



**HIS**  
*Human*  
**SOCIALITE**

**MONSTERS LOVE CURVY GIRLS #7**

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**MICHELE MILLS**

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I've been set up on a date with a Hyrrokin named Idun Grindstone?

Noooo. This will never work!

How can a human with a *significant* inheritance have anything in common with a foul-mouthed, satanic-looking security specialist? Smoke regularly wafts out of this guy's nostrils and his shiny barbed tail juts out in the air behind him as he prowls across the military hanger. But...I'm enchanted with Idun's deep voice, his massive bare chest and (swoon) those epic thighs. This Hyrrokin is a handsome red devil and oh so touchable. And I want my tongue in his mouth, immediately.

Unfortunately, Idun thinks I'm a spoiled, irresponsible party girl and he wants nothing to do with me.

\*eye roll\*

Party girl? He must have me confused with my 'evil' twin sister.

And then I'm kidnapped by the Hyrrokin mafia. When Idun finds out, he activates his team at Molten Lava and all hell breaks loose. And that's when I discover how much this fiery ex-soldier *really* cares about me—despite his protestations. Ha!

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Epilogue

Also by Michele Mills

## IDUN

“Who is that?” Fenrir gestures over the steering wheel.

I glance up from my work tablet, at something he sees beyond the front window of our parked vehicle. “Heh...?”

“In front of us, at the entrance to the gate. The guard is talking to a...a human female?”

I look closely where my teammate points. Our large tactical vehicle is behind a small auto drive with its door left wide open. And I see a small female in the midst of an animated conversation with the front guard. This is odd. Vehicles are normally pre-screened and waved into this gated community.

“Am I right, is that a human?”

I narrow my eyes, taking in the thick curves of this unknown female. Her pigment is pleasantly dark but not tinged with Hyrrokin red and she’s utterly lacking horns and claws. Plus, she’s wearing those strange human foot coverings. “Yes, that’s a human.”

“I thought so; for a moment she appeared smooth-headed, but I think it’s just because her human hair is tied up on her head. I can’t see any horns. But I’ve never seen this particular human before, and I thought we knew all the humans on Tarvos. She must be new to the planet. Why did the guard have her step outside her vehicle?”

“Hells if I know, but he’s denying her entrance into the community.” I turn around in my seat and note a long line of

vehicles parked behind us. “And she’s causing a hold up.”

“Is she crying?”

My body tenses and I grab the passenger door handle. “You stay here, I’ll check this out.” I leave Fenrir behind and march forward, my barbed tail jabbing the air behind me. I make ground easily with my long stride. As I get closer, I can overhear their heated exchange.

“Let me in!” the female shouts, her voice choked with emotion.

I stand behind the attractive female, strangely disgruntled over the fact that she’s openly crying. My bare chest tightens at the sound of her anguish.

“I need inside that community so I can meet up with my cousin,” she wails. “She’s expecting me. Please, let me in.”

Her cousin? Heh. She’s related to one of the humans already living on Tarvos? Interesting. Why didn’t I hear of her arrival? Cap, Hannibal and Skoll all have human bounds and I’ve become knowledgeable of the small community of humans living on Tarvos as citizens. I think I’ve met them all at one time or another. Good thing Fenrir and I happened to be nearby to offer our support. Humans are rare in the four sectors, very delicate and easily spooked by our noble Hyrrokin features.

“Female, I can’t let you inside the community,” the guard tries to explain. “I’ve received no message alerting me of your arrival and there is no answer at the Strikestone residence, therefore I cannot allow you entrance. I am going to have to ask you to reenter your vehicle and return from whence you came.”

“But there’s nowhere else for me to go.” She shakes a fist at him. “How can you do this to me? Do you thrive on causing heartache and pain to unsuspecting humans?”

He rears back, clearly offended she would think such a thing of him. “No, of course I don’t.” The male shakes his head at the feisty female. “But I cannot help you with the fact that you’ve just arrived on Tarvos and need direction. Do you

want me to alert the peacekeepers so they can connect you with housing support?”

She backs up. “Peacekeepers? No, I...I...”

“You are here to see Strikestone?” I finally interrupt.

The female whirls around at the sound of my deep voice and peers up at me. A gasp of terror and a shriek of dismay escape her full lips. She screams, flails, stumbles backward to the side, and falls against the hood of her auto drive, bracing herself with her arms, her breath coming out in short pants.

She didn't know I was standing there?

I move closer to ascertain her safety and I'm thrown off by her startling beauty. Her figure is splayed out on the vehicle for my perusal. A thin white top covers her torso and her arms, allowing for the exposure of her neck. Her short blue skirt shows off the delectable skin of her thick thighs. I didn't expect this exotic human to be this gorgeous. Humans are normally weak, with their lack of horns, tail and claws. They can't even flash flame. Instead of being disgusted at her lack of defenses, I feel a heightened need to possess and protect. The heft of her generous breasts under her white top is very enticing and the nip of her tiny waist and the shape of her wide hips is utter perfection. She's literally one of the most beautiful females I've ever seen in my life. Suddenly I wonder if she's unmated.

She gazes at me with her mouth open in awe. “Are...are you a peacekeeper?”

“No. I'm a veteran of the wars and a security professional.”

She inspects me, her gaze swiping from the top of my shiny black horns to my silver-tipped claws and down to my large bare feet, then back up again, lingering on my wide chest and the blaster secured to the holster on my hip and my knives strapped to my leg.

Humans consider Hyrrokin features to be the stuff of nightmares. This must be the reason for her initial reaction to me. I'm not the first Hyrrokin she's seen today, but I'm well-



known for my particularly “rough-hewn” tribal characteristics. My ancestors came from the wildland tribes and our features lack the refinement of city dwellers, but we are also known for our strength, intimidating fangs and our slightly barbaric use of the Hyrrokin language. The point of my barbed tail is particularly sharp and the ridges on my forehead are more defined and my claws longer than those of the other members of Team Molten Lava.

I am proud of these tribal attributes.

I gentle my tone, doing my best to keep back my pointed tail and disguise the true length of my fangs. “Female, I am here to help you. Tell me, do you know Skoll Strikestone?”

“Who?” She shakes her head. “I’m sorry. I was just surprised because you look so...so...”

I stare at her quietly.

The female sniffs at the last of her disappearing tears and starts to sit up. “No...no I don’t know that male, but I do know his wife, Arianna Gonzalez. She’s my cousin.”

I love the musical quality of her voice as she speaks through a universal translator. Humans speak my language with a pleasant accent. I can literally feel the vibration of truth in her statement. I gaze down into her wide eyes, still wet from her former tears, and decide to take a chance on her. I have no idea if she’s really Ariana’s cousin, but I instantly trust this female.

I grin and reach out to grasp both her small hands in my much larger claws and pull her back upright, helping her to balance on those strange, tall foot coverings. For a moment she ends up pressed against my chest and lifts her chin to meet my gaze. Again, I’m startled at the beauty of those expressive eyes and the length of her delicate lashes. Her soft curves against my hard chest prove startling and cause smoky, lust-filled fire to churn in my belly.

She swallows hard and takes a deep breath, but then her gaze drops to my black lips. The sudden waft of her arousal permeates the air between us. I blink with surprise. This

female is interested in becoming my pleasure mate? I inhale her luscious pheromones and an accompanying thickness grows in my trousers.

I take a step back and look over her head to meet the gaze of the harried guard. “I will vouch for her,” I announce, and he looks visibly relieved. He knows me from the last time Team Molten Lava saved the planet. “This human is going to allow her auto drive to return to the garage and she’ll instead accompany me and my partner inside the community. I will take her with us to Bergelmir Touchstone’s domicile. Team Molten Lava will take over this task.”

He lifts his chin in agreement and walks over to close the door of the auto drive and order it back to the vehicle garage.

The human’s eyes flash up at me and she jerks her hands out of my grasp. “Wait, that’s it? He’s doing what you tell him, meanwhile he wouldn’t listen to a word I said. Who are you? What is this ‘Molten Lava’?” She crosses her arms and frowns up at me.

I can’t help the grin that continues to spread across my face. She’s adorable. Like a hissing human kitten. And I’m happy that she isn’t scared of me anymore. “Molten Lava is a well-known security team on this planet,” I explain, “and I am a member of that team. I just vouched for you, female, which means I will make sure you arrive safely at Bergelmir Touchstone’s residence.”

“Who is Berrrgil...Berrrg...” She sighs. “Maybe I don’t want to go to that guy’s house. I told you, I’m here to see Ariana Gonzalez.”

My lips twitch. And I force my eyes from the enticing cleavage when she crosses her arms. My mind flashes to thoughts of those teats in my claws and her nipples in my mouth. “Trust me, you *do* want to go to his domicile,” I manage to answer calmly. “Bergelmir Touchstone is the boss of Ariana’s mate.”

“Oh.”

“Also, I am friends with her mate too, I will message Skoll Strikestone immediately so you can get in touch with his bound, Ariana Strikestone-Gonzalez.”

She drops her arms and shifts on her feet. “Oh, thanks. I... I’m sorry, I didn’t know...”

“I’m here to help you,” I confirm.

“Thank you.”

“Let’s go. We’re holding up traffic.” I point at my large black vehicle parked behind her auto drive. “We can talk more once we get inside and through the gate.”

She nods and struts in front of me with her chin held high.

I can’t help but stare at the sway of her large ass underneath her short blue skirt. Humans have strange follicles on their head, but I find I like how this female’s curly dark “hair” is tied up. The crook of her neck is particularly enticing and my fangs tingle with the need to score and lick her soft skin.

I come up close behind her and place my claw on the small of her back and guide her toward the appropriate rear door of our all-terrain vehicle. Instead of letting her inside so I can retake my own position at the front, I slide next to her and make sure our bodies are pressed close. I pull the back door shut and we are now in the backseat together.

I receive a look of questioning from Fenrir through the rearview mirror, but I ignore him. I do what I want. No one questions a Grindstone.

A possessive growl emanates from my chest as the female leans against me. I grab her hand and rest both of our entwined fingers on my thigh. The sight of her soft hand within my rough red claw brings me peace.

Fenrir restarts the vehicle and the engine rumbles to life.

I look down at her. “Tell me your name and where you’re from.”

She’s busy staring at my chest with look of hunger. “Uh... what?”

“Your name?”

Her eyes move up to my face. “Oh, my name is Jada Williams. I arrived on Tarvos via transporter from the town of Mumbai on New Earth. And who are *you*?”

“I am Idun Grindstone of Team Molten Lava and the male sitting in the driver’s seat is my teammate Fenrir Blackstone.”

“Nice to meet you, human,” Fenrir grunts from up front.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” the female answers pleasantly. “And thank you both for picking me up and helping me.”

I squeeze her hand, displeased with the attention she’s given to my teammate. I am helping her. *Me*.

The auto drive is now gone, and the guard waves us through the gate. Fenrir drives us into the community.

“You just arrived on Tarvos today?” I question.

“Yes, I’ve only been here for maybe two hours.”

Heh. This again explains her terror at my appearance. It will take this human time to get used to noble Hyrrokin features.

“Are you here on a work visa?” Fenrir questions.

“No, I’m here on a ten-diurnal travel permit.” She glances between the two of us. “Can you two please take me to see my cousin right away? I need to see her immediately.”

“Why?”

She bites her lip. “I can only tell Ariana the full story of why I’m here.”

I squeeze her hand. “You’re going to have to tell me something because I’m not taking you to Bergelmir’s residence, nor am I bringing you face to face with Skoll’s bound, prior to me vetting you.” I trust this female, but I also must assure the safety of the other humans in this community and their offspring first.

Fenrir grunts in agreement.

Jada Williams licks her full lips and I wonder what they'd feel like under my own. What would she taste like?

"I just...I don't know if I can trust you with the truth," she admits.

Smoke bursts out of my nostrils as I snort at this outrageous statement.

Fenrir chuckles and shakes his head. "She thinks she can't trust us," he mutters from the front seat. "That's hilarious. I'll have to tell the others this story later."

"What's so funny? Why would it be strange that I can't trust the two of you? We've just met. I don't know either of you..."

"Female, I already told you our occupation. Both Fenrir and I are veterans of the Hyrrokin military, and we were involved in many strike teams. Team Molten Lava has saved the planet three different times now. We've both retired from the military but we have devoted our lives to protecting other beings; it's our job. If you can't trust us, you can't trust anyone."

"Exactly," Fenrir agrees.

Then he pulls over to the side of the road and stops the vehicle on the edge of the community lake. We are now parked on the opposite side of the lake from Cap's historic Heimdall residence. I can see the flash of red and orange sculpted iron flames peeking from the rooftop in the distance.

"Are we still taking this female to Cap's residence?" Fenrir questions.

I grunt my approval. "Before we go any further, I will message Skoll with the news of Jada's arrival."

"Okay, that sounds like a good idea," she agrees.

I let go of her hand and pull out my tablet. Jada watches quietly while I tap out a message to Skoll, her cousin's mate. I make sure the screen is tilted so she can see the exchange.

*Skoll, I've found an unmated human female at the front gate of the community who is new to the planet. Her name is*

*Jada Williams and she claims to be Ariana's first cousin. Is this true?*

"Of course, it's true," she grumbles adorably.

I reach out and squeeze her hand again. "I had to ask," I respond.

Her smooth brow furrows. "You said in that message that I'm unmated, which is true. How did you know I'm unmated?"

"If you were mated, would you choose to sit this close to me?"

"No," she answers emphatically.

"Uh huh." If she were mine no one would care for her needs but me.

A series of dots undulate on the bottom of the screen, letting us know Skoll is answering. The response quickly appears, and I read it out loud for Fenrir's benefit, "*My bound is squealing with delight at the arrival of this human Jada Williams. Ariana is right now ordering the hovercraft to take us there to meet her cousin. ETA 20 min. Can you bring her to meet us at my new residence in the community?*"

A secure, private message arrives in my inbox with the entrance code for his domicile. *Yes, we'll be there*, I answer.

*Great. See you soon.*

"I'm also sending a message to Cap," I tell Fenrir as my claws tap on the screen, "Letting him know we'll be late to the meeting and why."

"Sounds good," my teammate responds, then he starts the vehicle again and pulls away from the curb.

"See?" Jada smiles at me. "I was telling you the truth. Ariana really is my cousin and she was expecting me."

I take her hand in mine again, pleased to know I was correct to place my faith in her.

Fenrir slowly drives through the large, expansive community. The human gazes out the window, eagerly

examining the layout and the Hyrrokin who stroll along the pathways around the center lake. We pass by a group of mothers pushing strollers or walking hand in hand with small offspring towards a neighborhood park. The streets here are wide and all the domiciles have perfectly updated exteriors as well as flowering foliage. It is a very beautiful community, I must admit.

I quietly gaze in wonder at her perfect profile and decide to wait to question her further until we meet up with the rest of the team.

We turn several times in the streets behind the lake and then finally stop in front of Skoll's domicile. This is my first time seeing my teammate's new residence within the community. It's been recently updated, ready for the arrival of Skoll's bound and the start of his family.

"Oh wow, this is where Ariana lives? It's very nice. I like all the large windows and the flowers out front."

"It's their second domicile," I explain. "The Strikestones have property in the wildlands that has been passed down for generations. They were staying in their cabin, but they are returning to town now that you are here. They only recently acquired this additional property in the community. This residence is one street behind where Cap lives. Cap was the first of us to move in here, because his brother, mother and grandmother all live here too. And then Hannibal purchased a domicile in this community and now Skoll is living here too."

"Who is 'Cap'?"

"Oh, that's our nickname for Bergelmir Touchstone. He was our captain when we all served together in the military. Those of us who served under him still refer to him by his military designation, as a way of honoring our service."

"Do you live here too, in this community?"

"No, I live in a small cabin on the edge of town. I don't know how I feel about this place. Maybe too rich for my blood. Cap's brother is a tech Billionaire so of course he's received excellent financial advice, and Hannibal and Skoll

both lucked out with mineral rights that paid off well. But I'm just a soldier. Basically, this community is a place I visit but don't live in."

"Oh."

Fenrir gets out of the driver's seat and opens the back door for Jada, and I slide out alongside her and take her hand in mine again.

She lifts her chin and smiles up at the arch of the wide blue, cloudless sky. "The weather here on Tarvos is so beautiful. I'm starting to understand why Ariana chose to make this planet her permanent residence."

"It's always like this," I shrug. "The weather here is always pleasant."

"Except for the rainy season, then watch out," Fenrir quips.

"Yes," I chuckle, "except for the godsdamn rainy season. Then all bets are off."

Now she's staring at me and I can again scent that former waft of arousal.

"What?" I question.

A genuine smile spreads across her smooth human features. It's the first I've seen so far, and it changes her face from exotic to downright breathtaking. "Nothing." She grins. "Nothing at all."

I let go of her hand and place my claw on the small of her back and guide her across the vast green lawn, past the flowering bushes and up the front steps of the domicile. We pause on the porch and I pull out my tablet to retrieve the entrance code.

Why does she smell so good? The longer I remain next to her the hotter my skin feels. My cock is now heavy and leaking, ready to fill her with my seed, causing me to turn away and make a quick adjustment to hide the erection in my trousers. I've never been this instantly attracted to a female. I must have her underneath me. I'm going to ask her to become



my pleasure mate during her visit so I can attend to her needs. I'll move into her guest room in Skoll's residence if I must, whatever it takes to remain at her side and offer my touch as well as my protection. I've never asked a client to pleasure mate, but I cannot deny the violent lust that rages through my veins for this human.

I reach forward, about to enter the code.

"Why did you come to Tarvos?" Fenrir asks from behind. "You said you have a travel visa, but you're not here just to visit your cousin, right?"

I pause for a moment, curious to see if she now feels comfortable enough to answer this question before Ariana arrives.

"You're right, I'm certainly not here just for a visit. My sister and I were forced to run away from our home world. We were supposed to arrive together, but we got separated. And now I'm worried that she's been hurt or captured. I need to find my sister."

"I'm sorry to hear that about your sister," Fenrir responds. "We'll certainly help you find her."

"Thank you. She's my twin and my best friend and I need to make sure she's okay." Then she looks up at me. "You said that Molten Lava provides the best security on Tarvos? Can I hire your team to find my sister?"

I turn back toward the front door, ready to enter the code again. "Yes, of course you can hire us, but you can't afford it," I respond absently, ready to tell her in the next breath that I'll take care of the charges for her. And if I don't, I'm sure Skoll will offer to pay for his family member, or at the very least Cap and Hannibal will declare this whole mission free of charge since it's for Ariana's cousins. We'll take care of them.

"Of course I can pay," she cuts in. "Currency is of no consequence in this matter."

I pause and glance down at her with surprise. "What do you mean? You think you have enough currency to pay for the

extraction of a being off planet? Do you understand how involved and expensive missions like this are?"

Jada waves a hand. "Whatever the charge is, I can afford it. The most important thing is finding my sister and keeping her protected."

She can afford to pay for an entire intergalactic search and extraction mission?

"Who the hells are you on New Earth?" I demand. "What kind of young human can casually declare that she can hire Molten Lava to search for a missing being not just on Tarvos but intergalactically?" I take a step closer and realize she's not wearing subscription fabricator quality clothing. Her clothes are tailored or bespoke and her jewelry looks valuable.

"I told you my name is Jada Williams. My father is Darius Williams, and he's...he's...and my family is..."

"Rich? Wealthy? Powerful? All three?"

She nods.

My jaw clenches. Steam escapes from my nostrils. She's been hiding the fact that she's a rich heiress. This female is a human socialite. Why didn't I see this shit right away? How could I be so stupid as to ache for a female with the same vicious attributes as my former intended?

When will I learn?

## JADA

A sudden coldness crosses Idun's harsh features.

His eyes narrow and harden. The protective stance is gone. Both claws curl into fists and smoke wafts from his nostrils. He's no longer gazing at me with his former possessive heat, standing nearby and giving me the warmth of his large body. His entire demeanor changes and I suddenly remember how scared I was of him when I first saw his menacing, satanic-looking face.

"Idun?" I question, worried I've said something wrong, because I have no idea why he's suddenly morphed into this distant stranger.

He bares his fangs and moves back from me.

A hovercraft streaks across the sky and starts to orient itself as it lands on the street in front of Skoll's house.

"Let's go," Grindstone growls at his partner, Fenrir. "Skoll and his bound have arrived. This means our work here is done concerning this female. Let's return to our original plans and make that meeting at Cap's house."

"What? You're leaving? Idun, tell me what's wrong. What did I do?"

He ignores me and steps off the porch as if I don't exist.

A whimper escapes my lips. I don't even understand what's happening. Why is he leaving so suddenly?

The hovercraft starts to land on the street, causing a gale force wind to blow bits of my hair against my lips. I have to

use both my hands to hold down my skirt.

Meanwhile, Idun strides away from me and crosses the other side of the lawn.

I stumble down the porch steps after him. “Idun” I cry out again, but the noise drowns out my words.

Fenrir catches me gently by the elbow and frowns after his friend. “I’m sorry for that,” he says, raising his voice to be heard over the windstorm. “Don’t worry female, you’ll be fine. I’ll message Skoll later, so he knows what happened here.”

I blink up at him. “What do you think happened here?”

“Fenrir!” Idun bellows from the car.

Fenrir sighs and doesn’t answer, he just winks at me and jogs over to rejoin his teammate.

I watch as the male I wanted in my bed tonight folds his large frame into the passenger side of their sleek, black vehicle, and tucks his barbed tail into his side as he did when we both sat together in back. He grips the top of the door frame for a moment, flexing his red-skinned muscular arm. The roof is tall, leaving headroom for his pointy black horns. I catch a glimpse of hard, red abs and the glint of his silver belt buckle and then the door slams shut, and I lose sight of him.

He’s gone.

I felt tiny and delicate while seated next to him. And he smelled wonderful, like soil and sunshine and midnight manly spices. Not once, as many men have on my own planet, did he seem to mind my weight or my thick legs and ankles. Idun gazed at my curves with heat in his deadly eyes. He’d stood unnecessarily close, and I swore he was staring at my lips as I spoke, like...like he wanted to kiss me?

My whole life I’ve been self-conscious about my messy boobs and thick thighs. I’m not exactly petite. I know I’m overweight, because how could I forget when everyone reminds me of the fact with a curl of the lip or their tone of voice? And today I certainly look like hell. Any makeup I’d worn earlier is smeared away from crying and rubbing at my eyes. I’m basically a mess, having left my home world in a

rush and been on the run ever since. I arrived scared and confused, trying to meet up with my cousin Ariana.

And also, I have no freaking idea where Aliyah ended up after she hit the initiation sequence, causing me to dissolve and leave ahead of her. What if she's hurt? What if...what if she was killed? No, no I don't sense that she's dead. She's my twin, I'd know if she'd been killed, right?

I rub a hand against my chest. Why is Idun's abrupt exit hurting my heart? Why am I suddenly needy for a male? Shouldn't I be focused on Aliyah instead of Idun? I've never had an actual boyfriend, nor do I usually even really care. Aliyah is the bold, sexy one with all the dates and gorgeous clothes. She's the pretty one, famous for not caring what anyone thinks of her weight or her shape. She's constantly involved in shenanigans and late nights and I'm the quiet twin people forget about.

Shouldn't I be pleased that this scary guy and his equally scary friend are dropping me off at my cousin's house like I asked? But...Idun immediately accepted me and helped me. He seemed to like me exactly as I was, without needing me to be any different. This male I just met has become important to me. I really thought he was feeling the same heady, instant attraction for me that I felt for him. He held my hand like there was something between us and now he's acting as if none of it happened.

He learned my family is rich and suddenly he left. Is that the problem, that my family is wealthy?

I blow out a breath. I'm on the run and I need to find my twin sister. She's lost and could be in danger this very moment. There's no time for me to be mooning over some satanic-looking Hyrrokin with huge back horns and a barbed tail. It doesn't matter how deep his voice is or how perfect his muscular red chest. Apparently, I was wrong about him and misunderstood the signals. He sat right next to me and kept holding my hand with our fingers entwined. I liked how when we walked side by side he placed his claw on the small of my back. I let him touch me in ways I'd never let any of my father's men touch me, or any men ever. And now that he's

left, I feel alone in the universe all over again and the enormity of the loss of my sister is causing my stomach to sour.

I shake my head, trying to ignore the big black vehicle carrying that luscious male, pulling away from the curb. The passenger side goes right past me and I lift my chin and concentrate on ignoring him as much as he's now ignoring me.

*Don't let them see you cry*, Mom used to say, and she was so right. I've already cried enough today for five other people, enough is enough. Time to pull on the big girl panties and carry on.

The hovercraft finishes landing in the street and I focus on the arrival of my cousin, who I haven't seen face to face in over a decade. The ramp opens with a clang and a squeal of delight echoes across the lawn. I'd recognize that voice anywhere.

"Oh thank gods," I breathe, a smile brightening my face. Ariana Gonzalez the fifth will know what to do in this situation. She's basically a celebrity on New Earth because her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother were infamous for their adventurous exploits. And Ariana is created from the same mold. My sister Aliyah and I had planned to run away and come here because Ariana is family and an obvious source of security and strength. If anyone would help us escape our father's clutches, it would be her.

But then everything went to hell, and I ended up here alone and I have no idea what's going on with my sister. This whole situation is so wrong. My twin should be standing next to me right now.

I watch as Ariana waddles down the ramp. Wow. She'd said she was pregnant, but I guess I didn't realize how far along. She looks like she could give birth at any moment. And now I feel bad that I've brought trouble her way.

I immediately confess my worry to her huge, scary-looking husband who has a nasty scar along the side of his face, because my guilt over the danger I've brought with me is that

deep. “I’m sorry I brought my troubles to you,” I tell him, “but I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Don’t worry, you came to the right place,” he answers with a warm Hyrrokin grimace, which I’ve learned is their version of a smile. Despite the scar, he seems less scary than many Hyrrokin I’ve already met. “You don’t have to run anymore. You are family and we will protect you.”

Aaaw, apparently Ariana married the nice Hyrrokin, unlike that jerk who just pulled away from the curb without a second glance.

And then I notice that Skoll is carrying two different cat carriers, one in each hand.

“Skoll, move over, I need to hug my cousin,” a familiar voice grouses. “I haven’t seen her in person in like a decade.”

And then we’re hugging tight because we’ve always loved hugs, even when we were little. Warmth spreads across my chest because it’s so good to see her again and I’m so happy for her that she’s pregnant and about to be a mom. “I missed you,” I whisper.

“I missed you too. It was like I didn’t have any family.”

She steps back, but I still hold one of her hands for a moment and meet her warm gaze. “I know. I’m sorry. At least I had my mom and her side of the family while I was growing up, but you had no one and I’ve felt terrible about it, but please know it was done to keep you safe. And Ariana, you look beautiful. Pregnancy suits you.”

“Oh, thank you. But...” she glances around, “Where is Aliyah? Why isn’t she with you?”

I place a palm against my chest. “I don’t know where she is.”

“What?”

“Let’s get inside so the pilot can return the hovercraft back to headquarters,” Skoll announces as he guides us down the ramp so it can close. “My bound needs to be seated and to eat. And then we can talk and get to bottom of this problem.”

The hovercraft starts to take flight and Ariana braces a hand behind her back. “Yeah,” she grimaces, “it’s true that a place to sit and a snack sound pretty good right now. Thanks babe.”

Skoll lifts one of the cat carriers right in front of her. “A Snack?” he questions.

Ariana laughs and waves a hand. “No, not the cat. I meant I need actual food.”

“Huh?” I question.

“This cat is named Snack,” Ariana’s husband explains lifting the carrier again for my benefit, “and this other cat is named Morsel. They’re both getting so big now, almost fully grown. Not kittens any longer.”

“My husband loves to make puns out of their names.” Ariana blows a kiss at the nearest cat, then the three of us start toward the front door of their domicile. Skoll enters the code and opens the door. Ariana chats with me, filling me in on how she found her cats and how they ended up with her on Tarvos. Skoll guides his wife inside, along with the two carriers, and I follow behind. As soon as we step inside the sunlit entryway and the door closes behind us, Skoll lets both cats out of their carriers.

Suddenly I’m not intent on anything else but the two kitties prancing around the floor. They are so cute I can’t even handle. “I have two cats back home,” I say. “I’m a big animal lover and I’ve been in a constant state of worry that they’re being properly cared for.” I walk up close and quietly bend forward and gently put out my hand, palm up, offering the tips of my fingers for the nearest cat to sniff. Snack boldly steps forward and puts his nose at my fingers for a quick, ticklish sniff. Then I turn and offer the same fingers for Morsel to sniff. He steps forward cautiously and I wait as long as it takes until he’s inhaled. After they’ve both sniffed my hand sufficiently and decided I was okay, they allow me to pet each of them. “You two are so precious,” I croon. “Beautiful kitties.” Then they both prance away to the kitchen, ready to ignore me now.



Skoll gives me a wide smile.

“I love cats,” I explain. “I helped found a no-kill animal shelter on New Earth for cats and other indigenous pets and I’m there often, volunteering.”

“I see.”

“And now you’re Skoll’s new best friend,” Ariana chuckles. “If you’re nice to his exotic New Earth pets, he likes you right away.”

“It *is* a good barometer,” he agrees. “Jada, how about you sit down on the couch next to my bound, which will encourage her to sit too. I’ll feed the cats, then I’ll bring food and drink for the three of us and we’ll talk. I want you to tell me everything about how you ended up here and what happened with your sister so we can help to find her.”

“Okay.”

Ariana guides me to their spacious living room. The white walls stretch up two stories and sky lights are embedded in the ceiling. Skoll goes around opening large windows so a lovely, flower-scented breeze flows through the space. My pregnant cousin slowly lowers herself into the cushions of their soft white couch and I sit beside her. She’s wearing a pink maternity shirt, the same type of tube top all the other Hyrrokin women wear, which bares her arms, but it flows out from under breasts to comfortably cover the swell of her belly.

She pats her stomach. “My belly is so large you’d think I was having twins but there really is just one child growing in here.” And then she turns to face me and her features turn serious. “Tell me why your evil twin isn’t here. I thought the whole plan was that the two of you were going to arrive in two weeks. What happened? Why did you have to move up the date and arrive without Aliyah?”

“I know, it was terrible. Believe me, we didn’t want to leave so suddenly either. Dad changed the date for our double wedding to his mafia buddies and we had to leave right away. There wasn’t even time to message you. I only had a currency chip in my pocket, that’s it. We were basically running for our

lives and I lost Aliyah on the way here and I need your help to find her. I'm worried that she was probably captured or hurt? Or maybe she got away too and went somewhere else? I don't know. I'm sorry to bring these troubles to you when you're in the midst of preparing for a new addition to your family."

"Oh, Jada, I'm here for you and Aliyah whenever the two of you need me. You're my cousins. And don't forget I'm married to a security specialist. I won't be doing anything but concentrating on getting ready to give birth, meanwhile Skoll and Team Molten Lava will take care of everything."

"I'm so, so happy for you that you're about to be a new mother and I promise I want to hear everything about how your pregnancy is going."

"Later, you can hear everything later. Right now we need to find Aliyah."

"Yes. I'm safe on Tarvos but Aliyah is still in danger."

"Don't worry, you came to the right place."

"Yes, you came to the right place," Ariana's husband agrees, setting down a tray of food and drinks onto their Traq table. He hands a drink and plate of snacks to his wife then asks me, "How do you like your Traq?"

"Oh, with some milk and sweetener please."

He takes a moment to put in the right amount of both ingredients then hands me a cup. I cannot believe how this huge, horned male with a barbed tail is being so...so...kind and professional. He sits in the chair opposite from us and pulls a purring orange cat onto his lap. The disparity between this male with such fierce features, silver-tipped claws and black horns, delicately holding this cat in his rough hands is so fabulous. If I had my tablet I'd be taking lots of pictures of this to send back to my friends at the animal shelter back home.

I busy myself with drinking up the wonderful liquid I didn't even know I needed until now. The warmth settles my stomach and I find myself leaning back into the comfy couch, pleased to have ended my race from the Tarvos transporter station to my cousin's house. I'm here and they will help.

I send out a silent thought... *Just hold on Aliyah, we'll find you.*

“I need to know your whole story so that we can protect you,” Skoll says. “Ariana told me a lot when we were preparing for the arrival of you and your sister. But now that you’ve arrived alone and she is in danger I need to know more. Do you mind if I record a holo vid of this conversation, so the team can review it later? That way you won’t have to repeat yourself and it will help fast-track your sister’s retrieval. This will remain entirely confidential, for our eyes only, and after we’ve watched and gotten the info we need we will destroy this recording.”

I suck down the last of my warm drink and lick my lips. “Sure, go ahead, I don’t mind.”

“Good.” Skoll leans forward and places a small, flat holo vid recorder device on the table. It beeps to life. “Start from the beginning. Tell me first why you and your sister ended up separated from Ariana when you were children.”

## JADA

I do my best to ignore the fact that strangers are going to watch this recording later and I just start talking. “Well, as you already know, Ariana and I are first cousins...”

“Yes, she told me that your mother and her father were siblings, but they have now both passed away? I don’t understand how the two of you were close when you were younger but haven’t seen or spoken to each other in ten years?”

“Well, my mother and Ariana’s father were close when they were younger but steadily grew apart as adults and finally stopped communicating altogether because my mother married a bad man. She fell in love with my father before she knew he was part of a mafioso family. That’s why we ended up separating. Ariana’s dad ended up eventually deciding he didn’t want to have anything to do with the crime family my mom had married into.”

“And not just any mafioso family,” Ariana cuts in. “Her mom married the man who was the heir to the head of New Earth’s most extensive and violent crime family. The kind who now sits on the board of the Intergalactic Crime Syndicate.”

Skoll tips his head to the side and hands me another cup of Traq. “Your father is now the head of New Earth mafia?”

“Um, yes.” I shift on my seat and squeeze my hands around my warm mug because this story is hard to admit. My father is a killer and my mother’s wealthy ancestors aren’t any better and sometimes I wonder what that makes me. Do I have

those genes too? It is just a matter of time before I lose all my ethics too and hurt others for monetary gain? I take another sip and then continue, “I don’t usually tell this to anyone, but my grandfather, Martell Williams, was the don and therefore my dad, Darius Williams, wasn’t just a loyal soldier, but the heir. I mean, I wasn’t using the last name of Williams until recently. My mom got pregnant right away with twins—me and my sister. She really loved our dad, so she tried to make it work at first, but you know, mafia families are dangerous.”

“They’re scary as fuck,” Ariana cuts in. “And also patriarchal and misogynistic.”

My lips twitch at her comment. “I see you haven’t changed.”

“She was like this as a little girl?” Skoll questions. “Always looking out for the rights of other females?”

“Yep,” I answer proudly. “Ariana comes from a long line of women who fight for the rights of other women.” And suddenly I’m sad all over again that I haven’t had my cousin in my life on a daily basis. I make a silent vow to never be separated from her again.

“The men at the head of the mafia kill whoever they need to in order to get ahead,” my cousin sniffs. “That includes friends and family. And they treat their women like shit.”

I nod. “Ariana’s father, Javier Fernandez Garcia, was my uncle. He eventually didn’t want my sister and I anywhere near his daughter because of the mafia connection, he thought it was dangerous. He thought my mom was stupid for being tricked into marrying a guy with a background like that and getting pregnant so fast. We all used to see each other at first because my dad was just the heir, but then he became the head of the organization and shit got real.”

“Javier was a jerk,” Ariana says, “but in this one instance my dad was probably right about how dangerous your own dad and the Williams crime family were. That was back when your grandfather, Martell Williams, was still in charge and he was even scarier than your dad. I was sad that I didn’t get to be with you. One moment I was a part of my dad’s side of the

family and I saw my cousins, grandparents and aunt all the time, and then suddenly I saw none of you, ever again. Our grandparents sided with your mom, saying that they needed to move with you to Mumbai to protect you and Aliyah. I was sad to lose all of you but I think our parents did make the right decision. For both of us. The hiding we all did from each other was sad but it kept us safe.”

“Yes, I agree. But I was sad too, being apart from you. And we’re going to make sure that never happens again.” And then I look over at Skoll again. “My dad got deeper and deeper into the mafia lifestyle. At first Mom thought she could pull them both out and they could leave together and start over, but Darius ended up taking over for Martell when he passed away and my dad became the leader of the Williams crime family.”

“I met Jada’s dad often when I was little. We used to see him and my aunt, and I have vague memories of him being a nice man. But her dad went from a nice young man her mom met in a coffee shop to the violent head of the entire human mafia, in a matter of years.”

“He became abusive. By the time my sister and I were in school dad had really changed. Mom’s husband wasn’t the man she thought he was, and she was even worried for our safety too.”

“And that was at about the same time my dad, Javier, broke contact with your mom and the two of you because he said it wasn’t safe being associated with the wife of the head of New Earth mafia.”

“My mom divorced Darius. He threatened to cut her off financially, which normally would be a terrible thing and most likely a deal breaker and she wouldn’t have been able to escape that life. But my mom, she came from a powerful and wealthy family, and she didn’t need dad’s money, so she was able to hire a team of mercenaries and sneak us out in the middle of the night. We moved far away from him to another city. Everyone we’d known still lived in Singapore, but we moved to Mumbai and she managed to keep us separate from the Williams mafia. We lived a reasonably normal life surrounded by the wealth and power of Mom’s family, and

Aliyah and I hadn't seen our dad since we left, when we were eight years old."

Ariana crooks an eyebrow at me over the rim of her own mug of Traq. "This whole time Darius Williams wasn't helping you financially?"

"Well, he wasn't helping *me*. I was living off my trust fund from the Garcia side of my family, and now that Mom passed away, I've also received that extra inheritance because Aliyah and I were her heirs. But one thing I didn't know that has only come to light more recently is that Aliyah was accepting handouts from our dad. I think he'd been trying to pull her into the lifestyle with the bling."

"Another reason why I can't stand your sister."

This comment doesn't surprise me. My sister is the type of person you either love or you hate, no in-between. But in this instance I'm a little confused, "How can you dislike her? You don't even speak to her."

"Oh, I've followed all the crazy exploits of your twin in the vid news channels. There's plenty to dislike."

I shrug because Aliyah's "party girl" moniker cannot be denied. "I know, but she finally saw the light and was running from Dad too. She knew the money wasn't worth it either."

"Good."

"What changed?" Skoll questions. "What made the two of you feel like you had to leave New Earth and join us here? It sounds like the two of you had a safe, secure life until recently. You kept away from Darius Williams and led very separate lives."

"We did. But then my mother died a few months ago in a sudden vehicular accident and everything changed. I hadn't seen Darius face to face in fifteen years and suddenly he was back on the scene."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Jada. Aunt Celia was a wonderful woman who loved her daughters very much."

“Thank you,” I whisper, still shaken up over the fact that Mom is gone. It still seems like a nightmare I’ll wake up from, finding her still sitting at the kitchen table with us, reading her tablet. My mom was my best friend; she helped me found the animal shelter. Her death hit both Aliyah and I hard and even the loving tribute at her funeral and all the friends and family who were there still didn’t make her death any easier. I’m still thrown off kilter without my mother to call for advice.

“Your dad came back in your lives soon after Aunt Celia passed away?” Ariana questions. “I’m wondering if it’s because you and your sister look so much like his side of the family. He probably felt possessive.”

“It’s true,” I turn and say to Skoll. “My sister and I do look like female versions of our dad. He remarried four other times after he and mom divorced and sadly all of his other wives eventually ended up dead.”

Ariana lets out a snort of derision. “Oh, I’ve no idea how that happened, *at all*...”

“And um, also, as a result of the turf wars and assassination attempts that killed his wives, Dad lost his only other child—my six-year-old half-brother Darius Junior was killed too.”

“What? Oh no, Jada, I didn’t know you had a little brother who passed away. No matter what an asshole your dad was, an innocent child didn’t deserve to die like that. Did you ever meet him?”

“No, I never got to meet my brother,” I answer, trying not to start crying again. “I only recently learned of his existence and his death at the same time.” Damn, my family is fucked up. There’s no use in denying it.

Skoll leans forward. “After your mother passed away your father reconnected with the two of you?”

“Yes. The end result was that my father had no heirs. I think over time he’d begun to understand why my mom left to protect their daughters. And he also had that succession of wives who he was always hoping would give him a son, and



then one of them finally did so I'm certain that made it much easier to forget about the two daughters he never saw. He allowed us to live away from him. Mom even changed our last names back to Garcia. I was Jada Garcia until just recently when my father demanded I legally change back to Jada Williams."

"That man doesn't get to decide what name you go by," Ariana raged. "I changed my name to what I wanted after Javier passed away."

"I know, but really both of my last names carry baggage, so it doesn't really matter, does it?"

"Oh yeah, I've heard about the protests over the outing of our great-grandfather, and well, really all the treasonous exploits of our despicable Garcia ancestors."

"Yeah. Finding out your family sold out their neighbors during the Hurlian occupation for currency isn't a good look."

Ariana's features turn sad. "I've had it easy because I've got my Gonzalez heritage that everyone remembers mostly and also I don't live on New Earth anymore so I'm away from it, but you've been right there in the middle of the chaos."

"Yeah, it's been hard."

"I'm not sure what you two are talking about," Skoll cuts in. "But your mother died and so did your brother, so your father returned into your lives and wanted you and your sister to take on his last name again and become his heirs?"

I glance down at the holo vid recorder that is still blinking and force myself to continue talking. "It was worse than that. My father showed up at our mansion and kidnapped the two of us and brought us back with him to his compound in Singapore. There was no asking us, or giving us a choice. He declared that we were both going to marry men he'd chosen for us because he needed to solidify his links with other crime families to consolidate his power on New Earth. And he wanted one of us to eventually give him a grandson he could pass everything on to."

An expression of horror crosses Ariana's wide brown eyes. "He kidnapped the both of you? Were you hurt?"

"No, but we were constantly watched by his guards and locked in our assigned room. I would say that their fatal error was letting Aliyah and I share a room, since we were cousins. We weren't allowed any outside communication, but Aliyah was the one who managed to steal and hide a tablet from the staff for us to use."

"Heh," Ariana grunts with approval. "She's more resourceful than I thought."

"I was surprised too. Aliyah's the one who planned and implemented our escape. Darius had us meet the two men he'd chosen as our husbands and that was when my sister flipped out. She was all 'hell, no' and kicked into overdrive her plans on getting us out of there. That is when we managed to get a message to you because we realized we had to escape off planet, or we'd get sucked into that life forever."

"You would've been stuck in a cycle of abuse or ended up as dead as all the other women your dad married. Basically, Darius is willing to use the both of you to get what he wants and if it means you both die young, so be it."

Heat burns again behind my eyes at the truth of this statement. "Yes. It's true."

My cousin's hands clench into tight fists. "He was your father and he was going to marry you and your sister off to some assholes for money."

"Yeah. I just...I thought this whole time he loved us from afar?"

"Well, I'm sure he did in his own twisted way. The same as my own father did in his own twisted way... What happened next? You contacted us, and Skoll and I were expecting you both here next week."

"We planned to leave then, but Darius must've intercepted our plans because, like I told you, he upped the wedding date. Maybe he learned that we had been talking to you? We didn't even message you again because we didn't want anyone to

track down what we were saying. And so, that night Aliyah created a distraction.”

“What sort of distraction?” Skoll asks. “How were you able to get away from your guards?”

“Aliyah used the staff tablet to hack into the mansion’s security system and we were able to leave.”

“Heh,” Skoll grunts. “Your sister is full of surprises.”

“Right? We walked off the grounds of his compound and ordered an auto drive to meet us down the street. We were running for our lives to the Mumbai transporter station at two o’clock in the morning. We broke in with an access code Aliyah had purchased on the black market and we got into a transporter room. But then at the last minute a group of my dad’s guards show up in the room. Aliyah looks at me, then and at the disk she can’t get to and says, ‘You’re the oldest and the nicest. You go first.’”

“One of you had to remain behind to initiate the sequence for the other to get away,” Skoll agrees.

“Yes. I screamed for her, but it was too late. She hit the sequence and it started, and I was gone, which meant she was left behind. I materialized on Tarvos without her. I haven’t seen her since.”

“Wow,” Ariana gasps. “I can’t believe she did that for you. Aliyah saved you and protected you. And she thinks you’re the nicest? That was sweet. I didn’t know she had it in her.”

“I can’t believe she did it either. I never expected to come here alone, leaving my twin sister behind and not knowing what happened to her after I left. When I dissolved on the disk on New Earth it was after two o’clock in the morning, but I arrived alone, on Tarvos, in the middle of the day, with only a currency chip in my pocket. I’d never seen a Hyrrokin before in real life...”

Ariana grimaces. “Yeah, that’s a scary situation, for sure.”

“It was,” I agree. “I got out of the transporter station, hired an auto drive and came straight to your domicile, but I got stopped at the front gate.”

Skoll starts tapping on his tablet. “The last time you saw your sister Aliyah Williams was when she was shoving you onto that transporter disk on New Earth?”

“Yes. She didn’t tell me anything about what she was going to do after that, or how she was going to get away from the guards, and I’m worried that right now she’s still on New Earth and being forced to marry or...or she’s been hurt.” Tears start to burn in my eyes. Everything that happened in the last twenty-four hours hits me hard.

Ariana takes my hand. “Like I said before, your dad is scary as fuck. It’s good that you ran away and came here. And I’m so sorry that things didn’t work out as planned. You and Aliyah should both be here right now.”

“Aliyah and I didn’t want to bring our troubles to you. We were really trying to get away without anyone knowing and we only planned on staying here on Tarvos as long as our visa allowed. But she could still be on New Earth, or maybe she made it onto another disk and got off planet too. She’s my twin and I need to make sure she’s safe.”

“Do you think she was hurt? Kidnapped?”

“I don’t know where she ended up, but I sense that she’s still alive. Is that weird? I don’t have any evidence to back that up it’s just she’s...we’re...”

“She’s your twin and you love her. I totally understand. You two have a special bond.” Ariana leans forward and puts her arms around me. “She’s my cousin too and I won’t rest until she’s found. We’ll find her. We will.”

“Yes, we will find her,” Skoll agrees.

## JADA

One of the cats, I think it's Morsel, jumps onto the couch.

I reach out and hug the fluffy darling to my chest for a moment because a kitty hug is what I really need right now. She gives me a few moments of her time and then squirms away and I'm swiping at the cat hair on my lap.

Ariana frowns at me. "Honey, you look like hell. You need to rest."

Heat blooms across my cheeks.

"Ariana," her husband scolds as he shuts down the holo vid recorder. "You're upsetting your cousin with your words." Skoll stands from his chair, steps around the Traq table and helps his heavily pregnant wife up from the couch.

Ariana takes his hands and allows him to pull her up. "What? No I'm not. What did I say that was so bad? Jada, it's not your fault you're a mess, you've been on the run. I'm sure you cried and screamed when you first got here on Tarvos and saw the other Hyrrokin staff members in the transporter room. Right? You've had a really tough morning, that's all."

"I *did* cry when I arrived! And I was screaming too. How did you know? I'm sure I don't have a spec of makeup on anymore, and if I do have any it's smeared in a clump under my eyes."

"Oh, that's easy. I know how you must've felt because that was my exact same reaction when I first came to Tarvos."

I stand up beside her. "Really? You screamed and cried?"

“Yes. Total meltdown.”

“Humans are terrified of noble Hyrrokin features,” Skoll agrees. “It’s very odd and also very well documented.”

“It’s because they all look like the devil,” Ariana whispers in my ear. “And our nightmares from the darkest pits of hell.”

A giggle escapes my lips.

“And the flame throwing doesn’t help matters,” she adds.

I meet her gaze. “Flame throwing?”

“You haven’t seen that yet?”

“No,” I whimper. “I’ve seen smoke coming out of their nostrils, but I didn’t know that meant...”

Ariana laughs and pats my shoulder. “Just you wait.”

Skoll strides off and settles into a chair at the kitchen table, tapping on his high-tech tablet. “I’m going to get this information to the rest of my team so we can immediately start the investigation.”

“Meanwhile,” Ariana says, “how about I show you to your room so you can rest and clean up while you wait for them to find more information about Aliyah?”

“Oh, I would love that, but...” The sourness in the pit of my stomach returns. “Maybe there’s something more I can be doing to help find her? I feel bad just resting while Aliyah is in trouble.”

“There’s nothing more you can do right now,” Skoll offers. “You’ve done everything you can to find her; it’s a waiting game now while our team reviews the information and starts an action plan. We will have results soon, but even Molten Lava needs a few hours to get things going when we’ve got an intergalactic investigation.”

“Don’t forget that I’m only here on a ten-day travel visa...”

“Got it, we’ll work on a solution to that too.”

I nod my head in agreement and start to follow Ariana out of the front room.

“When we meet up again, we will have some news about your sister,” he adds. “And I’ll have a new tablet for you so you can feel connected.”

“Thank you.”

“Ariana, I want you taking a nap too,” Skoll continues with a firm voice. “That’s an order.”

Her lips twitch and she offers him a cheeky military salute. “Yes, sir.”

Her husband grunts and returns to his work.

Ariana leans close as we both move toward the hallway. “Skoll is the only male allowed to give me orders.”

“I heard that,” a deep voice booms. “Get to bed, female, now.”

Ariana lets out a throaty laugh. “Come on,” she tells me. Then she snaps her fingers for Snack and Morsel to follow along with us and we all head together down the hallway.

“Your house is nice,” I comment as we walk with the two adorable cats trailing behind, with their tails high in the air. “It’s spacious but not too big. This seems like a good life for you. And I really like your husband. He’s a nice man who treats you well and is very much in love with you.”

“Oh, thanks for saying that. And yes, Skoll is all those things, I’m lucky to have him in my life. We moved in here a few weeks ago, so it’s perfect timing that you arrived. Prior to this we only had the cabin in the wildlands and Skoll’s small bachelor domicile here in town. We sold his city domicile and moved to the community because we could then have a larger house more appropriate for a family and be closer to his teammates. Most of the other humans on Tarvos live here too and I wanted to be close to them and their offspring.”

“Oh, there are other humans living on Tarvos? You aren’t the only one?”

“Yes, and we happen to all be young women who’ve gained citizenship because we married a Hyrrokin. Including you, there are now seven of us on the planet and we’ve all become close friends. Maybe you can meet them later?”

“That would be nice.”

Ariana yawns. “Oh, sorry. Guess Skoll is right that I do need a nap. I’ve been napping every single day since the second trimester, but recently it seems like I need two naps a day.”

“Are you having a boy or a girl?” I ask, embarrassed it’s taken me so long to find out this pertinent information. “And when are you due?”

“We’re having a girl and she’s due next week.”

“Oh wow, so soon?”

“Yep. Just warning you I could end up having this baby at any moment.”

And here I am messing up this momentous time in her life. “Ariana...”

“Don’t worry. There’s a big support system here with lots of beings who will help the both of us get through this crazy time; they’ll make sure your sister is found and that my baby is safely delivered. They can help us do two things at once.” Ariana stops in front of a bedroom door, taps the lock, and it slides open. “This is your suite. Go ahead and take a nap and relax. I already stocked this room with extra clothes and toiletries for your arrival. If you look in the closet, you’ll find a change of clothes. But don’t be surprised if they look a little different, I gave you traditional clothing that Hyrrokin females wear.”

“Oh thanks. I saw that none of the Hyrrokin have shoes...”

“Don’t worry, as you can tell I don’t walk around barefoot. I included a few pairs of flip-flops in the closet just in case. We also have a clothing fabricator you can use if you need more. And there’s always the shopping channels.” She yawns again.



I place my hands on her shoulders and guide her back out of the room. “Go lay down in your own bed and take that nap. I’ll be fine.”

Snack and Morsel gather around her in the hallway. “If you need anything just go out to the front room and let Skoll know, he’d be happy to help you. We’ll have dinner ready in a couple of hours,” Ariana picks up one of the cats and waves her fingers at me, “I’ll see you later.” And then the door slides shut behind her.

And now I’m alone for the first time today.

First, I rush into the bathroom and use the toilet because I suddenly realize I’ve got to pee. Then I pause and gaze at my harried look in the mirror as I wash my face and hands. Ariana was right, I’m a mess. I really should change and wash right now, but I’m just too tired. Now that I’ve stopped moving and got all that information out to team Molten Lava, the adrenaline is leaving my body and exhaustion is hitting me hard.

The room is spacious, with large windows overlooking a back garden. I sit on the big, soft bed and blow out a breath. I’m truly surprised at how nice this world is and how kind everyone has been, despite this species’ nightmare-inducing outward appearance. Cute Hyrrokin children were laughing and running towards a play structure in a park as we drove over and that was probably when I truly understood that these beings are the same as all the others in the four sectors, wanting health, happiness and family.

I’d watched that viral vid just like everyone else of Ariana dancing under a geyser of liquid gold with her clothes pasted to her body as if she were naked. She looked like a golden goddess, and the deep voice of her future Hyrrokin husband played in the background for everyone to hear. After that incident “Hyrrokin” and “Tarvos” were the most searched terms in the entire four sectors, so I knew a little bit about where she’d gone. But still, planning to arrive here and showing up and seeing this place in real life are two different things.

Aliyah made all the plans for our escape, but the both of us decided to come to Tarvos. Mom had always said if we were ever in trouble to go to Ariana in Singapore, but because she'd moved, we had to leave the planet to be with her. None of the Garcia side of the family could protect us from the Williams mafia. If we'd gone to family and friends for help, we'd be putting them in harm's way.

Tarvos isn't a permanent solution though. I've only been allowed a ten-day travel visa, which means I'll have to leave soon. Skoll vaguely referred to Molten Lava taking care of that, but I don't see how they can change my status. I assume I'll have to leave within ten diurnals and maybe go to the Omega 9 station or to Salo, where they allow permanent asylum for humans. Aliyah had felt that dad's minions wouldn't know if we'd left via transporter or on a spaceship or maybe we were just hiding on New Earth? It would take time to figure out we'd gone off planet and by then, maybe we could've left Tarvos and gone elsewhere to start over, our trail cold.

But that isn't how things ended up.

I bite my nail, fretting about what will happen now that I'm here. I thought I was escaping and my recent nightmare would finally end, but it only got worse. I don't know what happened to Aliyah and I'm concerned my father is plotting to find a way to get me back.

I have to trust that Molten Lava is going to take care of this.

I sigh, kick off my sandals and lie down on the bed. Then I twirl my hair and think about my crazy morning. I left New Earth at two o'clock in the morning and arrived on Tarvos in the middle of the day. I did have currency on me. At least there was that, but I got off the transporter into immediate chaos. My sister and I had already gotten universal translators inserted into our brains two days prior so at least the moment I arrived I could understand what the Hyrrokin were saying. That would have been even scarier.

I screamed and screamed when I formed on the disk at Tarvos and got my first look at the employees standing there, gaping at me. Then I dissolved into tears. It was embarrassing. A Hyrrokin female took pity on me and helped me. Apparently, she'd witnessed many other humans arrive and knew that we scared easily. She sat me down, gave me some water to drink and told me to take deep breaths. I even had my head between my knees for a little bit and then finally I felt a bit better. I was finally able to look straight at her terrifying devil-face and calmly tell her I needed to wait around, hoping that my sister would somehow make it onto that other disk and meet me here on Tarvos.

But the staff let me know there was no one else set to arrive from New Earth. That's when I knew I was alone and I had to get to Ariana. I requested a travel visa and explained I was here to visit my cousin Ariana Strikestone Gonzalez and that I would leave in ten days' time. I was immediately granted my visa and given a set return date. I went outside and managed to order an auto drive and programmed it to find Ariana's residence. It found her address and it took me to the front gate of her walled community and that's where it all went to shit.

And that was exactly when I met Idun Grindstone.

Idun...the male who left me behind for no apparent reason.

That huge, rough Hyrrokin came to my rescue as I was again losing my mind, weeping, crying and shaking my fist at the front gate guard, having a mental breakdown all over again. He swooped down and took care of me. But the moment I said I had enough money to pay for Molten Lava he looked closer at my clothes and jewelry, and he accused me of having a powerful and wealthy family, as if this were a bad thing. Then he immediately walked away.

Maybe he's right in thinking that a human female with a significant inheritance would have nothing in common with a foul-mouthed Hyrrokin security specialist.

But why do I doubt this is true?

I rub at my eyes and blow out a breath. Then I roll onto my side and adjust the pillow to my liking and then my eyes flutter closed and everything goes dark.

LATER I AWAKEN from the nap I hadn't even meant to take and glance out the window at the setting suns. The gorgeous view over the garden of orange and pink sky is spectacular, but then realize this means I might've overslept and maybe dinner is ready? Uh oh. I roll over and head on into the bathroom, ready to use the cleansing unit.

I strip out of the shirt and the skirt I wore when I left Mumbai. It's basically my favorite outfit because it's comfortable and yet nice-looking. The serviceable bra comes off, as well as my thigh-length underwear, which totally did its job, making sure I didn't flash bits I didn't want seen, as well as avoiding a sweaty rash. All this clothing gets shoved into the wall unit washer, where I hope it can remove the smudges of dirt off the white shirt. Then I unclip my hair and shake it loose and step naked into the cleansing unit. The warm water is fabulous, and the moisturizing cleanser smells great. In the end I press the blow dry button, which leaves my skin glowing and my shoulder-length hair straight and shiny. And suddenly I feel so much better than before.

The wall unit buzzer sounds. I step over and take out the warm clothing and put on my clean bra and underwear. The clothes I wore earlier are behind in favor of poking around in the closet. Ariana said she left traditional Hyrrokin clothes and I'm curious to see what she's chosen. "Ooh," I exclaim as I step into the walk-in closet and finger the row of jewel-toned tube top shirts clipped to hangers. The accompanying choices of pants, shorts and skirts is utter perfection. Ariana has good taste at almost the same level as my twin sister, who is a well-known style influencer. I'm the opposite, wearing clothing that I find serviceable and having no idea of what's fashionable. I mainly wear Aliyah's rejects or clothes she refers to as "so last season".

Hmm. These Hyrrokin shirts will expose my shoulders so I can't possibly wear the bra I brought. Darn it. Luckily Ariana

planned for this too, because there's an array of gorgeous, strapless bras in a dresser drawer. I pull out a red bra and try it on, thinking it couldn't possibly fit correctly, and yet it does. Probably because Ariana and I are of similar height and weight. For all I know these could be some of her pre-pregnancy clothes she's letting me borrow. The bra is surprisingly supportive and comfortable and manages to also smooth out any rolls in my back. It's a miracle-worker and therefore also a 'keeper'.

I slip on a red tube top and pull on a pair of thin, silky black pants and step in front of the full-length mirror and I'm pleased with what I see. The top does a good job of showing off my torso, which is my best asset. It nips at my waist, while still allowing plenty of stretch and the pants glide nicely over my wide hips and large ass, which now looks sexy instead of 'too much'. I turn around several times, checking myself out from many angles and...and I like what I see, which is unusual.

I slide on a pair of black flip-flops, wondering what Idun would think of how I look in this outfit. Then I frown and walk out for dinner, mad at myself for even caring what that male would think, considering he left me behind.

I head for the kitchen to meet up with my hosts and find Fenrir sitting at the dining room table with a plate of food in front of him, ready to eat. I rear back with surprise. "What are you doing here?" I question, and whirl around looking for his teammate.

"Idun isn't here with me," he smirks. "I came without him."

"Oh."

"Don't look so disappointed."

And then I realize he's teasing me, so I give him a light punch of my fist on his massive shoulder and take a seat next to him.

He chuckles, "Nice to see you too, human."

Ariana, who looks much more perky than before, slowly takes seat across from us, making sure to leave plenty of space between the table and her swollen stomach. “Good news Jada, Molten Lava has already discovered that Aliyah left New Earth alive.”

“Already?” I gasp. “Where is she? Is she okay?”

“Yes. Aliyah Williams is no longer on New Earth,” Fenrir confirms, “and was therefore not recaptured by your father. We are able to confirm that she left using the transporter in another room, but we do not yet know her next destination. That’s all we have so far, but we’re working to learn more.”

A goofy smile spreads across my face as I focus in on the number one fact—my sister made it off New Earth alive. I lean back in my chair, “I’m just so relieved to at least have that small bit of information,” I sniff. “I was so worried she didn’t even make it off planet. At least now I know she has a fighting chance. I mean, she knows I’m here on Tarvos so I’m assuming she’ll find a way to contact me.”

“Idun and Fenrir were working on this since basically the moment they met you,” Skoll yells out from the kitchen, “which helped to fast-track our identification of your sister’s movements.”

“They were?” I turn toward Fenrir. “Thank you so much for doing that for me.”

“Idun has been working nonstop on finding your sister,” he confirms. “The addition of your interview with Skoll helped us to find the information quickly.”

I try to hide my surprise that Idun remembered me after leaving me behind. But I guess I shouldn’t be surprised since it’s his job. And that’s all I am to him now—a job. “We still don’t know where she is right now or how to contact her? I’m thrilled to know she made it off planet, but that doesn’t mean she’s safe.”

Fenrir nods, “I estimate it will be another diurnal before we have more information.”

“Meanwhile, let’s eat,” Skoll announces as he brings a few more platters of smoking food to the table.

In minutes I find myself trying out Hyrrokin meat sticks that are basically some of the best food I’ve ever eaten. Ariana’s husband is an amazing cook.

“While we eat, I’ve got more important information that we need to discuss,” Ariana turns her head to stare at me, “Like for instance, I heard that Idun was holding your hand earlier today?”

I lower my meat stick. “Who told you that?”

“Fenrir.”

I glare at him accusingly, but he shrugs it off and starts blabbing about my private life. “I saw it all,” he says, between sips of fire ale, “Idun went and helped her with the front guard at the gate who wasn’t letting her inside without prior notice. He vouched for her.”

Ariana’s jaw literally drops open. “*No way*. This is true? He vouched for you?”

I nod, completely confused as to why this is a big deal.

“Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”

“I...I didn’t think it was important?”

“Oh, it’s important.”

Fenrir leans forward. “There’s more. He guided her back to the vehicle with a claw on her back and, when they arrived at the vehicle, he slid in the backseat next to her and held her hand in his, their fingers entwined and resting on his thigh the entire time.”

“He held her hand?” Skoll questioned with amazement.

“And he was polite to her and spoke to her in soft tones.”

Ariana and Skoll both stare at Fenrir’s statement with equal looks of shock and awe.

“Yes, he was nice to me at first, but then he left,” I point out. “He acted as if he hated me and he was gone. I called out

for him and he didn't answer."

Ariana gives me a look of pity.

My lips purse. "See, that's why I didn't tell you. It's embarrassing."

Skoll frowns. "He left this female behind?"

"I asked him about it. I said, 'I scented her arousal for you. Why did you just walk away like that?' and he wouldn't answer."

"My arousal?" I squeak, my face heating up. Oh dear gods, I wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole.

"Hmm, Fenrir has an avowed pleasure mate he's been with for a while now, he's even brought her to parties," Ariana comments. "But Idun is still single."

Fenrir waves a claw. "We broke up. She left me for another male."

"Oh, you're single again?" she questions. "Good to know."

"And why do I care about any of this?" I grumble. "What does it matter if Idun is single?" Although of course it does, very much.

"No reason. No reason at all."

"Where is Idun right now?" Skoll asks.

"Oh, he's outside on perimeter duty," Fenrir answers with an air of studied nonchalance.

Our four heads all turn at once to look out the front window. And there's Idun's black all-terrain vehicle parked on the curb across the street.

"He's been here all along?" I exclaim.

"For at least an hour now."

"Why?"

"You know why," Fenrir answers, then stuffs his mouth with another bite of food.

My jaw clenches. "Can he see me right now?"



“Yes.”

“I really don’t want to see him again,” I comment. “I’m just focused on finding my sister and settling somewhere with her later where we can both live in peace and start over.”

“Uh huh,” Ariana answers, staring off into space, twirling her hair.

## IDUN

I'm so fucking confused.

I've arrived at the restaurant to meet up with Fenrir and Strikestone and neither of them are here yet. Why would Skoll Strikestone want me to meet him at a godsdamn fancy restaurant? I'm in the midst of trying to find Aliyah Williams and secure the safety of her twin, Jada Williams. I had to leave off protecting the domicile where Jada is residing to two other team members in order to drive over here, which pisses me off. Why couldn't we have met in the community?

Jada Williams...

The sexy human who fills my every thought.

Heat rushes through my body at the mere image of her sexy curves. Her full ass and the nip of her tiny waist. Those full lips and the thick thighs. My life hasn't made sense since the moment I met that female. Yesterday, I left her behind at Skoll's domicile, only to think of her every waking moment, and because of this my cock is always half-hard. I've never wanted a female this much my entire life.

It's ridiculous.

Why does it have to be her that I ache for? She's filthy rich. I've learned that her mother's family is fantastically wealthy and from what humans consider 'old money' on top of that, her murdering father is also one of the richest humans on New Earth. She and her sister are socialites on her home planet, famous for being wealthy and unmated. I found a flurry

of vid reports of Aliyah Williams at every celebrity event on New Earth. I assume Jada lives a similar lifestyle.

She and I have nothing in common. And yet I still desire her and I swear I can scent her pheromones even when she's not around.

I step inside the establishment and make my way through the crowd waiting in line for their turn to be seated. At the front desk I let the employees know I'm here for a reservation under the name Strikestone.

At least this restaurant is also a local brewery frequented mainly by military from the nearby Tarvos Military Headquarters. We've met here many times in the past for long evenings of laughter and fire ale in the bar, around a flaming pit, but this comradery has been curtailed since Skoll, Cap and Hannibal found their bounds. They prefer to invite us over to their domiciles.

I'm guided to my seat by a hostess. I've never had reason to eat in the main dining area; this is most unusual. I'm stunned to find Jada Williams sitting alone at the table that has been reserved for our meeting.

What the hells?

Surprise also flashes across her features as she meets my gaze. "Idun?" she squeaks, trying to pretend this meet-up is simply an accident.

My heart races as I stare at her. She's dressed differently this time. Now she's wearing the same type shirts that the women of my culture wear and there's nothing covering the smooth skin of her shoulders. Her hair is shiny and sleek at her shoulders. Somehow, she looks even more beautiful than the last time I saw her.

I glance around and note that none of my teammates are anywhere to be seen. There is only one empty seat opposite her at the two-Hyrrokin table and that's when I know I've been tricked. This is why I'm here.

Fuck that.

By belly churns with fire and smoke because I've been fooled before by another female in my past who was also out of my reach. Her parents were aristocracy, and I was the son of a lowly gardener, born and raised on their estate, in the traditional cottage of the head gardener. My family had worked for hers for generations. But in the end, I wasn't good enough. My ancestry was tribal, I was poor and without power, and my genes weren't worthy to mingle with hers.

Hyrrokin aristocracy are well-known for being deadly serious about the management of their gene pool. The maintenance of their purity is essential, but I'd thought that wasn't the way my female had thought. She'd fooled me into thinking she was different. I loved her and thought we were steps away from the Courthouse and she was mine.

But she wasn't, at all.

It was the biggest mistake of my life. A mistake I refuse to repeat.

The hostess places down our menus and walks away.

Everyone in the main dining room stares at us because I haven't taken my seat and smoke continues to waft from my nostrils. I should turn and walk away but I'm angry *and* intrigued. "You tricked me into coming here," I growl.

"Of course I didn't trick you. What are you even talking about? Why are *you* here?"

She sounds sincere, but she's probably just a good actress. "You know why I'm here."

"No, I don't."

"Then tell me why a human is here by herself," I challenge.

"I'm here because Ariana is taking another nap and Skoll is at Molten Lava headquarters. He messaged me and told me to take an auto drive here to meet him and Bergelmir Touchstone for lunch so we could talk. I thought it was odd that he wanted to meet at a restaurant instead of at his domicile, but I figured it must be some sort of Hyrrokin tradition I was unaware of. Why are *you* here?"

“I’m here because Skoll said to meet him at this restaurant for a team meeting.”

Her eyes widen. “They set us up.”

“They did. You knew about this?” I growl.

“No”

“Yes, you did.”

“Stop accusing me of planning this. That’s ridiculous. Why would I be trying to go on a date with you when my sister’s life is in jeopardy?” Then she stands up like she’s ready to leave. “I know you don’t like me. I’m leaving. I thought I was here to meet more of Team Molten Lava, but since that’s not the reason then this is just silly.”

The crowd continues to stare at us and the thought of other males’ eyes on this female bothers me. But I also don’t want her leaving and out of my sight. “Wait,” I tell her. “Sit down.”

At that exact moment her stomach growls with hunger and her cheeks darken.

Suddenly it becomes important to me that she is properly fed. “We will eat together. You need to be fed.”

“No. I’m not going to sit here and have a pity lunch with you,” she huffs. “I don’t need that in my life. I should be working on finding my sister, not having a date with a male who doesn’t even like me.”

A date? I step close and look down to see that her lips are just as plush as I remember.

“You walked away from me yesterday and wouldn’t answer when I called for you. I’m telling you; I’m not going to eat with you,” she reiterates.

“Yes, you are going to eat with me. We are still searching for your sister and are waiting for the next info drop. Meanwhile, if you stay with me, I can keep you safe and make sure you’re fed. Sit down,” I order.

A whimper escapes her lips and she slides back into her seat.

Heh.

I take the seat across from hers and look around sharply at the Hyrrokin in the room, causing them to look away. I loudly churn the fire in my chest so they know I'm about to explode and flash flame all over them. And suddenly we've got our privacy back.

"Did you choose this place?" I accuse. The main dining area is full of military brass, heads of agencies, and a smattering of celebrity. It looks like the type of place a socialite would love. I'm a soldier. I'm not a rich male. Nor do I even care about gaining extreme wealth. I am happy with my job and my life I don't need to show off for anyone to prove my worth.

"No, of course I didn't choose this place. I don't even know this planet." She pauses and starts again, "Like I said, the only reason I am here is because I thought Skoll was here." She bites her lip and looks around. "But it is a nice place. I don't know if I can eat though. It's hard for me to eat lately, knowing my sister could potentially still be in trouble."

She's doing a good job of acting like she cares about someone other than herself. But I'm eighty percent certain she didn't tell the truth about the circumstances of her escape from New Earth. I can't help but wonder if she left her sister behind to save herself. It would be consistent with how my former intended would react in that same situation. "Tell me about yourself," I question, challenging her to admit how she really lives.

She gives me a hard look. "Why? You probably already know everything about me."

I lean back, cross my arms and stare at her quietly. It's true, I do already know everything I need to know about her.

"Idun...I don't understand what happened between us yesterday; what went wrong. We met at the gate and I thought you cared about me, but suddenly you went from warm to cold and you walked away. Now you act as if you hate me. But you won't let me go. Why? What did I do? Because I thought..." Her voice chokes and her gaze skitters away.

Why is there a sudden tightness in my chest?

“I...I thought we made a connection of some sort,” she continues, “in that small amount of time when you were holding my hand. But I guess it was just me misunderstanding the situation. Sorry.” And now her face flushes with embarrassment. She looks down at her hands.

I want to reach out, grab her and pull her onto my lap. But the other part of me remembers how I fell for this crap last time. The other female I cared about played with my emotions this way too. She pretended to care and instead it was all about her. This one I’m sure is the same. “I don’t hate you,” I rasp.

“Could’ve fooled me,” she mutters.

The waiter arrives with a wide, toothy smile. “Are you both ready to order?”

“Yes.”

“No, I’m not ready. Sorry, I haven’t had a chance to look at the menu.”

“I will order for the both of us. This restaurant only serves traditional Hyrrokin food, most of which I’m certain you’ve never heard of. I will order what I think you might possibly enjoy.” And then I order Urikaian blood eggs for myself and flaming meat sticks for the female because I know there are the easiest food for blunt human teeth.

The waiter leaves, taking the menus with him. And then our drinks arrive as well as the first course of fire soup. I blow out her flame, suddenly wishing I could always be the male who banks her flames.

“You think I’ll like it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s true that I am hungry.” She takes a sip with her spoon and a wide, genuine smile spreads across her face. “That’s good. What did you order for yourself?”

My heart softens. It’s pleasing to watch her happily consuming food I’ve specially chosen. And the food here is excellent, not that I’ll admit that out loud to anyone. I find

myself offering an amusing story about how my pants once caught fire while I was eating fire soup when I was a youngling.

She laughs, flashing her white, blunt teeth. Her laughter is pleasing. I want to hear it again.

No, I *do not* want to hear it again.

“Tell me,” she questions, “why are you working for Molten Lava? How did that happen? What led you there?”

I explain how I’m a veteran of the wars and how I ended up becoming a member of Team Molten Lava and how we saved the world last time.

Her eyes are wide as she’s sipping a drink. “The mercenaries blew up the front gate to the community to get to Berg’s house?”

“Yes. The gate was blown up and all the fighting mainly happened in the front yard of the Heimdall residence. Afterwards our President ended up in prison because he’d committed treason. That was the last time we saved the planet, which was two years ago. But we still work closely with the government in providing security.”

“You’re a decorated soldier? A hero?”

I stare back quietly, not wanting to boast. It’s always best to stick with facts and let beings draw their own conclusions. “Tell me about yourself,” I challenge. “Tell me more than what I learned from your background check. For instance, it doesn’t look like you have an occupation. What do you do to keep busy?”

Now she’ll have to admit that she does nothing and yet lives spectacularly off her parents’ wealth, mainly going to parties and events to keep busy and meet other beings of her same social standing. Because the most important thing to a socialite is currency and social standing. Nothing else.

But do I really want to force this confession?



## IDUN

“Well, um...” Her dark eyes lower and those thick lashes flutter.

And in a flash I’m suddenly unimpressed with this female and my resentment returns tenfold because I remember with clarity how my former intended turned into a notorious party girl after I left, her picture on all the vid channels. Her life a vacuous series of parties and events, as if our future together had meant nothing to her. As is she’d forgotten me and our child in a matter of days. “You don’t do anything, do you? All you do is live off your father’s money. You go shopping all day and party all night. And that’s your whole future, isn’t it? You don’t plan on doing a single fucking thing in your entire life that’s worthwhile.”

The color drains from her face. She drops her fork onto her plate. “That’s what you think of me?”

“Am I wrong?”

“You are. But even if I did like to shop incessantly, what’s wrong with that as long as I could afford it and was still a nice person? There’s nothing wrong with liking nice things.”

“It’s wrong if acquisition of items becomes more important than relationships and care for other beings.”

“You know, just because someone is wealthy, it doesn’t make them a bad person.”

“Ninety-nine percent of the time, it does. An overabundance of currency warps values.”

“Why do you hate rich people so much?”

“Because most of them are soulless assholes with no fucking clue how to treat anyone they consider ‘beneath them’ with respect.”

She tosses down her napkin and stands. “That’s it, I’ve had enough of this. I’m not going to sit here and be belittled and criticized by you. Who do you think you are? I don’t need this shit.” Then she marches off with her chin held high.

My chair scrapes as I stand and throw down currency chips onto our table. My human socialite has never had to concern herself over the payment of her extravagant meals. Nor has she ever had to worry how to gain a job that paid enough to keep the power on, food on the table and a roof over her head. How can we have anything in common?

And yet I’m right behind her as she weaves around tables and marches out to the lobby. The only human in the entire establishment, somehow remaining upright and balanced despite her lack of tail and the addition of those strange foot coverings. Does she know how beautiful she is when she’s angry? I’m so close I can smell that scent again, filling my lungs. Her natural pheromones are enticing. Her height reaches my shoulder and I’m yet again wanting her close.

She makes it outside the front doors of the restaurant and stops abruptly on the curb and visibly deflates because she doesn’t know how to get back to Skoll’s residence.

I snap my claws for the valet to bring up my vehicle and I take hold of her elbow.

“Leave me alone,” she barks.

“Jada.” I turn her around and pull her close, and instead of pushing me away she lets out a sigh of resignation and melts against my bare chest. I wrap my arms around her luscious form and hold on tight. I can’t apologize because I spoke the truth, but I also find I hate the thought of her upset.

She trembles in my arms and her fingertips grip my belt buckle, brushing against my bare skin. Her arousal again reaches my nostrils and a growl of possession rumbles in my

chest. This female is indeed very attracted to me, and I feel the same for her. All I want is to take her to my domicile, tear off her clothing and finger her wetness, then lick her slick cunt with my forked tongue until I hear her cries of release. I place a claw on her hip and breathe against her ear, "I will attend to you, female."

She pulls back and stares up at me with wide eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

Her chin dips down and the scent of her arousal intensifies.

The valet pulls up with my vehicle. I place a claw on the small of her back and she quietly allows me to guide her into my all-terrain vehicle. I shut her door and then walk around to the driver's side. Then I start the vehicle and pull away from valet loading, through the general parking area and onto the city streets.

"Where are we going?" she questions.

"You need to make a decision. Do you want to go with me to my domicile where I can pleasure you in my bed, or do you want me to take you back to Strikestone's residence?"

"Um..."

And then I pull over to the side of the road, stop the car and look right at her. "I know you've never had an avowed pleasure mate. You're a virgin, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You've never been touched?"

"No."

"Never been kissed?"

"No."

"I would be your first in all things?"

"Yes."

And now I want her more than ever. We're in an enclosed space and her scent is even more intense.

She licks her lips and shifts her hips, restless with need. “Idun, I don’t know what to—”

But she can’t finish because I reach forward and wrap my claw behind her neck and kiss her. I cannot stop from giving Jada her first kiss. I have to taste her plush lips. My fangs clash with her blunt teeth and my forked tongue swipes against hers. Her taste explodes in my mouth. She reaches out and holds tight onto my shoulder and her other hand is a fire brand against my thigh. I slant my head, going deeper and swallowing her moans of desire.

Finally, I break away and move back, panting with need.

Godsdammit, why do I want this female so desperately? I want to take her with me, throw her on my bed and sink my cock into her hot virgin pussy. But it would be wrong. She lets out a whimper of disappointment at our loss of connection, but I cannot do this. Part of me wants to teach her pleasure and then discard her. But I can’t. I won’t.

I let her go and start the vehicle and pull away from the curb. I shake my head and concentrate on the view out the front window as I drive. “I know I said I would attend to you, but I cannot.”

Out of the corner of my eye I see her touch her kiss-swollen lips. “Why not?” she breathes.

My voice deepens. “You know why.”

“No, I...”

“Female, I can smell your arousal. I can feel your heat. I know you want to pleasure mate with me, and I want the same with you. That’s why I kissed you, because I couldn’t stop from tasting what you’ve been offering. I thought I could take your innocence and then let you go, but I can’t.”

Her cheeks darken. She doesn’t even bother to try and hide the fact that I spoke the truth and I can see the poke of her hard nipples under her shirt.

“If I pressed open your thighs and felt along your slit I’d find you wet and ready for me, wouldn’t I?”

She whimpers. “Stop. Just stop. This isn’t fair. I’m human. I didn’t know how you felt about me because I can’t smell anything. But I know you hate me and so I’m the only one who wants this to become...” Her eyes drop to the tent in my pants. “Oh my gods, is that for real? It can’t be.”

A grin spreads across my face. This is a common reaction from the females I’ve one-time pleasure mated when I needed to unleash my Hyrrokin lusts. I have to go gently at first to ready them for my cock... Gently? Why am I planning out our mating? Jada Williams is not mine. She will never be mine. She will never be underneath me. Never.

“You’re attracted to me too, but you hate me personally?” she accuses. “So you’re denying how you feel?”

“No, I don’t hate you,” I answer as I drive through the front gate of the community. “Stop saying that. The problem is we are too different, and I cannot be with a spoiled female like you. Not even as a one-time pleasure mate,” Because I’m concerned one pleasure mating session won’t be enough and she’ll worm her way into my heart and then I’ll have another mate I can’t trust. I will not allow this to happen again. I won’t.

“A female like me?” She crosses her arms. “You think I’m spoiled and therefore a bad person? This is ridiculous. Don’t worry. I will not bother you or inflict you with my nearness. The only reason why we were alone today is because we were set up by the others. Fenrir told them how you were holding my hand yesterday and I guess your friends must’ve thought it would be a good idea to set us up. The whole thing is very uncomfortable, and I don’t like it. I will make sure to tell Ariana that this did not work out between us. I’m only allowed eight more days on Tarvos, so you won’t have to put up with me for long. So this attraction”—she gestures between the two of us—“is inconvenient and, in fact, embarrassing. I would normally never act on it. I’m embarrassed that you even know of my attraction because it was something I planned on hiding from you. And as you just said, you aren’t going to act on it anymore either. Apparently, that was a pity kiss?” She takes a deep breath and looks out the window. “I’m going to focus on

finding my sister and I promise I will act totally normal and professional towards you if we happen to meet up again while in a team meeting, as if we never kissed. It's forgotten. Maybe I can work directly with Skoll, Hannibal, Cap and the others and we won't even have to see each other ever again?"

I pull up in the driveway of Skoll's residence.

"Thank you for bringing me back and for my first kiss. It was nice. I hope you have a good life. It was nice meeting you." And then she's out the door and gone.

I get out and swiftly follow behind her with single-minded devotion. I don't even know what I'm doing. Why am I following her? She's given me the perfect exit, all I have to do is take it. But I sense that vibration of a lie in her voice again. I heard it when she was trying to tell me that she does nothing. And I heard it now when she said she could carry on without me.

Halfway to the front door, she turns around and sees that I'm following her. Then she throws up her hands and tries to walk quicker.

I rush up the steps and I stop her right at the front porch.

"What are you doing? Why do you keep following me? Just get in your car and leave me alone."

She's right. I look down at her plush lips and move close because her pheromones are addictive. I want to kiss her again, but I bury my face against the crook of her neck and inhale. The long pipe of my leaking erection rubs against her stomach. I cannot believe how much she affects me. I've never felt this way for any female, ever.

And I can't seem to forget that she's a virgin. The thought of another male taking her and teaching her pleasure makes my skin crawl with agitation.

"Stop it." She presses her palms against my chest. "My feelings are not a game. You're toying with me. Why are you doing this to me?"

She's right again. I let go and step back because it's ridiculous that I'm here. It's ridiculous that I'm following her.

Why am I behaving this way? Why can't I let her go? "What are you doing to me?" I growl, baring my fangs. "Are you still trying to trick me?"

"I'm not doing anything to you except being myself."

My jaw clenches. "I will never take a spoiled party girl heiress as my bound or even as a pleasure mate. You are only a human female who I will protect because that is my assignment but nothing else."

Then I turn around and stomp to my vehicle and peel out of the driveway.

## JADA

I can't believe any of that happened.

I open the front door to Ariana's domicile and shut it quickly behind me. Then I lean against the portal, trying to catch my breath and calm my racing heart.

Idun left me on the doorstep because he's literally disgusted with me. Right after he kissed me as if he couldn't get enough, and after he rubbed against me, letting me feel the outline of that enormous erection under his trousers. After all that, he was gone.

He thinks I'm a spoiled party girl? He must have me confused with my twin sister, Aliyah. We're identical twins so it's easy to do, but we're nothing alike. I often call her my "evil twin." Hell, even Aliyah refers to herself as my evil twin! But we stick together. Despite our differences I love her, and she loves me. And to be truthful if he also derisively called my sister a party girl directly to her face, I'd be angry in her defense.

And despite all of this I'm still stuck remembering my first kiss. Idun's lips on mine, his forked tongue in my mouth. The visual of his erection tenting his trousers. I cannot believe my off-the-charts attraction for this guy. Nor can I believe his equally intense rejection of me.

Why is the first man I want so badly in my bed also the exact same one who won't stay there? He doesn't want me as his girlfriend, or even a one-night stand. Nothing. My eyebrows pinch together. Fuck this shit. I might look like a girl



who can be pushed around, but actually I've got Williams and Garcia blood running in my veins and I'm only going to be with someone who treats me with respect, otherwise, forget it. I can be strong when the situation warrants. I ran from my father's compound to make sure that one day I could marry a man who loved me and would be a good father to my future children. A man who would treat me with kindness and respect and most of all love. There's no way I'm letting that dream go, not even for that hunk of Hyrrokin hotness and his thick erection.

"Jada?" Ariana cries out happily and waddles toward me. A huge smile spreads across her beautiful face. "I heard the door open. You're back early. How did it go? Did you like our surprise?"

A Hyrrokin-sounding growl rumbles in my throat. I'm an embarrassed mess because I was just on a date with a male who I desperately want, but who wants nothing to do with me. He's basically disgusted that he's attracted to me. All the beings at that restaurant got to witness my shame and humiliation. "No, I did not like your 'surprise.' How could you set me up like that?"

Her face falls. "But...I thought..."

"You thought what? That I'd enjoy a date with a male who doesn't like me? How could I possibly enjoy public humiliation?"

"What humiliation? What are you even talking about? What do you mean he doesn't like you? That isn't true. I had Skoll send you there while I napped because the two of you are attracted to each other and I thought you'd be happy for a bit of distraction while you wait for the team to get more information on Aliyah. I mean, you have to eat lunch anyways, why not eat with a male you like? I was trying to do something nice for you. Actually, something nice for the both of you."

"But it wasn't nice. You tricked us into going there and I didn't know it was going to be him. I thought I was there to meet your husband and the head of Team Molten Lava and instead it was Idun."

“I thought it would be a fun surprise and you’d be happy to see him again. I thought it would be a moment for the two of you to laugh together about and remember.”

“Happy? Ariana, that male doesn’t like me. He denies it but I think deep inside he hates me.”

“Hates you? That’s not possible. Come on over here and sit with me. Let’s talk about this. You’re too cute and sweet for a male to ever hate you. Wasn’t he happy to find himself at that restaurant with the gorgeous human female he’s attracted to, who is conveniently unmated?”

I settle into a chair next to her. “No, he wasn’t happy. Idun left me yesterday at your house because he realized he didn’t want to pursue anything with me. He’d chosen to stay away from me and wasn’t happy to find himself alone with me again. He said he’d never have anything to do with a party girl like me. Everyone at that restaurant witnessed my embarrassment, being seated with someone who didn’t want to be there.”

Now my cousin is angry. “What? How dare Idun Grindstone treat you like that. And also, that’s not you. It’s like he’s describing Aliyah.”

“Story of my life,” I mutter. “I get mistaken for my twin all the time.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Ariana knows all my troubles with getting confused with my sister and sometimes taking on her punishments, I told her all about it last night when we stayed up late, reminiscing about our childhood. My sister is popular and loves to show up for celebrity events in gorgeous gowns. I’m the one who wants to stay home and read and do volunteer work. But neither of us wants to be part of the Williams mafia.

“Oh gosh,” I sigh, feeling bad that I’m raising my voice at my heavily pregnant cousin who means well. I know she loves me and would never hurt me on purpose. “I’m sorry I’ve been raising my voice at you, it’s just that it was all really

humiliating, and I hadn't expected it at all. Maybe I don't like surprises?"

"No, I'm the one who is sorry. This was my bad. I completely messed this up. I really thought there was something there between the two of you. It seemed harmless. And I'm just so confused. I mean, Fenrir gave us all a play by play. Idun was holding your hand and he had his claw on the small of your back. This never happens. None us have ever seen him show interest in any female, ever."

"He doesn't touch other females that way?" I ask, because I'm such a wimp. This man bluntly told me he wants nothing to do with me, that's he not going to touch me ever again. And yet here I am asking about him.

"No, he's not like that with anyone. But I've heard rumors that he was once engaged a long time ago and it ended badly. But as long as I've known him, he's never been on a date. No one ever talks about him going out or being with anyone. He just mainly hangs out with his team and works and that's it. Personally, I think he's sad and lonely and needs a mate."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't have set you up with him if I thought he was a player. He's a good male and will make some female a terrific mate. Idun is very gruff and uses a lot of rough language, but I've seen glimpses of his heart of gold. He's a good friend of my husband and they are similar. I just thought maybe that's the type of person you needed."

"What kind of person?"

"Someone strong and forceful, who can handle women like us and not get run over in the process."

A smile twitches across my lips. "You think I'm maybe as strong as you? As strong as Aliyah?"

"You're not as outspoken as either of us, but that doesn't mean you don't stand your ground. How did you act when Idun was rude to you at the restaurant?"

"I told him I wasn't going to put up with his shit and I stomped off."

“Good for you. And what did you do when he said he didn’t want anything to do with you? Did you beg for him to take you back?”

I lift my chin. “I don’t beg. If he wants me, he can have me. If he doesn’t want me then I’ll survive and move on.”

“That’s my girl.”

Then my shoulders soften in defeat. “It’s just hard because none of these males wear shirts. How am I supposed to stay focused on my denial of Idun’s sexiness when I’m talking to him and there is his wide, bare chest?”

“I hear you. I love Skoll’s red bare chest, and the black pants and silver belt buckles they all wear. You know, you could live here forever,” Ariana points out. “We’ll find Aliyah and bring her back here too. The main way for you to be able to stay permanently is if you marry a Hyrrokin...”

I hold up my hand. “Ariana, no. I see what you’re thinking, that maybe you can set me up with someone so I can become his bound and then become a citizen and stay here forever? That’s sweet of you, but that won’t work. I can see that you’re happy here but I can’t possibly trick a male into marrying me just so I can stay. That’s wrong and not something I want for myself.”

“I’m not asking you to trick anyone. I was just thinking if the two of you happen to fall in love anyway, then that would work out perfectly.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m already making plans for my future. I think after my visa expires, I’ll just go to Omega 9 and from there try to find my sister myself. I can always keep in touch with all of you from there. It won’t be so bad.”

“That’s not a good idea. You could get hurt. Don’t run just to get away from him.”

Darn it, she’s too smart for me. “I can’t stay because of the visa and also, it would be good for me to have some distance...”

“No.” She grabs my hand. “Think smart about this. Pause and take a deep breath. Molten Lava is looking into this. You

hired them, remember? They will fix this for you. That's what they do. There's no need for you to run to Omega 9. Let them take care of this. You came to the right place. They will protect you and they will find your sister. Just give them a minute."

"Okay. Okay. Just reminding you I've only got eight days left on that visa."

"It will all work out. And meanwhile tell me more about that date that you think went so badly. When Idun was shown to your table and saw that it was you, did he leave right away?"

"No, he didn't leave. I was the one who wanted to leave, but he heard my stomach growl with hunger and insisted I stay and eat with him."

"He sat down and ate with you?"

"Yes. He ordered my food too."

"He did? You know, on Tarvos a male ordering a female food for her is a major sign that he's attracted to you."

I stand up and cross over to sit next to Ariana on the couch, needing to be closer. "Really?"

She turns to face me. "Yes. It's sort of considered romantic here."

"Oh, I thought it was because I didn't know any of the food on the menu."

"Well, that too. But if he wasn't attracted to you, he would never have ordered for you. He would've instead allowed you to take the lead and maybe helped you out, but not fully taken over and ordered. Okay, so he ordered the food and you guys ate together?"

"Yes."

"And then what happened?"

"It was like he was interviewing me. He kept asking me questions. And then he let me ask him questions about himself. And he told me about his work history and how he became a soldier."

“Hmm. You know what I don’t understand? It actually sounds like after a rocky start it was going well and that you two were having an actual date. Have you figured out why he doesn’t like you, or is it a mystery? He said you were a party girl, but that can’t be why he doesn’t want to be with you, right?”

“He did not mince words. He let me know exactly why he wants nothing to do with me. It’s because I’m rich and my family is rich and he thinks I’m a spoiled heiress and a party girl. A socialite. That’s what he said. There is no way he was ever going to be with someone like me. No matter how much I try to”—I pause to use air quotes—“trick him’ into being with me.”

Ariana rolls her eyes. “He thinks you’re trying to trick him into being with you? What kind of stupidity is that?”

“I know. I don’t understand that part either. He thinks I’m a liar?”

Ariana frowns. “Do you think he’s just not that into you and what Fenrir was saying last night about him holding your hand wasn’t as important as we thought? I mean, it’s not his fault if the problem is just that he’s not feeling the attraction. It happens.”

My face starts to heat. “No...no, he is definitely attracted to me.”

She grins. “You could visibly see his attraction?”

“Oh yes. I could see it. And at one point we were so close I felt his, um, erection against my stomach. It was quite large.”

“You were face to face, close enough to feel him? Does that mean he held you in his arms?”

“Yes, and he kissed me. And he also spent a lot of time with his nose in my neck, inhaling my scent.”

“Wait,” she gasps. “Jada, why didn’t you lead with that important bit of information? He kissed you but then still told you he didn’t want to be with you? Oh my gosh, that changes everything.”

“Yes, he kissed me in his vehicle but then said he couldn’t be with someone like me, not even as a one-time pleasure mate. He denies that he hates me, but he sure acts like it, and he was really mad at the end and thinks I’m tricking him into wanting me. He made it very clear that despite how his body may feel about me, his mind hates me and everything I represent. So yeah, a relationship between the two of us isn’t going to happen.”

“What happened?” a deep voice suddenly asks.

I jump in my seat, startled at Skoll’s sudden arrival.

Ariana smiles up at her tall, imposing husband. Smoke wafts from his nostrils and his black tail jabs the air behind him but she doesn’t seem to notice. “Oh nothing, but I’ve got bad news. It turns out that my idea to set Idun and Jada up on a date didn’t turn out so well.”

His features darken and his voice sounds like gravel, “You told me you were certain they would both enjoy the meeting and that it would be a fun surprise.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I was wrong. I guess the both of them were unhappy to find themselves alone with each other in a public setting and Idun was particularly displeased to find himself at the restaurant with Jada.”

Skoll gives me a hard gaze. “Did he mistreat you?”

“Well, he wasn’t happy about being unaware that I was his lunch date,” I admit.

His fists clench. “What did he do to you?”

I open my mouth and then shut it, not sure what to say because I find I don’t want to make Idun look bad. And maybe I’m a little ashamed of how far I let things go too with a male who hates me and is angry that he’s so very attracted to a female he doesn’t like or respect. It’s not like I said no to that amazing, magical kiss. And if he’d driven me to his home, I’m sure I would’ve easily fallen into his bed.

Ariana has no such compulsion. “Your teammate accused my cousin of tricking him into that lunch date, accusing her of staging the whole thing to get him alone. He said she was a

liar. He told her he couldn't be with a party girl like her. And he kissed her and scented her neck and then told her he'd never touch someone like her and left."

Skoll throws back his head and roars. I wince at the sound of his disapproval and the size of his elongated fangs. "I apologize, female. I should never have tricked you and sent you into a situation that was unsafe."

"Skoll, it's not your fault, I was the one who..."

But Skoll isn't listening. He turns to look out the front window and growls at something he sees. "The male who treated my bound's cousin with disrespect is going to pay for his behavior."

"Idun is here?" Ariana questions.

I let out a yelp of surprise. "I thought he left."

"No. He's parked out front." Skoll slams out the front door.

"Holy crap." I stand up and then reach down and help Ariana off the couch too. "What is your husband doing?"

"He's going to kick some Hyrrokin ass. Probably lots of flash-flames. Ooh let's go to the front window so you can watch. Two Hyrrokin soldiers fighting is pretty epic."

We move forward and stand side by side at the window and watch as Skoll stomps off across the street toward the all-terrain vehicle that I know contains the male who was watching me—the male I'd thought had left me behind. Puffs of flame escape from his mouth as Skoll walks. He wrenches open Idun's driver side door and yanks his teammate out. And then Skoll slams a massive fist against Idun's jaw.

"No!" I gasp and move towards the front door.

Ariana places a hand on my shoulder to stop me. "No, don't. Leave them alone, they've got to do this. Let them fight this out, it's their way of settling this with honor."

I'm agitated, but I manage to do as she says. The two soldiers stumble away from the vehicle and the fighting grows more intense. Skoll distends his jaw and flame shoots out and chars Idun's shoulder. The two males continue to pound



against each other and the flash flames blast back and forth, lighting up the front yard. Idun gets in a savage punch, dropping Skoll to his knees, but then his opponent is back up, slamming into his side. Finally, Idun drops to the ground and stays there.

I can't help it, I finally run to the door and step out to yell for him. But Fenrir arrives and waves me away.

Skoll returns to the house with blood dripping from his mouth and nose, burn marks and a limp as if he has a broken bone. First, he looks at me. "I have taken care of your honor. You will not be treated that way again."

"Oh Skoll," Ariana tries to say, "it was really my fault and Fenrir's. We talked you into it..."

"No. I was the one who sent the messages to the both of them, I should've known it was inappropriate. Jada, I apologize again for causing you harm."

My annoyance over the whole situation is long gone. "It's okay. I know that both of you meant well. Are you going to be okay?"

"I'll take care of him." Ariana walks up with a med kit in her hand. "This is almost as bad as when you fought Ashmoor."

"Idun is fierce, but he's at the med lab," Skoll remarks with pride. "His injuries are worse than mine."

My palm is against my chest. "He is?" And suddenly I want to go be with Idun Grindstone and make sure he's okay. Ugh. I'm such a mess. This male doesn't want me. When will I learn? "Is Idun going to be okay too?"

"Yes, he's going to be fine." Ariana reaches out to give me a hug. "You don't need that type of bullshit in your life. You need to wait for a man who wants all of you. A man who thinks everything about you is wonderful and loves you just as you are. Maybe Idun isn't that man."

"Yes," I half-heartedly agree, "maybe he isn't..."

## IDUN

**T**he nightmare is like all the others.

*My intended tells me she loves me as we make love in the woods. We plan how we will go to the Courthouse. I've joined the military and she's agreed to go with me and live on family housing on base. She says she wants a future with me and that's all she cares about.*

*The next morning, she shows up with her parents at my own parents' cottage.*

*"Can I help you, sire?" my father asks the great lord of the estate, his employer for the last thirty years.*

*"I am here to see your son."*

*The Fire Baron enters our small cottage, along with his regal wife, the Fire Baroness and their eldest daughter, the female I love. She is newly pregnant with my offspring, and she is mine. They are both mine. We are to legally join at the Courthouse and then leave together to start a new life with me as a soldier. My bags are packed and I've arranged transportation. We were planning on telling her parents after we'd left the Courthouse and made it to base housing because we both knew they'd never agree. But she'd always been certain that they'd eventually give in. And I'd thought the same, considering the fact they'd known me their whole lives and my family has loyally worked for them for generations.*

*The Fire Baron turns on me directly and snarls, "I've found out about your disgusting relationship with my daughter, and it isn't happening. Regan has repudiated you and is no*

*longer your intended. She does not care for you and will continue on to find a new bound."*

*"Regan," I growl. "Tell them our plans."*

*She shrugs and her gaze skitters away.*

*And then I scent that something is wrong. She smells different. My heart stutters. "Why has your scent changed?"*

*"Idun..."*

*And then I know what she's done, and my chest tightens. "No. No...our child is gone?" I choke.*

*Her father laughs. "As if I'd allow your crude genes to mingle with ours. Regan, tell this fool the truth so we can be done with it."*

*"Idun, I had to," she tries to explain. "You don't understand, they said they'd take away my title and my inheritance. I always thought we'd at least have that to live on so things wouldn't be that different for me, but..."*

*"You gave up our future together because you want to be rich?"*

*She looks me in the eye. "Idun, it was never really about you. Okay? I was just trying to get back at them and have some fun for myself before I had to mate with the male they chose for me. I always wanted them to find out about us and I was willing to be yours for a time if I could still maintain my inheritance, but without it, well, then I'd be just like you."*

*I stare in horror at the female I'd impregnated at her request. "You said you wanted to be a young parent. You begged me to have unprotected sex with you so we could start a family. We were about to go to the med lab together this week for the initial appointment to check on our child's growth."*

*Her face softens, "Idun, I wasn't thinking clearly. I can't have your child. It's impossible. You're not..."*

*"You're not worthy," her father sneers. "You are part of the serving class and the way you speak gives away your lack of heritage. My daughter will mate only with a Hyrrokin of our*

*choosing, a male of wealth and noble lineage. She won't be a virgin but at least we'll know she can easily be impregnated. It was better this way. If you'd actually taken her to the Courthouse and shared legal vows you would be dead already. This way we'll at least let you live. We are going to move forward as if your distasteful relationship with our daughter never happened." And then he turns to glare at my father.*

*"Sire..." my father tries to explain. "My son is a good..."*

*"No," the lord cuts him off, "your son went too far. He defiled my daughter. This is unacceptable. You and your bound are both fired. Because of your long service I'll allow a bonus so you can retire early, but you are both ordered off my property by tomorrow at sunset. If you aren't gone by then, I will send guards to remove you." And then he turns to look back at me. "And your son is leaving right now."*

*Four large, armed guards in formal livery enter the cottage and grab me.*

*And then I'm beaten and carried off their property.*

GRR. I'm still shaken from the memories of my recent nightmare. Usually, I can force myself to not think of it and to not remember, but lately the proximity of this new female in my life is bringing up old memories best left behind. It happened twelve years ago and the betrayal still cuts to the bone.

My misstep caused my parents to lose their home and their jobs. Somehow they don't blame me. They live happily in early retirement in a small apartment I purchased for them with the bonus I received after the last time Molten Lava saved the world. They've each gotten part-time jobs to make some extra money, and they in fact travel often. My mother often begs me to find a bound and give her grandchildren.

And suddenly I'm thinking again of the human female I rejected yesterday. The fact that I kissed her and know how she tastes doesn't help matters.

Along with the aches and pains from my recent fire fight with Skoll.

“I don’t understand why you don’t want anything to do with that female,” Fenrir remarks from across the worktable. “It seems like you’re attracted to her.”

“Stop,” I warn.

“It’s obvious she’s attracted to you too...”

We’re both at the table in the main hangar at Molten Lava headquarters, and I’m cleaning my weapon unnecessarily to keep my mind off the beatdown I received last night in front of Skoll’s domicile, while Jada watched from the front window. I was in the med lab overnight and only released an hour ago, barely recovered from the broken ribs and burn marks. “Shut the fuck up,” I growl. “You’ve caused enough trouble. You’re the one who has been telling everyone my business, if you’d just shut up they’d leave me alone.”

I’d driven away from Jada after I’d vowed to never be with her and left the community, only to turn around and drive back and park again across the street, determined to maintain a visual of her safety. Even though there was already another team in a parked vehicle watching her, along with Skoll inside the domicile. I parked behind them and stayed.

And then Skoll came out of the house like a flaming dragon out of hell, after me because he’d heard how I’d treated Jada at the restaurant.

I supposed I deserved it.

She watched Skoll fight for her honor, which was only right. And she watched me fall and I heard her cry out for me when I was dragged away by Fenrir and transported to the med lab.

“I’m just trying to help. I can see the way you look at her. And even I can scent her arousal for you.”

“Fuck off. No matter how much I might want her as a pleasure mate, she’s a spoiled party girl heiress. I’m not touching her.”

“I’m confused. What does it matter if she likes parties? Doesn’t that just make her fun?”

“Party girls are females who are more concerned with social standing and staying out all night at events than with real world matters, loyalty and honor.”

“Heh. Are you sure Jada’s a party girl?”

I shrug. “She’s rich.”

“This is your single piece of evidence for categorizing her as a ‘party girl’? She’s wealthy so she must be dishonorable? You know that doesn’t make sense, right? A lot of the beings you know are rich, this doesn’t make them assholes. You could be rich right now too, but you keep avoiding the compensations Hannibal and Cap try to give you. I suspect they’ve set aside your bonuses into a retirement account.”

“They have?”

“Yes. I’m not as filthy rich as either of the Touchstones or Hannibal, but I’m doing very well. I’ll soon be able to afford a domicile in the community. Don’t you want to live there too? We go there often enough we might as well live there. It’s not all that far from headquarters and it will be easy to see everyone. And when we all eventually retire, I’m certain we will remain friends and we can visit each other.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It actually is that easy.”

Fenrir looks at an alert on his tablet and starts putting away the weapons. “Come on, let’s go, it’s almost time for the morning meeting.”

I nod and stand with him.

We walk through corridors until we enter the meeting room. There are at least fifteen teammates and tech staff in the room. Skoll is here and we glare at each other as we take our seats. I want to remain parked in front of his domicile, watching Jada, but he has banned me from his premises after what happened last night. And I am even more irritated. I don’t want her, but I must know she’s safe.

“Everyone has watched the holo vid of the Jada Williams interview with Skoll and we all understand the history, correct?” Hannibal questions.

The team nods in agreement and for some reason it pains me knowing that Skoll interviewed this female and she opened up to him and I wasn't there with her while she spoke. And yet this is nonsensical, considering I was the one who'd left her behind. If I'd stayed, I would've been sitting there next to her, holding her hand as she told her story. I chose to pass the mission to Skoll. Logically, Strikestone should be heading this mission. Yet it continues to bother me. Why?

“Her father is the head of the human mafia,” Hannibal continues. “This human and her twin sister Aliyah Williams were separated as they tried to escape New Earth. Fenrir has been working on getting eyes on that New Earth transporter station by hacking into their vid security so that we can find out what happened to the sister. We learned that she left alive, but we need to see what really happened after Jada was pushed onto the transporter disk. That's the only way we'll be able to retrace Aliyah's steps and find her next destination.”

There are grumbles of agreement.

“Our mission is twofold. First, we need to make sure that the human mafia does not end up on our doorstep, trying to take Jada Williams back to New Earth.”

A growl rumbles in my chest.

“And second we need to find Aliyah Williams and ascertain her safety and bring her back to reunite with her twin sister here on Tarvos.”

“And there is a third part of this mission,” Skoll says. “I need to make sure my pregnant bound stays safe. Her due date is only one week from now.”

“Do you want us to move Jada Williams to a different safe house?” Hannibal questions.

What if I'd taken her to my domicile yesterday? What it would be like having the human female living with me? So

close, protecting her. It would be a job. Only a job. Nothing else. Wouldn't she be safest with me?

"No, she can stay with us," Skoll declares. "This is what Ariana wants and we are inside of the community with Hannibal and Cap and near headquarters. And lately"—he meets my gaze—"Idun has provided 24-hour security."

There are snickers from all around the table and in the room. I stand up, indignant at their treatment. "I always make sure the clients in our care are protected. This is nothing unusual."

Hannibal chuckles, "Thank you for taking the initiative in this mission, Idun."

Heat spreads across the back of my neck. "It's my job."

"Uh huh," Hannibal answers. "You know she's not yours, right? She's a client, as well as Skoll's family member."

"I know she's not mine," I answer hotly, rage boiling in my chest. "Skoll is the head of her family on this planet. He takes lead."

"Then why do you keep trying to take first position on this mission?" my team leader questions.

"I haven't," I protest.

"Yes, you have," the entire team choruses.

I sit down heavily.

"Okay, that settles it. Jada Williams will remain at Skoll's residence as her temporary safe house while we ascertain her safety on the planet."

Why am I disappointed at this outcome?

"As you all know," Hannibal continues, "Jada's father is Darius Williams. He's the head of New Earth mafia. Jada and her sister are in denial as to the extent of their father's nefarious dealings. New Earth mafia was originally a small planetwide crime syndicate, just in the main city of the planet, then there were turf battles and Jada's grandfather solidified his hold over the entire planet, creating the Williams mafia."



Her father Darius, due to the advent of their freedom from Hurlian enslavement, has been able to upgrade them with entry into the intergalactic crime syndicate. He is now connected New Earth mafia with the other Xylan, Hyrrokin, Creekan and Surrelian crime families, the other mafia of the four sectors.”

“Oh hells,” I blurt out.

“Yes. This human and her sister thought once they got off planet, they were free because their father’s reach only extended to the boundaries of their home planet, except that’s not true. The Williams mafia has connections with our Hyrrokin mafia. And because Darius Williams is now on the Intergalactic board of Crime, he now has immeasurable reach. Neither Jada nor Aliyah are safe now, wherever they go in the four sectors they will eventually be found.”

“That means the Hyrrokin mafia are after Jada?” I shout.

“Exactly.”

Deep voices explode in anger around the table.

“The Hyrrokin are the most effective crime syndicate in the four sectors.”

“I think they’re in a tie with the Xylan mafia.”

“They do not negotiate. When they take prisoners, they are only returned in a body bag.”

“I wish these Hyrrokin would use their powers for good instead of evil,” Hannibal agrees. “But they always choose evil. Since their crimes are usually financial and domestic, Molten Lava doesn’t have many dealings with them. We are soldiers who deal with terrorist organizations and off-planet entanglements. But I can only assume that the Hyrrokin mafia will come into play for the capture of one or both of these females in order to return them to Darius Williams.”

Fenrir taps his claws on the table. “This has suddenly gotten much more dangerous.”

My chest expands and fire churns in my stomach.

“Do we have any way we can reach out and talk to them?”  
Skoll questions.

“Yes, we do,” Cap announces as he strides into the room. The team grows quiet as all the males present watch and wait for Cap to deliver his information. Bergelmir Touchstone is notorious for his long silences, so when he speaks it’s always important and we all listen. “I just completed a holo vid with the head of the Hyrrokin mafia. Their Don let me know in no uncertain terms that they were going to find this human female, as well as her sister who is off planet and return the both of them to their father on New Earth. I was not able to talk them out of it.”

“Did you offer a bribe?” Hellstone questions. “Usually all the mafia cares about is currency.”

“I tried, because that’s usually the easy way to stop their machinations and they wouldn’t take it. I offered a ridiculous sum and they weren’t interested.”

“That’s unusual. Is it because they want to gain an alliance with humans?”

“Why would they risk angering and creating mortal enemies with Molten Lava in order to gain an alliance with New Earth mafia?” I question.

“I don’t know. But I let their Don know that many of us here on Molten Lava have mates who are human and therefore we have a natural alliance with humans. It is unacceptable to us for human females to be put in harm’s way or to be taken without their consent. In fact, Jada Williams does not have to pay, we’re doing this mission for free.”

“I agree,” Hannibal says. “We all agree.”

“Maybe we need to keep an extra eye on all of our females now that we are creating enemies with the Hyrrokin mafia,” Cap says.

“Good point. Where do we think they will strike first?”

“I don’t know,” he answers. “But they are well known for being smart and unpredictable. This is unlike any enemy we have battled before. They have no rules.”

## IDUN

**T**wo hours later I'm back at the same worktable as before in the military hangar, sitting again with Fenrir and cleaning my weapons, waiting for the next drop of intel.

The Hyrrokin mafia will soon try to kidnap Jada and I should be at Skoll's domicile with my eyes on her, making sure no one can infiltrate the heavy security barriers ringing the community, but I'm stuck at headquarters waiting and it leaves me angry and discontent. As soon as we gain more info we'll break off into groups and start moving, but as of right now all we know is to hunker down and protect Jada.

And then I sense something. A presence.

My chest expands and I turn and see her. The female I want most in the world steps into the military hangar alongside Skoll, and my cock instantly thickens in my trousers. Her eyes widen when she sees me. She's wearing a traditional top again, this time yellow, and a pair of white form-fitting pants. Her foot coverings this time are not pointed, instead they are flat with some kind of intricate lacing on the top. This means I can still see all the smooth skin of her neck and arms and the curve of her ass. I swear she looks ready to be fucked.

"Idun?" she breathes.

"Did you know she was coming?" I snarl at Fenrir.

He smirks and leans back in his seat.

I stand up and march across the hangar and leave, trying to ignore the look of hurt in her eyes.

“Idun,” Skoll shouts.

I turn back as he marches forward and stops me in the hallway. “Why the flaming fuck did you bring her here?” I growl.

“I brought her for a tour of the facility because we’re moving her here later today to live in the secure room. What is your problem? Why are you being so rude? I’ve never seen you treat a client this way.”

“Why do you continue to make sure she’s in my vicinity?”

“Don’t start with me again. Do I need to beat your ass a second time?”

I step close. “I let you have the advantage yesterday,” I snarl, “because I knew you needed the opportunity to ascertain the safety of one of the females under your care, one who is also a member of your family. Also, it was true that I’d treated her in a way even I thought was wrong. I deserved what you delivered, but today...” I expand my chest and lift my head to remind Skoll of my size and strength. “I will not back down. Are you certain bringing her here is the best for her safety?”

“First, this is the safest place for her, even safer than the community. Second, she wants to come and see for herself the headquarters and the secure room we’re moving her to before she needs to live here for an indeterminate amount of time and, she can learn first-hand what we’ve found so far, where we are in our progress. I wanted to make sure she knew that we were taking our mission seriously.”

I grunt with approval.

“Also, this gives you an opportunity to make up to her for last night. I know how you feel about her. I suspect it goes beyond simply wanting her as your pleasure mate.”

I let out an impatient snort, “I find her attractive but it’s nothing more. I will not act on my need.”

“I’ve been there before when I was first trying to decide whether to make a formal commitment with Ariana. That’s what you think at first. But you have it bad.”

“No.” I shake my head. “This is a pleasure mate I can deny.”

“I know your history,” Skoll says. “Hannibal told me this morning what happened with your former intended. And I know what that female did to you.”

Smoke wisps from my nostrils. I’d once told that story to Hannibal, in confidence, when I was extremely drunk. I’d sworn him to secrecy, but obviously my wishes meant nothing. Skoll has probably already told his bound and in a matter of hours the story will be everywhere. Godsdammit.

“I am sorry for your loss. I don’t even know what I would have done either in that situation. The pain and betrayal would’ve been too great. But I want you to know that I’ve had Jada Williams as a guest in my house the last few diurnals and I’ve learned that Ariana cares for her greatly and they played together as children. I’ve spoken with her often and I’ve seen her in many different moods and situations, and I am ready to vouch for her to say that she is a good female. She would make a worthy mate for a friend of mine.”

I cross my arms. I’ve known Skoll for the last decade and we’ve been on countless missions together. He’s laid down his life for me and I’ve done the same for him. His favorable opinion of this female means a lot, but it’s still not enough. “No. I’d known my former intended since we were children. We grew up together, played together and then we fell in love as young adults. I thought I knew everything about her and was convinced she was a worthy female. And I thought she loved me as much as I loved her, therefore I hadn’t used any protection and planted my seed in her womb when she asked because I thought she also wanted our children as much as I did. I hadn’t sensed untruth when she spoke. We were set to go the Courthouse the very next day and then she betrayed me, and I discovered it had all been a lie. Everything I had thought about her wasn’t true. Right now, everything that you think you know about Jada Williams is probably not true. She’s your guest. She’s showing the best side of herself right now. She’s trying to be polite to make sure she gets on your good side so you’ll help her. What if we find out later when we watch the

vid of the transporter station that actually she pushed her sister off the disk first so that she could take her spot and come to Tarvos? She says her sister was the one who demanded Jada go first, but we don't really know that, do we? We don't really know anything about her. You've only known her for three days."

Skoll frowns. "I guess the only way she can convince you is with her actions."

"I'm reminding you that I knew my former intended her whole life and she still betrayed

me. I don't know how I could ever trust again."

"I don't know either, especially if you don't want to."

"Skoll?" a delicate voice questions.

My teammate turns his head and marches over to where Jada hides in the doorway. They talk softly to each other and then move away from me, down the hall. The human ignores me, trying to stay on the opposite of the hallway and in moments they both turn a corner and I can't see either of them. But her scent lingers in the air. And my cock is again lengthening in my trousers.

It's very difficult having her nearby.

I'd told Skoll I could never trust any female ever again. And this is true, but it doesn't mean that my want for this particular female goes away.

Fenrir enters the hallway and stands in front of me with a look of determination in his eyes. "I know everything about your past with your former intended and why you're pushing Jada away," he says. "Ariana already told me. Jada knows too. She and I were standing together in the doorway, close enough that we heard most of your conversation with Skoll. It didn't help matters that the two of you were yelling."

I glance again down the hallway, where she disappeared. "She knows?"

"Yes, and I expect everyone else does too."

A growl rumbles in my chest. "I have no privacy."

Fenrir pats me on the shoulder. “No, you don’t, but in this instance I think it’s a good thing. You’ll see that everyone now understands why you feel you can’t trust this female. I am also sorry for your loss and for the way you and your parents were mistreated by your former intended and her family. It was wrong.”

I give a grunt of thanks.

“Let’s go, there’s another team meeting. More info from New Earth.”

Fenrir and I switch back to all business and march together down the hall and arrive in the meeting room again, which this time is filled with the entire team as well as Jada.

Somehow the only seat left available is the one next to her. Jada stiffens with disbelief, realizing I’m going to enter the room and sit down right next to her. I glance around at all the innocent faces that refuse to meet my gaze. She lifts her chin and doesn’t look my way as I slowly walk over and take my seat, but I can smell her arousal for me and that means the others can too. Normally this would be a matter of pride, knowing other Hyrrokin can scent that my mate wants me, but she’s not my mate.

Will this torture ever end?

“How close are we to finding my sister?” Jada asks Hannibal, our team leader.

He smiles down at her. “New Earth authorities have just now given us a recording of the transporter incident. A quick-thinking and honest Peacekeeper has apparently been trying to fight crime on his planet, so he saved this holo vid and got it to us when requested. We’ve received images of the interior of your transporter room on Mumbai, as well as the hallway and the room next door. We can all watch this for the first time together and hopefully, this will lead to where your sister is located.”

I turn and meet Jada’s worried gaze. My hand itches to reach out and touch, but instead I ask, “Are you sure about

this? We haven't seen this holo vid ourselves yet. We don't know if this is good news or bad news."

She blows out a breath. "I want to see. I need to know the truth."

"Turn it on," I say.

The holo vid flashes to life above the table. I can see Jada standing on a transporter disk dressed in the same clothing as when I met her, and the lighted disk next to her is empty. A female who I assume is her sister stands at the terminal. They really do look exactly alike; it's striking how similar they are. They have the exact same skin pigment, figures and faces. But their human hair is arranged differently, and they are wearing different clothing.

Jada's twin is readying to get on the secondary disk when they are attacked by two armed human males. The vid has audio and visual so we can clearly hear Aliyah order her sister to remain on the disk as they both hear the door being breached. "You're the oldest and the nicest, so you go first," her sister yells out. And then Aliyah hits the sequencer and Jada's shouts of denial fade away along with her body.

Skoll turns to meet my gaze from across the meeting table, giving me a smug look of satisfaction. Asshole. He loves being right.

"Oh, this is where I don't know what happened." Jada leans forward. "I left and...oh my gods, Aliyah." Right after Jada begins to fade out, a guard attacks Aliyah and the other goes after Jada but he passes through her and hits the opposite wall. "I was seconds away from being captured."

I reach over and take her hand in mine. "Your sister did indeed save your life." Her features soften. She gives me a nod, acknowledging I'm telling her that I understand she was telling the truth. Although one truth still does not mean she is completely trustworthy.

"There's more," Hannibal says. "The vid cuts out here but restarts from the hallway." There is an image of Aliyah racing down the hall and she opens the very next door. Soon after the



two guards storm down the hall and enter the same room. Then the image goes dark. “And now it picks up again inside the next room.”

“Oh my gods, how did she even get out of that room and away from them?”

I am wondering the same thing myself. How did that delicate human escape two armed humans?

The next holo bid blinks to life and now it shows Aliyah entering a transporter room filled with two other male humans in the midst of transporting off planet.

Jada gasps, “I can’t believe there were other people there too, in the middle of the night? I thought we were the only ones in the building.”

The two disks are lit, as well as the third, which was formerly empty. Aliyah runs straight for the third disk and arrives just in time to become part of their sequence. The guards are only a short distance behind the female but they are too late, she’s already dissolving. A guard throws himself at Aliyah, but phases through her body because she’s already gone.

“Gods, the timing of that. That was pretty spectacular. I have to admit,” Fenrir quips. “That’s one for the history books.” There are nods of agreement and deep voices around the table, discussing how the female managed to get away.

“Where did she go?” Jada asked. “We can see her enter the next room and she left. Where did she go?”

“First, the good news is we know she’s alive,” Hannibal says.

“Do we?” Jada asks. “Do we know she’s alive? Maybe something happened to her when she arrived at her next location.”

“Well I do know that those two males were on a pilgrimage to Salo. This is all we know so far. Salo is a safe planet. She arrived there and they don’t know who she is. All they will do is take her to a nunnery. This has been known to happen.”

“Wait. You think my sister, Aliyah Williams, has been banished to a nunnery on Salo?”

“This is very possible.”

I look over and see her lips twitching. “I’m sorry, I know this is a serious matter and I shouldn’t be finding this funny, it’s just that... Aliyah in a nunnery?” She bursts out laughing, slapping her hand on her thigh. Then she tugs her other hand away from mine and picks up her tablet, still giggling. “I have to tell Ariana.”



## JADA

I'm at the Strikestone residence.

My cousin Ariana is napping again and I'm in the house with her while she sleeps upstairs. This way Skoll can finish a few odds and ends and not feel guilty leaving his bound alone, so very close to her due date.

The team considers this a secure location, but not *perfectly* secure. In an hour I'm moving to headquarters, their ultimate safe location. Molten Lava's super-secret headquarters is hidden underground in the wildlands not all that far from the edge of this community and I'm happy I received a tour because living in their secure room doesn't sound fantastical anymore.

My father sits on the board of the Intergalactic Crime Syndicate and has ties to the other mafia species of the four sectors? It's crazy. When will his nefarious schemes ever end? The Hyrrokin mafia is gathering their network of high-tech street warfare to return me to my father on New Earth. And this greatly troubles Molten Lava. They'd always thought my father would send mercenaries after me, but the Hyrrokin mafia is a heightened threat they are taking very seriously.

Personally, I don't see how this mafia can get past the community security, or even the security already set up at Skoll's residence, but the team doesn't think this is enough so they're moving me to headquarters.

My bags are packed and I'm ready to go. I'll be sad to leave behind Ariana and these darling cats, but what if my

pregnant cousin gets hurt because we're in close proximity? I really need to leave soon. Waiting for the retrieval of my sister and the end to this conflict with the Hyrrokin mafia while within Molten Lava's underground bunker sounds sensible.

A ping sounds on my tablet. I'm sitting comfortably on a white couch in the front room, sipping on some Traq, too wired to nap. There's a message from the Hyrrokin male outside in his sleek black vehicle, which I'm choosing to ignore. Minutes after I arrived, Idun drove up and parked on the curb to start his watch.

Of course he's outside. Why would I think anything had changed between us? Just because I know his motivations and he knows I didn't lie about the way I arrived here on Tarvos, this doesn't mean he thinks I'm suddenly the female for him.

I've got it bad. I want Idun despite his constant rejection. He keeps sending me mixed messages. He holds my hand, says he'll take my virginity, kisses me, then wants nothing to do with me, then chases after me, holds my hand again...

I suspect he doesn't know how he feels either.

He's trying to deny his attraction to a female he views as too similar to the woman who once shredded his heart into a thousand tiny pieces. I wish I could track this woman down and kick her ass. I mean, what a bitch. How could she treat him like that? And I know exactly what it's like to be in the position she was offered and yet I'm not in the least sympathetic towards her choices.

My cousin gave away her entire inheritance to make sure she didn't marry the asshole her father had planned for her. Aliyah and I were kidnapped and almost forced into marrying the old, calculating men my father had chosen for us, and we managed to escape. I'd rather risk death than live the life Darius planned for me. All three of us decided that our honor, independence and self-respect were more important than the wealth being offered.

I could've instead taken the easy way out and given into father's demands. I'd right now be relaxing in luxury, instead of on the run and fearing for my life. The offer was certainly

enticing. Also, what if my grandparents had threatened to cut off my inheritance unless I publicly declare my allegiance towards the Garcias? This was something that certainly could've ended up happening. Currency and social standing really are deadly important to beings of power and old money. I don't know what makes me different than the rest of my Garcia ancestors, but I want to be able to put my head on my pillow at night, sleeping well because I caused no beings harm.

Idun has reason to dislike someone like me, doesn't he? Someone who represents everything he hates. But still, my heart aches for him. He loved someone who brutally betrayed him, and of course she'd been rich. Can Idun ever learn to trust and love again?

I shake my head.

Love?

How can I be thinking of love while Aliyah and I are on the run from the Hyrrokin mafia?

The tablet pings again. *What are you doing?* Idun questions.

I glance out the front window and see from a distance the shadowy outline of his wide shoulders and tall horns as he sits in his vehicle. *Why don't you come inside and see for yourself?* I challenge.

*Always remain within equal distance from both safe rooms,* he answers with professional detachment.

I send back a thumbs up.

Ariana and I were both recently given a safety drill on the use and locations of the two safe rooms in the house. The car in the vehicle bay is considered a secondary safe room and I learned that if I press the button inside the door hatch it will lock closed and the entire vehicle will rocket back to headquarters. Upstairs is the primary safe room. This domicile has the two safe rooms as well as a very sophisticated alarm system. Molten Lava also maintains 24-hour surveillance outside on the curb. A huge wall surrounds the entire

perimeter of this community, and the front gate has armed guards. Other members of Team Molten Lava live nearby. And yet I appreciate that they are not complacent. They don't feel I'm ever going to be one hundred percent safe because our enemy is the Hyrrokin mafia.

No one seems to understand why the mafia wants me so much. I mean, my dad has turned into an intergalactic crime lord, but still, he's only New Earth mafia. The Williams mafia is nothing compared to the one-thousand-year-old Hyrrokin mafia. I just don't understand. Wouldn't the Hyrrokin mafia be worried about making enemies of Molten Lava? Why go through the bother of kidnapping me? What's so special about me? And then I wonder if the Hyrrokin mafia also know that Aliyah is on Salo too?

I pet one of the cats, take a deep sigh and pick up my tablet again. Idun never responded after my thumbs up. Why is he being so quiet?

I bite my lip and glance out the front window. I feel an urge to go out and boldly knock on the passenger side of his vehicle, open the door and sit next to him. I'd rather be in the car next to him. Well, basically I just want him with me. Wouldn't it be better if he were inside since Ariana is upstairs?

*Come inside, I repeat, that way you can make sure I'm equal distance between both safe rooms.*

*Female, I'm treating you the same as any other client.*

*Heh. You kiss all your female clients?*

*No, I do not.*

I smile because I can almost hear the indignant tone of his voice. *I'm the only female client you've ever kissed?*

*Yes, the only one.*

And why does that make me happy? *Come inside and sit with me, I repeat.*

*You know why I can't come inside that domicile. You promised you would maintain a professional distance between*

*us. Skoll is meeting with Cap and Hannibal and will return in fifty minutes, and you will be moved to headquarters.*

I sigh with disgust because it's true I said that I'd help to keep our distance but... *I need you*, I admit.

Oh gods, I can't believe I just messaged that. Why did I say that? It's because I'm basically a mess. I lost my mother recently, and now I've lost my home and my planet. I'm on an entirely new planet, living amongst a species I barely know. And I appear to be falling hard for a male who is pushing me away.

And my twin is not with me.

Normally we live together, we share an apartment. We have totally separate friends and a separate life, but we always come together at home and spend time together daily. She's my best friend and now she's gone. And I'm antsy and worried and the only time I've felt at peace since I arrived wasn't necessarily in the company of Ariana and her husband, or the other members of Team Molten Lava, although they were wonderful—

*I'm only at peace when you're next to me, holding my hand.*

*Female...*

*I need you. Why are you being such an idiot about this? I challenge, only because I know the reason why and it's still wrong that he's comparing me to this other female. In fact, it's not fair. I'm nothing like her. So what if my family is wealthy? It's not really my money, I inherited the currency. I'm well aware I didn't do anything smart, fancy or hard working to receive this wealth. I was simply lucky to be born into a family with generational wealth that they were willing to pass down to me. In fact, I feel bad about the whole thing.*

*You do?*

*Yes.* I glance up through the window and see his horns tilted toward me, which means I've gotten his attention. I decide to open up to him and tell him the real truth about



myself. *I've never told anyone how I really feel about this, not even to Aliyah...*

*What?*

*I learned recently that my ancestors made our wealth by helping the Hurlians find targets to kidnap. Some of my ancestors were paid very well to turn on their fellow humans. That's how we got our currency, even when humans were enslaved and living in giant ghettos. When the Hurlians were kicked out we were some of the only beings who already had wealth to get things started. We didn't have to wait for a handout from the Gravians. Our businesses then became legal, but the original way we got our money was what I consider treasonous. My family doesn't want to talk about it. They act like it didn't happen and the accusations are false. But come on, it's the truth. It amazes me how some of my family will talk so highly of our ancestors when these were people who turned in their neighbors to help themselves. How does that make them a good person? I don't know. It's all been really confusing for me.*

I pause, giving him time to read my diatribe, my word vomit of emotions I've never said to anyone and suddenly I feel very nervous and vulnerable. I gave him this knowledge about me...will he turn around and hurt me with it?

*Does your sister feel the same way?* he questions.

I exhale and tap out my response, *We haven't spoken of it yet. Aliyah never seems to worry herself too much about any of this. She likes to party a lot and have fun. Sometimes I wonder if it's just so she won't have to think about things too much. Like she turns a blind eye. Why else would she have been taking Dad's currency? Right?*

*You were not supported by your father?*

*No, but don't think good of me. I've been living off my inheritance from my mother's family. I've been living very comfortably. They paid for me to have excellent schooling, I wear very nice clothes and have beautiful jewelry. I live in the best part of town and in one of the nicest high rises. That original currency that was earned by my ancestors who most*

*likely got other humans killed is still funding my lifestyle to this day. Yes, I work hard at trying to save animals in the shelter I started. I also work hard to help children and families by working in a woman's shelter and donating currency and sitting on the board. But in the end, I have that freedom to volunteer in those positions and help where I see the need because of my inheritance.*

*You do volunteer work to help children and animals?*

*Well, yes.*

*I thought you didn't work.*

*No, YOU thought I didn't work. I wasn't hired to do these jobs, they are volunteer work, but I work at this full time. I went to university, and I've been working hard to help other beings since I was a teenager.*

*You don't go to parties?*

*No, I rarely go to parties. I pause for a moment, suddenly wanting to stand up for Aliyah. There doesn't seem to be a derogatory term applied to wealthy males who enjoy fashionable parties, but there is one for females? *There isn't anything wrong with a girl who likes parties. My sister loves dressing up and going to events and grand openings and staying out all night, being the life of the party. There isn't anything wrong with that. I'm just different. Quiet. I like to stay home at night and read a good book. I'm more of an introvert and she's the high-level extrovert.**

*You are different from your identical twin?*

*Yes, we're different but she's still my best friend and I miss her desperately and I'm worried for her. I still cannot believe the last sighting of my sister was her being taken to Salo where the team believes she's ended up at a nunnery to await judgment because they won't know what to do with her. It's pretty hilarious. Ariana and I plan on never letting my sister live that down and we want to hear that story later, after we have Aliyah back safe and sound.*

*Can I tell you something else? I ask.*

*Yes.*

*I feel I'm caught in a middle ground my whole life, grateful for the wealth and yet embarrassed by the wealth. Is it blood money? Am I living off blood money? It's just hard because I know that I personally didn't do anything wrong, but my ancestors did terrible things. But then am I responsible for what my ancestors did? Why can't I start fresh and not be tied to their crimes and move forward with works of good, trying to fix the past by using that money for the good of other beings? I try to walk that line on a daily basis, but it's still a fine line. I don't know. I go back and forth all the time. Maybe because there's never been an actual reckoning. My family acts like our ancestors are heroes, there's even a statue that was erected to my great-grandfather in the town square of commerce. Recently there have been shouts for it to be torn down. When I was young I learned of that statue and used to admire it, and nowadays, I can't help but think it should be torn down too. How does it make sense to have the statue of a murderer in the town square? New Earth is now becoming advanced enough that there are actual human journalists and local vid news channels. And they recently published an exposé on treason among humans who aided the Hurlians. And of course my ancestors were the main villains in that story. And then I stop. I've said it all. Now he knows the good, the bad and the ugly. I'm hiding absolutely nothing from him and now it's up to him to take it or leave it.*

*I don't know what to say.*

Hot tears well behind my eyes and my throat burns. And suddenly I feel raw and rejected. Again. I opened up to him and he doesn't know what to say? How about "I'm coming inside that house right now to be with you"? That would be appropriate.

I turn away from the window and give him my back. I don't want him to see through the window that he's hurt me. It's hard to glance outside again because I'm confused at his specific reasons for continuing to push me away. He's not human, so it's not like he found out my ancestors were traitors and is upset for moral reasons at the crimes against humanity that my ancestors committed—that I would find a little more

understandable. This is just a general hatred of rich people because of the treachery of individuals in his past.

Or maybe it's just a rejection of me in particular? Maybe I'm the only one who is falling in love here?

I hear a noise and put down the tablet.

What was that?

The house is very quiet.

Why does this cause anxiety? Skoll is only one street over, meeting with Hannibal and Bergelmir at the Heimdall residence. I said that I could easily wait an hour for their meeting and that it was no problem, I would keep Ariana company while she napped.

Idun is of course watching us from out front. All should be safe. Like he said, in forty minutes there will be lots of other team members returning here, along with their hovercraft, to take me back to headquarters. There's no way the mafia could've infiltrated this community in such a short time and also without Idun knowing of their existence. This is why the both of us know it's maybe better for him to be monitoring from the perimeter.

I hear the sound again and smile when I realize it's just a cat scratching at the back door. Hmm, Snack was here with me earlier but now he's gone.

I stand and walk through the front rooms, past the kitchen and out through their dining room and to the back door, which is made of glass. There's a flash of a cat tail, so I unlock and open the back door. "Morsel?" Another streak of orange and white kitty tail. Poor baby, she must want back inside.

The backyard is also being watched with Idun's surveillance equipment, so I know no one is out there without him knowing. I step out onto the porch to try and entice the cat in. It would really be nice to have them both inside with me.

Two red arms wrap around me and a hypo spray stings against my neck and everything goes dark.



## IDUN

I want Jada in the vehicle with me.

But I *must* keep my professional distance as if I were any other member of Team Molten Lava on a stakeout. I've done this countless times for other clients, never wishing to go inside their domicile to be with their females.

She says she only feels at peace when I'm next to her... and I have to admit I feel the same. When we're apart I'm discontent. Why can't I consistently remain professional when it comes to Jada Williams?

And I am not taking her virginity.

I'm not...

But I continue to think of her sexy curves every waking moment. The way she shifts restlessly, in need of my touch. Her potent arousal always thick in the air. The way she licks her lips and stares hungrily at my chest and belt buckle. I ache for her when I sleep alone, wanting her in my arms. I miss the sound of her voice, her addictive scent, and the warm look in her eyes when she gazes upon me.

I rub my hard shaft to completion each morning and night in the cleansing unit, grunting her name as I come. I imagine her naked, with her knees on the floor and her mouth taking my cock and swallowing my seed. Maybe if I give into my needs and have her once or twice, to get her out of my system, I can move on after we pleasure mate before I go too far?

Smoke wafts from my nostrils.

To make matters worse, she messages me with deep heartfelt discussions of her family history, her ethics and values, that she claims to have told no one else. I reread everything she sent—her conflicting emotions about her wealth and status on New Earth. I literally want to rush inside the domicile and wrap my arms around her and give her comfort. This is ridiculous. How is it possible that I want to comfort a rich, irresponsible socialite?

But is she truly irresponsible?

I clutch the steering wheel with a white-knuckled grip. I have no idea how to respond to this beautiful female. What if this is a slippery slope leading to her becoming my avowed pleasure mate or even, my bound? Jada appears to be offering me not only her innocence but also her friendship...or possibly her heart?

How I can I trust my instincts when it comes to choosing the right female to mate long-term? My former intended's scent had smelled bright and trustworthy. Everything about her seemed true. I still believe she meant what she told me about her plans for our future because there had been no vibration of a lie in her voice when she spoke. But how quickly her outlook changed the moment she discovered her parents were going to disown her. She chose their offer over mine. Chose currency and her aristocrat title over our love and our offspring. I wasn't good enough for her or her family.

I can never forget the look of disgust on her father's face when he threw me off his land. I'd always had pride in my family's loyalty towards the estate they'd sworn their lives to, and I thought the Fire-Baron and his ancestors had cared about us and respected and appreciated the hard work we did for them. I was young and naïve, assuming we were in essence one large family already. But in the end, I was nothing more than trash under their feet and my parents were expendable.

I haven't thought this deeply about my sordid past in many years. I'd managed to push it all aside and move on with life. I went straight to the army as I said I would and became a decorated soldier who retired early to join Molten Lava and that's where I've been ever since. I've never had another

bound. And now here I am confronted with a female who is bringing up the same emotions as before. A messy mix of caring and longing and need that I vowed to never let myself become embroiled in ever again because last time the consequences were devastating. My erroneous choices affected not only me, but my parents too.

I cannot fucking take this lightly.

My teammates all seem to like and vouch for this female. Ariana, a human I have always considered fiercely loyal to her bound, obviously loves Jada and welcomes her into their home with open arms.

I don't remember my former intended ever being as transparent as Jada Williams. Looking back, I can see now that my first love hid half of herself from me. Maybe because she had been young and hadn't truly known herself either? Jada is a young woman, but more mature than the first female I gave my heart to.

My feelings for Jada seem different. Deeper? I spend time with her in the open because we do not have to hide our relationship. My teammates in fact find ways to bring us together. And this allows me to see how she treats me when other Hyrrokin are nearby. Since that first moment, after she recovered from her fear of my tribal Hyrrokin features, she has treated me with nothing but pride and respect.

And in turn, have I treated her with this same level of respect?

I glance up, needing to see my female's lovely profile again and the slope of her soft shoulders. And I don't see her framed in the window.

My jaw clenches and I sit up straight and tap on my tablet to check the security visuals. A low growl of disapproval rumbles in my chest. I told her to remain on the couch, which is equal distance from both safe rooms and perfectly in my line of vision. The security system locks onto her new location and I see she's opening the back door. What is she doing? Is she calling for the cats? Ridiculous. Godsdammit. She's gone into



the backyard with the cats? Now is not the time to be playing with those exotic pets that Skoll keeps.

I tap the next screen to reorient the feed to the backyard, but the security is funneled through a different system. I sit back and cross my arms, agitated that I must wait a few seconds for the next visual to go live. Finally, I have eyes on the backyard but the angle doesn't allow for a full visual of the back porch. I tap again and now the drone is positioned farther above so I can see the entire backyard and I don't see her.

Where has she gone? I move the drone, thinking she's probably in a corner. Maybe the cat ran away from her. I'm eager to see her smiling face, holding a cat in her arms, but I can't find her. The entire back yard looks empty.

Fucking hells.

I toss aside the tablet and burst out of the vehicle.

I run across the street and break through the front door. The alarm goes off but that's fine, the team needs to be alerted. "Jada?" I stomp through the house, going through the ground level front rooms continuing to bellow out her name. "Jada, where are you?"

I check in the entire backyard and do a sweep of the perimeter.

Nothing.

Wait, maybe she's hidden in the upstairs safe room? I get back inside and pound upstairs. That's it. That's it. She's in the safe room. How stupid of me, I should've looked there first. I punch in the code and open the door and it's empty.

Did she leave? And now my chest is heaving and black smoke billows from my nostrils. I didn't hear or see anything depart but maybe. And I race downstairs and look in the auto bay. Nope. The all-terrain vehicle, the secondary safe room is still there.

And then suddenly I'm worried for Skoll's bound and I go back upstairs to check on Ariana. I open the master bedroom door and find her still asleep on her side, a hand resting on her swollen stomach, safe and sound as if nothing has happened.

And yet my female is gone.

Back downstairs, I roar out my frustration.

Ariana shows up at the top of the stairs, rubbing her eyes. “What’s wrong?” she questions. “Where is Jada?”

I tap my comm wrist badge. “Jada has been kidnapped. Ariana is secure. Status red alert.”

TWO HOURS later we still haven’t found Jada.

Team Molten Lava has no idea where she is or how she was captured.

Skoll is losing his damn mind because it could easily have been his pregnant wife—one week away from her due date—who could’ve been hurt or captured.

The Fire Lord, Thayne Ashmoor, and his bound, the human Fire-Marchioness of Ashmoor, arrived thirty minutes ago in their hovercraft. Lord Ashmoor spoke at length to Skoll, offering his personal guarantee of Ariana’s safety and security at Ashmoor Manor. Then Ariana left with the Ashmoors and now we’re all in agreement, including Skoll, that his bound is now safe and comfortable. But Jada remains missing and none of us understand how it happened.

Now we can focus on finding my human. Because we will find her.

We’ve gone over every square nanco of the domicile along with the holo vids of every outside angle. We looked back through the recordings of who came and went through the front gate of the community. Checked the feeds and the alarm systems for the perimeter wall for anything unusual, to no avail.

Most of Molten Lava is now back at headquarters, scanning city-wide satellite feeds as well as the transporter station and the Main Tarvos Space Dock. The other human females in the community, and their offspring, have all been temporarily gathered at the Heimdall residence just in case

humans are being targeted. Everyone on staff is either at headquarters or securing the Heimdall residence.

I am the only one who is at neither of those locations.

“It is not your fault,” Hannibal tries to say. “It could’ve happened to any of us.” But he’s wrong, it is my fault.

And I can’t shake the idea that she’s nearby. I said this in a meeting, but no one would listen to me. Even Fenrir shook his head at my ridiculous notion and went back to scouring satellite feeds. Jada isn’t my bound. I have not claimed her. She wasn’t even my pleasure mate. Therefore, I shouldn’t have this kind of bond with this female, so I understand why they think my intuition is suspect. They are instead following protocol, which is what I would do too if I were in their positions.

Skoll is focused on his bound who is about to give birth, which is understandable. Jada is his family too, but Ariana and the child she carries in her womb are filling his senses and I suspect he is unable to truly focus on this mission. Hannibal and Cap aren’t much better, worried for the safety of their bound and offspring. It is now my turn to take over.

I am running on instinct alone. I drive over to Skoll’s domicile and park in the driveway. It doesn’t make any sense, but I must go back to the location of her disappearance. It’s a typical sunny day in Tarvos, the rainy season long past and the skies clear. This is not a day of rest, but a workday and everyone has already left for jobs or school. The streets are mainly quiet in the community. The Hyrrokin who managed to take her must be long gone, therefore the team is patrolling their escape routes. We have already gone over the house and already checked out the neighbors. The community itself has been thoroughly vetted and secured because of the last time we saved the world and we had the gate rebuilt. This entire community is nearly as secure as the safe room.

But whoever took her did so right under my nose, right under my watch.

And she begged me to come inside and sit with her and I said no.

Fire churns in my belly, and I let out another roar of rage.

I'm in the house. Again. I retrace her steps alone by myself. I scent Skoll and his bound and the cats, but there is Jada's underlying scent that only I can follow. I track it to the back door and onto the back porch.

I pause and look around. None of us understand how they were able to take her. They couldn't enter and leave in a vehicle without being checked at the gate. They couldn't arrive on foot, over the perimeter wall and leave again, unnoticed because of the gate and all our equipment monitoring the wall. Did they bring in a stealth craft without us knowing?

I move farther into the fenced backyard and gaze again at the neighbors on either side. Both include long-standing members of society. One house has a judge and the other is a doctor. I glance again at the fence and the house to my right because her scent is leading me again in this direction. But this is impossible. The doctor is well known for saving children and has lived in that residence since the house was built.

Why would Jada be in this house? She couldn't possibly be only next door...

And yet I follow her scent to the right and it ends at the fence. Underneath the vines I see for the first time there is a gate between these two houses.



## JADA

I awaken to find myself tied up, sitting on a hard, cold floor with my back braced against a wall.

What the hell?

A groan escapes my lips as I remember what happened. A large Hyrrokin male pressed a hypo spray on my neck and I dropped like a sack of rocks.

The last thing I remember is stepping out the back door to look for Morsel. I must've passed out and was carried here, wherever here is, and now I'm someone's captive. My hands are bound behind my back, which is really freaking uncomfortable.

Two distinct male voices are speaking nearby in the Hyrrokin language so I'm still on Tarvos. I look around first before saying anything because maybe I can get out of here, but there's no escape. My hands are tied and I don't have my tablet. I don't even know where I am. I guess I'm in a living room. No, actually I'm in a pantry with lots of shelving and food storage. The door is wide open and the males who took me are right outside of this small room. I'm in a house and they're trying to hide me?

And right then one of them comes inside. "You're awake," he remarks. This Hyrrokin is strong and muscular, like the soldiers at Molten Lava, but he's also wearing a flashy necklace and rings on his claws.

"No thanks to you. I could've been killed."

The other Hyrrokin steps inside. He's slightly shorter than the first guy and wears a couple more necklaces, all of them bejeweled. "We weren't trying to kill you. If we wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead, our job was just to snatch you. Our boss will be here soon."

"Your boss? Are you guys the mafia?"

They both grin but don't answer. I assume that's a yes. "Where are we?"

"Don't worry about where you're at, we're here waiting for the Prince. He'll be here any minute to scent you."

They're waiting for some kind of Prince? That's not even the weirdest part. "I'm being held so one of you can come here and smell me?"

"Yes, the Prince claims to have scented a human he wants and now he's lost her. He doesn't know what she looks like or her name, but he says he can find her by scent alone."

"It's bullshit," the other Hyrrokin mutters.

"Shut up. Do you want to be killed?"

I shift my hips, trying to find some relief for my aching arms, which is making me very grouchy. "This is ridiculous," I snap. "I was kidnapped because we're waiting for this guy to arrive so he can scent me? And what happens if he thinks I'm the one?"

The bigger one grins. "You're fucked. Literally."

I roll my eyes. Like this scares me. I've heard worse threats from my dad's own guards. "Wait, you called this guy the Prince?" I put two and two together and realize this guy is the heir to the entire Hyrrokin mafia and my heart sinks. Great, now I'm really in deep shit.

"Yes, the Prince. That's all you need to know."

"Ugh." I swallow against my dry throat. "While I wait for this Prince, can I at least have something to eat or drink? And can you maybe untie me?"

They exchange glances and then shrug in agreement and bring me some water, but they don't untie my hands. They tilt the cup and I greedily gulp it down. I feel a little better, my dry mouth receding as well as my neckache. And I begin to wonder—why would they need to hide me in the pantry if they're waiting for this other guy to come meet me? Why can't I just be on the front room on a couch? “Whose house is this?” I ask. “And why are you guys being nice to me?”

“We don't know what's gonna happen after the Prince arrives. He's gonna smell you and then he'll know if you're his bound or not. You could potentially be his lost Princess, so we figure we'd best start things off right.”

I blink. Did I hear correctly? “This Prince is going to smell me and decide if he wants to marry me? Why are mafia males incapable of finding a female to love them? I don't understand why they have to kidnap in order to find a mate.”

“The Prince has been looking because...you tell the story. Were you there?”

“No, I wasn't there. I guess Thayus was there when it happened and he said the Prince was in a hotel off planet and scented his future female but didn't know who she was. He returned to Tarvos but still wants her. He's decided to systematically scent each unmated human female who arrives on Tarvos. You are the first unmated human female to arrive on this planet since our Prince returned. This bid for your capture came up from your father on New Earth and the Prince convinced the Don it was important.”

They are obviously feeling more comfortable around me, basically giving everything away now, so I ask, “Are you going to return me to my dad?”

“That depends on what the Prince says.”

The front door opens with a loud bang.

“He's here.”

“Oh no.”

Heavy footsteps grow steadily louder and then there's a very large, horned Hyrrokin male standing in the doorway to



the pantry, staring at me with dark intensity. Several chains dangle from his neck and clink together against his bare chest and his silver-tipped clawed fingers hold several sparkling rings. The mafia are obviously into bling, but he's also still very menacing.

"You're beautiful," he growls.

"All the human females are beautiful," the shorter guard agrees.

"It almost makes me want to go to New Earth and get one for myself," the other one chuckles. And then they're elbowing each other and jabbing their tails.

"Shut up," the Prince declares.

The two guards immediately go silent.

"Untie her," he demands.

They do as ordered and help me to stand. I rub at my aching arms.

The Prince pulls me with him out of the pantry and into the kitchen where there's more space. "Are you the one?" he questions.

"I don't know," I admit.

He pulls a piece of silky fabric out of his pocket. "Is this yours?"

"I've never seen it before."

And then his terrible face is buried in the crook of my neck and he inhales. I try my best to avoid his horns and also not giggle, because it tickles. What if he decides I'm not worthy and has me killed? Mafia royalty are notorious for their mercurial moods. Finally, the Prince pulls back from me with a sad look on his face. "It isn't you," he declares loudly and turns and looks at his two guards. "She's not the one," he repeats. "All I scent is her fear."

And then backdoor crashes open and my favorite soldier appears in a flurry of broken wood, shards of glass and flying

hinges. His eyes wild and his nostrils filled with heavy black smoke.

Oh thank gods.

“Get away from her.” Idun roars. He’s huge and scary and mean. His black horns almost scrape the ceiling and his claws and fangs seem longer than before. Flames shoot out of his distended jaw and his barbed tail is scoring the wall.

“Idun,” I cry out and try to run to him.

The Prince puts up a claw to stop me. His two guards block my escape. The heir to the entire Hyrrokin mafia slowly turns and looks at Idun. “Molten Lava I presume?”

“Mafia asshole?” Idun snarls.

The Prince lets out a snort of laughter. “I must admit I’m impressed you found us so quickly.”

Idun glances at me again, probably noticing that I’m perfectly unhurt and not tied up. He lowers his fisted claws and softens his stance. “And I’m impressed that you managed to take her in the first place. But this human female is mine and I will not allow you to take her back to her father or to hurt her in any way. I am taking her with me right now.”

How sweet is my Idun? But now I’m scared because I don’t want him hurt. I mean, where’s the rest of his team? Why is he trying to save me all by himself? Has he gone rogue? “Will someone please tell me where we are?” I ask, hoping someone will finally answer.

Idun looks at me, “You’re next door to Skoll’s domicile. All they did was come through a gate in the fence and grab you.”

The Prince chuckles, “My uncle has owned this house since it was built. He doesn’t even know that gate exists.”

“Skoll Strokestone moved next door to a relative of the mafia?”

“Yes he did, but my uncle is still a good man. He doesn’t know I’m here. His wife and children are at work. He’s a respected doctor and a valued member of this community and

this incident has nothing to do with him. I stole his car to get in here and I have to return it immediately because he'll be enraged if he finds out I used him in this way. Don't worry, my uncle makes a point of living entirely separate from our criminality. I suspect he will come over later with restitutions to make sure your team member and his wife feel secure remaining here. I'm in this community today for one reason and one reason alone." He looks at me. "I wasn't sure if she was the one."

I pipe up, "I guess there's some human female that he scented off planet and he's got a piece of fabric with her scent on it and he's trying to find her."

"The other human females on this planet are already mated," Idun points out.

"Yes, and Jada Williams was the first unmated human female to arrive on Tarvos. I scented her just before you arrived and I've learned that she isn't the one."

"I see," Idun comments. "Are you working with her father?"

"No. Well, maybe a little. I am going to still track down her sister to see if she is possibly the one. If neither of these females were the one I was open to the idea of handing them both over to Darius Williams. But now..." The Prince steps closer to Idun and examines him. "Why are you here by yourself without your team? How did you find this female so quickly when the others couldn't?"

I look at Idun closely because I want to hear this answer too. Why is he shifting on his feet and looking nervous? What is he hiding?

"It's her scent, isn't it? You followed her scent?"

Idun's shoulders slump and his chin dips against his chest.

"Well apparently this female isn't free either." The Prince looks at me. "This one is going to need some convincing. Good luck with that."

Oh wow.

“What happens now?” Idun growls.

The Prince glances back at his men. “We’re done here.”

They both nod in agreement.

“I’ll program the repair bot to fix that door.”

“How about we go eat dinner at that new restaurant?” the other guard questions. And then the three of them start chatting about where to have dinner.

“Excuse me,” I say.

They ignore me.

“Excuse me,” I shout.

The three males look at me questioningly.

“That’s it? The kidnapping is over?”

“Well, yes. You’re not ‘the one’ and I’m certainly not returning you to your father”—the Prince tilts his head towards Idun—“because of complications. So, I’m gonna eat, then go home and rest. And then tomorrow.” He grins. “I’ll go look for your sister to see if she’s ‘the one.’”

“Jada, come here,” Idun growls.

I immediately race over to him, and he puts an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his side. And I sigh with delight. He feels so very good. Like home.

“I need you to do me a favor,” the Prince says. “We need to leave my uncle’s house exactly as we found it. I’m going to go out the front door with my two guards and we’re going to use my uncle’s car to leave. So then, at the gate, he’ll still be in good standing. I need you both to return through the secret gate in the back fence and return to the domicile next door, as if none of this ever happened.”

“Wait,” I say, “what about my sister? You said you’re still going after her to check her scent too. I want to make sure you’ll treat her with care and make sure she’s safe.”

He nods in agreement. “I will make you a deal. You both go back the way I asked and also promise that my uncle will

be allowed to remain living here quietly, with no blowback, and I promise in return that when I go find Aliyah Williams—and mind you I will find her before you do—if I scent her and she is the one, I will keep her but don't worry, this will be no hardship to her. But if I scent her and I find out that she's not the one, I will pause and take a moment to ask her of her own choices. Does she want to go back to her father or does she not? I will give her the choice. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I answer.

"Wait," Idun cuts in, "that gate that adjoins these two houses in the back is gone. And we will put up extra security surveillance on your uncle's house on the outside. It will be unobtrusive and confidential, and he will not even know it's there."

"Agreed," the Prince responds.

And they shake hands on it.



## IDUN

**T**he three mafia fuckers leave through the front door as if they hadn't just taken my mate and distressed all the other human females on the planet. I immediately walk Jada out the back door, as promised.

I almost lost my mind and murdered all three of those males when I saw through the glass door that she was in the arms of that asshole and he was inhaling her scent. He's lucky I managed pull back and refrain from snapping his fucking neck off. I heard him declare she wasn't the one and he literally pushed her away from him. Just in time.

Motherfucking mafia assholes, always trying to find their mates through kidnapping.

The suns are setting, and the sky is streaked with orange and pink. It took two hours and twenty minutes of non-stop searching to get her back. Too long.

We walk through the twilight, across the manicured backyard and I show her the location of the infamous gate.

"I can't believe we were just next door."

A growl escapes my lips as I open the gate between the two properties because I can't fucking believe it either.

She runs her fingers along the iron work. "The vines really were covering this gate and now that it's closed I can't see it again. It's ingenious. I wonder why this was built in the first place. Don't you think it's interesting?"

I grunt my disapproval as I lock it behind us. I could care less how it came to be; I just want it gone. Plus, my mind is filled with need. I must have this female underneath me in my bed to cover her with my scent. And I need her protected. Leaving her in Skoll's domicile while I patrol out front is no longer acceptable. I take her hand and guide her with me, back inside. I pull her through the first floor of the empty house, locking and unlocking doors as I go.

She glances around with worry on her features and digs in her heels. "Where is everyone and where are we going? Is Ariana okay? Are the cats okay?"

The cats? I shake my head. "Most of Molten Lava is at headquarters still looking for you through satellite relay. The rest are protecting the other human females and their offspring at the Heimdall residence. Ariana and her pets are at Ashmoor Manor with the Fire Lord and his bound. You're coming with me to my cabin."

Her face lights up. "I am? Oh wow. Where is your cabin?"

My heart warms at her enthusiasm. "Yes, you are and it's on the edge of town. Let's go."

"Alright."

We step out onto the front porch. I close the door behind us and set the security system to alert. Then I take her hand again and guide her across the lawn to my parked vehicle. I open the door, lift her onto her seat and secure her seatbelt.

"Don't we have to let everyone know you found me so they can stop looking for me and aren't worried anymore? The other women need to know not to worry and that they can all go back home."

I absently grunt with agreement and shut her door. First, I canvass the area, noting that indeed the mafia assholes have left and the neighbor's vehicle was shown passing out the front gate. Then I sit in the driver's seat and message my team with a quick statement: *I've found Jada Williams and she is back with me, unhurt and safe. I am taking her with me to my cabin. Do not try to ping me, I am going dark for the next few*



*days*. Because it will take that long for me to get enough of her in my lungs and my seed planted in her womb to finally feel satisfied and my blood lust to fade. I'll message Hannibal and Cap later about the deal I made with the heir to the Hyrrokin mafia.

I toss down my tablet and start the engine.

Jada picks up the discarded tablet and reviews the message I sent. "Hmm. This looks so dry. Do you mind if I ping Ariana and explain everything to her through vid while you drive?"

I nod in agreement.

I pull out of the driveway and start the long drive home. Meanwhile, Jada pings her cousin and I have to spend the entire ride over listening to these two females dissect everything that went on with the kidnapping and the state of Ariana's health due to her eminent birth. At one point Lady Ashmoor joins in the conversation and now three human females are loudly chatting together in the front seat of my vehicle. This is now my future. My female is becoming fast friends with her long-lost cousin and also Charlotte Cruz, the Fire Lord's bound.

Great.

"I'm just upset that all of you were inconvenienced. I mean, Ariana you must've been freaking out, waking up to find me gone."

"I was really frightened, worried you were hurt, but the person freaking out the most was that male sitting right next to you. He lost his mind, again."

"He did?"

"Yes, Fenrir told me Idun went rogue, looking for you. And thank you for that Idun, because of your dedication my cousin is safe."

"You're welcome," I mutter.

"How did Idun find you when no one else could?" Lady Ashmoor asks. I met her once at Sir Bane Ashmoor's Bound Declaration Ceremony at Ashmoor Manor, which I happened

to be invited to because I'd worked with his female on a stealth drop.

"He followed my scent and found me next door? Whatever that means."

Heat rushes across the back of my neck. I know exactly what that means and so do the other two females, but thankfully neither of them chooses to explain. They change the subject.

"I've already checked in with Avery," Ariana explains, "and she says everyone knows that the danger is over and they are returning home. Oh and I've got more good news, it was confirmed that Aliyah is on the Omega 9 space station."

Jada gasps with delight. "How long ago did this happen? Is she still there? Can I ping Aliyah and talk to her too?"

"The team was alerted to a sighting of her minutes ago, there's some grainy footage of her arriving in the transporter there. I think she's still on the space station? But you can't talk to her because apparently she was unlucky and arrived in the midst of some sort of prison transfer and now she's on the run with a convict?"

"What? Oh my gods. Is my sister in danger again?"

"For some reason the team seems unconcerned? Not sure why. But Skoll keeps telling me not to worry, that they are still helping her."

"What a mess. So that means we're still at sit tight and wait?"

"Yes."

"And also, did I tell you how the heir to the Hyrrokin mafia is trying to scent his mate and is going to follow Aliyah?"

"No, tell me all about it."

I listen with interest as Jada recounts her meeting with the Hyrrokin mafia from her point of view. Those bastards are lucky they didn't harm my female. I suspect even the Prince

knew hurting Jada meant all-out war with Molten Lava and he wasn't ready to take things that far.

The females finally wind down their conversation and come to the same conclusion that it is safe for Ariana to return to her domicile.

“Skoll will never agree,” I remark. “I believe it is still a proper location for you to both reside and raise a family, but he will not agree.”

“Oh, he will,” Ariana interjects, “I have the nursery all set up there. That's where I'm coming home after this baby is delivered.”

I shrug. It's true that this female has often been able to convince Skoll of things I'd never have expected otherwise. I suspect she will do her magic again.

“Where are you two going?” she asks. “I can see that you're in Idun's vehicle. I'll be back home soon, Skoll is arriving in the hovercraft and I'll talk to him about going back, so we'll be returning shortly. Will you join us there, Jada?”

“No, she will not,” I growl.

“He said he's taking me to his cabin?” Jada answers.

“Ohhh. Have fun.” Ariana winks and waves her fingers. “Guess I'll see you, whenever.”

Then the screen goes dark.

Jada looks over at me. “What was that all about? Why are you really taking me to your cabin?”

“You are going to live here with my as my avowed pleasure mate.”

“What?” She drops the tablet and turns in her seat. “Your pleasure mate? Need I remind you that you very forcefully vowed to never touch me again. And yesterday you said you'd never touch a party girl like me and you accused me of tricking you. Just this morning you were running away from me in the hangar and looked horrified to have to sit next to me at that meeting. You wouldn't even come inside the house this afternoon when I asked.”

I growl and grip the steering wheel. “I made many mistakes,” I confess.

“You think?” She crosses her arms. “And what mistakes were those?”

I exhale and force the words past my lips, “I shouldn’t have judged you so harshly. It was wrong. I apologize.”

“You’ve got that right. And thank you for apologizing. What changed your mind? Did you finally notice I haven’t tried to start an actual party, or request going to a club?”

My lips twitch. “Why didn’t you tell me from the very beginning, when we were at the restaurant that you started an animal shelter?”

“I’m shy and I don’t like talking about myself. I don’t know, it sounds like boasting?”

“Heh.”

“I am nothing like her you know, and it’s not fair for you to judge me for someone else’s mistakes. I don’t judge you as having the same faults as my father. You have to trust me.”

She’s so very right. “I want to trust.”

“Can you?”

“I don’t know. But I want to try.”

The night sky sweeps overhead with a swath of glittering stars when I finally park in front of my cabin. Suddenly I’m nervous about her reaction to my domicile. The vehicle’s lights spotlight the front and the domicile’s automatic exterior illumination clicks on. “It’s not a mansion. There are no servants, only a few cleaning bots. But I purchased this property many years ago and own it out right. It’s mine.” The same with my vehicle. Everything I have I own. I do not rent or lease. I have no debt and I’ve set aside a large currency account for emergencies. I’m not a Billionaire or an aristocrat, but I have a good job and I can very comfortably provide for a female, as well as a future family.

“Oh, I love it,” she exclaims.

“You do?”

“Yes, it’s colorful and charming. I’ve got to see more.” She unclicks her belt, throws open the passenger side door and before I can get there she’s running up the porch.

I chuckle and follow behind and watch as Jada gazes in wonder at the protective tribal statues that line the front steps. She bends down and runs her fingers along the wood carved flames. “What is this?”

“I’ve added many details of my own tribal ancestry to this place. It might seem uncivilized to some Hyrrokin, but I am proud of my connection to the original Hyrrokin tribes that still roam the remote wildlands to this very day.”

“I’m proud of you too,” she says with warmth and caring. “And your ancestry.”

My breath catches in my throat. I stare down at her staggering beauty. That smile that still lights up her exotic face. She’s been through so much today and yet she’s still eager and optimistic. And still praising me, a male that is entirely unworthy of her love. And then I sweep her into my arms because I can’t stop myself. My lips crash down on hers.

This kiss is even more desperate than the previous one in my vehicle. That was a sampling, a taste. This one is a claiming. I back her up against the wall of my domicile and slap my claws on the wall above her. My knee goes between her thighs and she moans at the connection to her hot core. Today she wears a pink top and sand-colored pants and I want to rip it all off her.

“I almost lost you,” I groan against her lips.

“You found me. Only you.”

True. Only me.

I pull back from her because I’m about to pull down that pink shirt she’s wearing and suckle her gorgeous breasts. But I want to wait for all of that inside. I’m not going to take her virginity here, on my front porch.

She stands on unsteady feet and I guide her inside my home.

Our home.

I give her the short tour of the front room, my secured weapons locker, the kitchen, bedroom and the one bathroom. This has been plenty of space for me—a place to rest between missions. I'd always meant to live alone, but now I want Jada to move in and make this her home too.

I pull her into the bathroom with me. “We are going to use the cleansing unit so you and I can both wash away what happened earlier today. And then I'm going to toss you on my bed and sink my cock into your hot cunt and take your virginity.”

Her mouth drops open.

But the scent of her arousal increases.

I wave a claw at her clothing. “Take it all off,” I order. “I want you naked.”

My weapons are left in a pile on my arsenal collector. I unfasten my silver belt buckle and she pauses in her own undressing to watch as my belt clinks against the hard floor. And then as I unzip and pull my pants down my hips. My red erection is long and hard and already leaking cum at the tip. I grab ahold of it and give it a rub. “It's ready for you.”

My boots are discarded as well as all her bits of clothing and then she's naked. Her dark skin glows under the lights and I can't believe her perfection. She starts to try and cover herself with her hands but I clasp her wrists. “You are beautiful,” I rasp. Her large ass is best of all, second only to the perfect bounce and sway of her heavy breasts.

“You're not so bad yourself,” she murmurs.

“Touch me,” I say. And she wastes no time in pressing close, running her palms all over my chest and around the back to my ass, pressing her belly against my hard shaft. Her tits and nipples against my chest might be my undoing. I want to come the first time inside of her, later I'll make sure to

come all over her face and stomach, rubbing my seed into her skin.

I turn on the cleansing unit and we both step inside. That human hair of hers curls up underneath the water but then when I hit the blow dry setting it turns sleek and shiny. It's most unusual. But what I love the best is the thatch of dark curling hair that covers her mound.

"Can I?" she asks eagerly, her tiny hand hovering near my erection.

"It's yours," I inform her, "do what you want."

"Mine," she agrees and then her small fingers are trying to meet around the thick circumference and she's sliding her hand up and down.

I throw my head back and groan, but I need more. I place my claws on her shoulders and have her on her knees taking my cock and my world is complete. I cup the back of her head and guide her towards the tip of my leaking slit and she opens her lips and sucks me off like she was born for this. It's just as glorious as I'd imagined. Her breasts are so large and her hips so wide. She's new at this so I teach her what I like and she's a quick learner. She does her best to take all of me, but she gags on all of my length so I pull back. Eventually she will learn to handle all of me. She moans around my shaft and I could come right now, but I manage to hold back. I pull out and help her to her feet. The first time with my future bound will be inside of her.

I sweep her into my arms and carry her to the bedroom.

"Idun, stop, put me down. I'm too heavy."

I chuckle and bounce her light form in my arms. "Female, you are so very small and delicate." Then I drop her onto my mattress.

Her eyebrows furrow when she looks around. "Is this where you've brought all your women?"

"You are the first female I've ever brought here."

"Really?"

The bed dips as I press my knees onto the mattress. And I cover her like I've wanted, resting my hips between her thighs. I grind my shaft along her wet slit as I cup one breast and suck on a perfect brown nipple. I spend an inordinate amount of time servicing both of her teats, going back and forth.

I need to taste her.

I sit back and move down the bed so I can spread her meaty thighs with my red claws and spend time licking her hairy pussy with my forked tongue. I discover exactly how she likes her clit sucked. She holds on tight to one of my horns and her other tiny hand squeezes the tip of my barbed tail while she shouts out her release. I lick up her gush of pleasure, loving her taste.

She's ready.

I'm back over her with the tip of my cock at her entrance. I sink inside of her a bit at a time, not wanting to hurt her. But she is having none of it and her feet are behind my thighs and she lifts her hips and suddenly I'm mostly inside of my female. She lets out a faint screech of pain.

"Are you okay?"

She purses her lips.

I spend a moment kissing her neck and then I bend down and take a nipple in my mouth, and then the other. Finally her hips shift and I can feel her growing restless.

"Move," she orders. "I need more."

I take my time, sliding back and forth slowly and then she becomes impatient. I worry that she's too hurt or too small for all of me. She's got most of my shaft but I'm not fully seated.

"Don't hold back."

I place one of her legs over my shoulder and I start to pound into her. And I slide a finger between our bodies and rub her clit. And that's when she starts to lose her shit. I hold her tight in my arms, with my tongue in her mouth as she screams out her release against my lips. My own release comes roaring down my spine. And that's when I realize I'm



about to impregnate this female. Is that what I want? Is that what she wants? And then I'm coming. It's too late. I shout out my release because it's the most intense orgasm of my life.

"Were you on birth control?" I ask afterwards, even though I know the answer.

"No."

Why didn't I wear protection? I always wear protection. And then I can't help it, I loom over her and growl. "You're mine now. I've planted my seed in you and you're mine."

"Uh huh," she pats my shoulder absently, obviously exhausted. She's already falling asleep.

She's amazing. Jada loves me and she can take my large cock, all of it and she can also keep up with me. She's mine. But what if she becomes pregnant?

I don't know what that means.

But, I do have my handcuffs.

I pull her into my arms and we both fall asleep.



## JADA

The next morning I wake up in Idun's arms.

We're both naked and the space between my thighs is pleasantly sore. He's still asleep so I take some time to bask in the glory of this big, sexy male. His soft red skin covering acres of hard muscle. I'm in his bed and he's snoring out puffs of white smoke from his nostrils.

He's been my first in everything. My first boyfriend, my first kiss and my first time having sex. He taught me how to pleasure him and he's been doing his best to learn what turns me on. I mean, I don't even know what really turns me on either, so we're learning together.

I cannot get over how much he seems to love the shape of my body. It's always been that way with him. He has no idea that I'm totally overweight. I'm a big girl. Aliyah and I have both been overweight since we were pre-teens and I can never seem to lose the weight either, and neither can she. My sister is a master at dressing glamorous and looking gorgeous just as she is, but I've never been the same. I tend to wear baggy clothes and hide how I look. The only reason I was wearing a form-fitting outfit when I left New Earth was because I was wearing one of Aliyah's reject outfits. Those weren't my own clothes. I would never have picked an outfit that showed so much skin. And now that I've been living here on Tarvos and dressing like the other women here, I've been showing even more skin.

And Idun always gazes at me with heat in his gaze. He loves my curves, folds and creases. He loves me just the way I

am. My naked body makes him hard.

I love him so much. Yes, I'm crazy in love with this man and want to marry him, like right now. No kidding. Yes, it's wild considering I met him days ago. But maybe because I met him in the midst of trying times, I've seen all of his sides already?

And he loves me too, he just hasn't admitted it yet.

I've been acting dumb, like I have nooooo idea what it means that he found me by scent alone and went rogue, looking for me. He hasn't said anything, but I know he found me because I'm his mate. Idun's ability to scent is an ancient tribal tradition. All Hyrrokin still retain this ability but I'm certain that it's even more intense with Idun because of his ancestry.

He doesn't want me simply as a one-time pleasure mate, or even simply as his girlfriend, he wants me to be his wife. And the good thing about the Hyrrokin species is that they don't do adultery. All mated pairs are bound for life and most Hyrrokin make every effort to wait to declare for another and become legal bounds until they are certain the being they've chosen is someone with whom they can maintain that commitment.

Basically, I'm his future bound, and he's my future husband, all that is left is for us to go down to the Courthouse and make it official. That's why I came out here without a bit of complaint and why I fell into his bed last night.

I've done my homework on this because I leave nothing to chance. I always plan ahead. There's something called a Bound Declaration Ceremony that is usually performed first. In fact the first step is for the male to ask the female to be his future bound and then they are legally each other's "intended". And the next step is the Declaration Ceremony, and then they go to the local Courthouse to make things legal.

Idun grumbles in his sleep. He must be waking up. He turns and buries his nose in my hair and inhales. He loves smelling me.

His whole body tenses. "You're pregnant."

“You think I’m pregnant?” I let out a nervous laugh because what is he talking about? “You know we had sex for the first time last night, right? There’s no way you could already know that.”

His arms tighten around me. “I can scent the change in your pheromones. There is another scent trail emanating from your skin.”

I’m stunned. “Oh wow.”

“You *are* having this baby,” he growls.

I blink, scoot back and sit up, pulling bedsheets to cover myself. “Of course I’m having this baby. Why wouldn’t I?”

Is the idea of pregnancy causing my man to revisit past trauma? Uh oh.

“You are going to stay with me, so I can watch your every move so I know for certain you are not trying to end our relationship before I can get you to the Courthouse.”

And then he handcuffs me to him.

I lift a wrist and frown at him. “First, I cannot believe you just did that. Second, you keep handcuffs next to your bed?”

He gazes at me with wild eyes. “You are mine. You’re both mine.”

“Idun,” I say gently, “I can’t marry a man who doesn’t trust me.”

“You’re going to leave me?”

“You’re not listening. I can’t perform vows with a male who doesn’t trust me.”

“You are going to the Courthouse with me,” he repeats with a very stern voice. “Females on this planet have the legal choice to decide what they will or won’t do with their own bodies and I respect that right. But in this instance, I want you to listen to my wishes. If I keep you handcuffed to me, you can’t leave me.”

I blow out a breath. “Idun,” I start, “I...I’ve just learned about this baby and I think it’s lovely that you already want

this child so much. I'm happy that our child will be loved..."

"You want our baby?"

"Well, I chose to have unprotected sex with you last night during the..." I pause to count on my fingertips, "*four* times we had sex, so on some level I was already saying yes, I wanted your baby. And also, I'm here for the long-haul so, yeah this sounds like a great idea. And I always knew that Hyrrokin become mated pairs in order to breed, so I knew this was on the agenda."

"What if your father recaptures you and tries to have you terminate my child in order to marry you off to one of his guards?"

I imagine that happening and primeval mothering instincts rage through my veins. "That's when I would fight for the life of my child and find a way to run away again—to you. I wouldn't allow it. I'd find a way to talk him into allowing me to have this baby. The bottom line would be that I'd protect this child with my life." I narrow my gaze and point at him. "And what if instead the problem is that *you* decide to leave *me*? Huh? Maybe I'm the one who is protecting this baby, carrying and delivering it and if you want to be a part of this baby's life, then that's great. If not, I'll carry on."

"What are you even talking about?" he sputters.

"Take off these handcuffs so we can talk rationally. If the end result is you wanting me with you at the Courthouse as your bound, handcuffing me won't get you what you want."

He bares his fangs but takes off the restraints and tosses the heavy cuffs onto the nightstand. Then he sits up in the bed with his back to the headboard and the scoops me into his massive arms and onto his lap. "I don't know what to do," he says with a hoarse voice. "I just...this brought back bad memories."

I lean into him. "I know. I just want to be clear—a female always has the right to choose about her own body. I have the right to choose whether I will become a mother or not. Do you understand?"

He takes a deep breath. “Yes.”

“My decision in this instance—because of how much I’ve always wanted to be a mom and because I feel I’m financially and emotionally ready to care for this child—I will definitely carry it to term. I want this baby very much and I am happy that you will be this baby’s father.”

He rests his chin on top of my head. “It doesn’t bother you that your child won’t be fully human, but instead half-Hyrrokin?”

“No, I don’t mind at all. My cousin is about to give birth to a half-Hyrrokin baby. I’ve spent the last few days living with her and her husband and I see how a marriage between these two species works and...”

He pulls back and places a claw under my chin. “You want to be my bound?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You do,” he smirks.

“I’m not marrying a male who doesn’t trust me,” I repeat.

“You’re beautiful and also the most honorable female I’ve ever met.”

Tears burn behind my eyes. I can’t get enough of this. He could say this to me once a day for the rest of our lives and it wouldn’t be enough. “You think I’m beautiful?”

“You are the most beautiful female I’ve ever encountered, inside and out. I’m amazed you’d want anything to do with a rough soldier like me.”

“My sister is the beautiful one.”

“How is that true? Aren’t the two of you identical twins? If she’s considered beautiful by the standards of your species, then so are you.”

“Well, Aliyah dresses up and wears gorgeous clothes and has her picture taken all the time. I don’t do any of that.”

“I like it that you don’t do that. I like you just the way you are.”

“You do? So that means you trust me?”

“I was stupid to push you away. Yes, I trust you. And if ever start to act again like I don’t trust you don’t let me get away with it. I count on you to hit me over the head and keep me on track.”

“It will be my pleasure,” I giggle. And then I think of something important, something that can really get in the way of our nascent plans for the future. “Let’s not forget that I’ve now only got six days left on my ten-day visa. How is that going to work?”

“Female, there is no need to worry about that anymore, you’re pregnant with my offspring so we can easily file for a temporary mating visa. Also, you didn’t ever need to worry about that visa because Lord Ashmoor’s cousin is the head of immigration. They’ve already extended your visa from ten days to ten months.”

“Oh. Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

He shrugs. “Also, you are going to the Courthouse today to become my bound, so you will therefore instantly become a citizen of Tarvos and you will live here permanently.”

My lips twitch. “I am?”

“Yes, you are...What’s wrong?”

“I’m still worried for Aliyah. We’ve got the mafia off me here on Tarvos, but they are still after my twin. I’m safe, but she’s not.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got a mole on that space station. My cousin was arrested and thrown in a detestable intergalactic prison on made up charges and we were on the verge of getting him out. We instead sent him to Omega 9 to look for her.”

“You think that will work out okay?”

He shrugs. “It’s our best chance”

“Hmm. You know what I want out of life in the future? I want a safe and peaceful existence with a husband who doesn’t break the law.”



“I can give you that.”

“And I’m not an heiress anymore,” I admit. “When I ran away, I had a ridiculous amount of currency in my accounts but now they are all empty. My father had recently been giving me large sums of currency in anticipation of my wedding to the man he’d chosen. But now he’s cut me off and in fact drained my accounts.”

“Do you want to go back to him?”

“Idun, I ran away from him because he was going to make me marry some criminal asshole. That wasn’t worth the money. I wanted my independence. And there’s also been a flurry of indictments for my family’s business, the Garcia corporation, and now my inheritance was frozen. So now I have no currency. Not a single credit.”

“Thank gods.”

I let out a bark of laughter. This guy. “You’re happy that I have nothing?”

“I have plenty for the both of us.”

“I can work. I have a degree and skills. I really can get a job here on Tarvos.”

“Only if you want to.”

We’re kissing again and I’m still on his lap and I can feel his erection and damn if I don’t want sex again. Time for round five. I need him inside of me. But then he starts talking and I can tell he’s got more angst to get off his chest. At first I wasn’t paying close attention to his words because I’m staring at his chest again but then he says...

“...she quickly moved on to becoming the bound of a Duke and providing two heirs for him. And a few years ago, she had the nerve to message me and try to get me to break her legal vows with him and commit adultery.”

I cup his face in my hands. “Wait, your former intended has been contacting you?”

“Yes.”

“Idun don’t you see that means she regretted everything. Her life is not good. She knows that she traded love for currency and power. Hopefully she loves her children and has them to love, but she doesn’t have the love of her husband, nor does she love him in return.”

His claws tighten on my waist.

“I don’t want you ever contacting her again,” I say with a harsh tone. “You need to block her messages. If I am going to become your bound you are mine and only mine.”

He grins, appearing pleased at my jealousy and previously unknown possessive nature. “She is already deleted. She had her chance and now it’s long over. Plus, now that I know what true love is, I know I never really loved her. I was infatuated with a pleasure mate but our relationship was nothing like what I have with you.”

“Really?”

He reaches down and slides his fingers inside of me. “Your pussy is addictive.”

Oh my gods, he’s so sexy I can’t even handle. “I hope you like cats,” I tell him as he positions my entrance on the tip of his erection, “because I’ve got my two cats back home who I’m going to have sent here via transporter. I can’t be apart from them any longer. I’ve been messaging my friends who took care of my pets after I was kidnapped by Darius but I need them with me. And I might very well end up starting another animal shelter here on Tarvos someday, just warning you.”

And then I’m sinking down on his cock.

“I love you,” he groans.

“I love you too,” I pant.

WE’RE at the Courthouse when we get the message that my cousin is in labor.

After our fifth and then sixth round of sex, we both came to same conclusion—“Why wait?” So we got in the cleansing

unit, then we both got dressed and drove directly to the nearest Courthouse. We had to wait a bit because we didn't have an appointment. But then we stood in front of a judge to recite legal vows.

"I take this female as my bound," Idun chokes with wet eyes.

"And I take this male as my bound," I answer solemnly.

There were so many legal documents to sign but they were finally complete. And then my new husband's arms went around me, lifting me off my feet, kissing me hard.

Wow.

And now I'm Jada Grindstone. No baggage, just clear skies and a new future. And our whole 'ceremony' seemed romantic to me because it was private and special, just for the two of us. It was perfect.

A red light starts blinking on Idun's tablet. He looks down. "Your cousin is at the hospital with Skoll."

"Ariana is in labor?" I gasp.

He nods. "We have to get to the hospital."

It takes awhile because traffic is terrible, but then we finally arrive. Everyone is in the waiting room. All of Molten Lava seems to be there, as well as the Ashmoors. It's a lovely time, meeting so many other human females who are married to Hyrrokin males. Ariana is right that there's a tight-knit community of ready-made friends for me here. We all start talking about my cousin, getting updates on her progress and the baby's health.

I laugh when Idun proudly boasts to his friends that we just came back from the Courthouse and that I'm now his bound. Everyone is happy for us and Fenrir is the first to give me a big hug. I blush and try my best to downplay it though, because I don't normally like being the topic of conversation. Also, this is Ariana's big day. She's about to be a first-time mom. And I'm about to gain a second cousin.

And also, my heart is heavy because my sister isn't here to share in our joy.

Idun must sense my mood because he puts an arm around me, kisses my head and says softly for my ears alone, "We'll find Aliyah soon. We will get your sister back for you, I promise."

"Thank you," I whisper to the man I love so very much.

And then the doors to the waiting room burst open and an exhausted Skoll yells out. "My daughter is born, and she and Ariana are both in perfect health."

And we all let out a deafening roar of happiness.

## EPILOGUE

I'm very grateful for my bound and my child.

"This is a full circle moment," Jada tells me. "An opportunity for a do-over."

Her human sayings are always charming and I like this one in particular, because it's true. I had no idea I'd been carrying that burden around for twelve years, not wanting to take a bound because of my lack of trust. I'd written off all females as not trustworthy, but on the other claw, it had been easy to dismiss all other females I met because none of them were Jada.

The moment I met her I knew she was mine.

Maybe from that first moment I saw her through the front window of the vehicle and then when I got closer and heard her voice and her scent entered my lungs, on some primal level I already knew she was mine.

And I think she knew the same.

"I love you," she tells me literally each diurnal.

The two best moments of my life were when I took my pregnant female to the Courthouse and legally declared for her and we became joined. And the next moment was a few weeks later, when we went together to the med lab and listened to the heartbeat of our son. I stood proudly, not caring that my eyes watered. I was there with her for every appointment, every time she vomited with her human morning sickness. I suddenly understood what Cap, Hannibal and Skoll had gone

through when their own mates had carried and delivered their children. The bond is deep.

When my son was born I held him in my arms and cut the umbilical cord. I had no idea there was this type of love in the world.

We continue to live in my cabin because Jada likes it so much. She's charmed by all the tribal details. All her female products line our bathroom and her clothing takes up most of our small closet. But I think it's time for us to move. The addition of another offspring makes this home too small. We need more space because Jada is already pregnant with our second offspring. This morning I again scented the change in her pheromones.

I have a surprise for my bound. I've noticed that she's been eyeing the rings that her human friends wear as a sign of their commitment. She said to be long ago that she didn't care about that. At the Courthouse we did not exchange these human 'rings.' But I know she desires one. I've learned that a ring on a finger is a powerful declaration for a human and the absence is saddening. She truly doesn't care that we skipped the Bound Declaration Ceremony in our hurry to become legal, but she is trying to hide the fact that she wants the ring.

So I will give it to her.

I've been secretly saving for this ring the last ten moon cycles. Then I had Ariana and Lady Ashmoor help me to shop and purchase just the right ring. They know better than me what a human female would require.

Our son is asleep in his crib in our room.

"What are you doing?" Jada laughs when I take her hand and pull her out onto the porch, where I've lit a series of tribal flames. The evening is clear and the scent of flowers is strong in the breeze. She loves it out here so she squeals with delight when she sees what I've done.

And then I get down on one knee.

"No..." She starts to tear up.

I pull a small black box from my pocket. I open it up and offer her the glittering four-carat diamond ring with a platinum band that her friends helped me to choose.

Now she's openly crying.

"You like it?"

She whimpers as I take it from the box and place it on her finger.

"I love you Jada Grindstone," I tell her. "Thank you for going with me to the Courthouse and honoring a Hyrrokin commitment. Please accept this symbol of human commitment. I am honored to not only be your bound but also your husband."

"Oh Idun. I've got one for you too. I carry it with me all the time lately, trying to find the right moment to give it to you too." And then she pulls her own box out of her pocket, opens it with trembling fingers and hands me a thick platinum band. "I love you," she whispers fiercely as she slips it on the correct finger of my left claw. It fits surprisingly well and I find I'm pleased at this wearable sign of our commitment.

And then we're both standing.

"You're pregnant again," I tell her.

"I am?" she laughs, placing a palm on her stomach. "That's wonderful news." Then she reaches for me and takes me in her arms and kisses me with all the passion that she shows for me on a daily basis.

And then we hear the baby crying from inside, waking from his nap. And we laugh and walk back inside, hand-in-hand, into our home and our life together.

THE END

GET ALIYAH'S STORY! [Her Alien Ex-Con, Live July 31st!](#)

I'm on the Omega 9 space station in the midst of a bungled prison transfer.



Handcuffed to a scary, impossibly tall, satanic-looking convict. And he's got the prison ID tattooed on his wrist to prove it. Holy hell. I'm on the run with him because it turns out he's breaking out of jail?

He's rough, bossy and throws flash-flames from his distended jaw. Yes, he's committed felonies, but he can also party all night, drink everyone under the table and shoot a blaster better than anyone I've ever met.

And his kiss is the stuff of legends.

Unfortunately, he's not the only one running from trouble. The Hyrrokin mafia is after me for...reasons? But when push comes to shove and I'm forced to choose between this big guy and *freedom*, I find I can't leave him behind.

Apparently, this soon-to-be 'ex-con' has captured not only my wrists with those handcuffs, but my heart as well?

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