

A photograph of a man's bare torso from the neck down to the waist. He has a large, intricate black tattoo on his left chest and upper arm, featuring a central circular motif with radiating lines and geometric patterns. He is wearing a dark belt and dark pants. His hands are resting on his hips. The background is a dark blue space with many small white stars.

Falling for the Alien

My Alien Love Story
Book 1

ROSEMARIE GOLD

FALLING FOR THE ALIEN

MY ALIEN LOVE STORY BOOK ONE



ROSEMARIE GOLD

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To those who look upon the stars with hope for the future.

CHAPTER 1



My alarm blares, and I groan, but I can't hit the snooze.
I haven't hit the snooze in four years.

Not since my parents died in a helicopter crash. As a result, I've inherited Sunshine Networks, the tech company my parents built into a Fortune 500 company.

I swear I haven't had a chance to grieve my parents. The board has been fighting me for control these past four years, and I've been stuck in meetings all day long every day, but I'll win. My father hadn't been more in charge than my mom. They had been equal partners. If anything, my mom knew more about technology than my father had.

First things first, I grab my robe, set my coffeemaker to brew me a cup, and hurry out the front door to collect the mail. It comes at such a weird time of day that getting the previous day's mail has become a part of my morning ritual.

There's a larger stack than normal, and I grab it all.

"Gracie Sparks," Willow Thornton calls.

I wave to my neighbor. "Good morning, Willow."

"Is today going to be the day?" she asks.

I grin. She used to be best friends with my mom, and while she doesn't understand business, she's been one of my biggest supporters.

"You never know."

“The board is just ridiculous,” she says. “They have to remove the blinders from their eyes sooner or later.”

“So long as they don’t try to do anything to jeopardize the company... it could be worse.”

“You can go ahead and try to make lemons out of lemonade and believe the best and wear rose-colored glasses, but this is beyond absurd. I still think you should’ve gone to news stations and called out the board years ago.”

“And have the company under scrutiny and look bad in front of the eyes of the public? Our stock would’ve plummeted, and there’s no way the shareholders would’ve thought favorably about such a move.”

“Bah.” Willow waves her hand. “It would’ve worked out.”

I laugh and head inside the house. My coffee is ready, and I bring the mail and my cup over to my dining room table. In addition to the company, I also inherited my childhood house which is way too big for just one person, but why would I sell it? It’s a mansion, and my parents paid it off.

As is my ritual, I check through the mail. Every single piece is junk.

I blow on my coffee and take a sip as I open up my to-do list on my phone.

1. *Shower*
2. *Apply makeup*
3. *Get dressed*
4. *Meeting with the board*
5. *Meeting with shareholders*
6. *Lunch on the go (most likely)*
7. *Meeting with Jack*
8. *Meeting with Jill*
9. *Dinner meeting*
10. *Wash face*
11. *Brush teeth*
12. *Bed*

13. *Rinse and repeat*

I sigh wearily. Jack and Jill aren't their real names, but it's a way to try to make things not seem quite so bleak. Jack is my best bet for getting in with any of the board members. Jill is the one biggest holdout against me, not that many on the board aside from Jack is on my side.

Yes, my to-do list is a little on the absurd side, but I love the dopamine hit each and every time I cross an item off.

Quickly, I shower, dry my hair, and ally my makeup. I should've added dry my hair to my list. Oh, well.

I stand in front of my closet. The collection of business skirt suits I have collected over the years is pretty incredible.

There's something in the air this morning. Today is going to be an amazing day. I have no idea why I feel this way, but I'm actually whistling as I adjust my skirt that falls a tasteful two inches above my knees.

A strong noise has me hesitating. My car is out front, but that noise definitely came from the back.

I glance at my watch. I have about ten minutes yet of time to play with, so I pull out my phone and check the security camera footage and see nothing.

What is that noise?

For better or for worse, I head out back to cautiously investigate.

As soon as I set foot outside, I'm nearly knocked off my feet. There it is again, a loud noise that sounds like a metal beam being twisted and then suddenly released.

My heart races as I slowly walk toward the sound. I'm almost to the back patio when I see a strange blue light coming from the trees in my backyard. The noise increases with each step until it's so loud that it feels like someone is drilling into my skull.

My legs feel strangely paralyzed. All I can do is watch as a blue-skinned alien saunters out of the trees, snatches me up in its strong arms, and disappears with me into thin air.

CHAPTER 2



One minute in I'm my backyard, investigating a strange sound in my backyard.

The next, I'm in the arms of an alien.

Disappeared.

Reappearing in some kind of spaceship.

Being kidnapped by an alien, blue skinned or not, was not on the to-do list!

I still feel a bit paralyzed as I stare at the alien. The blue isn't deep, not navy, but darker than sky blue. His eyes are like emeralds, and he stands about seven feet tall. He has pointed ears, sharp teeth, and what appears to be two antennae on his head. He's wearing some kind of shimmering tunic that looks almost like armor.

Armor. He looks like a warrior.

"Who..." I can barely talk.

What did he do to me?

Or maybe it was that sound that caused my body to feel so weak.

The alien stares at me for a moment before speaking in a language I don't understand.

I remain in his arms, but he takes a few steps and gently places me in a chair. My body still doesn't respond to my commands. All I can do is stare at him, my mouth hanging open. Even my tongue feels numb and strange.

Slowly, he reaches out with one hand. He gently touches my cheek in an almost comforting manner. I feel the strength of his touch, but it's not forceful or aggressive.

"Gael," he says in a voice that is almost musical. "I Gael."

His name? Gael?

"I am Gael, from the planet Zerkrud. Please do not be frightened. I mean you no harm."

My hand, I can lift it, but it just flops down.

Gael grimaces. "I am sorry. The effects should wear off too. Drink this."

He turns around. I have no idea where he gets a cup from, but when he turns back around, he holds a cup up to my mouth and forces me to drink some blue liquid.

My tongue doesn't feel so numb now, and I can move my neck some. The rest of my body still feels numb and immobile for the most part, though.

"Wha..."

Okay, so my brain is still slow. I'm not even sure what I should say.

"I am a Zilqud," he says, "just as you are an Earthling. Gael, a Zilqud from Zerkrud. You are an Earthling from Earth named..."

"Gracie," I say. "I need... I have to... You can't kidnap me!"

"You need to calm down."

I snort, and my nostrils flare. "You don't know much at all about Earthlings, especially Earthlings women. We never want to be told to calm down!"

Gael moves closer to me with sudden concern. He begins to murmur soothing sounds as he strokes my arm, trying to calm me down. I try to turn away from his touch, but my arm still isn't moving much at all.

"Don't touch me!"

“Listen.” He touches my ears. “Listen. The Zilquds are a part of the Cosmos Coalition.”

“As if that means anything to me,” I mutter.

“We are in the middle of an intergalactic war, the Cosmos Coalition and the Interstellar Amalgamation.”

I blink a few times. “That means nothing at all to me or the other Earthlings, and I don’t want that to change. Bring me back to my house and leave already!”

Gael shakes his head. “I’m sorry, I can’t do that.” He takes a deep breath. “It is not that simple. The war is larger than you could possibly comprehend, and much more dangerous than anyone can imagine. We are in a fight for our very survival, and both sides have powerful weapons that can destroy planets. If we do not win this war, it could mean the end of all life in this sector of the galaxy.”

“But what does this have to do with me? We aren’t involved in this war! Don’t drag us into it!

“I wish to keep the Earthlings out of this as much as possible, but you will come to see that will only be feasible with a representative there.”

“A representative. Me. Why me? Why not someone else? Anyone else?”

“The Zilquds have been fighting on behalf of the Cosmos Coalition for centuries now, so I understand your desire to return to Earth and live in peace. But I am afraid that is no longer possible at least for now.” He sighs heavily and looks into my eyes with determination. “I took you because I must.”

“Because you must?” I cry. “What kind of bullshit is that? And how do you know English? Have you been watching over us? That’s hella creepy if you have been.”

Gael averts his gaze and wrings his hands, as if he’s debating how much to tell me. Finally, he sighs and holds up a hand in a placating gesture. “I understand your frustration, Gracie, and I assure you English was not the only language I was able to pick up during my time here. All Zilquds have natural language abilities because of our advanced technology,

and I chose to learn your language specifically because of the mission.”

“What mission?”

Gael sighed. “It is too long a story to explain now, but I assure you that I mean the Earthlings no harm.”

“If you want me to be an ambassador to emissary, the answer is no.”

“I don’t, but we don’t need to worry about that right now. We’re already off.”

“Already off?” I cry.

If I could, I would have jumped to my feet.

“Earth is far behind us now,” he says calmly.

I feel sick to my stomach. How in the world is my being a representative going to prevent the Earthlings from being dragged into this war?”

“You’ll see.”

“Way to not explain things at all.” I roll my eyes and try to shift forward. I don’t think I’m ready to stand just yet, but I need to get up.

To get out of here.

Already off.

I can’t believe this. I have the rest of my to-do list and...

The armor. He really is at war. He’s going to drag me into war, and aliens are real, and I don’t know if I can accept all of this as being real.

Only... he’s real. Gael. He’s touched me. I’m not dreaming. I’m not dead.

This is real.

An alien really did kidnap me.

What the hell.

CHAPTER 3



I swallow hard. How is this my life? How is any of this my life?

Gael stands, his expression unreadable. He holds out a hand. “Come with me,” he says softly.

I don’t want to take his hand, but when I stand, I almost fall right back down, so I quickly latch onto him for balance. My legs have that terrible pins and needles sensation dialed up to an eleven, but I manage to walk using him as an aid.

He leads me down a long hallway and into a room that is lit in the corners of the ceiling by strange devices. There’s a large window overlooking an expanse of stars, and I can’t help but think about how far away from home I am now.

Gael steps back, making sure to keep his distance. He takes a deep breath. “I understand that this is all very overwhelming for you right now—”

“Understatement of the century,” I interject dryly, suddenly wishing he would let me go so I could be alone with my thoughts and my worries and my fears, all of which are rising up inside me like a storming sea.

His gaze remains one, steady and serious, too serious. I have to look away.

“I understand that this isn’t easy for you,” he begins quietly, “but please believe me when I say that we must act now if we are going to save our people from an unspeakable fate.”

“My people aren’t involved at all,” I argue, meeting his gaze and glaring at him, daring him to try to claim differently.

He grimaces but nods and then gestures to the one wall that has a bed built into it. “Sit or lie down,” he says gently. “Take your time to process what I have said and form your own opinion on it.”

On my own, I walk over to the bed and sit down slowly. My mind is reeling with questions, but I can’t think of any words that would make sense right now.

He gives me an understanding nod before turning away and walking out of the room without another word. The door shuts automatically behind him.

The silence is overwhelming. Why has happened? Meeting Gael, being brought aboard his spaceship, learning that aliens are real, that they’re at war... Nothing makes sense; I feel utterly confused, lost, scared...

I still have my cell. I open up my to-do list on my phone. Yes, I know it’s ridiculous, but I add to the bottom:

1. *Get kidnapped by aliens.*

Immediately, I cross that off, but there’s no dopamine rush with that.

I sigh and squeeze my eyes shut. What else do I need to add to my list?

1. *Find out what’s going on with Gael and why he needs me.*
2. *Decide whether or not I want to help Gael fight in his war.*
3. *Find a way to get home safely, if at all possible*

I sit there for a moment, my thoughts still racing through my head as I contemplate what I've gotten myself into.

1. *Take control of my situation.*
2. *Figure out what to do about this utterly bizarre and dangerous situation I'm in.*

I hate that I'm wondering if I should acquire armor for the war, armor like the kind Gael is wearing. You don't wear armor just for fun. Does that suggest he thinks we might be in danger anytime soon? That's the last thing I need right now.

Should I help Gael and his people fight whatever enemy they're facing? I can't see how I would be any help there. I would almost need to get trained in warfare and weaponry for all of that. Getting prepped for battle... physical and mental conditioning, acquiring armor, like I thought about before, gathering supplies...

No, I know what's the biggest thing I have to do right now, as much as I hate it, but there's no other way. Reluctantly or not, and trust me, it's reluctantly, but I have no choice but to face the truth.

I need to accept that this is my reality now. At least for the time being.

With a deep breath, I stand up and walk back toward the door. It's time to find out what else is waiting for me on this journey.

I stand before the door and realize I don't know how to open it. There isn't a knob.

I take a few steps back and squint my eyes. In the corner of the wall next to the door, there's a small electronic panel. That must be how Gael activated the door when he left.

But now that it's shut, I can't get out.

Gael locked me in this room.

My stomach drops. Anxiety starts to creep up my chest and throat like a thick fog, making it hard to breathe and think straight. Still, I can't give up just yet. I need to keep my head on straight if I want a chance at getting out of this alive and well.

I inspect the walls around me in search of any kind of mechanism that might open the door but there's nothing, not even a crack or crevice. All of the walls are perfectly smooth, as if built to never be opened again once sealed shut. Frustration mounts inside me, and my breathing becomes shallow as panic threatens to overtake me.

I sit down at the bed again and cradle my head in my hands, trying desperately to fight off the hopelessness that's beginning to take over as I realize that there is no escape from this chamber, none by my own power at least.

I'm in Gael's clutches now. My life is dangling by a thread, a thread that's in his hands.

And I swear, if he has scissors or a knife or some other kind of fancy sci-fi weapon that he plans on using to snap my life thread short prematurely...

As if I'm in any position at all to threaten him.

Dejected, I cross back over to the bed. How the hell am I going to survive all of this?

CHAPTER 4



I reach into my pocket to grab my phone. Even though I know it won't work, I still try to call a friend. My finger shakes as I hit the button to try to place the call, a feeble attempt at trying to reach someone and get help. Of course, I know it won't work. Not in this place, wherever that is. The strange static my phone is giving off is just another reminder that I'm all alone here, in a foreign and dangerous place with no means to reach out for help.

Well, not really a place. I'm out in the middle of nowhere in space.

I sigh heavily and shake my head in frustration.

Who is Gael? Why did he bring me here? What kind of war is he fighting? What kind of danger am I in now?

With a sigh, I resign myself to fate and put my phone back in my pocket. As I lie down, I slowly start to come up with a plan. First things first, I need more information about the situation at hand. I need answers from Gael... and hopefully some kind of safety net as well, just in case things go south quickly.

Second thing is figuring out how to get out of here once I'm done gathering info from Gael. That's gonna be tricky, since this spaceship room seems very secure and escape-proof, which only heightens my fear of what kind of enemies he might be up against if he needs such an elaborate security system in place.

Third thing is how I can make sure that whatever happens during the war doesn't end up hurting me or anyone else who might be involved. That's going to be next to impossible, I'm afraid.

But there's always a way, right?

I close my eyes and focus on all the small details of life back on Earth: the smell of freshly brewed coffee in the morning, the sound of children's laughter echoing down the street when I would ride in my convertible during the summer, the warmth of a hug from friends.

It all seems so far away now, as if it was another lifetime ago.

My stomach churns as I stand and walk over to the window. There are so many stars out there, but I don't really pay attention to the surreal sight before my eyes. Instead, I find myself reminiscing about the life I left behind through no choice of my own, a life where I could do whatever I wanted, go wherever I pleased. Sure, I had issues to contend with, especially with the company that should be mine already despite the board that things I'm incompetent, but that's far superior to all of this.

Because now I'm stuck in this sterile spaceship room with no way to get out and only a few clues as to why Gael brought me here and what kind of war he's fighting.

It's hard not to think of the consequences if something goes awry, but that's not something I can control now. All I can do is listen to Gael, stay brave and true...and hope for the best. As my thoughts drift further away from me, my gaze follows the stars scattered across the night sky outside.

The sky looks beautiful, clear and full of stars twinkling brighter than ever before, like a million pinpricks of light shining in perfect harmony against a dark canvas. Even though it won't help me escape this situation or answer any questions about what might come, I try to appreciate the sight before me.

No matter what, I'm not going to give up. I can still try my best to stay safe and protect myself.

And anyone else Gael might have brought onto his ship. I suppose I shouldn't assume that we're the only two people on board.

I press my forehead against the window, seeking comfort from its cold surface. Looking at the stars outside, I find myself feeling a strange mixture of wonder and sadness as I remember life before all of this had happened. Before Gael had taken me away from everything that was familiar and comfortable. Before I had become a prisoner in some stranger's war-torn world with no way back home.

The stars twinkle like distant memories in my mind, a reminder of simpler times filled with joy and laughter that now seem like a distant dream instead of reality, but the light they provide gives me some hope, tiny rays of optimism that light up even the darkest times, no matter how dire they might seem.

How much time had passed since Gael took me? All I had this morning was coffee. Normally, I'll grab a bite from a bakery on the drive in but not eat it until after the board meeting, although sometimes the meeting would make me so upset that I wouldn't want to eat, and then there's always another meeting.

I don't mind missing the meetings, but this is only going to make things almost impossible for me to try to gain my parents' company wholly and completely. Gael stole me away from my life. Why me? Why not someone else? I'm not a warrior. I'm not a leader. I'm not going to be able to help him.

I'm not sure I want to.

Why would I?

This isn't my fight. This isn't an issue for anyone on Earth.

Maybe it's just as well that Earthlings haven't developed the technology to go from planet to planet or from one solar system to another, one galaxy to another, one universe to another.

This isn't our fight. It's not fair that Gael wants to drag me into the middle of this.

But if doing so will create peace across the stars and stop a war that has lasted for centuries and centuries...

I guess maybe I should at least consider helping...

CHAPTER 5



I ‘m debating returning to the bed. Not that I’m tired, but seeing the stars, their brilliance, the murky blackness everywhere they aren’t shining, it’s too much of a reminder about the predicament I’m in.

Before I can make up my mind about standing by the window longer or sitting or even lying down on the bed, the door opens with mechanical hiss.

Gael fills the doorway, but he merely stands there, looking at me, not saying anything.

I cross my arms and lift my chin. “What do you want?” I ask, my voice steady, though I’m feeling anything but.

Gael steps into the room and closes the door behind him. He looks at me for a moment before he speaks. “I want to talk,” he says, his voice low and serious.

My heart races as I prepare to make my case, hoping against hope that maybe, just maybe, he’ll be willing to listen. I take a deep breath and start talking, slowly at first and then faster as more words come out of me.

“My parents died years ago. They left me their business, the house, their cars... all five of them, and they already bought me one. I have my own fleet. But that’s not... Their business is mind, but the board has been fighting me. You could even say they’re at war against me. They think I’m too young to step up and fill my parents’ shoes. My parents... That business meant everything to them, and they worked hard every single day to make it successful. And it is a success. It’s

a major company and so many people work for it. So many people depend on their company, my company, for their livelihood.”

I swallow hard. Gael is just looking at me, and I can’t read his emotions. His face... It’s so similar to my own in some ways, but in others...

My stomach churns, and I drop my gaze to his chest. He’s still wearing the armor, which reminds me of a far more dangerous one than the one I’m trying to claim is the one I’m fighting back on Earth.

I let my eyelids flutter shut. “Taking me away from the company has put the entire business in jeopardy. I need to go back for their sake. Otherwise... The business will be in flux. Stocks will plunge the longer I’m gone. The stockholders will panic, and it could, how knows? Cripple the entire company to go under, or... if I’m able to return too late, I’ll be shut out entirely. You’re forcing me into a war when I need to be back on Earth, where I belong, so I can fix all of the wrongs I’ve already had to deal with unfairly. You’re making my life almost impossible!”

I open my eyes. He’s staring at me, unblinking.

“What?” I challenge him. “Why aren’t you listening to me? Don’t you even care?”

He arches an eyebrow and his eyes narrow. “You seem to be the one who doesn’t care here, not me. You don’t seem to understand what’s at stake here.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. I’m not stupid and I don’t like being treated as if I am.

“I understand perfectly well,” I say, willing my voice to stay strong. “I know you want me to help you in your quest for peace, but it’s not something that concerns me necessarily.”

“No matter whether it concerns you or not, this is happening,” Gael says firmly. “We need your help, and I can’t let you sit idly by while matters are coming to a head.”

I take a deep breath and try to think of something that will convince him otherwise, without putting myself or anyone else

in harm's way.

"Look," I start, "you've taken me away from my home and family without my consent, so why should I—"

"I thought you had no family."

I stiffen. "You took me because I have no family?"

He says nothing, but I suppose that is answer enough.

"How long did you watch me before you figured that my life on Earth isn't worthwhile?" I spit out.

Gael remains silent, but somehow, I swear his presence seems to take up more space in the room without his moving. He's strong and solid and far too real.

I gulp. Arguing isn't going to get me anywhere with him. I should try a different tactic.

"You don't have to do this," I tell him.

He sighs, a sad and weary sound. "I need your help and there is no other way."

I nod slowly in acknowledgement, but I'm still determined to make him see reason. "Why me?" I ask again.

He shakes his head and finally steps inside the room, closing the door with a click behind him. "Because..." He pauses for a long time and then continues. "Because we need someone who can think outside of the box, someone who isn't afraid to take risks and can see past the obvious solution." He looks right at me as he speaks, his deep green emerald eyes intense and serious.

"Why don't you just use your own people? Someone who knows your world better than I ever will," I plead.

"There is plenty of time for you to learn more about everything," he says. "For now, you should try to rest. You are too emotional right now and—"

I snort. "Too emotional. That's another phase you really shouldn't use with Earthling women. Oh, and before you get the chance, don't you dare ever tell me to smile more."

“I meant no disrespect by saying you are too emotional right now. It is perfectly understandable that you are. In fact, if you weren’t, that would be alarming. You care, and that is important. People fight harder when they have more at stake. If you have nothing, why fight? The fight has gone out of you, but you... you have your company to fight for but also your friends.”

I stiffen and eye him. I do have friends. Despite my hectic life during the days spent trying to spend time fighting for my company, wrestling for controls, on the weekends, at least, I live for my friends. My parents had each other. Their love was the kind of fairy tales, and I hoped to one day marry for love, but after my parents... I cling to my friends. They’re the new family I have. No lover. I don’t have time for love, but I haven’t made much time for romance either.

“I’m not tired,” I tell Gael.

“I could give you something to help you sleep. You could sleep for the entire trek to my home planet.”

“How long will that take?”

“Two weeks in Earthling time.”

“That long?”

He nods.

“I’m not sleeping, not even taking a nap. Not now and not for that long.”

“Very well.”

And his lips curl into the smallest traces of a smile.

Does he think my company is something he wants? He’s going to think again.

Or maybe I should do what I’ve been trying with the board.

You catch more bees with honey.

Time to be sickeningly sweet so I can get off this blasted spaceship.

Once we've returned to Earth, that is.

CHAPTER 6



My mind races. How can I trick Gael into believing that I'm starting to see things from his point of view?

I swallow hard and clear my throat. "I... I don't know what to think about all of this. I apologize if it seems like I'm... It's not that I don't care that people are dying across the universe... universes? I just... It doesn't seem like it affects me, so... But if I can prevent it from affecting anyone else on Earth, I suppose..."

His smile grows wider. His lips are closed, so I don't have to see his sharp teeth, and despite his two antennae and his impossibly emerald green eyes and his blue skin, he doesn't look all that different from me. He looks almost... I don't know. The sight of him doesn't cause me to freak out, but the armor he's wearing does.

"Are you afraid we're going to be attacked?" I blurt out.

He lifts his dark blue eyebrows. His hair is the same color. Part of his head appears shaved, or maybe it doesn't grow everywhere on top of his head, but even the subtle five o'clock shadow on his chin is that same dark blue almost black color.

"What makes you think I'm afraid?" he asks.

"Well, for one, I don't think you would've taken me unless you were," I point out, ticking a finger and then another as I add, "and two, that armor you're wearing."

"This isn't armor."

"No?"

He shakes his head.

“So that’s just what you and your people...”

“Zilquds,” he supplies.

“Zilquds,” I repeat dubiously, but he nods. “That’s what you wear?”

“When we are in the presence of another alien species, yes,” he says.

I flinch. It’s strange for me to realize that he thinks I’m the alien, but of course I’m the alien to him.

I clear my throat again. “I don’t... I don’t know. It’s just a lot to take in, so maybe... maybe just for now... could we pretend that this is just a... sightseeing venture?”

“Sightseeing?”

“Like an excursion on a vacation. Jet skiing, ziplining, that kind of thing.” I brighten, and it’s not even entirely an act. “Maybe you could teach me how to fly this thing!”

“Just like that, you want to learn how to fly this ship,” he repeats, his tone a bit flat now.

Great. He’s suspicious. I mean, he has every reason to be, and honestly, he should suspect that I’m up to something, namely because I am, but still, he’s sure not making this easy on me at all.

I force a smile. “I’ve actually been thinking about learning how to...” I falter and look away, my stomach churning. “Before my parents, that is, I wanted to learn how to fly an airplane or a helicopter, but... not anymore. A spaceship, though, now that’s really something. I would love to learn how to. I mean, if the flight is going to take two weeks, why shouldn’t I learn? There’s plenty of time!”

“If you’re really that interested...”

I nod emphatically. “It’ll help keep my mind off of everything else, so yes, please. If you don’t mind. I hope you don’t. I really would like to learn, if you’re willing.”

“I suppose I could,” he says slowly.

I grit my teeth. “Should I learn? Because of the... war?”

He eyes me without blinking for so long that despite my trying to turn it into a staring contest each time, I blink three times.

Is he trying to read me? Understand me? Maybe he’s trying to work me as much as I’m trying to work him. Right or wrong, I’m trying to get what I can from him for my own purposes, but who can blame me? I shouldn’t have to shoulder the weight of every Earthling on my shoulders. I never sked for this, and he’s dragging us into this war. How fair is that? There’s no reason to believe that the Interstellar Amalgamation would ever be concerned with us. We don’t have the technology to make a difference one way or another so just leave us out of it.

Because we might not have the technology to explore the stars, but we do know how to make weapons of mass destruction.

My uneasiness grows. What if that’s some of the reason why Gael reached out to me? Because of our atomic bombs? I really don’t like that idea at all. Yes, there are a lot of warmongering Earthlings, but I’m not one of them. If he wants me to help fight... He should’ve realized that I’m not capable of violence if he really did watch me.

He claims he wants peace, but he kidnapped me. I don’t know if I can trust Gael.

He might not be the good guy in all of this.

CHAPTER 7



“You can learn,” Gael finally says.

“Thank you.”

I follow Gael out of the room and down a long hallway that leads to the cockpit. As we ascend the stairs I am in awe of the advanced technology. The dashboard is filled with switches, buttons and digital displays that light up the room like a starry night sky. It’s remarkable how futuristic it looks inside.

“How old is this ship?” I ask.

“Hundreds of years old by Earthling standards.”

“It looks so...”

“Well-maintained?”

“Something like that,” I murmur.

I glance over to the left at a holographic display system that shows 3D images of galaxies, planets and stars.

Gael begins to explain how each part works and what every button does. He pulls out a small device from his pocket and presses it against the console. The control panels light up, glowing with vibrant colors that seem to dance across the screen.

“This here is the navigation system. This ship was actually one of the first to use a database-based navigation system instead of manual calculations.”

“That sounds impressive.”

He snorts. “It is. We utilize advanced computer programming to create detailed maps of galaxies and interstellar routes that helped them travel quickly and safely from one point to another in the universe.”

“So it just comes down to sure computers?”

“There’s more to it than just that.” Gael points to a device that looks like a large joystick. “It is possible to manually control the main navigation system. Here is the control panels for speed and acceleration, but you shouldn’t have to worry about that. The auto-pilot mode allows the ship to travel on its own given directions.”

“Do you ever travel manually?” I ask.

“No.”

“Can you teach me auto-pilot?” I ask, trying to hide my eagerness.

If I can just get him out of here and program for us to return to Earth...

“Compared to Earth, we have holograms that assist us with our navigation as well as communications,” he says, basically ignoring me.

So maybe he doesn’t trust me much after all. Figures.

“And there are voice commands as well.” He eyes me. “It is not trained to listen and accept an Earthling voice. It knows and understands the registry of voices to know which aliens they come from. Do not worry. In the vent we are boarded—”

“Boarded?” I croak.

“If another were to have their ship attach itself to ours and they come aboard ours, they will not be able to use our ship.”

“No, they would just kidnap us. I wonder how much you would like that.”

“They would kill me and kidnap you alone, so I don’t think I would like that very much,” he deadpans.

My eyes widen. He’s sarcastic! He’s funny!

He grins, and I rub my arms and look away.

He can't sense my emotions, can he? He can't read my thoughts, right?

"We have sensors to detect just about anything and everything, and the weapons system is top notch."

I snort. "Top notch?"

"I took it upon myself to learn some Earthling phrases to try to make whomever I..."

"Kidnapped," I supply.

"I sought to make you feel more comfortable."

"Not exactly five-star accommodations here," I mumble.

He grimaces and dives further into details of its advanced features, such as its automated repair system, faster-than-light speed capabilities, and its inbuilt AI, and my curiosity is piqued.

"Come over here," he says eagerly, his enthusiasm for his ship evident. "This is the engineering section of the ship. We have different types of propulsion systems. Hydrogen fuel cells, anti-gravity thrusters, ion drives, and more. Here is a power grid system that utilizes superconductors which can generate immense amounts of—"

"Let me guess," I say dryly. "Power."

He snorts again. "Yes."

After familiarizing me with the cockpit controls, Gael takes me to other areas of the ship where I get an up close look at more advanced features. The ship has several different engines that allow it to reach extreme speeds in short amounts of time, and a powerful shield system protects against debris from space. There's even a teleportation chamber that can be used for transporting cargo or personnel from one place to another, which is how we disappeared and ended up in the ship.

"Why did I feel paralyzed before?" I ask.

“Ah. That was because of the wavelengths emitted from the huxfactor.”

“What’s that?”

“The noise you heard from the ship,” he says. “I knew you wouldn’t come willingly…”

“So you discombobulated me and rendered me incapable of fighting to free myself.”

He grimaces. “Essentially.”

“I can’t say I appreciated that.”

“I am sorry,” he says, and his tone is sincere.

I eye the equipment all around us. “So… are you going to turn this off of auto-pilot and let me fly some?”

“No.”

“Then can you teach me how to program in where we’re going for the auto-pilot?”

“There’s no need. It’s already programmed.”

I purse my lips. “So you never intended to teach me how to fly.”

He tilts his head to the side. “I did kidnap you, and you continue to hammer that point, which means you have yet to decide that you are willing to be here. As such—”

“Maybe it’s just my way of coping with being here,” I suggest.

Gael flares his nostrils. “You are not happy to be here, and you are not certain you wish to help. I am not asking you to fight. I am trying to prevent the Earthlings from being drawn into the war. My goal is for the war to end.”

“I still don’t see how my being here is going to help with any of that!”

He falls back into his stupid silence, and I turn my back to him. He can be so utterly infuriating, and bringing me here was just a tease. Gael is toying with me, and I don’t appreciate that at all. It’s immaterial that I was trying to use him.

How am I ever going to get back home?

CHAPTER 8



Gael clears his throat, and I stupidly hope that he's going to apologize.

Instead, he surprises me by asking, "Are you hungry?"

I look towards him in confusion. Is he serious?

"You're kidding me, right?" I ask, but my tone is more disbelief than anything else.

He shakes his head. "No, I am quite serious."

I consider this for a moment before realizing that it would be foolish to refuse food when offered. Maybe there's something on the ship that is actually edible. I mean Gael has to eat, right?

"Okay," I reply with a shrug.

He smiles at me, which I don't return, and he leads me from the engineering area of the ship. We make our way through several chambers until we enter a large room. In the center is a round table, and around it are several chairs. Gael takes out some food that looks oddly familiar: fried chicken strips, macaroni and cheese, biscuits—all of which look like it could be from Earth. He fills a plate for me with generous servings then hands it to me.

"Where did you get this?" I ask.

"I thought you might appreciate food from Earth."

"So this is really... You didn't make this?"

"No."

I no longer hesitate. I start to eat. I don't normally eat fried food, but the chicken strips are so juicy. The macaroni and cheese is made with spiraled noodles and many different cheeses. I find it hard to eat because of how stringy it is, but it is oh so delectable, and the biscuits? There's sausage gravy to go with, and the foods oddly complement each other well.

I've almost cleared my entire plate when I realize he hasn't eaten.

"Aren't you going to have any?" I ask him.

He chuckles. "I suppose."

I force myself to sit back, and I watch him until he eats. The utensils I'm given are a little different from those on Earth, but I figured out how to use them. They look a bit large in my hands, but they suit him. His fingers are long and thick, and his hands dwarf mine.

He takes a bite of a chicken strip first.

"Well?" I ask.

"It reminds me of a jabiird."

"An animal on your planet?" I assume.

He nods.

"So is that a good thing?"

Gael laughs, the sound deep and warm. "Yes, it is a good thing. If you like this, you will love to eat the wings of a jabiird."

He then tries the biscuit and gravy, but he eyes the macaroni and cheese with disdain.

"Just try a bite," I urge.

"The color... it is unbecoming."

"Close your eyes," I say.

He grunts but puts some of the macaroni and cheese onto his utensil and then shuts his eyes before he puts the utensil into his mouth.

"Well?" I ask.

He slowly starts to chew and then tilts his head to the side before opening his eyes, still chewing. I think he chews more than he needs to, but he finally swallows.

“Well?” I repeat.

“It is not a terrible starch, I suppose.”

I just laugh and shake my head before eating more of my food.

He’s eating, too, and I wonder if now might be a way to try to get in his good graces so he’ll eventually start to trust me.

I smile at him. “Maybe you can tell me about your family,” I say.

“The war... It has been a great darkness that has spread across galaxies, universes. It threatens to consume us all. My people have allied themselves with many others to try to fight the darkness.”

“I’m sure the Interstellar Amalgamation don’t think of themselves as darkness,” I remark dryly.

He grimaces. “They ignored the darkness. They thought it would help to wipe out those who deserved to die.”

“Wait, so is there a literal darkness then?”

“Yes... and no.”

I snort. “Because that makes sense.”

“The Cosmos Coalition is a brave resistance movement that fights against the oppressors in order to protect their homes and other planets as well. They fight still and perhaps always will... until they die. The price has been heavy. Far too heavy.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Let’s talk about your family instead,” I mumble, trying to get us back on track.

“We are,” he says shortly. “You have no siblings, but I had seven sisters and nine brothers.”

“Had?” I croak.

“All of them have perished. All sixteen of them made the ultimate sacrifice for freedom and justice. I could sit here and tell you stories of courage and strength about those who survived the war and how they helped shape what his world is today, an example of hope in a time when darkness seemed absolute, but...”

I can feel the emotion in his voice, and his emerald eyes? They glow unnaturally, but I can see raw pain. Muscles tighten all over his body, and his antennae lower as if he is sorrowful.

He grits his teeth. “My people have been fighting a long and difficult battle.” His eyes become distant, but I can see determination in them too.

He speaks of their tactics in battle and of their victories against a seemingly insurmountable foe. He recounts harrowing tales of courage and sacrifice from fallen comrades, stories that tear at my heartstrings like a knife and fill me with emotions I never knew I had.

He goes on to tell me about their fortresses and outposts spread across the galaxy, defending their homes from numerous invasions by the opposing forces. He speaks of their technological advances, which have allowed them to gain a slight edge in certain aspects of warfare.

But then he details their devastating losses, and he becomes so choked up at times that I find myself having a lump in my throat. He’s devastated by how many they’ve lost, not just his siblings, and I notice he never mention his parents. I don’t have the heart to ask him about them.

I listen intently as Gael shares his knowledge with me, each story more captivating than the last.

Despite the slight edge they have, Gael is worried. He’s terrified they’re going to lose.

And I’m terrified too.

I don’t want Earth to become embroiled in all of this.

CHAPTER 9



I finish eating in silence. This is too much to handle, and Gael... I'm starting to feel panicked all over again. He's an alien, a massively tall and strong one, and he could force me to do anything. Yes, he's intelligent, but I'm not going to be able to reason with him. He's convinced that I have to be here, that I have to be a part of all of this, and I don't know how to get out of this.

I'm not even sure if I should continue to try to get out of this.

But to stay involved... I could die. My life could be over.

I'm terrified.

But I do my best not to reveal just how worried and frightened I am.

"We have a long journey ahead of us," Gael finally says, breaking the silence.

I risk looking at him. The concern in his eyes... Damn it. How can an alien read me so easily? He knows how terrified I am.

And maybe a part of me is thankful that he knows this because it means I don't have to pretend to be brave.

Honestly, though, all things considering, I think I've handled being kidnapped by an alien really well. I haven't flipped out, made a scene, nothing like that. And to learn about that massive war? Yeah, I deserve a pat on the back.

Gael takes my hand and laces his fingers through mine. I'm so shocked by this gesture of intimacy that I don't know what to say or do. When he rubs his thumb over the back of my palm, I instantly feel calmed down. Can he manipulate my feelings? Because deep down, I feel like nothing will ever be okay again, yet I'm okay.

He takes a deep breath and then stands up from the table. "It's been an interesting evening," he says quietly.

I snort. "Interesting is certainly one way of looking at it." I tilt my head to the side. "It's evening already?"

He nods and stands, so I stand too. Gael moves to step closer to me and places his hands on my shoulders. His gaze is gentle, and I can't help but feel calmer in his presence.

"It's all right," he says softly as he looks into my eyes. "We will make it through this together."

I nod slowly as tears prickle my eyes. He wraps me in an embrace that I do not return. I'm stiff. Why is he hugging me?

He draws back. "Did I not do it correctly?" he asks. "I saw Earthlings hug one another like that, and I thought I might try to make you feel better through familiarity."

I just shake my head.

"So I hugged you wrong." He frowns, deep lines appearing in his forehead.

How old is he? How long does his kind live for?

"You should get some sleep first," he continues, a hint of tenderness in his voice. "The journey is going to be long and grueling, and it will take us through dark places you've never seen before, places that aren't safe for humans."

I look at him curiously. "Are you human?"

"Yes. I might be an alien to you, but aliens can be human. Not all are. Some are more animalistic, but we can speak more about this later. For now, you should rest."

I nod slowly, knowing that he's right. I don't know what's out there, but I do know that it'll be much better if I'm well-

rested for whatever lies ahead.

Gael heads into the next room and returns with a soft blanket, which he hands to me wordlessly.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

He brings me back to my room, and I hesitate at the door. The small window in the back wall reveals stars twinkling in the night sky outside, reminding me that even though things may seem dark now they can still be beautiful.

But beauty can be deadly.

I head over to the bed and turn back to Gael. He nods to me and shuts the door.

I toss the blanket onto the bed. The material is unlike anything on Earth, so very soft, but it’s just one more reminder that I’m not where I’m supposed to be.

I’m not tired, more resigned than anything, and maybe I should try to sleep, but I find myself walking over to the door.

It’s pointless. He’s locked it, no doubt, and...

It’s not locked. I’m not sure how exactly, since there isn’t a knob, but the door opens.

I peek out into the hallway and look up and down. There’s no sign of Gael.

My heart races as I leave the room. Maybe he does trust me some.

He didn’t teach me how to fly the ship, how to use the auto-pilot, but maybe I can try to figure out something.

Quietly, I do my best to recall how Gael brought me to the cockpit. I make a few wrong turns, but eventually, I’m there.

Only Gael’s there too.

Hunched over in a seat.

Crying.

CHAPTER 10



I don't know what to do. I don't want to intrude, but to see the giant of an alien crying like that...

It does something to me.

I don't think bonding with Gael is a good idea. This isn't some Beauty and the Beast kind of situation. All I want is to get back home. Sure, maybe I might be opening up to helping a little. I mean, this war has taken every single one of Gael's siblings away from him. He's lost so much.

To end the war... it would be incredible.

But after that, I need to go back home.

For now, though, Gael is here, letting out all the pain and fear of his life in silent tears. He thinks no one knows, that he'll never be discovered.

I wish I could just go over to him and hug him and tell him everything will be all right, but I know it won't be. Not for us at least. We're both just pawns in a much bigger game and we might not even make it out alive, let alone with an ending that makes sense.

So instead of moving closer, I stay tucked away in the shadows watching Gael as he cries his heart out, knowing there's nothing I can do but stand there silently with my own tears streaming down my face.

Even though I don't move, just listening to him cry is enough for me to feel my heart breaking alongside his.

The sound of his sobs is like a hammer striking at my heart, and I can't help but feel the pain of his sorrow. It's almost like it's my own.

And yet, I feel a strange sense of comfort in knowing he's not alone in this. That although I may never understand what he's going through, I can still be here for him and listen.

I don't move closer to comfort him, just listen to him crying, the sound eating away at me as if it were my own anguish being stirred up from deep within my soul.

If only there was something more that I could do, some way to make things better for Gael, but all I have are my silent tears and thoughts, and they aren't enough to make a difference in this moment.

Gael deserves better than this. He deserves to be surrounded by people that love and care for him, not just a silent stranger in the darkness.

We may not have a happy ending, but I can at least give him this moment of peace.

Peace. This isn't peace. He's in mental anguish. Anyone with eyes and ears would know that. He's in pain. Probably from our conversation. If I had known he had lost all of his siblings, I never would've asked him about his family.

I could very well be the reason why he's crying.

It's amazing. He's not an Earthling, but he is human, and the way he's hunched over, hands over his face as his entire body shakes... He might have different colored skin and strange eyes and those antenna, but he's not all that different from me after all. The sobs are quiet, but they pierce through me.

I wish I could help him, but I'm afraid that my presence will only make things worse, so instead of comforting him, I just stand in the shadows, watching him cry and sending whatever mental support I can muster to him.

I can hardly believe the way I feel right now. He kidnapped me, yet I want to go to him, wrap my arms around

him and tell him he's not alone. That I'm here with him, sharing in his grief and sadness.

But I'm not the one he needs. He needs someone who knows how to help, who can bring tangible comfort to the situation.

There's nothing I can offer him because, deep down, I know he took the wrong Earthling.

Hell, maybe that's why he's crying. He knows I won't be able to stop the war. More of his people will die, and it will all be my fault.

I don't know all of the ins and outs of both sides. Clearly, Gael is going to make the other side seem as evil as can be. Maybe he's right.

But he might be wrong.

I'm nothing more than a pawn, and I'm afraid.

But so he is.

And that makes things that much more terrifying.

As much as I want to help him, I'm not sure that I should.

So I stand there, in the shadows, not knowing which side to be on.

And ultimately deciding that I should be on mine and mine alone.

CHAPTER 11



Gael must have sensed me because his shoulders tense and he turns his head with a start. He wipes away the tears while I stand there, feeling like I've just witnessed something so private.

"I-I didn't mean to intrude," I stammer, my face hot with embarrassment.

Slowly, I approach the cockpit and take a step closer, slowly making my way to his side without speaking a word. He winces, his shoulders creeping up toward his ears as if he wants to turtle himself and hide away from me. Again, he wipes away the tears with the back of his hand but he doesn't turn around to face me.

There's no words exchanged between us, just a simple understanding that I am here for him. No judgement, no expectations, just pure empathy.

Neither of us knows what to say, so we just sit there for a few moments in a silence that slowly turns awkward until Gael finally speaks first. "I'm sorry you had to see this..." His voice is quiet and broken like someone who has been carrying too much weight for far too long, and all I can do is nod in understanding because even if words could heal us, they wouldn't be enough now anyway.

Gael takes a deep breath and straightens up in his seat, still not looking at me. "It's okay." He says gruffly. "It's been... a hard day."

"You can say that again," I say lightly.

I look around at the strange and wonderful technology that is so different from anything on earth. Lights pulse and glitter across the dashboard from some unknown source of energy, casting an eerie light across Gael's face as he stares ahead.

We sit in silence for a few moments before Gael speaks again, this time more softly than before. "This ship was built by my family many generations ago. It's hard... It's hard being here with only you on board."

Ah, so it is only us. He hasn't kidnapped any other humans.

I'm not sure how I feel about that.

It's only then that he looks up at me with those intense eyes of his. His face is stained with tears and sorrow. He takes a deep breath before he speaks in an almost hollow voice. "I'm so sorry for dragging you into this mess. It was not my intention... but sometimes our intentions don't always matter when it comes to fate, right?"

Fate. I grunt. I don't believe in fate. I've never been one to believe in God either.

Life sucks and then you die.

And now it seems like so many more people are going to die. Not just Earthlings but all of the other aliens involved in the war.

Gael lets out a bitter laugh as he wipes away his tears. "I wish things were different, but they aren't."

I keep quiet and just nod.

"I... I am a burden," he says, and I wince.

Why does he believe that?

"I'm afraid for your life," he murmurs. "I am leading you into danger. There is no better way of saying it. To lose another... My siblings and I all wanted to fight in the war. Our parents did not wish it, but we did. We fought. Our parents were deemed too old to fight, but after Mael died, my parents... Mael was the oldest, a son. I am the youngest. Mael was my parents' greatest joy, and when he died... My parents

stow away on a ship. For years, they fought, and they were instrumental in two battles in particular, but my siblings continued to fall more and more... There was a time when my parents thought I was lost, that all of their children were dead, so they went on a mission they knew they could not survive.”

“A suicide mission,” I murmur.

He nods curtly. “They died on that mission.”

“Gael, I am so sorry.”

He takes a deep breath, trying to compose himself, but he cannot. He looks away as tears streak down his cheeks. “My siblings... I have lost them all, and it is my fault. I should have been able to save them. I should have done something.”

His voice cracks on the last sentence and he turns away from me, unable to look at me any longer. The guilt is too much for him to bear alone and it has been too much for him for years now, long before this day even began.

I move closer to him and wrap my arms around him in an effort to provide some solace from the pain that is so deeply embedded in his soul. He leans into me, burying his face against my neck as he allows himself to let go of all of the sadness he has kept inside of him all these years. We remain there in silence, embracing each other until we both feel some sense of peace again.

Or that is my hope until Gael shrugs and speaks again.

“It was our destiny. It was their decision, and now I am here, in this war-torn universe, fighting against an enemy we may never defeat... until the day they finish me off too.” He lets out a heavy sigh before looking up at me again. “I have lost more than just my parents and siblings. I have lost my home planet, my culture, my way of life... and I have lost any chance of living in peace ever again.”

“Gael...” My heart aches for him.

Constantly, I feel torn. As much as I want to return home, maybe I really do need to help him first.

He nods again, his face unreadable. "So you see why I can't bear to lose another... It would be the end of me."

A lump forms in my throat, and tears burn my eyes. I'm unable to imagine how he must be feeling right now, all alone with no family and so much sadness and pain behind him.

I reach out for his hand, not sure if it will make a difference but needing to do something, anything that might let him know that he is not alone in this fight.

He looks up at me and gives me a weak smile before squeezing my hand tightly. "We don't have to go through this alone," he says softly, his voice filled with hope and strength despite the sorrow.

I nod in agreement and swallow hard, trying not to cry as my heart aches for Gael's loss. He may be alone on this ship, but he is never truly alone.

"Do you... Do you believe in Heaven?" I ask. "What happens to one of your kind after you die?"

Gael pauses for a moment, considering my question. "Come with me."

He stands and quickly walks away. I have to run to keep up with him, and he brings me to an observation deck. The sight of the stars all around us is humbling.

He looks to make certain I am here, and then his gaze shifts to the star-filled night sky outside of the observation deck. Gael takes in a deep breath.

"We believe that when one of us dies, their soul will ascend to a bright star up in the night sky. We have stories that tell of a beautiful and peaceful realm beyond the stars, where the souls of our ancestors go after they pass on. This star," he says, gesturing up to the night sky, "is the one said to lead them there."

We both gaze up at the star twinkling in the distance. It is so small from this view but I can feel its light radiating down on us with an intensity that seems almost otherworldly. I could almost swear I can hear voices coming from it, voices of those who have gone before us.

I take a deep breath and turn to Gael again. He looks calmer now, more at peace than he has been since I found him crying, perhaps even more peaceful than I first met him. He squeezes my hand again and smiles softly at me before leading me away from the observation deck, back into the darkness of space once more.

“It is said that this star is where we go when our time here has come to an end, where our souls will be safe and free from harm. We believe that when we die, our souls are taken to a place of peace and beauty in the stars. It is said that our souls can be seen there as bright, shining stars, watching over us from above.”

I’m too moved to speak. The star he has pointed to truly looks different from every other star I’ve ever seen.

“My people believe that each soul shines brightly in the night sky like a beacon of hope and love, reminding us of our loved ones who have gone before them.”

I can’t help but feel moved by Gael’s story and by this beautiful tradition shared by his people.

He looks back at me with a sad yet determined expression. “It may be difficult to imagine now, but our sadness will eventually give way to peace and contentment as we join our loved ones who have passed before us in this paradisaical realm.”

“That must bring you so much comfort,” I murmur.

Gael nods, and a faint, gentle, and, of course, small smile appears on his face. “It certainly does. More importantly, however, it reminds us why we are fighting this war, to protect our people’s freedom, to ensure we can all reach the stars one day and reunite with our beloved departed.”

A wave of emotion washes through me as I realize how much winning this war means to Gael and his people, not just for the sake of victory but also for the promise of peace and hope that comes along with it.

“We have come together in this coalition so that no matter where someone is born or what faith they follow, everyone has

the opportunity to experience peace and love in their lifetime. With each passing day, we get one step closer to realizing that dream.” He hang his head. “And yet... the Interstellar Amalgamation threatens not only our lives but also our dead. They have threatened to destroy...”

I gasp. “Not the star!”

He nods grimly. “Up there lies something much greater than just my people winning this war. We all have a chance at redemption and peace, even those who have gone before us, and we will do whatever it takes to ensure that our loved ones can finally rest in peace.”

“And that you can join them.”

Gael offers me that same small smile again, but his eyes aren’t glowing.

They look flat. Dull. Almost lifeless.

He truly does not believe he will ever see his family ever again.

He believes they will fail.

CHAPTER 12



I wish I knew something to say to offer him hope. I could say that I would try to help, but even I know my voice would be shaking. I can sweet talk businessmen and women, but I only ever got so far. The board never fully subscribed to what I was selling, and I have no doubt that convincing Gael that I believed I could help would be a tall order.

Even taller than the alien himself.

Gael must have sensed my doubt. He turns away from the stars and pulls me into his arms, squeezing me tightly.

“We will find a way,” he whispers fiercely. “We must.”

He releases me.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

He offers me a gentle look that is far too knowing. Then, Gael looks up, the star still glimmering above us and he nods in its direction. “No matter what happens, this will always be here for us.” He gestures around the ship, as if to show me every person on board and how we are all connected. “As long as we fight together and stay true to our cause, we can ensure that no one ever takes away our chance of reuniting with our loved ones.”

He smiles softly before turning back to me again. The sadness has returned to his eyes, but the warmth is still inside them too.

Once again, he takes my hand, leading me back to my room with a determined step. When we arrive, Gael stops at the door and glances down at me with an unreadable expression.

“Perhaps we should eat another meal if you do not wish to sleep just yet,” he suggests quietly, even though the suggestion carries an unmistakable authority in his voice.

Maybe he doesn’t want to be alone right now. I can understand that.

And maybe he wants to try to take my mind off the war.

Or his mind.

I give a small nod, not sure what else to do. He smiles, looking relieved, and he brings me back to the food area.

“Sit here,” he says, and he walks off, only to return with two trays and some questionable looking food.

He points to a shiny metal disk.

“This is from Zerkrud, my home planet,” he explains as he hands me the disc. “It’s an edible food created from natural elements found only there. It’s a bit like a cracker but much more flavorful.”

I eye it suspiciously. “You first.”

He laughs and plops one into his mouth and chews it a few times before swallowing. “Try it,” he urges.

I pick up my disc and examine it closely before popping it into my mouth and biting down cautiously. The flavor is unlike anything I have ever tasted before, sweet yet savory with hints of exotic spices.

Next, he points to greenish-blue cubes. “This is also food from Zerkrud. It’s an acquired taste, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I don’t wait for him to have one first and cautiously put one into my mouth. I’m not surprised that it’s crunchy. It even pops a bit in my mouth. Weird but not terrible.

I realize Gael is watching me expectantly.

“It’s... different,” I manage after several moments of silence, unsure if that’s even an adequate description of what I’m tasting.

Gael laughs softly before leaning forward in his chair. “That’s one way to put it.”

There are a few other food items that I sample, and I notice he doesn’t tell me the name of what I’m eating. Because there isn’t a word in English for it? Or because he doesn’t know what’s going on with his home planet?

Or has his home planet been destroyed? Hadn’t he said that both sides had the power to destroy planets?

I shudder.

“Full?” Gael asks.

I nod.

My stomach is full.

Full of strange alien food.

My head is full.

Full of doubts and fears.

My heart is full.

More doubts, more fears.

This is a nightmare.

CHAPTER 13



I glance up at Gael, wishing for some kind of assurance or comfort, but his face is unreadable. He stands and offers a hand to pull me up from my seat.

I take it.

Gael leads me silently back to my room, his grip steady and comforting. I'm so exhausted I can barely keep my eyes open, yet he still manages to support me down the hallway when I stumble every now and again. When we reach the door to my room, Gael pauses before turning to look at me. His gaze is tender yet sad as he takes in my appearance. His lips are pressed together in a firm line that speaks volumes without saying any words whatsoever.

My mind races with questions I dare not ask.

He finally breaks the silence with a sigh and raises his hands to cup either side of my face, looking into my eyes with an intensity that takes away all the fear inside of me. He's not just looking at me. He's seeing right through me, and what he sees is anyone's guess.

He pauses for a moment before reaching out and giving me a gentle hug.

"Remember what I said," he murmurs into my hair. "No matter what happens, we will always be here for each other."

He steps away and looks into my eyes with a mixture of sadness and strength. Then, he gives me one last smile and nods, leaving me standing in front of the door to enter my room alone.

I go inside slowly, pausing at the threshold as if something is holding me back from crossing it. After several moments of hesitation, I suck in a deep breath and step inside, feeling as if I'm stepping into an entirely different world, relieved that the entire experience has come to an end yet sad to see it go as well.

"Get some rest." His voice is soft yet still carries authority.

He lingers at the door for a few more moments and then finally leaves, his steps echoing down the hallway until they fade away completely.

I take a deep breath and sit on my bed, trying to process everything that has happened to my today and let it all sink in.

I'm beyond exhausted, and yet my mind is still spinning and my heart is aching.

Right about now, on Earth, I would have finished up my last task on the to-do list and would be brushing my teeth and prepare for bed. None of the items on my old list are possible, and even the ones I added here...

I take out my phone. I have no way to charge it, so it'll die eventually, but it's nice to have at least something from Earth on me.

I open up my old to-do list and delete it all. Time to start a new one.

Well, a nice long bath would be nice. A movie marathon and some desserts, comfort foods... All of that would be the perfect remedies for what's been a very intense day.

But not one of those is an option. I mean, there has to be a way for me to bathe at the very least. While we didn't eat any dessert in either meal, I have to believe that's an option if I asked. As for movies... maybe the Zilquds have holographic ones?

My thoughts start to turn to the Zilqud actors, if there are any, and whether or not they're still alive, and I can't help but worry about what the future holds.

No. Not going to travel down that road.

Well, there's no need for laundry or grocery shopping, like I would on Saturday, which would have been tomorrow on Earth. Instead, my top priority needs to be preparing for whatever comes next in this journey of mine.

I take out my phone and start typing away, creating a new to-do list full of wondrous items.

1. Learn Gael's language so that we can communicate better.
2. Researching his home planet and its culture so that maybe I can find a way to help him.
3. Attempt to understand the technology of his people so that perhaps we can use it here on Earth.

I sigh. If I had a free day back on Earth, I would maybe want to go for a walk or read more books. I would spend time with my friends. I've always wanted to learn how to cook, and one of my closest friends, Ashlyn Hope, had been asking me to make time to go with her for a free martial arts class. She thought it was important for young women like ourselves to learn how to defend ourselves in a dangerous world.

Just one dangerous world out of how many across the universes?

I shake my head and try to refocus on my new list. Having a to-do list was what helped me in the aftermath of my parents' deaths, and I cling to my new list as if it's a lifeline.

I definitely need to add researching the different galaxies and planets out there to my list. Learning Gael's language and his culture is one thing, but discovering worlds unknown would be immensely beneficial, not just for him but for all of us.

All of us. What in the world? Am I already starting to think of myself as one of them? One of the coalition?

If I could be free to explore the universes without the hint of a massive war breathing down my neck, I would love to go out and explore planets. Any mountains, lakes... forests filled with life that has yet to be discovered by humans... Wouldn't it be amazing to discover a secret species? To encounter creatures never seen before by human eyes?

But that's not in my future.

1. Learn self-defense techniques so that I can protect both myself and others when the situation arises.

The thought of learning something new makes me smile, but then I realize that I don't even know if it's possible to learn here or if there are any martial arts instructors around. Still, it's worth a try.

Maybe there are some exercises I can do on my own? Or maybe Gael would be willing to teach me his own technique? As a Zilqud warrior, he must know something about defending oneself.

I'll have to ask him about it tomorrow.

For now, more research is needed in order to better understand this world and the people in it. After all, knowledge is power. Understanding their culture could lead me to finding an effective way of helping them out of their current predicament and eventually make our way back home together.

There I go again. Their culture, meaning the Interstellar Amalgamation, which has to be comprised of many different alien species and multiple cultures. And our way back home? Gael isn't from Earth, and I'm not from Zerkrud.

Man, all of this is giving me one massive headache, but that's really the least of my concerns, isn't it?

CHAPTER 14



I close my phone and lie down in the bed, trying to bring some rest to my mind. I can't help but think of Gael, his kind eyes and soft voice.

Drawing the blanket he had given me earlier over my body, I let out a deep sigh. A wave of fatigue washes over me, making me drift off into dreamland.

In my dreams, Gael and I are having a romantic dinner together on the balcony of a castle overlooking the stars. We're laughing and talking about our journeys through space and time, sharing stories from our respective worlds that sound like something out of a fairytale.

Then, before I know it, we're dancing in the night sky, somehow floating, twirling around each other until we both fall into one another's arms. Everything seems perfect in this moment, like nothing else matters in the world except us two being together right here right now.

His strong arms around me... his piercing eyes that seem to look right through me... the sweet smell of his cologne... Is it cologne? Maybe it's his natural scent.

And then, in a whirl, the dream changes again. I'm embarking on a romantic journey through the galaxies with Gael by my side, one in which we explore distant planets, discovering new life forms and learning from their cultures. We share far too many passionate kisses under star-filled night skies on different worlds, feeling an intense connection as we laugh together at our experiences over dinner and finding

comfort in each other's company after a long day of adventuring.

As I continue to dream, I find myself standing hand in hand with Gael at the edge of a vast intergalactic ocean. We stand there for what feels like an eternity as we stare out into the horizon, watching as a million stars sparkle and twinkle brightly beside us. In that moment I feel nothing but peace and love for him.

It's only then that I realize there's no threat of war here in this dream, only him and me.

And love.

A dream. I know this isn't real.

But deep down, I can't help but hope and pray that one day it will become a reality.

Despite this being a dream, I make a silent wish that somehow, someday, Gael and I will find a way to travel through time and space so we can explore the galaxies together.

What would it be like to have the power to travel through the galaxies? To explore all of its wonders? Maybe if we focus hard enough on this dream, it will actually come true.

But not while there is the threat of the war.

"You do not need to be so troubled," Gael says, cupping my chin.

He kisses me, and I realize we're naked. The world around us disappears, and I don't know where we are, only that I need him.

He slides his hands down my body and then up to cup my cheeks. His eyes are filled with desire and love as he takes in every inch of me. We look deeply into each other's eyes, and the energy between us grows to become intense, almost unbearable.

In that moment, I know exactly what I want.

More even than returning to Earth.

Him.

Gael.

He moves his lips over mine, and I savor the moment. The stars twinkle like diamond dust in the night sky as we make love to each other under the stars. So passionate, slow, and full of emotion.

His warmth radiates through my entire body. His lips find mine again, and it feels like he's my entire world. I'm no longer scared of the future or of what might happen if we don't end the war. All that matters is this moment with him, and nothing else.

Our souls seem to become one as we move together in perfect harmony, both of us lost in the bliss that is this moment. We could be anywhere in the universe right now, yet here we are, together and connected through our love for one another. It feels like the ultimate escape from reality, a place where everything is pure happiness and joy.

The warmth of his embrace around me fills me with a peace I've never felt before. He's an alien, a Zilqud, but in my dream, he might as well be an Earthling. His antennae are gone, and his teeth aren't as sharp. He doesn't hurt me when he nibbles me, drawing out only passion and desire.

And his cock? It's thick and perfect, throbbing, maybe even vibrating inside me as he plunges deeper and deeper...

Wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me until there's nothing but bliss and ecstasy between us.

The dream fades away as I drift back into reality, leaving me with an aching heart and longing for Gael's embrace.

I sit up and wipe a hand down my face. What the hell? What kind of a dream was that? It's not what I want. Not really. I can't want Gael.

All of this is far too confusing. To become involved with him would be a mistake.

And right now, I can't afford any mistakes.

A mistake might very well cost me my life.

CHAPTER 15



I take a deep breath and try to clear my head. I'm already in enough trouble, and adding Gael to the mix wouldn't be wise.

But still... there's something about him that draws me in.

Maybe it's his kindness or the way he looks at me with those intense eyes, or maybe it's just the knowledge that we are both on this journey together.

Stupid. It's all so stupid.

I'm stupid.

I exhale slowly, pushing away the dreamy thoughts of Gael from my mind. I need to focus on the mission at hand.

But as hard as I try, I can't seem to push away the tender image of Gael kissing me passionately in my dream. I can still feel his lips on mine and his hands roaming my body, driving me to places unknown.

I sigh heavily before resigning myself to the fact that perhaps for now, adding to kiss Gael on my to-do list isn't such a bad idea after all, not that I intend on actually doing so anytime soon. Or at all. Ever.

It's a terrible idea.

I stare off into the distance, trying to make sense of the dream I just had.

I know it's not real, yet it felt so real at the same time. We had been in another world, a dream world, where the chaos of

the war between the Cosmos Coalition and the Interstellar Amalgamation didn't exist.

In my dream, nothing mattered but us. The stars twinkled above us like diamonds while Gael whispered sweet nothings in my ear, his voice soft and tender. His touch was gentle yet powerful, soothing away all my worries and fears.

His skin seemed to sparkle in the night sky like a beacon of hope that things would eventually be okay.

I felt so safe in his embrace, completely free from worry and fear despite the raging battle outside our little bubble of peace. I could feel our souls connecting with each other, as if we had already been together for centuries instead of mere moments.

The thought fills me with warmth that spreads all over my body.

And then his lips found mine again, and I long to feel that in real life.

No! I need to snap out of this!

That dream, was it just a reflection of the desire I have been feeling toward Gael?

Or is there something else beneath all of that? Something deeper, more meaningful?

Regardless of what it was, one thing remains certain. I'm not even actively fighting in this war yet and it's already taken its toll on me and my emotions.

I close my eyes once again and fall back asleep. Immediately, I'm dreaming again, only this time, I'm standing on an alien battlefield, surrounded by immense destruction as the Cosmos Coalition and Interstellar Amalgamation wage war against one another. Explosions light up the sky like fireworks, and lasers fill the air with their bright flashes. Inhuman screams echo through the night as soldiers fight each other desperately.

The sound of battle is deafening, the blood and carnage sickening.

My heart aches, knowing that so many have lost their lives in the heat of this conflict.

The smell of death is overwhelming.

The sight of bloodshed is haunting.

It's a living nightmare and the chaos seems to stretch on endlessly. I can feel my heart racing as fear creeps up my spine, threatening to paralyze me in terror. All around me, people are dying, some by the hands of their allies and some by the hands of their enemies.

I clench my fists, trying in vain to hold back the tears that start streaming down my face as I watch countless lives being taken away from this world before my very eyes.

It's too much for me to handle and I find myself wishing for a way out, anything to escape this madness and take refuge in a place where war doesn't exist.

Fear creeps up my spine as I witness the carnage in front of me. It's like a living nightmare, one that will never end. The war between these powerful forces seems to go on forever, with no end in sight.

I can only pray for peace and an end to this madness soon.

Throughout it all, I can feel an uncomfortable presence looming over me as if someone is watching me from afar.

Someone or something.

I turn to see a huge shadow hovering overhead, its menacing figure blocking out the stars on the night sky. The creature is enormous, its wingspan stretching for miles and its eyes full of rage and hatred. It's a dragon!

The dragon appears to be in control of both armies, sending them off in waves like pawns in some sick game. Its piercing gaze finds me amongst the chaos, and I stand rooted to my spot unable to move or speak. This is it. Death has come for me at last.

Suddenly, there's a sparkle of light as Gael appears, holding out a hand.

I reach for him, but the dragon clutches me in its claws. I'm trapped in the prison of its claws, only for the dragon to fling me up in the air. I scream as I freefalling, dropping into the dragon's giant maw...

CHAPTER 16



Without warning, alarms blare, and I realize I'm no longer falling. The hellish scene disappears. I'm in bed.

The alarms still ring, though. With a start, I truly wake up as my mind realizes what is going on. My heart pounds as I accept that it had only been a nightmare.

And now another nightmare, a living one, might have taken its place.

My head is spinning as I attempt to make sense of the nightmarish dream I had about the dragon and its control over both armies. It had felt almost too real, like I had been standing right there on the battlefield.

Alarms blare again, and I'm wrenched back into reality.

What can this alarm mean? I can't help but feel uneasy. This might very well be my first real encounter with this unknown enemy in this war-ridden galaxy of ours, and I am most certainly not equipped for what might come next.

I hurry to my door, fearing that Gael locked me, but as before, he hadn't. In my rush to reach the bridge, I almost trip more than once.

"What's going on?" I blurt out as soon as I reach the cockpit.

"We're being tailed by an alien ship," Gael says grimly.

The sight takes my breath away, and I lift a shaking hand to my chest.

Just off our starboard side is an alien vessel unlike any I have ever seen before. Well, it's not as if I've seen any before. I don't even know what Gael's ship, the one I'm currently in, looks like.

The alien vessel slowly approaches our ship, its giant guns ready to fire at any moment. The sound of its engines is deafening as it gets closer and closer until it finally comes into view in all its menacing glory. It looks like a huge draconic creature with gleaming green eyes that can't truly be eyes, yet they seem to be full of fury and malice. The vessel's massive body is adorned with spikes.

It looks like a mechanical dragon.

How... How was there a dragon in my nightmare? How did I know that?

And how can I hear its engines?

"I thought there was no sound in space," I mumble.

"That's ridiculous," Gael says.

"But space is a vacuum!"

"Now isn't the time," he snaps.

"What do you need me to do?" I ask, desperate to be of assistance.

Gael looks at me with a faint smile. "I need you to be brave."

"Be brave?" I snort. "That's hardly a task!"

"Sorry, Gracie, but that's all you're capable of."

He stares at me deeply, as if trying to give me some of his bravery, but it doesn't work. How is he so calm? I'm utterly useless.

In part because he didn't prepare me for this.

It's much easier to be angry at him and at the aliens bent on attacking us than it is for me to attempt to be brave. Plus, I would rather be furious than frightened.

I cross my arms and take a seat.

“We need to get out of here,” Gael says, refocusing his efforts on the task at hand. “I’m going to try and evade them.”

He fiddles with the controls, and the ship begins to turn, but it’s too late. The dragon vessel is already hot on our tail, gaining in speed as we attempt to make our escape.

Gael throws the ship into a stomach-churning loop, spinning us around before plunging us into a dive that takes us directly beneath the dragon’s path. Our ship darts away so quickly that we miss being hit by mere fractions of an inch.

His fingers moving quickly, Gael presses buttons and pulls levels, making adjustments. “That ship, Raazzor Claws, has been tracking me for some time now. I’ve been trying to avoid it, but... You do not have to worry. No matter how many times it’s found me, it can’t do anything to change the fact that my ship is faster.”

“That’s all fine and dandy, but if you can’t stop it from tracking us, won’t this keep happening?”

“I’m doing the best I can,” he mutters, his tone dark and deadly.

I wince and fall silent. I’m not helping any.

“I just need to..” Gael mutters.

All I can do is watch as he controls the thrusters, guiding the ship manually, entering into an asteroid field, avoiding both the giant asteroids and other space junk in our flight path.

“Help,” he says.

“How?” I ask eagerly.

“Over there.” He tilts his head to point to another chair. “Point and shoot.”

“At that dragon vessel?”

“At the largest asteroids that might be in our way,” he says grimly. “Shoot until they burst apart.”

“But then they’ll be smaller rocks that might hit us.”

“Better than us crashing into them when they’re nearly the size of our ship!”

I gulp and rush over to the seat. As soon as my ass hits the cushioned seat, a hologram pops up. It’s a small map of what’s directly in front of us, and I grab the joystick-looking device. When the green turns red, I press the button.

It’s like a game, honestly, and the asteroid is hit.

But nothing happens.

Again and again, I shoot at the asteroids until they explode. Our ship rocks from being hit, but I think it’s just from the asteroids and not the dragon vessel.

At least, I hope that’s the case.

I try my best to obey Gael’s instructions, even though I’m worried I’m more of a hindrance than anything. The dragon vessel seems relentless in its pursuit of us as we dodge planets and asteroids alike. It’s almost as if it knows exactly where we’re going every time we make a move.

Finally, after an hour or so, we manage to lose the alien ship amidst all the chaos of space debris. The dragon roars its fury at us as we race away from it, leaving it behind in a cloud of space dust.

Gael presses further and further away, pushing our ship to its limits until finally there is no sign of pursuit anymore. We have managed to escape unscathed. I breathe out a sigh of relief. That was far too close for comfort.

And that was only one ship. Not a true battle.

Next time, we might not be so lucky.

CHAPTER 17



I glance around the cockpit, the fear and adrenaline slowly wearing off. After a moment, I turn to Gael, my brow furrowed in concern. “Where do we go now? What do we do next?”

Gael sighs and leans back in his chair, rubbing his temples with the palms of his hands. He gives me a dry look before returning his gaze to the controls. “We need to find somewhere safe, somewhere they won’t be able to find us. That ship is relentless. They’ve caught me too often.”

He glances out the window at the stars that float by as he mulls things over in his mind. I wait patiently for him to come up with a plan, but eventually, he turns back around, shaking his head.

“I don’t know...there’s nothing on this side of the galaxy that I’m too familiar with anymore,” he admits ruefully. “Maybe we should try another planet... one far away from our current location.”

The idea makes sense, and I nod, though I’m still feeling apprehensive about what will happen if we are caught once more by that ship.

His hands dance across the various buttons, maybe charting a new course. He brings up a hologram of stars and planets and points at one of them, a green planet that looks remarkably like Earth in its size and coloration.

“We’ll go there,” he says finally. “It’s an uncharted planet, light years away from here. No one will be able to track us if

we make it there.”

“Sure,” I mumble.

Gael makes adjustments to the ship’s flight plan and sets our course towards this new world.

Our journey is long and arduous. We travel through space for hours, zipping past stars and planets until we arrive at Hexx and its two moons.

Gael carefully lands the ship in an open field of tall grasses and trees so that it is well hidden from view should anyone come looking for us. We both know this is just a temporary stop, though.

“Now what?” I ask eagerly. “We aren’t just going to wait here, are we?”

“Yes, we wait,” he says.

“How long?” I ask glumly.

Who knew space travel could be so boring?

“Long enough that I believe the Raazzor Claws is no longer a threat.”

“How long is that going to take?”

“You’ll know because I would have started up the ship again.” He grins at me, flashing his sharp teeth.

I suck in a breath. The dream with him kissing me made me forget about how sharp his teeth are. Those teeth wouldn’t be able to nibble my tender flesh.

He would tear my skin apart.

“Do you want to get something to eat?” I ask.

Flying here too hours. I’m still nervous and scared, jittery even, from the fight earlier, not that I want to let Gael realize that.

He’ll learn soon enough that I’m not the Earthling for whatever job he expects me to fulfill.

“I’m not hungry. You can eat if you want. Just head to the ___”

“I’m not eating if you aren’t,” I say stubbornly. “How... How did I do with the asteroids?”

“Not too bad,” he mumbles.

I wince. I broke many of them apart, but some of them had still been large when he hadn’t been able to avoid the pieces I created, and I should’ve shoot them quicker to make the shatter again into even smaller pieces...

I’m already a disappointment to him.

I clear my throat. “Don’t you think it’s time you teach me what I need to know to help you fight this war?”

“Win this war, you mean,” he says, giving me a pointed look.

I shrug. I meant what I said.

Fight.

Not win.

I’m not sure we can win.

“Can you at least tell me more about this planet?” I ask.

“Which is it? Do you want to learn how to win the war or about this planet?”

“That depends,” I say dryly. “Are you going to do either?”

He snorts, the corners of his lips curling upward.

I’ve always been a sarcastic person, but I can only enjoy my dark sense of humor with my friends. All day long, I would have to hold my tongue and try to butter up the members of the board and the stock holders. At least with Gael, it seems like I can be myself, and he can be dry and sarcastic too.

Which I enjoy.

For the most part.

“Well?” I ask.

“Which would you rather?” he asks.

I hate when a question is answered with a question.

“Does it matter which I pick? Are you going to just do the opposite one?”

There. I can answer a question with a question too.

Gael chuckles. “Well?” he parrots me.

“How can I help to win the war?”

“Some of us in the Cosmos Coalition have been bringing back technology from other planets to try to help to end to the conflict.”

“Is that what I am?” I ask, baffled. “I’m not technology.”

“No, but while Earth does not have the technology for space travel, you do have massively weapons.”

I shudder. “Nothing that can destroy an entire planet,” I mumble.

“Quite the contrary. Enough of those bombs of yours, and the entire planet is rendered uninhabitable for years. Both sides in the conflict do not relish using our technology to completely destroy planets, so we are both trying to move away from that, but with your atomic weapons...”

“I will not—” I start.

He holds up a hand to stop me. “The hope is just by having an Earthling with us, it will make it appear that we have your weapons and technology with you.”

He falls silent, and I have nothing to say to that.

I’m just a figurehead.

Just like with my company.

Useless except for my face.

Not meant to do anything of importance.

Just meant to stand there and pretend to be in charge.

It’s degrading. Humiliating.

Infuriating.

If I’m meant to be a pawn in this... No. That’s not good enough.

If I want to join a side, I mean to fight.

Although I suppose I should perhaps hear from someone on the other side to ensure that I'm picking the right side.

As if I'll ever have that chance.

I'm stuck with Gael, and now I'm stuck on this strange planet.

What could be worse?

CHAPTER 18



Ha. It takes all of two seconds for me to learn what's worse.

Being stuck on this strange planet in this spaceship while Gael plans on disembarking without me.

He wants to see if it is possible for him to fuel up the ship despite no other humans living here, and somehow, he seeks to gain any knowledge he can. Clearly, he has the means to communicate with other ships and maybe even other planets that are far away.

Technology I would sorely like to use, but no one back on Earth would be able to receive the transmission. Maybe that helps to make me even more salty.

"You'll be safer here," he argues. "The animals here will be dangerous. Perhaps even the flora as well."

My mind boggles at his argument. "What if something happens to you? What if something happens to the ship while you're gone? How will I get back home then?"

I probably shouldn't have asked that last question, but oh well. Too late now, and no, it doesn't matter that I should be safe here.

I want him to take me with him.

"I'm afraid that it has been decided," he says firmly, as if he's talking to a small child. "You are staying here. I will be back soon."

"I insist on coming with you," I say just as firmly.

But he is adamant about keeping me where I am.

My frustration boils up as he refuses to budge on his decision, and my anger pushes me into saying something rash.

“If you don’t let me come with you,” I blurt out, “I’ll just choose the other side!”

He rears back in shock. “What other side?” Gael’s eyes widen, and his emerald eyes glow with anger. “You don’t mean...”

I nod firmly as I cross my arms. “Yes. The Interstellar Amalgamation.”

His face turns pale and he takes a step back. Clearly, he was not expecting me to say such things.

“If I’m meant to be a pawn in this, I want to hear from someone on the other side of this war before deciding which side to join. I need to know that my decision will make a difference.”

I regret the words as soon as they leave my mouth.

But there is something about Gael’s expression that makes me think he respects me for speaking up.

He approaches me and places his hands on my shoulders, looking directly into my eyes. His gaze is so intense it feels like he can see right through me, and his touch fills me with confidence. For a moment, it feels like all of the anger has drained away, replaced by something else entirely.

gain, I wonder and even worry that he can manipulate my feelings. He’s an alien, after all. He’s not an earthling, so maybe he can change my emotions.

Which means I might not be able to trust him.

While it’s possible he might not realize the effect he has on me, he might know precisely what he’s doing.

He releases me then steps back, still watching me carefully.

“After everything I’ve told you, you still think my side might be the one that’s wrong?” he asks quietly.

He's wounded.

I swallow hard. "I am sorry for the loss of your sisters and brothers, for the loss of your parents, but... you kidnapped me. You thrust me into all of this, and I don't... If you were me, what would you think? How would you feel?"

He thinks for a moment, before nodding. "I understand. It is a difficult task I have put you in, and it is not fair of me to expect you to take my side without understanding the other side as well. Please, let me tell you more about the other side and their beliefs, so that you can make an informed decision."

I grimace. It's still going to be colored through his point of view and biased, but I guess it's a bit unreasonable for me to expect to be able to talk to someone on the other side, considering they did just try to shoot at me, even if they didn't know I was on board.

Right? They can't know about me already, right?

"The Interstellar Amalgamation was formed centuries ago by several alien races who embraced war-mongering tactics. It is a collective of planets who believe in a peaceful coexistence between all intelligent species in the universe, which sounds wonderful and would be, if not for their desire to annihilate everyone who stands in their way. And why would anyone oppose them? Perhaps because before they claimed to be wanting peace, they destroyed the planets closest to them, without asking if they agreed or would surrender. Just one morning, attacked them all at the same time. They are both technically advanced and highly unethical, doing whatever they can to preserve the lives of those from their planets while not caring for the lives of any who oppose them. While they value knowledge, they strive to find ways to use technology so they can exploiting them for their own gain instead of trying to benefit societies across the universes. My side respects all life and wishes for equal rights for all sentient creatures regardless of species or origin, freedom from oppression, and mutually beneficial relationships between planets, solar systems, galaxies, universes... We strive for galactic peace through diplomatic solutions instead of violence whenever possible."

“Forgive me, but that sounds a bit... prejudiced.”

“Very well. Listen.”

He presses a button off to the far right of the console, and the sounds of a panicked transmission fills the air. At first, I can't understand the words even if I can sense the fear and hopelessness in the voice, but then Gael presses another button, and the words of the transmission are now heard as English.

“Help, please,” says a man, his voice breaking and desperate. “They’re attacking, killing us. The... They call themselves the Interstellar Amalgamation. We... We had no idea... no warning... nothing. They have asked for nothing, no terms for surrender.”

In the background, I can hear crying, shouting, and, worst of all, the sound of weapons being fired, although they aren't like any weapons available on Earth. People are screaming for help, begging for mercy, and howling in pain. Some of the cries... they're death shrills.

The sheer panic and terror in the voices make me tremble, my heart racing as I realize just how cruel this organization is.

“We can't...” the man continues. “We don't want to fight, but... no choice... It's too... Help... Have mercy! I am a father. I have children and a sickly—”

The plea is followed by static as his transmission is cut off.

The despair in his voice sends a chill through my heart.

Gael remained silent during the transmission, his face unreadable except for a subtle twitch of sadness around his eyes when he turns to look at me again.

“That is why we fight,” he says quietly. “So no one else will ever have to go through what those people did. It is our right—no, our duty—to do whatever we can to protect innocent being like those people who were brutally murdered by those who have no respect for life as others still are to this day.”

The determination in his voice is unmistakable, and I feel my own resolve beginning to grow inside of me.

Gael takes me by the hand. You don't need to decide now who you want to be on this war, but when you do make your choice... make sure it comes from your heart."

I let my gaze fall to the floor of the cockpit as I dully nod. Things are far worse than I feared.

"That ship has been charged with finding mine and destroying it, killing me, but there are patrols that the Interstellar Amalgamation have as well. They change their paths all the time. I need to contact the nearest base so that we can live here and be safe, not just from Raazzor Claws but all of their ships. Please, stay here and be safe."

I nod again, and he leaves the cockpit and presumably the ship entirely.

Never have I felt more alone.

Or more afraid.

Not even after I learned about my parents dying.

CHAPTER 19



I wait for a long moment, long enough for me to be certain that Gael wasn't going to come back because he had forgotten to tell me something, and then I claim his seat in the cockpit. I hate that I feel like a caged animal. How can I even hope to survive out here? I don't know anything about piloting spaceships. Even if I do, it won't matter. The patrols are everywhere, and they're dangerous.

My gaze is fixed out of the window. I can't help but feel like I'm being watched by unseen eyes, and that at any moment, something terrible could come out of the darkness. The only thing keeping me from panicking is knowing that Gael is out there somewhere, fighting to gain what we need to be kept safe.

And to keep fighting.

But even having this knowledge does not take away all of my fear. The idea that these monsters can simply pop up and take away innocent lives without warning fills me with dread and makes me want to hide away until it's all over.

The silence in the cockpit is oppressive, the only sound being my own shallow breathing.

Somehow, the transmission still rings in my ears. My heart pounds against my chest as I try to process what I just heard and make sense of it all.

But this isn't a time for fear, I remind myself as I take a deep breath. What that man said... It was like he had been talking directly to me, imploring me to act and help save those

who are in danger from this cruel organization. He was giving me an invitation to fight for justice, protection, freedom... and maybe the fate of many lives depends on me taking it up.

Before, I wanted out of my room so that I could try to figure out a way back to Earth. Here I am, in the cockpit. I don't know how to fly, but I could maybe figure out the autopilot, maybe have the ship return to where Gael had been when he plucked me off Earth...

But I'm not at all confident I would reach Earth safely, not with the patrols, not with any of it.

Besides, there's a growing stirring within me, a need to do something, to make a difference and be part of something greater than myself. This war is bigger than just Gael and me. There are people all across the galaxies who need our help.

My help.

I take a deep breath and slowly let it out before standing. Sure, this could be suicide, but at least it would be a meaningful one. With newfound courage, I resolve to stick around.

CHAPTER 20



And I am sticking around, I tell myself, even as I try to figure out where I have to go to disembark the ship. I have to find a way out, to explore if nothing else, and there's only one place I can think of. With my heart thundering in my chest, I make my way down to the cargo hold.

The idea of stepping out into this expansive universe, alone and unprotected, fills me with fear. I can't afford to get myself killed, not when Gael is out there risking his life for a cause that I now believe in too.

Despite my reservations, with a determined stride, I make my way to stand beside the closed hatch, but I don't open it, not just yet. The unknown lies beyond this door, and what awaits is totally unpredictable.

There had been a handful of times when I felt I was brave when I had been on Earth, but here on this unfamiliar planet, my bravery is put to the test.

The hatch opens with a hiss of air pressure, and I walk down the ramp and step onto the surface, my feet sinking into the soft layer of sand beneath it.

I am surrounded by a vast sea of stars twinkling in a million different shades, so close, yet infinitely far away. They are beautiful and mysterious yet inspiring and so full of promise that I can't help but be mesmerized by them.

The air is cool against my skin and carries with it a heavy scent of exotic flowers floating down from towering trees that seem to go on forever. There's something indescribably

calming about standing here taking in all these wonders at once.

Bright green vegetation stands starkly against the deep navy sky filled with stars and planets that spin slowly around me like a carousel.

But my moment of peace is quickly interrupted by a strange and unexpected sound coming from the shadows ahead. It's almost like a low hum, almost like a song... No, not a song. A language.

Suddenly, I spot something moving out from the shadows and towards me. At first glance, it looks like some kind of small animal, but as it moves closer, I start to make out what it is, a creature with a human-like face and body covered in thick fur. The creature stops in front of me and looks up at me with its large eyes filled with curiosity and intelligence.

Is this... Is this another alien? Another human? But I thought Gael said there were no beings on this planet...

The being is on all fours, and it shakes its body, much like a dog would after getting wet, and off it trots, not looking at me again.

So maybe that was an animal? I can't be sure one way or another.

I walk a little farther, not risking leaving the ship too far behind. How Gael thinks he can bring me to a strange planet and believe I wouldn't want to see it up close and personal is beyond me.

A movement catches my eye in the corner of my vision, and I turn to see a strange creature standing just a few feet away from me. It has four slender legs that arch gracefully into an ethereal body made of glittering scales. Its long neck is crowned with a head sprouting two horns and two enormous eyes. Those huge eyes blink, and off the creature runs on those four legs, the knees bending backward, the opposite of my own.

I watch the creature go, and I can only marvel at the beauty of its design.

I can't help but gasp in wonder, marveling at how such a strange creature can exist.

I can hardly believe my eyes, and my heart is beating so fast I can feel it in my throat. I am not alone on this planet. There are creatures here, bizarre and beautiful.

The planet is full of life, I realize with a start. The ground teems with all sorts of unfamiliar plants and animals that I can't even begin to comprehend. Even the trees are different here, much larger and more intricate than the ones back home. Every leaf looks like it's made of spun glass and every branch hums with energy.

The urge to explore further is strong within me, and soon I'm wandering through the planet's landscape, discovering flowers and plants that I had never seen before, plants with large purple petals that seem to float in the air, small yellow stars that glow faintly in the dark, and even strange spiky fruits that I can't identify but taste sweet like honey.

It's only after I taste the fruit that I think that perhaps might not be the smartest of ideas, but my stomach doesn't complain.

More soft sounds float to me, like a song. I approach cautiously until I can make out what is making the noise and am completely amazed by what I find. In front of me stands a strange creature with twinkling eyes, its long limbs covered in fur that shines in shades of green and blue. This one doesn't have a human face at all, completely animalistic.

It stares at me for a moment before taking a few steps forward and bowing its head slightly as if it were trying to greet me in some way. Fear still restricts my movement for a second, but the creature opens its mouth and shows off teeny tiny teeth that can't possibly cut my flesh.

With tentative steps, I reach out my hand and hold it out to the creature who sniffs it softly before nuzzling against my palm with affection.

So cute!

I keep going, my eyes wide as I take in my surroundings. The flowers range from tiny little things no bigger than my finger to huge, lush blooms that tower over me like sentinels. There are so many shades and colors that I'm almost dizzy from looking at them all.

And then there are even more fruits, bright and juicy and full of flavor that burst on my tongue with each bite. This planet is nothing like Earth. It's exotic, wild, and untamed, a place where anything could happen.

Maybe Gael and I could just stay here. Stop fighting. Live out the rest of our lives here.

But the Interstellar Amalgamation will come here, eventually, won't it?

There's no escape from them.

Just like that, all of the wonder I've felt flees, leaving me dejected and resigned all over again.

CHAPTER 21



I take a deep breath. Maybe it's time for me to return to the ship. The last thing I need is for Gael to realize that I disobeyed him, but should he really have the authority to give me orders? Not in my opinion.

I turn to head back the way I come and gasp.

There, standing not five feet from me, is Gael. He has his arms folded across his chest. He's mad, and he's not hiding it.

"Gael," I say, trying to keep my voice even, but his expression has me falling silent.

He looks up at me with blazing eyes and a scowl on his face that could kill someone if it had the power to do so. He strides toward me, his mouth set in a thin line of anger, and he doesn't stop until he's invading my personal space.

So not like in my dream when he was all sweet and ridiculously sexy and oh so smooth and charming.

No, he's as furious as can be, and I could easily believe he's strong enough to rip someone limb from limb.

"Where have you been?" he demands, his voice carrying loudly in this quiet place, instantly silencing any hums or songs from any nearby animals.

I take a deep breath and meet his gaze head on, unwilling to show any signs of weakness in front of him. "Exploring," I answer simply, not wanting to get into details about what I found here or how much awe it inspired within me. "This planet is amazing."

Gael's expression shifts from anger to disbelief. "Exploring? You risked your life to explore?"

"I didn't see any dangerous animals," I protest.

"There are dangerous animals here! Just because you didn't see them doesn't mean... Gracie, do you want to get yourself killed?"

"Look, I know you're angry that I—"

He snorts. "Of course I'm angry! What were you thinking exploring this planet by yourself? You could have gotten seriously hurt!" His voice is tight with anger, but underneath it, I can hear the fear for me that he's barely keeping in check.

I fight down the urge to argue with him.

"I'm okay," I say softly, hoping to soothe him a little. "Look at all the wonders I found here! Things I never would have been able to see back home." I gesture around us at the trees and plants and strange creatures that lived here.

Gael doesn't answer right away, instead just reaches out one hand and takes mine in his own tightly. He sighs and shakes his head.

"You can't be this foolish," he says.

"And maybe you can't be so controlling," I spit out.

Gael's face hardens and his grip on my hand tightens to the point where I can feel it throbbing. We stand there, him glowering down at me and me glaring back up at him.

He stares at me for a moment, and I can tell he's trying to decide if he should be angry about my outburst or not. Finally, he takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

"I'm trying to keep you safe," he says.

"I know," I say, "but you don't need to keep me safe from everything." I look around us at the magnificent beauty of this planet and the promise of adventure it holds. "Sometimes, you have to take risks."

Of course, that is precisely the wrong thing to say.

“You’re too important to take foolish risks.”

“And you’re foolish to take a risk on me!”

He shakes his head. “If you wouldn’t be so blind—”

“Blind? To what? Just because you think I’m some kind of secret weapon to stop the war without any more loss of life doesn’t mean that I’m not human. I’m not just going to do whatever you tell me to do. I still have a mind and free will! Or am I a prisoner? Are you going to lock me in that room again? It’s barely even a room. Just a bed. Oh, and the window. A constant reminder that I’m not back on Earth.”

“Would you rather I shove you into a room without a window?”

“How about you shouldn’t shove me at all?”

I hate that the first thing I think of is him slamming me against the wall, my back to him as he undresses me...

Why the hell is my mind going there now?

Gael’s face hardens, and he looms over me. Tension radiates from him, and my heart starts to beat faster.

“We are on this mission together,” he says, clearly trying not to sound so angry with me. “I can’t be responsible for you if you go gallivanting off by yourself.”

His voice is low but intense, and I have to struggle not to flinch away from him.

“But if I’m going to trust you,” he continues, his tone softening a little bit, “then you need to start trusting me too.” He leans in closer and stares into my eyes until I look away from him, unable to withstand the intensity of the moment any longer.

“I don’t think this is about trusting each other,” I whisper.

Gael’s lips curl up into a slight smile, and he nods.

“Is it really that terrible that I wanted to see this planet?” I ask.

“You could have asked me to—”

“Oh, please. Do you honestly think you would’ve taken me off the ship? No. You might’ve brought a flower back for me to see and smell, maybe a fruit—”

“You ate some of the fruit here?”

“Yes,” I admit.

“You truly are—”

“If you dare to insult me one more time,” I threaten.

He glares at me, his nostrils flaring, and I glare right back at him.

Neither of us are willing to give an inch.

I’m ready to continue fighting with Gael all day, even though I know deep down that it won’t get us anywhere. However, before we can do that, a loud screech echoes through the air and breaks our stare down. We both look up in surprise and spot a large bird-like creature soaring above us, its wingspan easily twice my height. We watch as it flies off into the distance until it disappears from sight.

We stare at each other for a few moments after that. I can see the anger still in Gael’s eyes but also something else. Understanding perhaps? He squeezes my hand one last time before he releases it and takes a step back from me.

My heart started to slow down as we watched that creature fly, but now it’s starting back up again.

Maybe for a different reason.

I really hate that Gael has an effect on me.

CHAPTER 22



I take a deep breath, trying to regain my composure. I can't let Gael see how much he affects me or it could ruin our mission. We have come too far to let anything stand in the way of success.

I snort to myself. I haven't done anything. I haven't come far.

he has.

He has every right to be furious with me.

I open my mouth to apologize, but he clears his throat and offers me his arm. I reluctantly take it and we walk back towards the ship together in silence. I get the feeling that he doesn't know what to say after such an intense moment. I know I have no idea what to say, so we just keep walking in silence. The only sound is our feet crunching against the dry dirt beneath us.

As we approach the ship, I realize I never saw it until now. Earlier, I had been too excited to see my first alien planet to look behind at the ship, and when he kidnapped me, he somehow transported me onto it without my first seeing it.

I can't help but marvel at the beauty of it. The giant metal structure glistens in the sunlight, and its intricate details are nothing short of breathtaking.

Gael stops at the foot of the gangplank and turns to face me, his expression unreadable. He stares at me for what feels like an eternity before he speaks again. "I don't want you to take any more risks while we're here," he says, his voice soft

but serious. “I get that you have your own agenda and plans but I need you to realize that there is more at stake than just yourself.”

I stare back at him, trying to process his words. “I understand,” I finally say after a few moments. I take a deep breath, allowing the cool air to calm my racing heart. “Gael, I —”

He cuts me off by holding up his hand. “You don’t have to apologize. I understand why you wanted to explore this place and see what it has to offer. That doesn’t mean I’m going to let you wander around on your own again.”

His voice is gentle yet firm and I can tell he isn’t going to budge on this one, and why should he? He’s just trying to keep me safe and make sure our mission doesn’t fail.

Still, I can’t help bristling at his insistence at taking away my freedom.

I enter the ship first, feeling a wave of relief wash over me as I step inside. Somehow, the sights and smells are familiar already. They almost even comfort me.

What the hell? Please don’t tell me that this spaceship is already becoming my home away from home.

Gael follows closely behind. The tension is unbearable, and I blurt out, “I thought about flying off and trying to return to Earth, but... I went out exploring instead.”

He grabs my shoulders and forces me to turn around to face him. His expression is one of disbelief.

“You did what?” He steps closer to me, towering over me.

I shrink away from him, feeling my stomach clench with fear and guilt.

“Are you intelligent, or are all Earthlings so ignorant and carefree with reckless disregard for their lives?” he asks, berating me. “Your intelligence, the lack thereof, is appalling.”

I wince. His words sting more than anything I’ve ever felt before.

“You were foolish to go off on your own. If I hadn’t found you when I did, who knows what could have happened? You can’t be so reckless and irresponsible. Yes, some of those creatures might be friendly, but some are vicious savages, and you could have ended up getting yourself killed by one of them.”

His words are sharp, and they cut through me like a knife. My cheeks flush with embarrassment as I take a step back from him.

“I didn’t even try to take off. Doesn’t that count for anything? I decided to stay here, to fight, but... Maybe if you would have taken me with you instead of treating me like a prisoner or a child, this wouldn’t have happened! You can’t take me to an alien planet and rip me away from Earth and expect me to just obey your every command! I’m not a Zilqud. You aren’t my leader or my boss, and I’m not going to just blindly do whatever you tell me to! I’m a person, not a doll! Maybe I shouldn’t have eaten the fruit, and maybe I shouldn’t have gone off alone, but I did, and that’s that.”

His eyes flash.

I lift my chin and cross my arms. “You should apologize. Not me.”

He snorts and brushes past me. I think he might mutter something under his breath, but it’s not in English, which is probably just as well.

I just watch him go. The ramp behind us closes, and I’m trapped on the ship once more.

Trapped with an alien who is very, very angry with me.

CHAPTER 23



I go to my room and try to accept what's going on, but I can't. I feel like a caged animal, pacing the confines of my prison. I keep telling myself that Gael is only trying to protect me, but it doesn't help much.

I flop down onto my bed and try to focus on the stars outside my window. It's a beautiful sight, peaceful yet awe-inspiring at the same time. But I can't stop thinking about Gael and our fight. He had seemed so angry with me, angrier than he ever had before.

But why? What was it that made him so mad? Was it because he was worried about me, or was it something else entirely?

Is he hiding something?

I bite my lip in frustration as all these questions swirl around inside my head, making me even more confused than before. Maybe I should just go talk to him and get some answers straight from the source.

But can I even trust him?

I groan and rub the back of my neck as I continue to pace. The ship doesn't feel like it's going, but then again, it hadn't felt like it had been moving during most of the flight. Only when we had been frantically flying through that asteroid field to evade that alien dragon vessel had it felt like we were really moving.

Had we only been coasting along before? When he knew a ship was trying to track him down? That hardly makes any

sense.

My heart feels heavy in my chest, and I sit down on the edge of the bed. I have come so far in such a short amount of time, not because I wanted to, though. Regardless, here I am now, thousands of miles—no, thousands of lightyears—away from home with an alien who is mad at me for making a mistake that could have gotten us both killed.

Yes, I was wrong to leave the ship. I wasn't armed. If one of those strange animals had attacked me, I would have had no way to defend myself, and eating the fruit? That hadn't been smart either.

I lay back on the bed, feeling the sheets cool against my skin. My thoughts drift back to Earth and all the things I will be missing out on while we are gone—the familiar faces, warm summers spent lounging outside with friends, and family gatherings around the dinner table. Every passing second, even if we aren't actively flying yet, takes me one step farther away from everything I have ever known.

I sit back up and look out the window. Yes, it's beautiful here on this planet, but nothing compares to being able to step outside and feel the sun warm my face or looking up into a clear night sky full of stars.

My stars.

Earth's stars.

I try to focus on our mission instead, but in so many ways, it still feels like his mission, not mine. The stakes are too high. It's not only our lives at stake, but also those of everyone back home who are counting on us to save them from destruction.

Well, that's not entirely true. No one back on Earth knows about this war, and I don't know how many Zilquds are left other than Gael.

My stomach churns. I really do feel trapped.

I close my eyes. Trapped. That's one of my biggest fears. My parents had to have felt trapped as their helicopter spiraled about as it freewill to the ground.

To their doom.

The helicopter exploded seconds after it landed.

They never stood a chance.

That helicopter had become their coffin, their tomb.

They had both been buried in closed caskets.

Being trapped became my greatest fear after I learned about how they died, but there are so many ways a person can be trapped.

And I'm trapped right now.

CHAPTER 24



I'm back on my feet. I can't keep sitting here, thinking about all these things. No matter how scared I am of being trapped, I have to move forward, if only to save those back home who are relying on me. I refuse to let them down. They deserve more than that. Worrying about things that I cannot control won't get me anywhere.

Not that there's much of anything I can do. I mean, sure I could try to talk to Gael and...

My room isn't locked. I came here of my own free will.

I'm trapped, yes, on the ship, but I do at least have my freedom to walk about the ship.

I take one last look outside the window before heading out the door and into the hallway. The ship is still eerily quiet, making it feel like a ghost ship.

With a determination that I didn't know I had until now, I march down the hallway. One of these doors probably leads to his room, but I don't know which one it is.

He said this ship had been built by his family, right? Those other rooms belonged to his sisters, his brothers, his parents.

Which sibling's room am I in?

I hurry to the cockpit. It's one of the few places I know how to travel to in this maze of a ship. Sure enough, he's there, Gael—my kidnapper, my enemy, my teammate.

Teammate? I guess so. Ally works too.

My heart rate picks up as I approach him. He's sitting in his customary seat, eyes closed and hands clasped in front of him in a thoughtful pose. His lips are slightly parted and he appears lost in thought.

I hesitate for a moment, uncertain if I want to disturb him, but before I can do anything, he stands and turns around, halting immediately.

His gaze is guarded as he looks at me, making me feel like I should be running away rather than talking to him, but I stand firm as his eyes meet mine, seeking understanding and answers that he may or may not have hidden behind those steel walls of his.

"Gael," I say softly. "Can we talk?"

He narrows his eyes, as if he's trying to figure me out. I'm aware of the tension between us, but I don't let it scare me away.

"Please," I add, my voice barely more than a whisper.

He finally breaks his silence and takes a step closer to me. His face is unreadable, but I can see something in his gaze, something that looks like understanding and maybe even sympathy.

But he still hasn't said anything, and I'm starting to think he won't when he finally speaks up. "Yes," he says firmly, his voice devoid of emotion. "What about?"

I take a deep breath and gather my courage before continuing on. "I wanted to apologize for leaving the ship without telling you," I say. "I didn't mean to frighten you, and I acted a little rashly—"

"A little rashly?"

"Fine," I growl. "I acted rashly, but that doesn't excuse how I acted."

"You're lucky you're alive. Eating food on an alien planet... How... How unintelligent can you be?"

"Maybe I thought you wouldn't bring me to a planet that might kill me since you want me alive so damn badly!" I snap

and then wince. “I didn’t mean to lose my cool. It’s just... I’m sorry. Okay? I am. I do mean it. I hadn’t been thinking. I wouldn’t say I’m stupid, as you seem to think, but I maybe should’ve thought twice and thought better about things, but you... you aren’t blameless, you know. You can’t just bark orders at me. I’m not a dog. I have a mind, and I deserve to be treated with respect. I honestly would like an apology from you.”

The words tumbled out of me quickly, and I stare him down, almost challenging him not to cave.

Gael looks away and takes a deep breath before turning back to me. His expression is still guarded, but there’s something in his eyes that tells me he’s not as angry as he was before.

“I don’t think I need to apologize for wanting to keep you safe,” he says.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Yes, of course. I’m at fault. I’m the one to blame for all of it, and you’re so wonderful and perfect and incredibly, utterly infuriating! You don’t know anything about me! You don’t understand how scared I am and how helpless I feel. I can’t do anything at all! Not without your help. You made me this way. You made me helpless, and you want me to win this war for you? Ha! You kidnapped me, and I’m supposed to be thankful for that? Is that what you’re saying? Give me a fucking break! All I want to do is return home to be my friends, to my company, but... I’m trapped. You stole me away from Earth, from the only life I knew, and plucked me into the middle of a war between terrible sides that have killed how many? I’m trapped, and I feel like I’m suffocating, so yes, when I had the chance to experience a little bit of freedom, I took it. Sue me. My parents... Your parents aren’t the only ones who died. Mine died trapped in a hunk of metal that fell out of the sky. They had been on a helicopter, not that you know what that is, but it became a metal cage for them, and they were trapped and terrified, and they died, and I just couldn’t be trapped in your hunk of metal any longer. Yes, I thought about trying to figure out how to fly back to Earth even though it would’ve stranded you here, but I

didn't. I stayed, and that was when I went out for a nature walk, and you know what? Maybe I retract my apology because I needed that walk! I needed to know what is all out there so maybe I can accept that nothing in my life will ever be the same again."

I'm trembling. That's how worked up I am.

Words have failed me, and he steps closer and places both hands on my shoulders, looking directly into my eyes with a determination that can only come from understanding exactly what it means to be trapped, to be surrounded by uncertainty, to be afraid.

In his emerald eyes, I see his apology because I see how afraid he had been.

Afraid for me.

It doesn't give him the right to try to control me, but at least I understand more where he's coming from.

"Gracie," he murmurs.

I reach up and pat his hands on my shoulders. "I know," I murmur back.

"I accept your apology," he says.

Is he for real?

I gape at him.

He blinks at me in such a way that I'm left wondering if a deliberate blink by a Zilqud is the equivalent of an Earthling winking.

"I hope you accept my apology as well," he say.

"I do," I say, and I feel so much better, now that I've gotten all of that off my chest.

I just hope he truly does accept me, flaws and all.

I also hope that his faith in me isn't misguided because I sure as hell think it is.

CHAPTER 25



Gael blows out a breath. “I was able to make contact with a friend,” he says. “We can leave. I know where the patrols are, and I can avoid them.”

“Are we going to go to Zerkrud?” I ask eagerly.

He shakes his head. “As much as I wish we could, we can’t, not given the intel I was given. I was able to find a substance we can use for fuel, though, so it was not entirely a wasted venture.”

“You did? I didn’t see you bring anything on board.”

“I came on board to find you missing and went out to find you,” he says.

His lips purse, but he says no more about that, instead bringing up different maps of stars and planets and plotting a course for the ship to take. he mentioned voice commands, but he hasn’t demonstrated that yet.

The ship rumbles around me as it takes off, a reminder that we are leaving Earth farther and farther behind.

I swallow hard. Although a part of me wants to know what to expect, I figure at this point, Gael will either tell me without prompting, or else he won’t tell me even if I do prompt.

Gael swivels his chair to face me once more. “Would you like to learn more about my home planet?”

“Yes, please.”

“Zerkrud, naturally, is the birthplace of my ancestors and holds the secrets to our history and culture. The planet has vast deserts, thick forests, and rolling plains. We have monuments from times long past, sculptures carved from earth itself, intricate murals adorning cliff sides... Some of the first cities ever formed Zerkrud still exist, even if the civilization that once lived there has been lost.”

“We have a few cities like that on Earth,” I murmur.

“The sky is a brilliant red, much like the sky on Earth during a beautiful sunset,” he continues, his gaze turning faraway as if he can see his planet this very second. “There are two moons that dot the horizon as though they were painted there with care by an expert artist. The air is different than what we breathe here on this planet.”

“The air here... I didn’t realize take notice of it,” I admit.

“It is rather like the air on Earth,” he comments. “That is some of the reason why I chose here.”

“Yet, you did not want me to breathe that air,” I point out.

“Not without me by your side,” he says firmly. “I intended... It does not matter now. The air on Zerkrud is thicker, fragrant with the scent of exotic flowers from distant lands. The trees are taller than any others you have ever seen, and the grass is so thick that it feels like you’re walking through a soft blanket of green. Every night, flamsects dance in the starlight above us, creating a show that takes your breath away.”

“Flamsects?”

“They are like your lightning bugs, I suppose. There are some similarities between the animals there and those on Earth, but some of the ones we have are nothing like those on Earth.”

“You miss it, don’t you?” I ask softly.

He nods. “Yes, of course.”

“How long has it been since you were last there?” I ask.

“Far too long.”

We're silent a long moment, and I wonder if he's finished his story time.

"We also have our own customs and traditions. We celebrate seven major holidays throughout the year, each one focusing on a different aspect of our culture. We wear traditional dress for these celebrations, with men usually donning robes and women wearing colorful saris. On each holiday, we share stories and songs passed down through generations. Music is an integral part of our culture as well, so many people play different instruments during these gatherings."

"It sounds beautiful," I breathe in awe. "Why haven't I heard you sing any?"

"I don't sing. I share stories, and I'm sharing one now if you'll let me."

I nod sheepishly, and he smiles softly at me.

"Traditionally, we eat meals made from ingredients found only on Zerkrud—spices from the desert lands, fruits from the forests—but with the war, we sometimes run out of food from our home planet and have no choice but to eat whatever we can."

"Did it bother you, eating food from Earth with me?"

"Not at all," he assures me. "I am not as strict as some of the others. I can't afford to be. Let's see... Our main language is called Dootz-Kanor."

"Can you say something in that language for me?" I ask eagerly.

He hums thoughtfully, taking a few moments to consider before finally nodding. He begins to sing a slow, sweet melody in the strange language. His voice is smooth and melodic, like birdsong echoing through the air. Naturally, I have no idea what he is singing about, yet I've been to ballets and I can watch the story unfold between the music and the dancing. Gael's facial expression combined with the haunting melody call to mind both love and loss, and I'm captivated by his performance. When he's done, he smiles bashfully at me.

“I loved that,” I breathe.

“Do you want to know what the song was about?”

“Yes, please.”

“It is a story about two lovers. Fate separated them, and they never had the chance for closure before they were forced apart. They did see each other once more before being ripped apart once again, and in the parting embrace, they sang this song to one another so that they could sing it again and again, the other remaining in their hearts until they might find each other again someday in an another life.”

“You believe in reincarnation?” I ask. “But I thought... the star...”

Gael’s smiles stretches wider. “To be brought back again is the ultimate expression of unconditional love that transcends time and space. No matter how far apart they were, their love could never be broken. It must survive. The last part of the song speaks of hope for a reunion in the future so that their souls can once again be united, for them to know peace and joy for the rest of their lives.”

He falls silent, and I am so touched by the song and its message that I dare not say anything either.

To be loved like that... that is truly a gift.

That would be worth fighting for.

CHAPTER 26



We fly through space, the stars twinkling brightly in the black expanse.

But as beautiful as it is, it is also dangerous.

The patrols.

As much as we try to avoid them, my heart lurches each time Gael's body tenses up. His eyes will widen, the spark in his emerald eyes dimming, and I know that we're in danger of being discovered.

"We must be careful," he says lowly. "The patrols have increased."

"Isn't there a way to jump through space and time or..." I falter. "I hate that I know so little about space travel," I grumble. "All I know is from sci-fi movies, and that's not real."

Gael sighs heavily, shaking his head. "Well, there is hyper speed," he says, "but unfortunately, it's too dangerous to use. While it would be so much faster, we would run the risk of being detected by the patrols."

"How so?"

"Signatures left behind, residuals that can now be collected and studied so that they can learn precisely where we went. The patrols have the technology to detect anything that goes faster than the speed of light."

"Like that other ship." I shudder, thinking about that dragon vessel that seemed so much like a mechanical dragon.

“It is maybe a small blessing that they would not take us in. They would kill us, and that might well be a mercy. If the patrols find us, then we would have very little chance of surviving. They would fire on us without question, and we could try to fight back, try to flee... but the patrols are not small. The number of ships each patrol has...”

“The Interstellar Amalgamation is winning the war, aren’t they?” I ask point-blank. “To have that many ships on so many patrols... they have the ships and the manpower. What do we have?”

“Hope.”

I snort. “Hope is a foolish venture.”

“Perhaps.”

His voice is heavy with regret, but I can sense the underlying determination behind his words.

“The only way to stay safe from the patrols is to keep low profile and stay hidden,” he adds. “We must take our time and go at a steadier pace so that we don’t draw attention to ourselves.”

He looks away for a moment before turning back to me with an apologetic expression on his face.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly. “I know all of this must terrify you, but... Some of my friends attempted hyper speed to flee the patrols when they had first been set up, and...”

He hangs his head.

I rub his back, trying to hide the fact that he’s right.

I am terrified.

I feel so helpless and scared, but I try my best not to show it. We must remain alert and vigilant, always prepared for when things turn worse.

Because I fear that things will always turn worse.

“Is there anything else I should know?” I ask.

“There are much more dangerous things in this universe than patrols, things that even hyperspace cannot save us from.”

His words send a chill down my spine, but I don't voice my fear.

“Such as?” I ask even though I'm not sure I want to know.

“Black holes, cosmic storms, rogue asteroids, supernovas and more,” he says slowly. “Gravitational anomalies, energy storms, radiation belts... Those are the real threats of space travel. Things that we can't see until it's too late, things that we can't outrun or escape from. We must stay aware at all times, as any lapse in our attention could cost us our lives.”

“Great,” I mumble.

“And of course there are always the creatures of space that may not be friendly to humans who venture into their territory.”

“You mean aliens,” I assume.

“No.”

“You mean to tell me there are creatures that live in space?” I cry. “How is that possible?”

“Did that vessel you saw remind you of anything?”

“A dragon,” I say slowly.

He nods and gives me a telling look.

“Well, that's terrifying,” I mumble.

“You don't have to worry. I have everything under control.” He smiles, and I can see the determination in his eyes. “We will be safe. I promise you that.”

We fall quiet as he carefully navigates through the stars. I've never been religious, but I can't help praying to anyone who might hear me, asking that we won't be seen by any of the patrols. We pass by galaxies and constellations. None are familiar to me, of course, but maybe Gael has come this way before.

The stars twinkle brightly, and the vastness of space stretches out before us. Every so often, we come across a planet or two, but we don't stop at any of them.

Nothing but darkness surrounds us, occasionally punctuated by the starlight from far off galaxies. We take advantage of every moment of peace to get further away from the patrols, silently hoping that they are not able to detect our presence no matter how much longer it takes us to reach safety.

Time and gain, Gael will bid me to sleep or eat. I also insist on us eating together, and I do crash now and again.

But Gael? I don't know if he doesn't need sleep or if he just refuses to.

I peer over his shoulder as he plots yet another course for us. I'm trying to figure out what he's doing, but mostly just wishing for some kind of reassurance that everything will be all right.

CHAPTER 27



Suddenly, an eerie quiet fills that just doesn't feel right. Gael's face pales, and I brace as he stands, looking over to the left.

I follow his gaze, and my heart drops into my stomach. All of the light from the stars has been eclipsed by a massive vessel that looks like something out of a nightmare. It's easily twice our size and is adorned with sharp spikes on its exterior.

The ship approaches us quickly and its engines start to hum as it approaches.

Gael gives me one last glance before he slams his hands against the controls.

A loud alarm blares through the cockpit, and my heart leaps in my chest as Gael frantically taps on the console.

"What is it?" I demand.

"That style ship, should be part of a patrol, but I don't see anyone else."

"Do you want me to try to shoot at them?" I ask.

"You can try, but their shields... Go ahead."

I can tell from his tone that I won't be able to do anything, but I hurry over just the same. I'm just about to settle into the seat when the ship rattles violently as we dodge their attacks, but they stay right behind us. They're determined to take us down no matter what.

Gael swerves back and forth desperately as he tries to shake them off our tail, but they won't give up easily. They keep showering us with blasts. Gael is trying to get us away from the other ship, desperately trying to find some way to avoid the attack.

But it's no use. The craft is too close for us to escape unscathed. As we zip through space, desperately trying to outrun them, laser beams and missiles are fired indiscriminately from the other ship that follows closely behind us.

"Should we use the hyperspeed?" I shout.

"There's no point. It'll just follow us."

"So what do we do?"

He doesn't answer.

We swerve around asteroids and comets in an effort to trick them into missing their target, but they stay hot on our tails. Then Gael yells something in his language that I can't understand, and he slams his finger down on the hyperspeed button, propelling us forward faster than ever before.

The other vessel follows suit and continues shooting at us as we shoot past stars, planets and galaxies alike. I haven't been able to track the vessel much at all to fire at it. I'm just sitting there, gripping the controls, fighting back a wave of panic that threatens to make me vomit.

Gael brought me into this war so that I could try to bring about peace. He hoped that I would somehow end the war, not through fighting. I don't know if that will require me to be presented to the Interstellar Amalgamation or what exactly, but in order for me to try to accomplish his goal—my goal—we have to get out of this.

Even though I know that my firing at the ship won't do much to hurt it, I force myself to clear my mind, to stop panicking at least as much as I can stop panicking, and lock on the ship, fire, and lock it on its new position and fire.

Rinse and repeat.

I've gotten away from making my to-do lists. My phone's dead, and I don't know if Gael has any paper or what he uses to make notes. Everything seems to be so futuristic and computerized. Nothing by hand.

So my to-do lists will just have to be in my head for now at least.

And there's only one thing on it right now.

Survive.

"Gael... if I can't damage the ship... is there any way to disarm it? Or can we bring down their shields so I can blow it up? Or... What are our options exactly?" I ask, proud that my voice isn't shaking all that much.

"I'm not sure..." he replies, his voice strained as he keeps trying to get away from them. "Anything to stop them is going to be risky, but we have to try something."

He meets my gaze, and for a moment, time stands still.

We have to do whatever it takes to survive.

He begins typing away at the console and then slams his hand down on a few buttons as if he's trying to unlock something. The other ship is getting closer, and I keep firing at them since Gael hasn't told me to stop.

Abruptly, Gael has our ship speeding up again. We're heading for a planet that has a massive ring around it. Not like Saturn's rings. This ring is filled with debris and space junk that we have to weave around.

I continue to fire at the ship. It's much larger than ours, and it's getting hit by me and the rest of the junk. I can see tiny explosions from where it's struck by the debris, and I try to hit those specific spots.

"You're wearing the shields," he comments, "but not enough to make serious damage."

"I'm trying!"

"You're doing great," he assures me. "Hold on!"

He makes an abrupt left turn, sending my stomach somersaulting.

“You aren’t planning to go for another asteroid field, are you?” I ask nervously.

“This isn’t bad enough for you?” he jokes.

“Not nearly,” I mumble.

He laughs. His fingers fly over the keys with skill and precision.

“Now what are you doing?” I ask.

“Don’t you worry about me.”

“As if I can do that,” I mumble.

“Hold on,” he repeats.

Gael brings us around and heads straight toward the enemy ship, forcing it to evade and hit into a large piece of debris that shatters, striking both ships. We dodge the shards of metal as they fly by.

“Their ships are down!” Gael cries, bringing us back around to face the rear of the other ship. “Fire everything you’ve got!”

“Yes, sir!”

Now that the other ship is unprotected, I take advantage of this opportunity by firing shot after shot. What looks like fireworks explode on the ship until it finally explodes.

We did it!

CHAPTER 28



The debris from the wreckage shimmers in the starlight as it passes us by.

“We’re all good now, right?” I ask, hurrying over to Gael. I want to hug him.

Maybe even kiss him.

But I settle for putting a hand on his shoulder.

He doesn’t look at me, and the silence eats away at me as he clearly checking over different systems on our ship.

I gulp. We had gotten hit a lot, and sure enough, it’s not all sunshine and rainbows.

“Are we too damaged to get away from here?” I ask, my words low.

“We’re... It’ll be fine,” he mutters, but he doesn’t sound convincing at all.

I love him to check over everything and look at the added debris the enemy ship created in the belt. Even though we’ve won this battle, I can’t help but feel a twinge of sympathy for those aboard the other vessel who died.

Because of me.

I’m definitely a part of the war effort now.

There’s no turning back.

Gael is focusing on getting us out of here in one piece first before anything else hits us. We’re just floating along now

with everything else in this ring.

I clear my throat. “Do you think they managed to contact others about us?” I ask nervously.

“We have to operate under that assumption, yes,” he mumbles.

My heart drops. No matter how far we travel or try to elude our pursuers, they will eventually catch up to us. They won’t ever stop.

Even if we get to where we’re going, eventually Zerkrud or another planet that belongs to the Cosmos Coalition... This war isn’t going to end well for anyone.

Not them.

Not us.

I cover my mouth and try not to make a sound. This war is going to cost me my life.

Without a word or a sound, I turn around so I can cry without Gael realizing.

I never had a chance to tell my friends goodbye. My life on Earth just ended the moment Gael kidnapped me, and now, sooner or later, my life is going to end forever.

Fear weighs heavily on my shoulders, and I can’t help but feel like a coward. I shouldn’t care about my own life. There’s so much more at stake, and if Earth is dragged into this war, they’ll all die. We can’t fight a war against evil aliens and hope to survive.

If I had to sacrifice myself for this war, knowing it would cause us to win, would I do it? I would like to think so, but I don’t want to die.

Even though I will.

Just like that, we’re about to lose everything in the blink of an eye if we don’t make it out of this ring alive. We took a gamble, and it paid off, but that cost might also demand our lives in return.

The ship slowly starts to move. Gael maneuvers our ship carefully, avoiding any large chunks of debris threatening our path. Even though we're running on fumes, he still manages to get us through.

"I need to make repairs to the ship," he says.

"Sure," I murmur. "If I can help any..."

"Just stay here."

Of course. He won't bother to teach me or have me do much of anything to truly make a difference. I'll always be forced to have him save me time and again.

The door to the cockpit hisses shut as it closes behind him, and I collapse to the ground, completely overwhelmed by what just happened and the fact that our victory was only temporary.

It's only a matter of time until a much bigger enemy force shows up, and we won't stand a chance against them.

My hands tremble at thought of all the lives lost in these space battles, and it's hard for me to keep a hold on my emotions as fear isn't something I'm used to feeling. That fear is growing inside of me now, threatening to drown out any ounce of courage I could muster before this battle began.

But then again, maybe there's still hope for us yet if we can make it back alive to Zerkrud, not that Gael ever told me the specifics of why we can't head there straightaway.

Tears sting my eyes, but I quickly wipe them away. No matter the cost, I have to stay strong for Gael and for Earth. I can't let my emotions cloud my judgement, or else we won't make it out of this alive.

I push away from the floor, reaching deep down to find inner strength. I do my best to pull myself together and leave the cockpit behind in favor of seeking out Gael to try to help him anyhow.

I may not be able to help much, but I'll do what I can in this fight against our oppressors. That's all anyone ever needs,

a little bit of courage in a world filled with fear and uncertainty.

I can't let myself give up now, not when there's still so much at stake.

As I head down the hallway, I push away the fear of death that clings to me even though I've left the cockpit behind. No matter what happens, I won't give up.

CHAPTER 29



I find Gael in the engine room, a large circular chamber filled with complex machinery and wires. He's tinkering away with a few pieces of scrap metal he managed to salvage from the battle. His face is smudged with sweat, and his armor has stains all over it from his hard work. He moves on to fiddle with wires and circuits, mumbling to himself as he works, moving quickly but with purpose.

He glances up at me when I enter the room, and his eyes soften into a relieved expression. His hands are covered in grease, and his face is speckled with tiny cuts. When did that happen? While working on the machines?

"You're all right?" he asks.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Your body is so much more fragile than my own."

"I'm fine," I say.

It's not a lie, at least physically. Emotionally, though, well, that's another story.

"You don't have to help," he says softly, "but if you really want to, I could use an extra pair of hands."

I smile weakly and nod, glad that he's giving me an opportunity to help.

"What can I do?" I ask him, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Can you help me reattach these components? It shouldn’t be too difficult.”

I nod my head eagerly and get down to work helping him put all the pieces back together. With each twist of a screw and tug of a wire, we’re one step closer to our goal.

A goal that may or may not be achievable.

Once I finish with that, Gael points to another one of the machines in front of us. “This fluxcator needs to be repaired in order for us to get back on our journey.”

He details what I have to do and glances over time and again as he works on another machine. I still feel like I’m blind, just doing what he’s telling me without him explaining why or even what the fluxcator does, but at least he’s letting me help now.

Next, he moves onto yet another machine.

“The ship’s hyper-drive fusion reactor,” he says. “I’ll handle this.”

His repair tools are scattered across the floor while he kneels next to a massive piece of equipment that looks like it might have been damaged by enemy fire during our escape. I swallow hard as I take in all the damage that needs to be repaired before we can even think about getting back home safely.

The engine room smells like metal and oil, and it’s almost oppressive in its intensity. The hum of the machinery is oddly comforting, but it also makes me realize just how much work still needs to be done before we can even consider going to our next destination.

“I guess it’s a good thing we stopped at that other planet and refueled,” I mumble.

Gael looks up at me, and a small smile appears on his lips. “Yes, it is. And I promise you, I’m going to do everything I can to keep you safe.”

He holds out his hand, and I take it without hesitation. He pulls me close and wraps his arms around me in an embrace

that feels like pure protection. His warmth radiates through my body, and for the first time since our escape from the fight, I feel a little bit of peace.

But I know that peace is a lie.

“I’ll protect you,” he vows as he draws back and returns to work.

I nod to his backside, but I don’t believe him. Not really. Still, it’s nice to hear the words come out of his mouth because it means he cares enough about me to acknowledge his own mortality and acknowledge what could possibly happen if we fail in this mission.

He works hard, a determined expression on his face. Gael knows even better than I do knows what’s at stake here, not just for us but for all humans everywhere throughout the universes and galaxies.

“Stopping there might’ve been more intentional than I would’ve had you believe at first,” he says. “I wanted to make sure we were well-stocked, and I might’ve stocked up on some of that fruit you enjoyed so much.”

I gape at him. “Then why did you give me such a hard time about eating it?”

“Maybe because you shouldn’t go around eating things without first knowing if it’s edible and safe for you to consume. Not everything I eat you can digest, for one. The same goes for your Earthling food. A lot of your vegetables I can’t digest.”

I laugh. “We can’t digest some well ourselves.”

“So strange,” he mumbles, shaking his head. He stands and brushes off his hands, taking a few steps over to where I’m standing. “You know what? I think you’ve done more than enough for now. Why don’t you get some rest?”

My eyes widen in surprise, and I shake my head. “But there’s still so much that needs to be done!”

He shakes his head firmly. “No, it’s okay,” he says, determination burning in his gaze as he stares into my eyes.

“I’ll take care of the rest. And when you’re feeling better, I’ll need your help again.”

He reaches out and gently squeezes my shoulder, reassuring me in an unspoken way that he’s got this under control.

“No,” I insist.

I brace myself for a fight, but he relents, and we work for hours. By the time we’re finished, we are both exhausted from the effort.

The ship hums back into life, like it had been yearning for us to repair it all along. Gael looks satisfied at our work and slumps against one of the machines before standing back up again with a renewed determination.

“Let’s get on the space road again,” he jokes.

CHAPTER 30



I follow Gael back to the cockpit. He brings up a hologram of planets and sets us off, moving quicker than we normally do.

He's nervous about that ship alerting a patrol to our position. I know it is. He's all tense, and the smile he throws my way is tight.

"We'll be okay," I say, though I don't really believe it myself.

Gael looks down at me, his eyes twinkling with a sadness that he doesn't voice. He knows the dangers of this war more than I do, but he's also trying to stay upbeat for my sake.

"Yes," he says softly. "We will be."

He reaches out and takes my hand in his own and squeezes it tight, conveying everything he can't say in words.

I smile back at him, grateful for the reassurance even if I'm still scared about what's to come next on our journey through space. Gael pulls me close into one of his bear hugs and rubs circles into my back as if to make all the worry disappear with each movement of his hands.

It should alarm me how willing he is to hug me, but it's even more startling how much I accept those embraces. I don't always hug him back, though, and I don't know.

"Everything is going to be all right," he whispers into my ear before releasing me again. "We'll be out of the danger zone soon," he promises.

His fingers fly over the controls, and I stare at him in admiration. His knowledge and expertise are impressive, especially given our circumstances. The mission he's been asked to do—to find a way to end this war—seems impossible, but he's determined to try. Despite his own misgivings, he is still willing to risk everything for the greater good.

I turn away from him, sit in the seat closest to him, and look out the window, watching as galaxies and stars blur together in streaks of light against an endless night sky. For a moment, we both just sit in silence together as the ship moves through space towards its destination, wherever it may be.

Without warning, he stiffens. Immediately, I look around to see if there's an approaching alien ship, but there isn't.

It's the war. He's furious about it. The losses he's had to endure made him cry earlier, but now, he's livid.

he destruction, the lives lost and taken—it's all because of this senseless conflict. Tears prick my eyes, and I can feel a fury rising up in me that I haven't felt before. Gael notices, turns to me and pulls me into another hug without a word. He understands what I'm feeling. He's seen the effects of this war on innocent people. And he is just as angry as I am about it all.

Yes, I'm angry too. I might've been dragged into this war, but it's because Gael wants it over once and for all.

Every day, innocent lives are being destroyed, families ripped apart, and this senseless violence is only perpetuated by the powerful and those in control of their own destinies.

It's something that I can never understand, this wanton destruction of life, and it fills me with a fury so intense my mind goes blank. We're on a mission to end this war, and for that, I have renewed hope.

But as I take in the sight of the stars and planets, knowing that they are part of a much larger war, my heart sinks. everywhere we go, there is destruction, death, and pain. It's heartbreaking to see what this conflict has done to so many families and loved ones.

I draw away from him. He takes my hand again and gives it a squeeze before releasing it again gently. His expression is somber yet also determine.

“I wish you didn’t have to be here,” he says, breaking the solemn silence. “I should’ve taken someone else.”

My heart sinks. His words both infuriate and sadden me. He’s right, of course. I shouldn’t be here, in the middle of a war that isn’t mine.

“You won’t hear any protest from me,” I murmur, “but...”

“You don’t deserve any of this.” His eyes reveal agony. “I should bring you back.”

“No!”

Even I’m taken aback by my cry.

“I know and understand now why you took me. I know how important this mission is and why you needs me by your side. For better or worse, I’m here.”

“No one should have to go through the horrors of war, especially not you,” he argues.

“What about you?” I retort. “You’re kind and gentle.”

His laugh is dark and bitter. “So you think, but that’s not me, Gracie. That’s not me at all.”

These words make a chill go down my spine. I don’t know him much at all, not his entire life’s story. I don’t know what he’s capable of, the violence he might’ve caused upon others because of his family being killed.

“You’re determined to try and put an end to this war so that no one else will have to suffer like you have,” I say firmly. “What’s so terrible about that?”

“Maybe I’ve tried to end this war before with a... less than non-violent approach.”

“And now you are trying for peace with peace.”

He grunts. “We blew up one of their ships,” he reminds me.

“I did that, not you.”

“We did that together. If I hadn’t disabled their shields by forcing them to crash into that debris, you never would’ve been able to.”

“That just proves we make a great team,” I say lightly.

“More violence.”

“We’re at war,” I cry. “Of course there will be violence!”

He shakes his head but falls silent.

“Of course this mission won’t be easy,” I start.

“It’s going to get us both...”

“Go on and say it,” I hiss.

He doesn’t, of course.

“If you don’t think that we can make a difference, then go ahead.” I cross my arms. “Take me back to Earth and be done with it.”

His nostrils flare.

“You won’t, will you? Because if you do, you run the risk of bringing the Interstellar Amalgamation straight to Earth. You won’t risk the rest of the Earthlings because you have one. Sure, I get it. I’m not what you expected. I’m not going to be able to convince anyone that Earth is a threat. Your plan is going down in flames before your eyes, and you’re just pretending that we can possibly win.”

Gael opens and shuts his mouth, and I guess that’s that.

He really is only pretending.

He really does regret bringing me along.

In his eyes, we’ve already failed.

CHAPTER 31



This shouldn't bother me so much. I've been terrified since he first kidnapped and even more so after the explained about the war.

But for whatever reason, I feel almost insulted that he regrets taking me, and I truly don't understand my feelings at all.

He reaches out to take my hand, but I refuse to let him.

"There is a way we can still win, Gracie. The mission hasn't completely failed yet. We have a chance, but it won't be easy. It won't be without danger and sacrifice."

I swallow hard as I look up at him, his face illuminated by the stars shining through the dashboard window of the cockpit.

He looks so determined, so sure that we can pull this off somehow despite all of the odds against us.

A wave of admiration washes over me, and I almost forget that I'm still angry with him. Almost.

"What do you suggest?" I ask slowly.

"I will take you back home."

"Gael," I finally say, my voice quieter than before. "You don't need to take me back. I'll stay here with you no matter what happens."

He looks up at me, his eyes full of surprise.

"What are you saying?" he asks carefully.

“I’m saying that you’re being ridiculous! You want to bring them back to Earth!”

“They won’t—”

“They already found us twice,” I remind him. “I want to make sure that nothing like what happened before, that transmission... it won’t ever happens again for Earth or anyone else.”

He stares at me, his expression unreadable for a few moments. “You don’t understand the risks,” he says softly.

“I understand more than enough,” I reply firmly as my courage increases rapidly as I think of all the reasons why we should stay and fight for peace instead of running back home like nothing happened. “Why did you kidnap me if you were just going to turn around and drop me back off!”

Gael grits his sharp teeth.

“You’re keeping something from me, aren’t you?” I challenge, lifting my chin. “What is it? Why can’t we go to your home planet?”

“We’re trying to evade the amalgamation. There’s a battle taking place near my home planet, but you don’t need to worry. We have other bases, and we’ll reach the nearest one soon.”

“How soon?” I press.

He sighs and places a hand on his forehead. “It could be days or weeks,” he admits. “If you wish to stay—”

“I already said I don’t want you to bring me back. I’m sorry you wish you had someone else. Who would have you have preferred?”

Gael looks away, a fierce expression on his face. “It doesn’t matter now,” he finally says. “The reality is that we are on a dangerous mission, and there is no telling what risks and dangers we might face. We must stay focused and prepared at all times.”

“Of course it matters! Who would you have preferred? A big, muscular man? A beefcake like you?”

He shakes his head. "It's not just that. Your presence here puts us in danger, Gracie. You don't understand how powerful interstellar forces are."

He looks away, and I can sense the tension in the air.

"How does my presence put us in danger?" I question. "They don't even know about me." I pause. "Or do they?"

"They might now," he mutters.

Great.

Just great.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

"Why did you bring me along if you weren't sure we could do anything at all to stop the Interstellar Amalgamation? I thought we were going to make a difference!"

He looks away, his eyes glancing out of the window as he exhales heavily.

"I wanted us to make a difference," he finally replies in a strained voice. "But I also knew that it was a risk bringing an Earthling on board and exposing them to this type of danger. I take full responsibility for that decision, and if I could go back, I would have brought someone else from another planet entirely."

He takes my hands in his, caressing them gently. His touch is warm and comforting, but it doesn't ease my mind completely.

"I'm sorry," he whispers softly, "but please don't think badly of yourself. You are brave and strong and—"

"Someone from another planet? What about the weapons on Earth? How else would you have tried to convince the Interstellar Amalgamation to stop if you didn't have me?"

"I don't know," he admits, his words ringing with honesty.

"You really regret bringing me personally."

"No, that's not..." He sighs heavily. "I don't want you to risk your life for this."

“Why not?” I demand. “You are.”

“I’ve lost everyone. You still have friends, a life, a company.”

“What’s all of that if my planet is dragged into this anyhow?” I demand.

“It might not me—”

“But it might.”

He concedes that point with a grim nod.

“I’m sorry I didn’t live up to your hopes,” I say stiffly.

“That’s not—”

I hold up a hand to stop him. “Look, I know that there are risks we face if we stay and fight, but there are also risks if we flee too. I’m not about to let you drop me back off on Earth when I know that there are aliens and a massive war that could come to Earth at any time!”

He gnashes his sharp teeth together. “Gracie—”

“No, you listen to me. Since my parents died, I have been fighting. I’ve been fighting my entire life. People underestimate me all the time because I’m young and I’m a woman. I fought so hard and never got anywhere, and now, I can fight for something so much bigger than just my parents’ company. I refuse to be sent away without a chance to do something meaningful with my life.”

He groans. “Ultimately, it is your decision. I will abide by whatever you choose if you are willing to take full responsibility for what might happen as a result of your choice.”

“Very well. I—”

“At least take some time to reflect and think,” he growls.

I flinch. He’s never talked to me like that before.

After thinking about it for a few moments more, I finally say, “Staying with you and helping you finish this mission is worth the risk, even if it means putting myself in harm’s way.”

Gael slowly nods. He looks at me with an expression that's part admiration, part surprise as his lips part in shock.

I blush and look away. He's admiring me? I've done nothing yet.

But I intend to.

CHAPTER 32



A nervous excitement courses through me, and I can't help but feel like I'm on the brink of a big adventure.

We aren't far from our destination, K'arita, when an enemy ship attacks us out of nowhere. The nav system lights up with alerts and alarms. Once again, we're under attack.

Gael curses in his native language and quickly jumps into action, navigating us out of the area as we try to evade our attackers. Shots fly by us, narrowly missing their mark.

"Holy shit," I mumble. "That one has to be larger than the other two!"

"It is," he says grimly. "We have to get away from it."

I've just sat down, ready to open fire, but something in his tone makes me hesitate.

"What aren't you telling me?" I demand as the enemy ship is closing in on us first.

Gael sits tall in his seat, his fingers flying, his dark eyes narrowed as he stares out into space. His face is a mask of determination and courage that gives me strength even as my heart pounds in my chest with fear.

That he doesn't answer me makes me that much more nervous. It certainly doesn't help any that the enemy ship has to be at least twice our size.

Our lasers light up the darkness of space as I fire volley after volley at the enemy vessel. The other ship retaliates with

its own blasts of energy, but honestly, it doesn't seem like they're firing back at us as much as they could.

What's really crazy is how they seem to be trying to come right up to us, not caring that I'm hitting them.

"Can't we get away from them?" I shout.

Gael grits his teeth. "It's too late," he says solemnly.

I blast the ship one more time and glance over at him. The defeated expression on his face is one I've never seen before.

"It's like..." I shake my head.

It's almost like they're trying to attach themselves to our ship.

My heart sinks when I realize that my suspicions are right. Within seconds, the enemy vessel attaches itself to our ship, and its crew boards our ship. We can hear them clanking around in their heavy armor as they search for us.

My heart races with a terrible dread.

"Stay in your seat," Gael orders.

He grabs a few weapons, readying himself for battle.

He's not about to let anyone take our ship without a fight.

But if he thinks I'm going to just sit here and be a damsel in distress, fuck that shit.

"We need to make it out of here alive," I say, steeling myself against the fear coursing through me. "Whatever the cost."

"To do that, I need you to not do anything reckless, like you did on the other planet," he says grimly.

"Are you going to arm me or not?" I snap.

"You're more likely to hit me than you are them!"

"How would you know that? You point and shoot. I had a gun collection back on Earth, thank you very much!"

He mutters something under his breath, most likely not flattering, but he shoves a weapon into my hand.

“Fight if you must. I’m off.”

“Off!” I cry.

“Locking you inside,” he says, dashing to the door.

I barely have time to gasp and blink, and just like that, he’s done, chasing down however many of them there are, leaving me locked inside the cockpit.

Seconds later, the faint sounds of blaster fire and clanging metal echo throughout the ship.

Desperate, I try to find a way to unlock the place. I have no idea what I’m doing, and I bring up a hologram by accident, not of planets and stars but of the ship. I can actually watch Gael and the enemy fighters. There are five of them.

Gael’s a sharpshooter. He’s fast and precise, managing to fend off most of the enemy crew with a few well-placed shots, taking out one after another with ease.

My stomach churns as I sink into his seat. I’m so utterly helpless as I watch Gael fight for our lives. I hate that he’s made me feel this way, that he doesn’t trust me to fight alongside him.

More have come onto the ship. He had lowered the total down to one, but it’s back up to six again, and I watch as he fends off most of the newcomers, their armor and weapons failing against his quick reflexes.

He’s a one-man army, taking out each enemy one by one.

But if we can’t get away from their ship, more are going to come, increasing the chances of Gael getting hurt or worse.

I have to figure out how to detach us from the enemy vessel.

But how?

CHAPTER 33



I seriously have this is all no idea what to do, and this is all Gael's fault. We've been flying for how long now, and he still doesn't trust me to teach me how to fly or what to do.

"Ship, get us out of here," I say lamely, knowing the voice commands won't work.

Of course, the ship does nothing.

Sure, I've tried to watch Gael's done before when he's flown us manually, but I can't replicate all of that.

I frantically search the cockpit for any signs of controls, and my heart jumps when I finally find a cluster of buttons hidden behind a panel. I frantically press each one, hoping that at least one will do something.

One of them starts to glow blue. Is that a good thing or not?

With bated breath, I press it and watch as the enemy ship slowly starts to pull away from ours.

Good!

Only a glance back at the hologram reveals there are still five enemies on board.

Could be worse, and if I can't get us to fly away from here, the vessel is just going to reattach itself again and maybe deactivate our ability to disengage.

I claim Gael's seat and try to bring up the hologram of planets and stars, but I can't take down the hologram that's

already up no matter what I press or which lever I move this way or that.

Three enemies.

Two.

There's one last one.

Abruptly, the door to the cockpit is wrenched open. I gasp as the last enemy, a giant of a man, barrels into the cockpit toward me in his large metal suit.

I try to duck out of the way, but it's no use. He grabs my wrist and yanks me away from the cockpit.

My heart is pounding as we struggle, his grip tightening around my arm, his other hand going to my neck, squeezing until I can barely breathe.

Suddenly, I hear a loud crash from down the hall. The enemy looks up, and that's the time I need to bring up my gun or blaster or whatever it is that Gael gave me. I don't hesitate to shoot, and as soon as I press the trigger, I press it again and again, firing rapidly, not stopping until the enemy falls down.

Gael rushes up to me. "You..."

"I'm not a fucking damsel in distress," I spit out. "Now teach me how to fucking fly this thing!"

Gael hurries into the cockpit, stepping over the twisted metal that had been the door. I tear after him.

As soon as he's seated, he gets to work, talking as quickly as his hands and fingers are flying.

He quickly shows me how to use the controls, each button and lever doing one thing or another. I take it all in carefully, my mind processing the information quickly, but in the back of my mind, I'm worried. Is there a hole in the ship from where the other attached a tunnel or whatever for their people to come onto our ship? Or did I close that when we detached?

Gael doesn't offer to let me sit, but that's just as well. We need to get safety. Then, he can properly teach me. I do

appreciate him showing me how to steer the ship, how to use the thrusters, and how to dodge fire from our pursuers.

Soon, we're flying through space, the stars blurring past us. Eventually, he activates hyperspeed.

"Even if they follow us, I'll hop again and again, leaving them a trail to follow and then back track. We'll be all right," he assures me.

He does just that, and with each jump from the hyperspeed, I think I'm going to be sick, but finally, he leans back, his posture relaxed, the ship cruising along on autopilot.

Exhilarated, Gael takes my hands in his and squeezes them tight. "You did that! You saved us."

He looks so proud, not just of me but of himself too.

A sense of accomplishment runs through me, but still, I shake my head.

"You killed how many of them?" I argue.

"Who knows how many they had on a ship that size," he argues. "If you hadn't figured out how to disengage us..."

"Ask me how I did that," I say, my tone mockingly sweet.

"How?" he asks warily.

"Blind fucking luck!" I shout. "You need to teach me how to fly this ship, all of it. You trust me now, don't you? You have to now!"

He sighs and opens his mouth.

But I don't give him a chance to say anything. "You might not think I'm capable enough to fight alongside you in bile, which isn't true, but I can't be expected to be a part of the war effort if you don't give me more. I need to help. How much sleep have you been getting? You don't need to do everything. That's why you got me, right?"

"Can..." He blows out a breath. "Can we just wait a moment before we fight? I just..."

Gael stares at me with an expression that's somewhere between shock and awe.

"You did it," he murmurs. "You... I handcuffed you, but you still... And if I hadn't given you an energy blaster..."

The wide smile on his face falls.

"You could have been killed because of me," he says solemnly.

"Well, I wasn't," I say, calming down some. "You weren't either. We're safe now, right?"

"Yes."

"So you can teach me how to fly for real now, right?"

"I... Let's remain on autopilot for now. We're so close to a base. We'll be safe, and... You're right. I need to sleep. Otherwise... I will teach you once I wake."

My stomach churns. I really don't like the way he's acting. Is it just an adrenaline crash from the fight?

Or is he, once again, hiding something from me?

CHAPTER 34



I watch Gael closely as he steps away from the controls and shuffles to the back of the ship. He's moving slowly, like his entire body aches. I want to ask him what's wrong, but he's already shut himself off from me.

But the more the minutes drag on, the more I can't help myself. I know I should just let Gael rest, but something is off. He's not telling me the whole truth. I can tell by the way he avoided looking at me and his obvious reluctance to talk about what happened.

I try to find him, opening up the doors in the hallway merely by pressing my hand to them.

Eventually, I find him lying in his bed. His skin is a very pale blue color, underneath his eyes is entirely black.

He sits up with a soundless groan. When our gazes meet, I can see a hint of pain in his expression. Something isn't right.

Don't tell me... Was he shot during the battle?

My heart stops for a second before starting up its frantic beat once more. The adrenaline rushes through my veins. We need to get him medical attention immediately!

Gael averts his gaze.

"What is it?" I finally ask him. "You can tell me."

He looks up at me, his eyes sad but resigned, but as he tends to do, he remains silent.

"You were shot, weren't you?" I demand.

“Yes,” he admits in a low voice. “When the second set of soldiers boarded, I was caught unawares, and...” He hangs his head and shakes it slowly from side to side. “I’m so sorry,” he continues, his voice choked with emotion. “I should have protected you better, and here I am now, unable to help you even with such a simple task as teaching you how to fly this ship.”

My heart twists painfully in my chest at the sight of Gael blaming himself for something that wasn’t entirely his fault.

I grunt. “If anything, we both should have been more careful, but enough about that. Do you need... Is there anything I can do?”

I carefully lay my hand on top of his and give him a reassuring squeeze. He looks up at me with something like surprise in his eyes before offering me a weak smile.

“Yes,” he says. “I need you to help me walk to the medbay on board this ship.”

He looks at me with a hopeful expression, and for some reason, my heart warms.

Without saying anything, I move to support his weight and help him to his feet. He leans on me heavily as we make our way down the hallway. The corridor stretches before us like an endless void of darkness that only the soft light of stars outside can illuminate our path. It’s strangely peaceful, despite the fact that we are still in danger and far away from home.

Gael leans on me heavily as I direct him through the shadows. With every step, he winces in pain, but thankfully, we make it to the medbay unscathed. Once inside, we take it slow. He stops often to rest as I hold onto him tightly, providing a steady support while he regains his strength, and then, I help Gael onto one of the beds.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

“Don’t thank me yet.” I grimace. “There aren’t any doctors, so...” I blow out a breath. “What do you need me to do?”

Gael looks around the small room, his eyes scanning its contents before they settle on a small container filled with supplies.

“Grab the blaster burn kit,” he says as he slowly reaches for it. “It contains all the things you need to treat a blaster burn. We need to cool down my wound and make sure there isn’t any infection.”

I immediately snatch up the kit, careful not to disturb him too much. As I begin opening containers and gathering supplies, I can’t help but ask, “Why didn’t you come here immediately? Why didn’t you tell me you were hurt? If you needed to be treated, why go to your room?”

“I didn’t think... I thought...” He blows out a breath.

“You wanted to be big macho man, huh?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

I laugh. “Don’t worry about it.”

Gael then guides me through what needs to be done, talking me through each step of the process from cleansing and cooling the wound to applying salves and bandages. I even have to mix together different concoctions of herbs.

“Is there... Is there anything here you can take for the pain?” I ask, hating that he keeps wincing with every step of the healing process.

“I’m fine,” he says through his sharp, gritted teeth.

I almost wonder if he thinks he deserves to feel pain.

“There’s no blood,” I mumble.

“That’s because the burn cauterized the wound.”

“Shouldn’t that mean you don’t feel any pain?” I ask.

“You would think,” he says dryly.

I pause, studying his face. Gael has been through so much already and here he is taking on more pain, not wanting to admit weakness. I wonder why he didn’t come to me for help, or why he kept his injury a secret.

I start to apply the herb paste onto the wound. “Gael,” I say softly. “Why didn’t you come to me for help? Why did you keep your injury a secret?”

Gael’s gaze locks with mine as he takes a deep breath. “I... I had to make sure we flew away and reached safety. I... I’ve done you a grave disservice, and I will make things right. I will. I just...”

Gael looks up at me from his bed with eyes full of gratitude as I step closer again. He leans into my shoulder as I wrap an arm around his chest to support him, careful not to cause him any more pain than necessary.

“It’s all right,” I murmur.

“It’s not. We both almost died today, and I couldn’t live with myself if something worse had happened.”

He looks away from me his gaze fixed firmly on the wall, the guilt and shame of his actions evident in the slump of his shoulders.

“I thought it was easier this way,” he finally says, his voice hollow and resigned. “It was just a burn and I figured I could handle it by myself. I didn’t want to bother anyone with something so small.”

He turns back towards me as if expecting me to scold him. I’m so shocked by what he said that all I can do is gape at him.

“I was scared,” he admits quietly. “Scared of what might happen if I told you about my injuries and asked for help.”

I take a step closer, cupping Gael’s face in my hands and forcing him to look at me again.

“You don’t have to be scared,” I tell him firmly. “You can always come to me.”

I flinch. How many times did my parents say that to me when I was growing up?

It’s something you say to those you are about the most.

“I didn’t want you to worry about me,” he says quietly.

It's then that I realize Gael is strong in ways I could never understand, not because of the things he can do but because of the courage it takes him to put someone else's needs first no matter how hard the situation might be.

"You don't always need to do everything by yourself," I say, my tone gentle yet firm. "It's okay to ask for help when you need it."

"I think what I need..." Gael grunts and checks my handiwork. He had been shot near his left shoulder. He rotates his arm. "Thank you. This is great. It'll be healed entirely in a few hours now."

"In a few..."

"Between the medicine and time, yes."

"But..."

"I know. Earthlings are more fragile. I am not entirely ignorant. I would have healed without coming here. It would have been more painful... and what I deserve."

"Not at all," I murmur. "Not at all."

CHAPTER 35



Gael slowly looks up at me again, his gaze locking with mine in understanding and something else... something more. He takes a deep breath, almost as if he's gathering the courage.

Honestly, I'm the one who needs courage.

My heart pounds in my chest as I move closer and closer to Gael until our faces are only inches apart. My hand still cups his face. He looks up at me with a mix of surprise and anticipation, almost as if he knows what is about to happen. In that moment, everything slows down, and all I can focus on are his eyes, so intense and full of emotion.

The air between us is electric and laced with anticipation that neither of us can ignore any longer. My eyes flutter closed. Finally unable to resist any longer, I press my lips against his for the first time.

Unlike in that dream, this kiss is wonderful. Magical even. The kiss is gentle but passionate as we explore each other like two magnets that have been pulled together after years apart. His mouth tastes like honey and almonds, sweet yet bitter all at once—just like Gael himself, a mixture of goodness and pain that I never want to let go of again.

It doesn't matter that he sharp teeth. It doesn't matter that he's not from Earth.

All that matters is this kiss. He wraps one arm around my waist and the other rests on my shoulder blade. I feel him relax

into me as our kiss lingers, and I can feel something shift between us in that moment.

The kiss deepens as I wrap both arms around Gael's neck, pulling him closer to me as if I never want to let go of this moment.

The kiss is electric, sending sparks through me from head to toe. Our bodies instinctively lean into each other as if we've known each other for years.

My heart is pounding with anticipation as every second slowly ticks by until we eventually pull apart several moments later.

Gael pulls away from me, a satisfied smile playing on his lips despite the pain coursing through him.

He looks up at me with awe in his eyes, a faint blush spreading across his cheeks and turning them purple.

I back away from him. "If you're all right..."

I don't wait for him to answer. I just rush out of the medbay. I'm not sure how to explain what just came over me.

It's not until I reach my room and shut it that I realize I can cross kissing Gael off my mental to-do list.

Which really had been the last thing on it, right? Maybe not. I'm not sure anymore.

I'm not sure of much of anything anymore.

I'll have to start a new to-do list, but what to include? And nothing more about kissing Gael...

I just... What came over me? And the way he kissed me back... it's as if he knew what to do.

Do Zilquds kiss like Earthlings do? I wasn't so sure because of those sharp teeth, but...

Do Zilquds have sex like Earthlings do?

I shouldn't ever find out, right? We're at war. We can't... We aren't a thing. We can't... I'm an Earthling. He's a Zilqud.

All that matters is the war. We have to reach his home planet. From there, we can take the next steps toward ending this war.

And then what? Will he drop me back off at Earth? He has blue skin. It's not as if he can live there with me.

And my friends. I can't just never return. My parents' company... I have obligations back on Earth.

Obligations that can wait. The war comes first. The war comes before all else.

Whatever I want, whatever I might think I want... that can't come first.

But as much as I want to deny it, I know I can't ignore this feeling anymore. Despite all of the risks involved, I have grown to care for Gael.

The connection we share is undeniable, but can it ever be more than that? Can I ever truly be falling for an alien?

My heart says yes.

But my mind tells me no.

It's too dangerous for us both to get involved in something like this, even if it does feel right. Love, if it should come to that, is a risk I can't afford to take right now. Not when there's still a war going on that involves countless humans from so many different planets.

And yet...I can't deny the fact that these feelings exist inside of me.

Yes, I'm falling for an alien.



Up next is [Marrying the Alien!](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosemarie Gold has loved the stars since she had been a little girl. Star Wars? Star Trek? Yes, please! But they need more love... and that's when she put quill to paper, to write about an alien love story.

Email Rosemarie at authorrosemariegold@gmail.com with any comments, suggestions, compliments! She loves to hear from her readers! Happy reading!



SPECIAL AUTHOR NOTE

Hi, readers! If you notice any proofreading errors, please email me at authorrosemariegold@gmail.com and I'll fix them right away. Thank you!

Oh, and if you would like to join my beta reader team or my ARC team, let me know!

Thank you to the stars,

~Rosemarie