

## CHAPTER 1

**D**o we really have to play this game?” Delaney asked, the question coming out halfheartedly. She already knew what the response would be.

“Come on,” Mariana pushed. “I’m nervous.”

“You’re never nervous.” The two of them had been friends for four years now, so she would know. “Besides, I’m terrible at this. You always win. Hence, why I’m here standing in line, waiting to get into a place I have no interest in.”

“Don’t be so dull, D.” Mariana bumped Delaney’s shoulder playfully. “Any time with me is fun time. Now”—her deep chocolate eyes homed in on a man standing five paces ahead of them—“us or them?”

Delaney made a big show of staring at the back of the guy’s head before shrugging pointedly. “Us?”

Ignoring the fact that Delaney’s heart clearly wasn’t in it, Mariana pondered a moment before disagreeing. “Definitely a them.”

“How can you even tell?” Because chances were very good that her friend was right.

“It’s in the set of his shoulders.”

“It is not.” Or, if it truly was, Delaney couldn’t see it.

The heavy thrum of music from inside the large warehouse building vibrated around them, the waves rumbling up through their feet. True to its name, club Star Light was a glittering beacon off the fringe of Portland, Maine. The building itself was made of faded brick, and had once been home to some sort of manufacturing company. That was many years prior, and it’d been renovated into one of the hottest dance clubs in the state about half a decade ago.

“Tell me again who you’re hoping to meet up with?” Delaney asked as the line moved another foot closer.

Being that it was Friday night, it came as no surprise that the place was packed. A curvy stretch of people trailed from the two metal doors all the way to the start of the parking lot to the right. Because they’d traveled the forty-five minutes from their small town, Cymbeline, to Portland earlier in the day, they’d snagged a prime spot in front of one of the buildings across the street. At least leaving would be easier. Too bad they’d spent so long at dinner that they hadn’t gotten here at opening.

“I’m not *hoping* anything,” Mariana answered, though her wide grin gave her away.

“Right.” Delaney rolled her eyes jokingly. “That’s why you’re ‘nervous.’ What’s this one’s name again? Starts with an *O*? Owen? Otto?”

“Ottus,” she corrected, a strand of annoyance slipping past her deep-red-painted lips. “Which you totally remembered. His name is Ottus. And you’re supposed to be here for moral support. This is our first time meeting in person, and I want it to be perfect.”

“Oat-us,” Delaney sounded it out, and made a face. She remembered seeing the spelling of it flashing on Mariana’s phone last week. It wasn’t done in the traditional way; it was strange.

But of course it would be, considering Ottus was an alien.

It'd only been three years since the revelation of extraterrestrials. Apparently, they'd been visiting Earth for millennia, and no one knew quite why they'd decided to come out of hiding now, only that they had. After exposing their existence, there'd been talk of a merger, which of course the humans had protested. They'd attempted to fight, but their weapons were toys in comparison to the technology those from Xenith had.

"He's Vakar," her roommate said then, excitement brimming behind her smooth brown eyes. "He told me he used to be a soldier."

Mariana was obsessed with the aliens, who she'd dubbed Them. Like they were rock stars she couldn't get enough of. It was the one thing Delaney was looking forward to now that they'd graduated high school and moved into an apartment: separate rooms.

She loved Mariana, but she didn't share her interest in the otherworldly. Still, she was glad her friend was so excited to meet someone, even if he was an ex-alien soldier.

"And now he's a bartender," Delaney said, making sure the teasing lilt to her voice was apparent. "How impressive."

"Shut up." They moved less than a foot closer to the door. "If you'd just give him a chance, you would like him, I promise. But not too much. I don't want to share."

"I don't have anything against aliens," Delaney said for what felt like the millionth time. "I'm just not enthralled by them like you are. I'd prefer to go about my life per usual and pretend the invasion never happened."

Mariana was quick to defend them. "They didn't invade."

Done with this conversation, Delaney scanned her mind for anything else they could talk about. Literally anything. There was

a bickering couple directly behind them, and for a moment their argument about whether or not waiting to get in was worth it was entertaining enough to hold her attention.

At this rate, they were never getting in and Mariana would never get to meet the bartender.

“Moral support, huh?”

“Yes,” Mariana agreed.

“All right.” She stepped to the side of the line. “This is taking forever.”

Delaney ignored the six people who’d been standing in front of them, locking eyes with the bouncer. She’d watched him more closely over the past ten minutes and had noticed his bored expression and slouched shoulders. If she had to guess, he and his lack of enthusiasm were the main causes for the slow line movement.

Flashing a grin at him, she made sure to have his full attention before slipping a twenty from her pocket. Angling her body to keep the rest of the line from seeing, she held the bill out and motioned toward Mariana, who was still waiting in their spot.

“My friend is running late for a date,” she told him. “Help a girl out?”

He was about three times her size and didn’t appear to be the nicest of people, so she kept her smile firmly in place. He glanced between the two of them once before motioning Mariana forward with a finger.

Plucking the twenty from her hand, he absently asked for her ID, barely bothering to look down at it once she’d held it out.

She was a bit disappointed by that fact—the fake had cost her a decent amount of money, and using it had been the only part about coming to this club that had excited her. Then they were

through the doors and Mariana swung an arm over her shoulder and they both laughed.

THEY'D SQUISHED THEIR way into the center of the crowd, relishing the flashing of neon strobe lights and the surrounding heat from the other patrons. It smelled like sweat and beer, and Delaney's ears were already burning from the heavy beat that thrummed from large speakers situated all around the rectangular room.

The dance floor was a large fifty-by-fifty square dais at the very center of the club. A single step led down to the rest of the place, with a bar lining the entire right wall, and booths and tables taking up the left and front. At the way back, a DJ station towered over the dance floor. A man with a bright pink Mohawk was currently spinning, his hair and teeth glowing.

The black lights painted the world in a mysterious radiance, turning everyday objects—like Delaney's Converse—into flashy items. The entire high-rise ceiling was covered in tiny glow stars of all sizes.

Despite her reservations, Delaney loved that she could disappear here, blend in and become just another cog in the universe. It was liberating in an odd way, one she couldn't quite place her finger on. Word spread quickly in a small town, and the town her parents still occupied off the coast of Maine was as small as they came. Not for the first time, she inwardly rejoiced at the fact they'd agreed to send her to boarding school.

She'd spent the past four years at Cymbeline Academy, a good two hours from where her parents lived. Just enough distance for Delaney to feel independent.

Mariana leaned in and screamed against the curve of Delaney's ear, "I'm going to get a drink!" They'd spotted Ottus working the bar when they'd entered, but Mariana had insisted they dance first, no doubt to build up her nerve.

"Are you sure?" Delaney asked. "Do you want me to go with?"

She shook her head. "I don't want our first face-to-face to be with a third wheel, no offense."

Delaney held up her hands and kept dancing. She spun as her friend disappeared among the masses, and Delaney twisted her hips and waved her arms to the heavy thrum. The song changed and she loosened up, switching tactics with ease.

The crowd moved in on her, caging, and she laughed when a boy around her age made a really bad robot move to get her attention. He fell into step with her and they swayed to the beat, close, but still far enough apart for it to be appropriate. Another three people turned toward them and joined, two of them girls.

She didn't know how many songs passed with them, but when she realized it'd been a while since Mariana had gone, she waved at her new friends and stepped back to go find her.

For a moment there she'd been able to distract herself with the music, but now enough time had passed that she was starting to get tired. Mariana was the partier in their equation, with Delaney merely dragged along for the ride every once in a while.

Stepping down from the dance floor, she scanned the bar, which stretched across the entire wall, easily spotting Mariana in her red outfit.

Sure enough, she was leaning across the white bar top, laughing at something the bartender had said. That must be Ottus; Delaney recognized him from the photos he'd sent Mariana.

He was all height and muscle, hair a mix between blond and

brunette, depending on which way he turned his head. He'd shaved it so that there wasn't much to see anyway, making it even harder to correctly guess the shade.

The two of them had connected on one of the many dating apps Mariana used. The apps helped connect humans and aliens who were looking to get to know one another better, so it wasn't too big of a surprise that Delaney's best friend had signed up.

With a shake of her head, she decided to walk over and let her friend know she was leaving. There were enough people there that she had to move through the throng cautiously, but she'd only made it a few steps before someone slammed into her from the side.

She almost lost her footing, and instinctually reached out, grasping on to the other person's arm. Once steady, she glanced up to find herself staring at one of the most beautiful girls she'd ever seen.

They were about the same height, with the same small shoulder width and long legs. The other girl's hair was even cut practically the same length, to just past her chin. That was where the differences ended, however. Where Delaney's hair was a vibrant red, this girl's was inky black and slick like silk. Her eyes were almond shaped, tipped at the outer corners, and the color of spun gold.

"Are you all right?" Delaney asked, pulling back and straightening.

The other girl stared at her oddly for half a second before the lost, distracted expression on her face suddenly morphed into a large smile. It was almost a bit creepy how wide it was, and Delaney instantly distrusted it.

"I'm perfect," the girl said in a high voice. She reached out and rested her hand on Delaney's left shoulder, squeezing lightly. "You have a *fantastic* night."

“Um”—Delaney turned as the girl went to step by—“yeah, you, too.”

The girl was swallowed back up by the crowd. She hadn't even apologized for walking into her. Suddenly Delaney was completely drained. The music was too loud and the air was too stifling with all these people. Deciding she'd definitely more than done her best-friend duties, she turned back toward the bar where she'd seen Mariana only a few minutes before.

Only Mariana was no longer at the bar. Neither was Ottus.

Frowning, Delaney pulled her cell phone out of her back pocket. There weren't any messages, so she tapped Mariana's number and lifted it to her ear. It was hard to hear anything over the music blaring from all directions, but she was calling mostly so that her friend's phone would ring long enough to get her attention.

As it continued to ring in her ear, Delaney moved toward the exit, eager to get out of the throng. Outside, the air was sharp, and she sucked in a deep, chilled breath. It was close to one in the morning, and the line they'd waited in earlier was gone. There weren't many people out, just one or two smokers tucked against the brick siding by the door.

She turned away from them, heading in the direction of her car.

Mariana's voicemail picked up, and Delaney decided to give it one more try. After that she was going to resort to texting and waiting in the car. They'd driven together, so she didn't want to leave without knowing where her friend was and if she'd need a ride or not.

Knowing Mariana, the answer to that was the latter.

Just as Mariana's voicemail picked up again, Delaney's phone dinged. She paused at the entrance to an alley between the club and the equally large brick monstrosity next to it. Her car was



visible on the other side of the street, directly under a streetlamp, so she could easily see within. It was empty.

She moved her attention to the screen and sighed when she saw the text message was from Mariana. Her friend let her know that she'd grabbed a ride with Ottus and was heading back to his place for the night.

Mariana had ended the text with a kiss emoticon and a winky face that had Delaney rolling her eyes and laughing at the same time.

Relieved that it meant she could now head home without worry, Delaney went to take a step forward, checking both sides of the street for oncoming traffic.

Before she knew what was happening, a heavy hand slammed against her mouth, yanking her back against someone's solid chest. She dropped her phone and, in her shock, watched it ricochet off the cement ground.

It landed on its back, so that the smiling image on her home screen of Mariana hugging her was the last thing she noticed before being tugged into the dark alley.

## CHAPTER 2

**D**elaney couldn't tear her gaze away from the phone as she was dragged back into the dark crevice between the club and the closed restaurant at its right. The sky was practically black overhead, and the second they were in the shadows, her brain finally registered what was going on.

Her struggling increased, and she shook her head back and forth to try to dislodge the hand on her mouth. The arm around her waist tightened, almost to the point of pain, and she was pressed flush against her captor.

"Stop it, Lissa," mumbled a deep male voice directly above her. "We need to go."

She tried to tell him that he had the wrong girl, but she couldn't even manage a muffled word past his hold. Frustration welled, and she took a stuttering breath to clear her head before reacting. Slamming her foot down on top of his, she dropped to her knees when his grip momentarily loosened, not waiting for him to regain his composure.

Twisting around so she was sitting on the cold ground, she kicked out with both legs, landing a blow to his stomach. It felt like

she was hitting a rock wall. Flipping onto her feet, she bolted for the alley opening.

A growl sounded at her back, and right before she was about to make it into the light, she was grabbed again. This time he lifted her off her feet, letting out painful grunts when she repeatedly kicked him in the shins. He didn't loosen his hold again, and instead shifted her weight to his side.

He carried her as if she weighed nothing, toward the end of the alley and farther from the front of the club and any semblance of safety. His shoulders practically blocked out the building behind him, and she had to tip her head all the way back just to maintain eye contact. He wasn't bulky by any means, but he was fit and, judging by that kick she'd given him earlier, steady as a damn tree.

Which meant that the five measly self-defense classes she'd let Mariana drag her to weren't getting her out of this.

"I'll scream," she threatened, not really sure why she was telling him instead of doing just that.

"Then I'll silence you."

He dropped her suddenly and slammed her back against the frozen stone wall. His body settled around her, effectively pinning her in. Her head didn't even come up to his chin, but a couple of inches lower so that she was staring at the top of his chest. When she pressed her hands against him, he didn't budge, and there wasn't enough room for her to attempt kicking again.

She waited and, when nothing happened, risked glancing up at him.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked her, suddenly breaking the silence. His brows were creased, and he was inspecting her like he would an unruly animal.

“With me?” Her voice was incredulous. “I’m not the one who just kidnapped someone, buddy.”

“I told you, it’s time to leave. You’re the one who’s making this difficult.”

“I’m the one—” She stopped, shoved down the fear, and held up her hand between them. “Okay, let’s start again. First of all, dragging someone into an alley against her will constitutes kidnapping. Second of all, you also happened to *kidnap* the wrong person.”

“We don’t have time for this.”

Seriously? What wasn’t he getting?

“I’m not Lissa,” she stated plainly, watching his face for the obvious to set in.

Which it never did.

If anything, he seemed more aggravated than he had before. Instead of pulling back or apologizing, he gritted his teeth and relinquished the small amount of space between them. Her hand was now stuck between their bodies, and she wiggled it to get free until his low growl had her freezing for what seemed like the millionth time that night.

“This isn’t attractive,” he sneered down at her. “I told you what would happen if you tested me again, Olena.”

She blinked at him. What? So was the girl he was looking for named Lissa . . . or Olena? The realization that he was clearly insane actually gave her an inkling of relief. He was delusional, sure, but all she had to do was stall him a bit, and someone would eventually stumble upon them, right?

Did delusional people have actual plans? She assumed—hoped, really—not. Besides, this was a dead end. In order to get her anywhere from here, he’d have to lead her back out the opening on

the other side. It was very early in the morning, but all she needed was for one person to be there so that she could call for help. Then it was only ten feet to her car and home free she'd be.

Having a plan, even one as dodgy as that, helped calm her nerves so she could think more clearly. She wasn't sure if one could actually get through to a delusional person, but what would be the harm in trying? It'd certainly fall under the category of stalling.

"Whoever you think I am," she said, making sure to ease her tone, "I promise you, I'm not her. Just let me go, and no one has to get in trouble here. I won't tell anyone about this, or you. You can go your way, and I can go mine."

She tried to look trustworthy, easing her features to hopefully cover her dread. She'd grab the first cop she could once she left this alley.

"Enough," he barked, slamming a fist against the wall a few inches from her head. Bits of the stone broke off and crumbled to the ground.

How the hell . . . ? Her eyes widened, and some of her panic returned.

"You aren't listening—" she tried again, only to be swiftly cut off by his face invading the personal space of her own.

"They're coming, Olena. We don't have time for any more of your games. You don't want to leave? I get it, but you have responsibilities, and it's time you owned up to who you are. Now"—he angled his head at her, his expression softening some—"stop playing. I'm trying to protect you."

She forced herself to look him dead in the eye. "I swear to god, I am not the girl you're looking for."

He let out a frustrated sigh and pulled back, wrapping a large hand around her thin arm to tug her after him. When she stumbled

forward, he linked his other arm around her waist, keeping her securely upright with his large body.

Before her mind could filter through all the possible ways she could attempt getting loose, the sound of footsteps to her right caught her attention and she frowned.

That was the dead end. . . . How . . . ?

“Ander Ruckus.” Another man, only slightly less imposing than the guy holding her to him, appeared in the darkness. He bowed his head, then straightened, nodding curtly toward Delaney. “Lissa Olena.”

She didn’t bother correcting this one when he called her the wrong name. She wouldn’t be able to get through to him no matter what she said. Even now, the way he held himself across from them, legs spread, hands clasped and visible, like a soldier—

She gasped, and both of their eyes snapped in her direction, instantly confirming her suspicions.

Her body started shaking, and she was too shocked to recall how weak that would make her look. It’d been too dark to see before, but she could make out the color of her captor’s eyes now, yellow with a ring of dark green.

Like an alien’s.

“Oh shit,” she said breathlessly, body going slightly lax so that he had to tighten his grip around her, practically holding her up now.

“What?” her captor snapped. “What happened?”

“Ruckus,” the other soldier said, drawing his attention and pointing upward. “We should get to the ship. Fawna’s detecting enemy soldiers approaching quickly. We don’t have much time left before they’re—” His words were abruptly cut off by the sound of gunfire.

Only it was a bit different, the sounds more like pings that whizzed through the air toward them. A few bullets embedded in the stone walls at either side, sending clouds of dust into the air.

Delaney regained herself, straightening and gripping the guy—Ruckus, she assumed—tightly. She couldn't muster enough guilt not to use him as a shield; it was either that or get shot herself. She tucked herself closer, risking a glance over his shoulder at the opening of the alley, where three men were slinking their way in.

Using her sudden compliance as an opportunity, Ruckus rushed them toward the dead end while the other guy opened fire on their pursuers. Lifting his arm, her captor gripped a black metal bar that she hadn't noticed hovering down from the sky, and tugged once.

"Hold on to me," he ordered against the crown of her head, bringing her up high enough so that she could wrap her arms around his neck. She hesitated and he shook her. "It's either this or die here, Olena," he hissed. "They will kill you."

"Thanks, Captain Obvious." They were shooting at them, after all. "I'm just not sure what makes you a safer option?"

Before he could respond, another round of gunfire went off, and Delaney's panic spread. She linked her arms around his neck without further protest, her only thought on getting out of there intact.

"Put your legs around my waist," he asserted, and this time she didn't hesitate. The second he was satisfied that she was secure, he pulled on the metal bar.

"Activate extraction shield and pull us up, Fawna," he said, and it took Delaney a second to realize he must have a communicator in his ear. A thin, see-through beam wrapped around them and the man still on the ground. It was green, and from the other side she saw the men shoot at it, bullets bouncing off as if hitting bulletproof glass.

When they started rising, she yelped and tightened her arms and legs around him. She thought she heard him chuckle, but she couldn't pull her eyes off the slowly receding ground to check.

They were high enough now that she could see over the tops of the buildings, and more soldiers dressed in all black were approaching the mouth of the alley. She counted a dozen before stopping, not wanting to waste her time. Another black bar on a long silver string zipped past her head, and she watched it drop to hover over the guy who was firing on their attackers.

Without looking, he reached up and grabbed on, yanking once before it started pulling him up toward them. He continued to fire his weapon, a gun she'd never seen before, the color of melted silver with a line of bright red lit up on its side.

"Hurry it up, Fawna," Ruckus growled.

This time she did look up, and sucked in a deep breath. The ropes were being drawn into the underside of a large ship she hadn't been able to make out from the ground. It reminded her a lot of a jet plane, except three times the size and with circular wings instead of sharp-tipped ones. It was black but had somehow been programmed to camouflage with the night sky. Stars winked back at her from its metallic surface as if really there.

A bottom hatch opened up when they were only a few feet away, metal doors sliding to the sides to expose a deep beige room. The ropes bringing them up were attached to the ceiling of this room, and instead of a crank rolling it, the line merely disappeared within the metal.

"Oh shit," she repeated, vaguely recalling she'd already said that. She was so distracted by the gaping mouth of the alien ship she was headed toward, she didn't notice the green force field around them flickering and then disappearing.



She totally felt the bullet that sliced through the side of her left arm, though. It was a searing sensation, like someone was branding her with a hot knife, and it shot bolts of fire that immediately spiked through her bloodstream.

She cried out, saw a burst of red stain the white leather of her jacket, and had one last moment of panic before her vision winked out and everything went black.

## CHAPTER 3

**D**elaney moaned and shifted, wondering why she'd fallen asleep on the hard couch instead of going to bed; sometimes she fell asleep in front of the TV in the living room. Her mind searched for details of last night: she'd gone out with Mariana to celebrate, so she had to have been exhausted when they'd gotten—

She shot upright so quickly, she saw stars.

Mariana.

Last night.

It all rushed back to her. She hadn't made it home because she'd been frickin' kidnapped by aliens. And shot at. Her gaze went to her left arm, recalling the pain and the blood she'd seen before she'd passed out. Only, there wasn't so much as a scratch now.

Someone had removed her jacket, and she was left in her short-sleeved navy shirt. There wasn't a speck of blood on her bare flesh, no scar, nothing. It was as if it had never happened. Her gaze trailed over to the other side of the compartment, landing on her jacket. The left arm was shredded.

Confusion set in, and she was still rubbing at the spot when she stood and did a slow circle in the center of the room. It was

white metal, with two cots on either side. She'd been sleeping on one of them, the thin pad so far from the comforts of a mattress, she actually snorted. Sure, they could travel across space but couldn't come up with a better version of a cot. That made sense.

There were no windows, but a small sink was built into one end of the room. On the wall across from it there was a wide door, big enough to fit two grown men shoulder to shoulder. She'd just taken a step toward it when a beeping sounded and the door whooshed to the right faster than she could blink.

The one who'd taken her stood there, watching. His oddly colored eyes scanned her once, as if searching for imperfections.

Damn, he was gorgeous. If not for the fact that the guy was a total psycho, she might have looked at her circumstances a bit differently. Unlike back in the alley, there was enough light here for her to get a good look at his features.

He had a strong jawline and a square chin. His hair was a warm chocolate shade, shorter on the sides, and long on the top. It was the type of cut generally kept swept back, but right now it was shaken loose, and it hung off to the right of his head. Some strands fell down his forehead all the way to his mouth, they were so long. A ruby glinted in his right ear—no, three rubies: one at the lobe, another at the center, and one at the top, settled against the inner curve.

If the eyes hadn't given him away, the outfit certainly would have. The shirt was sleeveless and zipped up the front with a golden zipper. The material appeared strange, thick and almost with a sheen to it. There was a short stiff collar. His pants were form-fitting, tucked into large boots, and there were three strange black metal bands circling his wrists and upper arms.

The pants were charcoal. The uniform shirt forest green.

The color of Vakar.

She swallowed the lump in her throat, clutching her arm to her. Her feet were squared—as if there was anywhere she could run. She recalled how easy fighting him off had been. As in, not at all.

It took all her willpower not to cower when he took a single step forward, eating up one of the five paces between them.

He cocked his head, and she clenched her jaw so tightly, she felt the pressure in her teeth.

“You’re still not talking to me,” he concluded after another tense moment of silence. Nodding at himself as if it made perfect sense, he looked away, moving over to the cot across from her. He flicked her jacket off to the side and dropped down, stretching his long legs out in front of him.

The move forced her to retreat back to avoid him touching her, and he lifted a single brow, the corner of his mouth turning up at the same time.

“We’re talking right now,” she bit out, determined not to let him scare her. Or at least not to make it so obvious to him that he did.

Rubber squeaked against the floor, and then another man appeared in the doorway. He was smaller than Ruckus, with narrower shoulders, but still taller than her by at least half a foot. He was wearing the same black military pants tucked into boots, but a forest-green lab coat was thrown over it and buttoned all the way up the front.

“Lissa Olena.” He bowed his head.

“Olena—”

“Like I’ve already told you *a million times*,” she spat, cutting Ruckus off, “I am *not* Olena. Or Lissa, for that matter. Whoever the hell you’re looking for, I’m not her. How you can be so daft as to mix

us up is beyond me, but I am not her, asshole. So, if you could just let me off this ship, we can go our separate ways.”

She'd almost lost her resolve when she'd said *ship*, but she had managed to maintain her superior air at the last second. Thankfully. The way he was watching her, like if he told her to jump he fully expected her to comply, was really beginning to piss her off. She hated being told what to do.

“I must admit . . .” He settled more comfortably against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. “The look in your eyes? Almost convincing. Of course, we both know you’re being ridiculous. This is *me*. Not some easily manipulated Teller.”

“Whoever this Olena person is, I really hope she’s not your girlfriend, because if so, she really needs to reconsider her life choices.”

“My *girlfriend*?” He made a face like he’d just eaten a lemon.

Wow, pretty insulting for this Olena chick, she noted. Until she realized that if he was that disgusted by *her*, and he thought *Delaney* was her . . .

New tactic.

“What happened to my arm?” She finally stopped rubbing at it and dropped her hand so he could see her unmarked flesh. No doubt he’d seen it already, but still.

“I healed it,” he said, clearly thinking she was stupid for asking. “It wasn’t deep. You were lucky. We were able to extract the poison before it could do permanent damage. You’ve only been out for three cycles.”

“Wait,” she held up a hand. “Three what now?”

“Cycles.”

“What’s a cycle?” She clenched her fists when he rolled his eyes.

“I’m serious! What the hell is a cycle?! How long have I been here?” Feeling the panic rising up once more, she dropped down onto the edge of the cot, careful to keep her feet far from his outstretched ones. “Mariana has to be freaking out,” she said to herself. “She’s probably called the police by now.”

Unless, of course, she was still with Ottus.

He leaned forward, propping his arms on his knees. “They were going to kill you, Olena. The Tars are still upset about the arrangement. As soon as your parents and the Zane discovered they’d found you, they alerted my team and me.”

When all she did was frown, he moved back. “I promised you space, Lissa—not that I’d let you get yourself killed by your stubbornness.”

“Why does she have two names?” Delaney blurted, grasping on to the one part of the jumbled mess he’d just said that she could process. The rest of it was gibberish to her. “Is it like a nickname?” He’d said “your parents,” so they weren’t siblings. And they clearly weren’t dating. “Are you two related?”

He looked at her like he had back in the alley, that mixture of confusion and surprise. Like he was seeing her for the first time.

“Okay, whatever, don’t tell me,” she sighed. “Look, I don’t know much about aliens—Vakar,” she corrected, not wanting to insult him while she was trying to bargain for her life. “And I most definitely don’t know what a Tar is, but I do know that thing they shot me with hurt like hell. If they’re after this Olena person, then she’s still there. She’s still in danger.”

He continued to stare, and she fought the urge to stomp her foot like a child.

“Damn it, Ruckus—” She spun away and came face-to-face with the small rectangular mirror hanging over the sink. Only, it wasn’t

her face staring back at her. Her breath caught in her throat, and for a moment she completely forgot to breathe.

The girl staring back at her looked vaguely familiar. A dark-haired girl with milky skin and almond-shaped eyes. The same girl who'd bumped into her back at the club. Back in the dim lighting, Delaney hadn't been able to make out more than a single tone of her eyes, but now, like with Ruckus, it was easy. Gold, with a rim of deep violet.

Delaney blinked, and the girl in the mirror did the same. Just to be sure, she lifted a hand and pressed her fingers against her cheek, almost painfully. Finally recalling that air was necessary, she gasped, the sudden intake making her feel light-headed and woozy. She stumbled back and dropped onto the cot, shaking her head.

"I think I'm having a panic attack," she admitted, though her voice came out breathy and weak, and she wasn't sure either of them could hear her. She wasn't sure she meant for them to. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest, to the point that it felt as if there was a vice gripping her tight. "Oh yeah, definitely a panic attack."

She'd never had one of those before; today was clearly a day of firsts.

She struggled to compose herself, keeping an eye trained between the two of them just in case. Now that she'd seen herself, she had a better understanding of why they were so adamant she was this Lissa person. But that didn't mean she trusted them.

A device in the pocket of the smaller one still by the open door beeped then. He pulled it out and then frowned over at Ruckus.

"Her vitals are spiking, Ander," he informed him, as if that weren't already completely obvious with the way she had practically curled into a ball.

“You’re monitoring my vitals?” she asked, noting the hint of annoyance in her tone and grasping at it. Anger was easier to manage than fear, and right now she needed to be smart. In control. She narrowed her eyes at Ruckus, trying to see him in a different light. “So, you’re a doctor?”

Was this Olena person sick, on top of being hunted by these Tars?

His whole body tensed, stilling to the point that she wasn’t certain he was even breathing. Even from this distance, she could see his pupils dilating, felt the change of his emotions by the heaviness that entered the atmosphere. Whoever had come up with that saying about tension and a knife clearly hadn’t met Ruckus.

You couldn’t cut the tension in this room with a damn chainsaw.

“Look in the mirror again.” His voice was steely, and the command was delivered low.

She shook her head. She wasn’t ready to see that other face again just yet. If she did, she might *really* lose it, and then she’d be completely screwed. Pretty much the only thing she currently had going for her was the fact that she hadn’t completely mentally checked out. What would they do to her if she did? If she wasn’t conscious enough to defend herself because she was too busy weeping on the floor like an idiot?

A prospect that was seeming more likely as the seconds ticked by.

“Do it,” he demanded. “Now.”

“Um.” She licked her lips and swallowed audibly. “Ruckus? That is your name, right? I just assumed because Ander is a title . . . Unless I got that part wrong, too?” For the first time, she wished she’d paid more attention to Mariana’s alien obsession.



“I didn’t mean to insult you, if you’re not a doctor,” she continued, opting to be truthful as a last attempt. “I’m just freaking out and—”

“Oh.” The smaller one’s voice shook and his eyes widened. “No.”

“What does that mean?” Ruckus demanded. When he didn’t immediately get a response, the muscles in his jaw visibly tightened. “Gibus.”

“You aren’t going to like it. . . .” He wrung his hands, but despite his words, there was a tiny bit of excitement behind his wide eyes.

“Answer me, Sutter.” Before the smaller guy could, however, Ruckus swore and got to his feet so quickly that Delaney actually shot back.

Her skull rebounded off the wall, but he’d stopped paying attention to her already.

“The last time Olena was here,” Ruckus declared, “she took something, didn’t she?” The other man’s face was answer enough. “What was it?”

“Ander—”

“What was it?”

She wanted to point out that he had a serious interrupting problem, but she smartly kept her mouth shut.

The smaller one, Gibus, dropped his gaze.

“It was the device you’d been working on, wasn’t it?” Obviously, the question was rhetorical. “I told you to keep that thing safe! You call this”—he flung an arm out toward her—“safe?!”

Gibus suddenly found the slick white floor very interesting. He hung his head and kept his shoulders tense and squared. His silence spoke volumes.

“She got the damn thing to work,” Ruckus said, then added another angry curse.

At least, Delaney assumed it was a curse; it sounded like one even though the word itself wasn’t familiar.

“Someone gonna fill me in?” she asked, eyeing Ruckus warily. If he came at her, she was so going to knee him in the junk. She knew where that was, too, in the exact same place as a human male’s. Another tidbit from Mariana.

“Who are you?” Gibus said breathlessly, maintaining his distance.

She felt a shred of hope, and dropped her guard a bit.

“Not Olena, that’s for sure,” she said smoothly.

“I was going to tell you. . . .” He glanced at Ruckus from the corner of his eye, and it was like watching a child interact with a teacher. “I’d hoped I’d merely misplaced it. I do that. Often. And even if she had taken it, I didn’t think she’d be able to do”—he waved a hand at Delaney—“this. We’re talking about *Olena*, after all. Technological genius, she is not, Ander. I didn’t—”

“Dismissed,” Ruckus growled. “You’ll be dealt with accordingly later.”

“What the hell is going on?” Delaney asked, moving to her feet. “Why do I look like someone else? You know what”—she held up a hand—“I don’t even care. Now that we’ve established that you really do have the wrong person, can you reverse it and take me back already?”

Ruckus maintained eye contact, but Gibus looked away, clueing her in that something was wrong.

“What?” she said breathlessly, afraid to get an answer.

Gibus ran a hand through his scruffy chestnut hair. “The thing is—”

“You’re *dismissed*,” Ruckus told him before he could finish. When Gibus didn’t move, Ruckus shot a death stare his way. “Leave—now. And do not report this to anyone except Pettus. Do you understand, Sutter?”

“Yes, Ander.” He gave a curt nod.

“Good. Update Pettus and then send him here.”

“Yes, Ander.” Gibus turned away, and the door slid shut behind him.

She stared after him, feeling dread seep through her with every second that ticked by. She almost wanted to go after him. It seemed like he was willing to give her answers. Ruckus was a puzzle, and she really didn’t like puzzles.

Finally she gave in and turned to look at him, finding his harsh gaze already on her. There were only three feet between them, but at least it didn’t look like he was planning to bridge the gap.

“What’s your name?” he asked, startling her with the gentleness there.

She tilted her head, preparing for a trap. “Delaney.”

He nodded. “Delaney, I’m Ruckus.”

“Got that much.”

“Of course.” He ran a hand through his hair. “My lolaura—” He stopped, took a breath. “Apologies for my mistake. If you knew what I do, you’d understand why it was so difficult for me to believe you.”

“What do you know?” she inquired.

“The man you just met, Gibus, has made a terrible error in judgment. Olena, the real Olena, likes to hang around his workstation when she’s on board. He’d shelved a project for our military some time ago, a device that could alter the appearance of someone. It was meant to be used to help my people in the war.”

“But that’s over now,” she said, remembering something she’d absently caught on the news. “The Vakar and Kints are at peace. Right?”

He gritted his teeth but nodded nonetheless. “Yes, we are at peace. I ordered that project destroyed anyway, because if it fell into enemy hands, it would be catastrophic. Obviously, my order wasn’t carried out.”

“Go back.” She was struggling to wrap her brain around this. “How would this device alter someone’s appearance? I mean, how is that even possible?”

“By messing with the brain waves of a population with a specific gene. Gibus was unable to perfect the device, however. It alters the perspective of everyone, including those who’ve used the device, and had it used on them. This would have made it exceedingly difficult for us to trust what we saw. If the enemy realized what we were up to, for instance, all they had to do was switch out the double for the real person, and we would never know.”

“I’m sorry.” She rubbed at her temples. “I’m seriously slow right now.”

“You still don’t understand.”

“No.”

He tugged something out of his back pocket. It was a little larger than her iPhone, and square instead of rectangular. It looked more like a piece of glass, but when he tapped the center, it turned black. He pressed at it a few more times and then turned it around so she could see the screen.

A dark-haired girl smiled coyly at her from it.

“This is Lissa Olena,” he said. “As the Ander, it is my job to ensure her safety.”

“I walked into her,” Delaney told him.

He actually looked sorry for her, putting the device back into his pocket. “She walked into you, more like.”

“She did something to me.” It wasn’t a question, because that had already been established. Suddenly she was extremely tired. The warring emotions of panic and fear and anger had drained her.

“I imagine that’s when she used the device to alter your appearance,” he agreed, waving at her body.

“Oh shit.” She slumped back down onto the cot, dropping her head into her hands. That explained so much, why he’d taken her, why he’d insisted that she was messing with him. Why those people had shot her.

“Why are the Tars after her again?” she asked.

“They don’t agree with the peace treaty,” he surprised her by answering. “They’re a small rebellious group formed of Kints who disagree with their Rex’s decision to end the war.”

“Is a Rex like a president?”

“More like a king,” he corrected. “We still operate on a monarchy of sorts.”

“Okay, so Rex means king.”

“Their king. Vakar and Kint, you would call them countries, with slightly differing languages. Our king, the Vakar king, is called a Basileus. Our queen is Basilissa. And our princess—”

“Is called Lissa.” Delaney let out a slow breath and leaned back against the wall, drained. “I’ve been played by a goddamn alien princess.” None of this made any sense. “Why?”

For a second it didn’t seem like he was going to tell her, but he must have seen something on her face, because he gave in and came to sit next to her on the small cot. Settling, he angled his body so that his back was to the door and he could hold her gaze.

“The peace treaty between my people and the Kints was built

on an arranged marriage,” he divulged. “Olena has been on Earth for the past five years, for her denzeration. It’s a period in every Vakar’s life when they come of age and are allowed to explore Earth. To get to know the planet, the primitive life-forms there, and decide if they’d like to stay as an analyst, or if they’d like to return to Xenith.

“Being our Lissa, Olena knew when she left that staying on Earth was never really an option for her, but she’d convinced her parents to allow her to take the right anyway. Last week marked the end of her denzeration, and she was supposed to meet me and come back home.”

“Let me guess,” she said, stopping him. “She never showed.”

“No, she did not. Somehow the Tars discovered she was somewhere on Earth, unprotected, and sent assassins. I managed to track her to Portland. She clearly wanted me to find her so that she could lead me to you. She used you as a distraction, Delaney. I’m”—he hesitated—“sorry.”

Despite everything going on, the corner of her mouth twitched. “Not something you say often, huh?”

“No,” he admitted, smiling some himself. “If I had known she’d gotten her hands on Gibus’s prototype, that it hadn’t been destroyed like I’d ordered, I wouldn’t have taken you the way that I did. I can tell this is all very frightening for you.”

“I’m not frightened,” she insisted, instantly switching from tired to defense mode.

“I don’t blame you,” he told her easily. “It’s a scary situation. You said it yourself: You don’t know much about my people.” He cocked his head. “You aren’t one of those humans who are fascinated by us.”

She snorted. “Definitely not.”

The door opened up at his back, and the other guy from the alley stepped inside. Closing the hatch behind him, he waited until Ruckus had turned on the cot so that he could easily look at them both.

“We have a problem, Ander.” His voice was melodious, lighter than Ruckus’s, and smooth. He glanced over at Delaney momentarily but didn’t address her as Gibus had.

His long-sleeved green shirt was tucked into his pants, the zipper in the center done all the way up, closing the inch-wide collar around his neck. His hair was swiped back the same as the last time she’d seen him, held there by some sort of gel. It was a light brown, a match to his eyes, though when she looked closely, she could just make out the ring of dark blue around the outside of the otherwise tan irises.

“Pettus, you spoke to Gibus?” Ruckus asked.

“Yes—”

“How close are we to Xenith?”

“We’ve got an estimated three ticks till we breach the atmosphere. But”—his eyes trailed over to Delaney for a split second—“that isn’t the problem I was referring to, Ander.”

Suddenly a red light began flashing on the ceiling, and a loud beeping noise sounded.

Ruckus swore again, but Pettus was already continuing.

“It’s the Zane, Ander.” He paused and glanced between them. “He’s here.”

## CHAPTER 4

Who's the Zane?" Delaney frowned, not liking the way they were looking at each other. Like something terrible was about to happen—something even more terrible than taking the wrong person from another planet.

"They're about to board," Ruckus said, ignoring her, his attention on Pettus. "We're out of options. She's going to need to convince him."

Pettus nodded, clearly understanding, and Ruckus moved over to the door, pressing a palm flat against a panel on the wall. Static crackled through it for a second, and then Gibus's voice filtered into the room.

"Bring me a hebi," Ruckus ordered.

Pettus stepped up to her. "Here's the thing: You look like Olena. Exactly like her. And, well, we sort of need you. . . ." He waved both hands in air as if juggling invisible balls.

She tilted her head at him, scrunching up her face in the process. What was he going on about? Why the hell couldn't any of them just speak plainly?

"You need to pretend to be Olena," he stated.



She couldn't help it—she snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“Right,” he maintained. “We took you thinking that you were the Lissa, and we've just been informed that the Kints found out why her return home was delayed.”

“You mean they found out she didn't want to be married off like cattle?” It was the only reason she could think of anyone's being desperate enough to do *this* to someone else. Not that that justified it. At all.

His eyes narrowed, but he continued. “They aren't happy. They don't believe that Olena really wants peace. Their Zane is boarding as we speak. If he discovers that Olena eluded us, that she went to such great lengths in order to do so, he'll reinstate the war.” He paused, locking his odd-colored eyes on hers and holding them until he knew he had her complete attention. “They'll kill us, Delaney.”

“Kill us . . . dead?”

“Pretty sure there's no other version of kill, even on Earth,” he said dryly.

“But it's not my fault, or yours for that matter. It's Olena's.”

“They're our enemies. They don't care. They're itching for a reason to go back to war. The Kints don't just want this planet; they want Earth as well, and my people and this treaty are the only things keeping them from enslaving yours.”

The red light above them changed colors, flashing orange now. Pettus swore, using the same word as Ruckus had before, and opened his mouth to say something else when suddenly Gibus was at the door.

He handed a small square box over to Ruckus.

“Go,” Ruckus ordered them. “Delay him.”

They left without another word, and he twisted the top off of the small box Gibus had given him. Inside, there was an item that reminded Delaney of a circular bandage.

“I need you to do this,” he told her, attention still on the small circle.

“I don’t.” She shook her head.

His eyes shot to hers, full of frustration. “They *want* to kill us, Delaney. They just need an excuse.”

He moved toward her, motioning for her to angle her head. When she didn’t immediately do so, he sighed again and held the circle up before her. “We call this a hebi. It’s a translating device that’s embedded into the side of the neck. We’ve been speaking English; the Kint will not do so.”

“Sounds like I’d only need that if I planned on speaking to them then,” she countered, “which I do not.”

“Do you want to die?” he asked. “You do this, maybe we live. You don’t, we definitely die. Choose.”

“*Maybe?*” she repeated.

“You’ve done a good job of hiding your fear so far. Draw on that.”

If the peace treaty between the aliens was broken, then the treaty between them and Earth would be as well. She knew Pettus was right about the Kints wanting her planet. And Ruckus was huge; she’d never seen anyone as strong or as tough looking as him. If he was worried . . . maybe she should be, too.

“Just this once, right?” Her voice was a bit weak, and she strengthened it. “I pretend to be her and get us out of this, then you guys tell your Basileus, or whatever, the truth and take me home.”

“Yes.” He made to lift the hebi closer, but she held up her hand.

“Promise.” She didn’t know if aliens made promises, or if they knew what they were, but desperate times and all that.

“I give you my word, Delaney. I’m the one who wrongly took you; I will return you to your rightful place.”

She allowed herself one last deep breath and then straightened, coming to her full five-six height. She didn’t have to say anything aloud, because he noted her silent agreement.

“So I’ll be able to understand the Kints with this?” she asked, tilting her head to the left to give him better access.

“And Vakar,” he confirmed. “It attaches to the brain and will allow you to instinctually speak our languages as well. It translates and deciphers so that words in our language that are similar to yours will be translated accordingly.”

“To my brain?” Her nerves spiked up another notch.

“I’m not a Sutter,” he stated, busy placing the hebi. “I don’t know all the logistics.”

“I’ll speak a different language without knowing I’m doing it?” That seemed like a question he could answer.

“It calibrates to whatever language is first spoken to you. For example, if I spoke to you in Vakar, your reply would automatically come out as Vakar.”

“Kind of takes away having to actually learn, huh?”

The hebi was practically see-through, and at first, when he placed it on her neck, it felt sticky. Then her skin tightened around the area, and a cooling sensation followed. Ruckus stepped back, and when Delaney touched the right side of her neck, she couldn’t feel anything.

“It disappears into the skin,” he informed her, already turning away. “Ensures it can’t be removed accidentally or otherwise.”

Guess that meant she was never taking it off, either.

“Wait,” she said, stopping him just as he was about to open the door. “What’s a Zane? Who is he?”

Amazingly, Ruckus actually looked a little guilty when he said, “He’s their prince.”

The door was open, exposing them to the long hallway before she could respond, which was probably a good thing, because the tightness that’d been in her chest turned to lead in her stomach.

Their prince.

Olena’s betrothed, the one she didn’t want to marry and the one who knew it.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

*You can do this!* she told herself as Ruckus motioned with a curve of his chin for her to follow him. She stepped out into the hallway, leaving the room for the first time and suddenly wishing she didn’t have to. It was safe in that room, safer than out here anyway, and she wanted desperately to turn around. She didn’t, fighting against her flight instincts and focusing on the one that would get her out of this hellish situation.

Fight.

“Have they met before?” she asked him quietly, afraid someone might be ahead of them and overhear. Right now there was just the two of them in the long winding white hallway, but she didn’t know where they were going. As soon as they’d taken a few turns, she also didn’t know the way back.

“A few times,” he answered out of the corner of his mouth. “Don’t be too nice, but don’t be rude, either. Remember, all of our lives depend on you.”

“They don’t know about the device, right? The one that did this to me?”

He shook his head.

Well, that was something, at least. Even if she was a little odd during this meeting, there was no way the Zane could jump to the conclusion she was someone else posing as the Lissa. Only a crazy person would think of that.

They heard voices up ahead, and turned a corner, entering a large square room. It was the center of a crossway, halls branching off in all four directions. The group before her had obviously just come from the corridor directly across from them. When they came to the entryways, both parties halted.

Pettus was off to the side, with three men behind him. They all had stoic expressions and wore similar outfits to his, only in blue. They were tall, fit, but lacked the commanding air that Ruckus had in spades.

The man who'd clearly been leading the party toward them, however, didn't have the same problem as his men. He demanded attention, respect, instantly. It was clear in the way he held himself, the way he took up space and seemed to suck up all the oxygen in the room. His hair was light blond, more sunflower than honey. His uniform was different, the collar of his formfitting shirt an inch taller than the rest, the sleeves stopping at his elbows instead of covering his whole arm.

He was as tall as Ruckus, but his legs seemed longer somehow, and his eyes were cornflower blue rimmed in a deep crimson. They were a mixture of beautiful and creepy, especially with the burning way he had them currently set upon her.

She couldn't call him more attractive than Ruckus, just attractive in a different sort of way. There was no doubt in her mind that he was the Zane.

“I told them you were on your way, Ander Ruckus,” Pettus was explaining the whole time she and the Zane stared at each other. “Zane Trystan couldn’t wait.”

“I think I’ve waited long enough,” the Zane spoke, his voice cutting across the room like a blade. “Don’t you agree, Lissa Olena?”

Her confidence had been waning since the moment she’d spotted him. He didn’t appear to be the type of man who was easily manipulated. And he definitely looked like the type to kill the person attempting the manipulation.

“I apologize for my delay,” she said; it was the first thing that had come to mind. “I was unforgivably detained.”

“Unforgivably?” He took a step toward her and, if he noticed Ruckus tensing at her side like she did, he ignored it. “Indeed. What was it that detained you, Lissa, if you don’t mind my asking?”

She wasn’t one to be easily fooled, either. He wasn’t asking.

“As I’m sure you’re aware,” she said, taking a risk, “Earth has many strange oddities to offer. I merely got caught up exploring the culture. There’s a festival—it happens only once a year, in Maine, called the Summer Welcoming. It takes place in Seabrook, a very small town, and I’m afraid my curiosity got the best of me.”

Silently, she prayed that he believed her, while simultaneously thanking her mini hometown for having at least one thing notable about it. It also happened to take place in May, last week, even. Her parents had been very upset with her for not coming home to celebrate it.

“Hmm.” His eyes inspected her more closely. “Rumor has it your delay is due to other factors.”

“Other factors?” she said, faking confusion. “What other factors could there be?” At his pointed look, she feigned indignation. “Are

you implying that I intended to go back on my vow? I know my duty, Zane Trystan, same as you.”

For a moment she feared he didn't believe her, that she'd stepped over a line or given some hint that she wasn't really who she said she was, but then he pulled his arms behind his back, his cold stance gentling some.

“Ander Ruckus, you and your men are free to leave us for a moment.”

Her heart slammed into her chest, and it took everything in her not to show it. Her fingers twitched at her side, wanting to reach out and grab on to Ruckus before he could leave her alone. He might be an alien and a kidnapper, but at least she knew he'd listen to her. And frankly, she didn't trust the Zane. There was something about him, something dark that she couldn't quite place but knew well enough to avoid.

“With all due respect, Zane,” Ruckus stated, clearly struggling himself, “Lissa Olena has had a long journey, and I'm under strict orders to return her to the castle. Already our arrival has been delayed due to your boarding.”

“Surely she's not too exhausted to share a moment with her betrothed?” The Zane eyed her challengingly.

She rose to the occasion.

“It's fine, Ander.” She never took her eyes from the Zane's stare. “I'm perfectly safe in the company of the Zane. Aren't I, Zane?” Game. Set. Match.

“Of course, Lissa.” His lips twitched into a smirk, and his blue-and-crimson eyes glittered with humor. Turning, he extended an arm to her.

She forced herself to boldly step forward and take it. His arm was every bit as steel-like as Ruckus's were. She allowed the

Zane to angle her toward the hallway to his right as they began walking.

“My men will keep you company,” the Zane called over his shoulder to Ruckus, before they turned a corner and went out of sight.

Taking even breaths, she glanced around their surroundings, having been rushed down the previous hallway with Ruckus. There really wasn’t anything special about them, just pale white walls with doors scattered here and there and pipes lining the tops. Bright lights were set on the sides of both the floor and the ceiling.

“We talked about your silence last time we met, Olena,” he told her suddenly in an even voice, “and how much I dislike it.”

“Did we?” she asked, cocking a brow at him. “I don’t recall.”

“Don’t you?” His tone was as hard as his arm and the metal all around them.

It was risky, but she was certain he’d found her return of his challenge back there amusing. If she could hold on to that amusement, at least long enough for them to dock the ship and her to exit safely, she might actually be able to pull this off.

She allowed her mouth to twitch and she dropped her gaze, saying volumes with the move.

“Ah,” he said, “so you do remember.”

“I doubt conversations had with you are easily forgotten,” she told him.

“I know what you’re doing.” He’d led them down a labyrinth of hallways and then stopped, turning so that they were facing each other. “We were matched, Olena. How do you think it looks that my betrothed would rather stay on a primitive planet than return home to me?”

She bristled, noting the slight twinge in his voice when he’d



mentioned their engagement. Going out on a limb, she dropped her arm from his and tilted up her chin defiantly.

“Let’s not play games,” she said. “Neither one of us wanted this. But that doesn’t mean either of us would go back on our parents’ word. We don’t want to restart the war, do we?”

That glint returned, chasing away the anger that had threatened to spill into his eyes. “No, of course not.”

“Exactly. I stayed away for the reason I gave.”

“For a human celebration.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you.” Before she could argue, he took a large step forward, forcing her back against the wall.

What was with aliens and crowding her?!

“You were honest about one thing, however,” he told her, dipping his head low enough to keep the two of them at eye level. “I don’t want to bind to you any more than you want to bind to me. You are a child, Olena, always have been, and while I see Earth has done you some good, given you at least a slightly more witty tongue, I doubt it’s done enough to erase all of your many shortcomings.”

He took another step closer. He’d kill her if he got the chance; that was so clear now that she wondered how he’d managed to mask it from everyone well enough for them to think betrothing him to Olena was a good idea. No wonder the girl had run.

“If I wasn’t clear before, so long as the Rex is alive, I will follow through with his orders. I will bind my life to yours, but I won’t enjoy it, and unless you do exactly as you’re told, you won’t, either.”

He flicked at her navy T-shirt then, sneering. “Did you wear this as a peace offering, Olena? What a weak attempt to get me to believe your story. A festival? We both know you tried to run.” He

slammed both palms against the wall at either side of her head with enough force that she bounced against it. “You can’t run from me, Lissa.”

“Zane Trystan, Lissa Olena.” Ruckus had appeared at the end of the hallway. He did not look happy, but he didn’t attempt to approach them. “We’ve landed, and the Basileus is requesting his daughter’s presence.”

“Of course.” Trystan smiled a wolfish grin and pulled back, straightening his shirt. He gave Delaney one last once-over, clearly not liking what he saw, and then stepped away. “I’m sure you can take her from here, Ander.”

Ruckus didn’t respond, and it didn’t seem like the Zane really expected him to, because he kept on his way without a backward glance.

The second the sounds of his retreating footsteps were no longer audible, Delaney let out the breath she’d been holding and slid down the wall to the floor.

“Are you all right?” Ruckus was kneeling in front of her in a matter of seconds.

“He’s”—she inhaled—“intense.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” he growled. “Another would be saying he’s an asshole.”

Seeing that the subject disturbed her, he stood, holding down a hand for her to take. Once he had her back on her feet, he didn’t let go, instead tightening his grip to keep her from pulling away.

With a frown, she met his gaze.

“We just need to meet with the Basileus, and then I’ll be able to take you home,” he promised. “All this will seem like a really bad dream in no time.”

“Yeah?” She tried to focus on his words and not how comforting it was to have his hand holding hers. “That’d be good.”

RUCKUS AND PETTUS led Delaney off the ship and down a long hallway that attached to the castle. They moved quickly, giving her only enough time to catch glimpses of the place as they wound their way through the vast halls.

The smell was strange, foreign, a bit like mothballs and evergreen, and she trailed after Ruckus quietly, checking out the guards they passed from the corners of her eyes. And they passed many.

At each entry and exit point, there were always at least two guards. They stood tall, shoulders back, sort of like the ones she’d seen in all the pictures guarding the queen of England. Except they didn’t have poofy hats, and she found she sort of wished they did. It would certainly ease some of the tension.

Their uniforms were similar to Ruckus’s in that they wore black military pants tucked into boots. The buttoned-up jackets were different, however, skintight and the color of moss and with heavy gold accents strewn about. She’d expected to see more of the silver weapon Pettus had used back in the alley against the Tars, but if they had any weapons on them, they were well hidden.

Everyone dropped their chins to their chests in a bow when she passed, but the move was mechanical, toy soldiers, and it crept her out.

They finally stopped at a set of tall golden doors, and Ruckus reached for the handle.

“Wait here,” he told her and Pettus, opening it just enough for him to slip through without exposing the inside of the room.

“He needs to brief them,” Pettus explained quietly. “It’s best that he does that alone first.”

Right, because it was doubtful they’d react well to the news a human had been brought in their daughter’s stead.

Delaney kept silent, partly because she was unable to think of anything to say, and partly because she was afraid that if she did, she’d lose it. The more details she paid attention to in this castle, the more it sunk in that she was no longer on Earth. The walls were a material that’d been made to appear like wood but wasn’t. She could see the metallic sheen of it from where she stood, a few feet away.

Everything was done in earthy and metallic tones; even the lighting had a gold sheen to it.

The sudden opening of the door had her jumping, and she bit her bottom lip in embarrassment when she was met with Ruckus. His facial expression was tight, and he merely nodded at her and angled his head over his shoulder.

Taking a deep breath, she braced herself and then stepped beneath the archway.

The room was an office, with a fireplace to the right of the double doors and a small black round table to the far right, big enough to seat five. At the center, positioned between two large bay windows that overlooked the sprawling yard was a desk three times the size of any she’d seen before. Her gaze immediately landed on a tall man seated behind it; he had the same inky hair as Olena. A woman stood closely by his side, hands clasped before her.

There were no computers that she was used to, but a glass screen sat propped at an angle in front of where the man was sitting. She couldn’t make out what he was watching, and there was no sound, but movement on the other side of the glass clued her in that it was a video of sorts.

Ruckus came up to her then, lightly touching her elbow as he held his other hand out toward the pair. “May I introduce the Basileus Magnus Ond, and the Basilissa Tilda Ond.”

Delaney wasn’t sure what to do, so she tried a bow, grateful for Ruckus’s steadying grip on her arm when she almost wobbled. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could stand there, pretending everything was fine, and hoped this conversation would end quickly.

She hoped they’d put her directly on a ship headed back home.

“Ander Ruckus tells us your name is Delaney.” The Basileus’s voice was sharp, though she got the feeling he was attempting—poorly—not to intimidate her.

“Delaney Grace, sir.” Was it appropriate to call him sir? He didn’t correct her.

Both he and the Basilissa took a moment to openly inspect her. There wasn’t much to look at, of course, seeing as how she appeared exactly as their daughter did on the outside, but she held still and waited for them to finish.

“The Sutter did this?” The Basilissa, Tilda, pursed her lips in either disgust or confusion. Delaney couldn’t tell which.

“It was his device,” Ruckus said carefully, “but it was stolen by the Lissa, who used it without Sutter Gibus’s knowledge.”

“And Trystan doesn’t seem to know?”

“If he did,” the Basileus said with a grunt, “he would have declared war by now. No, she must have fooled him.”

His stare was making her even more uncomfortable, and Delaney barely resisted the urge to clear her throat pointedly. Instead she held her head high and tried to make her voice as calm and respectful as possible.

“I’d just like to go home,” she told them.

“This is not an ideal situation,” the Basileus said then, “and I assure you we will be taking steps to right the wrong my daughter has done us all. However”—he folded his hands across the surface of his desk slowly—“it has also come to my attention that we have no real knowledge of where she is. As you know, Earth is a big planet. Therefore—”

She felt the blood draining from her face before he’d even finished his sentence.

“We simply cannot allow you to leave.”