

Close Liaisons

The Krinar Chronicles: Volume 1

Anna Zaires

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Dedication

This book would not have been possible without my husband – my partner in life and close collaborator in the writing of the Krinar Chronicles. His guidance in all aspects of plot development, scientific elements, and general editing has been invaluable.

I would also like to give special thanks to my friends T and L (you know who you are!) for being my beta readers and proofreaders. Your sharp eye for detail has been extremely helpful in the editing process.

Prologue

Five Years Earlier

“Mr. President, they’re all waiting for you.”

The President of the United States of America looked up wearily and shut the folder lying on his desk. He had slept poorly for the past week, his mind occupied by the deteriorating situation in the Middle East and the continued weakness in the economy. While no president had it easy, it seemed like his term had been marked by one impossible task after another, and the daily stress was beginning to affect his health. He made a mental note to get himself checked out by the doctor later this week. The country didn’t need a sick and exhausted president on top of all of its other woes.

Getting up, the President exited the Oval Office and headed toward the Situation Room. He had been briefed earlier that NASA had detected something unusual. He’d hoped that it might be nothing more than a stray satellite, but that didn’t appear to be the case, given the urgency with which the National Security Advisor requested his presence.

Entering the room, he greeted his advisors and sat down, waiting to hear what necessitated this meeting.

The Secretary of Defense spoke first. “Mr. President, we have discovered something in Earth’s orbit that doesn’t belong there. We don’t know what it is, but we have reason to believe that it may be a threat.” He motioned toward the images displayed on one of the six flat screens lining the walls of the room. “As you can see, the object is large, bigger than any of our satellites, but it seems to have come out of nowhere. We didn’t see anything launching from any point on the globe, and we haven’t detected anything approaching Earth. It’s as though the object simply appeared here a few hours ago.”

The screen showed several pictures of a dark blur set against a dark, starry background.

“What does NASA think it could be?” the President asked calmly, trying to analyze the possibilities. If the Chinese had come up with some new satellite technology, they would have already known about it, and the Russian space program was no longer what it used to be. The presence of the object simply didn’t make any sense.

“They don’t know,” the National Security Advisor said. “It doesn’t look like anything they’ve ever seen before.”

“NASA couldn’t even venture an educated guess?”

“They know it’s not any kind of an astronomical body.”

So it had to be man-made. Puzzled, the President stared at the images, refusing to even contemplate the outlandish idea that had just occurred to him. Turning to the Advisor, he asked, “Have we reached out to the Chinese? Do they know anything about this?”

The Advisor opened his mouth, about to reply, when there was a sudden flash of bright light. Momentarily blinded, the President blinked to clear his vision – and froze in shock.

In front of the screen that the President had just been looking at, there was now a man. Tall and muscular, he had black hair and dark eyes, and his olive skin contrasted with the white color of his outfit. He stood there calmly, relaxed, as though he had not just invaded the inner sanctum of the United States government.

The Secret Service agents reacted first, shouting and firing at the intruder in panic. Before the President could think, he found himself pushed against the wall, with two agents forming a human shield in front of him.

“There’s no need for that,” the intruder said, his voice deep and sonorous. “I don’t intend to hurt your president – and if I did, there’s nothing you can do about it.” He spoke in perfect American English, without even a hint of an accent. Despite the gunfire that had just been directed at him, he appeared to be completely uninjured, and the President could now see the bullets lying harmlessly on the floor in front of the man.

Only years of handling one major crisis after another enabled the President to do what he did next. “Who are you?” he asked in a steady voice, ignoring the effects of terror and adrenaline rushing through his veins.

The intruder smiled. “My name is Arus. We’ve decided that it’s time for our species to meet.”

Chapter 1

The air was crisp and clear as Mia walked briskly down a winding path in Central Park. Signs of spring were everywhere, from tiny buds on still-bare trees to the proliferation of nannies out to enjoy the first warm day with their rambunctious charges.

It was strange how much everything had changed in the last few years, and yet how much remained the same. If anyone had asked Mia ten years ago how she thought life might be after an alien invasion, this would have been nowhere near her imaginings. *Independence Day*, *The War of the Worlds* – none of these were even close to the reality of encountering a more advanced civilization. There had been no fight, no resistance of any kind on government level – because *they* had not allowed it. In hindsight, it was clear how silly those movies had been. Nuclear weapons, satellites, fighter jets – these were little more than rocks and sticks to an ancient civilization that could cross the universe faster than the speed of light.

Spotting an empty bench near the lake, Mia gratefully headed for it, her shoulders feeling the strain of the backpack filled with her chunky twelve-year-old laptop and old-fashioned paper books. At twenty-one, she sometimes felt old, out of step with the fast-paced new world of razor-slim tablets and cell phones embedded in wristwatches. The pace of technological progress had not slowed since K-Day; if anything, many of the new gadgets had been influenced by what the Krinar had. Not that the Ks had shared any of their precious technology; as far as they were concerned, their little experiment had to continue uninterrupted.

Unzipping her bag, Mia took out her old Mac. The thing was heavy and slow, but it worked – and as a starving college student, Mia could not afford anything better. Logging on, she opened a blank Word document and prepared to start the torturous process of writing her Sociology paper.

Ten minutes and exactly zero words later, she stopped. Who was she kidding? If she really wanted to write the damn thing, she would've never come to the park. As tempting as it was to pretend that she could enjoy the fresh air and be productive at the same time, those two had never been compatible in her experience. A musty old library was a much better setting for anything requiring that kind of brainpower exertion.

Mentally kicking herself for her own laziness, Mia let out a sigh and started looking around instead. People-watching in New York never failed to amuse her.

The tableau was a familiar one, with the requisite homeless person occupying a nearby bench – thank God it wasn't the closest one to her, since he looked like he might smell very ripe – and two nannies chatting with each other in Spanish as they pushed their Bugaboos at a leisurely pace. A girl jogged on a path a little further ahead, her bright pink Reeboks contrasting nicely with her blue leggings. Mia's gaze followed the jogger as she rounded the corner, envying her athleticism. Her own hectic schedule allowed her little time to exercise, and she doubted she could keep up with the girl for even a mile at this point.

To the right, she could see the Bow Bridge over the lake. A man was leaning on the railing, looking out over the water. His face was turned away from Mia, so she could only see part of his profile. Nevertheless, something about him caught her attention.

She wasn't sure what it was. He was definitely tall and seemed well-built under the expensive-looking trench coat he was wearing, but that was only part of the story. Tall, good-looking men were common in model-infested New York City. No, it was something else. Perhaps it was the way he stood – very still, with no extra movements. His hair was dark and glossy under the bright afternoon sun, just long enough in the front to move slightly in the warm spring breeze.

He also stood alone.

That's it, Mia realized. The normally popular and picturesque bridge was completely deserted, except for the man who was standing on it. Everyone appeared to be giving it a wide berth for some unknown reason. In fact, with the exception of herself and her potentially aromatic homeless neighbor, the entire row of benches in the highly desirable waterfront location was empty.

As though sensing her gaze on him, the object of her attention slowly turned his head and looked directly at Mia. Before her conscious brain could even make the connection, she felt her blood turn to ice, leaving her paralyzed in place and helpless to do anything but stare at the predator who now seemed to be examining her with interest.

* * *

Breathe, Mia, breathe. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a small rational voice kept repeating those words. That same oddly objective part of her noted his symmetric face structure, with golden skin stretched tightly over high cheekbones and a firm jaw. Pictures and videos of Ks that she'd seen had hardly done them justice. Standing no more than thirty feet away, the creature was simply stunning.

As she continued staring at him, still frozen in place, he straightened and began walking toward her. Or rather stalking toward her, she thought stupidly, as his every movement reminded her of a jungle cat sinuously approaching a gazelle. All the while, his eyes never left hers. As he approached, she could make out individual yellow flecks in his light golden eyes and the thick long lashes surrounding them.

She watched in horrified disbelief as he sat down on her bench, less than two feet away from her, and smiled, showing white even teeth. No fangs, she noted with some functioning part of her brain. Not even a hint of them. That used to be another myth about them, like their supposed abhorrence of the sun.

"What's your name?" The creature practically purred the question at her. His voice was low and smooth, completely unaccented. His nostrils flared slightly, as though inhaling her scent.

"Um . . ." Mia swallowed nervously. "M-Mia."

"Mia," he repeated slowly, seemingly savoring her name. "Mia what?"

"Mia Stalis." Oh crap, why did he want to know her name? Why was he here, talking to her? In general, what was he doing in Central Park, so far away from any of the K Centers? *Breathe, Mia, breathe.*

"Relax, Mia Stalis." His smile got wider, exposing a dimple in his left cheek. A dimple? Ks had dimples? "Have you never encountered one of us before?"

“No, I haven’t,” Mia exhaled sharply, realizing that she was holding her breath. She was proud that her voice didn’t sound as shaky as she felt. Should she ask? Did she want to know?

She gathered her courage. “What, um –” Another swallow. “What do you want from me?”

“For now, conversation.” He looked like he was about to laugh at her, those gold eyes crinkling slightly at the corners.

Strangely, that pissed her off enough to take the edge off her fear. If there was anything Mia hated, it was being laughed at. With her short, skinny stature and a general lack of social skills that came from an awkward teenage phase involving every girl’s nightmare of braces, frizzy hair, and glasses, Mia had more than enough experience being the butt of someone’s joke.

She lifted her chin belligerently. “Okay, then, what is *your* name?”

“It’s Korum.”

“Just Korum?”

“We don’t really have last names, not the way you do. My full name is much longer, but you wouldn’t be able to pronounce it if I told you.”

Okay, that was interesting. She now remembered reading something like that in *The New York Times*. So far, so good. Her legs had nearly stopped shaking, and her breathing was returning to normal. Maybe, just maybe, she would get out of this alive. This conversation business seemed safe enough, although the way he kept staring at her with those unblinking yellowish eyes was unnerving. She decided to keep him talking.

“What are you doing here, Korum?”

“I just told you, making conversation with you, Mia.” His voice again held a hint of laughter.

Frustrated, Mia blew out her breath. “I meant, what are you doing here in Central Park? In New York City in general?”

He smiled again, cocking his head slightly to the side. “Maybe I’m hoping to meet a pretty curly-haired girl.”

Okay, enough was enough. He was clearly toying with her. Now that she could think a little again, she realized that they were in the middle of Central Park, in full view of about a gazillion spectators. She surreptitiously glanced around to confirm that. Yep, sure enough, although people were obviously steering clear of her bench and its otherworldly occupant, there were a number of brave souls staring their way from further up the path. A couple were even cautiously filming them with their wristwatch cameras. If the K tried anything with her, it would be on YouTube in the blink of an eye, and he had to know it. Of course, he may or may not care about that.

Still, going on the assumption that since she’d never come across any videos of K assaults on college students in the middle of Central Park, she was relatively safe, Mia cautiously reached for her laptop and lifted it to stuff it back into her backpack.

“Let me help you with that, Mia –”

And before she could blink, she felt him take her heavy laptop from her suddenly boneless fingers, gently brushing against her knuckles in the process. A sensation similar to a mild electric shock shot through Mia at his touch, leaving her nerve endings tingling in its wake.

Reaching for her backpack, he carefully put away the laptop in a smooth, sinuous motion. "There you go, all better now."

Oh God, he had touched her. Maybe her theory about the safety of public locations was bogus. She felt her breathing speeding up again, and her heart rate was probably well into the anaerobic zone at this point.

"I have to go now . . . Bye!"

How she managed to squeeze out those words without hyperventilating, she would never know. Grabbing the strap of the backpack he'd just put down, she jumped to her feet, noting somewhere in the back of her mind that her earlier paralysis seemed to be gone.

"Bye, Mia. I will see you later." His softly mocking voice carried in the clear spring air as she took off, nearly running in her haste to get away.

Chapter 2

“Holy shit! Get out of here! Seriously? Tell me what happened, and don’t leave out any details!” Her roommate was nearly jumping up and down in excitement.

“I just told you . . . I met a K in the park.” Mia rubbed her temples, feeling the band of tension around her head left over from her earlier adrenaline overdose. “He sat down on the bench next to me and talked to me for a couple of minutes. Then I told him that I had to go and left.”

“Just like that? What did he want?”

“I don’t know. I asked him that, but he just said he wanted to talk.”

“Yeah, right, and pigs can fly.” Jessie was as dismissive of that possibility as Mia herself had been. “No, seriously, he didn’t try to drink your blood or anything?”

“No, he didn’t do anything.” Except briefly touch her hand. “He just asked me my name and told me his.”

Jessie’s eyes now resembled big brown saucers. “He told you his name? What is it?”

“Korum.”

“Of course, Korum the K, makes perfect sense.” Jessie’s sense of humor often kicked in at the strangest times. They both snickered at the ridiculousness of that statement.

“Did you know immediately that he was a K? How did he look?” Recovering, Jessie continued with her questions.

“I did.” Mia thought back to that first moment she saw him. How did she know? Was it his eyes? Or something instinctual in her that knew a predator when she saw one? “I think it maybe had to do with the way he moved. It’s difficult to describe. It’s definitely inhuman. He looked a lot like the Ks you’d see on TV – he was tall, good-looking in that particular way that they have, and had strange-looking eyes – they looked almost yellow.”

“Wow, I can’t believe it.” Jessie was pacing the room in circles. “How did he talk to you? What did he sound like?”

Mia let out a sigh. “Next time I get ambushed in the park by an extraterrestrial, I will be sure to have a recording device handy.”

“Oh come on, like you wouldn’t be curious if you were in my shoes.”

True, Jessie did have a point. Sighing again, Mia relayed the whole encounter to her roommate in full detail, leaving out only that brief moment when his hand brushed against hers. For some odd reason, that touch – and her reaction to it – seemed private.

“So you told him ‘bye,’ and he said he will see you later? Oh my God, do you know what that means?” Far from satisfying Jessie, the detailed story seemed to send her into excitement overdrive. She was now almost bouncing off the walls.

“No, what?” Mia felt weary and drained. It reminded her of the feeling after an interview or an exam, when all she wanted was to give her poor overworked brain a chance to unwind. Maybe she shouldn’t have told Jessie about the encounter until tomorrow, when she’d had a chance to relax a bit.

“He wants to see you again!”

“What? Why?” Mia’s tiredness suddenly vanished as adrenaline surged through her again. “It’s just a figure of speech! I’m sure he meant nothing by that – English is not even his first language! Why would he want to see me again?”

“Well, you did say he thought you were pretty –”

“No, I said that *he* said he was there to meet ‘a pretty curly-haired girl.’ He was just mocking me. I’m sure that was just his way of toying with me . . . He was probably just bored standing there, so he decided to come by and talk to me. Why would a K be interested in me?” Mia cast a disparaging glance in the mirror at her two-year-old Uggs, worn jeans, and a too-big sweater she got on sale at Century 21.

“Mia, I told you, you’re constantly underestimating your appeal.” Jessie sounded earnest, the way she always did when trying to boost Mia’s self-confidence. “You look very cute, with that big mass of curly hair. Plus, you have really pretty eyes – very unusual, to have blue eyes with hair as dark as yours –”

“Oh, please, Jessie.” Mia rolled said eyes. “I’m sure *cute* doesn’t cut it if you’re a gorgeous K. Besides, you’re my friend – you have to say nice stuff to me.”

As far as Mia was concerned, Jessie was the pretty one in the room. With her curvy athletic build, long black hair, and smooth golden skin, Jessie was every guy’s fantasy – particularly if they happened to like Asian girls. A former high school cheerleader, her roommate of the last three years also had the outgoing personality to match her looks. How the two of them had become such good friends will always remain a mystery to Mia, as her own social skills at the age of eighteen had been all but nonexistent.

Thinking back to that time, Mia remembered how lost and overwhelmed she’d felt arriving in the big city after spending all her life in a small town in Florida. New York University was the best school she’d been accepted to, and her financial aid package ended up being generous, making her parents very happy. However, Mia herself had been far from excited about going to a big-city school with no real campus. Getting caught up in the competitive college application process, she’d applied to most of the top fifteen schools, only to face numerous rejections and inadequate financial aid offers. NYU had seemed like the best alternative all around. Local Florida schools had not even been considered by Mia’s parents at the time, as the rumor had been that the Ks might set up a Center in Florida and her parents wanted her far away from there if that happened. It hadn’t happened – Arizona and New Mexico ended up being the preferred K locales in the United States. However, by then it was too late. Mia had started her second semester at NYU, met Jessie, and slowly began to fall in love with New York City and everything it had to offer.

It was funny how everything turned out. Only five years ago, most people thought they were the only intelligent beings in the universe. Sure, there had always been crackpots claiming UFO sightings, and there had even been things like SETI – serious, government-funded efforts to explore the possibility of extraterrestrial life. But people had no way of knowing whether any kind of life – even single-celled organisms – actually existed on other planets. As a result, most had believed that humans were special and unique, that *homo sapiens* were the pinnacle of evolutionary development. Now it all seemed so silly, like when people in the Middle Ages thought that the Earth was flat and that the moon and the stars revolved around it. When the Krinar arrived early in the second decade of the twenty-first century, they upended everything that scientists thought they knew about life and its origins.

"I'm telling you, Mia, I think he must've liked you!" Jessie's insistent voice interrupted her musings.

Sighing, Mia turned her attention back to her roommate. "I highly doubt it. Besides, what would he want from me even if he did? We're two different species. The thought of him liking me is just plain scary . . . What would he want from me, my blood?"

"Well, we don't know that for a fact. That's just a rumor. Officially, it's never been announced that the Ks drink blood." Jessie sounded hopeful for some weird reason. Maybe Mia's social life was so bad in her roommate's eyes that she was eager to have Mia date someone, anyone – same species optional.

"It's a rumor that many people believe. I'm sure there's a reason for that. They're vampires, Jessie. Perhaps not the Draculas of legend, but everyone knows they're predators. That's why they've set up their Centers in isolated areas . . . so they can do whatever they want there with none the wiser."

"All right, all right." Her excitement waning, Jessie sat down on her bed. "You're right, it would be very scary if he actually did intend to see you again. It's just fun to pretend sometimes that they're simply gorgeous humans from outer space, and not a completely different mystery species."

"I know. He was unbelievably good-looking." The two girls exchanged understanding glances. "If only he were human . . ."

"You're too picky, Mia. I've always told you that." Shaking her head in mock reproach, Jessie used her most serious tone of voice. Mia looked at her in disbelief, and they both burst out laughing.

* * *

That night, Mia slept restlessly, her mind replaying the encounter over and over. As soon as she would drift off to sleep, she would see those mocking amber eyes and feel that electrifying touch on her skin. To her embarrassment, her unconscious mind took things even further, and Mia dreamed of him touching her hand. In her dream, his touch would send shivers through her entire body, warming her from within – then he would slide his hand up her arm, cupping her shoulder, and bring her toward him, mesmerizing her with his gaze as he leaned in for the kiss. Her heart racing, Mia would close her eyes and lean toward him, feeling his soft lips touch hers, sending waves of warm sensations throughout her body.

Waking up, Mia felt her heart pounding in her chest and heat pooling slowly between her legs. It was 5 a.m. and she'd barely slept for the last five hours. Dammit, why was a brief encounter with an alien having such an effect on her? Maybe Jessie was right, and she needed to get out more, meet some more guys. Over the past three years, under Jessie's tutelage, Mia had shed a lot of her former shyness and awkwardness. For her high school graduation, her parents got her laser eye surgery, and her post-braces smile was nice and even. She now felt comfortable going to a party where she knew at least a few people, and she could even go out dancing after having a sufficient number of shots. But for some reason, the dating world still eluded her. The few dates she'd been on in recent months had been disappointing, and she couldn't remember the last time she had actually kissed a guy. Maybe it was that nice kid from biology last year? For some reason, Mia had never clicked

with any of the men she'd met, and it was becoming embarrassing to admit that she was still a virgin at twenty-one years of age.

Thankfully, she and Jessie no longer shared a room, having found a flex one-bedroom that could be converted into a two-bedroom apartment for a reasonable (for NYC) rate of only \$2,380. Having her own room meant a degree of freedom and privacy that was very nice in situations like this.

Turning on her bedside lamp, Mia looked around the room, making sure that the door to her bedroom was fully closed. Reaching into her bedside drawer, she took out a small package that was normally hidden all the way in the back of the drawer behind her face cream, hand lotion, and a bottle of Advil. Carefully unwrapping the bundle, she took out the tiny rabbit-ears vibrator that had been a gag gift from her older sister. Marisa had given it to her for high school graduation with the joking admonition to use it whenever she "felt the urge" and "to stay away from those horny college boys in the big city." Mia had blushed and laughed at the time, but the thing had actually proven handy. At certain times in the dark of the night, when her loneliness became more acute, Mia played with the device, gradually exploring her body and learning what a real orgasm felt like.

Pressing the small object to the sensitive nub between her legs, Mia closed her eyes and relived the sensations brought on by her dream. Gradually increasing the speed of vibration on the toy, she let her imagination soar, picturing the K's hands on her body and his lips kissing her, stroking her, touching her in sensitive and forbidden places, until the ball of tension deep within her belly got even tighter and exploded, sending tingly warmth all the way to her toes.

* * *

The next morning, Mia woke up to a grey and overcast sky. Reaching for the phone to check the weather, she groaned. Ninety percent chance of rain with temperature in the mid-forties. Just what she needed when her Sociology paper awaited. Oh well, maybe she would make it to the library before the rain starts.

Jumping out of bed, she pulled on her comfiest pair of sweats, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a big hooded sweater she got on a high-school trip to Europe. It was her studying/paper-writing outfit, and it looked just as ugly today as it had the first time she'd worn it while cramming for her algebra test in tenth grade. The clothes fit her about the same now too, as she seemed to have developed a disgusting inability to gain inches either in girth or height since the age of fourteen.

Hastily brushing her teeth and washing her face, Mia stared critically in the mirror. A pale, slightly freckled face looked back at her. Her eyes were probably her best feature, an unusual shade of blue-grey that contrasted nicely with her dark hair. Her hair, on the other hand, was a whole different animal. If she spent an hour carefully blowdrying it with a diffuser, then she could maybe get her corkscrew curls to resemble something civilized. Her normal routine of going to sleep with it wet, however, was not conducive to anything but the frizzy mess she had on her head right now. Letting out a deep sigh, she ruthlessly pulled it back into a thick ponytail. Some day soon, when she had a real job, she might go to one of those expensive salons and try to get a straightening treatment. For now, since she didn't have an hour each morning to waste on her hair, Mia figured she just had to live with it.

Library time. Grabbing her backpack and her laptop, Mia pulled on her Uggs and headed out of the apartment. Five flights of stairs later, she exited her building, paying little attention to the peeling paint on the walls and the occasional cockroach that liked to live near the garbage chute. Such was student life in NYC, and Mia was one of the lucky ones to have a semi-affordable apartment so close to campus.

Real estate prices in Manhattan were as high as they'd ever been. In the first couple of years after the invasion, apartment prices in New York had cratered, just as they had in all the major cities around the world. With the hokey invasion movies still ruling the public's imagination, most people figured that cities would be unsafe and departed for rural areas if they could. Families with children – already a rare commodity in Manhattan – left the city in droves, heading for the most remote areas they could find. The Ks had encouraged the migration, as it relieved the worst of the pollution in and around urban areas. Of course, people soon realized their folly, since the Ks wanted nothing to do with the major human cities and instead chose to build their Centers in warm, sparsely populated areas around the globe. Manhattan prices skyrocketed again, with a few lucky people making fortunes on the real estate bargains they'd picked up in the crash. Now, more than five years after K-Day – as the first day of the Krinar invasion came to be called – New York City rents were again testing record highs.

Lucky me, Mia thought with mild irritation. If only she'd been a couple of years older, she could've rented her current apartment for less than half the price. Of course, there was something to be said for graduating next year, instead of in the depths of the Great Panic – the dark months after Earth first faced the invaders.

Stopping by the local deli, Mia ordered a lightly toasted bagel (whole-grain, of course, the only kind available) with an avocado-tomato spread. Sighing, she remembered the delicious omelets her mom used to make, with crumbled bacon, mushrooms, and cheese. Nowadays, mushroom was the only ingredient on that list that was in any way affordable for a college student. Meat, fish, eggs, and dairy were premium products, available only as an occasional treat – the way foie gras and caviar used to be. That was one of the main changes that the Krinar had implemented. Having decided that the typical developed-world diet of the early twenty-first century was harmful both to humans and their environment, they shut down the major industrial farms, forcing meat and dairy producers to switch to growing fruits and vegetables. Only small farmers were left in peace and allowed to grow a few farm animals for special occasions. Environmental and animal-rights organizations had been ecstatic, and obesity rates in America were quickly approaching Vietnam's. Of course, the fallout had been huge, with numerous companies going out of business and food shortages during the Great Panic. And later on, when the Krinar's vampiric tendencies were discovered (though still not officially proven), the Far Right activists had claimed that the real reason for the forced change in diet was that it made the human blood taste sweeter to the Ks. Be that as it may, the majority of the food that was available and affordable now was disgustingly healthy.

"Umbrella, umbrella, umbrella!" A scruffy-looking man stood on the corner, hawking his wares in a strong Middle Eastern accent. "Five-dollar umbrella!"

Sure enough, less than a minute later, a light drizzle began. For the umpteenth time, Mia wondered if the street umbrella vendors had some kind of sixth sense about rain. They always seemed to appear right before the first drop fell, even if there was no rain in the forecast. As tempting as it was to buy an umbrella to stay dry, Mia only had a few blocks left

to go and the rain was too light to justify an unnecessary expenditure of five dollars. She could've brought her old umbrella from home, but carrying an extra object was never high on her list of priorities.

Walking as fast as she could while lugging her heavy bag, Mia turned the corner on West 4th Street, with the Bobst Library already in sight, when the downpour began. Crap, she should've bought that umbrella! Mentally kicking herself, Mia broke into a run – or rather a jog, given the backpack weighing her down – as raindrops pelted her face with the force of water bullets. Her hair somehow managed to escape from the ponytail, and was in her face, blocking her vision. A bunch of people rushed past her, hurrying to get out of the rain, and Mia was pushed a few times by pedestrians blinded by the combination of heavy rain and umbrellas held by more fortunate souls. At times like this, being 5'3" and barely a hundred pounds was a severe disadvantage. A big man brushed past her, his elbow bumping into her shoulder, and Mia stumbled, her foot catching on a crack in the sidewalk. Pitching forward, she managed to catch herself with her hands on wet pavement, sliding a few inches on the rough surface.

All of a sudden, strong hands lifted her from the ground, as though she weighed nothing, standing her upright under a large umbrella that the man held over both of their heads.

Feeling like a dirty, drowned rat, Mia tried to brush her sodden hair off her face with the back of one scraped hand, while blinking the remnants of rain out of her eyes. Her nose decided to add to her humiliation, choosing that particular moment to let loose with an uncontrollable sneeze all over her rescuer.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry!" Mia frantically apologized in utter mortification. Her vision still blurry from the water running down her face, she desperately tried to wipe her nose with a wet sleeve to prevent another sneeze. "So sorry, I didn't mean to sneeze on you like that!"

"No apologies necessary, Mia. Obviously, you got cold and wet. And injured. Let me see your hands."

This could not be happening. Her discomfort forgotten, all Mia could do was stare in disbelief as Korum carefully lifted her wrists palms-up and examined her scrapes. His large hands were unbelievably gentle on her skin, even as they held her in an inescapable grip. Although she was soaked to the skin in chilly mid-April weather, Mia felt like she was about to burst into flames, his touch sending a wave of heat rushing through her body.

"You should get those injuries treated immediately. They could scar if you're not careful. Here, come with me, and we'll get them taken care of." Releasing her wrists, Korum put a proprietary arm around her waist and began shepherding her back toward Broadway.

"Wait, what –" Mia tried to recover her wits. "What are you doing here? Where are you leading me?" The full danger of the situation was just now beginning to hit home, and she began to shiver from a combination of cold and fear.

"You're obviously freezing. I'm getting you out of this rain, and then we'll talk." His tone brooked no disagreement.

Desperately looking around, all Mia saw were people rushing to get out of the pouring rain, not paying any attention to their surroundings. In weather like this, a murder in the middle of the street was likely to go unnoticed, much less the struggles of one small girl. Korum's arm was like a steel band around her waist, completely unmovable, and Mia found herself helplessly going along in whichever direction he was leading her.

"Wait, please, I really can't go with you," Mia protested shakily. Grasping at straws, she blurted out, "I have a paper to write!"

"Oh really? And you're going to write it in this condition?" His tone dripping with sarcasm, Korum gave her a disparaging once-over, lingering on her dripping hair and scraped hands. "You're hurt, and you're probably going to catch pneumonia – with that puny immune system you've got."

As before, he somehow managed to get a rise out of her. How dare he call her puny! Mia saw red. "Excuse me, my immune system is just fine! Nobody catches pneumonia from getting stuck in the rain these days! Besides, what concern is it of yours? What are you doing here, stalking me?"

"That's right." His reply was smooth and completely nonchalant.

Her temper immediately cooling, Mia felt tendrils of fear snaking through her again. Swallowing to moisten her suddenly dry throat, she could only croak out one word. "W-Why?"

"Ah, here we are." A black limo was sitting at the intersection of West 4th and Broadway. At their approach, the automatic doors slid open, revealing a plush cream-colored interior. Mia's heart jumped into her throat. No way was she getting into a strange car with a K who admitted to stalking her.

She dug in her heels and prepared to scream.

"Mia. Get. In. The. Car." His words lashed at her like a whip. He looked angry, his eyes getting more yellow by the second. His normally sensuous-looking mouth appeared cruel all of a sudden, set in an uncompromising line. "Do NOT make me repeat myself."

Shaking like a leaf, Mia obeyed. Oh God, she just wanted to survive this, whatever the K had in store for her. Every horror story she'd ever heard about the invaders was suddenly fresh in her mind, every image from the gruesome fights during the Great Panic. She stifled a sob, watching as Korum got in the limo and closed the umbrella. The car doors slid shut.

Korum pressed the intercom button. "Roger, please take us to my place." He looked much calmer now, eyes back to the original golden brown.

"Yes, sir." The driver's reply came from behind the partition that fully blocked him from view.

Roger? That was a human name, Mia thought in desperation. Maybe he could help her, call the police on her behalf or something. Then again, what could the police do? It's not like they could arrest a K. As far as Mia knew, they were above the reach of human law. He could pretty much do anything he wanted with her, and there was no one to stop him. Mia felt tears running down her rain-wet face as she thought about her parents' grief when they found out that their daughter was missing.

"What? Are you crying?" Korum's voice held a note of incredulity. "What are you, five?" He reached for her, his fingers locking around her upper arms, and pulled her closer to stare into her face. At his touch, Mia started shaking even harder, gasping sobs breaking out of her throat.

"Hush, now. There's no need for that. Shhh . . ." Mia suddenly found herself cradled fully on his lap, her face pressed against a broad chest. Still sobbing, she vaguely registered a pleasant scent of freshly laundered clothing and warm male skin, as his hand moved in soothing circles on her back. He really *was* treating her like a five-year-old crying over a boo-boo, she thought semi-hysterically. Strangely enough, the treatment was working. Mia felt her fear ebbing as he held her gently in those powerful arms, only to be replaced by a

growing sense of awareness and a warm sensation somewhere deep inside. Adrenaline amplified attraction, she realized with a peculiar detachment, remembering a study on the subject from one of her psychology classes.

Still ensconced on his lap, she managed to pull away enough to look up at his face. Up close, his appearance was even more striking. His skin, a warm golden hue that was a couple of shades darker than her roommate's, was flawless and seemed to glow with perfect health. Thick black lashes surrounded those incredible light-colored eyes – which were framed by the straight dark slashes of his eyebrows.

“Are you going to hurt me?” The question escaped her before she could think any better of it.

Her kidnapper let out a surprisingly human-like sigh, sounding exasperated. “Mia, listen to me, I mean you no harm . . . Okay?” He looked straight into her eyes, and Mia couldn't look away, mesmerized by the yellow flecks in his irises. “All I wanted was to get you out of the rain and to treat your injuries. I'm taking you to my place because it's nearby, and I can provide you with both medical assistance and a change of clothes there. I really didn't mean to scare you, much less get you into this kind of state.”

“But you said . . . you said you were stalking me!” Mia stared at him in confusion.

“Yes. Because I found you interesting at the park and wanted to see you again. Not because I want to hurt you.” He was now rubbing her upper arms with a gentle up-and-down motion, as though soothing a skittish horse.

At his admission, a wave of heat surged through her body. Did that mean he was attracted to her? Her heart rate picked up again, this time for a different reason.

There was something else she needed to understand. “You forced me to get into the car . . .”

“Only because you were being stubborn and refusing to listen to common sense. You were wet and cold. I didn't want to waste time arguing in the rain when a warm car was standing right there.” Put like that, his actions sounded downright humanitarian.

“Here.” Pulling a tissue from somewhere, he carefully blotted the remaining tears on her face and gave her another tissue to wipe her nose, watching with some amusement as she tried to blow into it as delicately as possible. “Feeling better now?”

Strangely enough, she did. He could be lying to her, but what would be the point? He could do anything he wanted with her anyway, so why waste time trying to soothe her fears? Her earlier terror gone, Mia suddenly felt exhausted from her emotional roller coaster. As though sensing her state, Korum gathered her closer to him, pressing her face gently against his chest again. Mia did not object. Somehow, sitting there on his lap, inhaling his warm scent and feeling the heat of his body surrounding her, Mia felt better than she had in a long time.

Chapter 3

“Here we are. Welcome to my humble abode.”

Mia stared around in amazement, her gaze lingering on floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the Hudson, gleaming wooden floors, and luxurious cream-colored furnishings. A few pieces of modern art on the walls and luscious-looking plants near the windows provided tasteful touches of color. It was the most beautiful apartment she had ever seen. And it looked completely human.

“You live here?” she asked in astonishment.

“Only when I come to New York.”

Korum was hanging his trench coat in the closet by the door. It was such a simple, mundane action, but somehow his movements were just too fluid to be fully human. He was now clad only in a blue T-shirt and a pair of jeans. The clothes hugged his lean, powerful body to perfection. Mia swallowed, realizing that her incredible surroundings paled next to the gorgeous creature who was apparently occupying them.

How could he afford this place? Were all the Ks rich? When the limo had pulled into the parking garage at the newest luxury high-rise in TriBeCa, Mia had been shocked to find herself escorted to a private elevator that took them directly to the penthouse floor. The apartment looked huge, particularly by Manhattan standards. Did it occupy the entire top floor of the building?

“Yes, the apartment is the whole floor.”

Mia blushed, just realizing that she had asked the question out loud. “Umm . . . it’s a beautiful place you’ve got here.”

“Thank you. Here, sit down.” He led her to a plush leather couch – cream-colored, of course. “Let me see your hands.”

Mia hesitantly extended her palms, wondering what he intended to do. Use his blood to heal them, the way vampires from popular fiction used to do?

Instead of cutting his palm or doing anything vampiric, Korum brought a thin silvery object toward her right palm. The size and thickness of an old-fashioned plastic credit card, the thing looked completely innocuous. That is, until it began to emit a soft red light directly over her hand. There was no pain, just a pleasant, warm sensation where the light touched her damaged skin. As Mia watched, her scrapes began to fade and disappear, like pencil marks getting erased. Within a span of two minutes, her palm was completely healed, as though there had been nothing there to begin with. Mia tentatively touched the area with her fingers. No pain whatsoever.

“Wow. That is amazing.” Mia exhaled sharply, releasing a breath she hadn’t even realized she was holding. Of course, she had known that the Ks were far more technologically advanced, but seeing what amounted to a miracle with her own eyes was still shocking.

Korum repeated the process on her other hand. Both of her palms were now completely healed, with no trace of an injury.

“Uh . . . thank you for that.” Mia didn’t really know what to say. Was this a K version of offering a Band-Aid, or did he just perform some kind of a complicated medical procedure on her? Should she offer to pay him? And if he said yes, would he accept student health insurance? *Snap out of it, Mia! You’re being ridiculous!*

“You’re welcome,” he said softly, still lightly holding her left hand. “Now let’s get you changed out of your wet clothes.”

Mia’s head jerked up in horrified disbelief. Surely he couldn’t mean to . . .

Before she even had a chance to say anything, Korum blew out an exasperated breath. “Mia, when I said that I don’t intend to harm you, I meant it. My definition of harm includes rape, in case you think we have some cultural differences there. So you can relax, and stop jumping at every word I say.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to imply . . .” Mia wished the ground would open up and simply swallow her. Of course, he wouldn’t rape her. He probably wasn’t even interested in her that way. Why would he want some skinny, pale little human when he could have any of the gorgeous K females she’d seen on TV? He’d never said he was attracted to her – just that he found her “interesting.” For all she knew, he could be a K scientist studying the New York breed of humans – and he had just found a curly-haired lab rat.

Letting out another sigh, Korum rose gracefully from the couch, his every move imbued with inhuman athleticism. “Here, come with me.”

Still feeling embarrassed, Mia barely paid attention to her surroundings as he led her down the hall. However, she couldn’t help but gasp at the first sight of the enormous bathroom that lay before her.

The glass shower enclosure was bigger than her entire bathroom back home, and a large elevated jacuzzi occupied the center of the room. The entire bathroom was done in shades of ivory and grey, an unusual combination that nonetheless paired well in this luxurious environment. Two of the walls were floor-to-ceiling mirrors, further adding to the spacious feel. There were plants here too, she noticed with bemusement. Two exotic-looking plants with dark red leaves seemed to be thriving in the corners, apparently getting enough sunlight from the large skylight in the ceiling.

“This is for you.” Korum slid open part of the glass wall and took out a large ivory towel and a soft-looking thick grey robe. “You can take a hot shower and change into this, and then I will throw your clothes in the dryer.”

With a nod and a murmured thank-you, Mia accepted the two items, watching as Korum exited the room and closed the door behind him.

A sense of unreality gripped her as she stared at the cutting-edge luxury all around her. This could not be happening to her. Could this be a really vivid dream? Surely Mia Stalis, from Ormond Beach, Florida, was not standing here in a bathroom fit for a king, having been told to take a hot shower by a K who had practically kidnapped her in order to heal her insignificant scratches with an alien magic device. Maybe if she blinked a few times, she would wake up back in her cramped room at the apartment she shared with Jessie.

To test that theory, Mia shut her eyes tightly and opened them again. Nope, she was still standing there, feeling the plush towel and robe heavy in her arms. If this was a dream, then it was the most realistic dream she’d ever had. She might as well take that shower – now that the excitement was starting to wear off a bit, she felt the chill from her damp clothes sinking deep into her bones.

Putting down her burden on the edge of the tall jacuzzi tub, Mia walked to the door and locked it. Of course, if Korum really wanted to get in, it was doubtful that the flimsy lock would keep him out. The incredible strength of the Krinar was discovered in the first few weeks after the invasion, when some guerrilla fighters in the Middle East ambushed a small group of Ks in violation of the recently signed Coexistence Treaty. Video footage of the event, recorded by some bystander on his iPhone, showed scenes straight out of a horror science fiction movie. The band of thirty-plus Saudis, armed with grenades and automatic assault rifles, had stood no chance against the six unarmed Ks. Even wounded, the aliens moved at a speed exceeding that of all known living creatures on Earth, literally tearing apart their attackers with bare hands. One particularly dramatic scene showed a K throwing two screaming men – each with one hand – high up into the air. The exact height of the throw was later determined to be about sixty feet. Needless to say, the men had not survived their descent. The sheer savagery of that fight – and some subsequent encounters during the days of the Great Panic – stunned the human population, lending credence to the rumors of vampirism that emerged some months later. For all their advances in technology and seeming eco-consciousness, the Ks could be as brutal and violent as any vampire of legend.

And here she was stuck with one. Who wanted to heal her negligible scratches and have her take a hot shower in his fancy penthouse. And put her clothes in his dryer.

A hysterical giggle escaped Mia at the thought.

Of course, he might like his snacks clean and sweet-smelling, but somehow Mia believed him when he said he didn't want to hurt her. Besides, there was very little she could do about her current situation – she might as well stop freaking out and take advantage of the most luxurious shower of her life.

Peeling off her wet clothes, Mia caught sight of herself in the mirror. Why was he interested in her? Sure, she was skinny, which was still in vogue, but he probably had the most beautiful women of both species fawning over him. Standing there naked, Mia tried to look at herself objectively and not through the eyes of a self-conscious teenager. The mirror reflected a thin young woman, with small, but nicely rounded breasts, slim hips, and a narrow waist. Her butt was reasonably curvy, considering the rest of her frame. Naked, she didn't look like the shapeless stick figure she always felt like in her baggy clothes. If she were taller, she might even think she had a nice figure. However, her skin was way too pale and the dark mess of curls framing her face was much too frizzy for her to ever be considered more than moderately cute or passably pretty.

Sighing, Mia stepped into the shower. After a brief battle with the touchscreen controls, she figured out how to work them and was soon enjoying warm water coming at her from five different directions. She even used his soap, which had a very faint but pleasing scent of something tropical.

Ten minutes later, Mia regretfully turned off the water and stepped out onto a thick ivory bath rug. She dried herself with the towel Korum had so graciously provided, wrapped it around her wet hair, and put on the robe – which was, to her surprise, only a little big on her. It had to be a woman's robe, she realized with an unpleasant pang of something that felt oddly like jealousy. *Don't be silly, Mia, of course he has female guests! A creature that gorgeous would hardly be celibate. He might even have a girlfriend or a wife.*

Mia swallowed to get rid of an obstruction in her throat that seemed to rise up at that thought. *Stop it, Mia!* She had no idea what he wanted from her, and she had absolutely

no reason to feel like this about an alien from outer space who may or may not drink human blood.

Padding to the door in her bare feet, Mia picked up her discarded clothes from the floor. They felt wet and yucky in her hands, and she was glad she was no longer wearing them. Carefully opening the door, she peeked out into the hallway, spotting a soft-looking pair of grey house slippers that Korum apparently left for her.

No sign of Korum himself.

Putting on the slippers, Mia left the bathroom and headed to the left, hoping that she was going back toward the living room. The last thing she wanted was to stumble into his bedroom, even though that thought made her feel warm and flushed all over.

He was sitting on the couch, looking at something in his palm. Sensing her presence, he lifted his head, and a big smile slowly lit his face at the sight of her standing there in the too-big robe and turban-like towel on her head.

"You look adorable in that." His voice was low and somehow intimate, even from across the room, making her insides clench in a strangely sexual way. Oh God, what did he mean by that? Was he actually interested in her? Mia was sure she had just turned beet-red as her heart rate suddenly picked up.

"Ah, thanks," she mumbled, unable to think of a better response. Was it her imagination, or did his eyes turn an even deeper shade of gold?

"Here, let me have those." Before she had a chance to recover her composure, he was next to her, taking her wet clothes from her slightly shaky arms. "Have a seat, and I'll drop these in the dryer."

With that, he disappeared down the hall. Mia stared after him, wondering if she should be worried. He said he wasn't going to hurt her, but would he take no for an answer if he really was interested in her sexually? More importantly, would she be able to say no, given her response to him thus far?

She'd heard of humans having sex with Ks, so their species were definitely compatible in that way. In fact, there were even websites where people who wanted to have sex with Ks posted ads designed to attract them. Some of the ads must have garnered responses, since the websites stayed in business. Mia always used to think that these xenos – short for xenophiles, a derogatory term for K addicts – were crazy. Sure, most of the invaders tended to be very good-looking, but they were so far from being human that one might as well have sex with a gorilla; there were fewer differences between gorilla and human DNA than between human and Krinar.

Yet here she was, apparently very attracted to one particular K.

A minute later, Korum returned empty-handed, interrupting Mia's chain of thought. "The clothes are drying," he announced. "Are you hungry? I can make us something to eat in the meanwhile."

Ks could cook? Mia suddenly realized that she was, in fact, famished. With all the excitement of the past hour, her bagel breakfast seemed like a very long time ago. Cooking and eating also seemed like a very innocuous way to pass the time.

"Sure, that sounds great. Thank you."

"Okay, come with me to the kitchen, and I'll make something."

With that promise, he walked over to a door she hadn't noticed before and slid it open, revealing a large kitchen. Like the rest of the penthouse, it was striking. Gleaming stainless steel appliances, black and ivory marble floors, and black enameled lava

countertops populated the space, for an almost futuristic look. Some kind of big-leafed plants in silvery pots hung from the ceiling near the windows, seeming very much at home in an otherwise sterile-looking environment.

“How do you feel about a salad and a roasted veggie sandwich?” Korum was already opening the refrigerator, which looked like the latest version of the iZero – a smart fridge jointly created by Apple and Sub-Zero a couple of years ago.

“That sounds great, thanks,” Mia answered absentmindedly, still studying her surroundings. Something was nagging at her, some obvious question that begged an answer.

Suddenly, it hit her.

“Your home only has our technology in it,” Mia blurted out. “Well, except for the little healing tool you used on me. All of these appliances, all of our technology – it must seem so primitive to you. Why do you use it instead of whatever you guys have instead?”

Korum grinned, revealing the dimple in his left cheek again, and walked over to the sink to rinse the lettuce. “I enjoy experiencing different things. A lot of your technology is really so ingenious, considering your limitations. And, to use one of your sayings, when in Rome . . .”

“So you’re basically slumming,” Mia concluded. “Living with the primitives, using their basic tools –”

“If you want to think of it that way.”

He started chopping the veggies, his hands moving faster than any professional chef’s. Mia stared at him in fascination, struck by the incongruity of a creature from outer space making a salad. All of his movements were fluid and elegant – and somehow very inhuman.

“What do you normally eat on Krina?” she asked, suddenly very curious. “Is your diet very different from ours?”

He looked up from the chopping and smiled at her. “It’s different in some ways, but very similar in other ways. We’re omnivorous like you, but lean even more toward plant foods in our diet. There’s a huge variety of edible plants on Krina – more so than here on Earth. Some of our plants are very dense in calories and rich in flavor, so we never quite developed the taste for meat that humans seem to have acquired recently.”

Mia blinked, surprised. There was something predatory in the way he moved – the way all Ks moved. Their speed and strength, as well as the violent streak they’d displayed, did not make sense for a primarily herbivorous species. So there must be something to the vampire rumors after all. If they didn’t hunt animals for their meat, then how had they evolved all these hunter-like traits?

She wanted to ask him that, but had a feeling that she might not want to know the answer. If his species really did view humans as prey, it was probably best not to remind him about it when she was alone with him in his lair.

Mia decided to stick with something safer instead. “So is that why you guys emphasize plant foods so much for us? Because you like it yourselves?”

He shook his head, continuing to chop. “Not really. Our main concern was the abuse of your planet’s resources. Your unhealthy addiction to animal products was destroying the environment at a much faster rate than anything else you were doing, and that was not something we wanted to see.”

Mia shrugged, not being particularly environmentally conscious herself. Since he was being so accommodating, though, she decided to resume her earlier line of questioning. "Is that why you're here in New York, to experience something different?"

"Among other reasons." He turned on the oven and placed sliced zucchini, eggplant, peppers, and tomatoes on a tray inside.

How frustrating. He was being evasive, and Mia didn't like it one bit. She decided to change her approach. "What brings you to Earth in general? Are you one of the soldiers, or the scientists, or do you do something else . . ." Her voice trailed off suggestively.

"Why, Mia, are you asking me about my occupation?" He sounded like he was again laughing at her.

Predictably, Mia felt her hackles rising. "Why, yes, I am. Is that classified information?"

He threw back his head and burst out laughing. "Only for curious little girls." Mia stared back at him with a stony expression on her face. Still chuckling, he revealed, "I'm an engineer by profession. My company designed the ships that brought us here."

"The ships that brought you here? But I thought the Krinar had been visiting Earth for thousands of years before you formally came here?" That had been one of the most striking revelations about the invaders – the fact that they'd been observing humans and living among them long before K-Day.

He nodded, still smiling. "That's true. We've been able to visit you for a long time. However, traveling to Earth had always been a dangerous task – as was space travel in general – so only a few intrepid individuals would attempt it at any given time. It's only in the past few hundred years that we fully perfected the technology for faster-than-light travel, and my company succeeded in building ships that could safely transport thousands of civilians to this part of the universe."

That was interesting. She'd never heard this before. Was he telling her something that wasn't public knowledge? Encouraged and unbearably curious, Mia continued with her questions. "So have *you* been to Earth before K-Day?" she asked, staring at him in wide-eyed fascination.

He shrugged – a human gesture that was apparently used by the Ks as well. "A couple of times."

"Is it true that all our UFO sightings are based on actual interactions with the Krinar?"

He grinned. "No, that was mostly weather balloons and your own governments testing classified aircraft. Less than one percent of those sightings could actually be attributed to us."

"And the Greek and Roman myths?" Mia had read recent speculation that the Krinar may have been worshipped as deities in antiquity, giving rise to the Greek and Roman polytheistic religions. Of course, even today, some religious groups had embraced the Ks as the true creators of humankind, spawning an entirely new movement dedicated to venerating and emulating the invaders. The Krinarians, as these K-worshippers were known, sought every opportunity to interact with the beings they viewed as real-life gods, believing it increased their odds of reincarnating as a K. The Big Three – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – had reacted very differently, refusing to accept that Ks were in any way responsible for the origin of life on Earth. Some more extreme religious factions had even declared the Krinar to be demons and claimed that their arrival was part of the end-of-days

prophecy. Most people, however, had accepted the aliens for what they were – an ancient, highly advanced species that had sent DNA from Krina to Earth, thus starting life on this planet.

“Those *were* based on the Krinar,” confirmed Korum. “A few thousand years ago, a small group of our scientists, sent here to study and observe, became overly involved in human affairs – to the point that they overstayed their mission by a few hundred years. They ultimately had to be forcibly returned to Krina when it became obvious that they were purposefully preying on human ignorance.”

Before Mia had a chance to digest that information, the oven let out a little beep signifying the food’s readiness.

“Ah, here we go.” He took out the roasted veggies and dropped them into a marinade he’d managed to whip up during their conversation. Placing a large salad in the middle of the table, he picked up a sizable portion and deposited it on Mia’s plate. “We can start with this while the veggies are marinating.”

Mia dug into her salad, holding back an inappropriate giggle at the thought that she was literally eating food of the gods – or at least food that had been prepared by someone who would’ve been worshipped as a god a couple of thousand years ago. The salad was delicious – crispy lettuce, creamy avocado, crunchy peppers, and sweet tomatoes were combined with some type of tangy lemony dressing that was mildly spicy. She was either super-hungry, or it was the best salad she’d had in a long time. In the past few years, she’d learned to tolerate salad out of necessity, but this kind of salad she could actually grow to like.

“Thank you, this is delicious,” she mumbled around a mouthful of salad.

“You’re welcome.” He was digging in as well, with obvious enjoyment. For a little while, there was only the sound of them munching on the salad in companionable silence. After finishing his portion – he even ate faster than normal, Mia noticed – Korum got up to make the sandwiches.

Two minutes later, a beautifully made sandwich was sitting in front of Mia. The dark crusty bread appeared to be freshly baked, and the veggies looked tender and were seasoned with some kind of orange spices. Mia picked up her portion and bit into it, nearly stifling a moan of enjoyment. It tasted even better than it looked.

“This is great. Where did you learn to cook like this?” Mia inquired with curiosity after swallowing her fifth bite.

He shrugged, finishing up his own larger sandwich. “I enjoy making things. Cooking is just one manifestation of that. I also like to eat, so it’s helpful to know how to make good food.”

That made sense to her. Mia ate the last bite of her sandwich and licked her finger to get the remainder of the delicious marinade. Lifting her head, she suddenly froze at the look on Korum’s face.

He was staring at her mouth with what looked like raw hunger, his eyes turning more golden by the second.

“Do that again,” he ordered softly, his voice a dark purr from across the table.

Mia’s heart skipped a beat.

The atmosphere had suddenly turned heavy and intensely sexual, and she had no idea how to deal with it. The full vulnerability of her situation dawned on her. She was completely naked underneath the thick robe. All he had to do was pull on the flimsy belt

holding the robe together, and her body would be fully revealed to him. Not that clothes would provide any protection against a K – or a human male for that matter, given her size – but wearing only a robe made her feel much more exposed.

Slowly getting up, she took a step away from the table. Her heartbeat thundering in her ears, Mia nervously blurted out, “Thank you for the meal, but I should really get going now. Do you think my clothes might be dry?”

For a second, Korum did not respond, continuing to look at her with that disconcertingly hungry expression. Then, as if coming to some internal decision, he slowly smiled and got up himself. “They should be ready by now. Why don’t you put the dishes in the dishwasher while I go check?”

Mia nodded in agreement, afraid that her voice would tremble if she spoke out loud. Her legs felt like cooked noodles, but she started gathering the dishes. Korum smiled approvingly and exited the room, leaving Mia alone to recover her composure.

By the time he came back, his arms loaded with her dry clothes, Mia had managed to convince herself that she had overreacted to a potentially harmless remark. Most likely, her imagination was working in overdrive, adding sexual overtones to where there were none. Given his apparent fascination with human technology and lifestyle, it wasn’t all that surprising that he would find an actual human interesting as well – maybe even cute in something they did – the same way Mia felt about animals in the zoo.

Feeling slightly bad about her earlier awkwardness, Mia tentatively smiled at Korum as he handed her the clothes. “Thanks for drying these – I really appreciate it.”

“No problem. It was my pleasure.” He smiled back, but there was a hint of something mildly disturbing in the look he gave her.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll just go change.” Still feeling inexplicably nervous, Mia turned toward the kitchen exit.

“Sure. Do you remember the way to the bathroom? You can go change there.” He pointed down the hall, watching with a half-smile as she gratefully escaped.

Locking the bathroom door, Mia hurriedly changed into her comfortably ugly – and pleasantly warm from the dryer – clothes. He had somehow managed to dry her Uggs as well, Mia noticed with pleasure as she pulled them on. Feeling much more like herself, she unwrapped the towel from her hair, which was only slightly damp at this point, and left the curly mess down to finish drying. Then, thinking that she was as ready as she would ever be, Mia left the relative safety of the bathroom and ventured back out into the living room to face Korum and his confusing behavior.

He was again sitting on the couch, analyzing something in his palm. He seemed very absorbed in it, so Mia cautiously cleared her throat to notify him of her presence.

At the sound, he looked up with a mysterious smile. “There you are, all nice and dry.”

“Ah, yeah, thanks for that.” Mia self-consciously shifted from one foot to another. “And thanks again for your hospitality. I really should get going now, try to write that paper and finish up some other homework . . .”

“Sure, I’ll take you wherever you want to go.” He got up in one smooth motion, heading to the coat closet.

“Oh no, you don’t have to do that,” protested Mia. “Really, I have no problem taking the subway. The rain has stopped, so I’ll be totally fine.”

He just gave her an incredulous look. "I said I will take you there." His tone left no room for negotiation.

Mia decided not to argue. It's not as if she rode in a limo every day. Since Korum was so determined to give her a lift, she might as well enjoy the experience. So Mia kept quiet and meekly followed him as he entered a posh-looking elevator and pressed the button for the ground floor.

Roger and his limo were already waiting in front of the building. The doors slid open at their approach, and Korum courteously waited until Mia climbed inside before getting in himself. Mia wondered where he had learned all of these polite human gestures. Somehow she doubted that "ladies first" was a universal custom.

"Where would you like to go?" he inquired, sitting down next to her.

Mia thought about it for a second. As much as she'd love to run home and blab about the entire unbelievable encounter to Jessie, the deadline for her paper was looming. She needed to go to the library. She only hoped that she could put the day's events out of her mind for a few hours, or however long it took her to write the damn paper. "The Bobst Library, please, if it's not too much trouble," she requested tentatively.

"It's no trouble at all," he reassured her, pressing the intercom button and conveying the instructions to Roger.

Sitting in the closed quarters of the limo, Mia became increasingly aware of his large, warm body less than a foot away from her. Her body reacted to his nearness without reservations.

He really was an incredibly beautiful male specimen by anyone's standards, Mia thought with an almost analytical detachment. She guessed his height to be somewhere just over six feet, and he appeared to be quite muscular, judging by the way his T-shirt fit him earlier. With his striking coloring, he was easily the most handsome man she'd ever seen, in real life or on video. It was no wonder he was having such an effect on her, she told herself – any normal woman would feel the same. Understanding the rationale behind her attraction to him, however, did not lessen its power one bit.

"So, Mia, tell me about yourself." His softly spoken directive interrupted her thoughts.

"Um, okay." For some reason, the question flustered her. "What do you want to know?"

He shrugged and smiled. "Everything."

"Well, I'm a junior at NYU, majoring in psychology," Mia began, hoping she wasn't babbling. "I'm originally from a small town in Florida, and I came to New York to go to school."

He stopped her with a shake of his head. "I know all that. Tell me something more than basic facts."

Mia stared at him in shock, suddenly feeling like a hunted rabbit. With surprising calm, she asked, "How do you know all this?"

"The same way I knew where to find you today. It's very easy to find information on humans, especially those with nothing to hide." He smiled, as though he hadn't just shattered all of her illusions about privacy.

"But why?" Mia could no longer hold back a question that had been tormenting her for the last two days. "Why are you so interested in me? Why go to all these lengths?" She waved her hand, indicating the limo and everything he had done so far.

He looked at her steadily, his gaze nearly hypnotizing in its intensity. "Because I want to fuck you, Mia. Is that what you're afraid of hearing, why you've been acting so scared of me all along?" Without giving her a chance to catch her breath, he continued in the same gently mocking tone. "Well, it's true. I do. For some reason, you caught my attention yesterday, sitting there on that bench with your curly hair and big blue eyes, so frightened when I looked your way. You're not my type at all. I don't typically go for scared little girls, particularly of the human variety, but you –" he reached across with his right hand and slowly stroked her cheek, "– you made me want to strip you down right there in the middle of that park, and see what's hidden underneath these ugly clothes of yours. It took all my willpower to let you go then, and, when you licked your little finger so enticingly in my kitchen, I could barely stop myself from spreading open your robe and burying myself between your thighs right there on the kitchen table."

His touch felt like it was leaving burning streaks in its aftermath as he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and gently brushed his knuckles across her lips. "But I'm not a rapist. And that's what it would be right now – rape – because you're so frightened of me, and of your own sexuality." Leaning closer, he murmured softly, "I know you want me, Mia. I can see the flush of arousal on your pretty cheeks, and I can smell it in your underwear. I know your little nipples are hard right now, and that you're getting wet even as we speak, your body lubricating itself for my penetration. If I were to take you right now, you would enjoy it once you got past the fear and the pain of losing your virginity – yes, I know about that too – but I will wait for you to get used to the idea of being mine. Just don't take too long – I only have so much patience left for you."