



OUT OF THIS WORLD ALIEN ROMANCES BOOK THREE

HER POSSESSIVE BULLY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LACEY CARTER ANDERSEN

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DEDICATION

*To every reader who thinks enemies to lovers is more than a
little fun!*

WANT MORE FROM LACEY CARTER ANDERSEN?

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ONE

The private spacecraft touched down in the shipyard with a familiar groan. Hannah swung her booted feet off the oversize chair in front of her and pressed her palms against the window. A few people outside had turned to stare.

My dad just has to travel in style! Yeah, the small craft moved faster and smoother than most, but just the sight of it would tell everyone that someone uncommonly wealthy and powerful traveled inside.

Which was exactly the opposite of what I wanted.

At least Mother hadn't come. The woman had been a sobbing mess.

The academy was already like a ghost, its memories haunting her mother with every step. Seeing her daughter there... Hannah couldn't even imagine how badly that would've ended.

But how to deal with her father?

She leaned back in her chair and regarded him. *Here goes nothing!*

"It might be better if you waited in the ship," she suggested in her least argumentative voice.

Her father lowered his computer interface, one brow raised in annoyance. “Do you think I traveled with you all the way here simply to—how did you put it? *Wait in the ship?*”

Disappointment flared. A true parent would’ve understood that an adult child deserved independence. Even on one of the most important days of her life, it was “the commander” escorting her to the academy, not her father. She should’ve known the moment he’d donned his deep blue uniform, perfectly starched and pressed as always.

You did know, her brain insisted, but the ache in her heart said she’d hoped she was wrong.

“Please?” She forced a smile.

He raised his interface once more, so only his neatly trimmed, steel-gray hair peeked over the top of it. “I pulled more strings than you can possibly imagine to allow you to attend The Starflight Academy under your mother’s maiden name. Even though I consider it an insult to my family. I will not act as your chauffeur, too.”

Hannah took a deep breath, fighting the urge to explode. “There isn’t much point in all of that if we enter the school together, now, is there?” she challenged.

He glared over the top of his computer. “If I had it my way, you’d either be attending the academy with guards at your side around the clock, or I’d simply assign you a position on my ship. And before you interrupt me—yes, I do admire your desire to follow in my footsteps. After all your training already, I think it requires a certain kind of person to be willing to attend this challenging of a program, simply because your drive to never settle for less.” He paused. “That’s a Stowe family trait I might add.”

His praise, even wrapped in anger, stunned her. Perhaps he was starting to think of how much he was going to miss her when she was gone. Regardless about how much he mumbled about his “rebellious” child.

“But,” he added, squashing her hopes with one word. “I also think your ego is outweighing your intelligence. Being my child is dangerous. The fact that you want to pretend otherwise doesn’t make the truth of your situation any different. By going here, you are putting yourself and me at risk.”

It took her a second to answer. And when she did, her words came out dangerously calm. “One day I’m going to be the captain of a Level 10 ship, and there is nothing in the world anyone can do to stop me.”

Her father didn’t respond. His gaze was already back on his screen.

Frustrated, she tapped her fingers on her leg, feeling precious seconds ticking away. She needed to change his mind before it was too late. She was twenty-one goddamn years old. She didn’t need her *daddy* to drop her off, and she certainly didn’t need the *Fleet Admiral* ruining any chance she had at a normal academy experience.

“We both know why I don’t want to be connected to you here.” The idea of living in her father’s shadow forever made her feel as if the walls were closing in around her. “But you’ve got to admit, the fewer people who know I’m your daughter, the safer I’ll be.”

There was a moment of silence. “This topic is closed.” Then, after a moment, he added. “We both know how gravely you want to be free of me, but remember, your people still

need you. Whenever I call, your service to us will come above all else.”

As if he would ever let me forget.

She touched the small scar just below her hairline. “I remember.”

Looking back out her window, she stared at the crowded dock. Spaceships of all shapes and sizes had come from many worlds to drop off the next class of students at the prestigious academy. She wanted to be anonymous among them. To create a new life, a new reputation for herself based upon her own merit.

At the same time, it wasn't smart to push her father. She'd learned a long time ago that if she did, he would simply say no, and there wasn't enough begging, pleading, or threatening in the world that would change his mind. But that left her few options in a situation like this.

A lot of people said his decisiveness was one of the many reasons he made such a great commander of the Earth fleet. *But it made a lousy quality in a father. He simply didn't bend. Ever.*

“I hope William is here.” Her best friend was the one person who understood her complicated relationship with her father, and she'd missed him fiercely over the past few weeks.

“I wouldn't count on it.”

She stiffened at her father's response, not realizing she'd spoken her thoughts aloud.

“It'd take a miracle for him to reach Turonga. Without a private ship, he'd need a great deal of money and a whole lot of luck to find someone able to fly him this far,” he stated, not looking up from whatever he was reading on his computer.

“The academy strives to accept its recruits from families of good standing. A gardener’s son is hardly—”

“You mean families with money.” Heat rushed over her as anger built.

“Contrary to what you think of me, it isn’t his lack of money that concerns me as much as his race. *Chamyions* are gutless weasels. His father was a gardener. His father before him was a gardener, and if I was going to make a bet, I’d say this boy will be a gardener, as well. Working on a ship requires a certain...strength of spirit and will that his genetics simply don’t lend themselves to.”

She clenched the plush handles on her seat and leaned forward. “You don’t know him at all. He’ll be here.” She paused only a second, not long enough to stop her words before they came. “Although we could’ve guaranteed it if we’d only allowed him to use our ship.”

He lowered his computer and met her unwavering gaze. “If he can’t make it here on his own, he’ll never pass the test to get in. It would’ve been a waste of all our time.”

She stood. “You just wait—”

“Sit down,” he commanded, his tone no longer that of a father, but a captain. “This isn’t the time for female hysterics.”

Every muscle begged her to do exactly the opposite. Her heart urged her to shatter his computer console against the window. But her mind knew how all of this would end, which was quite badly. He’d probably march her right up to the front door and announce her identity to the entire academy.

With effort, she forced herself to sit.

Her heart pounded. William had to be here! And he had to pass the test! That would show her father he was wrong.

The door to their ship opened and Father set his computer down. Rising to his feet, he smoothed the deep blue fabric of his uniform and strode out the door and down the carpeted steps. “Dean Sufters, Professor Walters, how good of you both to meet me here.”

The dean’s voice was grave as she answered back. “Of course. The new recruits will be amazed to see Fleet Admiral Stowe here to greet them.”

Their voices grew quieter. Glancing back through the window, she saw them walking across the spaceship dock. The dean raised her bony arms in one direction, and then the other, pointing out things around the docking yard.

Now is my chance.

Grabbing her duffel bag, she sprang out of her seat and down the steps. Instantly, the commotion of the dock sent her pulse jumping in excitement. Engines roared as spaceships both landed and took off. Airspace Marshals in flashing yellow clothes directed traffic. Chattering students walked the path leading into the academy, causing their own sort of chaos.

It hit her that she’d never felt more at home anywhere in her life.

Darting toward the wide pedestrian path, she effortlessly avoided baggage cars all while keeping her eyes on the skies. *Just in case.* She didn’t want to be the woman nearly squashed by a spaceship. Not on her first day.

An Airspace Marshal glared at her, blocking her way. “Where’s your escort? Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to be running through the dock unaccompanied—”

“Apologies!” she shouted, ignoring his warning.

She didn't slow until she stepped onto the glowing blue surface of the path. Glancing back at her father, she saw his attention was completely consumed by whatever conversation he was having. *Good*. But it wasn't until she was out of his sight that she finally took a deep breath and eased into a walk.

Her father would be angry when he discovered she'd left, but he wouldn't do anything about it. Because if he did, everyone would know that the great Fleet Admiral Stowe might be able to effortlessly control the skies, but not his daughter. Never her.

She was free for the first time in her life! Or at least as free as she could ever be. Her father would have eyes everywhere, watching her. But this was not like being back at their mansion, or on board her father's ship the *Allure*. She'd finally get to interact with people whose jobs and lives didn't depend on her father.

And there would be lots of other people around her age. *What would that even be like?*

Stopping, she looked up at the towering school building. Made from pristine white stone, it was both beautiful and extremely strong. It had endured five attacks over its three hundred years. Although she knew a few sections had been rebuilt, the rest showed no signs of any of it. At twelve stories tall, with glittering windows, it was everything she'd always dreamed of. And more.

This is what she'd been working her entire life for. One year from today, she'd be graduating from the best flight academy in the universe. After that, she wouldn't be given a Level 10 ship right off the bat, but eventually, she'd be the third woman in history to ever command such a large vessel.

She smiled. That was the plan. All she had to do was stay focused.

A ship flew overhead, but the sound it made was a soft hum, unlike anything she'd heard before. It landed lightly, like a bird settling upon a branch, rather than a giant mechanism touching down. Her jaw dropped. It was a living ship.

Bright green and the size of a small building, twisting vines made up its hull. There were windows and weapons woven into the outside, a seamless combination of technology and nature. Tiny white flowers sprang up in intricate patterns, giving it a beauty lacking in the ships around it.

She took a step toward it. Only Keltairs could fly a living ship. They were given to a child when they reached puberty and grew with the child, if given enough care. She'd studied them extensively, since peace with the Keltairs never seemed to last for long. And her father had taught her- it was important to always know one's enemy.

But what was a Keltair doing at the academy?

“Hannah!”

She turned instantly at the familiar voice, all thoughts of the unique ship gone with her excitement. “William!”

He grinned and started to jog toward her down the path. His thin body moved almost awkwardly as he ran. He slowed a bit, raising one hand to push back his dark glasses as they slid down his nose. His pale green skin looked paler beneath the harsh sunlight of Turonga. For an instant, she wondered why he wasn't wearing his floppy hat over his bald head to help protect his sensitive skin. But as he drew closer, his widening smile pushed away her concerns.

“You're here! I've been waiting for you to arrive.”

She embraced him. “I’m so glad you made it.”

Tears choked her throat as they clung to each other for a long moment before she pulled back.

His face was flushed. “I told you nothing would stop me.”

“And, you’re officially in?”

He pulled a neatly folded paper from the pocket of his frayed shirt and opened it gently. “I just got the notice.”

She hugged him again, crushing the paper between them. People said the gardener’s son was overreaching when he became her unofficial training partner in preparation for the academy. But she’d known better.

In her life, she’d come across many different people, and she knew he had it in him to be a great engineer on a spaceship. So, she’d made him her partner whenever she trained at the mansion, teaching him all she learned from her official tutors aboard the *Allure*.

Even knowing that he’d never be recruited for the academy, he’d focused on learning everything he needed to know to become a spaceship engineer. He’d have to join the 1 percent of people who arrived the week before sign-up to be tested. If he passed, he’d be given a full scholarship to attend. She’d spent the past three weeks wondering if he’d not only made it safely to Turonga, but also if he’d passed the test. The fact that he’d done both was almost miraculous.

That’ll show father!

“I’m so proud of you.” She squeezed his arms, then released him, shifting her bag. “Do you know what group you’ll be in?”

He avoided her gaze. “The Hawks.”

It took her a second to recover from her surprise. “That’s... that’s amazing!”

The Hawks were the most elite group of trainees. She’d been placed in it with ease, but from a young age she’d spent day in and day out on a Level 10 spaceship learning the ropes of her future career firsthand. The Hawks were groomed for such success from the time they were born. The fact that William had gotten into it...well, it was yet another miracle.

“Yeah,” he said. “It was a surprise to me, too.”

“Wow!” She pushed a strand of her long black hair out of her face. “Has a walk-on ever entered the Hawks before?”

He shrugged. “Not sure.”

“Well, we’ll have to celebrate for sure.” She tried to hide her shock with pleasure. “And now we’ll have at least our core classes together.”

He nodded, staring down at his feet.

A sound from behind made her turn around. The live ship had opened. The most incredible man she’d ever seen stepped out. His shirt was unbuttoned, showing off his impossibly muscular chest. Even his stomach was covered in hard, tanned muscles.

Something within her tightened. She didn’t know what a human was doing coming out of a Keltair ship, and she didn’t care.

He was big—bigger than any man she’d seen before. His dark hair, left a little shaggy, and his scruff of beard gave him the undeniable look of a man who knew what he wanted and simply took it. She bit her lip. Alpha males were a particular weakness of hers, and this man set off every alarm she had while he simultaneously drew her toward him. Like gravity.

His gaze snapped up to meet hers. The world melted away. Need flashed in his dark eyes. His jaw tensed. She could sense his physical response to her. It was an electric current running between them. He strode toward her purposely.

“Hello?” William stepped in front of her, trying to get her attention.

She almost pushed him out of the way. “Move.”

Anger flashed across his face. “Too busy checking out the eye candy to notice that Fleet Admiral Stowe is heading straight for you?”

It was like a face full of cold water. She looked behind her and, sure enough, her father was heading in her direction. No one else would’ve noticed the flicker of annoyance in his eyes, but she knew, and she had no intention of dealing with it.

“Let’s go.”

They hurried toward the academy building. She allowed herself one last chance to look back at Mr. Muscles. His eyes were locked on her as he stared around a Keltair who’d blocked his path.

Good. That was dangerous. She’d promised herself no more than a one-night stand or two to get herself through the academy. And that man didn’t fit the bill. He was the sort of guy she’d want to spend weeks on, exploring every inch of him. She’d want to know what turned him on. She’d want to bend him to her will and leave him begging for satisfaction.

She felt herself growing wet.

Shit. She was glad she’d brought her trusty vibrator, Turbo. Otherwise, this year was going to be the most frustrating one of her life. But she could manage, with Turbo’s

help, just as long as she stayed as far away as possible from Mr. Muscles.

But for some reason, she was sure the real thing looked a hell of a lot better than something she'd have to leave charging by her bed each night.

TWO

Liam wanted his father, Gurgo, to get the hell out of the way. The woman he'd just seen wanted to be fucked as badly as he wanted to fuck her. He could sense her needs from across the shipyard, and damn if he didn't want to satisfy them.

“Are you listening to me?” the large Keltair invaded his space, puffing his chest out in a show of dominance.

Liam knew better than to back down. He let his gaze run from the two white horns sharpened to deadly points on his head down to his deep brown face. The silver eyes that stared back at him grew paler in anger.

“I heard you the first time.”

His father grasped his shoulders, squeezing them so hard Liam had to fight to ignore the growing pain. “This human academy is a dangerous place to be. Do you understand me? You have grown into a man, but you are not yet ready to Bond with a female. This place cares nothing for your unique needs as a Keltair. They will throw you in with their wanton females and rely on your own control.”

Staring into his father's eyes, he didn't blink. “I have lain with too many females to count. I don't fear them the way you do.”

His father spat on the ground. “Laying with them is different than being surrounded by them. Understand me well, son of my blood. If you form too close a relationship with any of them, I will have you removed to a Keltair training center. I will not risk you Bonding with a human who will toss you aside and leave you forever weakened, unable to Bond with another. Do you understand?”

He shoved his father’s hands away. “I do not need to be told the obvious or threatened like a youngling.”

They exchanged glares for one long instance before his father growled, “Enough! I must pay my respects.” His voice grew harsher. “Not for the last time I’m sure.”

He turned away, heading for the academy.

Liam watched him go. *Had there ever been a better father? Not many males would push aside their pride to help their son. Or fight so hard to allow him to train with the humans.*

The man tried to hide his pain, but Liam had been there the day his father had found his only child, brought to the edge of death for his human appearance among the Keltair kind. All his dreams had come crashing down for his son that day. Not many men could so easily accept that the world they belonged to was the very world that would destroy their child. *Nor would many males have extracted such a slow and systematic revenge on those who had harmed his blood.*

Liam took a deep breath, pushing his thoughts aside, and looked back for the female. She was gone.

He closed his eyes and pictured her. Big breasts, a narrow waist, long legs. Her body pleased him in every way. Then, his thoughts strayed to her face. Had he ever seen eyes that color

of green before? Never. They drew him in. He wanted to see how they widened with awe as he entered her. He'd grasp her fine mane of black hair and take her deeply.

A ship lifted off noisily beside him, and he clenched his fists. What a time to be growing hard with need. The woman wasn't even present to please him!

Turning back to his live ship, he reached in and took his bag. Unconsciously, he ran his knuckles along the hard shell of its body. *Rest. Grow. I shall be back.*

The ship gave a soft hum of acknowledgment.

An Airspace Marshal waved his hands in front of Liam's face, gesturing for him to move to the path. Liam wrapped one large hand around the side of his throat and drew him so close their breath mixed. The man gave a tiny squawk and shrank back.

These are humans, not Keltair. He chided himself.

Against his instincts, he loosed his grip on the man and let him wiggle free. "Continue as you were," he said, then tried to give a reassuring smile.

The man shot away.

They already think that having a half-Keltair at the academy will be a problem. I need to show them that we're not all war and death. That peace between our nations is plausible. I need to remember the time before my father took me, the days with Mother.

He decided right then and there that he would do better. It would be difficult, but he'd relearn what it was to interact the human way.

When he entered the academy, he was surprised by how large and grand it was. A Keltair would've called such a place a useless waste. When they trained, they selected the most dangerous terrains and pitted the males against each other. Mercy was for the weak, and only the strong survived. This place was...dainty. Pretty even.

He hoped he'd made the right choice in coming here. He gritted his teeth. It had to be. If he ever wanted to serve on a ship other than a Keltair war machine, he'd need to graduate from here. And even then, the prejudice against his Keltair half would limit his options.

Unless he proved himself a thousand times over.

He joined a line of students, waiting for their assignments.

A pretty redhead turned around. Her eyes widened and she spun back around. Not so subtly, she elbowed a petite blonde beside her. The other woman turned and, after the initial shock, let her mouth curve into a smile.

"Hello, I'm Summer."

He sensed her need, but he felt no stirrings of passion. Which was strange. She was pretty enough, wasn't she? "Hello."

"You didn't tell me your name," she said, blinking her big lashes slowly.

Staring at her, he wondered if she would be quite so flirtatious when she learned of the alien blood running through his veins. No doubt, by the end of the day, everyone would have reviewed the files of their fellow classmates. Then, he would know for sure, if he was any better off among the humans than he was among the Keltairs.

"Liam."

“L...i...a...m.” She stretched out his name into four syllables, licking her lips. “I like it.”

An officer in black shouted for the next person in line, and the two women flushed with embarrassment.

“Maybe I’ll see you around,” Summer whispered, winked, and left.

He watched the two get their assignments with little interest. These women stirred nothing inside him. *Unlike the dark-haired beauty*. His muscles tightened. It was the strange woman’s fault. Once he buried himself inside her, he could move on to the next woman. Like he always did.

“Next!” the officer shouted.

He approached the man and noticed how his annoyed expression faltered. The officer took his papers and typed into his computer. Liam knew the moment the man read that he was part Keltair when the officer’s lips curled.

“Your assignment is the Hawks. Top floor.” His disgust was poorly concealed. “They’re the best, and *usually* include our most talented recruits.”

Liam leaned in as he took his papers. “Thank you.”

The man cringed.

As he walked away, Liam felt a spark of pride. Not only hadn’t he grabbed the man’s head and smashed it against the desk, he’d been polite. After eleven years of being under his father’s care, he would slowly remember the ten-year-old boy who used to cook beside his mother in the kitchen. Who smiled and meant it. He would let the human side of himself finally come free, now that he knew that part of him wouldn’t get him killed.

His time in the academy would be wonderful. He'd find himself again. He'd interact with humans once more. Maybe even make some friends.

And he'd track down the beautiful dark-haired woman and satisfy himself until the tension building inside him fled.

THREE

The auditorium was jammed full of recruits for orientation. Light shone through windows high above, illuminating the whole room in a gentle glow. On stage, the teachers sat in awkwardly placed chairs, some chatting with one another, others scanning the students themselves.

William's leg bumped Hannah's as it shook nervously, his new uniform resting in his lap. "What do you think is taking so long?"

She shrugged, not really caring, and tried to move her leg farther from his. Unfortunately, the little desks were practically on top of each other, so her leg would either be against his or the stranger on the opposite side of her.

Oh well. This was orientation day. No one cared how comfortable the chairs were or how well everyone would fit in the room. A certain amount of chaos was to be expected.

Most of the students probably felt the same way William did, nervous and excited. But she'd visited nearly every planet in the Alliance and nothing really fazed her anymore. She'd seen kings and queens being crowned. She'd shaken the hands of ambassadors. And on the *Allure*, she'd been on the bridge witnessing countless battles and odd situations alike.

The academy was exciting because it meant the beginning of her freedom, but it was really little more than a stepping stone to get where she really wanted to be. *Captain Hannah Stowe.*

She never got sick of imagining what her future would bring.

Looking toward the doorway, her breath caught in her throat. The ridiculously hot man she'd seen in the shipyard entered the room. His eyes scanned everyone quickly before he walked to the back of the room and leaned against the wall. The handful of overprotective parents near him shifted to give him more room.

What an arrogant son of a bitch. His entire demeanor radiated "I own this room and everyone in it."

She looked away, her heart beating rapidly. *Trouble, trouble, trouble. That's exactly what you don't need. One night with him, and you'd be throwing away your career to chase some man around the galaxy like Mother.*

The thought chilled her to the core.

Her focus remained trained on the stage for a painfully long time before Dean Sufters and her father walked in side by side, followed by two Keltairs. One of them, she was sure was the alien she'd seen in the shipyard earlier that day. The other, she recognized immediately as Professor Irtun. He often advised her father on diplomatic relationships with the Keltair nation, and now he would be her combat instructor. Both had smooth dark brown skin and twin horns on their heads, although the professor's were far larger.

Of all the teachers at the academy, he was likely the only one who would recognize her. The rest hadn't seen her since

she was a child. *I hope he keeps my identity to himself if he does.*

When the students caught sight of her father, murmurs of excitement rose. By the time he reached the stage, the people around her had erupted into applause. To her annoyance, everyone around her stood, until students and teachers alike were standing and cheering for her father.

She stayed seated, kicking at the duffel bag by her feet. *If I'd been a little earlier, I could've already been to my room and put my stuff away.*

The guy next to her leaned down. "Oh my freaking God, it's Fleet Admiral Stowe! My parents are never going to believe this."

He waited for her enthusiastic response. "Uh, yeah. Pretty amazing."

Frowning, he stood straighter and applauded harder.

"Students and teachers," her father's rich voice drowned out the sound of the clapping and, within a moment, everyone was seated and quiet. "It is a great honor that I get to address this year's new recruits." And suddenly, his gaze met hers. "I have high hopes for all of you. Do not disappoint me."

He turned to the teachers behind him, shaking some hands, and returning the salutes of a few others. Heading back down the stairs, he cast her one last glance, then disappeared out the doors.

She released the breath she was holding. He was gone. She was...free.

Orientation went by in a blur, and shortly thereafter, she was squeezed into an elevator with a dozen other students. Shoved in the back, she tried to hide her annoyance as one

overly friendly guy held the door open for one after another person. The guy in front of her shifted even closer, practically pressed up against her.

She was about to shout for the idiot to let the doors close when Mr. Cocky himself squeezed in. The words died on her lips. People cleared from around him, squeezing into one another, and finally, the doors closed.

As they stopped at each floor, a student or two would step out. When they got to the eleventh floor, a pretty blonde stepped out, casting an appraising glance back at the massive man before the doors closed once more. It took her a second to accept that they were both heading for the twelfth floor, and another second to accept that they were alone together.

He looked back at her, then did a double take, his dark eyes widening. “You?”

She stiffened, tossing her hair over one shoulder. “Did you need something?”

He crossed the space between them and placed one arm above her, leaning in. Her gaze traveled from the buttons of his shirt, which strained across his broad chest, to his chiseled face. Time stood still.

Every part of him screamed *male*. He smelled of rich spices and green life. Warmth radiated from his flesh, and his gaze held a possessiveness she longed to explore.

“I’m Liam Fallow,” he said. Each word held a rolling accent that sent the hairs on her arms standing on end. He lowered his mouth toward her own.

The ding of the elevator had her ducking beneath his arm and out the door.

“Where are you going?” he yelled after her, but she didn’t slow.

I can’t be like Mother. I’ve got to focus.

Halfway down the constantly curving hall, she found her room number. Her fingers shook as she typed in the code to open the doors.

“What’s your name?” he asked, suddenly at her side.

She jumped, but forced her face to remain calm. “What’s it to you?”

The doors to her new room slid open, and she turned to him feigning absolute confidence, but he spoke before she could say any more.

“I find you to be the most attractive woman I’ve ever set eyes on, and I’d like to know your name.”

She swallowed. “Hannah St...Clark. I’m Hannah Clark.”

Her head felt light as she stepped into her room and dropped her bag on the floor before turning back to stare at him.

His appraising gaze traveled slowly up until he met her eyes. “Well, Hannah Clark, I intend to bed you before the day is out.”

It was a second until she could catch her breath enough to answer him. “Good luck with that.”

One corner of his lips quirked up as he took two steps away from her. “I don’t think I’ll need it, neighbor.”

The doors slowly slid shut as he was entering his code to the room across from her own.

Shit. Shit. Shit. That’s exactly what I don’t need!

She told herself to stay focus, to unpack, and to prepare for the night's celebration. Especially before William got back from purchasing his secondhand books, since he'd be all over her then, his nerves palpable. But staying focused was harder than she imagined. Her entire body hummed with need...with tension, and she knew exactly how she could ease every muscle in her body. And the thought alone was enough to make her legs tremble.

Focus! Damn it!

She inventoried her room. It was incredible by academy standards. The Hawks usually came from wealthy background, so the academy couldn't exactly stuff them into small, shared spaces like the other cadets.

Even though it was a *massive* difference from what she was used to.

A pristine white kitchen was to the right, with its food combiner and rehydrator exactly where they should be. Standard blue couches with The Starflight Academy logo were in front of her. A model of a miniature Level 10 ship served as a coffee table centerpiece. The bed and dresser in the back were small but functional.

She moved past the bed, where her larger suitcase had already been delivered. Opening the drawers to her dresser, she unpacked her clothes, her thoughts on Liam Fallow and his sexy accent. It'd been such an unfamiliar combination, a little Irish, and something harsher.

When was the last time she'd heard an accent she didn't recognize? She loved a good mystery. And a mystery man? Even better.

Her hand closed around Turbo, and she looked down at it in surprise.

Turbo. That's exactly what she needed to calm her raging hormones. And since it was waterproof, she could take a shower and get ready at the same time.

FOUR

Liam unpacked his things and headed for the hall. The woman wanted him. Why was she denying it? He would approach her again. He would tell her how he could please her, and she would be his for the night.

Then, his thoughts could be his own again.

The doors to his room slid open on Professor Irtun's scowling face. Even for a Keltair, he was old. Silver slid through his black locks, and his horns were longer than almost any he'd seen before. He had to be older than his grandfather...perhaps three or four hundred years old, at least.

"Your father has requested I keep my eyes on you."

Calm. Respect your elders.

"I do not need such help."

Professor Irtun strode past him and into his room, glaring around before turning back to Liam. "You are only the seventh Keltair to ever be allowed at The StarFlight Academy of Turonga. It is an honor beyond your youthful understanding. Your success or failure will reflect upon us all."

He took a deep breath, unclenching his fists. "Grandfather," he started, using the term of respect, "I understand my responsibility."

A hiss emanated from the old man's throat. "You know nothing!" He spat, then sat on the dark couch. For a long minute, he didn't speak, just glared. "Your father tells me you have the face of a human and the heart of a Keltair. If this is true, I have a lot to be concerned with. Humans are weak, squishy creatures driven by their feelings and emotions. We must walk among them with gentle steps or we'll crush them. And because they multiply like rabbits, their numbers alone make them a dangerous enemy."

"They aren't my enemy," he spoke truthfully.

The old man nodded, the anger in his face easing. "That will make this much easier." He paused, setting his boots upon the coffee table. "Your father tells me you have excelled in every test, and that your results, along with your human demeanor, are the reason our leaders sponsored your training here. But you must know, half the people here will suspect you are a spy, and the other half will simply fear you because of your race."

Knowing that it was unwise to stay standing when one's elder sat, Liam eased into the large chair facing the old man. "Do you think it was any easier to train with the Keltair when I have the face of a human? I can handle this place."

The old man tilted his head, studying him. "Perhaps that is true. So then, I have one last warning for you. Do not let the human females distract you. Learn from your father's failure in choosing an unworthy human mate. Use them for their bodies. Do not connect with their minds."

He swallowed down the insult to his mother. It wasn't the first time he'd heard such disrespect. "My father has already said—"

“But if you make the wrong choice, I will be the first to let your father know of his son’s failures. And if you show yourself to be weak, you will not remain here.”

Liam growled. “I am not weak.”

The old man stood, moving surprisingly rapidly for a male of his age. “We shall see.”

Liam watched him go, considering his situation. His father had no need to bring on the old professor as a spy. He had no intention of growing attached to a female. He’d be a fool to let this opportunity slip through his fingers.

Rising, he picked one of the papers he’d been given off the painfully white countertop of the kitchen. The map showed where he could keep his live ship. The StarFlight Academy had made a small space near the garden, having learned a long time ago that live ships could not be kept in a spaceship dock. They didn’t enjoy the noise and the lack of nature. Such things could make them shrink in size, or worse, grow ill.

Just the thought of his ship made him speed back down to the shipyard.

Once there, he pressed his palm to the outside of *Zenon*. He felt a slight vibration, the ship’s acknowledgement of him, and the door swung open. Inside, he touched the control panel and the vessel slowly rose. He gazed out at the twenty-foot wall surrounding the expansive academy grounds, and to the cleared space around it where a dozen turrets pointed threateningly at the skies. Beyond that, a deep jungle separated the academy from the nearest city.

He steered *Zenon* over the gardens in the back of the massive building. For a minute, he frowned. There was an odd, short building tucked in one corner, covered in vines. A

memory ticked at the back of his thoughts, *the campus pub*. They'd been told about it in orientation.

When you want to get drunk, relax, and party, don't go into the town. Recruits have a tendency to get hurt, or even killed, on their way back here. The Wet Whistle is on campus, so students can have a little fun in a safe way.

Tonight will be the first of many nights there.

It didn't look like much, but he shrugged. He really didn't require much in a place to drink.

A small expansion of gardens separated *Zenon's* new home and the bar. Not the best spot, but certainly not the worst. He set his vessel down and stared out at the gardens.

Now to shower and prepare for the celebration.

All the better to bed Hannah Clark, a tiny voice whispered in the back of his mind.

He almost smiled. There was nothing a Keltair liked better than to beat a worthy opponent, and he suspected she would not disappoint.

FIVE

Hannah put on her tightest pair of jeans and a leather corset. *Subtle*. She laughed at her own image. She screamed sex, from her thigh-high boots to her hair pulled up high. A glittering pendant nestled between her breasts.

But tonight she didn't care what people thought. What she wanted was to find the right man to satisfy her. After being so close to the sexually charged man, Turbo simply hadn't been enough. She needed the real thing so badly she itched for it.

Any man will do, as long as he's someone I can walk away from.

Unlike the intoxicating Liam.

She slid her card off the nightstand and into her pocket, then glared back at herself. *No more thoughts of him. Not tonight.*

Her door buzzed.

“Open doors.”

They opened, revealing William. His gaze ran over her, froze, and his eyes widened.

“What do you think?” she asked, grinning.

One of his brows rose. “I think you plan to get into some trouble tonight.”

She laughed. “Don’t you?”

He tugged the baseball hat a little lower over his bald green head and walked into her room. “Yeah, I’m sure all the ladies are just thinking ‘Man, I want a little Chamyion in me tonight.’”

She strode across the room and punched his shoulder lightly. “Hey, you never know. Some of these girls are into some way more freaky stuff than you, my friend.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled. “I guess it’s possible.”

Sympathy squeezed her heart. She couldn’t imagine what it was like to stand out wherever you went. After the Chamyion home planet was destroyed, most of them had relocated to dark forests all over the universe, while the others had taken on serving jobs with some of the more wealthy citizens of the world. There was a good chance William would never be among a group of his own kind again.

How lonely.

But there was a reason why he was her best friend. He was kind, intelligent, and determined. A worthy woman would see that. She bet as soon as they got there, he’d be too busy with all the attractive women to remember how different he felt.

“We’ll have fun, okay? Don’t be so glum.” She went back to the full-length mirror and picked a particular dark shade of red to paint on her lips. “We might both go home with hot dates tonight. But let’s keep each other company until then. Okay? And tomorrow let’s have breakfast together.”

He didn’t speak for a painfully long time.

She casually gazed at him through her mirror. His expression was troubled.

Turning around, she smiled. “Or I could spend my night trying to find some hottie for you to hook up with.”

He shook his head and gave her a strained smile. “No worries. Let’s just head out. It’s already past nine o’clock. I bet there’ll be an awful line.”

Seeing her normally grumpy William at least make an attempt to be positive gave her some hope.

“Let’s go.”

They walked to the elevator where a group of people were already piling in.

One guy caught the door. He gave her a nice smile. Blond, taller than her, decent muscles. She might have found her man for the night.

“Going down?” he asked, grinning.

She raised a brow. “We can’t exactly go up, can we?”

Sliding unnecessarily close to him, she checked to see that he’d hit the ground floor button.

“What’s your name?” he asked, too close to her ear.

“I’m Hannah, and this is William.”

The guy didn’t look in her friend’s direction as the doors closed. “I’m Greg.”

One girl spoke aggressively from behind her, a brunette with no bra and a see-through shirt. “I’m Jennifer.”

Hannah swept a stray strand of hair out of her face. “Nice to meet some fellow Hawks.”

“Yes,” the girl said, squeezing between them. “We’re heading to The Wet Whistle.”

Greg’s eyes ran over Hannah. “I’m guessing you’ll be joining us there?”

Hannah smirked. “You bet. Who could miss a night of drinking, dancing, and attractive men?”

His eyes sparked with interest. “Got any particular attractive guy in mind?”

Not Liam.

She winked. “Maybe.”

SIX

The bouncer at the door took one look at Hannah and ushered her into the club and past the line. She draped an arm around William's bony shoulder and pulled him along with her, not giving the bouncer a chance to protest. The group they'd met in the elevator hurried in along with her, casting nervous glances back at the line.

She wished she could tell them to relax. With the male-to-female ratio about five-to-one at the academy, she knew their group, which included three attractive women, would be let in without a problem.

It was the two guys that'd be separated and thrown out.

Not that she would let that happen.

They traveled down the steep steps and into the underground club. With each step, a heart-pounding song grew louder. It vibrated through her boots and seemed to surround her, as if they'd stepped into the belly of a beast.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, she stopped and stared in awe. The club was bigger than she imagined. Silver lights flashed in unpredictable patterns on the roof. Shadowed tables lined the outside of the crowded dance floor. The harshest light came from the massive bar to one side of the room, which sparkled gold.

She made a beeline for the bar, swooping in right on time to seat herself at a newly opened barstool.

The bartender, a thirty something male with a long beard and harsh eyes turned to her. “What are you having?” he yelled above the pounding music.

She pointed to her new friends as the two other girls seated themselves beside her. “We’ll take a round of Jungle Juice and shots of Saturday Night Fevers.”

He shot her an annoyed glance and went to gather the ingredients for the complicated drinks.

“What’s Jungle Juice?” William asked, sounding out of breath.

She leaned back and grinned. “Trust me, you’ll like it.”

He frowned.

“It’s sweet. You might even forget there’s liquor in it until you’re dancing on a tabletop,” she grinned. How many times had that happened to her?

Greg leaned in, blocking her view of William. “I’ve never had a woman order for me before.”

Feeling bold, she leaned in closer so that her lips hovered above his ear. “Maybe I’ll show you a lot of things you’ve never experienced before.”

She could practically feel his heartbeat speed up.

“Your drinks!” The bartender set them down in front of her, his lips curling.

She reached into her back pocket and took out her card for the needed credits. He scanned it with a band on his palm, then handed it back to her, mumbling something about rich brats.

His problem, not mine.

With her card safely in her pocket, she reached for the pale-colored shots and gave them to her little group. “To The Starflight Academy!”

“To us!” Greg said, and they all clicked glasses.

She drained the shot in one gulp, then slammed it on the counter. The coconut and passion fruit left a sweetness in her mouth that almost masked the warmth of the liquor.

William winced and set the glass down, shaking his head.

“That bad?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but she pressed the next drink into his hands. “Drink it. Trust me.”

“Dance?” Greg asked.

She held up a finger and reached for their other drinks. Handing one to him, she grinned.

“I think you might be trying to get me drunk,” he said, hot breath puffing into her ear.

Taking a long sip, she watched him over the top of her glass. This man would do just fine. He was attractive enough. Interesting and fun. She could sleep with him and then forget him tomorrow. He was perfect.

Unlike Liam, who sends every muscle in my body tightening.

She released the breath she was holding. That was exactly why she needed to stay away from him. One conversation and she couldn't get him out of her mind.

Draining the rest of her drink, she set it down next to her shot glass. She needed to dance and enjoy her relative freedom

for the first time in her life.

And forget a certain man who haunted her.

Linking a finger in Greg's shirt, she pulled him toward the dance floor, but froze. William was standing next to the bar, looking lost.

"Hey, Jennifer!" The girl turned, scowling. "Do you know my friend, William?"

She turned to him, her scowl deepening.

Poor guy.

She released Greg and leaned toward the other girl. "Stay away from him, okay? His people mate only once a year. But when they do, their dicks grow ridiculously large, and they have to fuck. All. Night. Long."

Jennifer's eyes widened.

It was a load of crap. But after a few drinks, no one really cared who they went home with, and the lie would give her friend a fighting chance.

Hannah started back to the dance floor, winking at William when she passed him.

He caught her arm in a surprisingly tight grip. "Shouldn't we stick together?"

She pried his fingers from her arm. "Not if we want to have any fun."

Over her shoulder, she watched as the other girl sidled up to her friend. *He'll be thanking me a thousand times over in the morning.*

And that's when her night really began. The combination of liquor, music, and the man rubbing up behind her made her

lose herself. She danced with abandon, the music's bass pumping through her. Greg could've been anyone at all that night, she didn't care. She was free. Finally far from her father and his many rules. Finally where she always dreamed of being.

Several songs later, she stopped dancing. The people around her were a blur of colors. Her head felt like a balloon, trying desperately to fly away. The lights from the club were making her dizzy.

She needed some air, or better yet, to splash water on her face. She weaved through the dance floor and toward the stairs in the back. William blocked her entrance, but she couldn't hear his words over the booming music. She shook her head, moving around him. He tried to grab her arm, but suddenly Jennifer had her arms around his neck in an intimate hug.

Hannah tried to move faster as she started up the steps. She felt strange, as though she'd spent the night pounding drinks. What the hell had been in that Jungle Juice?

In the bathroom, she splashed water on her face until her mind and body seemed to connect more completely. A girl handed her a small bottle of water, and she took it with gratitude, slamming it and throwing it in the wastebasket.

My body must've forgotten what it's like to have a little fun.

Stepping out of the bathroom, she suddenly felt a desire to go up higher rather than back to the crowd on the dance floor. She took a few steps up, but didn't make it far. Someone knocked into her shoulder, almost sending her falling back, but a strong hand caught her.

She looked up. It was him. *Liam*. Touching her. Invading her space.

He released her arm but moved closer, shifting to stand behind her.

One big hand ran down the length of her spine, sending shivers through her body, before coming to rest on her lower back. “I need you,” he whispered in her ear.

His warm breath made the hairs on her arms stand on end. She nibbled her bottom lip and turned to him. Their eyes met and heat raced down her body.

She nodded.

He guided her up the steps.

A man stepped out in front of them, carrying a case of liquor on his shoulder. He shifted past them and Liam sprang forward, catching the door before it closed. In moments, he’d steered them into the room, the door closing quietly behind them.

It was a storage room for the bar. Every wall was lined with shelves filled with cans and bottles. Tiny blue lights lined the path through the storage room and slightly lighter white lights flickered on the edges of the shelves.

She could no longer hear the music, but the walls vibrated with the bass. Pressing her back against the door, she watched him. *This is exactly what I promised myself I wouldn’t do.*

But she couldn’t care less in that moment. The man looked fine. A dark shirt, jeans, and his hair still unkempt. Bad boy was written on every inch of him.

She bit her lip, willing herself to show at least a little bit of restraint.

“You’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen,” he said, his gaze traveling from her boots, lingering on the swell of her breasts, and then meeting her eyes.

It was a second before she realized her hand had drifted to the zipper on the front of her corset. She tugged on the metal tag, lowering it one inch and then another.

His eyes darkened. She watched in fascination as his large chest heaved, noticing as his hands clenched into fists at his side.

“What do you want?” she asked, the words coming out breathless.

He didn’t answer, but instead, drew closer. Their gazes held as he invaded her space, so close their bodies almost brushed. *Almost.*

That would never do. A man like him needed to be touched, to be explored. Her hands moved to his shoulders, then slid down to rest on his chest. The muscles tightened with the slight pressure of her touch. *He wants me as badly as I want him.*

His hands grasped her lower back, bringing her even closer to him. They shifted restlessly, sliding onto her hips and gripping her possessively.

His mouth lowered.

For a second they both paused, their breath mixing. Their lips inches from one another. Their noses brushed. His hand ran up her body to sweep along the curves of her neck before tilting her face up.

Her whole body ached and trembled as she grew wet. His lips were so close. His smell, rich and earthy, surrounded her. She was more aware of this man than she’d ever been of any

other person in her life. Even though their bodies hadn't yet come together, every inch of him radiated heat against her.

The chest beneath her fingertips was a gift, a piece of a godlike man, hard and strong. She dug her nails into him, standing up on her tiptoes until only an inch remained between their mouths. Nothing else mattered in that moment but capturing his lips in her own.

He groaned and closed the distance between them. His lips met hers in a flash of need. His were burning hot, threatening to consume her own beneath his touch.

She slid her hand into his shaggy hair, the strands running through her fingers, awakening every nerve on her hands. He growled, increasing the pressure on her mouth until she spread her lips.

He pressed her back against the door, his body conforming to her own. His tongue swept inside her welcoming mouth, and she felt a quiver run through her body. Heat pooled at her core.

Her hands were restless. There was too much she wanted to touch, needed to touch. Her fingers ran down the front of his shirt, fumbling with his buttons. When they trembled at his first one, she closed her hands around the material and tore.

Suddenly his skin was hers to explore. She grazed the lines of his muscles and let her fingertip brush one of his sensitive nipples, which hardened beneath her touch.

He swore.

Grabbing her ass, he lifted her up.

Her legs automatically wrapped around his waist. They both cried out against each other's lips. His arousal pressed between her thighs, and she rubbed against him enticingly.

He broke their kiss, gasping. His gaze met hers. Need and disbelief filled his expression. "It's never been this strong before. I need to be inside you," he said, shifting his hardness.

She cried out, digging her fingers into his shoulders. "That feels so...so good."

Her hips ground against him.

He threw his head back, grabbing her ass harder and pulling her even more tightly against him. "I could fuck you forever and never get enough."

The world suddenly tilted sharply, and her thoughts grew foggy. Pushing him away, she struggled to fight the strangeness of her slowing mind.

After a moment, he drew back. "What is it?"

"Air," she gasped, clenching her stomach. "Something's wrong."

It wasn't that she was going to puke. It was that she felt herself pulling apart. It was the dance floor all over again, only this time, she thought she might pass out.

A second later, she was swept up in his arms.

"I've got you," he murmured against her head.

He took her out of the room and up the stairs. At the end of the hall, he kicked open the door and, suddenly, they were hit by a crisp spring night. The flowery scents of the garden washed over her and she closed her eyes.

This was better. Right?

Why had she left the club again?

"Hannah!"

Whoever yelled her name, the voice was familiar... somehow.

“Give her to me,” the familiar voice demanded.

The man holding her tightened his grasp. “And who’s going to make me?”

SEVEN

The weakling pushed his huge glasses up the brim of his pale green nose. “She’s my friend. If she isn’t feeling well, I should care for her.”

Liam shoved past the little green man. “There’s no one better to watch over her than me.”

“You!” he cried, scrambling after him. “No way.”

“This is not up for discussion.”

He looked down at the woman in his arms. She looked pale. Her brilliant green eyes stared at the sky above, or perhaps more accurately, stared at nothing at all.

“How much did you drink?” he asked her gently.

Her glazed eyes focused and unfocused on his face. “One drink. Two maybe.”

Liam frowned. *She wasn’t drunk.*

“I’ll bring her to the academy doctor.”

“No!” Hannah and the tiny man cried in unison.

“If you bring me there, Father will know, and he’ll withdraw me—”

“You’ll get her into a lot of trouble,” the little man interrupted.

Liam looked between the two of them, feeling his annoyance rise. The woman needed treatment. *Nothing you can't provide yourself*, a tiny voice whispered.

He nodded, not liking the panic in her dilated eyes. "I will not take her to the doctor. I shall care for her myself."

"Just give her to me," the other man whined. "We've known each other since we were kids. She'd want me to be the one to care for her."

If he spoke the truth, Hannah might prefer the comfort of an old friend. But in her current state, the only person he trusted her with was himself.

"If you get in my way again, not only will I take her to the doctor, but I'll break one of your bones, too."

He shrank back, and Liam walked toward the gardens, a plan forming.

Leaving behind the noise and chaos of the club, he took her down the paths until he reached his ship. By then, she had passed out. Touching his palm to his ship, the door opened for him. He ducked and entered with her in his arms. The door closed behind them.

With quiet steps, he took her to the back of the small craft. Laying her on the ground, the rich green floor of his ship seemed to melt until it softened enough to cradle her. He selected a large blanket from a compartment and spread it over her.

In sleep, the woman looked more innocent than any woman he could imagine. Her features were soft. Her mouth opened slightly, curving her already full lips.

His cock twitched. *Not tonight*, he chided himself. First, he would care for her until she recovered, then he would bed her.

EIGHT

She stared at the pale blue bubble that signified a person's dream. Frowning, she drew closer. Liam lay on the surface of a red rock. Blood pooled beneath him. His chest and face were drenched in scarlet. Overhead, a cloudless sky burned harshly down upon him.

Her mind felt fuzzy. She was entering the bubble of his dream, without her normal caution. Leaning over him, their gazes met.

"You?" He frowned. "You weren't here. No one was here."

She stared around her at the desolate planet, then crouched down next to him. "What happened to you?" Never before had she seen a human being torn to shreds like he had been. "Who did this to you?"

"They did. They left me for dead."

She pushed the hair out of his face, realizing for the first time that he was younger than the man she knew. "But you're not going to die. You know that now?"

He pressed his face into her hands. "No. I did die that day, and the man that was reborn is a man I fear."

His expression wavered. The whole dream wavered. She stood. How was it possible that she'd Dream Walked into

Liam's dream? How was any of this possible? It took her months to grow close enough to a person to enter their subconscious without a great deal of effort.

And then, everything faded to black.

HANNAH AWOKE HOURS LATER, feeling safer and happier than she could ever remember. She was warm, too. Slowly opening her eyes, she winced at the slight headache that pounded to life. Where was she? Everything was green.

It was as if she lay in a cocoon of vines.

No, that wasn't quite right. It was as if she lay in an ancient ship, long forgotten, and swallowed by a greedy jungle. Metal peeked out, tangled in rich green vegetation. White flowers grew, glowing softly, woven across the ceiling like a sky full of stars.

Wherever she was, it was beautiful.

The floor vibrated softly.

Her fingers curled, and she glanced at them, noticing for the first time the muscular chest of a man. *What had she done?* Slowly glancing up, she gazed at the man lying next to her. It was Liam, his eyes closed in sleep.

Her breath caught. He was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. Not just hot or stunning, but in sleep, he seemed different. More real and less like a fantasy.

She slowly sat up. The blanket fell away, and she stared at herself, still fully dressed. They hadn't had sex? The realization brought both surprise and relief.

Frowning, she tried to recall the events of the night. Everything was a blur, except the kiss she'd shared with Liam. She remembered nothing after that.

Nice one! She'd really gotten that shit-faced her first night at the academy. How embarrassing! She must've had, what, ten or twelve shots? The last time she had twelve shots, she'd ended up dancing on a bar top.

But she'd still remembered it all the next day. Never before had she been "blackout drunk" as her friends liked to say.

Rubbing her face, she tried to clear away the dark cloud that hung over her memories, but all of it was hidden in shadows. Wincing as she stared around the room a horrible realization hit her. She was in a Keltair ship.

Scrambling to her feet, her pulse raced.

"Hannah?" The man at her feet blinked into the morning sunlight.

"Quiet!" She hissed, "We're in a Keltair ship."

He sat up, the blanket falling away from his bare chest. Her gaze instantly went to the deep red scars covering his chest. A memory brushed along her mind, but fled in the face of the seriousness of their situation.

"Calm yourself. The craft is mine," he whispered, following her gaze and frowning down at his scars.

It took her groggy mind a moment to process his statement.

"How is that possible? You're human."

He ran fingers through his dark, tousled hair. "Half human, to be exact."

Fear overwhelmed her panic. “Have you kidnapped me? Are you holding me for ransom?”

He laughed, a harsh sound. “How much do you imagine one beautiful human is worth to my people?”

She inched toward the door.

Frowning, he started to rise.

“Don’t!”

He settled back down. “I thought you were joking. I didn’t kidnap you. I brought you here to keep you safe.”

“Safe?” she challenged, the word laced with sarcasm. “So I can walk out of here anytime I want?”

He pressed his hand to the floor. Behind her, the wall lowered, becoming steps down into a garden.

She turned to go, but his words stopped her. “You have nothing to fear from me, but someone decided to drug you last night. And if I were you, I’d try to figure out who it was. We can probably guess at why.”

Her stomach twisted. “I was drugged?” That’s why her memories were gone.

“I wanted to bring you to the academy doctor, but your green friend advised me against it.”

Thank goodness for William! “My father would’ve withdrawn me if he’d found out about this.”

Liam looked relieved. “I am glad. All night I watched you, debating about whether or not I’d made the right decision in bringing you here instead of to the medic.”

She stared at her hands. “It was the right decision. But we...we didn’t...*do* anything, did we?”

“Are you asking me if I forced myself on an unconscious woman?” His voice was cold.

Her gaze met his. “I just woke up with almost no memories of last night.”

His expression softened. “Other than our kiss at the club, nothing happened.”

Relief flooded her. “Thank you, and thank you for taking care of me.”

She turned back to the door.

“This doesn’t mean I’ve given up. I will have you.”

Her cheeks burned as she left the ship. She couldn’t think of that now, but she was sure it was all she’d be thinking about in the days to come.

NINE

The door to William's room was open as Hannah walked past. She needed something to drink and a shower before being questioned to death by her friend.

“Hannah!”

She didn't turn as William called her. *Just a few more minutes.* Typing in the code to her door, she entered, with him right behind her.

Sitting on the couch, she unzipped her boots and pulled them off.

“Where were you? Are you okay?”

Her head pounded with each shrill word. “I've been better, but I'm fine.”

She leaned back and stared as her friend nervously paced, wringing his hands. “I wasn't sure if I should've let that guy take you, but I couldn't stop him. Did he...are you...?”

“He didn't hurt me. In fact, he was a complete gentleman.”

William didn't look the least bit relieved. “Do you remember anything?”

“I...” It hurt to think about it. “Not really.”

He sat down, pulling his hat off and placing it on his knee. “Well, okay. I mean, don’t do that again, all right? No more drinking for awhile.”

“I don’t think it was the alcohol,” she said, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

He went rigid. “What do you mean?”

She stood and moved to her dresser, feeling restless. “Liam said something.” Pulling out clothes at random, she threw them on her bed. “He mentioned I might’ve been drugged.”

Silence met her statement.

And then, after a moment. “Hannah, you spent the night slamming drinks like there was no tomorrow. Could it be that you just overdid it?”

She turned back to him. “Honestly, I don’t remember.”

After a moment, he shook his head. “No, you don’t remember and that should scare you, because it scares me.”

“William...”

He met her gaze. “You’re guaranteed a spot working on a spaceship, but I’m not so lucky. This is my chance to be something great, and it’s going to require everything inside of me to do it.” He stood, turning and walking slowly to the door. “As much as I might want to put energy into watching over you, I just...I just can’t. So, you need to figure out what’s important to you—partying like last night or our friendship? You can’t have both.”

He walked into the hall and her door slid shut behind him. She stared at her own reflection in the mirror, dark eyeliner smudged, face pale. Was he right? Was all of this her own fault for drinking too much?

Or was Liam right? Had she been drugged, and if so, by whom?

She leaned against her mirror, her legs shaking. Her warm breath puffed against the glass, as she watched her blood-streaked eyes. There'd be time to consider things later. She needed to refocus. Classes were starting and, although William was right that she could work on any starship in the galaxy with her firsthand experience and family name, the only way she could become a captain of her own ship was to graduate from the academy.

Turning her head, she brushed aside the stray hairs along her neck to reveal the tiny scar left over from her experimental surgery. The one that had saved her life. She didn't have time to worry about drinking too much or mysterious men—she would have her hands full. The academy would push each student to their breaking point, including her. But no matter what, she'd have to divide her attention between her training and continuing to serve the people of Earth. The two responsibilities together were daunting.

Her focus would be laser-centered on her goals. She wouldn't walk in her mother's footsteps. And the best way she could make sure not to fall into the same trap was to stay as far from Liam as possible.

With her resolve restored, she stripped off her clothes and headed for the shower. But with each step the tiny scar ached, almost as if to remind her of all the things she couldn't remember, and how the loss of such memories might be dangerous.

TEN

Liam could think of nothing but Hannah. Her face. Her smile. Her laugh.

Should he be worried? Was this the beginning of the Bonding?

He shook the thought aside. Once he had her, hopefully he would be free of his new and unexpected obsession. There were two things he could be sure of: he would bed the female, and he would find the person who drugged her and make him pay.

His first week at the academy was already proving more interesting than he could've hoped for.

ELEVEN

Across campus, two men met in the shadows of the gardens.

“Imagine my surprise when I saw Hannah Stowe walking through campus this morning.”

The other almost choked on his reply. “I failed. I’ll do better next time.”

Only the sound of his racing heart filled his ears as he prayed for a miracle.

“You better. Once is a mistake. Twice will make us doubt your loyalty.”

The man felt a wave of gratitude. He’d expected a dagger to the throat. “Before the year is out, the fleet admiral’s daughter will be yours. I promise it on my life.”

“Good, because your life is the very thing we’ll take.”

Overhead, gray clouds blocked out the morning sunlight, a sure sign of the storm to come.

TWELVE

Hannah stared from afar at the pale, golden bubble surrounding Liam's dream. She lingered as far from it as she could, like a reluctant observer, torn between fascination and worry. Why was she here? Going into the dreams of others usually required a lot of work and as much of an understanding of the individual as possible. She slipped into dreams by accident only if she knew the person well. Until now.

She neither knew Liam well nor studied him extensively. This shouldn't be possible. What did it mean about her powers? Were they growing, changing, or was there something wrong with her?

There was a groan from within the dream. Her heart raced. Almost unwillingly, she padded closer on bare feet to the translucent bubble, until she could see Liam clearly.

He was straddling a woman. Their golden bodies moved together in a slow rhythm. Her legs wrapped around his back. As she watched, he rocked faster and faster.

Their moans of pleasure built until Hannah felt her own need rising. She didn't want to watch, but seeing the perfect muscles of his ass left her transfixed. A longing to touch him

filled her. The need was so powerful that she stepped into the bubble and moved toward him.

He turned. They both did. And suddenly, she was staring at herself beneath the Keltair male. The Hannah beneath him vanished. He rose from the ground, his gaze fixed on her.

“Come back. I need you.”

She awoke, sweating. And frustrated beyond belief. What the hell was she doing jumping into Liam’s dreams when she’d spent the past few weeks doing her best to avoid him at every turn? She pushed her tangled black hair out of her face and wiped at the moisture on her forehead. Her whole body was tied in one giant knot.

Without wanting to, she sat up in bed, her gaze trained on the door to her quarters. Just a few steps across the hall, Liam was lying in bed dreaming about having sex with her. *It would be so easy just to go over and—*

No! She would not allow herself to be distracted any further. Not only was she already up too early on combat testing day, she was exhausted from Dream Jumping. *And from my first round of intro tests in my other classes this week.* She threw herself back on her pillows and groaned, rubbing her face. There was no more denying the very simple fact that if she didn’t have sex soon, she was going to explode.

She’d been putting it off for reasons she didn’t want to consider. But no more. By the end of the night, she promised herself, she’d have done the deed. With someone.

Putting her hand on her stomach, she closed her eyes. It just wasn’t soon enough. Glancing at the clock again, she saw that she still had plenty of time. She walked to her dresser and

pulled out Turbo. It wasn't sex with a real man, but it was the next best thing.

AN HOUR LATER, she was showered and dressed in her deep blue uniform. Her golden Starflight Academy logo shone on the front of her button-down shirt. Smoothing back her hair one last time, she smiled at her own reflection.

In a short time, she'd have her first combat test. By the afternoon, all the teachers will have posted their scores. She was bound and determined to be at the top of every list.

Even though Liam is my biggest competition.

She scowled at the thought. Her only competition should be herself, wasn't that what her father always said?

Her computer console played an angry tune. *Speak of the devil!* Her heart raced as she crossed the floor and sat down in front of her desk. Taking a deep breath, she hit the blue button on the screen.

Fleet Admiral Stowe, better known as her father, was staring down at a pile of papers on his desk. A pen had been placed behind his ear, slightly disturbing his neatly trimmed, silver hair. Next to his elbow, a small glass held an amber-colored liquid. *His most expensive scotch.*

None of this was good. The admiral didn't allow a single hair to get out of place. Or drink during the daytime. And the fact that he was contacting her...well, none of it boded well for her.

He looked up, and she swore there were more wrinkles at the sides of his eyes than when she'd seen him last. But, the

change was subtle. As always, his pale green eyes hid all emotion. “Good morning, Hannah.”

She leaned back in her chair, trying to look casual. “Miss me so soon?”

He sighed loudly. The lack of chastisement in his face made her palms sweat. *Definitely not good.*

“I told you before you left that your people would need you no matter what, and that your responsibility to them would come above all else.” He paused, searching her face. “You’re needed.”

Her stomach sank, but she simply raised a brow. “Are you just calling to kill my good mood, or is there something specific you need from me?”

Picking up the papers on his desk, he shuffled them, making certain that all the edges were even. “The president herself has ordered your latest assignment.”

She sat up straighter in her chair. “Seriously? Okay. What does she need?”

“As soon as we finish this call, I’ll send you information on your target.” He cleared his throat. “President Luna would like you to enter the man’s dream tonight.”

The air rushed out of her lungs. *Tonight?* “No, Dad, that’s too soon—“

“She wants you to do it immediately.”

She shook her head. It was too dangerous. She needed time to study him, to view any and all information. The only time she entered dreams is when she could perfectly recall every one of the target’s physical features in her mind’s eye, and

only if she had a firm understanding of who they were as a person. To do otherwise was dangerous.

Not knowing the person made it harder to separate herself from them. And what was more, she could make a mistake out of pure ignorance.

That lesson had been learned the hard way. The really hard way.

“We both know how dangerous what you’re asking me to do is...”

His gaze met hers. “I’ve never argued with the president before. But I argued with her about this. I bought you until tonight, but not a day longer.”

She swallowed the excess saliva in the back of throat. What was she supposed to say? That she was terrified? That she refused to do it? None of it mattered. The man she was speaking to was the admiral in that moment, not her father. And a command was a command.

“Okay, what do I need to know?”

He didn’t look relieved. “The specifics will be in the file, but in general, your target is Ahmed Zhou. He’s most well-known for being a wealthy arms consultant and dealer. But to nearly every advanced government, he’s known for running one of the largest sex trafficking groups in the known universe. The problem is, no one has ever caught him red-handed, so to speak.”

Am I really being forced into this sadistic man’s dream without the proper preparation? A shiver ran down her spine. She didn’t want to do this.

Nibbling on her bottom lip, she met her father’s gaze. “Why does this need to be done right away?”

And that's when his admiral mask faltered. "On another unrelated, highly classified situation, the president's daughter and a small group of her college-aged friends have gone missing."

The hairs on her arms stood on end. "Gabrielle?"

He nodded.

Gabrielle had been her close friend until the realities of their lives drew them further and further apart. They'd see each other several times a year at important functions, but they were always busy trailing their powerful parents. Until Gabrielle went to college and Hannah's training grew more intense. But still, being the daughters of two of the most influential people in their galaxy connected them in a way that seemed permanent.

"I'll do it," her voice came out an angry whisper.

And she was angry. Angry at the thought that they still lived in a world where young women weren't safe. That there were people who bought and sold women like livestock. It didn't matter that Dream Jumping so soon would be dangerous. She could help her friend, and she would.

"Hannah," her father's voice drew her gaze. "Be careful. And if things start to go badly, jump out. You'll have followed orders. She can't ask for more than that from you."

"Of course."

He clenched his jaw. "Damn it. Losing both of you won't do anyone any good."

Her eyes opened wide in surprise and she simply stared at him. "I'll be okay."

He nodded, then rubbed his mouth. "I'll send the information. Call me first thing in the morning."

For a minute, she thought he'd say more. Instead, he reached forward, their gazes held for a moment before he tapped the screen. It went blank.

She sank back into her chair. *Eat. Prepare for the combat exam, then study the asshole.* Her legs trembled slightly as she rose. *No. No! Don't get distracted.* She slammed her fists on the table. She would not allow her other responsibilities to impact the rest of her life.

Push it out of your mind, or you'll explode. She took a deep, calming breath and stood up, her back stiff. She would be Hannah the Unbreakable. No matter what.

Grabbing her leather backpack off the bed, she strode out the door.

Across the hall, Liam's door opened. *This is your world. These are your problems. Not the others.* His gaze slid to hers and held.

Seeing him, no matter how often, always took her breath away. The large, half Keltair male looked like every woman's deepest, darkest fantasy brought to life. Dark hair, a dusting of a beard, and a body that was both impressively massive and muscular. He stirred things inside her that she'd much rather keep hidden.

She raised a brow, trying her best to hide her reaction. "Waiting for me again?"

The lighthearted words lifted a bit of the weight from her chest. She could do this. She could live only in this world.

He smirked in response. "How many times do I need to remind you? We have nearly the same schedule." His slight

Irish accent slid over his words, warming something inside her.

She shook it off. *Don't let him wind you up!*

Yeah, there was logic to his point. They were both Hawks and, even worse, they were both specializing in Starship Command. That meant that not only did they have their core classes together, but they had most of their specialty classes together, too.

Which was beyond frustrating.

She turned, heading for her friend, William's, room. "Weird. There are a lot of other Starship Command majors here, but you're the only one I constantly seem to run into."

Her finger hovered over the green button next to her friend's door.

"We're across the hall from each other, too."

She jumped a little, surprised to find he'd silently come to stand so close to her. "Whatever you need to tell yourself."

His arm reached over her, touching the wall.

Turning, she suddenly found herself trapped by the sexy Keltair male. She swallowed hard, gazing up into his dark eyes. Whatever he wanted, she'd need all her wits about her to refuse him.

THIRTEEN

Liam had never seen the color green of Hannah's eyes before. They were like rare jade stones staring up at him. Her eyes were wide, pupils dilated. He reached forward and ran a thumb across her jaw. Her skin was so pale in comparison to his own. And soft.

God, how he loved the feeling of her skin.

It'd been weeks since their last kiss. Weeks spent dreaming of the taste of her mouth and the feel of her body pressed hard against his own. Even after the other Starflight Academy students learned that he was half Keltair, he'd had an assortment of women sending every signal that they were willing to warm his bed.

But I don't want them. I just want her. If I can ever get her alone.

"Tell me," he said, shifting even closer to her. "Why is the little green man always at your side?"

She stiffened. "William is my best friend."

Sometimes the human woman hid her emotions better than a warrior, other times they were openly displayed. When she was happy, the dimples in her cheeks stood out, deep enough

that he longed to touch them. When she was angry, the lines of her face suddenly seemed sharp and dangerous.

She intrigued him.

“And why do you want to be best friends with someone so weak?”

To his surprise, she pulled away from his touch, leaving an empty space between them. “Being strong doesn’t just mean having enormous muscles,” she said, scowling and pointing at his arms. “William is smart, funny, and creative.”

He frowned, wishing he’d never brought up the little man. Even when he was not there, he came between them.

“But you are all those things and more. He clings to you, because he sees all your strengths and hopes you will share them with him. You get nothing from the relationship.”

She tossed her head, sending her dark ponytail swinging. “For such an expert on friendship, I don’t think I’ve yet to see you on friendly terms with anyone.”

Her words struck a chord within him. She was right. He’d come here to put behind the shadows of his past and start anew among the humans, but things weren’t working as he had planned. It was hard to know whether it was the fault of the people he met, or himself, but he felt as ostracized here as he had with the Keltairs.

“You are right,” he said. “Friends do not come easy to me. With young Keltair males, we do not make friends. We compete with one another. I think I’ve forgotten even the basics of a true friendship.”

She nibbled her bottom lip and shifted closer. “With your...I think it’s Irish?... accent, I just assumed you grew up there.”

Memories of his home with his mother flashed in his mind. The unexpectedness of them sliced open a long-healed wound.

“I left when I was ten.”

Her brows drew together. “Why?”

“My father felt he’d allowed my mother to coddle me too long. The other Keltair boys had already been pulled into training. My mother is...a sensitive woman. He worried what the loss of me would do to her, but he could wait no longer. So on my tenth birthday, I was taken to Keltair to join them. I have not been back since.”

Students shuffled behind them through the hall, heading for the elevator, but he ignored them. The richness of her facial expressions had him drinking them in. She seemed to take in his every word, flip them around in her mind, and come to some kind of conclusion. *But what was her opinion of me?*

“Can I give you a piece of advice?” she asked.

He nodded.

“A friendship isn’t about what you can give to them or what you take from them.”

“Then what is it about?” he asked, truly curious about her answer.

She smiled, a half smile that was sexy as hell. “Make a real friend, and you might find out.”

Suddenly, the door behind them open. William, clutching his bag, stared at them nervously. “I thought I heard voices.” He pulled his baseball cap slightly forward, partially concealing his thick glasses. The pale green of his skin, combined with his uniform, gave an odd impression.

Hannah gave a wide smile. “Yup, just wasting time. You ready for breakfast?”

The green man frowned. “Do we have time?”

She gave a small laugh, waving her hand. “We always have time.”

He shook his head. “No breakfast for me. I’m just going to head for combat class.”

Liam watched the exchange with growing interest. “I’ll go with the green man.”

Her brows rose in surprise. “Really?”

“Yes.” He clapped a large hand on William’s shoulder and the smaller man winced. “How else are he and I going to become friends?”

“Friends?” William squeaked.

Liam tried his best to smile as the little man’s face crumpled. *I remember what it was like to be afraid.* Even though William bothered Liam in a way that was hard to understand, befriending him would be a good first step to remembering his human side again. And he had a feeling it would please Hannah, too.

As the three of them made their way toward the elevator, he glanced back at the beautiful woman who haunted his thoughts. Did she look paler? Were there slight circles beneath those remarkable eyes?

Admittedly, he’d been worried about her since the night she’d been drugged. He’d spoken to the bartender, who, although not exactly a personable human, remembered her ordering no more than a couple of drinks. He also searched through Hannah’s file, which was the cleanest and most

ordinary one he'd ever seen. She and her family were wealthy and powerful, but they had no obvious enemies.

So if someone drugged her simply to take advantage of her, who could it have been?

“Did you sleep well last night?” he asked, hitting the elevator button.

Her head jerked up, meeting his gaze. Her signs of exhaustion seemed to disappear as she squared her shoulders. “Very well, thanks. I hope you're ready for one hell of a fight.”

He winked at her. “I am. And just so you know, I'm ready and willing anytime you wish to practice hand-to-hand combat.”

The elevator doors opened and she strode in, leaning against the back wall with a challenging air. “I think you're the one who needs practice, big boy.”

He followed her in, closing the distance between them and looking down at her. “Are you saying you think you could take me?”

“Geez,” William muttered behind them, hitting the elevator button with too much force.

Liam ignored him, his full attention focused on the woman in front of him.

She leaned in, her mouth dangerously close to his. “Well, we're about to find out. You and I are the best in the class, so you know we'll be the last two fighting.”

He hardened as need rushed over him. “Want to make a bet?”

Doubt shadowed her eyes for half a second. Then it cleared. “What's my prize?”

He hadn't known what he'd say until she asked. There was something he definitely *wanted*, but he wouldn't make a bet out of it. "If I win, we go on a date."

Her smirk faltered for a second, then it reappeared, and she crossed her arms in front of her chest. "And if I win, I get to fly your ship."

Leaning back, he stared at her in shock. *Zenon* wasn't an ordinary ship, and living ships were bonded only to their pilot. He'd received her when he was eleven, and she'd fit snugly into the palm of his hand. She'd grown as he'd grown, thriving on his attention, sunlight, and nutrition. But after all that time together, she wouldn't want to fly for another pilot. *Unless it was my mate*. He pushed the thought out of his mind.

He had worshipped *Zenon* over the years, focusing all the gentleness he couldn't display with his people onto his ship. She had grown to the point she could comfortably support two humans for long periods of time, and four humans for short periods of time. He was proud of her. He cared for her. Could he really use her for a bet?

"No."

She opened her mouth to argue, but he cut her off. "But I will allow you to fly in her, with me at the controls. It would not be safe for her to allow someone she is not familiar with to fly her."

"She?"

He nodded. *Now, I need to get her to accept*. "Do we have a bet or not, little human?" For a second, his heart froze. Would she say no?

"You have a deal."

The elevator doors opened.

“This is my stop.” She sauntered out, casting a slight smile back at him. “I hope you’re ready for the fight of your life.”

“I am,” he replied. The doors closed, leaving him alone with the little green man for the first time.

FOURTEEN

Hannah stared at the remains of her massive breakfast, leaning back in her chair with complete satisfaction. Dream Jumping burned a ridiculous number of calories. Most of the time, she loaded up on food before she did it so she would have available calories to burn. Burning fat reserves was nice in theory, but not so nice in reality.

After half a dozen pancakes, eight thick slices of bacon, and a mountain of eggs, she was finally feeling better. It wasn't until she reached for another sip of her drink that she thought back on the conversation with Liam and froze.

In the elevator, whether it was the closeness of Liam or her empty stomach, she'd started to feel light-headed. So, why she couldn't just keep her mouth shut was beyond her understanding.

Because now I've agreed to a bet I can't possibly win. Either way, I'll be spending time with the man I'd promised myself I would avoid.

She rose. Nothing she could do about it now, a bet was a bet. But what she could do was take the next step to prove she was the best. Her scores, along with her background, should be enough to ensure her future.

She just had to beat one six-foot-something man with muscles as big as her head. *Which I've done before.* But this time, the man was also the best fighter she'd seen in a long time.

Beating Liam for the top score is going to be hard.

So far, in their sparring, she'd consistently taken down her other opponents. But with Liam, sometimes he won and sometimes she won. The worst part of it all though was that she wasn't entirely sure he hadn't let her win those times.

Walking to the conveyor belt, she put down her tray and hit the button. Her plate and food disappeared into the opening to the right. Leaving the cafeteria, she walked down the hall, nodding at a few cadets as they passed. Even the thought of it pissed her off. She wanted to win by her own means or not at all. And today would prove to him, and herself, which of them was better. Both with their sparring, and their other classes.

The elevator ride passed quickly, and soon she was stepping out onto the third floor combat rooms. The Hawks' room was located at the end of the hall—the largest and nicest of them all. She strode to it, only pausing for half a second for the automatic doors to open. Inside, most of the other trainees were already standing around the large mat, clearly uncomfortable.

William, in particular, looked an even paler shade of green. She had to admit he looked closer to a child with his small stature and his stick-thin arms and legs completely bare in his sparring uniform. But maybe it was simply that he was standing next to Liam, whose powerful arms and legs made her jaw hang ever so slightly.

Focus, girl!

“Out of the way, Assassin!” Peter shouted, giving her a wink as he sprinted past her.

Peter. The guy who’d gone from hating being humiliated by her day after day to embracing the fact that he found her scary as hell. At first he’d been the only one calling her Assassin, but now, half the class did. Luckily, her own little nickname for him had already spread around campus.

And his name certainly wouldn’t help with the ladies.

“Better hurry, Minute Man, we both know you could use every second you can get.”

He didn’t turn back as he rushed into the guys’ changing area in the back, but Brody hissed, “Nice,” and gave her a high five as she strode past.

Walking past all of them with a few hellos she went to the women’s changing rooms in the back. It was a small room, with lockers around the back wall and a wall of mirrors. Two girls chattered nervously behind her, while a third stretched on the dark wood floors, her gaze faraway.

Hannah put on her Starflight Academy sparring uniform. The dark blue tank top had a large academy logo on the back, teamed with short shorts. She looked at her reflection in the mirror.

She still looked thinner than she should after her Dream Jumping, but her ass and breasts hadn’t suffered.

For an instant, she imagined Liam’s dream. The curves of his body had fit her own so well. She was certain his muscular thighs and perfect ass would be imprinted in her mind forever.

Her entire body felt tight. She sucked in a deep breath. Thinking about him was the wrong way to get herself ready for the test. She needed to think of him as the enemy. But

instead, her mind kept going to the familiar expression that came over his face every time she walked out in her sparring clothes.

He wants me as much as I want him. She grinned.

“Nervous?” Sanders, a short girl with strawberry red hair, asked, rising from the floor of the changing room.

Hannah shrugged. “Not really.”

The other girl went a shade paler. “That’s because you’re good. That Professor Irtun has been wanting to fail me from the moment I walked in.”

A wave of sympathy washed over Hannah. She looked toward the two chatting girls in the back and leaned in conspiratorially. “The good thing about having the old Keltair as a teacher is that he doesn’t see much point in training students, other than those on a Commanding track or Security track. The rest of you, he challenges as little as possible and passes off. At least that’s what I heard.”

Relief rushed over her face. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

They walked out together, past the walls mounted with deadly looking weapons, and made their way to the mat. Hannah stopped just before it to stretch, while Sanders went to stand awkwardly beside a few guys who were chatting.

“It looks like we’ll be facing off today.”

She rotated her hips forward to allow herself to come down into a perfect split, then glanced up. Greg was grinning down at her. Decently tall and handsome, with above-average intelligence, he was the perfect resource for all her pent-up

frustrations. She should've been riding him in bed each night, and forgetting him each morning.

Then why haven't you been? her thoughts taunted. *Because you've got someone else in mind, even if you don't want to admit it.*

"I'll go easy on you, okay?" she said, reaching forward until her breasts brushed the floor.

It took him a second to answer. "Do you want to celebrate a little, either way, later on?"

Normally, she would've said yes, but she wasn't sure on the timeframe of her bet with Liam. *And I have to Dream Jump tonight.* Her stomach flipped, the air struggling in and out of her lungs.

Clearing her throat, she forced her words to come out casual. "Probably not tonight, but maybe tomorrow. I'll let you know."

She sat up and drew her legs in front of her, curling them up to her stomach. Rotating her neck, she felt some of her tension easing. Then, her gaze met Liam's and her breath caught. He was staring straight at her, eyes blazing. She'd never seen him look so angry and, as his gaze slid to Greg, she could guess as to his sudden shift in mood.

The doors to their room slid open.

"Cadets, line up!" Professor Irtun strode toward them.

She sprang up to stand in line with the others at the edge of the mat. The Keltair's deep brown skin, dark hair with gray twining through it, and two ivory horns never ceased to draw an instinctive negative reaction from her. *His people are not our enemies anymore,* she reminded herself.

But it was hard to be in the presence of a people who thrived on war and death. Who had killed more humans than every other species combined. Like the saying went, *Peace with the Keltairs changes like the weather on Turonga*. Her gaze went to Liam with his smoldering gaze. It was hard to believe he had their blood running through his veins.

When the professor stopped in front of them, he radiated authority. “Warriors to the right, everyone else to the left.”

By *warriors*, the professor meant those students who had proved themselves to be apt at fighting. He’d focused the majority of his time pitting them against each other over the weeks, while he ruthlessly pushed them harder.

She and five large men went to the right. The rest of the class went to the left.

Standing a little straighter, she tried to radiate absolute confidence. Being smaller or physically weaker meant nothing to her. Over the course of her lifetime, her father had given her the finest instructors in both common and unique forms of fighting.

She stared at the six students across from them, three women and three men. All were slight of build, but then, Communications and Engineering specialists hardly needed to be expert fighters.

“You!” Professor Irtun drew out the word as he circled to the other side of the room and stared down the row of small, pale students. “Chances are if you ever see any real combat, it will end in your deaths. You will show the basic understanding of the techniques I’ve instructed you on, because it is required of you.”

“And all of you...” He turned to face us, his gaze sliding down our line, hesitating as our eyes connected. “The academy does not allow fights to the death. Apparently, your precious parents would complain. But you will learn to fight, and you will learn to do it well. Understand?”

“Yes, sir!” She and the men answered as one.

“Good.” He nodded. “Let’s get the less exciting fights over with first.”

The students circled the outside of the mats. William and Sanders were up first. Both the redhead and her friend look toward Hannah. She smiled her most reassuring smile.

“Go!” the professor said, clicking his timer.

The entire fight was so cringe-worthy that Hannah wished she could look away. They danced around each other for a painfully long time before Sanders hopped on William and pinned him to the ground.

Professor Irtun clicked the timer and rubbed at a spot between his brows, his expression pained. “Next.”

After three rounds, the winners fought each other. In the end, Sanders was the champion of her group of students. The professor didn’t congratulate her. Instead, he scowled and asked her and the rest of her group to sit to one side of the room.

William hadn’t made eye contact with Hannah since his fight, even though she shot him a sympathetic glance as he crossed the room.

“Now...” Excitement finally crept into the old Keltair’s voice, “the interesting stuff.”

He crossed to a dark cabinet in one corner and pulled out a dagger that glittered in the bright light from the large windows. “The champion of these matches will receive this symbol of their superiority. This is a Keltairian dagger.” He spun it in his hand. “Perfectly balanced. Diamond-tipped blade. And a laser that can cut through six inches of solid steel.”

“Damn right!” Greg shouted, elbowing Hannah slightly.

Brody and Peter bumped chests.

Hannah rolled her eyes. She’d heard of daggers like this one, but never held one. It was exciting, but the guys didn’t have to go all *bro* on her. *Constantly having to prove what cool guys they are must be exhausting.*

“The winner will carry this weapon on them until the end of the next session’s fights, when a new champion may be named. At the end of the year, the student who kept the dagger the longest will get to carve their name here.” He opened the cabinet to reveal a long list of scribbled names. “Does everyone understand?”

“Yes, sir!” they shouted.

“Good,” the professor said, putting the dagger away. “Now, here are our initial matches. Greg and Hannah will be up first. Brody and Liam second. And Peter and Gurlock third.”

There was a lot of bumping and grunting as the excitement built between the macho *bro* brothers, but she had to admit that she was excited, too. Stepping onto the mat, she grinned at Greg. He returned her smile with just the slightest bit of worry on his face.

“Don’t look the Assassin in the eye!” Peter shouted.

“Come on, man,” Brody taunted. “You’re zero for fifty with this girl. Don’t let it be fifty-one!”

“Go!” the old Keltair shouted.

She tossed her grin aside and came at him. His arms rose to block her, but at the last second, she swept his feet out from behind him. Climbing on top of him, she forced her forearm against his throat and wrapped the other one behind his head.

He bucked beneath her, trying to throw her off. She increased the pressure on his throat.

Rolling, he was suddenly on top of her. She didn’t release her grip on him. He put his full weight on her, twisting to thump her against the ground over and over again. But she gritted her teeth, holding on for dear life. He started to sag forward, but she couldn’t let go. Not in this position, or she was done for.

“Enough!” the professor shouted.

She released him, panting.

Greg turned slightly, then fell on top of her. His head rested against her chest for a moment before he slowly looked up. “Geez. You always mean business, don’t you?”

She smiled and fluttered her eyes. “What can I say? I have a lot of experience rolling around with men.”

The frustration drained from his face and he frowned, although playfully. “I’m sure you’ll make it up to me sometime.”

“Are they finished?” Liam asked impatiently.

Hannah pushed Greg away, climbing to her feet and meeting Liam’s gaze. His neck was red, his pupils dilated. His

fists were clenched at his side. She could sense every muscle in his body tensed and ready to attack.

Greg climbed to his feet, putting his hand lightly on the small of her back. “Man, you Keltairs really can’t wait for a fight, can you?”

The look on Liam’s face made her breath catch. She shifted away from Greg and off the mat, feeling strangely guilty. *Liam and I only kissed. We’re not lovers or a couple—he can’t be that jealous. He doesn’t own me.*

But the unfamiliar feeling persisted.

Liam stomped onto the mat. Brody followed him a little more slowly, and she swore the look he shot the professor was *you’re kidding me, right?*

“You got this, man,” Peter said, “show Irish your new moves.”

She swore Liam looked only angrier at the nickname they’d given him due to his slight Irish accent. *Which wasn’t good for Brody. Not one bit.*

“Go!”

She barely took a breath before Liam was attacking the other man. His fists flew, knocking Brody to the ground. And even though both men were big and muscular, Liam moved as if he was half the size. Striking. Blocking. Rolling.

The battle was over so fast that it took the other cadets a moment to respond. There were some forced cheers, but overall, she thought they all must be in awe as much as she was. *Or in fear.*

Liam might look like a human. He might have been gentle in his training. But in this battle, he was all Keltair.

When he strode off the mat, the professor gave his shoulder a pat. “*That* is a fight.”

Liam didn’t look at her through the next battle, when Gurlock destroyed Peter on the mat. His gaze seemed to be fixed on the window at the far end of the room, tension radiating from him.

It was a relief when the professor faced them, ready to announce the next pairing.

“Gurlock and Liam.”

She fought down a wave of disappointment, even knowing Liam and Gurlock were a better match. Gurlock never seemed to know what to do with her. She was far faster, but she got the feeling he wasn’t comfortable fighting a woman. When he fought the other men, it was violent and bloody. When he fought her, he blocked and moved but rarely went on the attack.

Stupid sexist Andorian.

She turned her attention back to Liam as he stomped to the mat. The two massive aliens squared off. For the first time, Hannah had a flicker of doubt whether Liam would win. Gurlock was stocky, with razor-sharp teeth that curled over his top lip. His wide shoulders and huge muscles made Liam look lean in comparison. So far, Liam had always won, but the Gurlock looked particularly dangerous today.

Do you seriously feel worried? She shouldn’t be. Logic already told her who would win.

Still, she inched closer to the mat as the battle began.

The Andorian’s skin was thick and tough, so his moves lacked finesse, but he was also less sensitive to pain. Liam rained punches onto the other alien, but it was awhile before

Gurlock started to struggle. The Andorian had one leg crumple beneath him, and then the other. Liam was so aggressive that the other alien was bleeding and bruised by the time the professor called an end to the match.

“Hannah and Liam,” the professor said, followed by a few hoots of excitement from the other warriors.

It was exactly the way she expected things to end, but as she and Liam strode to the mat, butterflies slammed around the inside of her stomach. His dark eyes were darkened further with rage, and the gaze he pinned her with made her growing sense of unease deepen even further. *If the others didn't make, I don't have a hope in hell.*

She shoved away the thought. Liam was one of the best fighters she'd seen in her life, but even he had weaknesses. And she was pretty sure she knew every one of them.

“Go!”

They circled one another. Liam leaped toward her, and she slammed her fist into the side of his face. He moved back, rubbing his jaw as he continued to circle. She closed the distance between them, pretending to kick with one leg but sending the other one into his nose.

Liam caught her leg before she could bring it down and shoved her back, throwing her off balance and forcing her down onto the mat. She turned to scramble back onto her feet, but he caught her from behind.

And suddenly, she was pinned face-first to the mat.

She struggled to turn over, but his sheer weight was impossible to move. He lay on her entirely. She struggled harder, trying to kick, twist, and strike out at him, but he didn't budge.

When she caught sight of his face, rage fueled her. He was enjoying every minute of her ass rubbing against his hardening cock.

He leaned down, his lips brushing her ear. "I win."

She froze. She couldn't let this happen. *I am my father's daughter.*

Very slowly, she rubbed her ass against him.

He groaned softly into her ear.

Placing her palms against the ground, she lifted slightly and twisted so she was facing him. He settled in above her, his mouth widened slightly. She gave him her sexiest smile, leaned close to his mouth as he leaned closer to hers. Then she hit him as hard as she could in the ear.

He swore and reared back, and she scrambled out from under him.

As he started to rise, she kicked him, sending him sprawling forward. She got behind him, placing her forearm against his throat and her other arm behind his head. He managed to stand with her still choking him. His balance was uneven.

Reaching behind his head, he tried to grab her, but she held tight. His knees buckled.

"Enough!" the professor shouted.

She held on a second longer and whispered in his ear. "No. I won, sweetheart."

Releasing him, she strutted off the mat. Professor Irtun placed the dagger in her hands, but his gaze was trained on Liam. "Nothing is off-limits in battle. But remember, distraction can kill you as effectively as a knife."

She smirked as Liam made his way to the edge of the mat. But instead of seeing defeat in his eyes, she saw raw determination. She shivered.

Something told her she might not like it when he got even.
Or maybe I will.

FIFTEEN

Liam paced the rooftop. It was the perfect night for a date. A slight breeze teased the air, carrying with it the scents of the blossoming garden far below.

So why am I so nervous?

Everything was perfectly in place, but where was she? He'd setup candles, laid down a large blanket with pillows, and put out some of her favorite types of foods. *The woman did like to eat, and damn if he didn't like watching her eat. As much as she hated noticing him staring when their eyes met across the cafeteria.*

But why wasn't she here yet? Was it possible she hadn't seen his message?

She stormed out the open door, which he'd left carefully propped open with a rock as large as his head.

"Where is it?" she hissed.

He probably should've been worried about the rage seething from her. But he couldn't think of that because he was too damn turned on. Her hair was still wet from her shower, and flowed down her shoulders in the sexiest way possible. The skintight white tank top she wore was enough to set his pulse racing, but underneath it, a black bra stood clearly

visible. And her shorts... good God, they were shorter than even her sweats. Her long, perfect legs had him envisioning all the ways he could make her spread them for him.

“Liam! Answer me!”

Shrugging off his jacket, he knew the moment she saw the dagger at his side.

Her face blackened with rage. “I want it back. It’s mine, and I earned it.”

Was it wrong he liked her angry just as much as he liked her laughing? Both turned him on. “You’ll get it back, little human. But I still think you owe me a date, since you didn’t exactly play fair.”

She put her hands on her hips and glared. “You heard Professor Irtun. All’s fair in battle.”

He studied her. “I believe the saying is ‘The rules of fair play do not apply in love and war’. You sure you agree with that?”

“So you’re saying this is love?” she challenged, looking at the blanket.

He ran a hand through his hair. “Are you saying today was war?”

She avoided his gaze. “I have to be able to return that dagger to him if I need to.”

Liam gestured to the blanket and food. “Come take it, and then we should get on with our date.”

Striding toward him, she stopped not two feet in front of him. “I’ve got things to do. Just give it back.”

He reached out and brushed his thumb along her cheek. Something was off. “I think you’ve been working too hard and deserve a bit of a break. But if you really want me to give you the dagger back, I will.”

The anger seemed to drain out of her, and she leaned closer to him.

Wrapping his arms around her, he drew her closer. He held her for a long time, running his fingers through her hair. Concerns and desire battled within him. Was this simply exhaustion, or something more?

She looked up at him, those perfect jade-colored eyes of hers filled with an unnamed emotion. “If we start something between us, it needs to stay casual.”

Something twisted inside his chest. “Of course.”

“Just sex.”

It took him a second to nod.

“And we should set a limit. After that, we agree to stop altogether.”

He frowned. *She must know it’s going to be good.* “You mean to limit the number of times we can have sex?”

“Yes.” She pushed his hand away from her hair, but brought it down to rest on her hip. “I’m thinking three times.”

She thinks three times will be enough? “Ten,” he countered.

A grin stretched across her face and, for the first time, she laughed. “Five, and not a single time more.”

Her offer bothered him. He would not be finished with her after five times of lying together. In his mind, he could

imagine the dozens of things he wanted to do to her, and all of them would require time. But if he argued with her, she would simply refuse him altogether and that would be the end of things.

Show her that she wants to have you more than that.

“Agreed.” She seemed so satisfied that he had to add, “Unless, of course, you demand more. Then I will reconsider.”

Her eyebrows rose so high they disappeared into her hair. “You’re setting my expectations pretty damn high. I hope you can meet them.” There was a slight tinge of desperation to her voice.

She needs me as much as I need her.

He responded to the emotion in her voice and wrapped his arms around her again. For a minute, they simply stood, holding each other. And then, she drew away from him.

He cleared his throat. “Food?”

“All right.”

They sat together and ate. And for once, he didn’t have to be across the cafeteria from her, watching her from afar. It felt right.

When they were done, he pushed the food aside and drew her close to him.

“Just sex,” she repeated.

He exhaled. “Just so you know, I’d agree to just about anything right now to get those clothes off your sweet little body. It torments my dreams.”

Despite the urgency in his voice, he leaned down slowly. He brushed his lips against hers with a soft caress. Then he

touched the side of her face, drawing her closer to him. Her lips welcomed him so he kissed her hard, running his tongue along the outside of her mouth.

She shivered, parting her lips.

His tongue drove inside and, with a groan, the spell of gentleness was broken, replaced by blinding need. He pulled her onto his lap, one hand drawing up the edge of her shirt. His fingers slid over the clenching muscles of her belly to close around one perfect breast.

She gasped when he feathered his thumb over the nipple. He teased it through the lacy material, squeezing and rubbing until it hardened. Pushing back the cup, he uncovered her large breast and rolled her nipple between his fingers. She was panting by the time he switched to the other breast.

He was hard.

Her hand strayed to the front of his jeans, and he maneuvered slightly to allow room for her to grip him. Now, it was his turn to gasp.

Her touch was firm, full of need, and soon her fingers were sliding up and down the length of him.

Desperately, he pulled up her shirt to reveal her naked breasts. His mouth descended to cover them in seconds. His lips rubbed over them, he licked, then taking her nipple in his mouth, he sucked.

She cried out, digging her fingers into the back of his hair.

He couldn't get enough of her. She squirmed eagerly against his arousal, while he grazed his teeth against her sensitive nub.

"Liam," she whispered.

He heard the need in her voice, knew what she wanted, knew what she was asking for. Because he wanted to be inside her, too. Cupping her ass, he squeezed it, his lips going to her neck as he did so.

“Enough, God, enough! Liam, I need...”

Moving his hand from her ass, he slid his fingers up the inside of her thigh, into her short shorts. She spread her legs and, suddenly, he was touching her hot, wet core. She arched her back and cried out.

His dick throbbed. He needed to take her. Needed to be inside her. She was wet and ready for him.

But he waited. Using his fingers he stroked her, driving the fire hotter and hotter until his fingers dripped with her need.

“Please, please...” she begged.

And all at once he knew it was enough. Enough waiting for them both.

Rolling, he laid her down on the blanket. He started to undo the buttons on his jeans when she pushed his hands aside, tugged his zipper down, and drew his cock from his pants. He choked, unable to draw in a breath as her fingers closed around him.

“Hannah...”

She started to stroke him. He should've pushed her away, but he couldn't. Every hair on his body stood on end. Every muscle tightened. The exquisite feeling of her hand wrapped around him, the sight of her body on the blanket beneath him. Of even the smell of her. All of it was too much.

He was going to explode.

Looking off in the distance, he was determined to focus on anything else but the sexy woman beneath him. He watched as the tiny lights of a spaceship flew over the jungles just behind the wall of the academy.

Suddenly, the lights along the wall and on the turrets went dark. The spacecraft passed over the wall soundlessly and continued toward them.

Are ships even allowed on this side of the academy?

He caught her wrist. "Wait."

"I can't," she gasped. "I need you now."

And that's when he recognized the type of ship. It was an old Keltair ship from their last major battle with the humans. Living ships were too precious to use in wars, but these were made to look just like them.

But this ship was coming right for them. *I hope it didn't see us.*

"Hannah, we need to—"

The door to the roof slammed shut.

She released his cock and slowly sat up. "What...?"

The ship was drawing closer. Yet no alarms had sounded.

"Come on," he said. He pulled up his pants and helped her to stand.

She adjusted her clothing in a nervous rush of movement.

They went to the door. He yanked on it, but it didn't budge.

"What's going on, Liam?"

“Something is wrong. There’s a ship that shouldn’t be here.” Behind them, the ship was continuing forward. Its major lights were off, and it was drifting far below any normal speed.

“The door is locked,” he explained, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

She met his gaze, and the hurt within them was obvious. “Use the dagger. Father can pay to repair it.”

That door is solid steel. We’d be dead long before we cut through it.

He shook his head. “No time for that.” His gaze fell on an air duct. “This way.”

Standing before it, he pulled out the dagger and used the laser option. After a few seconds, he kicked out the metal slabs and they crunched inward. “Let’s go.”

A second later, shots rang out. Loud explosions came as bullets hit the roof. Debris went flying, and the shooting came faster and faster.

A wailing siren rang out.

Liam grabbed Hannah, pulling her farther down the metal tube. There was barely room for them both, but he managed to squeeze them into the corner before it turned into a sharp drop.

She was shaking and he wrapped his arms around her, tucking her head under his chin.

Overhead, the explosions shook the whole roof, in fact, the entire building. Hannah clung to him in an attack that seemed to last a lifetime. At last, everything grew eerily quiet.

“What should we do?”

“Stay down,” he commanded.

And so, they stayed.

Minutes went by before they heard a different sort of chaos on the roof. Footsteps, shouts.

Someone opened the grate they’d climbed into, and bright lights immediately shone in their eyes.

“Get up!” A cold voice ordered, “Come out onto the rooftop.”

Liam helped her up, and they exited slowly with their hands up.

“Down! Get down!” the soldiers with guns shouted. He didn’t want to let her go, but it didn’t look as if he had a choice.

They both complied, lying on the blackened roof.

Their arms were wrestled harshly behind their backs. The dagger at his side was taken. A man put his foot in the middle of Liam’s back, while two others pointed weapons at his head.

Hannah gave a soft cry, and he turned to see the man pinning her down.

“Get off her!” he yelled, glaring up at the soldier.

A stillness came over the group on the roof, and Liam turned to look at the cause of it.

Dean Sufters stood behind him, her arms crossed behind her back. Every one of her pale blond hairs had been neatly smoothed back. Her uniform looked freshly pressed and perfect.

“Mr. Liam Fallow, it looks like you’re in more trouble than you can possibly imagine.” She turned to her soldiers. “Take

him to the brig.”

Liam didn't fight. This was all a misunderstanding. He had to make them believe him. They'd hear his explanation and then they'd let him go.

Don't Keltair heads still line the walls of some of the cities on Earth? A tiny voice whispered in the back of his mind. Were any of them given a chance to explain themselves?

He shivered. *Maybe I should've run rather than let them take me down.*

“Stop!” Hannah said.

Dean Sufters knelt down next to her. “Oh my goodness! Hannah. What in the world are you doing out here? Let her up at once.”

The solidier moved, and she was allowed to rise into a standing position.

“He's not responsible for any of this. We were attacked.”

The human hauling him away didn't pause. But Liam hadn't expected him to. He was more surprised that the dean seemed to be eagerly undoing the bindings at Hannah's wrists.

“It's okay,” he said, hoping to reassure her. “We'll get this all cleared up.”

The dean met his eyes with an unfriendly stare. “Save your talking for your questioning. I should never have let a Keltair into this school. Even if you are half human.”

He looked back at Hannah's wide, panicked eyes. And for the first time in longer than he could remember, he was afraid.

SIXTEEN

Hannah beat her fist against the door one more time, even though her hand ached. “Let me out! Liam! Liam, can you hear me?”

An hour in a cell was annoying, but not a big deal. It was what they could be doing to Liam that had her gut twisting in fear.

Finally, she heard a key in the lock. Dean Sufters opened the door and calmly walked in, her high heels clicking on the tile.

“He didn’t do it.” Hannah forced herself to keep her voice level. Even though she wanted nothing more than to scream in Dean Sufters’s face.

The older woman stared at her with concern Hannah knew was feigned. And gestured for her to sit at the tiny interrogation table. Hannah took a seat, and Dean Sufters sat across from her, folding her hands on the table gracefully.

“Miss Stowe. There’s no need to worry about any of this. The Keltair is being questioned, that’s all.”

Hannah moved her chair back. The dean flinched at the horrible squealing sound as the metal chair scraped the white tile. Hannah stood and placed her hands on the table in front of

her, leaning in. “He’s the reason I’m alive right now, so if I don’t get some answers, I’ll be calling my father. Fleet Admiral Stowe, remember? And I guarantee you don’t want me to do that.”

Dean Sufters looked nervous. She smoothed the sides of her short, perfectly sculpted hair in an anxious gesture. “Please, sit down. The whole academy is still in lockdown. Even if I wasn’t suspicious of the Keltair, he’d need to stay exactly where he is until it’s deemed safe.”

The older woman’s answer just wasn’t good enough.

“I want to remind you,” Hannah’s lip curled as she spoke. “The Keltairs aren’t our enemies anymore. And Liam’s presence here only helps to strengthen our alliance. So if—”

The dean stood up to match her height. “Little girl—” she started, her tone condescending.

Like hell Hannah was going to let her finish. “You’ve got two minutes to free Liam, then I contact my father.”

The older woman’s mouth snapped shut, even as she raised her chin.

They glared at each other for a long minute.

The dean’s assistant, Stevril, opened the door to their tiny questioning room and closed it behind him before speaking. “The Keltair ship has left the atmosphere and is being pursued in space. The whole of the Turonga’s fleet has taken to the skies, but there are no signs of other enemy ships. The emperor has degraded the threat level from a code red to a code orange.”

And that’s when it hit Hannah. Both the dean and the people of this planet thought they were facing an all-out war with the Keltairs again. Their extreme reaction suddenly made

sense to her. If the warlike aliens had decided to break the treaty, and Turonga was simply the first planet in their path of destruction, the loss of life here would likely be immense. Earth had located its most prestigious Starflight Academy here because it was considered so secure, but no one could guarantee they'd be safe indefinitely from the wrath of such violent people.

“How much of the school was destroyed?” Hannah asked.

Stevril wrinkled his piglike nose and made an obvious effort to ignore the cadet, turning his gaze from Hannah back to the dean. “Shall I take the school out of lockdown?”

“Yes,” she answered, and then after a moment of hesitation, “What did they destroy?”

He looked at Hannah again with his arrogant stare, his dusty orange skin darkening with his changing mood.

Hannah felt her temper flare. Stupid Purtos. The creatures were organized and fiercely loyal, which is why they often assisted powerful people, but their lack of flexibility was a downfall. Hadn't he picked up on the dean's reaction to the young cadet? Did he have any idea that Hannah's father could destroy his career and his life with one interplanetary call?

“This is *Fleet Admiral Stowe's* daughter,” the dean explained slowly. “You may speak openly in front of her... because I'm sure she'll know everything we do by the end of this.”

Hannah was far too satisfied by the raw panic that came over his wide face.

“Nothing was destroyed. I mean, the roof took a lot of damage, but they didn't fire at anything else.”

The dean frowned, and Hannah's own mind started to turn over what that might mean. "Then what was the point of all that? Was someone just trying to cause problems between our races again?"

Dean Sufters shook her head. "No. I don't think so. They could've attacked the outside of the academy and risked much less."

Hannah sat back down, rubbing her chin. *They just attacked the roof? How pointless...*

"How many people knew you were on the roof tonight?" the dean asked, and their gazes met.

Hannah didn't want to tell her that only Liam knew. The dean hardly needed more fuel to add to the fire of her racism. Especially when Hannah knew in her heart the sexy alien had nothing to do with any of this. He'd been on the roof, too. And he didn't even know her real name.

"There's security monitoring on nearly every inch of this place." Hannah raised her brow. "Any person on your staff would've seen us going to the roof. And, if you weren't careful with my identity, one of your untrustworthy staff members could've passed off the information."

Her blue eyes widened, and Stevri's orange face went a shade paler.

"We kept your real name off every document and file," she asserted.

Hannah crossed her arms in front of her chest. "My father will want to investigate, just to be sure. I hope you understand. If this academy can't keep such a small thing private, he'll have to ask himself if he and the president might need to make some changes."

The dean and Stevril exchanged a panicked glance. The deep lines in her face looked even deeper as she leaned forward. “There’s no need for that. I will personally conduct a full investigation into this. You and your father shouldn’t worry yourselves about it.”

Hannah stood again, looking down at them. “Perhaps. But first, take me to Liam Fallow. After such a traumatic event, and your failure to keep me safe here, I’ll need someone I trust to seek emotional comfort from.”

The dean hesitated.

“Or perhaps I’ll just seek that reassurance from my father. Although...the last time I was in danger from negligence, he fired an entire ship’s crew.”

Dean Sufters was on her feet in an instant. “I’ll take you there. Stevril, end the lockdown. Make an announcement that the threat is gone, but that all students should remain in their rooms until further notification.”

He gave Hannah one last frightened look, then headed out of the room.

The dean visibly swallowed, and Hannah saw the frustration burning not so subtly in her eyes. *It must cut through her like a Keltair blade to have some wealthy, powerful brat ordering her about like a servant.* Usually she was above using her father’s name to get what she wanted, but since witnessing their treatment of Liam on the roof, she was afraid of what they were doing to the Keltair. Being a student of an ambassador should’ve offered him protection from being tortured. But the prejudice against his race still ran deep among most humans.

“We’ll go,” the older woman said, very slowly, “but keep in mind that we only did what we had to do in order to protect the students of this academy.”

The air rushed out of Hannah’s lungs, and she grabbed the back of the chair. A Turongan constrictor snake seemed to squeeze her stomach. “What do you mean what you *had* to?”

SEVENTEEN

Liam coughed, spitting blood onto the stark white floor tiles next to his face. He strained against the bindings that held his arms twisted behind him and the ones lashed around his legs. The metal cut further into his flesh before he gave up, dropping his cheek onto the floor.

Starflight Academy head of security, Rick, crouched down beside him, his mouth drawn into a stiff line. “I’m going to ask you one more time, Keltair, and then I’m going to stop playing nice.”

The man probably expected that eventually there would be a level of pain Liam would reach where he’d start babbling every secret in his heart. It was the height of ignorance. Liam wasn’t just a half human half Keltair with abnormally large strength and size. He was a man who had endured levels of pain unimaginable to even his own species.

This man couldn’t break him. No matter how hard he tried. “Tsk, tsk, tsk.” Rick lowered his mirrored glasses revealing the silver in his eyes.

Liam’s insides twisted. No wonder this man was so fast and so strong. The silver in his eyes revealed the nanobots running through his system, replacing muscles, bones, and whatever else they could, with metal. Rick wouldn’t break

him. But from the sadistic gleam in the other man's eyes, he would enjoy using every nanobot in his body to try.

“No more Mr. Gentle then.” Rick cracked his knuckles. “You Keltairs don't want that, anyway.”

Liam began to worry that Rick actually meant to kill him. *And humans say Keltairs are brutal. I'm just a student.* He glanced toward the door.

Rick turned and followed his gaze. “No one's coming to help you, traitor.” A second later, he struck out with his foot

The blow smashed into his face with the speed and power of a bullet. Liam's head snapped back and his eyes saw stars.

Hot blood ran from the new wound on his cheek. He rolled to face the ceiling, gasping.

It's just pain. Pain means nothing.

It'd already been an hour of this. He wondered how long it would be until the man tired. Until he realized that Liam knew nothing about the Keltair ship.

Even though he'd only asked him a handful of questions...

What if the goal wasn't ever to get information from me?

The thought chilled him. *Who would question it if they killed the one “responsible” for the attack? His father?* There wouldn't be anyone left willing to tell the truth.

Except maybe Hannah.

Hannah. The beautiful dark-haired beauty that haunted his mind and his dreams. Were they hurting her the same way they were hurting him?

He shivered. Finally the chill of the tile slid under his skin and into his blood.

Yes, they'd untied Hannah's bindings and led her off like some kind of princess, but that didn't mean they'd continue being so gentle with her when they realized she didn't have any useful information. *Or that she was up there having a picnic with me.*

Rick stood and drew back his leg.

Liam rolled, springing to his feet.

Rick laughed. "Going to make this interesting, huh? I knew you were only hiding that savage heart."

The two men squared off. The head of security matched him in size, but Liam wondered if the nanobots had also given the older man actual skills in fighting along with strength and speed.

"Do we really need to do this?" Liam asked. "By now you have to know I wasn't involved in any of this."

"Oh, I never really cared whether you were in on it or not." He gave a chilling smile as he reached into the pocket of his uniform. "I just think that the only good Keltair is a dead one."

An electric shock device. Liam growled and charged him, but it was too late.

Too fast for his eyes to follow, the man shot him.

Needles from metal grippers burrowed into the flesh of his chest and stomach in a dozen places, making it impossible to remove them. The pain was excruciating. Liam looked at himself in the mirrored glasses of his opponent. The reflection was that of a blood-splattered man with eyes widened with terror. Liam crumpled to his knees.

"Enjoy," Rick muttered.

He turned a dial on the black device in his hands. Electricity raced through the cords in his chest.

Liam flew back, hitting the ground. It was like being struck by lightning. He smelled smoke. Tasted smoke. The world was a bright flash of light. His body twitched and shook uncontrollably. And it didn't stop.

After everything I've been through, is this really how I'm going to die?

“What the hell is going on?”

Hannah's frantic voice came to him as if from far away.

“Give me that, you son of a Turongan swine!”

The electricity stopped.

“Get out! You'll be lucky to be alive when my father finishes with you!”

A gentle hand cradled his cheek, even as he twitched and shook with residual contortions. “Shh. Liam, I've got you now.”

EIGHTEEN

“Is he going to be okay?” Hannah asked the doctor fearfully. It had taken four security guards to carry his unconscious body back to his room, and she had locked the door behind him.

Dr. Wores dug out the last of the metal grippers from Liam’s bare chest, letting it clink into the silver tray on his worktable, then quickly stitched up the wound left behind. “He’s going to live. No thanks to that barbarian.”

Her entire heart squeezed, and she rubbed at her eyes, willing her tears to stay in place.

Going to the other side of Liam’s bed, she sat down and took his limp hand in her own. “Why is he still unconscious? What’s wrong with him?”

The doctor took off his gloves and threw them into a tiny trash compactor on his doctor’s cart. The machine made a soft whirling sound as it sucked them up.

He sighed. “Honestly, this boy’s lucky he’s a Keltair. He’s a mess of hairline fractures, bruises, and abrasions. I could bring him back to the medbay, but it won’t do much good. And frankly, I think he might be more comfortable here, what with the rumors floating around...”

Hannah swallowed hard. “Do people really believe he’s in on this?”

The old man ran a hand through his shoulder-length white hair and gazed at her with his pale, cloudy eyes. “It’s less scary to point the finger at whoever they can find, rather than believe there’s some faceless enemy still out there.”

She squeezed Liam’s hand a little harder. “What can I do for him?”

His gaze ran from their hands held together back to her face. “When he wakes up, he’s going to hurt. Badly.” Pressing his finger to a black box on the side of his cart, it slid open. Reaching inside, he pulled out a small bottle. “Make sure he takes these every six hours, or more if he needs them.”

She took the bottle of pills and stared down at them. *For pain.*

The doctor placed his hand on her shoulder. “It isn’t just physical pain that will need to mend. The other thing you can do is be his friend.”

A rush of anger came over her, and she stood, shaking. “How did this happen? Liam’s a cadet here. An ambassador’s son. Every single administrator should fry for this! And that head of security... I’d like to tie him down and see how he likes being my punching bag!”

The old man shook his head. “Solving violence with violence is never the answer.”

She spoke without thinking, “And what if this was your son lying here instead of him?”

A strained silence filled the room.

He turned, pushing the cart toward the door. But when he reached it, he paused, looking back at her. “That’s why loved ones aren’t allowed to assign punishment. Our emotions blind us from what’s best—both for them and for us. Forgiveness. Love. Those things redeem us in the face of the worst brutality imaginable.”

The doors slid open, but he hovered there for another moment. “And just so you know, many years ago it *was* my son lying there. He was killed by Keltairs in the war.”

He stepped out and the doors slid closed behind him.

She sank back onto the bed, clutching the bottle of pills.
Loved ones. Love. Do I...could I...love him?

For the first time, she truly looked at Liam’s face. Her heart ached as she reached forward and brushed her fingers through his slightly overgrown hair. One of his eyes was black and swollen shut. His entire face was puffy and bruised. Stitches had been sewn and one cheek was bandaged. And that was just his face.

The doctor had dug the electrodes out of his broad chest as gently as possible, but they’d still left deep gorges that were stitched shut. Bruises decorated his golden flesh, making the old scars stand out even worse.

Anger at the others warred with feelings of tenderness for him.

Love redeems us.

She rubbed her cheek, surprised to find tears there. Reaching out, she almost touched his chest, but drew back.

Why did this really happen? Was he so badly hurt just because of his race? Or because he was unlucky enough to be on the roof with me during the attack? Or was it simply that he

was unlucky enough to be interrogated by the head of security?

Putting her face in her hands, she cried. The sobs that shook her body surprised her, but she couldn't stop them. She felt foolish.

How many years has it been since I cried?

She should be out demanding justice, calling her father and Liam's and unleashing the wrath of powerful men on the miscreants that'd dared to hurt an innocent man.

Instead, she was in here crying, wishing she could've protected Liam. Knowing that she'd failed him.

Love might redeem us. But it's making me pretty damn weak at the moment.

A deep voice rumbled from the bed beside her. "Did they hurt you?"

She looked up, shocked. Liam's voice was harsh, filled with pain. But his dark eyes were locked on her. He reached out, wincing, before touching her bare knee with his fingertips.

Rubbing away her tears, she curled her hand around his. "Are you crazy? I'm fine. You're the one who's..." The words died on her lips.

"I'm fine." He closed his eyes, gritting his teeth. "I've been through worse."

He's been through worse? Why? And how?

"I don't care," she said, softly. "You're not fine."

Rising, she went to the small white kitchen, took out a glass, and filled it with water. When she returned to his side, she pulled one of the small green pills from the container.

“Open your mouth,” she ordered.

He didn’t open his eyes. “Hmm?”

She placed the pill on his bottom lip.

His eyes popped open. “What’s that?”

“For your pain.” She slid it into his mouth with one finger, then pressed the water to his lips.

He drank slowly, but eventually, he drained the glass.

“Lie with me?” he asked, the vulnerability so raw in his voice that all she could do was comply.

She set the glass down on the nightstand and cautiously curled into one side of his body. “Just sleep.”

His stubbled chin brushed the top of her hair. “I can...but I don’t want to.”

He’ll sleep when the medicine kicks in. “Okay. You told me you were hurt worse once...”

He sighed, his breath ruffling the top of her hair. “A long time ago.” He paused, and she thought he might not finish. “When my father left me to train with the Keltairs, we were all given weapons and released into the desert to fight one another. Our mentors monitored us with flying drones, so they could intervene if necessary.” His grip around her shoulders tightened. “But instead of us all tracking each other down, they all came for me. They shredded me to pieces, leaving me for dead.” He was silent for long moments. “No one intervened.”

She had to remind herself to breathe. To keep her voice level. “How did you survive?”

“My father came to visit two weeks later. They told him I was dead, but he refused to believe it. He said when he found me, I was closer to death than anyone he’d seen before.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, tears choking her words. “I’ve heard Keltairs can be vicious for no reason.”

“They had their reason,” he said, slowly. “I was too human.”

She sat up slowly. There was a hint of moisture in his eyes, but he closed them. When he opened them again, it was gone. She touched his face, turning him gently to her.

“You were attacked there for being too human. And here for being too Keltair.” She leaned in, her face inches from his own. “I promise you. I will make them all pay for this. For every wound they caused you, I will cause them a thousand more.”

He looked taken aback. As if he was surprised someone was defending him. Then, to her surprise, he gave a short, pained laugh. “My own little warrior.”

“No,” she said, brushing her lips against his. A jolt of something sizzled between them. “You have no idea who I am. Or what I am capable of. Those bastards should be afraid right now. And if they’re not, they will be.”

He raised one shaking hand and dug his fingers into her loose strands. In a moment, he’d pulled her down, his lips taking hers in a fiercely passionate kiss. Warmth blossomed inside her, and when he drew back she was shaking, too.

“I’ve never met a female like you before.”

She traced his chin with her fingertips. “I’ve never met a male like you before.”

A shudder ran through his large body.

“You need to rest,” she told him, even though that was the last thing she wanted.

He closed his eyes. “Will you talk to me? Tell me stories? I want to think of you. Not...”

“Of course.”

She couldn't tell him the truth. She didn't *want* to tell him the truth. But she also wouldn't lie to him. So, she didn't tell him that she was the only child of one of the most powerful men in their galaxy. Instead, she described a life of growing up mostly on large ships and sometimes in her mansion.

But to her surprise, the picture she painted was that of a wealthy girl who was lonely and kept herself busy to hide from her loneliness.

She spoke of her mother, a sad woman who took pills because of her pain, who took pills when she was stressed, and who faded away in the darkness of her father's shadow. Her worries came out then, whispered into the stillness of his room. Of the truth. That she believed dreams were like food and water, a person couldn't survive when they lost them. Her mother had traded the love of a man for her dream to become the captain of a ship, and without her dream her mother had become nothing.

It was then that she realized how steady the rise and fall of his chest was.

She smiled. It felt good to tell this man her every thought and fear, but the tough woman inside her felt a massive wave of relief knowing he hadn't heard a word of it.

Snuggling into him, she drifted toward sleep.

You promised Liam revenge, a tiny voice reminded her. And you need to keep your promise. But what of your duty to your father? And Gabrielle?

She stiffened, suddenly wide awake. Tonight she needed to visit the dreams of the horrible leader of a sex-trafficking group and discover where he had taken the president's daughter, Gabrielle. But she wasn't even close to prepared.

Reluctantly, she climbed out of bed and went to Liam's computer, where she opened the encrypted file from her father. The less she knew about Ahmed Zhou, the more dangerous her Dream Jumping would become. And already she had a terrible feeling that going into the man's dream was a dangerous idea.

Still, she opened the man's file and stared into the face of one of the most frightening aliens she'd ever laid eyes on. His eyes were hollow, his expression manic with his own importance. Her hand trembled as she scrolled through the most intimate details of his life.

I'll see you soon, Ahmed, she thought, the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end.

NINETEEN

Liam awoke in a panic, sitting up straight, and then crying out as he gripped his stomach. Memories of the night flooded his mind and his pulse beat a frightened pace in his ears.

“It’s okay.”

Hannah was at his side in an instant. He looked into her face and the world seemed to shift. She was the most beautiful woman he’d ever laid eyes on. Her skin was pale and flawlessly smooth. Her cheekbones were high and the arches of her dark brows framed her almost-impossibly green eyes. Her full lips were an intoxicating pale pink.

He reached for her, smoothing back the tangled mane of black hair from her face, and tucking it behind one of her ears. Her eyes widened, and the conflicting emotions were all there, laid bare before him. Fear, sympathy, and desire.

She shifted out of his reach, and his hand dropped limply onto the bed. He tried to rise, but pain, sharp and brutal, ripped through him. He fell back on his pillows, panting.

“Here,” she said.

She pushed something into his mouth, and then cool water slid past his lips. He drank greedily until the glass was empty.

For awhile, her fingers combed through his hair. So gentle. Had anyone else ever touched him like this before? As if he was something fragile.

Never.

Yes, he'd lain with many, many women. It was always exactly what the women expected from a Keltair, rough and thorough. He'd brought them, and himself, to ecstasy. But when he was finished, he wanted them gone. He wanted to be alone.

Never before had the touch of a woman felt so different. He snuggled into her caresses. He sighed, feeling that each stroke of her fingers brought immeasurable peace.

What was it about Hannah that did this to him?

He noticed the moment the pain pill kicked in. The aching in his body eased. But, he was also far too aware of the way he smelled and of the layer of dried sweat on his body.

“Shower,” he mumbled, slowly sitting up.

Her hands were there, pushing him back. “No, that’s too much for you now.”

He shook his head and rose.

The world tilted for a moment, then righted. Her arms were around him, green eyes filled with concern.

“What were you going to do if I fell?” He gave a short laugh and hissed as the wounds on his chest and stomach twitched.

“Lie back down! Now!”

He didn't bother to shake his head, already he felt unsteady on his feet. He just lumbered toward the bathroom.

Inside, he blinked at the large shower stall. His mind was still moving too slowly.

“You’re really set on this, aren’t you?” she mumbled, then went to the stall and hit the blue pad next to it. “Computer, set the bathroom to Hannah Clark’s setting number five.”

This was his room... it wouldn’t even know...

The lights dimmed. Golden ones bloomed on the walls in a stunning pattern, reflecting a sky filled with stars. The water turned on from a dozen jets and the room suddenly filled with steam. A second later, an unfamiliar melody came, soft and sweet. Like Hannah herself.

“I’ve only ever turned the damn thing on.” He fingered the hem of his underclothes and then pulled them down, dropping them to the ground.

Hannah gave a soft gasp.

He grasped the glass side of the enclosure and used it to help walk beneath the spraying jets. *So warm.* His legs trembled, and he used the wall to ease onto the small porcelain bench. The jets washed every inch of him. His gaze focused on the bottom of the shower, watching the red water as it drained. He knew he should wash his hair, but he couldn’t raise his arms.

And then she was there, in front of him. Naked. His gaze rose from her long, shapely legs to her womanhood, shaved bare. He reached out and touched her hips, bringing her close. His fingers drank in her smooth belly, and then her breasts. They were full and firm, small, pink nipples standing hard and erect.

At last, his gaze took in her face. Water had soaked her dark hair, and the expression on her face was one of pride. He

loved that she didn't look embarrassed.

"I want you," he said. And he meant it. Need had risen above his pain, and he longed to embrace it. To finally have this woman. To forget what he had endured.

"What you wanted was a shower. And that's what you'll get."

She hit a button on the wall and blue shampoo squirted into her hand. A minute later, she was rubbing it into his hair. He sighed and leaned his head back. How was her touch always so... amazing? Unexpected and wonderful all at once.

She got more and more soap, rubbing the muscles of his shoulders, chest, and arms. Always moving downward. His erection rose. His need grew with each second.

At last, she knelt, rubbing soap gently over his stomach.

He hissed as she came too close to one of his wounds.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and suddenly her mouth was there, pressing hot kisses to his stomach.

He'd never wanted a woman more in his life.

Sliding a hand to the back of her neck, he met her gaze. "Hannah..."

Her need-filled eyes shifted to his cock and, a second later, her lips were around him.

He groaned, throwing his head back.

She moved in slow strokes, taking him in and out. Taking him so fully that his head spun. Every muscle in his body tensed as he held onto the back of her neck.

At last, he couldn't take anymore. "Enough! Gods, enough!"

She drew back, and the desire in her gaze had him spiraling.

“Come here,” he ordered.

Instead, she moved away from him. “You’re hurt. That’s enough.”

“Wanting you is worse than the pain.”

She shook her head, but indecision filled her expression.

“Fine,” he said, “help me up?”

She was immediately at his side.

But instead of rising, he reached between her legs and stroked her fire. She gasped, her breasts brushing his face as she leaned in. He took one hard nipple in his mouth and sucked.

“Liam...”

His fingers moved, matched the slow rhythm she’d so expertly tortured him with. He moved from one breast to the other, feeling her shudder around his damp fingers.

At last, she pushed away from his shoulder. “I can’t... I can’t... I’m going to...”

“To the bed.” He held her gaze. “Let me show you how a Keltair male pleases his female.”

Her entire body stiffened. “No.” Her voice was firm. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

He clenched his teeth. “Please.”

She closed her eyes. “Remember, you have only five times.”

Our deal. He never intended to be done after five times of laying with her. There were far too many things he wanted to do with her sweet little body.

“I remember.”

She dried them both with soft towels, then led him to the bed. Pushing him back softly, she climbed on top of him.

“But,” he stuttered, unable to think with her body so fully against his own. “I’m the male.”

She leaned in and took his earlobe between her teeth, whispering huskily into his ear. “Shh... let me show you what I can do.”

Her womanhood brushed against his tip.

His fingertips dug into her hips, shock radiating through him.

And then she slid him slowly inside her.

They cried out in unison, neither moving for a long moment.

“So big,” she murmured, rolling her hips to take him more deeply.

He tried to shift, to take her faster and more powerfully, but she withdrew from him.

“Uh-uh. Let me.”

He froze, and she slowly brought him back inside her. Slowly, oh so slowly, she moved him in and out of her. Inflaming his desire. Her perfect breasts bounced in his vision. His hands gripped her hips, taking her deeper each time she came down on him.

They were both panting and groaning. As she increased her rhythm, he met her every movement with a thrust of his own. She clenched around his manhood, growing wetter and tighter with each second.

Her fingernails dug into his back as she cried out his name, climaxing in torturous waves. A second later, he came, too, overwhelmed by the sight of her hot, naked body in front of him, her womanhood gripping him so tightly.

She fell forward, her chin resting on his shoulder. For a long time, they sat like that, her hardened nipples pressing into his chest.

He kissed the top of her dark head. “Hannah...I—“

“I know,” she whispered, looking up at him.

They kissed, slow and soft. And when she pulled back, all he could see was her face. Filled with happiness and wonder.

His heart squeezed. He was glad that he’d pleased her. She’d pleased him, too, in a way no woman had before. Was this some power of hers? Had he fallen under her spell?

“Come on, now,” she said, running her hand along his cheek. “Time to rest.”

He grinned tiredly. “To rest up for next time?”

Her brows drew together. “Let’s just focus on getting you feeling better.”

But even though his body trembled with exhaustion, he hoped to find the strength to make love to her again before the night was out. There was nothing he’d ever wanted more in his life.

TWENTY

Hannah waited until he slept before drawing on her clothes and heading to his door. She was exhausted. She wanted nothing more than to curl up with her sexy Keltair male and sleep the night away, cradled in his arms, but she needed to Dream Jump.

Returning to her room across the hall, she was greeted by the annoying sound of a message on her computer. Clicking the button, her father's face came onto the screen. "Contact me as soon as you get this."

So he heard about the attack? Of course he did.

Even though the night had almost faded into the early hours of day, she knew her father wouldn't be sleeping. *Not after something like this.* Hitting the button to contact him, it took only a moment before he accepted.

"Hannah!" His expression was stern.

"I'm fine. They held me for questioning, but I wasn't hurt. I do want to talk to you about the way they treated—"

"Have you done it yet?"

She froze, startled by his question.

"No...I was nearly killed tonight, so I—"

Anger flashed across his face. “I’m glad you’re okay. Beyond glad. And I’ll be launching a full investigation about what happened tomorrow. But tonight, the president has contacted me a dozen times wondering why you haven’t reported in yet.”

Hannah closed her eyes, overcome by the feelings of surprise and disappointment that washed over her. “I thought, given the circumstances, that you would be more concerned about me than my duty.”

“I do care about you. I wish I could give you more time, but I can’t. Before you left, I made your responsibilities clear.” He paused, clearing his throat. “If you ever want to be the captain of a Level 10 ship, you’ll need to learn an important lesson. It doesn’t matter what you go through personally, your job always comes first. Whether you nearly die, or whether your only child nearly dies.”

In that moment, she knew how hard this must have been for her father. *Always the admiral, never the dad.*

“All right, I’ll do it now and report back in when I’m finished.”

He nodded, rubbing the ever-growing wrinkles on his forehead. “Just remember. There’s no one there to help you if things go wrong. At the first sign of trouble, get out.”

“I *know*—“

“Hannah, don’t give me that. The last time you were thrown into some sick bastard’s dream without being prepared, we almost lost you.”

I couldn’t suck in a breath. Yes, I remembered. I remember coming out of that coma, having suffered what it’s like to die. That’s the day Dream Jumping became something I feared

more than I enjoyed. The day I realized that even though my body couldn't die when I used my gift, my brain certainly could.

“You don't have to remind me. I'll never forget.”

Guilt shadowed his eyes as he looked from me to his desk. “Don't let him touch you. Remember, if he touches you, he can hurt you.” He was quiet for a moment. “All you have to do is go into his dream.”

As always, it wasn't what her father said, but what he didn't say. *You're required to Dream Jump, but not to compromise your safety. No one said you're required to succeed in your mission tonight.*

“Will do.”

He gave a sharp nod, pressed his screen, and her own faded to black.

She let her head drop onto her desk. Exhaustion, pure and simple, flooded through her. It'd been a long day. Probably one of the longest in her life. Her combat training class seemed to have taken place a year ago, even though it'd only been that morning.

But Gabrielle needed her. The president needed her. And her father needed her.

She knew Dream Jumping in her current state was dangerous, but she'd be cautious.

Sitting up, she closed her eyes, gathering the strength to walk to her bed.

No, first she would change, then she would crawl beneath her covers and start the process.

She sensed a movement to her left.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, instincts flaring into panic. She sprang back from her chair as the man's arms grabbed at her. They stared each other down. The man with his silver eyes, his face hidden beneath a tight black mask.

“You'll get out of here if you know what's good for you.”

His eyes twinkled. “I'll tell you what. I won't fondle those ample breasts of yours if you submit without a fight.”

She looked at the cloth clutched in one of his hands. *Soaked in chloroform, no doubt.* “You really think this is my first rodeo, cowboy?”

In her life, there'd been more than a few failed kidnapping attempts. *But never when I was this tired.* With each second, she inched closer to the door, maneuvering so the oversize chair and coffee table separated them.

“You want this the hard way?” He laughed. “Good. I like a girl with a little fight in her.”

Her fists clenched in anticipation.

But faster than her eyes could follow, he leaped onto the chair, and then sprang onto her. She hit the ground, the back of her skull smacking the carpet. Her head spun as one of his hands gripped her breast, while the other one pressed the rag to her mouth.

His strength was incredible. Almost like Liam's.

She fought not to breathe and moved to the left, body-slammng him as hard as she could into the wall. She pinned him and shot her hand out, digging her fingers into his eye. It popped with a sickening squelch. Her attacker gave a high, bloodcurdling scream.

She rolled to her feet and stood over him. Even though she'd tried not to breathe, she'd gotten a whiff of some of the chloroform. Her head was starting to spin.

The rag had dropped to the ground and she picked it up, jumping on him and smothering his face with it. He wrestled her with one hand, finally kicking her off him.

She sprang up and he climbed to his feet more slowly, hands pressed over his eye. Blood leaked through the cracks between his fingers.

She kicked him in the groin, then spun, sweeping his legs out from under him. He fell back, his head hitting the side of the table with a sickening crack.

He lay where he fell, unmoving.

Running to her intercom, she called down to the security desk and reported the breach. A panicked guard responded they'd be there in moments.

Going back to the man, she touched the side of his throat. No pulse. *All his many enhancements, and a table did him in. But who is he?* Peeling back his mask, she stared into the face of the head of security, Rick.

Her stomach twisted. *Why the hell did he attack me? Is it revenge for rescuing Liam from him? Or does someone know who I am?*

Given the chloroform rag, whoever it was didn't want to kill her, but instead planned to take her. It was everything her father had warned her about.

She lay on the ground, leaning against the couch, staring at the dead man with his eye clawed out. Her father would want her to leave the academy, effectively destroying any hope she

had at ever commanding a Level 10 spacecraft. She could not let that happen.

Whoever was after her, she'd figure out who it was. And she'd make them pay.

Her mind started to turn over the events of the past few weeks. Liam had probably been right. That night at the bar, someone had drugged her drink. And the attack on the roof might've been yet another attempt against her. Then the attack tonight. But to accomplish all these things...whoever was after her had to have a lot of power.

Who could have been close enough to slip a drug into her drink? Who could shut down the school's defenses and allow the enemy vessel onto the grounds? And who could buy off the head of security?

She wasn't safe here any longer. But she wouldn't be chased off.

The door to her room slid open. Half a dozen security guards rushed in, then froze at the sight before them.

"What the hell?" one of them stuttered.

She raised a brow. "I hope one of you has a good reason why your boss tried to kidnap me..."

It was utter chaos until Dean Sufters rushed in ten minutes later. To Hannah's satisfaction, her dark blue uniform hadn't been tucked in and she'd missed a button on her shirt.

"What—?"

Hannah pointed to the dead body. "It looks like even though you guys beat an ambassador's son, blaming him for your breach in security, it was your very own head of security to blame."

The dean paled and gripped the edge of the door. “This can’t be—“

“I hope you aren’t too attached to your job because by the time my dad and Liam’s dad hear about this, you’ll be lucky if you get to scrub the bathrooms at the academy.”

Sufter’s shoulders fell and she stuttered apologies, but even she knew it was too late.

The next hour dragged on as they took her statement, cleaned her room, and the dean personally called both her father and Liam’s. It was by far the most satisfying conversation Hannah had ever witnessed. While her father took the information with a calm that warned Hannah that there would be hell to pay, Liam’s father ended the call by smashing the screen in.

Dean Sufter looked as if she was about to faint.

“I’d hoped to wait until morning to call...” she whispered.

Hannah shrugged, feeling pleased that the bitch who’d allowed Liam to be injured was going to get her comeuppance. Even if it was a different method of suffering. “They wouldn’t have taken the news any better in the morning.”

Dean Sufter tried to stand but her legs wobbled. A guard rushed to her side to help her.

“Your father is immediately sending his own men to guard you, but has asked that we place our own people outside your door until they arrive.”

Hannah had heard it all, but still enjoyed watching the dean sweat over it. “He can’t trust you to do your job, so he’s left with no other choice.”

The woman's blue eyes met Hannah's. "And, your father plans to be here in a week's time."

Hannah smiled. "If you thought he gave it to you on the phone, just wait until he arrives in person."

The older woman visibly swallowed. "Get some sleep, cadet. We'll discuss this in the morning."

The dean and the guards left her room, with two of the men taking position on either side of her door. When the door slid shut, her smile fell. After all this, she still had work to do.

TWENTY-ONE

Hannah stood outside the murky green bubble that represented Ahmed Zhou's dream. Her stomach twisted with anxiety as she crept closer, peering in. The alien lay on a wide couch, leaning back with his large arms thrown across the back of the couch on either side of him. His face was a cross between a bull and a human. Dark hair covered him, running across his wide, bare chest, and down his nude body. His erection lay across his leg, stopping at the top of his kneecap.

She wrapped her arms around her chest and took a deep breath. Stick to the plan. You know this alien...well enough. You'll be able to fool him. If not, all you have to do is get out.

Plucking her power from the dream world, she transformed herself.

Blinking, she stared at her own reflection on the outside of the bubble. She looked just like Ahmed's ex-wife, who'd been murdered years before. According to his records, she'd been the one true love of his life, and he harbored a great deal of guilt that he couldn't save her life.

The woman staring back at her was a Vuret, just like Ahmed. She had two twisting horns on her head, but a mane of long blond hair. She was massive in comparison to Hannah's true size, but still petite in comparison to Ahmed himself. The

clothes she wore were little more than a one-shouldered leather bra and a pair of underwear. The cool material felt odd against her furry body.

“Here goes nothing.” She took a deep breath and stepped into the dream.

Music swelled around her. A pounding, bass-filled music that assaulted her ears. Naked women danced on shimmering platforms not ten feet from where the Vuret lounged.

Hannah felt a wave of panic. If she’d known this man well enough, she would’ve seen the women when she stared at the bubble surrounding his dream. She would’ve heard the music. The fact that she was aware of neither was frightening.

The big creature’s gaze swung to her and froze. “Imera!” he cried. “Come!”

She did, swinging her hips the way the woman had. Although she’d only watched a handful of vids of her.

Motioning her to sit down beside him, the Vuret grabbed her hand and pulled it to rest on his leg, just next to his manhood.

She had to hold back a shudder of disgust. I need to get out here as quickly as possible. “You’ve done well, my husband.”

The Vuret smelled of wet fur as he leaned closer to her. “And how is that, wife?”

Hannah forced a seductive smile. “The newest shipment of girls...”

Now, it was his turn to smile. “They will fetch the highest price of any group before.”

Caution now. Don’t do anything to alarm his subconscious. You must sound like his wife. Act like his wife.

“Which one will go for the most?”

He laughed. “Why, the wide-hipped daughter of the pretentious humans, of course! My special buyer has desired her since she was a child.”

Ugh! “But they must know you took her. Even you may not be able to keep her hidden.”

The music faded away, and the room shifted. Suddenly, they were on a couch in the middle of a freezing room. If not for the fur covering her body, she was sure she’d be shivering.

“You think they will look here?”

The room blurred again, and suddenly, there were huge meats hanging on hooks from the ceiling. “They will search my many ships carrying arms, but they will not think to look through one carrying exotic foods.”

Hannah stared around the room. But where were the girls? “I’m certain they’ll search everywhere. Can you really be so certain they won’t find them?”

He gave a roar of laughter and stood, walking to the panels on the wall. He dug his fingers into the sides of one and yanked it from the wall.

She gasped.

He continued to move about the room, pulling panel after panel off.

Hannah stared in speechless horror at the dozens upon dozens of women crammed into the purple liquid. Large beads pulsed in the water, shimmering. The women opened and closed their mouths, but no words came out. Frightened eyes stared, while their arms and legs stayed bent in odd positions spread out around them.

Every woman was nude.

And then, she caught sight of Gabrielle.

Don't show your reaction. Stay in character.

But Hannah couldn't help rising and walking toward the woman she'd grown up with. Putting her fingertips on the glass, she cried out at the intense cold and pulled back.

"Glorious, isn't it?" He placed his hand on the small of her back, sliding it lower to cup her ass.

She tried to pull away from him, but he yanked her back, cupping her ass yet again. You're not supposed to let him touch you, but you're also not supposed to alert him. His wife wouldn't pull away from him.

Just stay calm. Move away as soon as you get the chance.

"Your plan was the perfect one, wife. These beautiful creatures help to keep our precious meats cool. The Kirlian crystals keep their body temperature so low that they're undetectable by other ships, and no matter how hard each government has tried to discover how we do it, they cannot."

Hannah swallowed and forced the word past her lips. "Glorious."

"I've missed you," he said, his grip on her ass growing harder. "You're the only woman who can take me the way I like and not die from our coupling."

She inched out of his grip, glad to be relieved of his touch, and turned to him. Just one last thing, and I'm free. "What ship are we on?"

He frowned. "The Magic Spicery, of course."

Without warning, his fist slammed into her face.

She fell backward onto the floor, her head spinning. He kicked her in the stomach, then leaped on top of her.

Time to wake up. Time to wake up.

But in her fear, she couldn't focus enough to pull herself free.

He put an arm against her throat, tightening it until she saw spots. "You're going to love this," he panted into her ear. "You always could take all of me."

She tried to scream as the world went black, but no sound came out.

TWENTY-TWO

Liam awoke, an overwhelming feeling of panic coming over him.

Something's wrong with Hannah.

TWENTY-THREE

Where was Hannah?

Sitting up, Liam winced. His entire body ached, even his bones. All he wanted to do was take a pain pill and lie back in bed, but he had a horrible feeling something bad was happening to the little human he'd so recently made love to.

Love to? Since when do I call mating a female making love?

And the way they'd done things. The sex was different than it had ever been before. *She'd* taken the lead. *She'd* touched him so gently, setting the pace for them both.

But where is she and why do I feel she is in trouble?

That's crazy, a tiny voice whispered in his mind. *She probably just went to her room to sleep.*

He climbed to his feet and limped to his dresser, pulling clothes out at random. It took an embarrassing amount of effort to clothe himself, and he was exhausted and sweaty by the time he was done.

I'll lie down when I know she's safe.

As the doors to his room slid open, he found himself staring at two strange guards positioned on either side of her door.

Probably a precaution after their attack on the roof.

“What’s going on?” he asked anyway.

Had there been a new problem?

One guard glared at him. “Mind your business, Keltair.”

Even this dickshit knew he was a Keltair? Geez. “Hannah is my business.”

The guard walked up to him, and hesitated. A full head shorter than Liam, maybe he’d realized that threatening the large Keltair male wasn’t a good idea.

Or maybe it’s the sight of your battered face.

“Look,” the guard said, his voice wavering just a bit. “No one is to bother her tonight.”

Liam hesitated. Hadn’t he had enough trouble already? Was he really going to fight a guard just because of a horrible feeling that Hannah was in trouble?

“Is she in there alone?”

The guard rolled his eyes. “Yup. We’ve been stationed here since we were assigned.”

Maybe I should just go back to bed. She’s not my mate. I don’t have some extra heightened sense of her. This is nothing more than a feeling, probably brought about from all the drugs.

Still he hesitated. Should he listen to logic or the nagging feeling in the back of his mind?

He advanced on the guard. “Get out of my way.”

The human took two steps back, looking at the other guard.

Liam moved to the keypad beside her door. He typed in the security code, long ago having memorized it. Her doors slid open.

“We’re going to contact the dean and let her know, Keltair,” the man spat. “I’m guessing you’ll be handing over your uniform before the night’s over.”

Liam stepped into her room, speaking over his shoulder. “Yes, let the dean know. I’m sure she’ll be excited to give my father another reason to kill all of you.”

The doors closed behind him.

Inside the room, silence stretched. The lights were dim and nothing stirred. Liam made his way to her bed, wondering if he’d been a fool to break into the human female’s room over nothing more than a feeling. All logic said the mound in her bed was simply Hannah sleeping.

And then, she cried out in her sleep.

He frowned, limping slowly past the small kitchen to his right, and the standard academy couch and chairs to his left.

She screamed, and he bolted across the remainder of her room.

As he stared down at her face, he knew instantly that something was wrong. Her long black hair was matted to her sweaty face, and her pale skin looked ashen.

A nightmare?

Sitting at the edge of her bed, he brushed the hair back from her face. “Hannah?”

Her hands twisted in the blankets. She struggled against some unseen force, whimpering.

“It’s just a nightmare,” he said, trying to wake her from it gently, but she didn’t respond to his voice.

“Hannah?” Now, he shook her.

Still, she didn’t respond.

He picked her up, wincing as the stitches on his stomach and chest pulled. “Wake up, damn it.”

She fought with heavy limbs against his hold as tears streamed down her face.

His heart twisted. *Something is very wrong.*

TWENTY-FOUR

Hannah bit into the Vuret's hairy arm as her vision blackened.

He cried out and released her. "Bitch!"

She crawled away from him, gasping for breath. Turning, she stared back at him.

He grinned, transforming his half human, half bull face into something terrifying. "You always did know how to turn me on." He wrapped his hand around his arm-sized erection and started to stroke himself. "Come. Put this into your mouth."

She just needed a minute, a minute to calm her pounding heart, so that she could Jump right back out of the dream. Touching her bruised throat, her fingers curled back from her hairy neck. She'd forgotten for half a second that she'd made herself look like his deceased wife.

He leaped on her again. Sat on her chest. "Open your mouth," he commanded.

Screaming, she struck out with her hand, hitting his dick as hard as she could.

He swore again, punching her hard in the face. For a moment, she saw stars.

“You’re going to love this,” he grunted, turning her onto her stomach. A hand pulled down the small pair of leather underwear she wore, and her insides crawled. “I always did regret killing you.”

She felt something hard and long rub against the back of her ass.

“Get off!” she screamed, trying desperately to buck the huge alien off her, but he barely moved.

Panic set in.

I knew I wasn’t prepared to Dream Jump. I knew this was a bad idea. Why didn’t I learn my lesson the last time?

“W-h-a-t,” he sputtered.

He grabbed her hair and yanked her head back. And suddenly, she was staring into his terrifying face. “Who the hell are you?”

And that’s when she knew. In her terror, she’d let her dream image fade. He was staring at her real face, at Hannah Stowe. Never before had she done something so dangerous.

His mouth turned into a dangerous smile. “Whoever you are, I’m going to enjoy every second of this, and then, I’m going to end your miserable life.”

She coughed, spitting out cold water. Her entire body trembled as the freezing liquid hit her. *How did she end up in the bath?*

“Are you okay?”

Suddenly, Liam’s worried face leaned into view.

She stared. There had never been a more welcome sight in her life. Even though his face was bruised and battered, and

one cheek was bandaged, she felt a rush of gratitude. This Keltair male had saved her from something horrible. Everything she felt in the dream, her body felt. And if the creature had killed her in his dream, she'd be left brain-dead.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

And then to her horror, she felt tears well in her eyes.

Closing them, she tried to push away the terrible images that filled her mind, but she couldn't. It wasn't just this Dream Jump. It was all of them. Being sent into the dreams of some of the most dangerous men and women in the universe filled her memories with things she could never unsee.

Things she could never forget.

“Are you all right?” Liam asked, stroking the hair back from her face.

Her teeth chattered. “Yes.”

Eyes still closed, she leaned into his touch. How was such a large man so gentle? And why did she trust him so much?

Her father had always liked to be there when she Dream Jumped, just in case she ran into trouble. But he never greeted her with a gentle touch. He simply avoided her gaze, so she couldn't see the guilt in his eyes.

Even though she knew it was there.

“Computer, try Hannah's bath setting number four.” Liam shifted her in his arms as he gave the command.

Warm water rushed over her flesh, and she gasped in pleasure. She relaxed against Liam's chest, her senses were entirely overwhelmed. A soft melody played, and she felt the water rising around her.

“How did you know?” she mumbled, with a slight sigh.

He nuzzled the top of her head. “I knew one of your settings would be a good one.”

She took a deep breath, steeling herself as her face gave a painful throb. *Ignore it. Focusing on it won't help. Think of Liam instead.* His scent washed over her, his pleasant earthy smell, mixed with her own sweeter one.

He smells like me.

The thought pleased her for reasons she couldn't understand. Of course he smelled like her, just hours ago she'd bathed him. And shortly thereafter, she'd gently made love to him.

“I've never seen anything like that before,” he whispered, his arms tightening around her.

And suddenly, she remembered why they lay tangled together in a slowly filling tub. The dream. Her responsibility. As much as she wanted to tell him the truth, it was classified. Only her mother, her father, and the president knew what she could do. But that didn't mean she couldn't tell him half the truth.

Opening her eyes, she stared into his dark ones. “This happens sometimes.”

He brushed a soft kiss across her nose, which sent a shiver right down her spine. “Why?”

It took her a second to find her voice. “I was born with a rare deformity in my brain. My parents tried everything to save my life before they finally found an experimental surgery. It saved my life...but it had consequences.”

There were so many of the surgeries she didn't remember, but that one she did. She'd been six, and running out of time, according to her doctors. The man her parents had brought her to was unlike anyone she'd met before. He lived in an underground base on a strange planet. And the way he looked at her terrified her.

She'd woken from the surgery screaming. And screaming. And screaming. Her parents were nowhere to be found, and the surgeon had glared at her, yelling right back in her face. She'd never felt pain like that before, even after everything she'd been through.

That was the day she lost faith in her parents.

"So," Liam said, his voice breaking through the darkness of her memories, "these consequences include terrible nightmares you can't be woken from?"

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Among other things."

Her thoughts tried to go back to the dream, to the Vuret male who'd hurt her. She sat up, drawing her knees to her chest. Liam's legs lay on either side of her. His jeans and dark shirt were soaked, along with her red-and-white striped pajamas.

"Liam?"

"Yes."

She didn't know what to say.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back against him. "It's okay. I've got you."

Goosebumps erupted on her arms, and she snuggled into his touch. She was okay, wasn't she? Now that the adrenaline

was starting to fade, her face ached. It more than ached, it hurt like hell. And the rest of her body...she definitely felt like she got into a fight with a Turongan Ice Bear and lost.

She often felt like this after a dream, which usually resulted in hours of lying beneath a shower streaming cold water, trying to forget what she had seen. What she had been through. This time was so different. Even though she hurt, the dream felt less like reality and more like a nightmare.

And it was all because of the huge Keltair male holding her as if she was the most fragile thing in the world. She could get used to this.

No, you can't. How can you hope to focus on your classes with your heart slowly being pulled from your chest? Yet, in that moment, she found it hard to care.

“Bed?” she whispered.

He nodded, his chin rubbing the top of her head.

Wrapping his arms around her, he started to struggle to his feet.

“No!” she said, pushing free and standing on shaking legs. “You’re going to tear open your stitches.”

His dark eyes flashed. “I’m a male. I can carry a tiny human female. How do you think you got here?”

He rose completely, towering over her.

She took a step back. “I can walk.” *I think.*

His lips pulled into a thin line. “Come here. Stop being stubborn.”

To her surprise, she laughed. Pressing a hand against his sopping wet shirt, she stood up on her tiptoes.

His gaze zeroed in on her lips as he leaned forward.

At the last second, she ducked past him, having to step over the edge of the tub. *When had he changed her shower to the tub setting?* She grinned. He could do it anytime he liked.

“Computer. Exit Hannah’s bath setting four.” Liam barked behind her.

The sound of the running water stopped.

She gingerly peeled off her wet clothes, suppressing a groan as her shirt slid against her aching face, then tossed it into a pile on the floor. Gritting her teeth, she grabbed a huge white towel and wrapped it around herself. *Be strong. He can’t suspect it was more than a nightmare.* With a forced smirk, she turned back to him.

Her jaw dropped as she stared at him. His wet clothes clung to every hard muscle. *He’s like a god. Flawless. Untouchable. A creature of fantasy and desire.*

For a minute, she allowed herself to ogle the beautiful alien. *There will be time for that later.* She nodded to herself, then crossed the room and began peeling off his wet shirt, trying to be matter-of-fact about it. That plan fell away as his shirt fell to the floor. Her gaze slid over his hard muscles, but froze at the sight of the bandages. Her thoughts went to the electrified metal claws that had to be dug out of his flesh.

“What are you doing here? You should be sleeping,” she whispered, her heart aching as he brushed the waterproof bandages clinging to his bruised flesh.

An unreadable look flashed across his face, then was gone. “I needed to see you.”

And aren’t you glad he did? She shivered. *Don’t think of what could’ve happened, just think of how you can help this*

stubborn man.

She put her hands on her hips, wincing at the ache in her stomach. *Damn Vuret.* “We need to get you to bed. You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine.”

She raised a brow and reached over to slowly pull the zipper down on his jeans.

His hardened manhood flexed against her touch through the thin layer of cloth. He groaned, and heat blossomed between her legs.

Later! He’s hurt. You’re hurt.

“Let’s get these off,” she said, trying to ignore the huskiness in her voice.

Kneeling cautiously, she slid his pants slowly down his hips, legs, and around his ankles.

He stepped out of them.

Glancing up, she stared at his erect manhood.

It looks even bigger now, if that’s possible.

Her insides tightened, and she felt herself growing wet.

With deliberate movements, she crossed the room and got him a towel, and then began to dry him.

“Enough,” he growled, stealing the towel and tossing it carelessly on the floor with their clothing. His eyes burned with desire.

She stood. “Fine. Time for bed.”

He grinned, and she swore there had never been a sexier sight than this powerful man, naked and grinning at her.

Focus, damn it.

She led him to her bed, dropped her own towel, and climbed in. He followed her more slowly, his face twisting in pain as he sat on the edge of the bed. Slowly, clenching his jaw muscles, he moved his legs onto the bed.

Covering them up, she moved closer to him. He wrapped an arm behind her.

“Lie down,” she commanded him.

He did, brows raised. “Where I’m from the male is the one in charge.”

She gave him her sweetest smile. “Well, you’re on Turonga now, big guy. Why don’t you try it? You might like it.”

He scowled. “Fine, but next time, I’m in charge.”

“Agreed,” she said, crossing her fingers behind her back. *Maybe.* She lay down and brought him with her. “Now, go to sleep.” She caressed his face gently.

He caught her hand. “To sleep?” he asked with incredulity. “You can’t honestly expect that after rubbing me down, undressing in front of me, and leading me to bed, you’re going to get two seconds of shut-eye.”

She kissed his stubbled chin. “That’s exactly what I expect, my big Keltair male. Now, quit whining. If you’re good, maybe we can have a little fun before class in... well, a few hours.”

He groaned in frustration, but she could see the tired circles beneath his eyes. “I’m never going to be able to sleep.”

Hiding her smile, she closed her eyes. Even though she had everything but sleep on her mind, she knew both of them

desperately needed it.

A few minutes later, he was snoring.

She eased out of bed and grabbed her computer off her bed. Pulling on a robe in Starflight Academy blue, she returned to the bathroom and sat on the floor. Taking a deep breath, she called her father.

He answered instantly. “Hannah, is it done?”

“Yes, Father.”

The relief on his face was almost comical. Almost. His silver hair was ruffled to the point of being a complete and utter shock. The man slept? He was actually human? But then she caught sight of his dark, cotton pajamas, they looked perfectly pressed. *Only my father would have his pajamas ironed.* Just the sight of something so like her father eased her tension.

“Gabrielle is on *The Magic Spicery*.” She kept her voice level.

He leaned back in his chair, throwing his head back. “Thank God. The president has been contacting me hourly since it happened.” Then, he frowned. “Do you know where she is on the ship?”

Vivid memories of her dream threatened to pull her back under. She gasped in a breath, trying to shake away the images.

“Hannah...” her father said, his voice soft.

She stiffened. “If you remove the panels on the freezer protecting their rare meats, you’ll find the girls within the crystals. They can’t move, but they’re aware of everything.”

She swallowed as sickness bubbled inside her. “And they’re naked.”

He was quiet for a very long time, his eyes studying her intently. “Did that bastard Ahmed hurt you?”

She looked away to avoid his gaze. “You’ll need to get to the girls as soon as possible. He might suspect something was off—“

“What happened?” But the question was no longer that of a concerned father, but that of Fleet Admiral Stowe.

A man I know better.

“I almost lost consciousness. When I did, I changed back into myself in the dream.” She swallowed, preparing herself for the anger that was about to come. “He saw my real face.”

“You’ve got to be...Hannah, have you any idea how dangerous this is?” His eyes blazed. He reached for something, and suddenly he was pouring a glass of scotch.

She glared at him. “Do you think I wanted this to happen?”

His voice was like ice as he spoke. “If he ever recognizes you, both of us are in trouble beyond anything you can possibly understand. Ahmed Zhou is one of the most powerful criminals I’ve ever come across. One of the few who no one can *prove* has done anything.” He took a huge swallow of his scotch and let the glass hit his oak table with a clatter. “I knew letting you go to the academy was mistake. You can’t possibly study and do your job without screwing something up.”

Rage slammed into her. “The hell I can’t.”

“Watch your mouth,” he shot back.

Her pulse raced as she tried to control the volume of her voice. “I didn’t choose this gift, Father. You did. And I’ve

done as you asked with it, no matter how awful, without complaint. But you listen to me, this academy is what I want, and no one is going to take it from me. Not even you.”

He leaned forward, his pale green eyes flashing with rage. “Young lady, if I hadn’t made that choice for you, you’d be dead. And what you owe the people of Earth is your complete dedication. Your skill has saved thousands of lives, and I’m not about to let you throw it all away. And for what? A dream? Yes, you’d make a fine captain one day. But you know what? I don’t think you’ll ever be able to balance the two responsibilities. So if you think you’re honestly going to be able to command a Level 10 spacecraft when—“

“Shut up!” her voice shook as she spoke, and she realized her entire body shook, too. “If I can’t do both, then I won’t Dream Jump anymore.”

“Hannah...” The word held all the warning of a snake about to strike.

She held his gaze. “It’s your choice, Father. Keep pushing me and see what you get.”

Her finger trembled as she clicked the screen, and it went blank.

Sitting in the bathroom, she gathered her legs to her chest, overwhelmed by it all. She was so tired. She hadn’t wanted to say those things to her father, but he left her no other choice. Because the secret truth, the dark one she hid in the back of her mind, is that she didn’t want to Dream Jump. She never had.

Her hand slid to the back of her hair, the sensitive nerves on her fingertips stroking the two tiny scars that were all that was left of her experimental surgery. A tiny cry escaped her

lips, and she jerked her hand back. The scars were sore and a little swollen.

This is all too much. I just want to live a normal life. I don't want to be a freak. I don't want to see the things I've seen. Can't I just feel safe and happy? Just for a little while?

Pain radiated from the scars down the back of her neck as if to say, "Never. You'll never be free of us."

TWENTY-FIVE

Liam stood behind the many students gathered at the end of the Hawks' penthouse floor. Shimmering screens flashed the scores of the first tests of the year. A few students swore. Some yelled, "Yes!" and moved out of the way.

With a slight growl, Liam's patience evaporated. Shoving the tiny cadets out of the way, he stood in front of the screens, surprised when his face gave a throb of protest. *Pain means nothing!* He would not acknowledge it.

"Combat—Hannah Clark first, Liam Fallow second." Hannah's voice slid down his spine, awakening all kinds of things he preferred not to feel when they were surrounded by others.

He ignored the raging hormones and focused on the smugness in her voice, his gaze going back to the scores. "Battle strategy—Liam Fallow first, Hannah Clark second."

Her brilliant green eyes flashed with rage. "Communications—Hannah Clark first, Liam Fallow third."

"Bah!" he shouted, sending a few of the cadets scattering from him. "Communications is for females."

She raised a cocky brow. "The whole, 'anything we can do you can't do better thing', huh?"

It took him a second to process her insult. “I could have done better, if I’d wanted to.”

Her false pout was obnoxious. “Sure, sweetheart.”

Rage and desire flashed through him. He knew exactly how to put her in her place.

Not yet, his mind chided.

“Weapons—Liam Fallow first, Hannah Clark second.”

She stood up a little straighter, drawing his gaze to the swell of her breasts visible thanks to the two open buttons on her blue uniform shirt. “You just wait until next time. Then, we’ll see.”

Turning, people shifted out of her way as she headed back down the pristine hallway. He followed the swaying of her perfect ass, pushing himself harder as he felt his right leg start to limp. Cadets moved out of his way, shooting him pointed glares.

“Female! Wait!”

She didn’t slow, which only fueled his rage further. *Didn’t she ever just obey?*

When she paused outside her door and began entering the code, he caught her hand in his, pulling it away from the pad.

To his annoyance, she smiled.

Who the hell kept knocking the breath from his lungs? He shouldn’t care that such a beautiful woman was smiling at him. And the only reason to find himself obsessed with her lush mouth was because he was busy imagining that sweet mouth around his cock again.

To his shock, he hardened at just the thought.

Because you haven't yet fully satisfied yourself with her.

“About our bet...”

Now she perked up. “Yes?”

“We have a break between classes, and I've got clearance to fly *Zenon* for a few hours. Are you available?”

She nibbled her lip. “Am I available? Hmm...”

God, she's so damn sexy.

It took her a painfully long time to answer. *Maybe this was a mistake. I should've just followed her into her room and buried myself in her, despite my aching body. I won't be able to think clearly until I do.*

“Okay,” she said.

The relief he felt bothered him. Why did he care that she got to fly in his ship? He'd never allowed a human on it before. He should have put off allowing her on it. *No, I'm a man of honor. I want to follow through on my word, that is all.*

And you have plans for her.

He pushed aside the thought. “Come on then.”

They walked together to the elevator. When the doors slid shut, she turned and pressed herself against him. He hissed from the pain in his chest and stomach, but despite that felt his manhood growing.

She peered up at him seductively. “I thought you might like that, big boy.”

And then, to his horror, she reached down and curled her hand around him.

He groaned. “Female. Stop. There's nowhere to...”

She stroked him through his tight uniform pants, stealing his every thought. He closed his eyes as his need grew. *Take her here and now.*

The elevator chimed, and she was away from him in an instant.

It took him a second to open his eyes and stare, once again, at her firm ass swaying as she made her way out of the elevator.

Damn tempting female.

As he started after her, he was startled to discover a human male talking to her. *Mine!* He strode over to them and slid a hand around her hip, to rest on her lower back.

The man glanced at Liam, his voice faltering for half a second before continuing. “So if you wanted to meet at the club tonight—“

“She’ll be busy. With me.” Liam towered over the blond-haired male and was satisfied when he flinched, then took a step back.

“Liam, relax,” Hannah said, running her fingertips over the muscles of his stomach, before turning back to the human. “Greg, maybe we’ll try to figure out a time to hang out. Okay?”

Greg’s whole demeanor changed. “You’re actually fucking this Keltair, aren’t you?”

Liam clenched his fist. *This human is going down.* His muscles tensed in preparation for the fight they would have. It would be brief. Very brief.

“Oh, Greg,” Hannah said, her voice soft and sweet, “of course I am. He’s a big, sexy Keltair. And if you really want to

know, he's also big in all the ways that count. Why wouldn't I be fucking him?"

Greg's eyes widened. "You've—got—to be—"

She leaned in closer to him and winked. "If you hear me screaming his name, don't assume it's some kind of human-Keltair battle going down, okay? He's probably just going down on me."

Flipping her long, dark hair over her shoulder, she sexily strutted away.

Liam forgot about the other male. He'd follow his female anywhere. *His?*

She was unlike anyone he ever imagined. She was brave to the point of being foolish. Her fighting was that of a cornered Telusian dragon, vicious and unexpected. And when he'd been injured...no one had ever treated him with such gentleness. As he'd held her during her nightmare, he'd been overcome by her. It seemed impossible for such a creature to exist, so soft one moment, a warrior the next.

Doing a small spin just as she reached the exit, she turned back to him. Standing in her dark blue uniform in the center of the bright, ridiculously tall ground floor of the academy, she took his breath away. One side of her mouth quirked up, as if she knew exactly what he was thinking.

He hurried toward her, pulling the damned female against him and crushing her mouth to his. He didn't even care about the residual pain of his swollen face. Sparks flew between them. She groaned and ran fingers through the back of his hair. He ground her hips against his erection, then plunged his tongue into her mouth. Heat spread through him.

She pulled back from his kiss, panting.

He tried to catch her lips again.

“Liam! I don’t know how they do things where you’re from, but here someone’s likely to shout ‘get a room’ at us.”

He ground her against his cock again.

Her cheeks flushed.

“Excellent advice,” he said, opening the door.

Putting a possessive hand on her hip, he led her out the archway leading into the gardens. They wove past the nightclub tucked in one corner, vines nearly swallowing the stumpy building, and down a path.

A short time later, they came upon his ship. Pride swelled within his chest. *Zenon*. The ship was his pride and joy. And for some reason, it was important to him that Hannah meet his ship, and that the ship like her.

Have you lost your mind? She’s a human. Father would never live it down.

Or maybe all the blood in your cock came straight from your brain.

He took a deep breath. “Meet *Zenon*.”

TWENTY-SIX

The last time Hannah had been in Liam's ship, she'd been so busy trying to escape a possible kidnapping that she hadn't stopped to fully appreciate the beauty of a living ship. Now, however, she had all the time in the world. *Zenon*, as Liam had called her, was incredible.

Reaching out gently, Hannah stroked the deep green of her hull. The ship vibrated softly beneath her touch, or perhaps it was her imagination. Walking slowly along the length of the spacecraft, she was amazed by the combination of plant and technology.

A spike of jealousy buried itself in her stomach. Why did these creatures only bond with Keltairs? She would love one for herself.

"Do you like her?" Liam asked, his voice soft.

She turned to him, sensing nervousness behind his dark eyes. "I love her. Liam, she's beautiful. Just amazing. Can we really fly her?"

His lips curved into a smile that made her heart stop. "Of course."

He leaned in, crowding her back against the side of the ship. For a minute she thought he'd kiss her again, and heat

grew in her core. But his hand brushed the hull of *Zenon*, and a door opened, a ramp forming below.

“Want to take a ride?”

Her entire body tingled with anticipation. “Hell, yeah.”

Stepping into the ship, she was surprised by how bright it was. Windows peeked from the walls, and tiny white flowers flowed along the vines, glowing softly. It was more beautiful than she remembered.

The door closed behind them.

She circled the small area, letting her fingers glide along metal and vegetation, until she came to the front of the craft, where two chairs sat at the control panel, staring out a large window into the gardens.

He sat gingerly on one of the chairs.

He's still hurting, though he tries not to show it.

“Ready?”

Excitement buzzed through her. She sat down on the other chair, and they both buckled up. He reached out and touched his palm to a large square of green on the control panel. Beneath his touch, the green seemed to melt. The ship hummed softly, and suddenly, seemingly effortlessly, they were rising from the ground.

“Wow,” she whispered reverently.

It was unlike anything she'd experienced before. Like flying in the belly of dragon, rather than a metal machine. The ship maneuvered like a bird, banking and soaring. As they rose higher and higher, she laughed, amazed by the strange sensation. Soon they left the atmosphere and entered space.

Only then, did he take his palm away from the controls, and turn to her.

Words bubbled out before she could stop them. “This is incredible. I thought I loved flying before, but this is like something entirely new. She moves so smoothly, so gracefully. I can’t imagine technology ever being able to compare with this.”

She unbuckled, and he followed.

Peering around the ship, she laughed. “*Zenon* is something else...”

He pulled her against him.

Her gaze met his. His emotions were written clearly on the strong lines of his face. They washed over her, stealing her breath. Never had she seen a man look at her like that, as if he cared for her, as if he was amazed by her. As if... her heart stammered.

“I’m so glad you like her.” He ran a finger along the line of her jaw, and she shivered. His gaze said far more than his words ever could.

She leaned into his touch. “You know. You’ve ruined me now.”

He frowned. “Ruined you?”

Smiling, she pressed a light kiss to his fingertips. “Yes, for other ships. How am I ever supposed to fly something else?”

He took a step away from her. “I want to show you something.”

She instantly missed the feel of him so close to her. He wasn’t just warm and comforting; he had somehow become familiar in a way that sent her blood singing through her veins.

Maybe it wasn't just his ship that had ruined her.

"This way." He turned and walked to the center of the ship. Pressing his fingers to the wall, a circle opened above him. Using steps she hadn't seen before, he climbed up into the ceiling. She followed after him, nervousness and excitement bubbling through her stomach.

She gasped as she came through the ceiling into the upper level of the ship. The entire high-domed ceiling of this level was made up of square glass, with vines covered in glowing white flowers woven between the squares. Space was all around them, stars glittering in the vast darkness.

It took her a second to look at the actual room, too overcome by the beauty of the unique ship's design. It was sparsely decorated, with a large bed to one side, and an equally impressive desk to the other. But even though there was little that felt personal about the dark wood furniture and silver bedspread, the patterns of swirling flowers on the walls gave the room a strangely personal touch. A beauty like nothing she could compare it to.

"I've envisioned this room from the first time I was handed *Zenon*." Liam was watching her again, his expression guarded.

She closed the distance between them, running her hands from his chest up to his broad shoulders. "I would've never had the imagination to create something this beautiful."

He closed his hands over hers. "You're the only person I've ever shown this room to, besides my father."

His words raised every hair on her body. She should be afraid. The last thing she wanted was to see this man as anything more than a sexy alien to satisfy her every desire. *But*

he's already more than that to you. She pushed the dangerous thought aside and rose on her tiptoes, needing his kiss more than she needed her next breath.

“Last time,” he said, his husky voice sending heat shooting through her stomach, “we did things your way. This time, we do things the Keltair way.”

Need and excitement raced through her. “And what way is that?”

He reached for the buttons on her shirt. “I’m the male.”

She tilted her head, doing nothing to stop his nimble fingers as they moved from one button to the next. “What does that mean?”

He undid the last one and slid her shirt off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor in a pool of dark blue fabric. “That means I’m in charge.”

A shiver made its way down her spine. “I’m always in charge.” Her voice came out as husky as his own.

His gaze traveled down to the translucent black lace barely covering her breasts. “Then it’s about time for something new, don’t you think?”

“I wore this just for you,” she murmured.

His eyes darkened, and he reached out, brushing his warm fingers against one nipple and then the other. She gasped as her nipples hardened, straining against the soft fabric.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured. His fingers trailed through the valley between her breasts and down her stomach. They stopped at the button to her uniform slacks. “Still sure you want to be in charge?”

She couldn’t breathe for a long second. “Liam...”

He undid the button, then slid down the zipper. Her pants joined her shirt on the floor. His hot gaze traveled to the scrap of lace that matched her bra.

“Those...” He met her gaze, murmuring, “can’t possibly be considered underwear.”

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her voice before speaking. “Are you complaining?”

“Always such an attitude,” he whispered, moving closer to her.

Their gazes met and held.

She gasped as he slid the lace aside and slid one finger inside her. Her knees nearly caved, but his other arm wrapped around her and held her as his finger slid tortuously slowly back out, then back inside her again.

“Oh, God,” she groaned, closing her eyes as trembles racked her body.

He is right. I don't want to be in charge, not if it means feeling like this.

“You’re so wet,” he groaned into her hair, his rhythm increasing.

Her knees did give out then, but he didn’t let her fall. Instead, his magical fingers left her body and he picked her up. She whimpered in frustration, a sound so foreign that it took her a moment to realize it’d come from her own lips.

Instead of taking her to the bed, he set her down in front of his desk. His need-filled gaze met her own. “Take it off.”

She reached for the clasp between her breasts.

“No,” he commanded. “The underwear.”

With trembling fingers, she slid the scrap of lace down her legs, letting it drop to the floor beneath her. Without being told, she placed her hands on the desk behind her and spread her legs, thrusting her breasts toward him.

“Shit,” he groaned, and the curse was music to her ears.

He was on her in an instant, one hand brushing up her spine and the other going to her core. He stroked her once, making her cry out in shock and surprise.

He cursed again, stepping back. He didn't bother with the buttons on his shirt, but simply tore it off, throwing it over his shoulder.

For a second the sight of him was almost too much. The heat. The power of his movements. *Am I really going to orgasm from the view of his spectacular body?* She ground her teeth together. *No.* She had more self-control than that.

Still, she loved to see him like this. His golden-bronzed skin, the hard muscles of his stomach and chest. His desire barely under control. It sent waves of need through her that left her hot and bothered in a way she never had been before in her life.

He undid the buttons on his pants and they fell in one quick motion.

He wore nothing beneath.

She drank in the sight of his large manhood. Before, things had been so quick, so unexpected, she'd really had no more than an impression of how large he was. Now, she knew. He was huge. So large that she wanted nothing more than to take him in her mouth, to taste the thing that left her wet and painfully aroused.

She reached for him.

He took a step back. “No. Turn around.”

She didn't give a damn about his orders and grabbed him anyway. A groan ripped from his lips as she knelt down and took him in her mouth.

“Hannah, no. No.” But the words were a chant as he rocked back and forth, his expression pained.

She took him in and out, bringing him so deep she had to fight an instinct to gag. But inside of frightening her, it only turned her on more. She hummed against him, reaching out to stroke the sensitive parts of him that didn't quite fit in her mouth.

He cried out and drew back from her. “Gods, woman. Do you want me to finish right now?”

She licked her lips and looked up at him. “Maybe I want to taste you.”

His hands fisted, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the fire burned her to the core. *This is a Keltair male in charge.*

Half of her wanted to run, but there was really nowhere to go.

And then, he was on her, spinning her and pushing her facedown on the desk. Her hardened nipples brushed the smooth surface, and she felt the heat of his body as he covered her from behind.

One hand slid around to cup her breasts through the thin material of her bra, thumbing the tender nubs. Then, it slid down her spine, making every hair on her body stand on end.

“You want to taste me?” he growled sexily into her ear. “Maybe I want to taste you.”

His large hand ran along her ass, sweeping down, one finger flipping into her from behind. She cried out, unable to control herself. Her core was throbbing, and when he removed his finger, it felt painfully empty.

She heard him suck his finger, and then he groaned. Her body trembled in response.

“I’m going to enter you now,” he whispered.

His manhood pressed against her ass. He slid it along her butt cheeks. Her legs shifted in anticipation, but his cock continued its slow, torturous rubbing against everything except where she wanted him.

“Damn it, Liam,” she groaned, running out of patience. “Fuck me.”

In an instant, he plunged inside her.

She screamed in utter pleasure.

His hands rested on her hips.

She tried to wiggle, to force him to begin the rhythmic movements that would send her into an orgasm unlike anything. But he held her still with his hard grip.

To her frustration, he kept them that way, leaving her painfully aware of the hardened cock inside her. She could feel it pulsating, sending every nerve in her body spiraling. He filled her, stretching her to make room for him. But he didn’t move.

She scratched the surface of his desk, gasping as her body screamed for release.

He reached forward, brushing back her bra and capturing her nipple. *Holy hell. I didn’t think he could make this any worse.* His fingers squeezed her in just the right way.

“I’m—going—to—kill you,” she groaned.

He chuckled humorlessly. “Well, my little warrior. Perhaps you’ve suffered enough.”

“Bastard!” she cried, wriggling so his cock rubbed just enough to send stars dancing before her vision.

Releasing her nipple, he leaned over her on the desk so that his breath brushed her ear. “But then again, maybe you haven’t. Shall we bargain, wee warrior? You want me, and I want more than four more times.”

It took her spinning thoughts a second to grasp his words. “Just four more—“

He slowly withdrew his manhood from her.

“No,” she choked on the word. *Damn him.* “Fine. Please, Liam.”

Both his hands grasped her breasts as he slid back inside her. “I want you as often and as many times as I want.”

You might as well just hand him your heart on a silver platter.

“No, that’s way too many. I have to study...”

He growled and slid all the way out. She tried to back into him, to force him into her. “As often as I want, Hannah. Nothing less.”

Her head was spinning, her senses overloaded. Every cell in her body trembled and cried out for him. *I don’t fucking care anymore. I just need him.* “Yes, yes, all right.”

He groaned with relief. And that’s when he finally gave her what she wanted. His large cock slid in and out of her, and the stars before her vision turned into blasts of white. Her

entire body shook as she moved, matching his rhythm. He moved faster and faster. The sounds of their panting filled the air. Her heart raced, pounding until she thought it was going to explode.

And then she came. Screaming his name. Desire burning through every nerve. Her body spasming around his erection. And then as her body descended into twitches and her vision blackened, he came. The feeling of his hot seed and the sounds of her name torn from his lips had her coming again. She spiraled upward into pleasure once more.

When it was over, her entire body twitched. Her legs felt numb. He lay against her from behind, his hands still cupping her breasts. Her sight slowly returned, even while her head continued to spin.

“That was—“

“Incredible,” he finished for her.

Incredible doesn't even begin to describe it. Whatever I thought I was doing all these years, I was doing it wrong.

A second later, he turned her around and swept her up into his arms.

“But you're hurt,” she protested softly.

He shook his head, his jaw locked as he carried her to the bed and laid her down like something precious. *Stubborn male*. But her words lacked their usual chastisement—she just felt too damn good to be angry. Then, he was climbing in beside her, his long body cradling her own.

She reached up and brushed the soft hairs on his face. “Is that how it always is with a Keltair?”

His eyes narrowed. “If you’re thinking of trying out more of my kind, you should know I’m the only male who will ever make you feel that way.”

She laughed. “And are all of you so well-endowed?”

“Just me.”

“You answered that pretty quickly,” she said, raising a brow. “Could it be you’re hoping I never have an opportunity to be proven wrong?”

He rolled on top of her, sliding between her legs.

She gasped as his erection brushed her womanhood.

“All this talk of other males tells me you’re not satisfied just yet.”

Her head spun. “Liam, already?”

He slid inside her, tearing a groan of pleasure from her lips.

“When I’m finished with you, you’ll never think of another man again.”

When his hot mouth took one of her nipples at the same time as his manhood came fully inside her, all she could think of was *if this is how he punishes me when I talk about other men, I’m going to make sure to do it all the time.*

But as he slowly made love to her again, she was left with absolutely no thoughts, her heart and body overwhelmed with emotions.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Hours later, Hannah stumbled through the gardens back at the Starflight Academy, grinning at the thought that Liam would soon wake to see her gone. *He might have been in charge for a little while, but he needs to be reminded that I'm the true alpha of our relationship.* She'd never felt so weak or so satisfied in her life. But the best and worst part of it all was the strange feeling that filled her chest. Liam was special. He suited her in unexpected ways. As much as she wanted things between them to stay superficial, they weren't.

She should be terrified, but she wasn't.

Her mother might not have been able to balance her love for her father and her pursuit of her graduation from the academy, but Hannah was not her mother. She could do both, and she could do both well.

Someone stepped onto the path in front of her.

She jumped back into a slight crouch on instinct. Then she saw him.

"William," she said, letting her fists fall. "You scared me."

Her friend adjusted the cap on his bald green head, pulling it lower over his dark eyes. "I've been looking for you."

Guilt crept up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you."

It took him a second to answer. “You were with that Keltair, weren’t you?”

Hannah patted her hair, wondering if her day of ecstasy was so easy to see. “I’m glad I ran into you. The whole school probably knows by now, but I don’t exactly want to walk in screaming sex, if you know what I mean.”

The corners of his mouth turned down, and he shifted his backpack higher. “We need to talk.”

She frowned, swiftly coming back to reality. *Why does William seem so serious? Is something wrong?* The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. “Let’s just go inside. I’ve got a weird—“

“You said you didn’t want to be like your mother.”

She sat up straighter. “I don’t. I just—“

“You said you didn’t just want to be Fleet Admiral Stowe’s bratty, rich daughter.”

“I don’t,” she said, wondering at the growing venom in his voice.

“But all of it was a lie, right? You were always going to act like some slutty, lazy girl and excel just because of your damn name.”

“William! What are you talking about?” She stared at her friend, barely believing the words coming from his lips. “Just because I took a few hours for some fun doesn’t mean I’m a completely different person.”

He looked up from beneath his baseball cap, anger glittering in his dark eyes. “You missed our Communications class.”

Shit. “I got distracted.”

“Clearly,” he said, the word laced with sarcasm.

She bristled. “It was a dumb mistake. It won’t happen again.”

He glanced around them. “There’s more. I learned some stuff about that Keltair.”

His words knocked the air from her lungs. “What—?”

“Not here,” he said, weaving her down an unfamiliar path in the gardens.

Her stomach twisted as she followed him. William was one of her closest friends. She’d never seen him this angry before. There had to be something really wrong, and she dreaded what it might be. *Is it possible I’m wrong about Liam?*

She sped up. “What did you learn?”

He didn’t turn to her, but spoke softly, almost to himself. “You trusted the wrong person. I know you think you know everything, but you don’t.”

They circled deeper down the path. Large trees grew closer and closer, their full branches blocking out the sunlight. In the shadows, the day no longer felt so warm. She shivered, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Where is all of this coming from?” she asked, her thoughts spinning. “I know you’re worried about me, but I’m not going to make the same mistake as my mother. It was a momentary lapse in judgment. I’ll fix it.”

“I bet. You’ll just use your name, and the professor will forgive your absence.”

“No, William, I’m not like all the rich humans who’ve treated you and your dad like crap. I’m your friend.” She took a deep breath, feeling her heart squeeze. *He’s not angry. He’s*

sad. And scared. He's worried that now that I have Liam, I won't need him anymore. “Everything is going to be okay. We're going to achieve all our dreams.”

He started walking again. The twenty-foot walls surrounding the academy towered over them, deepening the shadows of the trees.

“Did you even look at my scores?” he asked the question over his shoulder, not looking back at her.

More guilt rose inside her. “No. I was...” She'd been distracted by Liam. “I'm sorry.”

He walked farther, his short legs moving surprisingly fast. She hurried to keep up with him.

“I had the bottom score. In every class.” Hurt laced each word.

She caught up with him, circling to stand in front of him. He wouldn't look at her. “You got in, William. *You*. On your own. These are just the first tests. You were nervous. You'll do better on the next ones. And I'll be there to help you.”

He was quiet, staring down at his feet. “I don't think I'm going to do any better. Not without more help than you can give me.”

She grasped his arm. “Yes, you will. I believe in you. One day you'll make an amazing starship engineer.”

“Do you see that over there?” He gestured with his head.

Frowning, she turned to look behind her. “What?”

Something stabbed into the side of her neck. She grasped it with her fingers and pulled out a long, metal injector. It lay in her hands, blurring more and more with each second. She

looked back at William. He was staring at her, his expression unreadable.

She crumpled to the ground, lying on her side. She tried to move her arms, but they wouldn't listen. She couldn't feel her legs. "Why?" The question came out garbled.

He crouched down beside her. "You rich kids are all the same. You think the world is there for the taking, but it isn't for all of us."

"But..." Her lips felt heavy as she spoke, "you got into the academy. You're a Hawk."

His lips curled. "You really think I did all of that on my own? As smart as you think you are, you're not. They're the ones that got me here, not you. I can have a future that should only be the stuff of dreams. All it's going to cost me is you."

She felt tears gather in the corners of her eyes. *No! William is my friend. He wouldn't really do this.*

"I'm sorry," he said, but his words lacked all sincerity. "I don't know what they're going to do to you, but I don't think it's going to be good."

He reached for her, trying to wrap his arms around her.

Using all her strength, she bit into the flesh of his arm as hard as she possibly could.

He screamed and drew back from her.

She spit out the blood and flesh that filled her mouth.

"Bitch!" He struck her across the face, so hard her head spun.

Then, he hit her again. And again. And again.

Her vision blackened.

She couldn't move, not a muscle. All she could taste was the coppery blood that laced her tongue, but whether it was all his or some of hers, she wasn't sure.

He dragged her. For how long she wasn't sure.

But when he stopped, her head fell to the side. She found herself staring at dirt around a large hole beneath the fence.

A slimy voice came from somewhere she couldn't see.
"Very good, William. Very good."

TWENTY-EIGHT

Liam awoke with an odd sense of déjà vu. His ship trembled around him, reflecting the way his heart pounded. He rose and threw on his clothes. *Where is my female? And why do I have the awful feeling she is in trouble, yet again?*

TWENTY-NINE

Hannah Stowe was pissed as hell as she stared from William to Heter. *Do these two assholes actually think they're going to abduct me?* Between her traitorous, former best friend and the spineless Letchi she'd encountered a few years before, they were a joke of a team.

“Remember me?” Heter rasped, scratching at the tan scales on his flesh.

A few of the scales came off on his fingers. He turned his dark pupils, surrounded by green, to stare at the scales, before letting them flake off to the ground.

“Nervous?” she mumbled, forcing the word past her partially numb lips. *Shedding was definitely the reptilian alien's tell.*

His lipless mouth turned down. “You won't be so cocky in a few minutes.”

“I doubt that.” She tried to sound sarcastic, while desperately trying to move her fingers.

She could feel her body twitch, but her hand remained limp on the ground. *Damn it. All I can hope is the paralytic they injected me with isn't too powerful, that before we get wherever we're going at least I get a chance to fight.*

The Letchi kneeled over her. “All those years ago when your dad threw me out of the Earth fleet in shame, he thought he’d won. You both stared down at me so smugly as he destroyed my life without a thought. But now you’ll both see why you shouldn’t have doubted me.”

Hannah probably should’ve been afraid, but she wasn’t. Heter was a dumb waste of space. He’d been lucky to get some low-level job on the *Centurion* starship. She could outsmart him. Hell, she could outsmart both of them, and she could get away. She just needed to play this right.

“So you did all of this just to take me and...what...kill me? Punish my father? Honestly, my father isn’t the kind of guy to get all weepy over his daughter. He’s just going to send the whole of the fleet to hunt you down and kill you. In the slowest way possible.” She swallowed around the dryness in the back of her throat, but kept her expression confident.

He laughed. “You think I arranged all this? No, stupid human. The people paying me are very, very wealthy. And they don’t want to kill you; they want to humiliate your father.” He leaned in, so she could smell the gut-wrenching scent of wet reptile. “I can imagine the many ways they’ll do that.” He licked his lipless mouth, obviously relishing the thought.

For the first time, William spoke, his voice shaky. “Sh-Shouldn’t we get her off the academy grounds?”

Heter shot him an angry glance. “The security cameras are disabled in this area, and since she didn’t take her precious guards with her, no one should notice she’s missing for a *very* long time.”

“Still...” William said.

Coward. Hannah glared at him, even though he wouldn't look at her. "So basically, your servant over here does all the dirty work and you get rewarded just as much?"

Heter froze, and she could practically see the wheels spinning in his head. "No. That isn't fair. The little green man will be helping me."

William took a step back, shaking his head. "That wasn't the deal. I just had to bring her to you."

Heter rose, wrapping a hand around William's throat and dragging him closer. Suddenly, the Letchi didn't look nearly as weak. He towered over William. Hannah's gaze snapped to the two laser pistols strapped to his sides. *Those certainly make him dangerous.*

"You will come with me through the jungle. Once we reach my ship, you may slink back to your academy and pretend you can succeed here without our benefactor's money. Understand?"

William nodded.

Heter released him and turned to her. "Ready for a little walk?"

"Bite me!" She spat.

The alien's strange eyes flashed with anger, and his hand curled into a fist.

"That reminds me," William said, turning his arm over to stare at the bloody wound she'd left him. "Watch out for her teeth."

"If the girl bites me, I'll bite her back." He smiled, flashing his rows of sharpened yellow teeth. "And you can bet that'll leave a mark."

As he hefted her over his shoulder and climbed down into the hole beneath the academy fence, Hannah had the sinking feeling she was in trouble. Maybe more trouble than she could get out of. *If only Liam knew how to find me.*

But that was the problem. As Heter had pointed out, no one knew she was gone. And even if they did, they had no idea where to find her.

THIRTY

Liam weaved through the gardens, his tension rising. He could sense where she'd gone. It was more than just the sweet scent she left behind that was wholly Hannah—it was something more. *You're scenting her like a mate.*

He pushed the disturbing thought aside. Yes, he wanted the little human more than he'd ever wanted a female before. And yes, her intelligence and attitude made for a combination he knew would never be boring. But no, he didn't plan to make the same mistake as his father.

Then, why can you sense her? Why are you so sure she's in trouble?

“Keltair!”

He whirled around to find Greg striding toward him. *I don't have time for this.* Liam turned back around and continued walking.

“Hey! I'm talking to you.” The human sounded out of breath as his feet stomped the ground behind Liam. “Hey!” He grabbed Liam's shoulder.

Mistake.

In one smooth motion, Liam grabbed the hand on his shoulder and twisted it, shoving downward so the blond man

was suddenly at his feet. Liam's body felt too tight and more than a little sore, reminding him that only a night before he'd been beaten by the cowardly head of security. *But pain means nothing.*

Greg flinched as Liam slowly turned his wrist harder.

"Damn it. All right," the human's voice was high and pleading.

Liam released him. "Whatever your issue, I need to find Hannah."

To his surprise, all the anger drained from the man's face. "Is she okay?"

A spike of jealousy buried itself in Liam's gut. How well did Hannah know this man for him to show such obvious concern?

"I don't know, but I plan to find her."

The other man climbed off the ground, wincing as he stared at his wrist. "After the attack on the academy, everyone is sort of nervous. But...I mean, are you just being cautious, or do you think there's actually something wrong?"

Liam debated not telling him. *But Hannah's life might be at risk. This is not a time for pride.*

"I think she's in danger. You may wish to alert security."

The blond nodded, his gaze clinging briefly Liam's face.

Yes, I know what I must look like. My stitches still bandaged. Bruises still black-and-blue. But no, it doesn't matter.

"Are you sure you don't need me to go with you?"

Liam stiffened. “No.” *A Keltair does not need the help of a weak human.*

“If you’re sure.” Greg’s voice held doubt as he turned to head back the way he’d come, but froze midstride. “You’re in love with her, aren’t you?”

Love...is that what this is?

“I’m going to look for her.” His voice was gruffer than usual.

He left the prying human behind as he hurried farther into the gardens. The shadows grew deeper as he left the better traveled paths. He inhaled sharply, smelling Hannah, but also... there! On the ground. He knelt down and touched one of the spots of dark red blood.

Bringing it to his nostrils, he breathed in the coppery scent. *Hannah’s blood, but also someone else’s.* He took two more steps before his gaze caught something shiny. Kicking it with his foot, he knocked the syringe out of the bushes.

Shit.

He didn’t run. Running meant he might miss some sign of the direction she’d taken, but he moved more quickly, his ears pounding with the sound of his racing heart. Without thinking, his hand went to the blade at his side. Personal weapons were not allowed by cadets, but he’d concealed his Keltairian fighting dagger in his ship anyway. The raw and powerful weapon was too important to leave behind. Besides, after all the years of training, he felt naked without it.

He’d hesitated to bring it when he awoke with the odd sensation Hannah was in trouble. Especially after the recent episode on the roof, but now he was glad he’d taken the risk.

Whoever had shed his female's blood would pay for the mistake with their life.

Old memories followed Liam with each step he took. Memories of his time among the Keltairs. It was hard to breathe as his chest tightened. He'd hoped to forget the person he'd become in those dark years. A person who was more animal than human. A person who was pitted against his fellow males. A person who killed.

And killed.

A chill ran along his spine. He'd wanted to leave that Liam behind so badly and embrace his human half, but the dangerous killer within him would have a far better shot at saving Hannah.

So that's who he would become.

If Hannah sees who I really am, she cannot love me.

The pressure on his chest built as sweat dampened his flesh. When he came upon the hole beneath the academy wall, he knew without question that's how Hannah was taken. He maneuvered his large body awkwardly into it, climbed into the darkness, and eventually came back out the other side.

In the jungles of Turonga, anyone could become lost. But Liam's steps never hesitated. He could sense Hannah. *Not much farther now.*

And when he found her, blood would run.

THIRTY-ONE

Hannah's mouth was no longer numb. And even though she hid it from them, she was able to shift her hands and feet. Heter adjusted her on his shoulder, then gave her ass another hard slap. She clamped her teeth on the hiss that nearly escaped. Her butt cheeks were probably as red as an Endorian sun, but she wouldn't give the Letchi the satisfaction of knowing he'd hurt her.

"You sound out of breath," she taunted.

Another firm slap sent her teeth gritting together.

"So much attitude," the Letchi said, running a hand down her upper thigh. "I know exactly how we'll get rid of it."

Her stomach twisted. She could not let this creature put her on his ship, no matter what.

"You must be enjoying this, William." She twisted her head slightly to look back at the little green traitor as he scrambled after them.

Vines and plant life that Heter easily stepped over were far more of a challenge to her short ex-friend. His gaze met hers, then slid away.

"I bet you told yourself that this was your way of getting back at all the privileged people out there," she continued,

“too bad that this won’t hurt them. It won’t make things better. It will just prove what they always thought about you and your race.” She choked on her anger. “Despite how those other people felt, I was your friend. And it was all just a lie you told yourself to justify betraying me.”

He said nothing, which only fueled the fire of her anger.

“What do you think they’ll do to me? Huh? While you’re at the academy, only succeeding because someone privileged has paid your way, how are you going to sleep at night knowing what I’ll be enduring?”

Finally, he met her gaze and held it. “I’m sorry, Hannah. I really am. But what I want is worth your life.”

Bile rose in the back of her throat. “My father was right about you. A Chamyion simply lacks the natural ability to be anything more than a useless follower.”

Anger flashed over his face. “Yet, I’m not the one being kidnapped.” And then, more softly. “I wish I could show you exactly what I’m capable of.”

How could I have missed every sign about what a psycho William was all these years?

Something beeped in Heter’s pocket. He pulled out a device. “The security cameras are back up. No one has been alerted to her disappearance.”

“Shit.” He jumped back. “Watch out. Fierian quicksand.”

Heter walked carefully sideways until finally striding forward. Finally, she saw what he was talking about. This jungle was dangerous in many, many ways, but the Fierian quicksand was one of the deadliest. Not only could it drag a person under in minutes, it also burned like hell.

She slid from Heter's shoulder and hit the ground with the side of her body. The breath ripped out of her chest, and for a moment she was too stunned to process what had happened.

“Chamyion, you wanted to show her what you're capable of, and I've always wanted to put my dick in this female. We have some time, so which hole do you want?”

Her stomach twisted sharply. “William wouldn't do that.”

Silence met her words.

Heter kicked her with his foot, flipping her onto her back. William and the Letchi stood over her. William knelt down next to her.

“We were friends.” She refused to beg, even realizing the note of desperation in her voice.

He met her gaze. “I'll start here.” His hand brushed her womanhood.

She tried to twist away, but couldn't.

“Good,” Heter muttered, slapping William on the back. “I wanted her asshole anyway.” He grinned. “At least for now. We'll have lots of time for more once she's on my ship.”

Both men began to undo their pants.

And that's when the reality of it slammed into her. Terror tore through her body and she started to scream, even knowing that no one would possibly hear her.

THIRTY-TWO

Hunt. Kill. Save your female.

Already Liam's thoughts were changing. He felt the dangerous creature inside him rearing its head. Every sound of the jungle echoed loudly within his ears. Animals moved in the distance, the screaming songs of birds came from all around. But everything ignored him. They sensed in him his right to be there, just as much as their own.

Hannah's scream cut through the natural sounds.

And he was running. Leaping over roots and bushes. Maneuvering around trees. Closer and closer until she was just beyond the next set of trees.

A slight disturbance stopped him in his tracks.

Crouching, he moved forward, hiding around the trunk of a tree. To his left, an immense pool of Fierian quicksand bubbled and spewed forth a putrid, acidic smell. He edged around it, inching closer till he saw them.

Every muscle in his body tightened.

Hannah's pants and underwear had been removed. William lay on the forest floor, his own pants down. A Letchi held Hannah up, then tossed her on top of William. The lizard-man pulled his own pants down.

“Put your little Chamyion’s cock in her. Who knows if she’ll even feel it, but she’ll definitely feel my big, scaled cock vibrating in her ass.”

Liam saw red.

He leaped toward them.

William cried out.

The Letchi turned with surprising speed, and Liam knocked him to the ground. Wrapping his hands around the reptile’s neck, he squeezed. The lizard’s eyes widened as his pale skin turned paler. Liam growled, enjoying seeing the life drain from his body.

A searing pain ripped through his stomach, and the Letchi rolled on top of him, a laser pistol in his hands. *If I hadn’t been in such a rage, I would’ve noticed it.* The reptile brought the gun toward his face, but Liam knocked it away. Using his head, he slammed the creature in the face. Black blood sprayed from its nose.

The creature screamed.

Liam threw it to the ground, knocking the pistol from his grip and onto the forest floor. He sat on its chest, and started to pummel the creature’s face. Over and over again he struck, his adrenaline pumping as its face became a swollen, bloody mass. The Letchi tried to strike back. Liam took the hand and snapped it, drawing a horrible scream from its lipless mouth.

Suddenly, he felt a pistol touch the side of his head. “Get off him.”

William’s voice shook, high and feminine.

Liam slowly turned to look at the coward. “Don’t.”

The pistol shook harder and harder in his hand. “I’ll kill you. I really will.”

“Not before I kill you.”

The weapon shifted slightly, and Liam knocked it away.

William’s eyes widened as *oh god* formed on his lips.

Liam grabbed him and tossed him into the Fierian quicksand.

The little green man was silent for one painful second, and then he began to wail. *Burns like hell, doesn’t it, coward?*

The Letchi rose unsteadily onto his feet, reaching for the other gun at his side. Liam caught the hand, snapping it. The reptile shrieked and crumpled to his knees. Liam withdrew his dagger.

“You took the one I love. For that, you deserve a slow death.” His words were clear, even over the sound of William thrashing and screaming.

But somewhere in his clouded thoughts, he was aware of Hannah still lying on the ground. Half-clothed, and probably terrified. He slashed the dagger across the creature’s throat. Blood struck his flesh. It tried to reach for its throat with two useless hands, then fell back.

Liam kicked him once. Then again. *Dead.*

Turning back to William, only his neck and head were still out of the quicksand. But even that bubbled with sickly, swollen green and yellow bumps. *A very painful death. One deserving of a coward.*

“Help! Help me, please!” William begged, tears streaming down his swollen flesh.

Liam ignored him and finally let himself look at Hannah. Her face was swollen. A cut bled from her cheek, while her lip bled, too. Her pale skin was even paler, and tears swelled in her eyes.

His heart ached, even though he didn't want it to. He ignored William's desperate pleas while he began to dress his battered human. Fears sprang to his mind. Had they succeeded in raping her? Or had he been fast enough?

If he'd been too slow, he'd never forgive himself.

As he reached for her and drew her into his arms, his chest twisted in pain. He grit his teeth and stood.

"You're hurt," she whispered, her head lolling back.

He frowned. "So are you. Did they...?"

"The injector was filled with a paralytic."

She hadn't answered the question he was asking, but maybe she wasn't ready to. He turned and started back to the academy, striding around the outside of the quicksand.

"Please," William begged.

His heart hardened, and he didn't slow.

"Liam." His name sounded like something precious from her lips. "We should save him."

His grip tightened around her. "If I save him, you will never be safe."

She made a sound that was almost a laugh. "I'm not afraid of him."

He looked down, staring into her impossibly green eyes. "Trust me. Knowing he's alive will haunt you."

"Liam..."

“His death is by my choice. Not yours. You’ll have no guilt in this.”

As if to end their argument, William grew silent behind them.

“It’s done. You’re safe now,” he whispered.

Relief washed over her face. “Let’s hurry back then. You look like you’re about to fall over.”

He forced himself to stand up straighter. “I’m not even tired.”

She gave a soft laugh. “Liar.”

Liam took one step when a sickly sweet voice had him freezing.

“Well, what do we have here?”

THIRTY-THREE

At first, Hannah saw nothing. But then shadows separated themselves from the jungle trees, and a sight from her nightmares had her blood turning to ice. The most dangerous race of creatures in the known universe.

Darogos.

One of them stepped out into the light, his oily skin shimmering like diamonds as the rays slid across him. From his bald head to his nude body, the darkness that cloaked his skin was almost painful. White eyes with pale golden pupils stared without blinking. And after a moment, he opened his mouth to hiss, displaying a mouth full of sharp, golden teeth.

“Hannah, we meet at last.”

This is impossible.

Her father was said to be responsible for the attack that stopped his interplanetary-child-genius smuggling ring and killed every last one of his gang. There were whispers that a few of them had escaped, but the admiral had done everything in his power to squash the rumors.

Although now I know they weren't rumors at all.

More shadows stepped forward. Her heart quickened as she counted...there were eleven of them in total. *Too many.* A

cold hand wrapped around her heart. Darogos were fast—predators that fed on the flesh of other creatures. They believed they could absorb strength and memories from other intelligent beings, so their preference was for humans or humanoids. It was said one Darogos could strip the flesh of a person in under a minute.

God, I hope I don't find out if that rumor is true.

“What?” he asked, his sickly sweet voice sliding against her skin like a shark rubbing across her leg. “Do you have nothing to say before we take you and eat your friend?”

She swallowed. There was no getting out of this. If they were faced with one or two Darogos, she wasn't sure they could make it. But against these odds? They were doomed.

You are doomed. But Liam can still get away.

She took a deep breath, barely moving her lips. “Throw me at them and run. It's your only shot.”

To her horror, Liam's grip tightened around her. “Not a chance.”

“This is suicide,” she ground out, her gaze never leaving the creatures.

He was quiet for half a second. “Clearly you have never seen an enraged Keltair.”

Very slowly, he knelt and set her down.

No! How the hell can I help him if I can't move?

Come on, Hannah, you know how.

“Darogos. Hmm... this is awkward. I thought all of you were dead.”

The creature crouched, hissing again, and the other Darogos followed his stance. “We are immortal. Death can never take us.”

Hannah laughed, although it sounded hollow. “I seem to remember seeing a lot of your *immortal* bodies exploding like overripe fruit.”

The creatures threw back their heads and a horrible, high-pitched chattering filled the air.

“What are you doing?” Liam growled, crouching further over her.

“Providing the distraction, so you better make good use of it,” she whispered.

She thought he would sneak away, plan a surprise attack, or something. But apparently, he had other plans.

His shadow passed over her as he leaped, driving his Keltairian blade into the eye socket of the lead Darogos. He pulled back the impossibly sharp blade and let the creature fall to the floor. He sliced two more heads off before they reacted. But to her horror, they did the worst thing possible; they came at him as one.

Razor-sharp claws raked toward him.

He sliced one hand off.

Another Darogos leaped onto his back, sinking its teeth into his shirt, ripping through the fabric like butter, before chomping into his flesh.

Liam ran backward, slamming it into a tree and scattering the other Darogos from him. As it slid to the ground behind him, he sliced its throat.

Two more dived at him.

Liam sliced. He missed. One slashed his stomach.

Liam grunted and cut off its arm. Blood sprayed him and the other Darogos.

They surrounded him, ignoring their wounded. Liam stabbed out. Missed. They sliced with their claws. He darted out of the way.

One raked Liam's arm.

The Keltair roared, the sound shaking the trees around them.

He rushed them, knocking them to the ground. His blade caught one. Another rose and sank teeth into his shoulder. He shook it free, tossing it to the ground and shoving his blade into its chest.

The Keltair male spun, and the Darogos were running. He gave another roar and ran after them into the darkness.

Hannah was trembling. It all felt like a strange dream. No one should be able to fight that many Darogos and live. Her mind flashed over his many wounds, to his body drenched in blood.

He still might not live.

She raised an arm, rubbing her chest where an ache had bloomed. *I can't lose him. Not just because he risked his life for me, but because I need him.*

A second later, the trees began to shake. So close that she could feel the heat from the rockets, an old ship, structured to mimic a Keltair living ship, rose into the sky. In seconds, it shot away, disappearing beyond the clouds.

Liam! Is he okay?

She tried to use her heavy, but working, arms to rise, but she couldn't. The rest of her body was still numb. She started to crawl, inch after inch, through the blood-drenched ground. Avoiding a severed hand, she shifted and continued on.

“And where are you going?” A relief she hadn't known she could feel came over her as she was hoisted back into his arms. Tears sprang to her eyes. “Liam, you're okay!”

He nodded, flinching.

He isn't fine.

“Put me down. Go for help.”

“No,” he said the word and started walking, his gaze fixed ahead.

She studied him. His golden skin had never looked so pale beneath the splatters of crimson blood. Every part of him was oddly warm as blood soaked into her side. All she could hope was that most of it was from their enemies, rather than him.

“You saved my life.” Her throat closed around the words. *But why? Why had he endured such awful things for me?*

She wanted to ask him, but the question simply stuck inside her head. *All I can do now is make sure he lives.*

THIRTY-FOUR

Liam's head felt heavy as he continued through the jungle. More lives. More lives taken by his choice, and his little female had been there to witness it all.

Would she fear him now?

Looking down at her pale face, their gazes met once again.

Perhaps she didn't fear him...worse still, she likely felt he couldn't keep her safe.

"I..." But he couldn't find the words bleeding within his heart. "I'm sorry I didn't protect you."

To his surprise, his little human smirked. "You might not be able to predict the future, but your timing is damn good."

How could she smile after all she had been through? Hannah truly was incredible. A woman he'd strive to be good enough for every day of his life.

Just ahead of them, a loud siren began wailing. *It took them long enough.* But just as quickly as his annoyance flared, he extinguished it. None of it really mattered, except that Hannah was safe.

Except for the unquestionable truth that Hannah has somehow become your mate.

The idea should've terrified him, but it didn't.

A soft clicking came from all around them.

“Drop her, Keltair!”

Again?

THIRTY-FIVE

Hannah glared at Dr. Wores. “Why isn’t he awake yet?”

The old man ignored her, his focus on reading the projected screen at the foot of Liam’s bed.

She didn’t want to be annoying, but she couldn’t seem to sit still. Rising from the chair next to Liam’s bed in the medbay, she started to pace. Outside the huge windows, the two suns were setting, painting the sky in reds and oranges. And yet as beautiful as the image was, she felt strangely detached.

This had not been a good day.

After a lengthy explanation, she’d finally gotten the security personnel to understand that Liam was not the enemy so he could get some medical treatment. They’d found Heter’s body, and later brought in a specialized machine to pull William’s body from the quicksand. *The person I considered my best friend. If this experience isn’t enough reason not to trust anyone, I don’t know what is.*

Except Liam.

She didn’t want to look at him, but she did. Lying on the bed, the white sheets pulled up over his bare chest, he looked strangely...vulnerable. She’d seen him get shot, but she’d

been in too much shock to fully register what that meant. And she'd seen him get clawed and bitten, but shock had kept her from realizing how much blood he'd lost. It wasn't until he collapsed that she'd been left wondering how he'd managed to carry her through the jungle, with not only his barely healed wounds from the attack by the head of security, but also from the laser pistol slicing through his gut, and the Darogos using him as their chew toy.

No one should have to be so strong.

"He'll live," the old man said, staring at her with his cloudy eyes.

She'd known he would. So why was her throat suddenly so tight? Slowly moving back to his bedside, she swept the dark hair off his forehead. "He'll have even more scars to add to his collection."

Dr. Wores's stern voice startled her from her musings. "Those Keltairs are animals. If his scars are any indication, I'm shocked this boy lived through whatever the hell they did."

"It wasn't just the Keltairs." Hannah let her hand travel down to play at the edges of the waterproof bandages covering his chest. "Our people hurt him, too."

After a moment of silence, the doctor spoke more gently. "I'm glad he has the love of a good girl like you. He deserves that."

Her heart lurched. *Love?* Did she love him?

Her heart beat faster and her palms started to sweat.

She wanted to run from the question. But she'd been dancing around it for days.

He's intelligent, hot...and he obviously cares for me. He's saved me twice, been there for me when no one else has. We're a good match, in so many ways.

But he's a Keltair.

Does that matter? She examined her thoughts. No. It doesn't matter at all.

She tried to calm the trembling of her hands. I do love him.

A knock at the door stilled her thoughts.

"Hannah?" One of the guards stuck his head in. "Your father wants you to call him."

She looked at Dr. Wores. "I'll be right back. Let him know if he wakes."

THIRTY-SIX

“I need to see Hannah,” Liam said, pushing away the old doctor’s hands as he sat up.

“Boy, you need to lie down. I just finished stitching up that stomach of yours, and I won’t have all my hard work destroyed.”

Liam groaned as he threw his legs over the bed and rose unsteadily to his feet. “Where is she?”

“She went to her room. She said she’d be back shortly. Just lie down.”

He wanted to lie down, he really did. But more than that, he wanted to hold his female and make absolutely certain that she was okay. No amount of medicine or rest could soothe him the way seeing her could.

You saved her. Why isn’t she here watching over you?

He pushed the thought aside. When he saw her, he would know.

The old man’s wrinkled face was suddenly peering up at him. “All right. You can go. Already your body’s healing at a remarkable pace. I’d thought to give you more time to rest, but —”

“Thank you,” Liam said, his gaze meeting that of the old human. *Thank you for saving my life.* He owed the man more than he could say.

And then, he turned and walked out of the medbay. It took him a moment to get his bearings, but then he headed for the elevators. He hit the buttons by the doors. A few seconds later, the doors slid open, onto his waiting father.

The Keltair’s gaze widened as it ran over the bandages covering his son’s cheek, shoulder, arms, and stomach. “What have these damned humans done to you?”

“Peace, Father, I am well.”

He tried not to look as unsteady as he felt as he joined the other Keltair in the elevator, hitting the button to the twelfth floor. The doors closed, trapping them inside together.

“First they falsely torture you, then they allow you to be abused by Darogos.” His voice lowered. “I was wrong to let you come here.”

“No,” Liam said, meeting his silvery eyes. “I’m fine.”

His father’s eyes narrowed, and he inhaled sharply. “Son...”

Liam’s heart pounded faster. “You can return home. Your help isn’t needed.”

“Who is she?”

They stared at one another.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

His father growled. “You smell like a mated-male. And there are no other Keltairs here. I refuse to believe my only child would be so foolish.”

So it's true. I've mated Hannah.

But for some reason, he smiled. "I'm a man. I know what I'm doing."

His father reached out, gripping his bare shoulder. "You are repeating my mistake. Why can't you see that?"

Because I'm not. "Hannah isn't like Mother. We are perfectly matched, and she's in love with me, too."

"Bah! Most youthful mistakes can be overcome. This is a mistake that will haunt you forever." His father's anger was palpable, filling the small space like a heavy stench.

"I'm not making a mistake."

The elevator doors opened, and Liam stepped from his father's grip and into the white hallway. Then, he turned back to face the old Keltair.

"Are you sure she loves you?" his father asked, his voice softening.

"I'm sure."

The doors started to close, but his father caught them. "I got you a spot at the Starflight Academy on Earth. It is the second best. No one would need another reason to move you there, beyond your vicious attack at the hands of these cowards. If you leave now, if you never see her, smell her, or touch her again, you have a chance to be free."

Liam squeezed his hands into fists. "I don't want to be free. I just want Hannah."

As he strode down the hall, a tiny flare of doubt burned within his heart. Hannah had never specifically said she loved him. In fact, she'd gone out of her way to make it clear that

their relationship was nothing more than a temporary satisfying of their sexual needs.

But I know this is more than that.

Still, to risk his heart, to give up any chance of mating with another female, he needed to know for sure.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Hannah stared at her father on the monitor, her body trembling with exhaustion. It was hard to remember the events of the past few days. She'd slept only a handful of hours since the attack on the academy just the day before, and it felt as though weeks had passed. "I'm fine."

"Those damned guards should've done more than stand at your door!" He slammed his fist into his desk. "Where the hell were they through all of this?"

Her gaze went to his rumpled uniform and messy silver hair. *I'm driving him crazy.* She hid a smile. As much as her father liked to hide behind the mask of Fleet Admiral Stowe, underneath it all he really did care about her.

"It doesn't really matter. It's done."

Her father fell back in his chair, running an angry hand through his hair. "It does matter! I'll have their uniforms before the end of the day."

She sighed. "I never told them they needed to follow me around. They shouldn't have needed to—"

"Yes, because the academy should be safe!"

She drummed her fingers on her desk. "All that matters now is that I'm okay now."

His pale green eyes fixed on hers. “I’m glad we found out that William was a traitor sooner rather than later, but this should be a warning to you. As confident as you are about your ability to judge a person’s character, even you can be wrong.”

Subtle. “So you heard about Liam?”

He tilted his head. “What are you doing with that Keltair, Hannah? Surely you could find less dangerous methods to keep me worried and awake at night?”

She frowned. “It isn’t about that.”

“Then, what’s it about?” His tone was soft, his expression unreadable.

This was the last thing she wanted to talk to her father about. But who was left that she could confide in now that William was gone? Her heart gave a useless squeeze. *He was never your friend. It was all a lie.* But as confidently as her brain thought the words, her heart only ached more.

“He saved my life.” The words dropped like stones.

After a moment, her father picked up the papers on his desk, his gaze skimming over them. “I read that. But I also read that you wouldn’t have been in the gardens if not for your time *visiting* that Keltair.”

She bit her lip. *Of course he knew everything.* “He’s the most incredible man I’ve ever met.”

Damn, I sound like a lovesick puppy.

Her father sighed loudly, setting the papers down. “They call it the ‘academy attraction.’ They put a group of attractive, intelligent, young people together. Everyone falls in and out of *love* with each other throughout the year, and then each cadet

is placed on different ships, and they realize that their feelings were nothing more than a crush.”

Swallowing the lump that had formed in her throat, her brain screamed *that's exactly what this is*. But her damned heart radiated a more powerful thought, one that burned through her veins: *this is more than that*.

“I care for him.”

They locked gazes for a long moment. But to Hannah’s surprise, it wasn’t anger in her father’s eyes, but pity.

“This is my fault. I’ve treated you as an equal all your life. But I forgot, underneath all the training and your incredible intellect, you’re really just a girl. And girls have crushes that overpower all logic.”

She glared. “I bet I look small from that high horse you’re riding.”

He snorted, a sound that was half laugh, half angry. “I’m just saying I thought you were having difficulty balancing your work at the academy and your Dream Jumping. But the truth is, you’re having difficulty balancing your responsibilities and your new crush.”

“That’s not true.” She crossed her arms.

A battle of wits with my father is not what I need right now. After the day I’ve had, I’m basically fighting this battle with a broken sword. Her head gave a throb, as if to confirm that she was indeed one step away from curling up into a ball and letting her father win their argument, out of sheer exhaustion.

“Why did you miss your class earlier today?”

Shit. Of course he had to know that, too. “It won’t happen again.”

“Hannah.” He steepled his fingers on the desk in front of him. “I’m going to be blunt with you, because, frankly, I think it’s the only chance I have at getting through to you. You know I was against you attending Starflight Academy in the first place. But now you’re there, and you need to succeed. For yourself, if not for me and our family name. If what you and this Keltair have is real, then you should be able to take a step back from him, to gain some clarity, and decide if pursuing this relationship is worth the risk to your future career. But if you just want to stay in a hormone-induced, bubbly, love cloud, that’s fine. Just don’t kid yourself about what you might lose as a result of the wrong choice.”

Like Mother: Her head felt light. *Am I really going to follow in her footsteps?*

Everything I feel for him seems so real, like nothing I’ve experienced before. Just the thought of his face has everything inside of me warming. This is more than attraction—it’s love. But what price am I willing to pay for it?

“Do whatever you wish, Hannah.” She looked up as he pushed aside the pile of papers in front of him and picked up another, his gaze running over them as he continued speaking, half-distracted. “I had finally begun to accept that all the sacrifices we’ve made in order for you to attend the Starflight Academy were worth it. But one of my abilities as a leader is to adjust my perspective. If you want to just have some fun there, God knows you deserve to act like a normal young adult. You don’t have to achieve the impossible. You entered the academy knowing more than most of the crews I’ve encountered. Whatever you do, you’ll do well at any ship you work on.”

She was shocked by his words, and hurt blossomed in her chest. “I can have Liam and be the captain of a Level 10 ship.”

He raised a brow, glancing up from the papers. “Can you? Only a handful of women have, and that was through dedicating their lives to the pursuit of their careers. But who am I to doubt you? Now, I have other things to attend to. Enjoy your time at the academy.”

“I won’t,” she spit out. “I’m here to work hard.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, reaching for the button on his screen. “Oh, and your personal guards will arrive in the morning. They’ll be following you every second for the remainder of your time at the academy. And, by the end of the month, there’ll be a new dean, and a new security staff, handpicked by me.”

“Father—” Hannah didn’t give a damn about the security. She didn’t want her father to change his perspective of her.

“Good luck,” he said, and the disappointment in his eyes burned before he clicked the screen, and it went black.

Hannah sat back in her chair, stunned. Her father had lost all respect for her. She could feel it like a bullet buried beneath her flesh. What was worse, though, was that she was disappointed in herself. How could she risk everything she’d worked her whole life for, for one man? Well, not a man, an alien. For Liam.

Because he loves you, and you love him. Because he saved your life.

But where was the future in that? At the end of the day, love wouldn’t make her the captain of a Level 10 spaceship. And she was terrified of making the biggest mistake of her life.

I need to take a step back from Liam. She needed to put up a wall between them until she could fasten the lock on her emotions and approach what they had from a logical point of view.

But convincing Liam of that might be hard.

It didn't matter what she had to say or do. She was drowning in her doubt, and she couldn't allow the Keltair to make this decision for her.

Even if taking a step back from him will hurt him.

A tiny voice whispered a terrible thought, *or if it might mean you'll lose him forever.*

She wrapped her arms around herself, gathering the strength for one more battle that day. One she couldn't afford to lose.

THIRTY-EIGHT

How long had Liam been staring at her door? His finger hovered over the button, but still, he couldn't bring himself to push it. *You're a warrior! Are you really afraid of a little human female?*

His finger still wouldn't push the button. He contemplated turning around and leaving. If he felt she loved him, did he really need her to confirm it? An image blinked into his mind, of living life like his father. He could not be tied to a weak female who would not be able to handle being with a Keltair male. *Imagine how much happier Father would have been if he'd had a woman to stand by his side. If he hadn't spent so much time worrying about her—and me?*

“No,” he whispered to himself. *Hannah isn't like that. She's the strongest woman you've ever met.*

He pushed the button.

A moment later, the doors were sliding open onto Hannah's pale face. Her eyes widened at the sight of him. Her gaze swept over him, and the corners of her full lips twisted down.

“What are you doing here? Why aren't you in the medbay?”

It wasn't the greeting he expected, but he didn't care. She looked beautiful. Standing in a long green shirt, the same shade as her eyes, cut enticingly low over her large breasts, she was a fantasy. His gaze ran over her bare legs. *No pants? Was she wearing underwear?*

His manhood rose. *If she was wearing anything, it was probably another tiny scrap of lace.*

Which I'll see for myself before the end of the day, he promised himself.

He reached out for her, taking her chin and tilting it up. "I needed to see you."

He stepped inside, the doors closing softly behind him, and suddenly, the room felt intimate and small.

She sprang out of his grip, taking several steps back. "You—you should be lying down."

He ignored the way his stomach turned. *She's acting strangely.* Pushing the thought aside, he attempted a smile. "Trying to get me in bed again?"

Pushing her dark hair, still wet, behind her ear, she nibbled her bottom lip. "At least sit on the couch."

He frowned and stepped toward her. "I don't want to sit. What's wrong?"

Those brilliant green eyes of hers looked up, locking gazes with him. "I need to talk to you."

Not good. "I love you."

She stiffened, her large eyes widening even farther. "Liam..."

"And I know you love me, too."

Please.

“I—you see...” She had turned even paler.

Do not let her push you aside. This female is strong. She will fight you just to ensure that you will fight for her.

“There’s no need to deny it. In fact, I won’t believe you.”

Her hands fisted at her sides, even while she stared down at her bare feet. “My goal at the academy is to be the best—”

“As is mine,” he cut in, confused by the change in topics.

She took a deep breath, which drew his eye to the swell of her breasts. “But this has been my dream all my life.”

He nodded distractedly. His body ached for her, but he had to put his needs aside for the moment. He would still lay with his female that night. *She won’t leave me. I can’t let her.*

“Liam, are you listening to me?”

He tore his gaze from her body to her face. “I am.”

She ran a hand through her hair and started pacing in the small space. “The thing is—what I’m trying to say is—I think we need to take a step back.”

What? His focus was totally on her now. “A step back from what?”

She froze and looked at him like a six-legged squid caught in a net. “From us.”

It might’ve been the medicine, but in that moment, he finally understood. He felt someone had reached into his chest and ripped out a vital organ. He grasped the back of the chair beside him, closing his eyes.

“Liam?” Her voice was close, tentative. “Maybe you should sit.”

He opened his eyes. *Like hell.* “We are not taking a step back. We are in love, and there is no reason to be separated in any way.”

She touched his arm. *Such a gentle touch.* “I don’t know how I feel, but I know I need time to sort it out.” Another deep breath. “And I know my goal will always come before whatever is happening between us.”

“It’s love,” he pressed. “Why are you afraid to admit it?”

She straightened. “I’m not afraid. It’s just—we agreed on five times. We’ve slept together twice now. That means there’s only three times left.”

His head ached. “That was before. When this was just physical.”

“It’s still just physical,” she said, staring at his chest.

Liar. “I will not settle for something ‘just physical’ between us. I need more.”

Every second she didn’t respond cut him to the core. *Am I wrong about our connection?*

“I can’t offer you anything more right now.”

Anger flooded him. He grabbed her and dragged her against his body. He had an impression of eyes widened in surprise, and then he was crushing his lips against her own. Electricity shot between them. Heat wrapped around him. His desire rose as he sensed her need matching his.

Not just physical. She spread her lips, one hand digging into his hair. As she shifted, he bit back a groan of pain as the wound on his stomach gave a sharp stab. But he ignored it, his hands drifting below the hem of her shirt and cupping her firm butt cheeks.

Suddenly, she pulled back, ducking out of his grip. “We can’t!”

She wiped her lips with the back of her arm.

He tried to clear his mind from the raw desire.

“If you’re trying to prove this is more than just physical, you’re failing.”

He growled, opening his mouth to respond, but she spoke before he could.

“This,” she said, pointing from him to her, “is physical. I want you. There’s no denying that. But if you think I’m going to give up the career I’ve waited a lifetime for, you’re wrong. We’ll have to separate, maybe for years, before we could request an assignment together. And if you think I’m going to be thinking of you, waiting around when you aren’t there, you’re wrong.”

No. He stared at her. The woman he loved. The woman he was mated to. Disbelief swirled in his mind like smoke. *Could I have really been so wrong?*

“This is a crush,” she said more softly, almost to herself. “Once we graduate, we may never see each other again. This can be fun, but nothing more than that.”

The ripping in his chest continued, long and more painful than anything he’d experienced before. *Is this what it’s like to be denied by one’s mate?* He could never endure this feeling again.

Whatever hold this female had over him, he would eradicate it. He would not allow love for her to torture him like it had his father.

“You are right.” His voice was harsh, so harsh she jumped. “My pain and medicine had me speaking of love. When really, it has only been physical for me, as well. You are not even a Keltair, just a pale, weak, human female. Your fear proves you are not worthy of my love.”

Her face fell, but he wasn't done. He felt betrayed by her inability to admit the truth. And any remaining connection with this woman would destroy him. He needed to burn every connection between them, or he would never be able to let her go.

“I release you from your bargain of three more times. I will find a new woman to satisfy myself.” He spit the words with all the venom that oozed from his broken heart. “One who is brave enough to acknowledge her feelings. And can handle being with a Keltair male.”

The doors opened before him, and he hesitated before walking through, not looking back at her. “Goodbye, Hannah. I'm glad we had this little talk.”

THIRTY-NINE

Hannah crumpled to the floor. She wasn't sure how long she sat there, staring at the door Liam had walked through. She felt cold, colder than she'd ever felt in her life. Liam's words were filled with violent anger, but they didn't fool her. Underneath it all was grief.

I hurt him.

She'd broken his heart. And her own. Her thoughts spiraled, spinning together uselessly.

This is what she'd wanted. To draw a line between them. To no longer be distracted.

But you didn't want to completely destroy everything between you. Tears filled her eyes. That was the last thing she'd wanted.

She'd made the choice between her future and Liam, so why did she feel so awful? *Because maybe your future could've included Liam. If you were stronger. You're just too weak.* One of her tears broke free and slid down her cheek, followed by another. Now, she'd finally be able to focus.

Yet, she felt empty. *Why focus if there's no joy in it?*

As darkness descended, and the soft lights came on automatically around her room, she realized too much time

had passed. Rising on stiff legs, she stared without seeing.

How could I have made the right decision if it hurts this badly?

Maybe you didn't. If she could choose a future—being the captain of a Level 8 ship, with Liam by her side, or a Level 10 ship alone—which would she choose?

The choice was easy: *Liam.*

And it hit her, goose bumps erupting on her flesh.

I made the wrong choice.

But it wasn't too late.

She rushed out her door and across the hall. At the keypad by his door, she typed in the code she'd long ago mesmerized. Lights flickered on, illuminating the dark space.

Something felt off. Moving around the room, it took her a second to realize what was wrong. Every tiny thing that was Liam's, that made the room personal, was gone. She went to his dresser and pulled out a drawer. *Empty.*

Sickness bubbled inside her stomach.

She turned and hurried out the door, nearly bumping into Sanders. The short, red-haired cadet flashed her a smile that faltered.

“Have you seen Liam?” Hannah asked, desperation lacing each word.

The woman nodded. “He was in the front office while I was there getting some paperwork. I guess they moved him to the Starflight Academy on Earth.”

“*What?*”

She turned and stumbled across the hall back to her room.

“Are you okay?” Sanders asked, her voice filled with concern.

Hannah couldn't form the words to answer her. Instead, she entered the code to her room and stepped inside. The doors slid shut behind her, and she stood, staring. What now? Had she really just lost the man she loved?

Like hell!

She was Hannah goddamned Stowe. Nothing ever stopped her from what she wanted, and she wanted Liam. *So what now?* She glanced at her computer and clenched her fists. Perfect. She would bare her soul to the incredible alien who'd stolen her heart. And if he was the man she thought he was, he'd be on his way back to the academy before the night was out.

At least she hoped.

FORTY

Hannah stared at the shimmering bubble that indicated Liam's dream. Tears flowed freely down her cheeks. After three days, she'd had to accept that the alien who'd professed his love for her hadn't really meant it. No matter how empty she felt inside, she told herself to accept his decision. Even though food no longer held any appeal. Even though her dreams had been plagued with nightmares ever since.

So how did she end up here?

You agreed to let him go. But she guessed her brain and heart didn't give a crap about her decision, or else she wouldn't be here. She should leave. She knew that. Along time ago she'd made the decision to respect the privacy of her friends and family when accidentally Dream Jumping into their dream.

Yet, she didn't leave.

Instead, she stepped into the bubble. The dream was a familiar one. Liam lay on a hot red stone, baking beneath the harsh rays of three suns. More stone and sand stretched out in all directions around him. His body had been shredded, leaving behind a mass of bloodied flesh.

Her heart twisted, even while she tried to ignore it. This was not a nightmare. Liam had actually lived through an

attack by his fellow Keltairs, one where he'd been left for dead.

She inched closer. Her shadow fell across him.

He turned, squinting his eyes. "You?"

An unexpected horror squeezed her chest. Did she want to hear what he had to say?

"No," he said. "You shouldn't be here."

The landscape blurred and changed. Suddenly, they were in a tropical paradise. A large waterfall fell into a pool of crystal blue waters. The trees that crowded them were draped with vines covered in glowing blue flowers. A slightly chilly breeze carried with it a sweet, foreign scent.

"This is where we should be."

She turned at the sound of his voice. He stood before her, naked. Her body warmed. She'd started to think her memories of him were more fantasy than reality. But she was wrong. His skin glowed a healthy bronze. He was large, large in every way. Big shoulders, huge, muscular arms. Her gaze ran lower.

"You can't really be that big."

His cock jerked as if to acknowledge her words.

"Come on," he said.

Gently, he removed her white tank top and lacy white underwear. He flung them, then surprised her by lifting her into his arms.

She laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck. Even though none of it is real, I want to pretend for a little while it is. One last time.

He carried them into the warm, sweet-smelling waters. He set her down and stood her in front of him. His hard manhood pressed into her stomach. Heat shot into her center, pooling between her legs.

“I need you,” she whispered, brushing his dark hair from his forehead.

He tugged her wrist, kissing it and then her fingers. Then, his mouth descended on hers. She arched against him, feeling her hard nipples as they rubbed against his bare chest. She moaned as one hand grasped her breast while he deepened their kiss, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. His fingers grasped one of her nipples, squeezing it.

Her womanhood tightened. “Liam...”

Groaning, he grabbed her ass and pulled her up, to wrap her legs around his waist. Suddenly, his head was buried against her chest, taking one nipple into his mouth and sucking gently and then harder. She cried out, grasping his hair. But his hungry mouth only moved onto the other breast.

So good together. Why didn't he come back for me?

She shifted, rubbing against his erection.

He cursed, pulling his head back, staring into her eyes. The look of pure need and desire hit her, stealing her breath. His cock rubbed against her opening and slowly slid in. She screamed his name, her body shuddering around him.

The pounding of her heart seemed to fill her ears. Very slowly, he withdrew from her, then slid back in.

She was shaking. Shocked by how he filled her. It was almost uncomfortable, as if there wasn't quite enough room. He filled her completely, more than she'd ever thought possible. It also felt amazing. Deep. Profound.

Wanting more and not willing to wait a moment longer, she drew him in farther as his fingers dug into her ass. And that's when he snapped. Thrusting in and out of her, his rhythm grew faster and faster. She clung to his shoulders, throwing her head back.

His mouth drew in one of her hard nipples, sending her crashing over the edge. She screamed his name, over and over. Her vision turned white. Every nerve carried an impossibly strong electric current as her muscles went from tense to liquid.

And that's when he came, hard and fast. His seed spilling into her like liquid fire, sending her over the edge again, as she clawed at his shoulders.

"I love you, Liam." The words bubbled out against her will, but she felt the need to say them, even if it was only a dream. Even if he wouldn't remember it.

He didn't answer, but held her in the waters for a long time after that. His cock still warm inside of her. Neither of them spoke. One of his hands stroked her back, while the other held her ass, as if afraid she might pull away.

But she never wanted to be away from him. She wanted to live in that moment forever. Because somehow, this Keltair male had become an essential part of her life. How was she supposed to slip away, never to see him again?

He didn't come back for you.

How would she ever be able to say goodbye?

You have to. He's already let you go.

Her throat closed.

She needed to let him go. She'd revealed her heart to him, and he'd ignored her desperate plea, not even caring enough to respond. He said you were too weak. Was she really so desperate to cling to him through his dreams?

No, Liam, I promise, I'll let you go. For both of us. Holding him more closely she made a silent wish, that the morning would never come.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lacey Carter Andersen is a USA Today bestselling author who loves reading, writing, and drinking excessive amounts of coffee. She spends her days taking care of her husband, three kids, and three cats. But at night, everything changes! Her imagination runs wild with strong-willed characters, unique worlds, and exciting plots that she enthusiastically puts into stories.

Lacey has dozens of tales: science fiction romances, paranormal romances, short romances, reverse harem romances, and more. So, please feel free to dive into any of her worlds; she loves to have the company!

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