, but that was years ago. With my feet hooked around a leg of each of their chairs, I could whip their asses before they hit the floor. Two hundred years gives you a long time to master martial arts. It’s great for exercise and mental discipline.

“Ms. Wilson—”

“What, you gonna shoot everybody in here? I don’t think so. Nice gun, but mine’s bigger.” With that, I drew out my

skinning knife from its thigh sheath. Danny jerked back. “Relax, boys. It’s just a steak knife. Oh, and here it comes. Smells delicious. Thanks, Amy. My friends here have guns under the table.”

From five feet away, Amy tossed back over her shoulder, “Around here, who don’t?”

“See there, boys? Guns aren’t a big deal here, so put them away before you get hurt.” For show, I squinted one eye, aiming with my fork, casting about the room. “I count six men and two women, no, three packing heat. Be careful, or you’ll find your heads mounted on someone’s wall.” With my coldest hooded stare, I leaned forward, advising them, “Finish your dinner, then we talk.” Frank holstered his impotent weapon. Since Michael had done his job, all it was good for was cracking walnuts.

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“Danny!... Frank!... Wake up!”

The pair’s snoring was upsetting to Jasper and Jinks. I squatted down, gave each man a shake. They were coming around slowly, sitting on the cold ground, backs propped against a large tree. Rousing, they found their hands manacled to their feet by short chains. Their belongings were in a pile between us. The IDs were fake but the best the government could manufacture. Their wallets held the usual receipts, cash, credit cards—the corporate expense account type. No photos.

The pocket-sized notebooks were interesting—names, dates, cryptic entries, probably sloppy personal codes.

Frank spoke first. “Where are we?”

“You’re a smart guy, Frank. Look around. Where do you think you are?”

“The woods.”

“In the Yukon, we call it the way-out as in way out in the middle of nowhere.”

“You’re in a lot more trouble than you were before. Kidnapping federal agents is a crime punishable by life imprisonment.”

“Frank, what’s the last thing you remember?”

“We were following you out the back door of the restaurant. You must have drugged us. Got that waitress to put something in our food.”

“Frank, Frank, Frank. You already had your food by the time I arrived. So that’s a no. And you didn’t drink the whiskey. We sat together for thirty minutes before we left, as you recall.”

“Well, whatever you did, it’s still kidnapping, and you’re going to jail. People know where we are. Powerful people.”

“Frank, you haven’t been kidnapped.”

“Well, little girl, what do you call it?”

“Me? Let’s see... I call it a Canadian citizen detaining two rogue foreign agents. That’s what you are, aren’t you? I mean, if you’re caught, your government will call you that, won’t they? Can you imagine the stink it would cause if the Canadian government thought you were here, authorized by the FSA, to capture one of their citizens? Your government would have to disavow all knowledge of your actions, hence rogue agents, off the reservation, that sort of thing. You’d be the ones in prison, not me. A Canadian prison. They’re nicer than yours, I hear.”

“You don’t have any proof, so get off your high horse and release us.”

“Proof? How about all this?” I poked at the pile in front of me. “Let’s see... Illegal handguns, fake IDs, handcuffs, and these little notebooks full of your scribbles. I’m sure there’s more back in your hotel room, like that little tranq gun... another illegal weapon, by the way. So, yeah, it looks like prison and no pension for you two. Maybe the public defender can get you a lighter sentence, though I doubt they’ll try very hard to defend two big brutes against a helpless young woman.”

Danny fidgeted, panic starting to set in—my target. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Danny? You got anything to say? No?”

Glancing left and right, he took in my boys. With me squatting, they towered over me, making them appear much

bigger than they really were. I folded my arms over my knees to lean in closer. "Meet Jasper and Jinks, my wolves. They're almost trained." Danny tested his restraints, shifting his weight, remaining silent. "Okay, fellas. I want some information. Make it easy on yourselves. Isn't that what you told me? If I leave you here, even unshackled, you'll die, lost in the wilderness, your bodies eaten up by the unsavory critters we have in these parts. You'll be worm dirt by Wednesday."

Frank blurted angrily, "We're not telling you anything, and I don't think you have the guts to leave us here. So cut the act. End this charade." With his last words, Frank leaned forward aggressively. Jasper and Jinks didn't like that, not one bit. They exposed gleaming teeth, projected a low, rolling growl in stereo. Frank fell back heavily.

"You were saying?"

Frank was the leader here. Danny was scared spitless. I sat quietly, continuing to stir the pile of their personal things, not making eye contact. For some people, silence has its own terror. I was betting Danny was that sort. I waited as he percolated in the chill air, forehead sweating, moisture trickling down his face. Danny's timer went off.

"Jasper, Jinks, home." They turned in unison, trotting off.

"So, we're close to your cabin. Thanks for that information." Frank was feeling smug.

“You don’t know much about wolves, do you, Frank? But, if that’s what you want to believe, go ahead.” They had no idea how far away my cabin was. “I’d like to introduce you to another friend of mine. I sent the boys away because they don’t enjoy being around him. Gives them the frights.” I let them absorb that for a minute.

Frank broke the silence. “Well, tell your accomplice they’ll be charged with kidnapping too.”

“Oh, I don’t think anyone will find him. He’s not from around here.” Behind me, the bushes and branches rustled. The most god-awful odor rose, permeating the air. I pretended not to notice it.

Danny spoke. “What’s that smell?”

“That’s my friend, Gorlak. It’s the best approximation I can make of his proper name, but he answers to it.”

The intervening branches moved aside, snapping as an eight-foot-tall, hideous beast emerged—hairy spider legs, a bulbous, spiky center mass, slimy green tentacles waving in the air. His slobbering mouth exposed a double row of goo-dripping teeth. I almost gagged at the aroma as he settled himself next to me. Swallowing my gorge, I noticed both men had pissed themselves. “Gorlak is from a planet not too far from here... Well, relatively speaking. He’s considered quite handsome to others of his species. Anyway, I promised him a treat.” I pointed. “Take that one.”

The globular horror snatched up a screaming Frank, making a fast retreat further into the trees. But not so far Danny and I couldn't hear Frank's screams suddenly go silent, replaced by the sound of crunching bones and slobbering feasting on flesh. Then, in the dark silence, Frank's bloody manacles landed at Danny's feet.

"We still have a few minutes. Anything to say?"

Gasping, he looked up. "I'll tell you anything, everything! Just keep that thing away from me," he wailed. "I don't want to die."

I leaned in. "Danny, I don't want you to die either, and you won't if you cooperate. I have two questions. Who sent you? Are there more coming? See, easy questions."

Danny's eyes were wide as coffee saucers as his breath came in gasps, threatening hyperventilation. "FSA sent us. Squad on the way... six men... two days... Thursday... night assault... your cabin... Oh God, oh God, oh God!"

"Okay, calm down, Danny. You're doing fine. As for who, I meant specifically, a name. You can tell me that, can't you? Better hurry, Danny. We need to be moving along. I can hold off Gorlak for only so long. He loves the juicy texture of humans and the crunchiness of the bones... especially the bones. But it gives him the most god-awful gas if he eats more than one."

“Anderson, it was Anderson... George Anderson, chief of covert ops, in Washington.” A small twig snapped—Danny fainted.

“Michael, give him some sleepy-sleep, and keep them on ice until we get back to Earth. Throw them in the auto-doc to remove the chafe marks from the shackles. If you find any cancer, clean that up too.”

Before leaving the ship’s arboretum, I bagged up their belongings. The rancid-acid fumes from that costumed, rubber-coated bot were still punching at my gag reflex.

“Michael, next time, tone it down a little. That was the most disgusting thing I’ve ever smelled. What was that?”

“My own mixture of musk amines and esters, with Limburger cheese extract for flavoring, cooked over low heat for thirty minutes. I’m quite proud of its effectiveness.”

“Where did you come up with that monster design?”

“It’s a blend from old science fiction movies of the 1950s and 60s. Can’t beat Hollywood for horror. Gorlak is primarily a mix of monsters from *The Angry Red Planet* and *Them*, both classics in my book.”

“Well, put him on ice. I don’t want him stinking up my ship.”

“So, what’s next?”

“Crank up the environmentalals on the station. I’ll be there in a few days. First, I want to pay Mr. George Anderson a visit to convey my disappointment in his lack of manners, then we can go anywhere we want. There are a few aliens referenced in your library I’d like to meet. The heat should be off here in a few centuries. I don’t want to stay away from home forever.”