

Order of Succession Realm of Chelayna

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Chapter One

Coming of Age

Kaelyn wiggled her toes in the icy water and watched the shadows dance across the waves as they surged up from under the base of the fountain. She shot a quick look at Rein. "This is where you saved my life." She said.

Rein took her hand in his.

She continued, "I remember opening my eyes and gasping for air. All I could see were your big brown eyes with those long thick lashes looking back at me. I thought you were my knight in shining armor."

Rein threw his head back and laughed. "I remember being pissed off that you'd been so stupid as to slam into the fountain."

Kaelyn pulled her hand free and punched him in the arm. "Was not!" she teased, laughing with him. "Now you know the truth."

"And it's even worse," Rein laughed, rubbing his arm.

When had he gotten so tall and where did those broad shoulders come from? She felt a flutter of panic rush through her stomach.

Her smile vanished as their eyes met. She whispered, "You're my knight, my protector. You're my best friend, Rein. You know everything about me, all my secrets."

"I have always been your friend. No command from the gods or my father could ever change that. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have told you. But things will be changing soon. I'm not always going to be here. One day you won't have me around to rescue you."

She locked eyes with him. "But you said the gods had chosen you to protect me. So you have to be here with me, always."

Rein slipped his hand into Kaelyn's and turned to gaze down at her. His voice was quiet and soothing in the silence of the garden. "I have something to tell you, and I'm doing a terrible job of it."

Kaelyn forced herself to meet his eyes as he continued. "I've been accepted to the Dryghton Military Academy on Pegasus 5. They have an accelerated program. I can finish my degree in two years and return to follow in my father's footsteps. I want to become Head of Intelligence at the palace."

His words seemed to fade as the pounding of Kaelyn's heart filled her ears. Was he leaving? She heard her response, "Oh, Rein, that's wonderful! I'm so proud of you. When will you leave?"

"Two weeks." His answer bore into her heart like a flaming arrow.

"So soon?" she managed weakly, losing her composure. She released his hand and forced a smile. "This doesn't sound like an impulsive decision. How long have you known?"

"Kaelyn." He reached for her. "I found out two months ago, but I didn't tell you. I didn't want to upset you."

Her smile vanished. "Upset me? Why would I be upset? You have every right to choose a school off-planet if you like. It's none of my business." She took a step back and slipped on the wet stone walk.

Rein reached out and steadied her, adding, "It's only two years."

"How am I going to survive without you? Who's going to rescue me now, Rein?"

He cupped her face in his hands and whispered, "You'll just have to take care of yourself, Kaelyn. You always could. You need to stop trying to be the sweet, innocent girl and knee some of those randy suitors in the crotch once in a while."

She laughed in spite of the tear that trickled down her cheek. "You know it's hard for me to be rude to people. It's how my parents taught me to behave."

"And what has it gotten you, Kaelyn?" Rein persisted. "A life so sheltered you haven't had chance to live."

She stared at him incredulously, considering his words. "Rein, you're right. I'm sixteen, and I've never even kissed a boy. What kind of life is that? Not one kiss?" She gazed into his eyes and added, "I could have kissed any of those boys who tried to get close, but I held back. I was so caught up in being a good girl. I wanted my first kiss to be with someone I care about; someone who cares about me. I wanted my first kiss to be something I'd always remember. I wanted it to be with someone I'd never forget." She touched his cheek and whispered, "I want that someone to be you, Rein. I want you to kiss me. Kiss me. Just once; even if it's to say goodbye."

"I can't kiss you, Kaelyn," Rein answered quietly. "It's not my place."

"I don't care," Kaelyn insisted, leaning closer. "You said so yourself, those boys waiting in line to dance with me aren't good enough. I think you know deep in your heart we share a special bond. Kiss me, Rein, just this once. Kiss me. I'll never ask you again, I promise."

Rein pulled back and turned away. "No, we can't. What would your father say?"

Kaelyn cupped his chin and turned him to face her. He wouldn't meet her eyes. She moved closer until her face was inches from his and added, "If you can look me in the eyes and tell me you have no feelings for me, I'll stop. If you can tell me to my face that you don't want to kiss me, that you've never wanted to kiss me, then I won't ever ask you again."

When his eyes rose to meet hers, Kaelyn felt a rush of heat course through her. Her heart pounded as his eyes searched hers. His breathing grew deep and quick. Rein touched her hand, pulling it away from his face. He ran his fingers up her arm to her shoulder, then along her collarbone, and caressed her face with his fingertips. He whispered hoarsely, "I've wanted to kiss you for such a long time, Kaelyn, it hurts."

His mouth was on hers in an instant, warm and moist. His tongue slid inside her mouth. A soft gasp escaped her lips. He pulled her against him. She slipped her arms around his neck and melted into him. Then, just as suddenly as it began, Rein released her.

He rose abruptly and announced, "We should get back to the dance. Your presence will be missed."

"No, Rein," she protested, rising to face him. "That ball is for everyone except me. I don't want to dance until I get blisters on

my feet just to please all those boys. I just want to be with you. We don't have much time left before you leave, Rein. I want to spend every moment of it kissing you."

"No." Rein turned back and grabbed her hand, pulling her along behind him toward the steps. "We can never do that again. I told you, it's not my place. I had no right to kiss you. It was a mistake."

"Please, Rein." She resisted, trying to pull her hand from his. "It was wonderful. It was everything I ever dreamed it could be. Don't you see, we're meant to be together?"

He spun to face her. "We can never be together, Kaelyn!

"I'll talk to my father," she stammered. "He'll understand."

Rein took a deep, calming breath. The anger vanished from his eyes, and he added in a soft voice, "Kaelyn, you said so yourself. You've led a sheltered life. You keep your head buried in your science books and ignore the outside world. Your science studies are your only rebellion. Don't you see why they let you continue those studies? Not because they want you to excel in the world of science, but because it kept you busy while they planned your life.

"You've allowed everyone to guide your public life, to show you how to live your personal life, to tell you what to say, where to

go, and how to act. That's exactly what you were supposed to do. There's a reason your father raised you to be compliant instead of independent like Miras. He wasn't grooming you to be a leader; he was grooming you to be submissive. He was grooming you to accept your fate as it's chosen for you. I promise you, your father's already chosen your future husband. It's only a matter of time before you're told. And it won't be me. You have no idea how it pains me to say this, but it can never be me. You have to see that. It doesn't matter what we want. Kaelyn, you need to face reality."

"I love you, Rein," she whispered. Tears streamed down her face.

"Love has nothing to do with your life, Kaelyn." he snapped. "Grow up."

Her slap left a crimson mark to his cheek that echoed the pain in his eyes.

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