



HORDE BRIDE

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HORDE BRIDE

VAHKING HORDE

BOOK 2

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DESCRIPTION

Life is about survival—not romance—but her Vahking Prince never got the memo.

While I'm searching for my missing brother, I find myself in a dark alley with the wrong people. Too bad the hero that saves me is no better.

He thinks he can win me over with sweet words, but I show him that I'm a girl of action... by ditching his ass.

Unfortunately, fate isn't easy to ignore. The Vahking Prince Rune's blood sang for me, and now I'm in his sights.

My family and my past keep me away from others, but Rune makes me forget all the lessons I learned to protect myself. Dammit.

Now, I'm starting to see there is only one destiny for me—at his side.

Will Rune be the one man who can break into my stone heart... **or will my past push him away, too?**



CHAPTER 1

NORAH STARED AT THE VIDSCREEN, watching the stars fly past in a kaleidoscopic-streaked tunnel as the starship churned through hyperspace. She couldn't keep her eyes from staring at the view spread before her.

"Refreshment, ma'am?" She turned to face the cylindrical body of a flight attendant robot. One of its modular appendages bore a tray filled with delicately made cocktails all meant for human ingestion.

"No, thank you." She smiled with her denial. Did it matter if she smiled at a robot? She wasn't sure, but it felt natural, so she rolled with it. "I understand we'll be reaching Verkoon soon enough."

"In approximately ten Earth minutes. It's difficult to measure precise time in hyperspace travel."

"I understand."

"Are you certain you do not wish for a cocktail? The price is waived for all human women here for potential Blood Song."

She let out a tired sigh.

"That's just it, my robust robotic friend. I'm not here to be matched up with a giant horned alien whose forebears visited Earth and inspired the entire Viking culture." She shrugged.

"Therefore, I pay for my own drinks. I can wait until we arrive on Verkoon instead of paying the exorbitant prices here."

"As you wish, ma'am." The robot rolled along on a single globular wheel beneath its chassis. She wished she *were* on her way to meet up with a sexy alien prince or something like that.

She was actually on her way to find a man but not for dating purposes. She searched for her kid brother, Lyle. Good for nothing Lyle. Lyle the thief, the swindler, the grifter. But he was also Lyle the brother, and no way was she going to let him get into even worse trouble.

Not only that, but Lyle had stolen their grandparents' coin collection. Those rare coins were valuable in more ways than one. They were made of precious metals and enough of a collector's item to increase their worth beyond their face value.

But more than monetary value, she treasured the coins for their connection to her dearly departed grandfather. It would kill him to know Lyle had taken them, and he was already one step toward death's door.

She looked around the sleek cabin, shaking her head ruefully at all of the Earth women there. The Vahking had similar fertility issues to the Preor and were in need of females of other species to prevent population decline.

At first, the Vahking had invaded Earth and simply kidnapped the women they desired. But thanks to a peace deal brokered in part by the Preor, the raids were no longer necessary. There was little shortage of women looking to sign up for the chance to match with a Vahking.

The stars outside ceased to streak as the starship experienced a mild turbulence. Her ears popped, and suddenly she stared out at the stars as normal pinpricks of twinkling light.

She gathered her one carry-on bag—traveling light for speed—and joined the milling throng of humanity on their way toward the exit. The ship approached the forest moon of Verkoon, a green and blue ball orbiting the purple, yellow, and black gas giant that spawned the satellite.

Norah watched as they vectored in toward the planet. Thanks to inertial dampening tech, she didn't even feel it when they entered the moon's atmosphere.

The other women talked eagerly to each other, but she felt like an outsider, a stranger. She wasn't here looking for love. This

was a family matter, and once she completed her task she would return home—gladly.

The ship settled onto the tarmac at the starport. She filtered out with the rest, until she reached a bridge connecting the ship to the starport terminal.

Norah inhaled deeply, tasting crisp air with a tang of ozone. All around the starport stood great pine forests, their tips nearing a hundred feet tall. Terraforming Earthlings had changed Verkoon's climate to be more habitable. As part of the peace accords with the Vahking, the moon was passed over to their people.

The starport struck Norah as being rather on the small side, which made sense. It was one of a handful of structures on the planet, including the newly rising longhouse.

She had heard the longhouse was enormous, but had only seen poorly taken pictures of it on news sites.

A tall, horned Vahking woman waved down the humans as they entered the main terminal. Norah knew they weren't looking for her to join the tour, however, and lagged behind the main glut.

Her eyes rose to the ceiling, a massive translucent dome that allowed a view of the blue beyond. White fluffy clouds skirted across the pristine azure of Verkoon's skies.

This planet is beautiful. It would be a nice place to visit—if I were on a vacation instead of trying to find my no-good brother.

The Vahking woman led her charges along. She noticed with chagrin they were being led past customs and security. It made her think maybe she should have tagged along with them. Instead, she made her way for the customs agent, so to speak.

She swallowed the lump in her throat as she approached the Vahking male standing by the security gate. His piercing green eyes and long, flowing white hair made him seem like something out of a fantasy novel.

His leather garments bore a striking resemblance to those worn by Earth Vikings, which made sense given the cultural

exchange. But a touch here and there reminded her of their advanced tech. His energy pistol was made of bone and wood as much as metal, but she knew it was just as deadly as the standard variety.

“Name,” he growled.

“Norah Tennyson,” she said.

He grunted. “Like the poet?”

“Um, sure,” she said. “Full disclosure, I’ve never read anything by him.”

“You should. Out of all the Earth writers, he strikes me as particularly sublime. Identification please.”

“I didn’t know you guys read books.”

He took her ID with a sour expression. “We are intelligent beings, just like you humans.”

Her hand went in front of her mouth as she gasped. “Oh god, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.”

He grunted and handed her back her ID. “What’s your business here on Verkoon?”

“I’m here to visit my brother.”

His brows climbed high on his face until they nestled under his horns. “Your brother? He is a Vahking?”

His incredulity was palpable as the air before a storm.

“No, of course not,” she said, letting out what she hoped was a playfully girlish giggle. “That’s so silly. He’s a human, of course. He works for FreeJax construction.”

“Oh. And is your brother here to meet you?”

“No, he’s not.”

“Why not? You’ve come a long way from Earth. Why is he not here to meet with you?”

She sighed. “I’m not a spy.”

“Spy?” His eyes narrowed. “Who said anything about a spy?”

“I didn’t mean...” I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Look, my brother isn’t here because he doesn’t know I’m coming. I want to surprise him.”

The guard relaxed almost imperceptibly. “Hmm. I suppose that makes sense. Do you have any contraband on you?”

“No, of course not,” I said. “I only have my overnight bag.”

“What are the contents of this ‘overnight’ bag?”

“You know, the usual. Clothes, toiletries, that sort of thing. You know they scanned everything and searched it before we left Earth. Right?”

He grunted and stood to the side. “We hope you enjoy your stay on Verkoon. I will remind you that you are under our laws, not your own. Mind your business and your manners.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind, thanks so much.”

Wow, she mouthed on the way past him. In a few more steps, she would be outside the terminal. Then she realized that she had no idea where to look for her brother. It wasn’t like he’d left a forwarding address.

She figured the construction crews probably bunked close together. It would probably be best to go and check the work site and see if she could find him. Maybe she’d even spot Lyle at work and save herself a lot of grief, not to mention time.

Norah exited the terminal and stopped to gape in awe at the construction site on a distant hillside. The longhouse overlooked a freshwater sea, or at least it would... once it was finished.

At the moment, it was little more than scaffolding and a buttress, but she could see the eventual form it would take. It was going to be a grand structure indeed.

She checked her dwindling supply of credits and sighed. It looked like a long walk, but she had little choice. She couldn’t afford to hire a ride.

It took the better part of an hour and a half of walking down the road to reach the outskirts of the pop-up city, which had sprung up around the construction site. The work crews all

needed places to live, as well as goods and services. The pop-up settlement had virtually everything they might need as well as basic colonization supplies. It was rumored the Vahking horde wanted at least some people to settle permanently on the moon.

It was certainly a lovely place. She loved the fresh, untainted air. No species had ever burned fossil fuels in this atmosphere, nor would they. Thanks to being protected by the gravity well of the nearby gas giant, Verkoon was nearly invulnerable to meteors or asteroid strikes.

It had four seasons and plenty of good, fertile soil from past volcanic history to support a large number of people. She had no intention of being one of them, though. As soon as she found Lyle, she intended to return to Earth.

Lyle, you'd better not have sold those coins already or I'm going to wring your neck.

Norah soon discovered that she couldn't even get close to the construction site due to heavy security. The Vahking horde had their enemies, and she supposed it might be dangerous for civilians to wander around the construction site.

Undeterred, she began asking the townsfolk about Lyle. Unfortunately, her brother looked like a lot of other human construction workers. The aliens she asked could barely tell humans apart to begin with.

“Hey, are you looking for Lyle Ten-sun?”

She turned to find a slinky-looking reptilian alien standing before her. “Lyle Tennyson,” she corrected. “Yes, I am. Do you know him?”

“Yes,” he said. She was glad she'd taken the Galactic Basic language lessons. It made her task a lot easier. “Yes, I know Lyle. He is not a close friend, but I work with him.”

“Can you tell me where to find him?”

The lizard man spread his hands. “I can take you to him.”

“Really? I can pay you...”

She fumbled for her creditstick, but he held his hand up.

“Oh no, is free. Happy to help. It’s all of us against the Vahking, yes?”

“Um, sure,” she said, falling into step behind the alien. “So, what should I call you?”

“Oh, my name is unpronounceable,” he replied smoothly.
“Here, come this way.”

“So, how do you know my broth—” A hand closed over her mouth and dragged her into darkness.

Well, shit.



CHAPTER 2

RUNE STOOD in the foreman's office, a temporary structure whose thin metal walls could ill keep out the sounds of construction going on outside. Rune had to remember to keep from standing up too straight, or his horns would puncture the roof.

He listened patiently as Foreman Lupta rambled on and on about the delays the project had suffered and how much the male had endured trying to deal with Rune's "unreasonable" demands.

"Just this morning," the blue-faced, robust alien sputtered. "You come to my job site and tell me that we're going with marble wall panels as well as flooring? Do you have any idea how much that sets us back?"

Rune crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged. "If you're referring to our budget, it's not anything you need to worry about. If you are concerned that the task takes too long, let me remind you of this longhouse's importance to my people. It is literally a matter of life or death to us. Money is no object when it comes to the longhouse."

Lupta sighed. "Maybe for you, but I have a reputation to uphold. You've already forced me to go way, way over our estimate because of your crazy ideas. This is more like a luxury resort than a traditional Vahking longhouse."

"Exactly," Rune said with a conviction that forestalled any further complaints from the foreman. "Others may be bound by traditional ways of thinking. My brother and my father

certainly had that problem. Me? I prefer to be more creative in my interpretations of history.”

“Are you talking about when you tried to seize the throne for yourself?”

“I don’t know why a member of your species is trying to talk about internal Vahking politics, but I assure you that anything I did was done for the good of the horde and not to its detriment.”

“Is that why your father banished you to this moon?” Lupta drawled.

“Banished?” Rune’s tone took on a harsher element. The room seemed to darken along with his mood. “I might be more relaxed than others of my ilk, but I assure you, Lupta, you will not speak to me in such a manner without consequence.”

“Your pardon, Prince Rune.” He bowed his head. “It won’t happen again. I’ll get the men working on the install for the marble just like you want.”

“Good—”

The door to the trailer burst open, and a four-armed, purple-skinned alien entered. Its face looked like a cross between a mosquito and a spider with compound eyes that betrayed no emotion. It was dressed in a green silken suit in the latest business fashion.

“When I heard that the prince himself was on the site, I had to come and say hello.” The four-armed alien rushed across the floor and offered his hands. Rune was familiar with the human custom of shaking hands upon greeting but was taken aback to see the alien utilizing the custom.

“Nice to meet you, Prince,” the alien took Rune’s hand in two of its own.

“Nice to meet you...”

“Oh, please forgive my manners.” The alien had a grating voice, which sounded almost as if it were trying to tell a joke without being obvious. “My name is Kovik Yenk. I am pleased

as can be that you've chosen my company, FreeJax, to build your longhouse."

"Well, all of the other bids mysteriously withdrew their estimates," Rune grumbled sourly. "So, it wasn't as if we had any choice."

"Funny thing, but you know, not everyone has the balls to build on a forest moon like this one."

Rune smirked. "Yes, funny thing about all of that. One would almost think they had been threatened into withdrawing their bids."

"*Threatened?*" Yenk said, exaggeratingly aghast. "That's just terrible! I hadn't heard that at all. What sort of evidence have you seen that this is what happened?"

Rune chuckled. He found Yenk amusing. The wannabe master criminal thought himself far cleverer than he actually was in reality.

"It was nice speaking with you, Yenk." Rune inclined his head in a slight bow out of respect. "If you'll excuse me, I must get going."

"Always a pleasure, my prince," Yenk said. "If you need anything at all—women, drugs, rare vintages, artifacts—just let one of my underlings know and it will work its way up the grapevine, if you know what I mean." The male winked.

"That's quite kind of you, but I believe myself to be in no need of any of those things. Good day, Yenk."

He left the office and stepped out into the afternoon sun. The wind sighed through the limbs of the forest and stirred his hair slightly. He smoothed it back out of his eyes and surveyed the construction site.

In his mind, he didn't see the scaffolding and metal skeleton of the building. He could see it as if it were already completed, and it was glorious.

I know my father banished me here in order to teach me humility. But I will teach him a thing or two. I will make this the greatest possible matchmaking lodge experience the

galaxy has ever known. Not even the Preor will be able to hold a candle to us once it is done.

Rune didn't kid himself. He knew it would be a very long time before his father Odyn trusted him again. If, indeed, the old man ever did once more.

But Rune didn't really want the throne. He hadn't been bitter when it turned out that Thor ascended to be king after all of his schemes went awry. At the time, Rune had tried to stop the union with Adeline because he truly believed Thor was unworthy of the burden of kingship.

The throne. They think I want the throne. Bah. His lips twisted into a wide smile. Do they have any idea how much power I would have to give up in order to be king?

Rune wielded more influence in his own ways, through unofficial channels. He supported his brother Thor in his own unique way and had for years.

In the process, he'd amassed a good deal of behind-the-scenes influence in the form of favors and dark secrets. All of that could easily be wielded by a prince's hand, but not so much by a king's.

He took one last look at the construction site and then turned to take the road back to the settlement below. The air came off the sea and stirred his senses. Part of him longed to take the sailboat out on those pristine aquamarine waves, their frothy tops kissed with golden sunlight.

Later, perhaps.

He could have summoned an air car, but the weather was so nice Rune decided to stroll back to town instead. It had really become a more or less permanent settlement at this point, which was all well and good. The longhouse would be in service for a long time, and having a city close at hand would ease the burden on services the Vahking had to provide the potentials.

I wonder if at some point a woman might come who causes my blood to sing.

Rune scowled and banished the rogue thought. He wasn't here for matchmaking, though it was a major concern of the lodge. He had a job to do, a task to complete, and he intended to do so better than anyone else could possibly manage. Rune knew that his father expected petulance and mutiny.

Instead, Odyn would get something who absolutely floored him—a monument to Vahking power and hospitality all rolled into one.

Unlike many of my Vahking brethren, I do not scoff at the human indulgences of massages, spas, or seagrass peels. My skin has never glowed so much. The longhouse will be a place where the Earth women can completely relax and be at ease, even if they are not matched.

That last bit was important, he knew. Not every human woman would be matched to a Vahking warrior. That was just the way it was. But those unmatched women would then return to Earth and tell everyone about the fabulous and luxurious longhouse. Women who didn't even want to join the matchmaking would come just for the experience the longhouse offered.

And if they caused a male's blood to sing, well, the longhouse had served its purpose in any event. Hadn't it?

He thought himself rather clever.

You'll see, Father. I do have something to offer. I would not have made a good king—far too boring for my tastes—but I can contribute to the horde as well or better than a monarch. I can give our people a legacy. I can continue our reign of terror across the cosmos.

He passed into the outskirts of the settlement, where the less affluent denizens chose to dwell. His thoughts drifted so far away into the ether he almost missed the sound.

A woman's scream, cut off mid-shout.

Rune's senses instantly came to life. No longer distracted, he used his innate Vahking ability to locate electrical impulses—such as those given off by living beings.

He felt the woman had been close by. *No sign of any Vahking security forces anywhere*, he thought glumly to himself. It was entirely too nice of a day to go lurking about in dark shadows.

It's not like I'm some dashing hero like my brother. Oh well, I suppose I'd better take care of this. It would be bad for business if the planet developed a reputation for being dangerous.

Rune entered the alleyway, his eyes adjusting to the gloom. He heard the scuffle of feet scraping along stone followed by another muffled cry. Two four-limbed aliens grappled with a human woman. He couldn't get a good look at her, but he saw a flash of golden hair.

“Ahem.”

The aliens turned to look at him as he approached. They still held the woman, her arms splayed out widely between them. One of them held a hand firmly clamped over her mouth and nose.

Her blue eyes were wild with fear but also renewed hope at his arrival. The pure sapphire of her gaze stirred something deep within Rune he'd not felt before in his entire existence.

She's gorgeous. Hair in golden waves like the sun... how dare they sully her with their dirty hands?

Suddenly he no longer saw this as a burden. He saw it as providence.

“Unhand her,” he said in a low growl, whipping out his twin blades from their sheaths. “Or I will cut you down where you stand.”



CHAPTER 3

THE FOUR-ARMED ALIENS tightened their grasp on Norah, eliciting a muffled squeal from her mouth. Her would-be rescuer stalked toward them like a panther on the hunt. His body moved with the sinuous grace of a jungle panther combined with the gristle and merciless aura of a grizzly.

Her captors felt his strength, his intent, too. They exchanged glances, forked tongues darting out of their mouths. The air suddenly smelled like an engine burning too much oil.

Norah realized they were communicating with scent when they abruptly threw her down to the ground and charged the Vahking interloper. The air rushed out of her lungs in a gush, and though she tried to stand, she collapsed back onto the disgusting ground. All she could do for the moment was watch until she regained her wind.

The lead reptile, the one who had led her into the alley in the first place, produced a knife from somewhere on his body—a wicked-looking blade with a curve that seemed to go the wrong way. The metal flashed in a beam of sunlight that had somehow made it into the dark, dank alley.

“Look out,” she wheezed. “He has a knife!”

She wasn’t sure if the Vahking heard her, but to her relief, he caught the reptile’s wrist and stopped the slashing attack cold.

The other reptilian, seeing an opportunity, charged in from the opposite side. He thought the Vahking couldn’t stop his assault, seeing as his arm on that flank was busy.

The Vahking's foot lifted from the ground as his leg snapped out in a blur. A hard, bone-crunching blow from the Vahking's heel shattered the reptilian's jaw. Teeth and blood rained down into the alleyway as the attacker folded like a worn blanket.

The reptilian still standing tried to make use of his extra limbs. He pummeled at the Vahking's torso with a rain of close-fisted blows.

The Vahking didn't so much as *flinch*.

Muscles in the Vahking's bared arm stood out in corded relief and the reptile made a croaking sound as the male crushed his wrist. The reptilian collapsed to his knees, all three of his free limbs desperately prying at the Vahking's hand to no avail.

"Apologize to this female." The Vahking's voice sounded utterly calm, almost tranquil. He obviously didn't consider the reptiles a threat in the least.

"Apologies." The reptile turned to her with sap-like tears streaming down its scaled face. "All much apologies. Wasn't going to hurt. Just take credits."

"If you need money, there are plenty of construction jobs to be had." The Vahking released the reptile. Both aliens cowered on the ground, backing away from the towering, horned warrior. "I would suggest it's a lot easier on you than robbery." He stared at them for a long moment, and then his eyes narrowed. "Well? What are you waiting for? Go get your injuries treated at the free clinic and get in the employment line. Otherwise, I will tell my soldiers to hunt the two of you down and throw you in a cell. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir." They fell all over themselves in their obsequious fawning. "Yes, sir. We no cause any trouble."

The two aliens ran out of the alleyway back into the sunlight, and the Vahking turned to her.

He said, "My soldiers..." Who is this guy? He fights like he's the god of war. Is he the captain of the guard or something?

His dark eyes teemed with mystery and enigmatic beauty. It was hard to stare into them and not feel hypnotized. He crouched down in front of her easily, like a seasoned athlete.

“Are you well?” His voice caressed her ears, soothing her fear somewhat.

“I think so,” she murmured. “I just got the wind knocked out of me.”

He stood and stared at her for a long moment. Norah was hardly dressed to impress, wearing simple leggings and a jacket over a tank top shirt. Still, she could feel his appreciation as much as see it on his face.

While part of her felt flattered, it reminded her of just how far from home she really was and how little power she wielded compared to this swaggering warrior.

Then he offered her his hand. “Here, allow me.”

She took his offering, gasping at the strength she felt in his grip. He wasn’t trying to impress her, but it felt like holding a solid slab of beef.

His hands are huge... he could tear me limb from limb without breaking a sweat.

He pulled her up faster than she expected. She overcompensated and lost her balance, stumbling into him, and the Vahking caught her easily.

“Careful,” he whispered. She lifted her gaze from his chest to see his face. His expression of intense interest as well as wonder, sent a shiver down her spine. “What is your name, beautiful one?”

She could count the number of times a man had called her beautiful—while her clothes were still on—on zero fingers. And the way he said it... not like a cheesy pick-up line or with the sneering overconfidence of a frat boy.

He said it like he meant it, like he simply stated a fact.

“Norah,” she released at last, forcing the word out of her chest. Her wind was back, yet she remained breathless. His heady scent washed over her. Something like well-maintained leather and a touch of the open sea.

“That’s a lovely name for a lovely woman.”

“Um...”

It was so hard to think. The Vahking’s sheer size commanded her attention, and those eyes, the way they seemed to smolder as they undressed her bit by bit... it was more than she could take.

“Um,” she muttered once more, putting her hands on his chest with the intent of pushing away from him. Only when she touched him, she marveled at the play of muscles under his shirt. She just knew he was chiseled like Michelangelo’s David under his clothes.

With a monumental force of will, she pushed back. He could have easily resisted, and not let her go. But he released her with minimal hesitation. She took an extra step back and swallowed the lump that had found its way into her throat.

“Ah, well, thanks for saving me,” she muttered. “Where I come from, when you asks someone their name and they give it to you, you’re supposed to give yours in return.”

His eyes widened slightly. “Forgive my crude manners.” He dipped into a bow so low his long, dark hair almost swept the ground, though his eyes never left hers. “I am Prince Rune-Loki Odynson.”

He reached up and caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. She tried to tell herself to move away, not to let him touch her, but it was impossible to force herself into motion. The second his soft skin brushed her face, a trembling wave of heat pulsed through her.

“You’re a prince?” Her voice trembled like the surface of a pond under a strong wind.

“Yes,” he purred as he straightened though his hand never left her cheek. “And you... are *mine*.”

Her mind reeled, unable to process what he had just said for a few frantic moments. Then she realized he had said just what it sounded like.

Wait, what? He just told me I’m his? He can’t do that... wait, what if he can? He is a prince.

“You tremble so, beautiful one,” he spoke softly. “It’s dark in this alleyway. Won’t you come with me into the light? I believe your golden hair is more radiant than the daystar itself.”

A tingle started at the juncture of her thighs, her pussy growing heavy and aching as electricity seemed to arc through her entire body. Everything the male did was seductive, alluring. He didn’t even have to force his sex appeal. Looking at her with half-lidded eyes, his lips slightly parted like a thirsty man staring at a distant oasis, he moved his face in closer to hers.

“Norah,” he breathed, warmth spreading across her skin as his delicious natural scent invaded her senses. “My sweet little Norah—”

Some part of her knew he would have kissed her at that moment if she had allowed it. Which caused her brain to scream in panic and triggered her fight or flight response.

“No!” she yelped, slapping him across the face. He didn’t even so much as flinch, but he did stop his approach. “No, I’m not... I’m not *yours!*”

I don’t sound confident about that at all. I’ve got to get away from him. I can’t deal... I just can’t deal with this. I’m here for my brother, not romance.

Norah spun on her heel and fled the dank alley, emerging into the sunlight with a rush of movement. He called her name, but Norah didn’t stop her mad dash to freedom. She slammed into passersby in the busy city streets. Most of them grumbled or just turned and stared as she fled. A few called out threats to notify the Vahking security forces of her misbehavior.

Exactly what she *didn’t* need at the moment.

At length, she realized she left a wide trail of disruption in her wake and slowed her pace. As her heartbeat calmed, she found herself regretting her actions. Just a little. There were better ways to have stopped him from kissing her than a slap to the face.

Only maybe I did want him to kiss me. It was just too sudden! I mean, we literally just met. You can't go around kissing girls and telling them, "You're mine," when you've just met!

Then it hit her. She had struck a *prince*. Assaulted a member of the Vahking monarchy, for heaven's sake.

All after he had saved her from muggers.

Maybe she'd gone overboard, but the law wouldn't necessarily see it that way. She realized the best thing she could do was find Lyle and the coins, and get off planet as quickly as possible.

Now that she knew the prince oversaw the construction site, she didn't want to go there and ask questions. It severely hampered her ability to find Lyle.

Then she remembered one thing that had been true on Earth. Would it be true on Verkoon?

Bartenders are usually good with information.

Norah picked out a tavern that seemed to have a good number of humans sitting inside. She figured Lyle would probably be more comfortable at an establishment that catered to his own kind. She pushed the door open and paused just inside the entrance to allow her eyes to adjust to the new, dimmer lighting. When her vision finally cleared, she scanned the interior, searching out the bar.

The bartender looked a lot like a cross between an ostrich and a human. His neck was very long, which gave him an advantage in that he could see over the heads of the patrons and take drink orders from across the bar.

"Excuse me." She reached out and patted his feathered elbow.

He turned to her, his flexible neck twisting and curling to put his face almost right next to hers. She shrank back a bit, even though she knew he was doing so to make sure they could understand each other in the crowded bar.

"Yah, whatchoo want, hooman?" His voice sounded like a parrot's, sharp and reedy but understandable enough.

"I'm looking for a man—"

“Plenty dose around, yah?”

“I’m looking for a *particular* human,” she tried again, clinging to her patience. “My brother, actually. His name is Lyle.”

She showed the ostrich alien a photo of her brother. It had been taken a couple of years back, but he hadn’t changed much in the interim. He had the same blond hair as hers, but his eyes were brown and full of mischief.

“I thinking I seen this hooman before. Not know name Lyle, though.”

“You have?” Hope filled her chest. “Does he come here often?”

“Oh yah. Two, three, four times in a Tenday, yah?”

She was about to ask the creature if any friends of Lyle’s were present when a cold shiver ran down her spine. She spun on the barstool and faced the doorway.

Prince Rune-Loki Odynson stood framed in the entry, his dark eyes fixed solely upon her with the intensity of a hunting shark.

I’m so screwed.



CHAPTER 4

RUNE STOOD IN THE ALLEYWAY, staring wide eyed after the fleeing woman. His hand rose to cup his cheek. Not because it hurt, but because it was the last place she had touched him.

She... does not wish to be mine?

The mere idea she didn't want to be with him floored Rune. It shook the pillars of his existence. Rune had always assumed he was irresistible. Whether by hook, by crook, or by charm, he had always managed to bed any woman he desired.

One thing he had never done, however, was tell them, "You are mine."

What came over me to say that? If only she'd kept looking me in the eye instead of turning away, I would know for sure if my suspicions are correct...

The Blood Song didn't always trigger on a first meeting. It worked by its own rules and refused to be quantified. Some Vahking went their entire lives without experiencing the Blood Song. And then some experienced it early in life.

No one could say for certain when or if it would happen to a Vahking. Sometimes two people who had known each other for years or even decades would look at each other and find themselves in the rapture of the Blood Song.

I have to find Norah again. I have to know for sure if this is just mere infatuation or something more... primal.

Rune strode out of the alleyway. As he suspected, she was nowhere to be found on the busy streets. The sounds of

construction on the hilltop carried down to the city below, muted by distance into a pleasant white noise. Conversational hum and the foot traffic were more immediate yet somehow less distracting.

Norah must be new to Verkoon, or she would have known better than to follow a couple of Booshimis into a dark alleyway. It's possible she just came in on the ship today.

As prince and the overseer of the longhouse project, he had the political clout he needed to call up the starport and demand to see the passenger manifest. He was in luck. Only one Norah was listed.

It must be her. Norah Tennyson. Now to see if she's taken lodging anywhere.

His search took a bit longer. More than twenty hotels, hostels, and inns had taken up residence on Verkoon. To his chagrin, none of them had a guest listed by the name of Norah Tennyson.

He put his communicator away with a grunt of frustration. Obviously he would not be able to solve his problem by proxy. Rune knew sometimes he must delegate, and other times he needed to handle things personally.

Rune thought about how the Booshimis had lured her into the alleyway. The only way he could fathom she would follow them was if they had something she desired. Since she didn't have the scent of a drug addict or the look of someone in need of purchasing intimate relations, he figured Norah must have been after information.

Rune was not certain his conclusion was correct but decided to work from that assumption because it seemed the most likely. He knew she would probably be more comfortable asking questions in a place with a lot of humans, so he headed for the tavern district.

Of the dozen or so drinking establishments in the settlement, about seven were known to be frequented by a high number of human beings, so he concentrated his search in those taverns.

Rune kept hoping he would catch a whiff of her scent or see a flash of her golden hair in the sunlight. Only all he noticed were the usual teeming masses of construction workers and support staff mingled with the occasional Vahking security patrol.

He began to worry that maybe the Booshimis had decided to track Norah down for a little revenge. Rune called his foreman, Lupta, and inquired if any Booshimis had come to get a job. He said two who looked a little roughed up had applied, and he was planning on putting them on the groundbreaking crew.

With that fear allayed, Rune returned to his search. He went into the first tavern and didn't see her immediately. After walking a circuit around the lobby floor a few times, he turned to the barkeep and inquired directly.

No one had remembered seeing a blonde-haired human woman. Most of the human women were in the luxury accommodations provided by the Vahkings, their temporary dwelling until the longhouse was finished. Few of them came this deep into town because their needs were met by the Vahking horde.

This meant the few human women really stood out. Unfortunately, none of them were Norah. Undeterred, Rune went into the next tavern. He knew he still had plenty of places to look.

Once again, his search proved fruitless. The same proved true of the third bar he checked as well as the fourth.

But on the fifth try, just as he was beginning to despair, he saw Norah. She sat at the bar, speaking to a Giordian-Err bartender.

She froze and then turned to look his way. Rune was startled. He had given no sign of his presence, and with the loud din of the bar, he didn't see how she could have heard him. Yet she immediately recognized his presence.

Their eyes met across the bar, and then she slid out of her seat. Norah rushed through the bar, casting frantic glances over her shoulder as she sought the rear exit.

A pang of fear rang through him. He didn't want to lose her again after he had worked so hard to find her. He rushed back out the door and ran around the back of the building, startling a drunken derelict in his wake.

The derelict hurled an empty bottle at Rune. It shattered on the ground behind him, crystal shards of glass skittering across the pavement around his feet. Rune didn't even bother to slow down. The derelict didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was catching up to Norah before she could walk out of his life again, possibly forever.

He rushed around to the rear exit, and she ran right into his chest. Norah grunted and stumbled back, looking up in shock to see him.

"Wait," he held up a hand. "I just want to talk. I didn't mean to frighten you before..."

He caught her gaze and held it. Rune's mouth gaped open, and Norah let out a shocked gasp. He felt himself falling into the endless mystery of her ice blue eyes.

Rune felt as if he were a longship in a storm-tossed sea. An enormous wave broke over the prow, washing inside his hatches and drawing pieces out. Only the wave left something behind, too, plugging the holes it had left in his core.

His mind returned to normal, and he realized he had been staring at her for a long time. Norah looked confused, her crystalline eyes swimming with doubt.

"What... what was that?" she sputtered. "Why do I... how do I know your favorite color is blue?"

"Because it is the color of your eyes," he returned. For some reason, he didn't want to admit out loud what had just happened. That had been the Blood Song. Their minds and souls exchanged bits of themselves over a murky telepathic contact that no one fully understood.

He knew she liked something called jazz music, and she liked it because it broke her expectations. It was frustrating, in a way, to know little tidbits about this enchanting creature when so much of her remained a mystery.

“Would you stop?” she hissed, clapping her hands to the side of her head. “Why is it so hard to think around you?”

“Would I stop what?”

She peeked out from between her splayed fingers, her blue eyes wild. “Stop... just stop doing stuff!”

“What kind of stuff?”

“You know what kind of—stop saying things like ‘you’re mine’ and that your favorite color is blue just because that’s the color of my eyes.”

“But you’re the one who said you know my favorite color is blue.”

“I don’t have time for this.” She shook her head. “I’ve got to go.”

She tried to move past him, but he took a step and countered her movements.

Norah looked up at him, and he held his hands up again.

“Wait, please. As I said, I only want to talk.” Her belly rumbled, loudly. Norah’s face turned red as the setting sun over the rolling waves. “Perhaps I can buy you something to eat?”

He saw reluctance battle with hunger in her expression. She wanted to avoid him, yet she couldn’t turn down a meal. Judging from her garments, she was not well off financially.

“All right,” she said. “You can buy me lunch, but no more stalking me afterward. And don’t even think about saying something creepy like ‘you are mine.’ Got it?”

“I promise. I will be circumspect.” He admired her spirit, and that was not all he admired. He could picture her naked body spread beneath his own, and the image never quite left his mind.

Her eyes narrowed, her lips growing tight as if she were privy to his thoughts. With the Blood Song, it was possible she picked up on at least a little of what Rune imagined.

He gestured toward the open street. “If you’ll come this way?”

She fell into step beside him but kept a good three feet of space between them. He wondered how to break through the walls she put up around herself. Something about her struck him as far more mature than her years would suggest.

Norah carried herself like someone much older. Yet the weight of the galaxy's many burdens had not yet made her shoulders stoop. Her step was as lively as his, even if her furtive glances hurt his pride.

Wisdom and youth are often strangers. When they are familiar with each other, tragedy is often the matchmaker. I wonder what she has endured to make it here to Verkoon? Why is a woman who isn't on our potentials roll even here to begin with?

He led her down the avenue to a corner bistro, which served intergalactic fare. A placard depicting the outline of dozens of species, including humans, hung over the door, showing it would be a safe place to eat for those who did not have translators.

“You really must tell me what brings a vision of loveliness like you to our crude frontier moon.”

She paused halfway through the door. “Food first, and then maybe I’ll be in the mood to answer questions. Maybe.”

He chuckled deep in his throat. Far from being frustrated, her playing hard to get was marvelous. Rune loved the hunt every bit as much as the takedown.

But he vowed he *would* take her down.

It is only a matter of time.



CHAPTER 5

NORAH'S NOSE wrinkled as they entered the restaurant. All around her, the smells of strange food permeated the air. At first, she almost turned around and walked out, but then her belly growled once more.

I guess beggars can't be choosers. Besides, if the meal is terrible, it will be that much less awkward to give Prince Rune here the slip after it's over.

The restaurant had a few empty tables near the back. She followed in the wake of the massive Vahking as everyone made way for him. Those who recognized him as the prince bowed respectfully, but he didn't pay any heed to anyone one way or the other.

Rune pulled her chair out for her. She didn't know if the gesture crossed cultures or he had studied up on human customs. It was sort of flattering, but given the intensity of his gaze, she feared him seeing how much she appreciated the action.

"You may have anything you wish off of the menu," he said. "I will cover the costs."

"Well, I should hope so, considering you're a prince." She smirked and thumbed through the small screen built into the table, looking at the menu options. "Um, some of this stuff is toxic to me."

"Did you sort by your home planet?"

He gestured at the corner of the screen, where a small menu allowed her to cycle between different worlds. She found the

silhouette of the human and the number of choices were narrowed down to just one screen.

“I guess I’ll have the rice with chicken,” she decided. “It’s the only thing I recognize.”

“There are over a dozen different items for humans on the menu,” Rune gave her a frown.

“Okay, so a peanut butter-jellyfish sandwich is not a thing on Earth. All right? I think there might be some translation issues here.”

They brought her the chicken and rice. Whatever meat was in the bowl didn’t look like chicken, but it didn’t *not* look like chicken either. She decided to give it a try.

“Okay,” she said, noticing a certain gaminess about the meat, though it was palatable enough. “Not bad.”

“I must tell you that there might not be actual chicken in there but a native substitute guaranteed to be compatible with human digestion.”

She stopped chewing and looked at him in horror. “Another type of bird?”

“Think smaller.” He dug into his own bowl. “And add a lot more legs.”

Oh fuck it, I need to eat. Who cares what it was before they cooked it? If this place poisoned humans, I don’t think it would be in business long.

The restaurant teemed with her kind. Rune was the only Vahking, in fact.

“How come the only Vahkings I’ve seen on Verkoon have been you and security personnel?” she asked.

“I thought I was going to get to ask *you* some questions in exchange for dinner.”

“Hmm. Tell you what, you answer one of mine, and I’ll answer two of yours. Sound fair?”

He grinned, and his face grew even more handsome. Most Vahking she’d seen were dour and taciturn, rowdy in the

taverns and lethal on the battlefield, but not a lot of fun otherwise. However, Rune had a spirit of mischief about him that she found intriguing. He didn't seem malicious, just mischievous. He seemed like the kind of man she might like to get into trouble with... between the sheets.

Stop it, you idiot. He's a prince. You're nothing but trash. It will never happen.

“Why do you look so sad?”

“Nothing. Answer my question already.”

“I did not agree to your... oh, very well.” He shrugged and sighed. “The main reason you don't see many Vahking is that they are mostly at the retreat.”

“The retreat?”

“The large structure next to the construction site. It is the best accommodation to be found on Verkoon. The Vahking warriors there are all potentials, hoping to experience the Blood Song with their mates.”

“Blood Song with their mates?” She frowned. “What does that even mean? I've heard it said before, but I thought it was just like a euphemism for sex.”

Rune laughed and lifted a flagon of ale to his lips for a lingering sip. He kept his eyes focused on her the whole time, the delight in his dark eyes proving infectious. She was enjoying herself, enjoying his company in spite of everything.

“I think you owe me two answers before I give you another of my own,” he teased.

“Fair enough.” She put her hands on the table and arched a brow at him. “Ask away.”

“Have you been claimed by anyone?”

A flush of heat raced through her, and she found herself laughing anxiously, unable to meet his smoldering gaze. “Ah, um, that's not the kind of thing you just come out and ask a woman.”

“You set no rules on the criteria our queries had to adhere to.”

“Are you a lawyer?” she narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips.

“No.”

“You would be a good one. All right, the answer is... no. I’m not seeing anyone right now, nor am I married...mated, whatever your people call it.”

“I see. And why not?”

She clapped her hands over her face and groaned, feeling flush with embarrassment. “Oh my god, you’re nuts. How can you ask me that?”

“Quite simply.”

“Argh.” She dropped her hands from her face. Suddenly she had no idea what to say.

Oh my god, he’s so good looking. He’s just... devouring me with his eyes.

An image of herself pushed up against a wall, writhing in erotic union with Rune, popped unbidden into her mind. The smile playing on his lips almost made it seem as if he knew what she was thinking.

“I don’t know,” she admitted at last. “I don’t know, I guess... there just hasn’t been time. I haven’t had any time for myself, at all, ever since my parents died.”

His features drew into a grave frown. “How did they die?”

“Freighter acci—hey, wait just a damn minute. It’s my turn to ask the questions here.” She mock glared, a smile teasing her lips but she suppressed the grin that threatened.

He chuckled softly and leaned back in his chair. Rune spread his hands out and nodded at her. “Ask away.”

“If you’re really in charge of the construction site, you could find a worker for me. Correct?”

“Yes, I imagine I could.” His gaze grew more intense. “Who do you want me to find?”

“My brother, Lyle. I need to talk to him, and it’s pretty urgent. Time sensitive, if you will.”

“And why do you want to see him?”

“He... stole some things from me, and I need to get them back as well as give him a good kick in the ass. Maybe it will knock him onto the straight and narrow path this time.”

“This time?”

“Yeah. It’s my turn to ask a question, though. How come you were following me?”

His lips pursed into a thoughtful frown. “I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

She gave him a long, hard look.

“What is it?” he asked, a bemused smile stretching his expressive mouth. The idea of those lips kissing her own brought on a fervid heat, which covered her thoughts in a thick haze.

“Are you telling me the whole truth?”

“I mentioned earlier that most of my people were at the retreat—the potentials, yes?”

“Yeah, I recall.”

“And they are seeking a human with whom they may experience the Blood Song?”

“I’m still following you so far.”

He stared at her, his eyes boring into her soul. She couldn’t suppress a shiver though she had broken out into a glistening sheen of sweat. It was so hard to think. Every piece of her body, mind, and soul wanted Rune to kiss her.

Rune didn’t speak, not with words, but his eyes and intense expression said it all. Her heart skipped a beat.

“Wait, what?” She let out a watery laugh. “You don’t think... you don’t think you can have this weird Blood Song shit with me. Do you?”

Rune reached out and put his hand on top of her own. “No, beautiful one. I do not think we might experience the Blood Song. I think that we already have.”

She yanked her hand away from him as if it were hotter than the surface of the sun. “I told you not to say any more creepy stuff. Come on, Rune! You promised.”

“I’m not trying to be ‘creepy’ as you so quaintly put it, sweetness.” His eyes blazed with the heat of a passion she wasn’t ready to accept as real, much less directed at herself. “But the facts are the facts. We stared into each other’s eyes, our souls met, and our blood sang for one another.” Her pulse hammered in her ears so hard she could scarcely hear herself think. His voice sounded like the low rush of waves crashing inexorably against craggy cliffs when he spoke. “A piece of me is forever inside of you, just as a piece of you is forever inside of me. We are destined to be together, Norah. There is no need to be afraid. There is no need to fight destiny.”

“Okay.” She stood up, put her napkin down, and shouldered her single carry-on bag. “All right, I’m done.”

“What’s wrong?” he frowned as she rose to her feet.

“You. You’re what’s wrong,” she snapped, jabbing her finger at him. “I mean, I appreciate you so much for saving my life in that alleyway. I really, really do. But that doesn’t mean I belong to you. You can’t just say I’m yours and make it so. And you can’t keep talking about fate and destiny when we’ve only just met!”

“Why not?” Rune shrugged with a casual dismissal of her fears she found equal parts amusing and annoying. And frustrating. Had she mentioned frustrating?

“What do you mean, why not?” she blurted. “You just can’t! I mean, look, every girl wants to hear sweet talk like that—eventually. Like when you’re in the relationship for a long time, six months. *Minimum.*”

“I have studied human culture intensively of late, and I am aware of no such minimum time investment for love to blossom or for destiny to manifest itself to us.”

“You’re impossible!” She shook her head. “I’m out of here.”

“Wait,” he called out to her. “Don’t walk away from me.”

His imperious tone made her pause and turn back to face him. “I’m sorry, my prince,” she did a mock curtsy even though she didn’t have a skirt on. “But I’m not one of your erstwhile subjects. I’m a nobody born with a plastic spoon in her mouth, and you’re better off forgetting about all of this destiny crap because no way would fate put you and me together.” She laughed and shook her head helplessly. “Look at us,” she said a bit more softly. Her gaze dropped to the floor. “I mean, just look at us...”

He took her hand and she looked up with a start. When had he moved? His eyes swallowed her up with heat and affection in equal measure.

“All I see,” he said in a voice as deep as the ocean, “is a man and a woman. Can you look into my eyes, touch my skin to your own, and really tell me you don’t feel the pull of destiny tugging on your heart? Your mind? Your very soul?”

She opened her mouth but no sound came out.

*He’s almost... hypnotic. Oh man, what am I going to do?
What?*

“I really think I should be going,” she murmured, breaking free of his spell.

“Wait.” He followed her out the door and into the street.

“Please, bide a moment.”

“Nope, no can do, Mr. Destiny. I’ve got things to do and places to be—far away from you.”

“I can help you find your brother.”

She stopped dead in her tracks, her face contorting into a grimace. He had used the one kind of bait that would snare her.

Don’t turn around, girl. Don’t do it. You might not ever be able to walk away from him again...

She took a deep breath and made her decision.

I'm so screwed.



CHAPTER 6

RUNE WAITED with bated breath while Norah stood stock still several feet away. He'd offered the one thing that might entice her to spend more time with him—help finding her brother.

Rune felt as if he balanced on a razor's edge. He'd never cared so much about a woman before. The Blood Song only made his agony worse.

So help me, I think I would have wanted her without the Blood Song. No, I'm certain of it. In all my travels through the stars with the Vahking horde, I've never met another such woman.

She turned slowly, her lips drawn into a thin, tight line. He could see the war she waged within herself as competing desires vied for supremacy. Rune almost couldn't stand himself as he waited for Norah to speak.

“Okay,” she finally agreed, and he had to mask his immense relief. He could do nothing to stop the smile that stretched his lips, though. “But this isn't a social call. I need your help, and then me and my brother are getting the heck off this planet.”

“Very well.” Even a few more moments in her company made the deal seem like a bargain well struck. “If you'll come with me?”

She fell into step beside him. Norah avoided looking his way. This disgruntled Rune as he wanted to see her lovely eyes. As lovely as the sky meeting the sea on a crisp autumn day—

“For heaven's sake, they're not that big of a deal.”

He started and then glanced over at her. “I'm sorry?”

“My eyes.”

She turned to face him at last. Something seemed different in her manner. It took him a moment to realize she felt flattered. Her eyes were so pure azure he lost himself in their depths.

“You’re doing it again.” Those objects of his obsession narrowed to angry slits. “Can you stop it?”

“I don’t know that I can. It’s the Blood Song.”

Her face stretched into a grimace. “Come on! I can’t be the first girl with blue eyes you’ve seen.”

“You are not, but yours are special.”

“Just try and stop thinking about me until we find my brother. Okay?”

Rune chuckled. “I do not think I can comply with that request, my dear. You see, your voice is a song to my ears, the beating of your heart a poem, your name the gateway to sublime bliss —”

“Do you always lay it on this thick?”

“Not this thick, no.”

She laughed, and some of the tension fled from her shoulders and face. “You know, you have a knack for making people like you even though you’re a pain in the ass and more than a little bit arrogant.”

“So, you like me now?”

She rolled her eyes skyward. “That *would* be your takeaway from all of this.”

He escorted her to the retreat, where he kept his quarters. Her mouth gaped open at the opulently appointed lobby with its vast arched ceiling and temple-like columns carved to resemble trees from the Vahking home world. A fountain in the center of the lobby featured the Midgard Serpent releasing a continuous spray. Mist from the fountain rose up and caught the sunlight coming in through the skylights overhead, creating micro rainbows.

“This is gorgeous,” she breathed.

“This is adequate,” he said with some distaste. “The lodge will be much better once it’s completed. It will make this look like a hovel dug into the side of a dung heap.”

“You’re really serious about making this lodge something special. Aren’t you?”

He turned to Norah. Her gaze now bore a new level of inquisitiveness. She was interested in him. That was progress. “Indeed. I intend to make this the best longhouse in Vahking history.”

“Why, though?”

“My dear,” he said, deflecting smoothly. A sharp pain and shame kept him from telling her the truth. “I try to do everything to the absolute best measure.”

“I do admire a man with high standards,” she said, her gaze softening. As if realizing she was warming up to him, Norah first looked shocked and then cold. “Anyway, let’s find my brother.”

He nodded and led her to the lift station. Instead of only one or two elevator cars, the retreat boasted ten, which sported inertial dampeners, allowing them to move far more swiftly.

It only took a few seconds to get to the thirtieth floor of the retreat. Rune led her down the carpeted hallway to his door. Here, the opulence of the retreat gave way to traditional Vahking interior design. The walls were darker, and artificial holographic torches hung in sconces along the hallway.

The door to his quarters was solid wood and swung open on hinges rather than mechanical servomotors. He pushed it open and gestured grandly.

“Wow,” she said, looking around his domicile at the fur-covered furnishings, vast feasting table, and roaring fireplace. “I have to admit, this is not what I was expecting.”

“And what were you expecting?” he asked, closing the door behind them.

“I don’t know, just something fancier, I suppose. Like what you would find in a prince’s quarters.”

“I’m not like most princes. To tell you the truth, the title chafes more than a little bit. At times it seems more like a burden than a boon.”

“Oh, fuck you.” He glanced sharply at her, finding Norah glaring at him with her hands on her hips.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked, his face pinching into a sour expression.

“I said, fuck you,” she repeated, a bit less aggressively. “How dare you complain about being rich and powerful? Let me ask you something, Rune. When’s the last time you had to go hungry? And I don’t mean ‘skipped my lunch’ hungry. I’m talking ‘haven’t eaten in a week’ hungry.”

She stepped toward him, her lovely countenance drawn into a mask of anger and misery. He could feel the loss, the emptiness pouring out of her blue-eyed gaze.

“I mean the kind of hunger where your stomach feels like it’s turned inside out and gnawing on itself. When you shake so badly you can hardly walk across a room, but you’ve still got to go into work. Because if you don’t go to work, you and all the people who rely on you are going to stay hungry. You ever been that kind of hungry, Prince Rune-Loki Odynson? Huh?”

He shook his head, feeling quite the fool for complaining about his lot in life. “I had no idea things were so hard for you.”

“You didn’t ask.”

Rune arched his brows. “Fair enough. Allow me to pour you a drink as part of my apology for being so rude. How did you come to such a state of poverty in your life that you could not eat for an entire week?”

As he spoke, he took down some peach brandy from the shelf behind his stand-up bar. He poured them each a glass and then added a splash of alien seltzer that gave the liquid a warm, amber glow.

She took the glass from his hand, stared oddly at the liquid within for a moment, and then shrugged and answered his question.

“I wasn’t smart enough to get me some of those rich parents that other folks had, I guess. Or any parents at all. My mom and dad died when I was sixteen. After that, I dropped out of high school to go to work to take care of me and my siblings.”

Rune stroked his fingers across his lips. Sixteen summers was hardly what he would call seasoned.

“You should not have had to shoulder such a burden.”

“Yeah, well, what else was I going to do? In the state we lived in, I could file for legal emancipation, which I did. I was a legal adult in the eyes of the law. A legal adult who couldn’t vote, buy cigarettes or alcohol, or even purchase a damn lottery ticket. But an adult nonetheless. Of course, without a college degree or any work experience, the only jobs I could get paid minimum wage. Hence the poverty. But hey, I was an adult. Right?”

“So, as an adult they allowed you to maintain custody of your siblings?”

“Yeah. Me, my brother Lyle, and my kid sisters Jasmine and Janelle. They’re twins. Anyway, the twins turned eighteen and headed off to college a couple months ago. I thought I was done taking care of other people for a while... until Lyle came back into my life.”

“Drink,” he said, lifting his own glass. “It will make you feel better.”

“What is this stuff anyway?”

“Peach brandy with Vahking prismatic seltzer. It enhances drinks and brings out their natural flavors.”

“Down the hatch, I guess.” She sipped the drink, and a look of wonder spread over her face. “Damn, that’s pretty tasty.”

She took another drink and set the glass down.

“What did Lyle do to prompt you to chase him all the way across the galaxy?”

Norah’s eyes grew hard, and her voice took on an edge when she spoke. “He blew into town, out of money and out of luck as usual. Whatever floozy he’d shacked up with had finally

had enough and kicked him out. He begged me to stay with me, and I told him no. Not even for a few days.” She sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Now that I think about it, I was probably pretty hard on him. Maybe I should have let him crash for a week or two, but I just didn’t want to surrender my independence so quickly after I’d just gotten it back.”

Norah lifted her face out of her hands, a frank solemnity on her features. “He stole from me. Came back while I was out at work, and took everything he could shove into his pockets and sell for a couple of bucks. My jewelry, most of which was fake anyway, and a couple hundred bucks in dollar bills I had hidden under a floorboard.”

Her eyes grew hard as flint. “I could have dealt with that, but then he went and stole Grandpa’s coin collection. Those coins had sentimental value to me, and he knew it. He knew it. He stole them because he knew that would hurt me. He wanted to hurt me.” Norah’s hands clenched into fists. “So now, I want to hurt him.”

Rune took a moment to gather his thoughts before he spoke. “Norah, I can certainly understand your anger. If my brother had done something like that to me...”

His voice trailed off. Rune had already done far worse to Thor than merely stealing from him. Rune had thought what he did was for the good of the empire at the time, but that didn’t make his guilt any less painful.

“Anyway,” she said, shaking her head as if to clear it of the painful memories. “You said you were going to help me find Lyle. Right?”

“Of course. And you’re sure that he’s working on the construction crew?”

“Yeah, FreeJax.”

“I have a roll of the entire staff of that company for security reasons. Just let me access it.”

He pulled a computer tablet from his belt pouch and tapped it to life. After a few moments, he was able to navigate to his link to the FreeJax employee database.

“Lyle, does he have the same surname as you do?”

“Yes,” she said, perking up and leaning forward. She rested her elbows on her knees as he typed in the name. “Did you find him?”

“Yes, I think I did. Lyle Tennyson, apprentice grade boltsetter. Looks like the company is lodging him at the Royal Grand Hotel in the city.”

“That’s great news,” she said, standing up. “Now I can go and talk to him. Thank you so much.”

“It was nothing,” Rune said with a smile. He liked making her happy. The thought struck him as out of character, but he was so enchanted with her presence he really didn’t have time to examine it.

“Yeah, you did that fast...” Her brows came low over her eyes, and her lips curled into a sneer. “Hey, wait a damn minute. You just pulled that thing out of your pocket and typed on it for like, a minute, and you knew where Lyle was.”

“Yes, as you said, it was quick.”

“So why the hell didn’t you just do that back in the restaurant?”

Rune felt that particular soul-crushing sting when one is caught in a scheme. He had wanted to spend more time with her, so he had taken her back home. Rune was going to use the computer terminal in his office to find Lyle, but he’d gotten lost in the moment of her intoxicating presence.

“You’re just trying to get me drunk.” She put her glass down and headed for the door. “Thanks for nothing, Prince Rune!”



CHAPTER 7

“WAIT.” He rushed to take her by the arm. “I’m sorry I tricked you. It’s...” he frowned. “...kind of my thing.”

“I’m getting that.” She pulled from his grasp and crossed her arms over her chest. “The thing is, there’s no way in hell I could ever date a man who goes around trying to trick me. Save that type of cleverness for the rest of the galaxy, but be honest with me. All right?”

“So,” Rune drawled. “We’re dating now?”

“You’re impossible.” She had a smile on her face when she said it, however. “I have to admit, you’re persistent.”

“If I can help you find your brother, you’ll allow me to take you to dinner, then?”

“You already helped me.” She cocked an eyebrow. “I’ve got it from here.”

“Do you know where the Royal Grand Hotel is?”

“Um, sure, I think I saw it on the way in.”

He could tell from the uncertainty in her voice he was on the right track. “The city that has sprung up is, I’m afraid to admit, a bit on the rough side. Perhaps you would permit me to escort you? The riffraff will stay away, if nothing else, and of course my sunny disposition and sense of humor are treasures in dark times.”

“Sunny disposition,” she sputtered. “Sense of humor?”

“You’re laughing.”

“Because you’re being ridiculous! Do you believe half of what comes out of your mouth?”

“At least that much, on good days.” Rune gestured toward the door. “Shall we?”

“I guess we shall.”

They returned to the teeming streets. He enjoyed watching the way she looked around at all of the sights he considered mundane. It was like seeing them again for the first time. Norah was enamored of a simple levitation belt, watching the nimble green-skinned alien twist through the air with a look of wonder.

She thought the Rodexian congregation were verminous pests and was startled when they were served rather than squished at a restaurant. By the time they neared the Royal Garden Hotel, they had engaged in a lively conversation.

“All I’m saying is a monarchy is no way to run a government,” she said, chewing on some human food called popped corn. He tried one of the dry, dull things and promptly got a hull stuck in his teeth. He still poked at it with his tongue, trying to dislodge it.

“Then what would you have us do?”

She jabbed a finger at him. “Supreme executive power should come from a dictate by the masses. Not some king.”

“Some king?” he sputtered, incredulous yet amused at her point of view. “Odyn is far from ‘some king,’ and my brother Thor will be a worthy successor and lead the horde with selfless wisdom.”

“Yeah, but what if you wind up with a king who isn’t honest? How do you get rid of him?”

“I... the horde would not follow a king who did not put the horde ahead of himself,” he replied firmly.

“So, it *is* sort of a democracy... but what if you don’t like a rule the king comes up with, but he’s still acting kingly?”

Rune shook his head and laughed. “I think we could go on all day about hypotheticals and what-if scenarios. For example, I

could ask what would happen if I were to hypothetically take your hand while we walk.”

He slipped his hand into hers. She seemed startled at first, but she did not pull away. He thrilled at the feel of her skin against his. Yes, this was good. He wanted to do more of this touching her.

“What are you doing?” she narrowed her eyes with suspicion.

“Don’t worry, beautiful one, it’s all hypothetical.”

“Is that so?” She laughed, a musical sound that lightened his steps as well as his heart. “Well, I suppose, hypothetically... it might feel nice for you to take my hand.”

They had to break apart because of a passing hover cart merchant. He wanted to take her hand again, but they had arrived at the hotel, and it would have been awkward to try.

“This... is the Royal Grand Hotel?” she asked, her voice dripping with incredulity. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Neither royal nor grand, I know,” he agreed.

The hotel, such as it was, occupied a strip of land right beside a drainage trench that serviced both the construction site and the colony that had sprung up around it. Most of the tiny windows remained tightly shut, though a few were open to the wind and sun. The bluish color had a light, almost sickly tint to it.

“It looks like two shuttles mashed together into a hotel.”

“That’s exactly what it is,” he said with admiration. “Good eye.”

“Jesus, I can’t believe Lyle lives here. Are you sure this is his address?”

“Yes, I am.”

“All right. Let’s go ask about him.”

They entered the lobby, if one could call it that. Rune always considered it a bad sign when the hotelier chose to hide behind a force screen and interact through a tiny hole at the bottom. It meant he didn’t trust the people who rented rooms from him.

“Rune,” Norah cried, tugging on his arm. “That’s him. That’s Lyle.”

His gaze followed her pointing finger. He spotted Lyle standing outside the hotel, about to step into the lobby. Lyle bore enough resemblance to Norah that he could tell they were siblings, but Lyle was longer and lankier.

Thus, when he spotted his sister and broke into a run, Rune had to strain to catch up. Humans were smaller and lighter, and they had greater acceleration than a Vahking.

But in flat-out top speed, a Vahking had humans beat cold. Lyle had nearly disappeared around a corner when Rune began to catch up.

“Oh no,” Rune hissed between heavy pants. “You’re not costing me a date with your sister.”

Rune drew on his innate Vahking psionics, a rare gift for his people. Using a mix of sleight of hand and low-level telepathy, he could “dazzle” people with feats of “sorcery.”

He couldn’t do anything too dramatic without the proper buildup, but he could make Lyle think the door he was about to flee through was suddenly boarded shut.

Lyle recoiled as if he had struck a physical barrier and flopped back onto his butt. Rune moved to block his escape as Norah caught up to them.

“Norah,” Lyle said, smiling as she grabbed his collar. “Fancy meeting you here. When did you get in?”

“Don’t piss on my leg and tell me it’s raining, Lyle,” she snapped. “You know why I’m here. I want them back.”

His face drew into a quizzical expression. “Want what back?” he asked in a tone that was just a bit too innocent.

“Don’t you play with me, boy,” she snapped. “I’m damn near your mother.”

“But you’re not my momma. Are you? And now that I’m all grown up, you can’t tell me what to do, neither.”

“I’m not looking to argue with you, Lyle. Just give me the coins and I don’t give a damn what you do. Though if you had any sense you would get back to Earth.”

Lyle looked up at Rune and scowled. “And if I don’t cough up the coins, this guy will beat the crap out of me? Did you hire a Vahking bodyguard or something?”

“Or something,” Rune said, doing his best to exude an aura of menace. Lyle shrank back and lost a bit of his spunk.

“Look, I’m sorry I took the coins. Okay?” Lyle’s voice sounded sincere, at the least. He had genuine affection in his eyes when he looked at his sister. “I really am sorry. And I’d give them back if I could, but…”

The sad truth dawned in Norah’s perfect azure gaze. She ran a hand over her face and groaned.

“You already hocked them. Didn’t you?”

“Already what?” Rune frowned, confused by Norah’s words.

“Hocked them. Fenced them,” Norah snapped, clutching at the air with her fingers as if she could snatch the right word from the ether. “Don’t you high-class folk have a word for it?”

“I understand fencing,” Rune replied. “And not just with a sword. Who did you sell the coins to, Lyle?”

“To my boss. I mean, not my foreman, the big boss. Kovik Yenk.”

“Kovik Yenk?” Rune growled. He knew the man was a mobster, but he had no way to prove it. And with all of the other construction company bids being withdrawn, he had no choice but to do business with the man.

“Yeah, he said he really liked the coins and gave me a good price for them.”

“Well, we’ll just have to go to this Kovik Yenk and ask him to sell us the coins back,” Norah announced.

“It’s not that simple, sis,” Lyle picked himself up out of the dirt and dusted his clothes off. “I mean, Kovik Yenk doesn’t

grant meetings to just anyone. And it's not like you can tempt him with money. He's got plenty of that."

"Kovik Yenk is a gangster and a racketeer," Rune growled. "I have suffered his presence for far too long. Now I finally have a chance to get rid of him."

"How so?" Norah questioned him, and he found he did not mind it so much. "And what does this have to do with getting my coins back?"

"He received stolen goods and paid for them," Rune said. "It's a clear-cut case of criminal enterprise. I can be rid of him at last."

"You can't do that," Norah said. "Not until I get my grandpa's coins back. If you startle Kovik he might run."

"And who are you gonna get to do the construction without FreeJax?" Lyle brought up a good point.

Rune grimaced. It was true. As much as he wanted to go full-on Vahking and kick in the door to Kovik's office, he knew that a more measured, thoughtful approach would yield better results.

"If I get directly involved, Yenk will know for certain something is up. Lyle, you go and arrange for a meeting with Kovik Yenk. Tell him it's about getting those coins back. If they give you a hard time or tell you that he's busy, drop the bomb."

"What bomb?"

"That the coins are stolen merchandise. Admit it to them, if you have to, but get that meeting arranged. Understand?"

Lyle nodded. "All right. I think I can manage that. If I do, will you forgive me, Norah?"

"Maybe. Get your ass out of my sight for now. I can't stand to look at you."

They watched him go, and Rune turned back to her. "Don't you think you were a bit hard on him, Norah?"

“He’s such a pain in the ass. You have no idea. If anything, I should have been harder on him.”

“I see.” He looked down at her and cocked an eyebrow. “So, I suppose that in the interim, while we wait to hear back from your brother, we should have our date.”

She gaped in astonishment. “Our what?”

“You said if I helped you find your brother, you would go out on a date with me. I am using the human term correctly. Yes? A courtship ritual involving entertainment and dining with a slim chance of performing the reproductive act—”

“Um, yeah, I think you’ve got the gist of a date. When did I agree to...” She sighed and covered her eyes with her hand. “I remember now. Okay, fine, I did agree to those terms.”

She pulled her hand away from her eyes and smiled at him. His heart fluttered like the wings of a hundred butterflies in his chest when she smiled at him like that.

“Well, Rune. Guess I’m all yours tonight.”



CHAPTER 8

SHE COULDN'T BELIEVE she was actually following this man to his... well, wherever he was taking her. He'd been vague in his answer, something Norah was finding to be unsurprising the more she interacted with Rune.

He didn't exactly lie to her when talking with her, but that didn't mean the half-truths weren't wrapped up in clever tales to throw her off the trail of scenting them out. Truth be told, he was magnanimous in his approach to a conversation, easily weaving through his words so much so it became hard to track his teasing from the actual truth.

She wondered if it was a means of protecting himself. Though, from what, she couldn't really imagine. He was a damned prince, after all. What exactly did they need to be scared of? He'd mentioned the burden the crown placed upon his head earlier, but Norah found the notion of something like that to be little more than his privilege talking.

It's not like he's suffered a minute in his pampered life, so what gives?

Still, he remained quite cheerful as he led them both through the throngs of people and aliens alike. The crowd traveled to and from their habitats or work locations, chattering away while she listened with half a mind, focused entirely too much on her anger toward Lyle.

She hadn't gotten too accustomed to the way things worked on this forest moon, only having been on it for less than a day. But she felt naturally protected with Rune at her side, even if she didn't want to admit it to herself in the first place. Rune

just had that kind of magnetism that Norah found harder and harder to ignore, especially with them both stuck together until this coin business was resolved.

Their shoulders brushed briefly together as he took her hand, sliding his fingers between hers.

“Just up ahead,” he nodded forward. “My cruiser.”

He tugged her along onto a large loading dock, aliens with large, muscled bodies that were covered in tough-looking orange scales were busy heaving large loads over their shoulders and carrying them to and from opposite ends of the dock.

More than just Rune’s cruiser was docked in the area, but his was by far the largest. “Jesus,” she breathed out.

“Overcompensating much?”

The cruiser was... well, more than just a cruiser in her opinion.

It was as long as two football stadiums and had at least four or five floors worth of height to it. The rather modest-looking outside—if one could even call it that—was made up for by the fact that upon stepping up to the side of the cruiser to wait for the landing strip to unlatch and lock onto the side of the dock, she could tell that the rich red carpet stretching all the way into the interior of the ship was in fact expensive looking.

“Overcompensating for what?” Rune glanced at her, tilting his head curiously.

“You know,” she waved her hands vaguely. “For your dick. It’s a human expression. Basically to call someone out for over extravagance.”

He flashed her an audacious smile. “Oh, if that’s what you’re worried about, don’t worry. I’m *more* than happy to show you what you think I lack. I’m confident you’ll find my appendages *quite* pleasing.”

She rolled her eyes, feeling butterflies kick up in her stomach at the mention of his... *appendage*. “Of course, that’s all you heard.”

Wait, did he say appendages? As in more than one?

Now she felt faint.

He dragged her down the landing strip and into the cruiser, the door shutting behind them the moment they were inside of the large cabin, which sealed out the noisiness of the loading docks. She breathed out a slow sigh of relief, feeling the tension in her shoulders lessen.

She hadn't realized how much running around the busy streets had stressed her. And now that she was inside of a quiet environment, she felt much more relaxed.

"Hungry?" Rune offered, moving deeper into the cabin and over to a large set of stairs that branched out to another platform up above. "I promise not to feed you peanut butter and jellyfish."

She smiled a little. "I'm surprised you remember that."

As he glanced back at her, his face took on a more serious tone. "I remember everything you've told me, Norah."

She stopped in her tracks. His words of "*you're mine*" echoed in her mind. She wasn't sure if that was some psychic thing he was putting into her head again or if that was her own mind supplying the words. Either way, they were making her stomach do funny dances.

"So, food?" Norah clapped her hands together, ready to change the subject.

Getting so down and serious after her run-in with her brother was already putting her in a weird headspace. It was best to keep things light between them until they could deal with Yenk and get her grandfather's coins back.

"Yes, food. Let me feed you."

The unspoken *to provide for my mate* didn't go unnoticed by her. Or maybe her own mind was supplying the words again.

Following Rune up to the second story platform, they headed down a long hallway, passing a few staff who bowed deeply to him and cast her wary glances. It was strange to think that Rune hadn't taken a random human woman back to his ship

before, and if that weren't the case, she tried not to let it make her feel special.

She didn't want to be involved with a damn prince, let alone one that was dead set on claiming her in his weird Vahking way.

The door to his chambers parted silently and she was taken aback by the opulence of it all. Much like his title, this room was fit for a prince.

"Please, take a seat." He brandished one of the chairs tucked into a large table that was next to a large viewscreen displaying the activity on the docks.

She let him push her in, a panel appearing in front of her embedded into the table with a screen that showed what looked like a menu of sorts. Over her shoulder, Rune reached and tapped at the screen a few times, bringing up a list of foods that looked familiar to her.

"Huh, so you do have human food on this thing."

"I'm well-traveled. What can I say?"

She laughed, scrolling through the menu. "I can't imagine any of this is actually authentic."

"You doubt me that much?" He took a seat opposite from her, pulling up a different screen on his side and tapping on it a few times. "Let me spoil you."

"And how's a prince supposed to spoil a pauper?"

He grinned again. "Easily."

Across the way, the door to his room opened up and an alien with gray skin and large ears that folded over his shoulder appeared. He had a stocky build and a tailored uniform that didn't have a single set of wrinkles in it. His strides were long as he made his way over to them.

He bowed deeply. "What can I get you and the lady, sire?"

"Why don't we have one of everything off the menu? And make sure it's good for human consumption. I don't want my date spending the rest of her evening tied up in the restroom."

The alien bowed deeply again. “Of course.”

As he left, Norah settled back into her chair. The room had a certain ambiance to it—romantic, in a way—that wasn’t lost on her. She knew exactly what he was doing, but she was finding it harder and harder not to fall into his trap. Not when he made it look so cozy and inviting.

“Tell me, beautiful one.” he slid a hand across the table to gather one of hers in his. “What are these coins to you? They must be worth something if they’ve forced you to travel so far.”

She sighed, mainly to herself. “It’s... complicated.”

“How so?”

Getting into her family history, or should she say *shitstory*, wasn’t ever something she was fond of doing. She’d mentioned to him about her upbringing with her siblings but never really the dynamic that went on between them. Sure, one could read between the lines and guess at how she and her siblings got along now that her parents were no longer alive. It didn’t take a genius to figure that out.

With her only grandparent left alive so close to his deathbed, getting those coins back was the one thing she felt she could do right by her grandfather before he passed. She didn’t have much time left, and the longer she spent dallying around with Rune as he was trying to—and actually seemed to be succeeding in—winning her over, was less time she’d be able to spend with her grandfather.

He was an elderly man and was finally succumbing to his old age—a fact that made Norah choke up every time she thought about his imminent demise. It wasn’t fair that the only parental figure she had in her life was slowly slipping through her fingers, and she couldn’t do a damn thing about it.

“Norah?” Rune’s voice jolted her out of her thoughts.

She subconsciously tightened her hand around his. “They’re my grandfather’s coins. They belonged to him before he gave them to me. Lyle had no right to take them and sell them like

he did. Once I get them back, I'm going to my grandfather and letting him have them one last time before..."

She couldn't finish her sentence, the reality of it all too painful. She hated the way her throat tightened and seemed to close up. It made her feel weak in front of a powerful warrior like Rune.

"I'm sorry, Norah. We'll get your coins back."

She felt him squeeze her hand tightly.

She sure hoped so. Because if they couldn't, she really didn't know what she was going to do.



CHAPTER 9

HE TRIED to distract her as much as he could with tales of battles won and extolling the virtues of each dish, mead, and whatever else he could think of that would help brighten Norah's spirits.

He didn't like seeing her fall into such a glum disposition. His once bright and shining star was now fading away into the cold and distant reaches of the atmosphere, slipping through his fingers as she let her mind drift to her family back home on Earth.

It hurt his heart to think about the potential problem they would run into when she actually ended up wanting to leave to go back to her own home planet. Would he be able to convince her to stay? Or was he crazy enough to follow her?

One could never really tell when it came to the Blood Song. It was a bond unlike any other and drove people to do mad things they otherwise normally wouldn't. So far, he'd already been a victim to his own selfish desires, stalking Norah and seeking her out until he could finally bask in her presence once again.

Did any of it really make sense? Not necessarily, but again, when did the Blood Song ever have any proper sense to it anyway?

It worried him that even if Norah's brother was able to successfully secure an audience with Yenk, there was no guarantee he'd be able to buy back those coins. While Rune wasn't as familiar with the underbelly of this forest moon, that

didn't mean he wasn't aware of how valuable trading was as a commodity.

Not to mention, if Yenk had been interested in those coins, it had been for good reason.

As their dinner wound down, and Norah was slowly lapsing back into her quiet and contemplative shell, Rune was having trouble figuring out just how to keep her here with him and not inside of her own head.

She was beautiful, sitting across from him with her crystal glass half filled with mead clutched in her hands as she watched out the viewscreen to the docks below. Workers milled about, working in tight lines that had a certain order to them Rune could appreciate.

A well-rigged machine only worked as good as its gears shifted, after all.

After a long moment, Norah sighed and set her glass down. "I should go."

"What?" It wasn't like him to balk at such a simple sentence, but the thought of letting Norah walk right off his ship and out into the fray of people in Verkoon made him sick to his stomach. After all of this time of finally getting her to trust him, of getting to know each other, now she wanted to leave?

He stood quickly. "I'll go with you."

She gave him a wry smile. "You don't even know where I'm going."

"I'll come with you anyway."

She sighed again. "Rune, don't you have some... I don't know, princely duties to attend to?"

He did, actually, and it was probably high time he went back to the longhouse and checked up on its progress. But this matter with her was much more pressing and would take priority over it all.

"I can spare a few minutes."

“Just a few, huh...” She tossed her napkin down onto the table.
“Look, I appreciate you wanting to come with me but—”

“At least let me walk you.”

It was a last-minute desperate attempt to stay in her company, and he would double over laughing if he witnessed some poor fool trying this same tactic. But now that he was in those very shoes, he couldn't help but find himself tossing his pride aside if it meant being able to continue to bask in Norah's light.

He was sure that if anyone were to see him like this, they'd double over immediately.

“You're not going to take no for an answer. Are you?”

He flashed her a grin. “I don't usually, no.”

She rolled her eyes, but it was more playful this time. A small smile tugged at her lips, and as he came around to offer his arm to her, she hooked her own around it after a minute or so.

“All right, fine. But you're *only* walking me back to the Royal Grand and that's it. Then you really need to go.”

“Of course.”

It was a noncommittal answer and one that he would most certainly be breaking the moment she stepped foot inside of that hovel. He couldn't just let her disappear on him, not like last time.

The Blood Song wasn't going to let her slip away from him. Not when he had her so close.

He could feel the tension in her frame as they headed out of his room and down to the ground level of his cruiser. One of his waitstaff was already on standby, finger pressed to the door panel to open it and let them out. They bowed deeply to him, not standing up until both he and Norah were well past.

“They seem to respect you a lot,” she murmured.

“Yes, I imagine so. I do treat them well.”

She nudged him. “If I were to take an anonymous poll, you think they'd feel the same way?”

That got a laugh out of him. “Well, I hope so. But there really is no telling until it happens. Does this mean you’ll want to come back to my quarters again?”

She shook her head at him. “You’re really something. I hope you know that.”

The trip back to the Royal Grand was filled with idle chatting while Rune tried to keep the conversation light. He didn’t want Norah heading back into whatever state she’d been in at the end of their dinner together. Now that she was out in the open fresh air surrounded by the busyness of the streets, she seemed in better spirits.

And Rune hoped to keep her there.

“You don’t actually think the people of Sumidera are intelligent beings. Do you?”

Rune shrugged. “All I’m saying is that communicating in tonal clicks isn’t exactly a form *of* intelligence. Plus, they haven’t even learned how to utilize all of their appendages to become bipedal yet. They’re much further down the line of evolution than you think they are.”

“There you go again, mentioning appendages...”

Rune grinned. “I told you I’d be more than happy to—”

She cut him off with a sharp nudge to his side. “I heard you the first time. You know, for a prince, your talk is quite scandalous.”

“You should hear my brother, then. He’d probably put you into an early grave.”

“That bad, huh?”

Rune swept the doors to the Royal Grand open to let her inside. “You have no idea.”

Standing in the lobby, Norah’s head swiveled around a few times, scanning the small seating area over by the windows, presumably for her brother. They saw no heads of dark blond hair nor lanky frames bent over one of the chairs resting.

“There’s a chance he did get a meeting.”

Norah frowned. "Shouldn't he be back by now? It's been hours."

"Maybe he's still negotiating."

She shook her head. "I don't like this. Where's Yenk located? We need to go check it out."

"You mean where does he usually stay or where does he usually do business? Because those are vastly different answers."

She huffed at him. "Rune, stop being so obtuse. Can you just take me to where you think Yenk will be? I want to make sure they haven't strung my brother up by his thumbs and dangled him over a pit of alligators or something."

"Of what?"

She shoved at his chest, not moving him at all. "Just take me to where you think he is. Use your best judgment."

He sighed. "I don't think that's a good idea, Norah. Remember what happened last time you got involved in some shady business?"

She stabbed his chest with a finger. "First of all, it wasn't my fault some guys tried to mug me. And second of all, I had you to save the day. Didn't I?"

His chest puffed with pride. "Saved, huh?"

"*Rune.*"

He held up his hands. "All right, all right. I'll take you to where I think Yenk is located. But listen to me. You need to stay right beside me the entire time. Do you understand? No running off and no investigating something shiny on your own. You stay with me unless I tell you to run."

"You sound like we're going into battle."

"Trust me. Treating the undergrounds like a battlefield is the only way you survive them."

"Sounds like you speak from experience."

"Are you listening to me?"

She held up her hands. “Yes, I’m listening. I got it. Stick with you unless told otherwise.”

Rune nodded, resigned. “Fine. Let’s go.”



CHAPTER 10

AS THEY ARRIVED at the back alleys of the underground, conveniently located only a block away from the Royal Grand's front doors, Norah couldn't help but stick close to Rune's side just like he'd asked her to.

At first, she'd wanted to be a little defiant and test what exactly he'd do if she strayed too far off, but that thought was quickly squashed once they were at the maw of what looked like a subterranean den.

It turned out that not only was Yenk a part of the illegal black market her grandfather's coins were likely being trafficked through, but the criminal himself owned a nightclub that seemed to be a hotspot for all such illicit activities.

Norah found herself watching the doors as a bouncer stood at the front, giving the prospective guests hard once-overs before deciding whether they were worthy of getting into whatever kind of establishment was kept locked behind the large double doors he guarded.

Odd-sounding music thrummed out onto the streets from inside of the club while lights and flashes of a glitter-like substance poured out with each hard hit of the down beat. Most of the patrons who gathered outside waiting to be judged weren't necessarily scantily clad like Norah would've figured they would be, considering that's how clubs on Earth worked.

What she did end up finding out was that all of them had some kind of card that was handed over to the bouncer, which was waved over a terminal on his wrist before being allowed to enter.

“What do you think they have?” She nodded over to the line.

Rune shrugged. “Could be credits put on one of those nontraceable chips. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was some kind of cap they have to pay before being allowed access to trade.”

Norah raised a brow. “Trading inside of a nightclub?”

Rune cast her an amused glance. “What? Does Earth not combine its pleasures?”

All right, he had a point, but she absolutely wasn’t going to let him know that. “No, not like that at least.”

“That’s a shame.”

She tried hard not to let her smile show and instead focused on the line to get in. “So, how do we go about obtaining an illegal chip card with illegal credits?”

Apparently, Rune already had an idea because he was pulling up the terminal attached to his hip and quickly scrolling through whatever was displayed on the screen. She tried to get up onto her tiptoes to take a peek at it but Rune’s massive size was much too difficult to even get so much as a glance over his shoulder.

He was engrossed in whatever he was looking at, a contemplative frown crossing over his beautiful features that somehow looked both out of place and exactly right. He was a hard man to peg down, and even with their supposed status of growing closer the longer they stuck with each other, Norah couldn’t help but find him innately fascinating.

Just as she was about to ask him what he was so focused on, Norah spotted two aliens a few feet away from them. They were hunched together as they walked, talking and laughing. They weren’t completely out of place among the other passersby, but for some reason they stuck out to her.

“Wish we could stick around and see that kid’s face when he opens the bag,” one of them was saying.

An echoing laugh answered the other. “I know. Can you imagine what’s going to happen as soon as it explodes? He’ll be blown up into the stratosphere.”

“That is, if he actually lives before it splatters him into a million pieces.”

“What a moron.”

For some reason, Norah’s gut feeling told her that they were talking about Lyle. She had no other indications stating they weren’t making some wisecracks about some other poor and unfortunate soul, but she knew in her heart of hearts that her kid brother was about to be blown to smithereens if she didn’t find him *soon*.

Darting away from Rune’s side, she jogged to the alleyway where the two aliens had come from. It was a long shot. Even if they were talking about Lyly, he likely wouldn’t still be in the area, but she had to try. She had to make sure he wasn’t getting himself entangled into another dangerous situation that was ultimately going to kill him.

It better not be you, Lyle. You better be somewhere safe or I’m going to kill you.

Quite the oxymoron her brain was making, but that was inevitable given the direness of this situation.

“Norah!” she heard a distinctly Rune-sounding voice call after her.

She ignored it and darted down the alleyway, picking up her pace until she reached the end of it where it opened up to a large area that served as the back of the club. Not much was back here other than an old trash compactor and some other aliens crowded around each other smoking something—the smell of which was acidic and burned the inside of her nose the closer she got.

“Hey.” She waved to them all. “You all see a guy running around here? Yea-high? Skinny and looking to trade something?”

They all exchanged looks with each other before pointing down to another alleyway. “Went down there,” one of them said.

Her heart pounded in her chest. So, her instincts were right. It really was Lyle.

She ran down the alley, hoping to catch up with him before he actually did end up opening that bag and ending his life before he even knew what hit him.

She spotted him a ways down, almost at the mouth of the alley. “Lyle!”

He stopped and turned suddenly, looking over his shoulder at her. He indeed had a bag clutched in his hand that he held up to his chest, swinging dangerously to the point where she thought that at any moment it’d go off.

As soon as he realized it was her, he raced out into the streets, bumping into people as he tried to get away.

Damn it, boy! What is wrong with you!

She followed him, aware that for some reason, she felt a crackling energy surrounding her and making the hairs on her arms stand on end. Ignoring it, she pushed her way through the traffic crowding the main sidewalk and headed for her brother.

He got about half a block before his entire body was slammed down onto the ground by some invisible force, the bag in his hands skidding out of his grasp and landing a few feet away from him. Norah’s heart practically jumped out of her chest as she saw it land hard on the ground, and she braced herself for the imminent explosion that was about to occur.

Rune appeared in front of Lyle, his tall frame bending down to grab the back of his jacket and haul him up from the ground.

“Why were you running?”

“I-I I didn’t... she was coming after me!”

“Your sister,” he said, incredulously.

“Yes! I thought she was mad at me! I’m sorry!”

Rune shook his head, tossing Lyle back down onto the ground before stepping around him to reach for the bag.

“Don’t!” Norah screamed, her hands outstretched toward him like she could actually reach out and toss it away from him.

He froze in place, halfway to grabbing it.

“Bomb!” she screamed again.

“B-bomb?” Lyle skittered away from Rune, crawling back on his hands and knees until he was pressed almost flush against the wall of the building next to them. His breath was coming in and out of him in rapid spurts, sweat pouring down his face as he stared at Rune, his eyes wide.

As Norah reached him, she grabbed on to the front of his shirt, and with an amount of strength that surprised even her, she hauled him up off the ground. “Rune! Don’t touch that!”

But it was too late. He was already reaching out for it again and grabbing it up off the ground.

“Run,” he commanded, sounding ever the prince he was.

His tone sent a deep chill that raced down her spine, making her entire body flushed and hot. However, now was not the time to get turned on by an alien prince telling her what to do. They all needed to get away from that thing.

“Don’t!” she yelled again, dragging Lyle backward with her.

They were twenty feet away when the bomb suddenly went off.



CHAPTER 11

THE MOMENT he heard the mechanism inside of the bag click, he knew what he had to do.

It wasn't the smartest decision, but it was the one that would save Norah and her brother from being hit with the crossfire.

Rune quickly threw himself over the bag, covering the entire thing with his body as he braced for impact. Norah let out a bone-chilling scream, one that would most certainly haunt him for the rest of his days, as the bag underneath him exploded.

It lifted him clear off the ground, sending him about ten feet into the air while white-hot heat seared his chest. It felt horrible, but honestly, he'd had worse before. And it most certainly would not be the last time his Vahking toughness would save him from something that would've otherwise killed anyone else.

He landed a few yards away from the siblings, his shoulder crunching under the impact of both his own weight and the force of the bomb throwing him back so hard. He skidded on his back before coming to a halt and facing the sky above.

"Rune!" Norah yelled for him again.

The sound of her frantic voice, coupled with her quick footsteps, had him already trying to sit up. Despite the obvious bits of flesh that had been seared off of his chest from the shrapnel and explosion, he felt otherwise fine.

"Oh no. No, no, no." She knelt down next to him. "Oh god, what are we going to do?"

He let out a chuckle, catching her face in one of his hands.
“Not to worry. It looks worse than it is.”

“You’re bleeding! I can see pieces of your skin coming off!”

Even though she was beside herself with worry, that growing possessiveness inside of him purred at the thought of her caring so much for him. Sure, the sight was probably more gruesome than anything she’d seen before, but that didn’t matter when her hands were hovering over his chest, trying to find a way to stop the bleeding.

“Lyle!” she snapped. “Call for some help!”

“No need.” Rune ran a thumb over her jaw and down to her perfect lips. “I’ll be fine. Us Vahking are quite hardy creatures.”

Her eyes were watery with growing tears. “Don’t be a hero.”

He chuckled. “Trust me. If I was trying to impress you, I would’ve done something much cooler than let a bomb explode under me.”

That surprised a laugh out of her. “You’re insane. I hope you know that.”

“Yes, I’ve been told that from time to time.”

She helped him sit up slowly. Thankfully, his skin was already knitting itself back together, and the bleeding had slowed to a dull trickle. Lyle was already making his way over, his terminal out with his hand hovering over it, ready to call whoever it was he thought would come to this side of the city.

Unfortunately, not many emergency services bothered answering calls when it came from the underground area. Most of the time, they couldn’t be bothered because some kind of emergency was always going on from illegal activities or people being stiffed on sums they had been promised and retaliating justly.

And even if Lyle somehow managed to get someone to respond to him, in the time it would take for a squad to arrive, Rune would already be mostly healed.

He often took this perk of his species for granted, but right now, he was simply glad he was able to survive to see another day with Norah. “I’m all right. I promise.”

She looked at him warily, not exactly believing him. Her eyes darted down, taking in his quickly healing form. Even if she thought he was being “a hero” about it, the proof was right before her eyes that medical services were only going to get in their way.

“I can’t believe they sold me a bomb.” Lyle fisted a hand at his side, clutching his terminal tightly. “I paid so much money to get those damn coins back!”

Norah shook her head at him, looking over her shoulder. “Why the hell didn’t you make them open the bag before you took off? They probably wouldn’t have given you the bag with the bomb in it if you forced them to open it before you forked over the money.”

“I’m not a complete moron. They looked like coins.” He frowned at her. “How was I supposed to know they planted a detonator inside? It’s not like I have a bomb detector on me or anything!”

“Even if it wasn’t a bomb, they clearly scammed you! Now you’re out even more money!”

His face flushed. “Do you even care that I almost died?”

“Of course, I care! But that doesn’t make up for the fact that what you did was stupid!”

Rune watched the argument like a tennis match, bouncing his eyes back and forth between the siblings. Despite the fighting, the conversation was already heading into dangerous territory. Though they both might not know it, their yelling was going to attract the attention of other vagrants looking for trouble.

Not to mention, he was already in a bit of a vulnerable position, still healing and all.

“Why don’t we take this conversation elsewhere?” he offered.

Norah turned to him and stood, holding out her hand so she could help him up. “Sorry...”

“No need to apologize.” Admittedly, he grasped her hand more firmly than necessary and tugged her a little closer when he was finally on his feet again, relishing in the soft gasp that left her lips. “We should reconvene someplace without so many eyes and ears on us and figure out our next move.”

“I’ll tell you what our next move should be,” Lyle shoved his terminal back into his pocket, his shoulders tensing. “I’m getting a gun and going back to find Yenk and make him pay for what he and his men tried to just do.”

“Don’t be stupid, Lyle,” Norah chided. “He’s more likely to grab you by the ankle and shake you upside down until whatever’s left in your pockets comes tumbling out. Then he’ll probably toss you into some compactor before turning it on and making you into minced meat.”

“He tried to kill me!”

“Yeah, I get that,” she snapped. “But don’t go doing something stupid because you want revenge. We have to be smart about this, or he’ll succeed next time!”

“I’m curious,” Rune heard himself saying. “Why would Yenk not take that obscene amount of money I gave you to buy back the coins? Someone of his caliber would see that as a golden opportunity to cut a loss and get more than what he paid for.”

Lyle blinked at him and held his hands up defensively. “I don’t know. I really did fork over the money. I swear.”

“Empty your pockets,” Norah demanded with a scowl.

His mouth went slack. “You... you can’t be serious.”

“Empty. Your. Pockets. Let me see that you don’t still have the credstick.”

“I’m not keeping it for myself!”

“Prove it.”

Letting out a disgruntled sound, Lyle dug into his pockets and turned them right-side out. Aside from his terminal and a few loose scraps, he had nothing else in his pockets.

“See? I don’t have it.”

Norah groaned, putting her hands over her face. “So, you literally paid for a bomb...”

Rune put a hand on her shoulder. “It isn’t his fault he was tricked. Plus, I have plenty more credits where that came from.”

“I can’t believe this...” she mumbled.

Despite his still-bloody appearance, he wished he could wrap her up into his arms and hold her against his chest. Fighting the impulse to do so when she was clearly so upset took him gritting his teeth and starving off the need by rubbing slow circles into her back. “We’ll figure this out. If anything, I’ll have him dragged in under a royal decree.”

Norah lifted her head. “What if he ditches the coins by then? There’s no telling where they’ll end up after that.”

That was true. And while Rune had the reach to look for the coins for as long as possible, that didn’t mean they would ever be found if, for some reason, they were exchanged into the wrong hands. Traders were notorious for fleeing when they found themselves a good trade and all of Rune’s armies wouldn’t be able to catch up with a thief who knew how to evade detection.

“We need to make him pay,” Lyle grumbled.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Rune shot back, continuing to gently touch Norah. “We’ll get your revenge, but we need to play this smart. This is obviously a game to him, so we need to find out why he didn’t take the money you offered him and give you back the coins.”

“It makes no sense.” Norah sighed. “Those coins are simply Earth collector’s items. What would keeping them do for him other than for bragging rights?”

“I can’t imagine there’s much to brag about for tricking a human kid.” Rune shoved a hand into his pocket, pulling out his terminal. The screen was completely busted and the mechanism inside completely fried.

“Hey!” Lyle shot back.

Rune gave him a hard look. “What did those men say to you when they gave you the bomb?”

“Not much. They told me to have a nice day and then left. They took the credstick and said Yenk appreciated the donation.”

“Hm.” Rune put his terminal back into his pocket. “Well, that means we’re going to have to go undercover and find out what Yenk’s real motives are behind keeping the coins.”

Norah looked up at him. “How are we going to do that? Yenk already knows Lyle’s face, and yours isn’t exactly unrecognizable.”

He blew out a breath. “Yes, I realize that. We’ll need to hire someone.”

A beat of silence fell between the three of them, only interrupted by Lyle’s voice. “Why don’t we send Norah in? It’s not like she’d ever be recognized.”

A sudden growl jumped out of Rune’s throat. “No.”

Both Lyle and Norah blinked at him in surprise.

He tried to reel the territorial possessiveness back in, but it was almost impossible. “She’s not going in there by herself.”

Norah frowned. “We can’t trust outsiders to do this job properly. Plus, they’re going to have no idea what to look for. If I go in and spot the coins, I can just take them and run.”

“And what happens if you get caught?” he challenged.

She grinned right back at him. “Good thing I have a tough-ass Vahking covering my back, huh?”

That deflated him a little bit. “Norah…”

“Please? We need to get those coins before Yenk gets rid of them. This is the only solution we have right now, and we need to jump on it before it’s too late.”

He sighed again, running a hand through his hair to fix it. It was still matted from the explosion and being thrown so many feet. “Fine, but you’re following my lead.”

“Deal.”

Rune knew he would regret this. Just knew it.



CHAPTER 12

THEY DECIDED on going back to Rune's cruiser to spend the rest of the night figuring out the logistics of what they were going to be doing when it came to dressing Norah and getting her into the club.

Lyle had given them both the rundown on Yenk's whereabouts and confirmed that his frequency inside of the club was just as Rune had suspected. It wasn't often that he cared to pay attention to mobsters, but Yenk was a loud-mouthed wannabe who was more comfortable bragging about his dark dealings than actually getting his hands dirty himself.

And while Rune could understand the need for caution in a case like this, he was also wary to be sending Norah into a den of vipers. Since both he and Lyle were going to be heading in after her as simple patrons looking for a good time, Norah would be left to fend for herself for however long it took them to actually get into the club.

Rune had no concern about being able to get in. He was a prince after all, but that didn't mean people wouldn't be standing in his way wanting his attention. If that did end up being the case, he'd need to reel himself back in before he caused a scene by shoving people out of the way to get to his mate.

Well, future mate, if all this went according to plan.

"Hey." Norah stopped him right as he reached the door.

He'd brought her to a private room so she could change and refresh herself before they headed back out for the night. It

didn't make him feel like much of a provider as she stared at him with obviously tired eyes and a bit of a haggard expression. She'd been through so much in her short time on this moon that it was a wonder she still was able to look so beautiful.

"Would you like me to bring you up some food?"

She shook her head. "No, I..."

She cast her head down, staring at the floor beneath their feet.

Was she having doubts about all of this? He wouldn't be mad if she was. Coming up with another plan would take time, and they would be losing valuable headway, but if it saved him from having to put her into a precarious situation, he was all for it.

"What's the matter?" Hope sang in his veins.

"Would you... mind staying for a while?"

"Of course, I wouldn't. Let me get us some refreshments."

A hand grabbed his, stilling him. "No, it's okay. Just... stay here and watch the planet rise with me."

Before he could say anything, she tugged him over to one of the port windows. Out in the distance and over the domed view of the port station, the curvature of an orangey-yellow planet could be seen steadily rising over the peaks over the atmosphere. It was truly a beautiful sight, and not one he ever really stopped to appreciate while being so consumed with the longhouse's construction and now Norah.

But this... being here with her at his side watching something so magnificent, felt nice. For the first time in Rune's life, he felt absolutely content, and that familiar restlessness inside of him was quelled for once.

Without thinking, he slipped an arm around Norah and tugged her closer. The press of her body against his was a warm and welcomed invitation, and he leaned into it. This made him happy, feeling her slowly relaxing around him and letting all of those familiar guards down.

"It's so beautiful," she murmured into the quiet.

He turned to her, not wanting to focus on the planet any longer and instead on her enraptured look as she watched the planet rise. She truly was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen with her long golden hair swept back away from her face and those deep blue eyes that always seemed to be filled with a kind of wonder that had long since been lost in his own.

Pieces of her filtered through their shared bond, memories of her watching the sunset on her home planet while her siblings played together. Their joyous laughter was heartwarming as much as it was comforting.

Rune leaned forward, cupping Norah's face and turning it to him. She tore her eyes away from the window, her tongue darting out to wet her lips as she stared up at him.

He couldn't take it anymore.

Her lips felt soft on his, perfectly angled for him to tilt his head and deepen the kiss. However, he didn't get as far as he wanted before she was putting her hands on his chest and pushing him away.

"I-I can't," she stuttered, avoiding his eyes. Her cheeks were flushed. "Sorry..."

Before he could say anything else, she pulled away from him and quickly headed to the bathroom. Rune felt his shoulders sag when his ears picked up on the sound of the lock engaging right after she closed the door.

Damn...



Rune paced for a few minutes, waiting for Norah to come back out, but as soon as he heard the water running inside, he knew he should probably leave her to her business.

It wasn't that he wanted to give her space. In fact, he wanted the complete opposite. But if he truly was bent on winning her heart, he couldn't be as pushy as he desired. His blood sang

for her like sirens in his head the moment he stepped out of her room and the door slid shut behind him.

He hated this, being apart from her, when all he wanted to do was sweep her up into his arms and carry her to bed. Wanting to get her naked and under him wasn't even necessarily what drove him so insane. He wanted to feel the touch of her skin on his, wanted their bodies pressed so close together that he could feel every intake of breath she took and the beating of her heart against his chest.

Maybe she was a little overwhelmed to have someone like him so deeply devoted to her with her hardly knowing him. But the longer they spent together and the more the Blood Song rang through their souls, the worse their separations were going to be.

Not to mention if she was actually serious about leaving him behind to go back to Earth.

What would he do then?

Shortly after leaving Norah's room, he caught Lyle sneaking around the lower level of the cruiser. Lyle's eyes widened the moment he'd been spotted. He had a plate of food clutched between his hands, fresh from the kitchen by the looks of it. He shuffled backward, trying to blend into the background even though he obviously stood out among the opulence.

Rune sighed and reached out to grab him by the back of the shirt collar, guiding him toward the dining area so he could eat like a proper adult and not some roguish child scampering away to some dark crevice.

He forced Norah's brother into a chair and took one of his own across from him. One of his waitstaff appeared with a plate of food not long after and a handle of mead that he drained in two generous gulps.

"Tell me something." Rune sighed as he set his mead down.

"How do I go about winning over your sister?"

Lyle paused in the middle of scarfing down his food, looking up with rounded cheeks. "Wait, what?"

"Wooing her, that's what you humans do, yes?"

Lyle blinked at him. “Are... you asking me how to... get my sister to sleep with you?”

Of course that’s where his mind would go...

“Lyle.” Rune’s tone was chiding, bordering on scolding. “Be serious.”

He swallowed thickly and threw back his own mead to clear his mouth before speaking again. “Well, you could always go with the hunter-gather angle.”

Rune raised a brow. “The... what?”

“You know, being the provider.”

Rune looked around his cruiser. “Is this not providing enough as it is?”

The extravagance alone was enough to make any woman swoon. Then again... Norah wasn’t just *any* woman.

She was his mate, after all. A tough nut to crack, given that he’d had very little time to actually delve into the way she worked internally.

“Well, sure. But you can show her you can provide for other people she cares about too.”

Rune saw the casual shrug to Lyle’s shoulders for what it was—a means to get something for himself without outright asking for it.

“I doubt that buying *you* things is going to make your sister fall for me.”

He huffed. “Well, it’s just a thought.”

Rune leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest and letting himself smile in Lyle’s direction. “It was a good try, though.”

“Look, all I’m saying is that she’s not one for the big stuff. My sister has always liked gifts that have meaning, not some... flaunt of wealth. She’s not like me and you. She likes things to be memorable.”

That had Rune running his hand over his jaw. That was an interesting point. For all that Norah portrayed herself to be, she was quite sentimental. The moment she'd seen that planet coming up over the horizon, she'd immediately thought of her family, and a tender memory followed.

It was safe to say that for all the stubbornness Norah showed him, she was a deeply feeling and caring person who would do anything for the people she loved. Even if it hurt her in the process.

He could tell, even at face value, that the strained relationship she had with her own brother was slowly eating away at her. And while she put on a brave face about it, it was obvious she would've much rather had Lyle in her life than not.

Maybe that was the true way to her heart—not to shower her with gifts or opulence but to bring Norah and her brother back together again. He could help reunite their family and make it whole so she wasn't stuffed with past memories of what they used to be.

Rune smiled to himself. What an excellent plan.

Over Lyle's shoulder, he saw someone coming into the dining area. Norah appeared, fresh faced and looking much more awake than she had before she'd locked herself in her bathroom to get away from him.

Her eyes darted between them, a crease forming in the middle of her brows as she watched them curiously.

“Everything... okay?”

Rune nodded, patting the spot next to him. “Come, sit. We need to go over our plan.”



CHAPTER 13

IT TURNED out the plan was relatively simple.

Norah would be infiltrating the club as a waitress in order to get a closer eye on the activities going on inside. From there, she'd report on her comms back to Rune, who would then be able to sneak in through whatever way was more vulnerable and corner Yenk to threaten him into giving up the coins.

Honestly, it was rather foolproof and a little bit exciting that she was going to be the lead on this assignment.

She could tell that Rune had some reservations about the plan, even though he was the one to have come up with it in the first place. She wasn't about to dig into why he was suddenly giving her the cold shoulder, because she figured if he really wanted to talk about it, he would.

No matter, though, she had a job to execute and a handful of coins to save.

Around noon the next day, she headed to the club and talked to one of the bouncers about a job. It didn't take long for her to be swept inside after getting a hard once-over from the tall four-armed alien and sent over to one of the bartenders manning the counter.

About an hour later, she was given a uniform, told a couple of ground rules, and then sent off to do her job. All in all, it was a whirlwind of an afternoon, but by the time night fell and the real crowds started to trickle in, she was ready for some action.

"*Norah.*" Rune's voice came over her comms. "*I'm outside.*"

She quickly tapped the button on her comms, giving him a short ping to acknowledge she heard him loud and clear. She hoped he wasn't brash enough to drag her brother along—that was the last thing either of them needed—and instead had disguised himself like he said he would when they'd made the plans.

No sense in him drawing attention to himself when they were both trying to remain as circumspect as possible. And while they had a small window in which the prince of the horde could make for the perfect distractions when tracking down Yenk, they had no guarantee it wouldn't lead Yenk into running.

The last thing they needed was to go chasing this guy down through the streets, trying to catch up with him before he went MIA again.

As Norah made her way through the crowded tables, she felt someone grab her arm. “Hey, can I get a drink over here?”

She turned, flashing the patron a smile. “Of course, what can I get you?”

Thank the stars she'd waitressed at a bar for a summer back when she was fresh out of school because while the drinks were nothing like anything she'd ever heard of, the mixology of them was pretty universal. It turned out that aliens also had a unique taste for mixed drinks.

As she took the table's order, a hand snaked around her waist. She jumped slightly when the hand grabbed her ass cheek and quickly turned to the alien sitting next to her. Two rows of teeth grinned at her while black beady eyes stared back at her, clear enough to see her distorted reflection.

Not knowing what to say in order to not blow her cover, Norah stepped aside and finished up putting the drink orders into the system. “I'll have that back for you in a tick.”

As she turned away, she spotted Rune across the club coming in from the front doors. He'd managed to find a rather shaggy-looking wig that he used to cover up his own hair and hid a part of his face. His horns were still sticking out from the top

of his head plain as day, but he'd somehow painted them a different color that was of a bright blue and not the typical black to white tips she was used to seeing.

He wore a baggy outfit that did little to hide his strong physique, but it gave him enough of a pass that people barely glanced his way.

He nodded to her as their eyes met and then made his way over to a table close to the bar.

Norah moved back around to the other side of the bar and then grabbed another tray to load a couple of tumblers full of mead that were on their way out of the lineup. She balanced them carefully in her arms and brought them over to a large table full of Chauncay men who were already grabbing the mead off her tray before she could even set it down.

She scoffed at them and moved away before one of them could spill something on her given how much they were swaying in their seats. Shaking her head, she made her way back to the bar to wait for her other table's drinks when one of them waved her over. "Hey, can I help you?"

"Yes, can we change one of our drinks?"

Norah tucked the tray under her arm and pulled out her touchpad to bring up their drink order again. "What can I get you?"

Suddenly, she felt the sting of a slap hit her ass. A gasp left her lips, surprise dulling the pain from actually hurting.

The entire table laughed.

"Oh, she's a squirmy one," one of them said.

"I like it." And then came another slap on the other ass cheek.

"Who knew humans were so expressive?"

Norah glared at them, feeling her cheeks turn red. "Did any of you actually need anything? Or are you all just being assholes?"

The table snickered. "A mouth on her too!"

Just as Norah was about to open her mouth and snap back at them, she felt a looming presence fall over her.

Her back went ramrod straight with the feeling of pulsing tension filled the air, making the hairs on her arms stand on end. She could taste electricity on her tongue, the crisp and strange sensation filling her with not only fear but excitement.

“Do you think that’s appropriate?” Rune asked. “To be treating a human like breedstock?”

One of them scoffed. “Who cares? That’s all they’re good fo —”

The words weren’t even finished coming out of his mouth before Rune reached over and dragged him up by the front of his tunic. The entire table gasped when Rune slammed the alien down onto the table, the remnants of drink glasses scattering off of the table and hitting the floor with a distracting amount of noise.

Norah jumped back in order to avoid the flailing limbs while Rune held the alien down, pinned on top of the table with what looked like barely any effort on his part.

“Apologize,” he demanded. The alien choked out a “sorry” to him. “No.” Rune lifted the alien up, balancing them over the side of the table easily with one hand while the other was wrapped around a horn in order to bend their neck back to expose it. “Not to me. To her.”

All around them, tables were turning to stare. Norah felt dozens of eyes on her, watching her closely as the disguised prince shamed the alien responsible for assaulting her. Which was all fine and good, but what the hell, Rune had just blown their cover.

“I-I’m sorry!”

“For?” Rune prompted.

“F-for touching you... uh, inappropriately!”

Norah sighed. “Thanks...”

Rune let go of the alien, allowing him crumble onto the ground. She rubbed a hand over her face and set her tray

down.

What a nightmare...

“Are you alright?” Rune asked, crowding in her space.

Ugh, what the hell is his problem? He gives me a two-second silent treatment and then he plays protector? What the hell is going on...

She peeled her hand away from her face. “Can I talk to you? *Outside?*”

Rune frowned.

He clearly knew he’d messed up judging by the look he saw on her face. She doubted he actually considered the fact he’d completely blown their cover and was probably patting himself on the back for a job well done of “saving” her.

What a load of bullshit...

Norah set her tray down and tugged the apron off her waist in order to toss it at the alien who’d slapped her ass. She then grabbed Rune’s arm and yanked him toward the doors, mindful that more eyes seemed to follow them as they went.

Ugh, what a nightmare...

By the time they pushed through the crowd on the dancefloor and came in through the doors, she already had a headache at the base of her skull from all of the stress of having to play waitress while scoping out any sign of Yenk.

“Norah?”

She let go of his arm and spun around to glare at him. “What is your problem!”

He blinked at her. “Pardon?”

“Are you serious? You think beating up people in a club is going to keep you from getting noticed? News flash, you stick out like a sore thumb! You’re lucky no one pegged you the moment you stepped through the doors!”

He slowly let his eyes drop down to his out-of-place clothing and then back up to hers.

She held out a hand. “That’s *not* what I meant. Your energy is what I’m talking about.”

“...my energy.”

“Yes!” she huffed. “Is very obvious you’re a Vahking prince! You bleed authority. How are we supposed to get an intel on Yenk when you keep scaring everyone away!”

His mouth opened, but no sounds came out. After a long moment, he pressed his lips together and then frowned.

Norah groaned. “Take me back to the cruiser. I need a drink...”

“Norah...”

Pushing past him, she stormed off down the street. If he wanted to catch up with her and walk with her to the ship, he could do that. Or if he wanted to stand there on the sidewalk looking like a flabbergasted idiot, he could do that too.

At this point, she was too pissed to care.



CHAPTER 14

NORAH FOUND herself pinned to the wall the second she stepped foot inside of Rune's cruiser.

He loomed over her, his chest expanding tightly as he panted—not from being out of breath but from anger. She could tell just by looking into his eyes that she'd frustrated him and for whatever reason, he seemed to be completely oblivious as to why.

She wasn't going to let this prince wear her down, though. He'd royally pissed her off and had made it harder for both of them to track down Yenk, now that she'd been forced to haul him out of there. There would be absolutely no way that the club was going to let her back in after that stunt.

Not to mention that it had caused such a commotion that people were bound to talk about it even outside of the confines of those seedy walls.

"Why," he growled, "are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?" She was feeling petulant and let herself give in to the feelings.

"You know exactly how you're looking at me." Suddenly, Rune was smirking, leaning in closer to her. "Like you don't know whether to slap me or kiss me."

Norah felt her eyes widen. Never in her life had she ever met a man so goddamn cocky in her life but in a way that made her pussy tingle with desire. What was wrong with her to think that Rune being maddeningly annoying made him so attractive?

It wasn't fair. She had better taste than this. *Right?*

"Well?" He tilted his head to the side, his breath ghosting over her cheek.

Norah reached over and grabbed at the fibers of his wig, pulling it off his head and tossing it onto the floor. He chuckled and, without warning, pressed his lips to hers. The motion jolted her, a sharp feeling of pleasure coursing through her veins that was unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

Flashes of images flew through her mind of her in different positions, bent over, and getting fucked by Rune. It made her flush hot, suddenly having too many layers on her body.

Rune shifted them slightly, pressing her back against the wall with his hips and trapping her there while he deepened their kiss. She shivered when his tongue ran along the seam of her lips, begging for entrance.

She gasped softly, allowing him access, which he took full advantage of. His tongue speared into her, moving in and out of her mouth in the same way she knew he'd do with his own cock inside of her pussy. The thought made her rub her thighs together.

He growled against her lips, somehow sensing that she was thinking dirty thoughts. "You're coming upstairs with me."

She gasped again when she was lifted up off the floor and thrown over his shoulder like a damned sack of potatoes. She didn't fight him, though, her body thrumming with too much heat that was undeniable now that they were so close together.

Rune headed up to the second floor's accommodations, his footsteps quick and eager as they moved through the hall until they reached the end of it. She clutched onto his shoulder, steadying herself when he shifted her in his arms in order to let one of his hands be scanned to access the door.

It slid open slightly, letting cool light spill out into the hallway from inside.

Rune ducked inside, letting the door lock shut behind them.

"Norah."

“What?”

“Tell me now if you want me to put you down.”

Her heart stuttered in her chest. Despite their rather animalistic attraction toward each other, Rune still had the sense to ask her if she was okay—something she greatly appreciated. It wasn't every day that an alien prince checked to make sure you were set to get your world rocked.

Or at least she hoped that's where this was headed.

“You going to show me the obnoxious size of your bed or what?” she shot back instead.

That shocked a laugh out of him. “Naughty...”

She barely had time to register anything before she was suddenly being thrown down onto a bed, her back bouncing on a fluffy mattress before pillows and an expensive-feeling duvet settled around her.

How the hell did he move so fast?

She didn't have time to interrogate him over it before he was crawling on top of her and kissing her again. She groaned into it, letting him touch her wherever he pleased. As much as she was still pissed at him, she couldn't deny that she wanted him.

All that tension building between them was finally coming to a head, and Norah was ready to see it through.

Rune worked his hands around her waist, pulling her up off of the bed in order to slowly start tugging her clothes off of her. First went the button-up shirt and then came the zipper to the slide of her skirt that was tugged up over her chest and discarded away from them. She shivered when the cool air hit her skin, her nipples tingling under her bra.

Rune cupped one of them, squeezing the soft flesh while moving his other hand down to her waist.

“I want to taste every part of you,” he murmured, catching her eyes.

His gaze was intense and filled with primal heat that Norah wanted to tell him to give in to. She'd had boyfriends in the

past who she'd taken to bed, but it was never anything to write home about. But for some reason, being in Rune's lap and feeling his hard cock pressed up against her thigh was making her feel like this was going to be the last man in the galaxy she'd ever sleep with again because everyone else afterward was going to pale in comparison.

It seemed wild to her that's where her mind would automatically go, but the second he unhooked her bra and tossed it before wrapping his mouth around one of her aching nipples, she knew she was done for.

Norah arched her back with a groan, her pussy throbbing as Rune flicked his tongue along her nipple, playing with it. She wanted that tongue on other places of her body, but she was too shy to ask. Even if she wasn't, no way was she going to be able to form any words other than the moans tumbling out of her mouth.

Rune's hand tightened on her waist, his hips moving under hers to rock them both together, building up that delicious friction she so desperately craved. She could feel her panties grow slick, internally begging for him to reach down and touch her there.

He seemed to somehow read her mind again and did just that.

Trailing the hand down her hip, he slid it between her thighs and rubbed along her panty line, teasing her until he was finally right over the patch of damp wetness that had collected there.

"Rune..." she groaned, her hips stuttering against his hand.

He chuckled, popping his mouth off her chest and flicking her nipple with his tongue. "You want my mouth down there. Don't you?"

Her face flushed from embarrassment. "I-I—"

She found herself tossed back onto the bed again and her thighs parted for him to settle between. His big body was warm against her bare skin and felt nice when she crushed her thighs against both of his arms. He chuckled at her while

pulling her panties to the side, finally revealing her pussy to him.

He took a long lap up to her clit and flicked it a few times with his tongue in the same way he had with her nipple. It made her hips buck uncontrollably, her breath stuttering out of her until she felt like she was on the verge of hyperventilating.

The sharp stabs of pleasure made her toes curl, and that was even before she felt him put his entire mouth on her.

As his tongue slid inside of her, she groaned his name again.

“Rune...”

He lapped at her, tasting every inch of her just as he said he would.

Without thinking, she reached down and wrapped her hands around the base of his horns.

He choked out a groan against her. “Fuck...”

She practically screamed when his mouth pressed hard against her pussy, his tongue fucking her until she was being thrust into an intense orgasm. She drove her hips against his mouth, trying to get that tongue of his as deep as possible before her body finally eased up and let her fall back down against the mattress.

She let go of his horns, allowing her arms flop down behind her.

When he sat up slowly, his face was flushed. “You...”

He couldn't even finish his sentence. He looked half-drunk. Had touching his horns done that?

“I want you inside me,” she told him, pulling her hips back toward her chest to display herself for him again.

She felt so fucked out of her mind but she wanted more. She wanted all of him.

He grabbed her panties and ripped them off of her body, tossing the shredded pieces away before backing off of the bed and stripping down as well. His body was magnificent—all hard lines and strong muscles, so clearly defined that she

wanted to leave love-bites all over. It was a stupid thing to want to mark him up for others to see—like she somehow owned him—but at this point she wasn't exactly thinking with her “right” brain.

His cock was huge, and for a split second, fear shot through her system at how in the stars he was going to be able to shove that entire thing inside of her without ripping her in half. It jerked slightly as she continued to stare at it, a bead of cum wetting the head.

Shit, I've never wanted someone so badly in my life.

When Rune finally settled back between her legs again, she let him manhandle her until her legs were pressed up against her chest. He held her in a tight grip, slowly brushing the head of his cock against her entrance until it breached her. Her body clamped down on it immediately, wanting to suck in more of him with even what little he'd given already.

He sounded strained as he said, “Eager.”

She wanted to whine. “You're going too slow.”

He laughed. “Oh really?”

Without warning, he shoved completely inside of her.

She gasped, her entire body jolting off of the bed. “*Oh!*”

He bowed his head, his arms shaking slightly. “You... feel like paradise.”

She could feel every inch of him stretching her, his cock jerking inside of her from how hard her walls were clamping down around him. He simultaneously felt like too much and the perfect fit.

How the hell was that possible?

Before she could think straight, Rune was already moving, pulling almost all the way out only to thrust himself back in until their hips clapped together.

She cried out, her head slamming back onto the bed. “Yes!”

He drove into her hard and fast, taking no prisoners, least of all her. She'd never had a man fuck her like this, let alone a

damn prince.

Her orgasm crashed into her faster than she could've imagined, taking her over the edge hard enough that she saw stars. Rune didn't let up, though, only continued pounding into her over and over again until all that was coming out of her mouth was his name.

"You're mine, Norah." he growled. "I won't let anyone else touch you again."

Her entire body sang with the promise, her pussy leaking so much that she could feel it dripping down onto the bed under her.

"Do you understand me?" he panted, looking her right in the eyes.

She nodded quickly. "Yes... yes!"

"Mine."

"Yours," she choked out, another orgasm already building.

Her eyes slammed shut as it crashed into her, stealing the breath from her lungs while her body shook with pleasure.

She heard Rune groan out a low, "Fuck..." before his hips slowed and she felt a rush of warmth fill her up.

Norah opened her eyes again when Rune pulled her in for another kiss, his thrusting finally coming to a stop until their hips were pressed flush together. Norah never wanted to move again from this spot. She'd be content to live here in this bed with him for the rest of her life if she could.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she slowly relaxed into him.

Now that had been a promise well kept.



CHAPTER 15

WAKING up in Rune's arms had been a pleasant surprise.

She didn't think he would've ditched her in the middle of the night, but it was nice to know that he felt just as content as she had after they'd had sex.

Norah couldn't believe she'd finally given in to her desires, but then again, they'd been getting increasingly harder to ignore the longer the tension between them continued to spool.

Rune lifted his head up from her shoulder, smiling at her with sleepy eyes. "Hello,"

She laughed. "What time is it?"

"Late. We seemed to have slept most of the day away."

"Oops."

Just as he was about to say something, the sound of a comms alert broke through their quiet contentment. Rune sighed and rolled away from her to grab a comms unit that was docked on one of the nightstands next to the bed. The alert message popped up the second it was in his hands, a red scrolling note that looked odd.

He quickly stumbled out of bed. "Shit."

Norah sat up quickly. "What happened?"

"Something happened at the site."

She threw back the blankets covering her. "I'll go with you."



When they arrived at the construction site, Rune pushed her back behind one of the barriers as soon as they came into view.

“Stay here.” His tone was firm as he pressed her up against the barrier.

Yelling was coming from the site down below, which was hard to ignore over Rune speaking to her, even with him blocking her view. She leaned around him, seeing a crane towering over the construction site and spinning wildly around in a circle.

Before she could say anything, Rune jogged down to where workers were standing around looking up at the crane as it went haywire. Down below, sparks flew off where the metal was grinding on its track. The interior of the crane’s window had been smashed out, presumably by whoever had been operating it at the time’s body being flung out.

Nora wandered down past the barrier Rune had put her behind. She watched as he conversed with one of the foremen who had a panel pulled up with flashing red alerts going off on it. From here, it looked like even if they tried to shut it down remotely, it wouldn’t work.

Another set of loud grinding had her wincing and stopping right before she was able to make her way over to Rune. The entire frame of the crane rocked before settling back down with a large thump. It sent shockwaves through the ground, needle-pricking her legs and making them tingle from the vibrations.

Whatever was going on with that crane, it needed to be stopped before the entire thing toppled over into the longhouse that Rune had been working so hard to build. She could tell that this was some kind of passion project for him, and he’d do anything to see it through.

She feared the erratic behavior of the machine would destroy more than just the building. It might take Rune and everyone

here with it.

She couldn't help but be drawn to his determination, though. All her life, she'd been in similar situations where a project she devoted all of her time and energy into didn't pan out or was completely destroyed.

She'd felt that heartache before, and she never wanted to feel like that again. Knowing that he—and the workers—would not yield to this crane problem had her feet moving before she could stop herself. She couldn't stand by and watch this.

She pushed her way through the workers, ignoring their annoyed grunts as she bumped into them. Only when she was more than halfway down to where the crane was anchored into the ground did she hear Rune yelling.

“Norah!”

She took off running toward the crane. She knew she'd have the advantage of a head-start on him, but he was built for speed. That much had been showcased when she'd run away from him the first time around.

The crane let out another whine as metal grinded on metal, and the vibrations of it fighting against the anchors holding it down strained under the pressure. She had dabbled in electrical engineering a few times in her life, going as far as being able to dismantle and reassemble every appliance she owned, and if she could get to where the circuit board was, she could disconnect it from its power source to stop it before anyone got hurt.

The wind whipped around her as the crane continued to spin, causing dust and other stray particles to partially blind her the closer she got.

She felt, rather than heard, Rune yelling at her again to get away from the crane, but she promptly ignored him in favor of crawling onto its base and scooting herself over to where the large power source supplied its energy.

She knew what it looked like when a power source was becoming overwhelmed and putting everyone on the site at

risk. Maybe they didn't recognize the dangers of a machinery malfunction, but she did.

At the base, it looked like some kind of nuclear core—something she had enough experience with that she felt comfortable around it. She was used to electricity on her home planet, but her curiosity had led her to learn about the elemental source that powered most things on Verkoon during her travels.

The source felt hot the closer she got to it and even gave off a tingling sensation when she reached out to hover her hand over it. She knew she had to be careful, even as she got close enough for her skin to sting before she shifted away from it.

Looking around the other parts of the paneling, she finally found what she was looking for—the wires. She needed to sever them, but she didn't have the time to painstakingly detach each one from the source given the way the machine was behaving.

Using a large rock that had been kicked up by the crane, she rolled it over to the board, grabbed a hold of a portion of the wires, and started yanking.

Behind her, the crane screamed.

Among the horrible sound it was making, she could also hear people yelling incoherent words. She could only hope they could see she was trying to help, not exacerbate the problem.

A few of the wires ripped from the board, coming apart in her hands and spraying a shower of pulsating matter around her that stung as soon as it touched her skin. It felt close to what getting burned felt like but with a little more sting behind it.

Like a combination of fire and electricity.

What a horrible combo.

“Look out!” someone shouted before a heavy thump hit the ground, rattling everything.

Bracing her leg onto the board, Norah yanked hard. She didn't have time to bother with a slight burn. It was worth it in exchange for other people's lives.

She was close to severing the connection, and she pulled harder until she was falling back onto the dirt with them scattered over her. She heard another grinding sound that seemed different from the others, this one being more of a slow and steady decline until the crane finally stopped moving.

A hush of silence fell over the entire construction site, one that had Norah rolling out from under the wires and lifting herself up to check whether anyone had been hurt.

“It stopped!” someone shouted again.

She grinned to herself.

“Norah!” Rune called for her.

Slowly crawling away from the wires, she winced as some of the spots that had been touched by them burned slightly. Fresh marks marred her skin, but they didn’t look deep enough to be troubling.

“Norah!” Rune called again.

“Over here,” she said, slowly rolling up onto her feet.

Surprisingly enough, other than the harrowing feeling of the crane possibly coming down at any second, all in all it had been a successful rescue. Just as Norah was about to hop up over to the other side where she knew Rune was waiting for her, she spotted something shiny down on the ground.

Bending over, she scooped it up and brought it up into the light where she could see it better.

What the...

She had to blink a few times to verify she was indeed seeing correctly. In her hand was a small pin that looked identical to the one her brother always wore on the collar of his shirts. It was a replica of an old flag from their planet, slightly rusted over and worn from all the years that it had been passed between the men in their family.

Her hands shook slightly as she stared down at it.

“No...” she mumbled.

“Norah?” Rune’s voice was much closer this time.

She snapped her hand shut around the pin, keeping it from view when his face appeared over the side of the base. He was worried, his expression drawn down into a tight frown as he stared at her.

“What were you thinking? You could’ve been killed!”

Normally, she’d be flattered that he cared so much, but she couldn’t bring herself to feel anything other than anger.

How could her brother do this? *Why* would he do this?

After all Rune had done for him—saved his life from a damned bomb and, even before that, indirectly given him a job so he wasn’t forced to beg for credits on the streets like a vagrant.

How the hell could her own brother almost sabotage all of Rune’s hard work? And for what purpose?

Shoving the pin into her pocket, Norah took Rune’s outstretched hand to help her back over to the other side of the construction site. His chest still heaved from earlier, upset at her for going off without him and running into something dangerous.

She wanted to apologize to him for scaring him like that but her mind was otherwise occupied by some other horrible thought.

What if Lyle’s plan had been to seriously injure Rune?

“Norah,” Rune snapped at her. “Are you listening to me?”

She shook her head and pushed past him, barely registering the words he was saying. She needed to go confront her brother before he did anything else more stupid than this little stunt.

“Norah—” Rune grabbed her arm.

She snatched it back, barking out a sharp, “Don’t touch me!” that she didn’t exactly mean.

The hurt in his eyes almost made her wilt, but it was for the best for the time being. She needed to make sure Lyle wasn’t involved in some horrible plot to harm Rune. And if he was,

she was going to have to figure out how to bring it up to Rune without him demanding her brother's head on a silver platter.

"Norah... wait." She could hear the regret in his tone, and it already made her want to turn around.

But she kept walking, even as all of the workers on site gave her appreciative looks.



CHAPTER 16

DROWNING himself in mead probably wasn't the smartest decision, but Rune had no other options at this point.

It felt like he'd been set back to the very beginning where all of this had started, when Norah had spurned his advances. He was fumbling and unable to understand what to do about Norah's sudden change in behavior, so he let himself wallow in this run-down tavern along with rowdy patrons who were more than happy to disrupt his silent and brooding thoughts.

Three meads deep, he'd taken up residence toward the back of the tavern, away from the chaos of the bar. He couldn't wrap his head around why Norah had told him not to touch her.

Had their lovemaking scared her off?

She seemed fine afterward, even going so far as to fall asleep with him. But had she still been reeling from his jealousy at the club? She'd never liked him coming across as possessive. Had she reconsidered their relationship once the lust had cleared? He had ruined her chance at finding her grandfather's coins with his stunt at the club. He should have known that Norah was as beautiful to everyone else as she was to him. That she'd likely be harassed if she worked in that club.

Damn it all, he should have thought of another way.

He sighed and rested his head against the table, letting his body sag into it. Now what was he going to do? He couldn't let her leave without talking to him. The fire in his veins burned with their separation, and it was becoming increasingly hard not to track her down and demand answers.

That feral part of him wanted to give in to the instincts that had been bred into him from the millennia the Vahkings had existed. Their kind were so protective and overbearing for a reason when it came to their mates. Not only did it serve as a bonding tool, but it helped keep the other partner safe from harm.

Especially after sex.

Groaning, he lifted his head, drawing the attention of a couple of Dorakanis to his left who snuffed at him loudly for disrupting their card game.

At his hip, he felt his communicator signal that he had an incoming message. Unlatching it from his belt, he held up the busted screen, barely able to tell what it said before he answered the call.

“Yes?”

“You look like shit,” came his brother’s voice, his distorted image popping up on the screen. “What happened to you?”

Rune resisted the urge to groan again. Of course, his brother would be calling him in the middle of his crisis. Who else would have the sixth sense to know when he direly wanted to be left alone?

“What do you want?”

Thor snorted. “I heard about the accident at the longhouse project site. What happened?”

Rune couldn’t say he was surprised that that information had worked its way through the grapevine and up to the king himself, but he had very little to say on the matter as of now.

Sure, back when it was actively happening, he’d had plenty of things to say. But that all had been before he’d noticed Norah running over to the machine and diving over the side of it to somehow figure out a way to disconnect it.

He’d been furious to see her doing something so stupid, but that emotion had quickly been overtaken by fear the moment she disappeared behind the machine. He had no idea if she was going to make it out alive or what in the hell she was doing in

the first place to think it was a smart idea to approach a raging machine.

The relief that had flooded through him the moment the machine had stopped and her head had popped over the side of it, unscathed and unharmed, had practically dropped him right to his knees.

And now she didn't even want to be near him.

"You look miserable, brother. Talk to me."

Rune sighed. "The longhouse project has been... stalled for now. Until the crane can be fixed."

"Well, I'm sure it won't take long. If you need an additional set of crew, plenty are on that side of the quadrant you can pick up."

"I know that." He didn't mean for his voice to come out sounding as rough as it did, but there was no taking it back now.

Thor, sharp as ever, immediately picked up on his horrible change in mood. "Why do I suspect your brooding isn't over this project..."

"Can you, for once, not butt into my business?"

"No."

Rune rolled his eyes. "How is the fair queen? Is she still dealing with you or has she smartened up and decided to finally ditch you?"

Thor barked out a laugh. "As if that will ever happen. Addie is more than content being here with me. In fact," even through the streaks in the monitor's plasma, Rune could make out Adeline waving to him. "She's with me as we speak."

Great. A lecture from both of them. He could already see it coming.

"Wonderful," Rune drawled.

"What's got you down?" Adeline asked. "It's not like you to look so glum, Rune."

He sighed. “Well, if you both are so bent on getting involved in my business, I suppose there’s no harm in asking for your advice.”

“Rune? Asking for advice? This must be an alternate reality.”

Thor let out a laugh. “That’s true.”

Rune bit back another remark. “As you both know, I did not come to this moon looking for any kind of connection with anyone. However, it seems fate had other ideas.”

“What do you mean?” Adeline frowned.

“I experienced the Blood Song with a human woman called Norah.”

Adeline gasped. “What?”

“Rune,” Thor’s distorted image came back into view. “Are you sure?”

“Were you sure with Adeline?”

“...all right, point taken. So, what’s the problem?”

Rune sighed again. “She wants nothing to do with me.”

On the opposite end of the call, everything went silent. The sounds of the tavern picked up, filling the void in conversation easily as Rune stared at the fuzzy images of his brother and his brother’s mate. He felt the urge to put his communicator down but held on to it tighter anyway. Whether he wanted to admit it to himself or not, Thor and Adeline were probably the best options he had in terms of finding advice for this specific problem.

And really, they were the only ones he trusted anyway.

It wasn’t like he had a revolving door of friends who, one, knew him as best as they did and two, had their mate completely reject them without any kind of warning.

He couldn’t wrap his head around any of it, no matter how hard he tried. Norah’s actions today were such a stark difference from last night, when she’d let him touch and pleasure her.

Those words she'd said to him after he'd helped her over the base of the crane haunted him.

"Are you sure she wants nothing to do with you?" Adeline finally asked.

"Yes. She was quite upfront about it."

He could tell they both shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, Rune. To be fair..." his brother started. "You can be a bit... much."

That had him scowling. "What does *that* mean exactly?"

"It means that sometimes you go a little overboard. Do you or do you not remember what happened when you tried to snatch the throne from me?"

Rune rolled his eyes. Leave it to his brother to bring up something like that when he was already wallowing in self-pity. "I vaguely recall a time like that."

"Anyway," Thor went on. "You need to show her that you care, not throw a bunch of expensive things at her and expect her to fall in love with you. That's not how humans work, let alone someone like your mate."

"You don't even know her..."

Thor scoffed. "I don't need to. I know *you* well enough."

"Your brother's right, Rune," Adeline jumped in. "You can't expect a woman to fall in love with you if you don't show her your authentic self."

"That's all I've been doing, yet she still rejects me."

"Then obviously she senses something you're not telling her or letting her know about you. We human women know when our men are trying to play us." Adeline's tone shifted slightly, as did the images on the screen.

He knew from the way she spoke, she was definitely giving his brother that *look* of hers. He didn't envy the king at all when it came to his warrior of a mate. She was tough as any of the Vahking horde, and anyone who mistook her as weak would soon learn otherwise.

“Well, I don’t know what to do at this point. She really is giving me the cold shoulder.”

“Go find her and apologize, even if you don’t know what for yet. That will at least get her to talk to you. Even if it’s just to ask what for.”

Actually... that wasn’t such a bad idea.

He still needed to help her get her coins back, anyway. And maybe apologizing for the club incident—if that truly was still upsetting her—would be enough to get Norah to come around again.

He shifted his communicator in his hands. “Thank you both.”

“Good luck, Rune.” He could tell Adeline was smiling, even if he couldn’t exactly see it through the fuzz. “Let us know how it goes.”

“I will.”

And with that, he let the call drop.

Time to go find his mate.



CHAPTER 17

UP until that point in her life, Norah had thought she had her brother figured out.

Lyle wasn't the most devious of people. He tended to be a reactionary person with impulse control issues and what any typical little brother suffered from, which was always trying to best his siblings.

When they were growing up, Norah found his brash nature to be more endearing than annoying, thinking eventually he'd grow out of it. Surely, she'd thought, Lyle could only get into so much before he figured out that sticking himself into dicey situations only resulted in a horrible outcome.

But to her surprise, her brother actually never changed.

Instead, he became more bullheaded than ever and never seemed to learn from the consequences of his actions. It had been part of the reason why she's stopped bailing him out of trouble while he was still on Earth.

She found no sense in constantly fixing his mistakes when he never seemed to appreciate the efforts or change, learn, and grow.

Norah figured eventually, with enough fuckups, Lyle would have to figure himself out.

But unbeknownst to her, he was doing the exact opposite and actually getting into more trouble than she could've ever imagined.

Finding his pin at the construction site had been the last straw. Funny enough, she'd thought the coins had been, but that

damned pin had really solidified her decision to drag him off this moon and go back to Earth once and for all.

She knew Lyle was bound to get into more trouble, but that didn't mean she was going to stand by and watch him dismantle everything Rune had worked so hard for.

Rune could act like it was just a project, but she knew what it really was—a chance to prove himself. She knew how it felt to be an outcast, and she wouldn't rip away his opportunity to prove that he could do something right. He was more than that.

And so was Lyle. If only he could see how much he was like the prince.

Whatever Lyle's reasons were for trying to completely demo the longhouse weren't good enough, no matter how he tried to spin it.

She wouldn't—*couldn't*—knowingly let her brother run around on Verkoon's moon unsupervised any longer. The second she got those damn coins, she and Lyle were going back home, and he had no choice in the matter.

The thought of leaving Rune behind left her with a pang in her chest, but sticking around any longer she was afraid would result in more destruction coming into his life. In good conscience, Norah couldn't let that happen—not when she could stop it.

When she headed back to Rune's cruiser, she caught sight of her brother sneaking out of it and heading down toward the entertainment district where Yenk's club was located. She had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach, wondering if her brother was trying to meet up with Yenk for some reason, but she was pleasantly surprised that when she followed him, he passed right by the club and kept heading south.

Tailing him was actually relatively easy, considering he had no awareness of the dangers that lurked in this city, let alone his own sister. He'd kind of always been like that, though, oblivious to everything except for himself—another charming quality about him that had soon turned into something annoying once he got older.

Surprisingly, Lyle led her back to the construction site of the longhouse—something she absolutely wasn't expecting.

She watched with a heavy heart as he quickly climbed over the barrier leading down to the site, which had been blocked off after she left to go find him, preventing anyone else from accessing it while the rest of the crew presumably went home for the night.

He jogged down to the crane, which now was slightly bent at an angle from how hard it had been spinning before Norah was able to disconnect it. Lyle climbed over the base of it and dropped down behind it to where the power source was, disappearing from view.

She sighed to herself and followed him down. "Cleaning up the evidence?"

Lyle's head immediately popped up, his eyes wide. "N-Norah?"

She glared at him.

He really thinks I'm an idiot. Maybe I am for thinking of trusting him.

Instead of answering, she dug into her pocket and pulled out his pin, holding it up between her fingers to show him. It caught the light briefly, shining just enough for him to recognize it.

"I-I..."

"Are you insane?" she asked. "Do you have any idea how many people you could've hurt by pulling a stunt like that?"

"It's not what it looks like!"

"Save it, Lyle." Her hand clasped around the pin again, the sharp edges of it digging into her skin. "I don't want to hear it. Once we get Grandpa's coins back, I'm taking you back home with me, and I'm not hearing any arguments about it."

"B-But..."

"No. No more. I'm done playing around with you. I can't believe you would do this to Rune. He's literally trying to help

us and you try to destroy his project. What is wrong with you?”

Lyle frowned, his eyes watering slightly. “I’m sorry, Norah. I-I didn’t mean... this was all before...”

“Before what?” she snapped.

“Well, before I knew who he was. I set this up almost an entire week ago. I didn’t think it would still go off!”

Norah’s mouth parted slightly, “What the hell are you talking about?”

Lyle groaned, disappearing behind the crane once again.

“Before I sold the coins! I got a side job doing errands for this Hemnak down in the underground. And before you say anything, it didn’t start out as being shady!”

Norah put her hands on her hips. “What does any of that have to do with this mess?”

“I’m getting there!” Lyle’s voice sounded strained despite his moody tone, almost like he was lifting something heavy.

“Anyway, so I was going around doing these odd jobs, and up until a week ago, it was all normal stuff. But then I was told if I completed this task, I’d get paid a bunch of credits.”

“What *task*?”

Lyle’s face finally appeared again. “To plant this thing.”

He lifted up what looked like a black box with a small panel on the front. He tossed it over to Norah before climbing over the side of the crane and landing down next to her again.

“I didn’t really know what it was for until I planted it.”

Norah shook it a few times, hearing the inside of it rattle. “Is this a bomb?”

Lyle rolled his eyes. “No. When I attached it to the power supply for the crane, it turned on with some weird timer. I didn’t know what it did. I thought it was just recording data or whatever. It wasn’t until I heard that the crane went crazy earlier that I figured it was probably from that box I planted.”

She sighed heavily, digging her fingers into her eyes. “Lyle...”

“I didn’t mean for it to happen! I just needed the credits, so I took the job.”

“So then why the hell did you sell the coins?”

He hesitated. “Because I needed more credits.”

Norah gave in to her desire to smack him upside the head. “You’re honestly such a troublemaker. I don’t know how I dealt with you for so long.”

He huffed, rubbing the spot. “Look, I’m sorry. Okay? If you want, I can apologize to Rune. I seriously didn’t know it was going to happen.”

Norah hated that she wanted to believe her brother. His eyes were genuine as he looked at her, and the slight fear in his stance over whether or not she was going to spit fire at him was all too telling. Honestly, he *should* be scared of her. He was lucky she didn’t smack him upside the head again for being a complete dumbass.

“Fine.” She pointed. “But I swear, if you don’t actually give Rune a good apology, I’m not stopping him if he wants to drag you to some labor camp and leave you there.”

Lyle’s mouth dropped open. “Y-you can’t let him do that!”

“Then apologize properly.”

His face went a little red. “Fine... I will.”

“A *good* apology. One starting with explaining why the hell you’re like this and why you’d be dumb enough to take a job like that.”

“Okay! Fine! I get it!”

She sighed, tossing the box back to him. “Good. Now get rid of the evidence before someone sees you with it.”

“Okay... are you really going to drag me back to Earth after we get the coins back?”

“Yes.”

“What about Rune? I thought you two were...”

As his voice trailed off, she frowned. She wanted to get back home to their grandfather before he was on his last leg, but that still left her heart hurting. She couldn't ask Rune to come visit her, not when he was a prince and was clearly very busy with the longhouse project.

Still... she wished she could, even if just for a little while. Even if it was to do something completely stupid like meet her family.

Norah rubbed her hand over her face. What was the world coming to? Her, thinking about introducing an alien prince to her family. And here she thought she'd be single for the rest of her life. Now she was contemplating some imaginary future with her family and Rune all gathered around for a meal together.

"Uh... Norah?"

She pulled her hand away from her face. "I'll figure out the Rune thing. Get rid of the box and meet me down at Yenk's club."

"Not Rune's cruiser?"

She shook her head. "I don't want him tracking us. Yenk's club. If you're not over there in half an hour, you're not going to like what happens."

His spine straightened. "Got it. Meet you at Yenk's."

As he ran off, Norah sighed with only one other thought left in her mind.

What *was* she going to do about Rune?



CHAPTER 18

AFTER DOWNING the rest of his mead, Rune stumbled out of the tavern feeling a little worse for wear.

It wasn't that he didn't want to talk to Norah about everything, but the thought of being so vulnerable with someone, even with the one person he was destined to be with, was a little daunting.

What if she rejected him again?

It was one thing to be rejected like he had at the construction site and another after being honest and open about who he really was. He never thought Norah to be cruel, but that didn't mean she couldn't destroy him.

He wanted whatever she would be willing to give him.

All he hoped for was that she gave him a chance to prove to her that he was worth it, that he'd take care of her and make her want for nothing.

Heading down the street, Rune bumped into a few beings, still feeling a bit tipsy. Mead never typically got to him, given his size and all, but coupled with the conversation from his brother and mate, it was all making his head swim.

He'd never considered himself a coward. By all means, he was a fierce warrior who strived to never back down from a fight. But this was entirely different. He'd wanted, for the first time in his entire life, to go back to his ship and hide out until he could get his bearings.

Or better yet, bury himself in work.

Too bad the longhouse was on hold until they could get a tech to fix the crane.

Rune heard the telltale sign of music being pumped onto the street from a club nearby, one he recognized as he grew closer to it as Yenk's club. The thought of that man made his blood boil. If only he could get his hands on him and demand to know where those damn coins were.

What he wasn't expecting to see as he passed by was both Norah and her brother waiting outside of it.

"Norah?"

She whipped around, her eyes widened at seeing him. "Oh, Rune."

He held back a frown. He didn't like the way she said his name, as if seeing him made her wary. What had he done to make her feel like that? He tried replaying through their last night together.

Over and over all he could come up with was... nothing.

"What's going on?"

Lyle's entire body went stiff. "Uh..."

Norah sighed at him and moved around him to grab at Rune's arm. "Come on."

"Wait, Norah." He slipped a hand around her wrist, stopping her from trying to move them off somewhere else. "I wanted to talk."

Her eyes darted around the street, not exactly looking at him but focusing on everything else around them. "That's fine, but —"

"Please, listen." He tightened his hold. "It's important."

Her eyes shot up to meet his.

Behind her, Lyle shifted on his feet, clearly uncomfortable.

But Rune didn't care. He needed to get out what he'd wanted to say to her since the day he'd met her. Thor had been right, being honest was the only way to win her heart, and trying to

woo her by showing her the extravagance of being a prince was nothing compared to the deep and meaningful connection he wished to have with her.

“I know I’ve been... rather obtuse when it comes to being around you. But...” His thumb grazed over her skin lightly. “I wanted to be transparent. All my life I’ve never thought that I’d meet a woman like you, yet the moment you walked into my life, I knew I’d do anything to keep you. Norah... I don’t want to lose you, and whatever I did to offend you, I am sorry. I apologize for it all. It was never my intention to hurt or harm you in any way.”

She blinked a few times at him, her gaze softening. “Rune...”

“No matter what happens, I want you to know that. We haven’t gotten much time to get to know each other, but I already feel like I’ve known you for lifetimes. I’m so happy to have you here with me, and I hope one day you will feel the same.”

Behind Norah, Lyle choked into the crook of his arm, turning his body away completely from them.

“I...” A smile crept over her face. “Wow. You really have a way with words. You know that?”

He laughed. “Yes, I have been told that from time to time.”

“Hopefully not by too many.”

“Only enough to stroke my ego every once in a while.”

She shook her head, still smiling. “Thank you for apologizing. But you didn’t do anything.”

“Back at the longhouse. You retracted from my touch. You told me not to touch you.”

She winced visibly. “Oh... right. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“You didn’t?”

She shook her head again. “No. I was focused on, uh... something else. But I didn’t mean for it to come across like

you hurt me or anything. I'm sorry. That was on me for wording it poorly."

Rune felt his entire body sag with relief.

She didn't hate him.

"Are you guys done?" Lyle muttered.

"Actually." Norah turned around and reached out to grab her brother by the shoulder. "Someone else *does* have some apologizing to do."

"R-right now?"

"Yes." She wiggled her hand out of Rune's grip and steered her brother directly into his path.

He looked between the two siblings, trying to assess what, exactly, was going on. With Lyle, it could be any number of things his sister was forcing him to apologize for. He couldn't imagine it was anything horrible. Maybe he did something brash like spray paint the outside of his cruiser, or maybe he got mixed up in some other shady business that he was going to need to be bailed out of in order for Norah to keep him out of trouble.

Either way, he wasn't prepared for the next thing to come out of Lyle's mouth.

"I'm sorry for destroying your crane."

Rune stared. "Pardon?"

Lyle's face flushed immediately. "I... okay, look. It wasn't my fault—"

Norah smacked him on the back of his head. "Don't start. Just apologize."

Rune looked between them again. "Apologize... for what?"

Lyle swallowed tightly. "Your crane. I... um... I destroyed it."

That had Rune laughing. "It was a mechanical malfunction. Not the work of someone accidentally turning the rig on the wrong setting. Plus, you weren't at the site."

“No.” Norah sighed. “Rune, you don’t understand. He *made* it malfunction.”

“How so?”

Lyle’s eyes turned down to his feet. “So, I was doing a job for someone from the underground and they gave me this box to put on the back of the power source. I really didn’t think it would do all of that, though. It just looked like some kind of counter.”

Rune sighed, pinching his brow.

What a mess...

“I’m really sorry...”

As he let his hand drop from his face, he gave Lyle a sharp look. “You’ll be giving me the name of whoever gave you that job. I’ll hear no backtalk about it.”

Lyle nodded quickly. “Of course.”

Norah frowned. “What are you going to do?”

“Track them down and make them pay for the repairs. I suspect the crane was sabotaged as a way to offset the project’s timeline.”

“Who would do something like that?”

“Someone who knows that the longer the project goes on, the more money they’re paid.”

“Someone like Yenk...” Lyle said.

Rune nodded. “Just another reason to apprehend him and get him off the streets. The longer we let all of this drag on, the more we’re all going to suffer for it.”

Rune’s hand tingled when Norah reached over and grabbed it. “We’ll work together. With all three of us looking for him, we’ll find him. This city isn’t *that* big.”

It charmed him greatly to see the determination in her eyes. That was something he admired about her. No matter what happened, she never let that stop her from moving forward.

She was a warrior in and of herself, and whatever lay in the future, she was ready for it.

He squeezed her hand, letting the fire in his veins fuel him too. “Yes, we will most certainly take care of this growing thorn in our sides.”

She grinned. “I like the sound of that.”

Rune’s hand felt cold the moment she let go of his in order to grab her brother by the shoulders and shake him slightly. “No more getting into trouble. You hear? I don’t want to have to bail you out of some cell while we’re trying to get Yenk off the streets.

“I *swear* I won’t.”

“Good.” As she let him go, she nodded her chin. “Why don’t you go back to Rune’s ship and chill out for a while? You’ve had a long day.”

His shoulders sagged. “Yeah... All right, I will. Rune, I’m sorry, again.”

Smiling a little, he reached over and clapped Lyle on the shoulder. “Thank you for your apology. Heed your sister’s words and go back to my cruiser.”

And with that, Lyle turned and ran off.

Rune stood with Norah, watching him disappear into the throng of people. Hopefully he was good and actually listened to his sister and did as he was told. Though, only time would tell on that one. Still, he could see that Lyle was trying to behave. He simply seemed to have a knack for attracting bad influences.

“Thank you,” she said, turning back to him. “For hearing him out.”

Rune flexed his fingers at his side, fighting the itch to run them over her perfect face and stroke her cheek. His affection for her was astronomically hard to fight, even with them both standing there with loud club music pouring over them.

“Of course. I know he means well.”

Norah rolled her eyes. “Most of the time. Although sometimes I really wonder how in the world he gets himself into these situations.”

He laughed softly. “One will never quite know.”

“True.” She smiled a little. “Hey listen, I am sorry about what happened at the site. I feel bad that you thought you did something wrong. I knew you were worried about me, but I was so focused on finding Lyle that I wasn’t really thinking.”

This time, he didn’t fight the urge. He brushed his fingers over her cheek and tucked a piece of her golden hair behind her ear, loving the way her face reddened from his attention.

“I know how you can make it up to me.”

She smiled a little at his teasing. “Oh really, and how’s that?”

“Come on a date with me.”

“A date? Where? Don’t we have a criminal to find?”

He chuckled. “We do, but I think tonight we should relax and figure everything out in the morning. I’d like to spend some time with you before we have to deal with Yenk and demand your coins back.”

She knew she should probably get back. She was worried about her grandfather and had been rushing to see him before it was too late.

But she had spent so much of her life dedicated to her family. Shouldn’t she get to enjoy some of it, too? And if that made her selfish, so be it. She was going to take this night for herself and hope there weren’t consequences to pay.

“True... and a night out on the town does sound nice.”

“What about on a lake?”

Her eyes lit up slightly. “A lake? Where?”

“It’s a surprise. Why don’t we head back to the cruiser to freshen up and then we can head out.”

She grinned. “Sounds good to me.”

His blood sang.

He couldn't wait to finally have her all to himself once more.



CHAPTER 19

SHE NEVER THOUGHT GOING on a date with an alien prince would be *this* stressful, yet here she was, standing in front of the mirror fixing her hair for the sixth time.

Since deciding on coming to Verkoon's moon, she'd only packed the bare essentials, not planning on sticking around for very long anyway. Why would she need to wear something sexy to traipse around the damn city looking for her stupid brother? It would've only attracted unwanted advances.

Of course, she hadn't managed much better in plain pants and a tank top. But then Rune had come and saved her, and the rest was history.

Still, now she was kind of regretting not packing at least a few hair ties.

Groaning at herself, she twisted her hair back from her face and turned her head a few times in the mirror. Norah knew she wasn't ugly by any means, but Rune was just ethereally gorgeous, so how could she realistically make sense standing next to him?

She had no idea what this "lake date" entailed and was even further confused when he told her to dress nicely but not enough that it would be difficult to walk. What did that even mean?

Ugh, I'm so not cut out for this.

Norah jumped when the door to her room slid open.

Looking over her shoulder in the mirror, she spotted Lyle raising a brow at her and leaning in through the doorway.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m... going on a date?”

He stared at her. “With the prince?”

“*Rune*. And yes. Why?”

“Oh.”

Suddenly feeling self-conscious, she wrapped her arms around her waist and turned to look at him. “How do I look?”

“You’re not seriously asking me that.”

“Oh, come on, Lyle! Who else am I supposed to ask!”

“I don’t know! Someone else?”

She gestured around to the empty room.

Lyle groaned. “Ugh, fine. Yeah, you look fine.”

“That’s it? Just fine?”

“What am I supposed to say? I’m not giving you advice on how best to get laid.”

What a brat.

Norah grabbed the vial of hair oil she’d found in the bathroom and chucked it at him. It caught him right on the cheek, bouncing off and hitting the wall next to him.

“Ow! What the hell!”

“Brat.” She turned back to the mirror and tried fluffing her hair again.

Should she put it up or leave it down? She did spot some hairpins in the bathroom, but would they even work with what she was going for? She wanted to look good for Rune but not seem like she was trying too hard to impress him. That wasn’t her style. If she was going to go on this date, she wanted to be her authentic self.

“Jesus,” Lyle muttered, walking over to her. “Would you quit picking at yourself?”

Before she knew it, he was grabbing her by the shoulders and turning her away from the mirror. He did some quick flips of

her hair and fixed the collar of her shirt to press it down against her collar bones. His eyes flitted over her pants before he unbuckled her belt and pulled it out of the loops completely.

“All right, that’s better. Now you don’t look so stuffy.”

Norah smiled a little. “Think so?”

“Yeah, you don’t have a dress or anything?”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly expecting to be chasing you around the city in a dress.”

“All right, you got me there.”

She nudged him lightly. “You going to be okay by yourself?”

Lyle grinned. “Yeah. Some of the staff offered to bring me up a shit ton of food. And Rune’s got an entire theater on the third floor. Isn’t that insane? You could be living in this mansion if you play your cards right.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. It’s just a date.”

Lyle gave her a hard look. “You like him. Don’t you? So, what’s the big deal?”

Maybe the fact that he thinks we’re soulmates or whatever...

“I don’t know.”

“Come on, Norah. He’s a *prince*.”

She pushed away from him, moving around the giant room to put some distance between—what? Her brother? Her own feelings? Everything was starting to collide, and it was making her feel overwhelmed. She knew she and Rune together was a bad combo—not because of their personalities but because they came from two separate worlds.

How could someone like her be with a damn prince?

“Oh great, you’re spiraling.”

Norah flopped down onto one of the lounge chairs and draped herself over it. “Stop it.”

Lyle followed her over. “You need to stop getting in your head about it. Who cares if he’s a prince? He likes you. That should

be enough.”

Rolling her head to the side, she stared at her brother. “Are you... actually giving me love advice?”

He sank down onto the couch across from her. “This is never going to happen again, but I’m trying to give you my blessing.”

That had her laughing. “Wait, seriously?”

His cheeks reddened. “Yes. So pull yourself together and go win yourself a prince.”

Norah sighed softly. “What if it turns out he actually doesn’t like me? He *thinks* he does, but that’s all because of this weird... alien thing he’s got going on.”

“Alien thing?” He raised a brow at her. “Like what?”

“Apparently Vahking’s have a... way to tell who their soulmate is.”

“So you’re telling me... a prince told you that you were his soulmate and you’re still on the fence...”

“Stop it. You make it sound like it’s simple.”

“Because it is? Norah, you have a damn prince wanting to marry you. What’s the issue?”

Grabbing the pillow from behind her head, she tossed it over at him, hitting him square in the face. “The *issue* is that I’m just some human. And he’s a whole-ass prince. Did you forget that? Plus, I want to go back to Earth to see Grandpa before he passes. Which you should *also* want to be doing.”

Lyle blew out a breath, fluffing the pillow over his lap a few times. “Yeah, I know... how’s he doing by the way?”

Norah sat up, ready to lecture him again about suddenly up and abandoning his family, but she caught the genuine emotion in his eyes, making her sigh. “He misses you.”

Lyle deflated. “Really.”

“Yes. He talks about you all the time, wondering when you’ll come around and visit.”

He picked at the tassels on the sides of the pillow, quiet for a moment. “Oh...”

“So, when we get back to Earth, you should go visit him.”

Sometimes harping on this subject felt like it was falling on deaf ears, but this time around, it seemed that Lyle was actually listening to her for once. He seemed remorseful over not seeing their grandfather, which she hoped he was. That man had done more for her and her siblings than anyone else ever tried to. He loved them all deeply, and it would be such a cold and sad day when he finally passed.

She knew Lyle would regret nothing more than not seeing their grandfather for the last time before he passed away. She wasn't going to let that happen, even if in the moment, Lyle hated her for it.

“Alright.”

She smiled. “Good.”

Standing up, she fixed her clothes again before blowing out a breath. Time to go see what this date of hers entailed.

Lyle glanced up at her. “Go snag yourself a prince.”

Norah laughed. “Alright, twist my arm about it.”



Their date landed them on a beautiful lake out past the city limits and on a beautiful yacht that was more high-tech than anything Norah had ever seen in her entire life. Not only was the yacht fitted with android-like staff, but state-of-the-art panels were everywhere, simulating not the inside of what a boat looked like but a beautiful moonlit meadow.

Out the windows, Norah could see the lake's water shimmering slightly from the yacht's dimmed lights, giving the entire place a romantic feel.

“Rune, this is incredible.”

He smiled at her, clearly happy for the praise, and brought her over to a table by one of the large windows facing the water. Candles had been lit with actual fire that danced along as they sat down. She stared at them mesmerized, not at all believing what she was seeing.

“How did you get your hands on these?”

Rune’s smile lifted even more. “Oh, I have my ways.” He cleared his throat. “I... did a little research on human courting customs. It was mentioned a few times that a candle-lit dinner was a must.”

Oh my god... he’s killing me.

“Wow,” was all she could think to say. “I’m... speechless.”

“In a good way, I hope.”

She grinned. “Definitely.”

“If this is impressing you, you’ll love the food.”

Just then, one of the staff came over with a huge tray balanced in its arms. It placed a few plates down, all of which were steaming and smelled fresh off of a kitchen grill. Norah put her hands over her heart, looking over the food.

“Are... how the hell did you get your hands on potatoes?”

“I told you.” Rune slid a glass of mead to her. “I have my ways. Now, they’re not all actually Earth foods, but I tried to have the staff simulate them as closely as possible. Hopefully they taste the same. You’ll have to let me know so I can tweak them for next time.”

Her heart fluttered at the *next time* comment.

“You’re really serious about this date, huh?”

“I told you. I want to impress you.”

She felt her eyes soften. “Rune, you don’t need to keep trying to impress me.”

He faulted just then, his knife pausing over what looked very close to a beef steak. “Yes, I...” He sighed. “I was told to stop doing that.”

“Oh? By who?”

“My brother.”

Norah tilted her head. “You have a brother? Well, actually, I guess I should’ve figured you had siblings. You are royalty after all.”

“Just the one, fortunately. I don’t think I could handle any more of him.”

Norah laughed.

“Anyway.” Rune waved his knife before sinking it into the meat on his plate. “I may have mentioned you to him and his mate. They told me to stop trying to impress you with grandiose things.”

“They seem wise.”

“Yes. They are. But I suppose that comes with the territory of being king and queen of the horde.”

Norah nodded, picking up her own fork and scooping up some mashed potatoes onto it. She slid it into her mouth, focusing on the taste of it. While it wasn’t exactly like the mashed potatoes back on Earth, it was fairly close. The texture was right but the taste was slightly sweeter and closer to a sweet potato than a russet.

But nonetheless, it tasted wonderful.

“How is it?”

“Delicious. Thank you.”

He grinned. “I’m glad.”

“Tell me more about your brother.”

Rune sliced cleanly through his meat, setting down his knife with careful fingers while he moved his fork back into his dominant hand. He gently lifted a piece up onto it and held it close to his mouth. “What’s there to tell?”

“Do you guys get along? I mean I assume you do if you told him about me.”

The question made him pause. “We... do and we don’t.”

Norah tilted her head. “That sounds complicated.”

“Well, it’s hard to reconcile when you plot to overthrow his usurpation of the throne.”

Her eyes widened. “Wait, what?”

“It’s a long story.” And with that, he popped his food into his mouth.

Norah stared at him while he chewed slowly. “You can’t *actually* expect me to let that slide. Right? I’m obviously going to ask questions about that.”

Rune’s eyes narrowed as he continued to chew, and she was starting to suspect he’d done it on purpose in order to save himself from answering the question. Too bad she was never one to take a hint nor drop a subject when it seemed to benefit the other person.

“Rune.”

After he swallowed, he said, “Yes?”

“Tell me everything.”



CHAPTER 20

WHEN RUNE FINISHED HIS TALE, he sank back into his chair, suddenly feeling incredibly exhausted.

He didn't often tell people of his past. Actually, now that he thought about it, he'd never told anyone before. Common knowledge among the horde was typically only reserved for the bigger events that happened politically.

Of course, it was no secret that Rune had tried to start a rebellion against his own brother, but the ins and outs of why he'd done so in the first place were never something that were discussed publicly, especially with people who knew him.

All anyone needed to gather was that it happened and that both Thor and Adeline stopped it. That was that.

But here he was, telling his entire sordid story to the person who made his blood sing. The moment he felt his mouth opening after her demand, the flood gates opened up, and soon he couldn't *stop* talking. It felt rather cathartic to confess all of his sins, even if they put him in a horrible light.

A weight had been lifted off his shoulders and for the first time in a long time, he felt free.

"Wow," Norah finally said, staring at him.

Nerves kicked up in his stomach, making it feel tight with worry. Would she look at him differently now? They'd finally gotten onto the same page after constantly misunderstanding each other, and now that he'd confessed the worst of himself to her, would that break that fragile bond that had only just begun to form?

Rune looked down at his lap, trying to remain as unbothered as possible. “Yes. Well. That’s all of it.”

“So... Thor and Adeline... they forgave you right?”

“Yes, for the most part. In fact, my little rebellion brought them together, so I’d say I did them both a favor.”

Surprisingly, Norah laughed. That had him raising his eyes again to meet hers.

“True. And hey, maybe they can name you when it comes time to do their renewal vows. Do you guys do those?”

Rune felt the corners of his mouth tick upward. “No. But I’m sure Adeline is aware of what they are. Who knows what will come of them in a few years. All I know is that whatever Adeline needs, my brother will provide for her.”

“That’s sweet.”

Rune lifted a shoulder. “It’s what the Blood Song does. We Vahking are deeply devoted to those our blood sings for. It is ingrained in us since birth. No matter what, our mates will be protected and provided for, even if they don’t want us.”

“Does... that happen often? A... mate not wanting their partner?”

Rune felt his eyes dart away again. “No, not typically.”

“Oh.”

A sudden silence fell over them, this one heavy and filled with something Rune couldn’t exactly name. It felt strange to tell her such private things, even though she was a part of this now. It somehow felt like he was breaking the magic of it all. The Blood Song was such a complicated and complex bonding tool that no one really understood, yet all Vahking followed it like a lifeline.

It was the only kind of connection that made one feel whole, even in the grandest of senses.

He didn’t want her taking what he said and using it against him, even though in the back of his mind, he knew Norah wasn’t that kind of person. But being a Vahking with a mate

who was unwilling to accept the inevitable was a harder battle than he ever thought he'd have to be facing.

“Rune...”

He glanced over to her again.

She picked at her pants, her brows pulled together. “Whenever you were talking about the Blood Song with me... and you telling me that I was yours. What would happen if I left for Earth?”

“I would follow you.”

Her gaze snapped up. “But what about your work?”

He brushed his hands together in his lap, finally lacing them together after a moment while he thought about his words carefully.

“It would kill me to do, but I would leave it behind in order to follow you.”

For some reason, Norah's eyes began to water.

Rune was out of his chair and coming over to her before he even registered the motion. He knelt down by her chair and lifted a hand up to cup her face. He caught the tear that fell from her eye, swiping it away instantly.

“Why does that make you sad?”

She laughed softly. “It doesn't. I've just... have never had someone say that to me before. Or want to leave everything behind for me. It's a little overwhelming.”

“I'm sorry.” He wasn't, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

She shook her head slightly, still letting him cup her face. “It's okay. What I meant was... I don't know. I'm afraid that you only feel this way because you're being forced to and not because you actually want to. Isn't that kind of scary that a reaction like that in your head can make you leave behind a passion project you've been working so hard on?”

Oh, she's so, so human. What a wonderful heart to have beating inside of her chest.

“Yes. And no.” He swiped another thumb over her eye.

“Norah, I would feel this way even if the Blood Song never manifested. I would follow you anywhere, just to keep you safe.”

“Ugh,” she let out a watery laugh, more tears clouding her eyes. “Stop that. You can’t say such sweet things to me so straight-faced. It’s not fair.”

He lifted himself up off his feet and pressed a soft kiss to her cheek while a few tears streamed down her face. “It’s only the truth.”

“I wish you had a filter.”

He moved his lips over to the other side of her face. “I am nothing if not honest. That is something you can always count on.”

She leaned into his touch, sighing softly when he peppered her skin with light pecks. He wanted to kiss her everywhere, taste every inch of her. The dire need burned low in his belly, forcing him to clutch the arm of her chair with his free hand in order to stop himself from grabbing her and pulling her right into his lap.

“Take me home?” she spoke softly.

He pulled away, looking at her beautiful face. “I’d love nothing more.”



They held hands while walking back to the cruiser.

The air felt warm tonight, and Rune was unsure whether that was from the atmosphere changing or the fact that he could feel his entire body thrumming with heat. Norah walked quietly next to him, leaning against his side while he led them through the empty streets.

A comfortable silence had fallen between them, something he’d never felt in his entire life. He’d always been the one to

fill the silence with useless chatter, until now never feeling content in the quiet.

Something in that mutual understanding not everything shared had to be said. The soft balance was easily satisfied if you listened to your partner's silent cues.

Arriving back at the ship, Rune waved his chip over the front panel, surprised that no guards were standing outside.

Typically, he always had at least two manning the main entrance. In this port especially, thieves were known to go around to unmanned ships and try to remotely lock pick them to get inside and steal whatever they could grab before the owner came running out chasing them off.

Perhaps it was later than he thought, and they were doing a shift change.

Once the platform locked into place, Rune led Norah across and engaged the drawback to pull the platform away and seal them both inside. He'd have to check later what the rotation schedule was, but for now he wanted to solely focus on his mate.

Norah smiled at him, squeezing his hand. "Mind if I go check on Lyle real quick? I want to make sure he's actually behaving and not doing anything crazy."

Rune chuckled. "Can't imagine what he'd get into on this ship."

She rolled her eyes. "You'd be surprised."

He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her forehead—something she leaned into the moment his lips touched her skin. He wanted to stay there with them both relishing in this feeling that was thrumming between them through the threads that connected them.

Finally, when Norah pulled away, she smiled again. "I'll be right back."

He watched her climb the stairs leading up to the second landing and then disappear around the corner out of sight.

I guess I can check the rotation schedule while I'm waiting...

Heading over to the cockpit, Rune rattled his knuckles against the wood door and waited for one of the captains to open up and greet him. When more than a minute passed by, he knocked again.

Strange...usually they were still up.

Pushing at the door, Rune found it was easy to open and let it slide into the invisible paneling on the side of the wall.

“Jax? Audrin?” He looked around, stepping inside of the cockpit.

The space opened up into a large desk that had two captains’ chairs facing outward to large wall to wall glass windows. Monitors were lined along the entire circumference of it, all of which were lighting up with different colored buttons that had little meaning to him.

He’d never been interested in the logistics of piloting a ship, let alone something as complicated as a pleasure cruiser, but he could appreciate the skill nonetheless.

He saw no signs of either pilot, something he felt was incredibly strange. Just because they weren’t currently flying didn’t mean one or both of his pilots weren’t typically in here checking on the status of his ship as well as coordinating any incoming messages he could be receiving from his father or brother.

“Hello?” he called out again, only to be met with more silence.

Strange...

Then he heard a distant scream.

His heart jumped out of his chest.

Norah.



CHAPTER 21

THE ENTIRETY of Lyle's room was completely trashed.

She had no idea what she'd walked into until she'd seen the bits of blood spatter tinging the walls and clear drag marks that went from the middle of the room and all the way over to the door.

Whatever had happened to her brother, the people who'd attacked him had been strong enough to get through both Rune's guards downstairs and the ones up here, who had presumably heard Lyle screaming and come running.

She'd been shocked when she'd seen the first set of bodies out in the hallway, horror overcoming her in the worst way as she prepared herself to enter her brother's quarters. Thankfully, no other body was lying among the destroyed items—a relieving feeling that was only temporary, considering her brother was now missing.

“What are we going to do?” Norah grabbed on to Rune's arm. “How are we going to find him?”

She could feel her entire world coming to a complete halt. She never wanted her brother to get hurt, no matter how much of a pain in the ass he was. She loved him dearly and would always be protective over him. That was how it was to be a big sister.

Rune already had a communicator out and pulled up to a location service that only the patrol officers were allowed to access. She didn't question why he had clearance for the service and was glad to see that he was already tracking the location of Lyle's communicator.

“Seems he’s downtown.”

“Downtown?” she echoed. “Why the hell would they take him there?”

He shook his head, zooming in on the city grid. “Not sure, but we’ll head over there and see who has him.”

Norah didn’t question him any further.

With his guards knocked out, they had no time to shake any of them awake before heading out of the cruiser and back into the city. It was late enough that not many people were still out. As they passed through, a few taverns were still open with the sounds of rowdy guests throwing back drinks inside and hammering away at tables as they lost their card games.

It was all too familiar and too normal for Norah to feel anything but disconcertion. All of it was making her head spin, making her grab on to Rune’s arm in the hopes he’d be able to steady her. He shook her off and, instead, grabbed her hand, holding it tight in his.

“We’ll find him.”

How can he read my mind so easily?

She didn’t have a chance to ask him out loud before Rune’s communicator pinged, and they found themselves in front of a large, dilapidated warehouse. From the outside, it looked like it hadn’t been used in a while and had been roughly raised. Norah was sure the inside hadn’t fared much better.

Looking around, she spotted two guards near the side of the building and pointed them out to Rune. “Look.”

He frowned, tugging her away from the front of the chained doors and ducked them both down behind a warped barrier. “That’s probably the entrance over there.”

“You think Lyle’s in there?”

“That’s what his communicator says.”

She swallowed thickly. “What are we going to do? They’re armed.”

He pecked her cheek quickly, standing. “Stay here.”

“Wait—*Rune!*”

Without another word, he jumped over the barrier and headed right for both guards. Her eyes widened as she felt the hairs on her arms stand on end and a wave of electric pulses wash over her. Small, nearly invisible sparks shot out from Rune’s fingertips and struck one of the men who moved forward first.

He went flying off to the side near the road, skidding on his back until he came to a full stop. Rune grabbed on to the other alien, flipped him over with a quick snap of his wrists and slammed him into the ground. He let out a loud choke at the force of his body hitting the hard surface.

The other man was already rising back to his feet, grappling for his gun on the ground.

“Rune!” Norah called out to him.

Rune turned, seeing the man and throwing out another few zaps toward him. The man flew back once more, slamming directly into another one of the barriers before he slumped down onto the ground motionless.

She panted slowly, blinking a few times to clear her vision.

Rune waved her over, twisting the other man’s arm hard enough to audibly snap it from his shoulder. It had her wincing as she stood and raced over to him.

The door to the warehouse was open and thankfully free of other aliens guarding it. Moving quietly through the dimly lit walkway, Norah’s ears could pick up on the telltale signs of struggling coming from further inside of the building.

“Stay close to me,” Rune spoke softly, tucking her back behind him as they moved.

She nodded, even though he couldn’t see her, but she knew he knew she’d do as she was told. Even without any kind of weapon on him, Rune was a force to be reckoned with. And no matter what happened, she knew he’d protect her.

The space opened up into a large room with twenty-foot ceilings that had exposed support beams and dusty floors from disuse. Fresh foottracks were strewn through the dirt, and long

marks looked suspiciously like drag marks. Her heart hammered in her chest, hoping that it wasn't what she thought it was.

What if Lyle's been seriously hurt? Who would drag him to a place like this?

She couldn't fathom it, even if she wanted to.

The only sign of solace was that she saw no bloodstains.

A pained shout had her jumping and grabbing on to Rune's arm, keeping her body pressed up against his while they headed toward the noise.

Suddenly, heat hit them.

"What the..." Rune mumbled.

She looked around him. A bright light cast wild shadows along the stained walls. In the center of the warehouse a large pit-like structure was built in the shape of a chiminea. Real fire blazed in the center of it and was causing not only the sudden change in temperature but the light as well.

Across from the pit sat a large slab table with someone lying on top of it, strapped down by wide cords attached with metal clamps underneath. Whoever was on the table was struggling to get off of it, their body straining against the restraints that held them down.

She stepped away from Rune, toward the table. "Lyle?"

"No!" a voice screamed from the other side of the warehouse.

Both of them turned to the source, seeing a disfigured alien moving slowly toward them. As they grew closer, Norah could feel that familiar spark of electricity rolling through the air.

"Back off," Rune barked.

The figure continued to limp closer, the shadows from the chiminea throwing off their proportions wildly. When they got to the light circumference of the area they were in, Norah could finally see who it was.

Kovik Yenk in all his rat bastard glory. Except instead of being the intimidating gangster that he was, he was now completely

disfigured. He was covered in some kind of metallic-looking substance that seemed to be eating away at his body in order to replace it with whatever was taking over.

Half of his face was already covered in the stuff, along with his hair being half burned off and his clothes too. His alien skin had been replaced with the molten metal-looking material that shone slightly in the dancing fire's glow.

"Jesus," Norah breathed out. "What the hell happened?"

Rune shook his head. "What did you do, Yenk?"

He crooned, "All I wanted was those fucking coins to work! I had all the right material!"

Norah's heart sank. "The coins?"

"That fucking prick lied to me!" The alien gritted his teeth, glaring across the way to where the table was. "He told me they were made of Admantian metal!"

Rune stiffened. "Admantian..." He shook his head in disbelief. "Were you trying to create a Heart of the Horde?"

Norah looked at him. "What's that?"

Yenk let out an agonizing cry, dropping to his knees while his skin continued to burn under the molten metal slowly crawling down his arm to envelope his fingers.

"It's a rare material that's hard to come by since it's made from a specific type of meteor found in the Alexanda quadrant. If melted down with the right type of ingredients, one is able to make a stone that can produce unfathomable riches. But it is an old Vahking tale. One that is the source of the Philosopher's Stone myth on Earth. It is not *real*."

Norah's eyes widened. "What? But Grandpa's coins weren't made of Admantian metal."

Rune gazed over at Yenk for a long moment before turning to her. "Evidently they were. Though, I'm sure the exact quality was a little too poor considering Yenk wasn't successful."

Yenk choked on another groan of pain. "All that work... all that fucking work!"

Rune shook his head and remained silent.

Norah moved away from him and jogged over to where the chiminea was still blazing. As soon as she got close enough, she could see her brother's wide eyes staring at her. He had a gag in his mouth and his shirt had been ripped right down the middle where a large gash was sliced into his skin. He was still bleeding, but the wound didn't look deep enough to be fatal.

"Jesus," she breathed out again.

His voice was muffled as he yelled something at her.

She squatted and grabbed at the restraints, tugging at them until they finally came loose and let him sit up.

"Ugh!" Lyle spat out the gag and sat up straight.

Norah grabbed it and held it up to his chest to try and stent the bleeding. "Why the hell did he cut you?"

"I don't know! He was going on and on about the pure blood of the owner to create the Heart? He was babbling all sorts of insane things."

Rune came up behind them. "It might be from an ownership standpoint. Typically, materials are supposed to be sourced from the original point of existence. I imagine Yenk didn't know that the coins actually belonged to your grandfather and not you, Lyle. No wonder his attempt didn't work."

Norah turned when Yenk let out another agonized groan.

"What are we going to do with him?"

Rune shrugged. "Leave him. It seems he's learned his lesson."

"What's going to happen to him?"

"Who knows. If he's lucky, the metal will only take over half his body so he can still function. If not, he'll be a statue by morning."

Norah winced, though she couldn't exactly feel all that bad for him. He'd kidnapped and harmed her baby brother, all in the pursuit of greed.

Lyle sighed under her hand, his body quivering from his adrenaline finally wearing off. "I can't wait to crawl into bed

and sleep.”

“We’ll need to stay at a hotel for the time being until I can get my ship back in order.”

“Oh right, they totally trashed it. Didn’t they?”

Rune nodded. “They did, but thankfully it’s an easy fix.”

Norah smiled a little. “You okay, Lyle?”

“Yeah, just get me the hell out of here. I’ve had enough alien adventures for a lifetime.”



CHAPTER 22

THE HOTEL they ended up at was on the ritzier side and far nicer than anything she'd ever stayed in.

Norah wandered around the large living area, taking in the grand floor-to-ceiling windows that stretched the entire length of the penthouse. The city skyline was beautiful outside of them with their twinkling lights and the planet soon to come up over the horizon.

She wasn't sad about finally being able to turn in for the night. She'd had more than her fair share of excitement to probably last her a lifetime, and it was enough to give her plenty of stories to take back home with her.

The thought made her chest pang.

Home.

Now that the time was finally here, she suddenly felt like it'd come all too soon. She hated that now of all times, she was second-guessing herself. Since retrieving the coins was out of the picture, she no longer had any purpose staying on this forest moon.

She should really be looking into booking a shuttle back home, but for some reason the thought of dragging her feet sounded appealing.

"How are you feeling?" She heard Rune ask from behind her.

She turned away from the windows and looked over at him, taking in his magnificent form and the way the bond between them seemed to light up whenever he was close to her. She

tucked her arms around her waist, forcing herself to keep her hands to herself.

“Better now that we’re finally away from all of that chaos.”

“I agree.” He chuckled. “It’s been a long few days.”

Indeed, it had been.

She couldn’t help the melancholy starting to overtake her mood and felt herself pulling away from him. The desire to cry was strong, and it took everything in her to hold her tears inside.

“Norah?”

“Think I’m, um.” She cleared her throat. “I should turn in for the night.”

“Oh.” He let his hands drop to his sides. “Right, of course. Much to do in the morning.”

His words made the pang in her chest hurt more.

She’d probably need to start planning for her and Lyle’s departure. Should she say goodbye to Rune or leave him a note? Which would hurt less?

Ugh, this sucks...

“Norah, are you all right?”

No, is what she wanted to say. Instead, she lifted her head and gave him a smile.

“Yes, I—” her voice broke off when he frowned.

He slowly lifted a hand and brushed it under her eye, wiping away a stray tear she hadn’t known was leaking. Norah’s face became hot with embarrassment. Of course, now of all times she had to get emotional.

“What’s wrong?” His voice was soft.

It broke her. “I don’t want to leave,” she choked out.

He smiled slightly. “Then don’t. Stay here with me.”

Her body shook from the force of holding back a brewing sob.

“I can’t. My family... they’re back home waiting for me.”

“Then we’ll invite them here.”

He said it so simply like it was nothing. And maybe to him it was. He was a damned prince, after all. Realistically he could do whatever he wanted with a flick of his wrist. He could have the entire horde show up at her grandfather’s front door to knock and escort him and her other siblings to Verkoon’s moon.

“Mate with me, Norah.” he grabbed her hands. “I’ll make you the happiest you’ve ever been. I’ll protect you and provide for you. You’ll want for nothing.”

His words sounded like golden promises.

“I…”

“Are you actually going to turn him down?” Lyle’s voice had her jumping and turning around. He stood with his hands crossed over his chest, raising a brow at her. “He’s literally asking you to marry him, and you’re thinking about it. Rune, maybe if you get down on your hands and knees and beg she’ll actually consider it.”

Right as Rune started to drop down to the floor, Norah squawked and quickly pulled him back up. “No! Don’t!”

“Well, would it get you to say yes to me?” She saw a twinkle of amusement in his eyes.

She glared over her shoulder back at her brother. “Don’t conspire against me!”

He held up his hands in mock defense. “Forgive me for encouraging you to bag a prince.”

Rune laughed.

“Norah, just say yes already. You’re torturing all of us when we all know you want to,” Lyle teased her.

Her cheeks reddened again. “I—”

“Save it.”

She felt her lips press together and turned back to where Rune was watching her with that same small smirk he always had on his face whenever he looked at her. His eyes held such

affection that it was hard not to let herself fall into them and get lost. She'd never thought that Rune, of all people, would ever want to look at her in that way.

As if she held the entire galaxy in her hands and he couldn't help but stare in awe.

"Okay," she said quietly.

"Louder," Lyle called.

Rune's smile grew wider.

Norah pulled in a deep breath and then said, "Rune. I want to marry you. Or... mate with you. Whatever you Vahkings do when you find the one."

She let out another squawk when he scooped her up into his arms and kissed her again and again and again.



What surprised her the most about the entire mating ceremony was that the queen herself had come to attend to her.

Norah had a feeling she would run into her after the ceremony, what with her being married to Rune's brother and all. But to have her show up in her dressing room while the handmaidens got her ready before dressing her was something she never expected.

Norah's family had been sent for not long after her acceptance to Rune's proposal, and from what she could hear through the grapevine, they'd arrived not too long ago. She longed to see all of their faces, especially on a day like today.

"The water's chilly, just so you know."

At the sound of the unfamiliar voice, Norah turned to look over her shoulder. A woman with stunning red hair and a baby on each of her hips was coming in through the silk curtains. She smiled at Norah before nodding to the marble basin in front of her.

“It’ll shock you at first, but don’t worry. It’s just to cleanse you from your old life.”

Cleanse? Norah wanted to echo but held herself back.

All Rune had really told her was that they were to follow some long-standing traditions before getting married—like some kind of rite of passage that would give them good luck toward their future marriage.

When she’d been carried away by a parade of handmaidens and stripped bare of her clothes after being brought to this room, she really had no idea what to expect.

“I’m sorry. Who are you?”

The woman grinned. “Oh, sorry about that. I’m Addy, Thor’s mate.”

Norah blinked and then her eyes widened. “You’re the queen...”

Oh lord... I’m in the presence of royalty royalty... Am I supposed to bow or something?

Before Norah could do anything, Addy laughed. “Guilty. And *these* little munchkins are Asria and Averin.”

Two of the handmaidens came over to scoop the babies out of her arms while Addy made her way closer to Norah. The thin white garment the handmaidens had given Norah didn’t keep her from shivering slightly, even as Addy took her hand and helped her into the basin.

She gasped when the water was poured over her, shocking her senses.

Addy laughed, still holding her hand. “Awful, right?”

“It’s freezing!”

“I know, but at least it’s over and done with.”

As Norah stood again, Addy stepped back to let the handmaidens help her out of the basin and dry her off. “Is that it?”

Addy grinned at her. “Now we get to go see your blade.”

“My... my what?”

She laughed. “Let’s get you changed. Everyone’s waiting for you.”



CHAPTER 23

AS WITH VAHKING TRADITION, the ceremony was a big affair. Not including Rune's family or Norah's, the turnout for witnesses to watch their mating was close to the turnout that Thor had when he'd married Adeline a year and a half ago.

Everything had melted away the second he spotted his beautiful bride accompanied by Adeline. Rune felt his heart pounding, and his fist clenched around the hilt of the sword in his hand as he forced himself not to run and catch her halfway.

She was radiant as she smiled at him, her long dress trailing behind her while the sword she planned on gifting to him was held tightly in her hands. He could feel the energy coursing through their bond, and at last as she drew closer, he did something unceremonious by stepping away from his spot in front of the large oak tree to take her hand in his.

"Oh, beautiful one," he murmured. Her eyes immediately lit up at his nickname for her.

"This thing's heavy," she whispered.

He couldn't help but laugh. "Good thing we're exchanging them, hm?"

Her eyes twinkled as he led her back into place. When they exchanged swords and strapped them to their waists, Rune reached out again to grab her hands, needing to touch her in any way he could. She grounded him.

After vows were exchanged and they were finally pronounced wedded, Rune scooped Norah up into his arms and kissed her

hard, his blood singing.

She laughed against his lips, giving in with not a care in the world. Off in the distance, he could've sworn he heard someone gag who sounded suspiciously like Lyle.

But he didn't care if they all thought he and Norah were over the top. He was simply happy to finally have her.



Norah barely registered the penthouse's suite when Rune carried her in, much too busy kissing him and running her hands through his hair. He stumbled as he kicked the door closed, putting her down for only a moment in order to help her unstrap the sword against her hip and strip her of her beautiful dress.

The moment she was naked before him, he scooped her up in his arms once more and carried her off to the bedroom.

Norah laughed. "What, you aren't going to get undressed too?"

Her back hit the mattress as he slung her down on top of it, her body bouncing slightly before coming to a rest as he crawled over her.

"Let me admire you." He kissed his way up her body, sweet tingling spots that left her shivering by the time he got back up to her lips.

She wrapped her arms around his neck in order to pull him down into another deep kiss. Rune's tongue pried open the seam of her mouth, a moan escaping her when he sucked her tongue into his mouth sensually.

Their bodies moved together, rolling in a singular motion that had her panting the moment he pulled his lips from hers. Ever since they'd tied the knot, she could feel that pressure in her head growing stronger—the mental bond between them

something like a live wire that danced between their consciousnesses.

It was a wild and wonderful thing to know they would be connected for the rest of their lives.

“Rune.” She grabbed at his overcoat. “I need you.”

“Fuck,” he mumbled, his eyes glazed over with desire. “You shall have me, my beautiful one.”

She keened at the praise, sad to see him slide off the bed but excited as he began to strip down. He gently leaned the sword against the nightstand before ripping away the rest of his clothing. That incredible body of his was finally on display for her and making her mouth water.

He crawled back over her, settling between her legs while she wrapped them around his waist. Rune’s hands caressed her sides, creating a heat that burned under her skin. She arched herself into his touch, needing and wanting more of it but not being able to verbalize it other than with another moan.

“Oh, how I love those sounds tumbling out of your mouth.” He leaned over and kissed her again. “And I get to hear them for the rest of my life.”

She laughed softly. “So sentimental.”

“I know. Blame it on the mead.”

She hooked a leg around his hip, pushing her knee around his side and back to force him to lean down further until their chests were brushing. “Never.”

He chuckled before sliding his cock against her pussy, moving it along her wet core and teasing her clit with the tip. The entire motion made her wild with a fever-like shiver that raced up her spine. She’d never needed someone to get inside of her so desperately in her entire life.

Rune brushed his lips against the shell of her ear. “I love you wanting me so badly.”

She groaned at him. “You’re teasing me on our wedding night. You have no shame.”

“I don’t.” She could hear the grin in his tone.

Just as she was about to protest again, Rune rolled his hips back and finally sank himself into her wet and aching hole. He didn’t waste any more time before he was pushing inside of her, stretching her and stuffing her so full that it made her toes curl with pleasure.

Norah’s back arched off of the mattress, a gasp catching in her throat the moment he finally bottomed out and their hips were pressed flushed together.

“*Oh my god...*”

Rune licked at her ear. “Mine.”

He pulled back slowly before slamming into her. Norah cried out and quickly wrapped her arms around him, her nails finding his shoulder blades and digging into his skin while she held on for dear life.

He rocked his cock into her over and over again, each thrust sending zings of pleasure racing straight to her brain. All she could do was let him take her at this fast and brutal pace that had them both panting after a few seconds.

“Tell me you’re mine,” he whispered into her ear.

“I’m yours,” she promised. “All yours, Rune.”

He groaned, his face pressing into the crook of her neck while his hands gripped her hips in a tight hold. Their skin slapped together with each thrust, hard enough that Norah knew she’d be bruised in the morning, but she didn’t care at all.

She’d wear the marks with pride, and if anyone asked, she’d gladly tell them that the consummation of their wedding was a success.

Rune groaned her name, his cock swelling inside of her to the point where she thought she would burst. The walls of her pussy clenched around him, squeezing him back inside of her each time his hips reeled back. Her body was greedy for him and would do anything it could to keep him right where she wanted him.

She wanted him spilling inside of her and coating her with that delicious warmth. Maybe even giving her a baby out of all of this.

“Rune,” her nails slid down his shoulders to where his waist was. “I’m gonna come...”

She felt his teeth sink into her neck, holding her down as he continued to pound into her. Norah couldn’t take it anymore. She was already falling over the edge of the cliff before she knew it, her orgasm crashing into her and sending stars to cloud her vision.

She screamed his name, her body jackhammering off of the mattress to follow the grinding of his body into hers as much as she could to draw out the pleasure.

He choked out a groan, his cum filling her the moment her pussy started to milk him for it.

“Yes! Oh god, fill me up!”

He rutted against her, giving her every last drop until he finally eased back and relaxed against her shaking body.

She panted while tucking her chin against his shoulder, breathing in the scent of their sex and sweat. Rune turned his head to kiss her cheek, smiling against her skin.

“I love you.”

Her heart sang. “I love you, too.”



CHAPTER 24

A FEW MONTHS LATER...

Fixing her hair in the mirror, Norah turned a few times to get a good look at her outfit, making sure nothing was out of place for their upcoming dinner.

Rune had been telling her over the past few hours to relax and not let the stress of his family—and coincidentally hers—get to her. She knew this dinner was important, not just for the fact that it was the first time both of their families were spending time together after their wedding but because something special would soon happen.

As she turned to make sure her hair looked good, she felt a pair of arms wrap around her from behind. Glancing up in the mirror, she watched Rune rest his chin on her shoulder and smile at her.

“You look lovely.”

She felt herself blush. “Thank you.”

He kissed her neck sweetly. “Are you ready to go?”

She was and she wasn't. All of her nerves over the past few days of planning had boiled over into something that made her feel a little out of sorts. She wanted to see her family, of course, and getting to know Rune's family over the past few months had been amazing.

She was quickly becoming close friends with Addy, who visited more frequently now that the construction for the

longhouse was coming to a close. She was so proud of Rune for finally seeing his goal through.

Every time he talked about it, Norah could see the passion and pride in his eyes, and it made her happy that he'd been able to get his project back on track after the disaster that had befallen it months prior.

Norah smiled again at Rune in the mirror, grabbing his hands and moving them down to rest over her belly. She watched as his smile widened into a grin.

“Are we telling them tonight?”

Norah laughed. “I want to. But it's up to you. It's still a little early.”

“I think it would be nice for my brother and Adeline to know that the twins will have a cousin coming along soon.”

The thought made Norah's heart melt.

They'd found out about her pregnancy a few weeks ago, and it had been killing her to keep it a secret—especially around Addy who frequently brought the twins around. Norah had gotten such horrible baby fever that by the time her test results had come back, she'd cried.

Rune had found her sobbing in the bathroom and had thought the worst. And then of course she had to quickly show him the pregnancy test to reassure him that she wasn't actually dying like her sobbing suggested.

She had no idea what it was going to be like to give birth to a Vahking, but she supposed if Addy had given birth to two, Norah was ready for whatever was coming her way.

All in all, it had been a very exciting, yet nerve-racking few weeks.

“Well...” Norah laughed. “Let's not delay any longer then, hm?”

Rune gathered her up in a tight hug and kissed her neck before stepping away from her and taking her hand.

The trip into the city was a short walk. The tavern they were meeting at was more of a low-key destination that served not just mead and drinks but good food as well. Lyle had actually found it when he'd been out in the city exploring—under the supervision of his new brother-in-law of course.

He'd been behaving well, though, so Norah couldn't exactly put him on her naughty list anymore. It seemed the scare from Yenk and almost getting sacrificed had led her brother to believe that turning his life around was in his best interest.

Rune led her into the tavern, nodding to the guards posted outside the doors.

The entire place was empty save for a large table in the back where both of their families were already seated.

The sight of her grandfather talking with Rune's father, Odyn, had Norah smiling. It had surprised her that both her sisters and her grandfather had decided to take an extended vacation on Verkoon for longer than just the wedding celebration.

Of course, they would need to go back to Earth eventually since their intergalactic travel passes were expiring soon, but it was so nice to finally be able to see them and spend time with them after being away for as long as she had been.

Not to mention getting Lyle to actually spend time with his own family for once.

“You're here!” Addy was the first to greet them, one of the twins in her lap while the other was crawling all over Thor.

Both Rune and Norah made their way around the entire table, greeting and hugging everyone before sitting down. Food was already placed down along the center part of the long table, utensils and hands grabbing to dig in the moment both Rune and Norah were settled.

It all smelled amazing, even though it all looked completely foreign to her. She'd been getting better at eating Vahking cuisine without first turning her nose up at it. With the help of Rune figuring out what foods humans could and couldn't have, it had been an interesting experience trying out different things.

This tavern was horde-occupied, so most of their ingredients were freshly sourced for Vahkings.

“Damn, you hungry or what?” Lyle nodded to his sister’s plate as she piled on more and more food.

Norah kicked his shin under the table. “You’re one to talk.”

“Ow!”

“Behave, you two,” their grandfather scolded.

Lyle stuck his tongue out at her.

At the head of the table, Odyn chuckled. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d suspect you were eating for two, Norah.”

She smiled to herself. Leave it to Lyle to actually spill the beans and bring attention to the situation by simply being his bratty self.

“Actually.” She set down her plate to take Rune’s hand. “We do have an announcement.”

Addy was the first to gasp. “No way!”

Norah laughed.

“Wait, what is happening?” Thor looked between both women, balancing his son over his shoulder.

“Go on, Norah!” Addy waved her hands. “Before I blurt it out before you can.”

Norah laughed again. “Well, expect the twins to be receiving a cousin sometime next summer.”

After a beat of silence, the entire table erupted into excited chatter. Norah beamed when her grandfather pulled her into a tight hug, kissing her head and congratulating her. Both of her sisters peppered her with questions about how far along she was and when she was estimated to be due.

Rune slid a hand over her thigh to grab at her hand, squeezing it in his as he smiled down at her.

Everyone was so happy—

Shouting at the front of the tavern had them all quieting and turning to the source of the noise. It wasn’t long before

General Lokin came storming in through the doors, looking rather upset.

“Ah, General,” Thor greeted. “We were beginning to expect you were going to miss the merriment.”

The general let out a long sigh. “I apologize for my tardiness. My daughter is refusing to come inside and join all of us.”

At that, Odyn chuckled. “She still has that infamous stubbornness, I see.”

Lokin ran an irritated hand through his dark red hair. “You have no idea.”

“Perhaps you need a babysitter,” Rune smirked. “Might help give her that nudge in the right direction.”

Lokin only glowered at him.

“What an excellent idea, Rune.” Thor smiled. “Lokin, you shall find yourself a nanny. I’m sure Sif simply needs that womanly touch. She’s getting to be that age, you know.”

Lokin’s cheeks burned red. “What age? What is that supposed to mean?”

“You know,” Rune drawled. “When a girl starts to grow up, she stops needing her father and needs her mother more. It’s how it is with us Vahking, Lokin. You know this.”

The general shook his head and made his way over to one of the last seats still vacant. “I no longer want to talk about this. What are we celebrating?”

Thor slapped him on the back. “We will celebrate once you agree to find that daughter of yours a nanny. Rune will be more than happy to show you around the longhouse tomorrow. Perhaps you’ll find your blood singing for one of the women who come in looking for a match.”

Lokin waved him off. “I’m not looking for a bride.”

“Nanny,” Thor smoothly corrected.

It looked as if the man was lost in deep thought. He looked down at his empty plate for a long moment, his shoulders

tense while a flash of some kind of emotion passed over his face. Finally, he sighed and let his body relax.

“Alright... I’ll look for a nanny for Sif.”

“Wonderful.” Thor clapped him on the back again. “Now, let’s celebrate the new life that will be joining us very soon.”

With that, the king of the horde lifted up his mead, the rest of the table following suit as they all chanted a loud cheer.

Norah smiled, looking around the table at her family.

Finally, she felt like home.



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