

A DARK SPACE SHORT

Catching Starlight



LISA HENRY

CATCHING STARLIGHT

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This story is a free read for members of Lisa Henry's Hangout on Facebook, and newsletter subscribers.

This one is for everyone who loves Cam and Brady as much as I do.

*You don't have to have read the Dark Space trilogy first for this to make sense,
but it does contain mild spoilers!*

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CATCHING STARLIGHT

I was trying my hardest to get drunk, but after my first three beers some asshole kept making sure water found its way into my hands. He was a hot as fuck asshole in his neatly pressed dress uniform, which clung to his ass in all the right ways. He had a gleam in his eye that told me he didn't need to be in my head to know exactly what he was thinking, and a quirk to his mouth that promised that if he had to pick me up off the floor later, we'd be having words.

I gave him a smirk right back, put my water down, and grabbed something dark and cloudy from a passing waiter with a tray. I threw it back while Cam raised his eyebrows at me.

The fuck if I knew why I was even at this bullshit officers' dinner thing, where a bunch of dickheads cared more about the way you passed the port than whether their newest batch of recruits were getting blasted out of the black or not.

Cam put his hand on the small of my back and walked me away from the waiter with the drinks. "You travelling okay there, arm candy?"

"Fuck off," I said. "If anyone's the arm candy here, it's you, pretty boy."

His hand slipped down to my ass, and he gave me a quick tap. "Watch your drinks, Brady. And your mouth. Anyone in this room could bust you back to down to crewman in a heartbeat."

Yeah, I wouldn't have been surprised to learn the waiters outranked me.

"I'm good, LT," I said. "I'm pacing myself."

The officers at the base had one of these dinners every couple of months, and I'd mostly managed to avoid them. I sure as shit had no business going to one—I'd eventually be an officer if I didn't wash out of classes, but I was coming at it the hard way, not like most of these fuckers who'd had everything handed to them. I hadn't even finished school. I'd dropped out at twelve, because that's what kids like me from shithole refugee townships like the one I'd been born in had to do. And now I was in a room surrounded by assholes who knew how to wear cufflinks.

Not the craziest thing that had ever happened in my life, but pretty fucking close to it.

I reached for another drink and—

"No," Cam said firmly, and suddenly I was holding a mineral water instead.

I would have given him some lip, except Cam was about the only officer in this room that I'd ever listen to, and I knew he had my best interests at heart. He always did, even when I didn't. He knew I hated shit like this, where me and him were under the spotlight way more than either of us liked, and he knew that I'd been drinking too much to try and blunt the edges of my anxiety. I got twitchy, which usually ended up sparking up my anger, which usually ended up with punches being thrown. I was working on that, and I was getting a lot better, but nights like these when I was surrounded by officers didn't help any. Either they looked at us like we were some kind of science experiment on account of our history with the Faceless, or they looked at us like we were some kind of social experiment, because someone like Cam didn't have any business being with someone like me. They thought he was too good for me, and they were right. But Cam had picked me anyway, and always would, and we'd faced a whole universe together.

"Let's get some air," Cam said, and led the way outside to where I could breathe.

And not run my mouth and get court martialled, probably.

Everything was a little bit blurry, but Cam steered me away from the doors to the shadows of a tree-lined path and leaned me up against a wall where I spend half a lifetime fumbling to light a cigarette.

"I'm quitting," I said when I finally stuck it in my mouth.

"I've heard that before," he said with a wry quirk of his lips.

"That's because I've said it before."

"You've said it a lot before."

"Yeah." I closed my eyes briefly and exhaled a cloud of smoke. "Sometimes I even mean it."

He leaned on the wall beside me and we watched the night for a while.

There wasn't much to see from here. Just the dark shape of trees, and glimpses of a starlit sky behind them. I fixed my blurry gaze on the ground, but Cam's chin was tilted up as he gazed at the stars. They were like magnets to him.

The dry eucalyptus leaves rattled together in the cool breeze.

"I'm pretty drunk," I said at last.

His shoulder knocked mine gently. "I know."

"Sorry."

"No, you're not." His smile was evident in his tone. "Listen, I know these things are bullshit, but you're going to be an officer one day. You have to play the game, Brady."

I wrinkled my nose. "Does blowing you out here where anyone might walk out and see us count as playing the game?"

"No," Cam said firmly.

I shrugged. "Your loss."

He groaned. "Don't tease."

I laughed and closed my eyes again. "Do we have to go back in?"

"Do you think they'll notice if we sneak away?"

I snorted. “That’s the problem, Cam. They *always* fucking notice. You and me, we’re the freaks at the fair.” I blinked my eyes open. “Why doesn’t Chris come to these things? He could bring Thomas, then everyone could gawp at him instead.”

Cam gave me a sidelong glance. “Because Chris plays the game, Brady. He kisses ass with whoever he has to, and that gets him leverage when he tells them Thomas doesn’t want to come to these things.”

“I don’t want to come to these things either!”

“But you’re not Thomas.”

“I’m about fifty percent Thomas, actually.”

Cam snorted. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, you mean they can tell me what to do because I’m a reffo from Kopa, but Thomas gets a pass because he’s half Faceless and he scares the shit out of them.”

“Has bitching about how life is unfair ever changed it?” Cam asked me. He took the sting out of the words by linking our fingers together and squeezing. “I think that being back here and having to kiss ass to their hierarchy occasionally is a lot better than the alternative, Brady.”

My stomach swooped.

Yeah. Yeah, it was a whole lot better than the alternative, and we’d come close to that. We’d seen the Faceless ships exploding around us. We’d seen the Faceless turn on Kai-Ren because he’d contaminated their pool of DNA—contaminated their *offspring*—just by having us aboard his ship. We’d come so close to dying out there in the black, just like I’d always thought I would, and somehow we were still alive. Somehow we had dirt under our feet again. It was all I’d ever wanted, but Cam...

Cam had given up the stars for me.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said, pushing myself off the wall and dragging him with me.

We set out across the base.

At night it was pretty quiet. A sweet-smelling breeze drifted through the jacaranda trees. We walked away from the lights of the officers’

dining hall, and past the administration offices and the classrooms. Over on the hill, the hospital loomed. Last time I'd set foot inside there, it had been holding a mop. Next time, in a few weeks, I'd be tagging along at rounds with Doc as one of his medical students. I'll bet nobody who remembered me from when I was a mop jockey would believe that. I could hardly believe it myself.

On the other side of the rise were the barracks and the buildings where the enlisted men lived and trained before they were shipped out to other bases, or to the Defenders hanging in space. I'd done my recruit training there, back when I was sixteen and homesick and still growing into my badly-fitting boots.

"Where are we going?" Cam asked as I dragged him down the pathway between Admin Building E and the officers' library. "This isn't the way out."

"Just come with me." I tightened my grip on his hand like I thought he might refuse, which was dumb as hell. Cam had crossed galaxies with me. He wasn't likely to back out now.

He did balk though, when I rattled the gate at the pool fence and discovered it was locked. I started to scale the fence, wobbling a bit when I got to the top, then letting gravity do the rest of the work for me. I landed on my ass on the other side.

"Ouch."

Cam laughed at me through the fence and then, a moment later, he was landing in a neat crouch beside me. "Want to tell me why we're breaking into the pool?"

I pulled my tie off. "To go swimming, of course."

"Of course," Cam said wryly. "If the MPs arrest us, I'm telling them it's your fault."

"You won't even have to tell them," I pointed out. "They'd just assume it anyway."

Cam threw back his head and laughed, and the moonlight gleamed on his throat.

I tugged the rest of my clothes off and left them in a heap before slipping into the pool. The water was cool at night, and my breath caught before I adjusted to the temperature. Then it was just nice. It rippled around me, teasing my skin into goosebumps.

I watched as Cam undressed.

Never got sick of the sight of it, actually.

He was strong and lean and moved with the self-assured poise of someone who knew his place in the universe and didn't doubt for a second that he had a right to be there. He shed his clothes with a lot more grace than I did, and then stood for a moment at the edge of the pool, looking down at me and smiling.

He was framed in starlight.

"How's the water?" he asked.

"Get in and find out."

He slid in. He gasped when the chill hit him, and then ducked down underneath the water. When he came back up again, he wiped his wet hair back and smiled at me. "Do you even know how much trouble we'll get into if we get caught here after hours?"

"Shut up," I told him, and reached out for his hand. "Now come over here and kiss me."

It was a messy drunken kiss. Not our messiest, and not even our drunkest, but, like usual, it was my fault. Neither of us minded too much though. Cam was the one who broke the kiss first, because he was smiling too much. He blinked, and a droplet of water chased down the side of his face. I tried to follow it with my nose, which ended with me losing my grip on his shoulders and dunking myself under the water. Cam pulled me up again, laughing softly as I spluttered.

"You're too drunk to be swimming," he said. "Come on—"

"No! Not yet! Just... can we float here for a bit?"

"Float?"

"Yeah." I drew my legs up, still holding his hand. "Just float."

Cam did the same. I kept my gaze on him as well as I could, and he

fixed his, like I'd known he would, on the stars. He got the same expression on his face that he sometimes did when I caught him looking at me: pure wonder. And maybe in another lifetime, or as recently as a year or so ago, I might have been jealous that I had to share that look with the stars. Whereas now I knew better. A part of Cam would always be chasing starlight, but he'd still choose me every time.

The water around us settled at last, and smoothed out, and the starlight sparkled on the surface.

"Look at you, Cam," I whispered, and let go of his hand. "You're floating in the stars."

He drew a sharp breath, and the starlight around him rippled as he moved. Then he relaxed again, spreading his fingers on the surface of the water, and he smiled as he stared up at the stars. Then he drew his hands up to temples and held them there, narrowing his field of vision so that all he could see was the night sky.

I would never understand exactly why Cam loved the black so much, and how he could ever feel free out there when he knew what nightmares were waiting. But I didn't have to understand, not really, just like he didn't have to understand why I sometimes took my boots off to curl my toes in the dirt. I liked my universe small-drawn and safe, and Cam liked his vast beyond all human comprehension, but somehow we met in the middle on the dusty surface of a planet spinning in space.

Somehow it worked for us.

Cam moved his hands back down, and reached one out for me.

I stood in the pool, holding his hand, while he floated in the starlight.

We might have stayed there for hours except for a passing pair of MPs that shone their torches through the fence and yelled at us.

was still pulling my pants on as we took a breather behind Classroom B.
"Did we lose 'em?"

I Cam, hugging his shoes to his chest, peered carefully around the corner. He laughed breathlessly. "I think so."

"Lucky," I said. "Because I can handle myself in the stockade, LT, but you're too soft."

He rolled his eyes at me, and then made a face when he shoved his wet feet inside his shoes without socks. "Let's go home, Brady."

I shoved my tie in my pocket and left my shirt and jacket unbuttoned.

We crossed the oval together. I dug my watch out of my pocket to check if we'd make the last train or not, and winced when I saw the water inside the face. Cheap piece of shit watch. I shook it to try to read the hands.

"The fuck does this even say?"

Cam didn't answer me, and I turned around when I realised he was no longer by my side. He was standing in the middle of the oval, his face upturned to the starlight, smiling. He looked entranced. Then he jolted, as though he suddenly came back to himself, and broke into a jog to catch me up.

"I love you," he said, linking our fingers together.

"I love you too," I said. It didn't matter how many times I said it; the words never lost their power. Cam has his starlight, and I had my bedrock, and those words were at the heart of them for both of us.

We kissed under the starlight, on top of the dusty ground, and then ran so that we didn't miss the train.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa likes to tell stories, mostly with hot guys and happily ever afters.

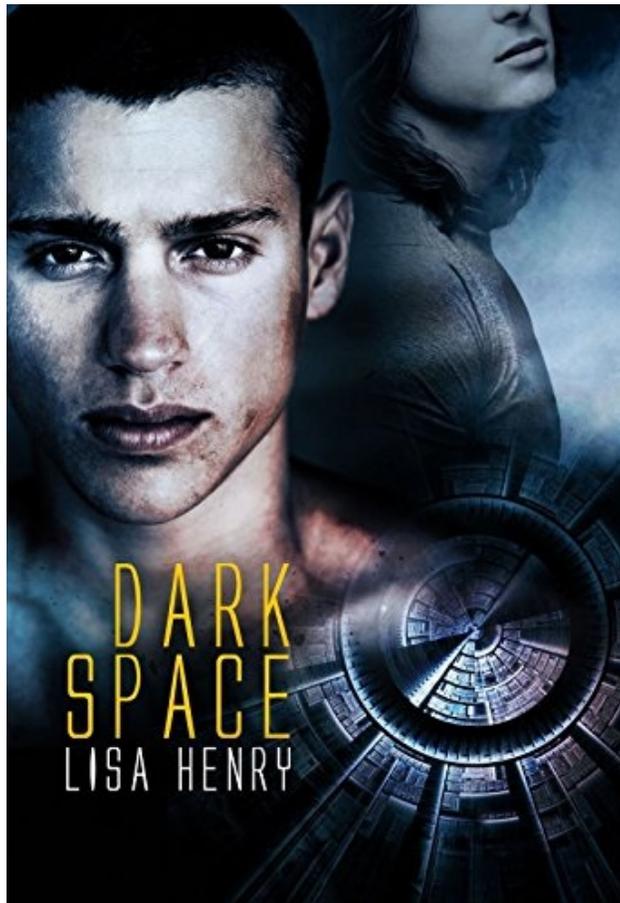
Lisa lives in tropical North Queensland, Australia. She doesn't know why, because she hates the heat, but she suspects she's too lazy to move. She spends half her time slaving away as a government minion, and the other half plotting her escape.

She attended university at sixteen, not because she was a child prodigy or anything, but because of a mix-up between international school systems early in life. She studied History and English, neither of them very thoroughly.

She shares her house with too many cats, a green tree frog that swims in the toilet, and as many possums as can break in every night. This is not how she imagined life as a grown-up.

ABOUT THE DARK SPACE TRILOGY

Dark Space



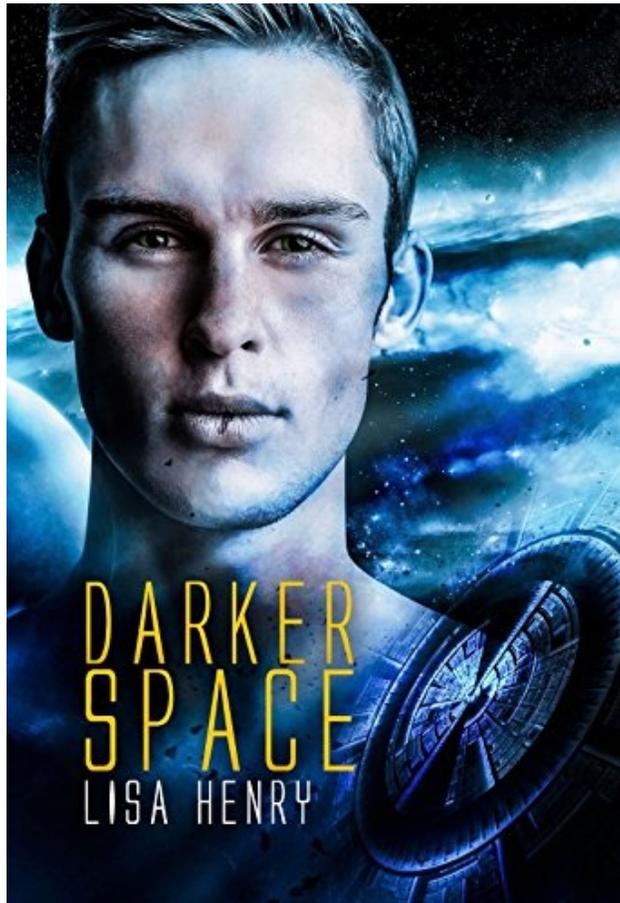
Brady Garrett needs to go home. He's a conscripted recruit on Defender Three, one of a network of stations designed to protect the Earth from alien attack. He's also angry, homesick, and afraid. If he doesn't get home he'll lose his family, but there's no way back except in a body bag.

Cameron Rushton needs a heartbeat. Four years ago Cam was taken by the Faceless--the alien race that almost destroyed Earth. Now he's back, and when the doctors make a mess of getting him out of stasis, Brady becomes his temporary human pacemaker. Except they're sharing more than a heartbeat: they're sharing thoughts, memories, and some very vivid dreams.

Not that Brady's got time to worry about his growing attraction to another guy, especially the one guy in the universe who can read his mind. It doesn't mean anything. It's just biochemistry and electrical impulses. It doesn't change the truth: Brady's alone in the universe.

Now the Faceless are coming and there's nothing anyone can do. You can't stop your nightmares. Cam says everyone will live, but Cam's probably a traitor and a liar like the military thinks. But that's okay. Guys like Brady don't expect happy endings.

Darker Space

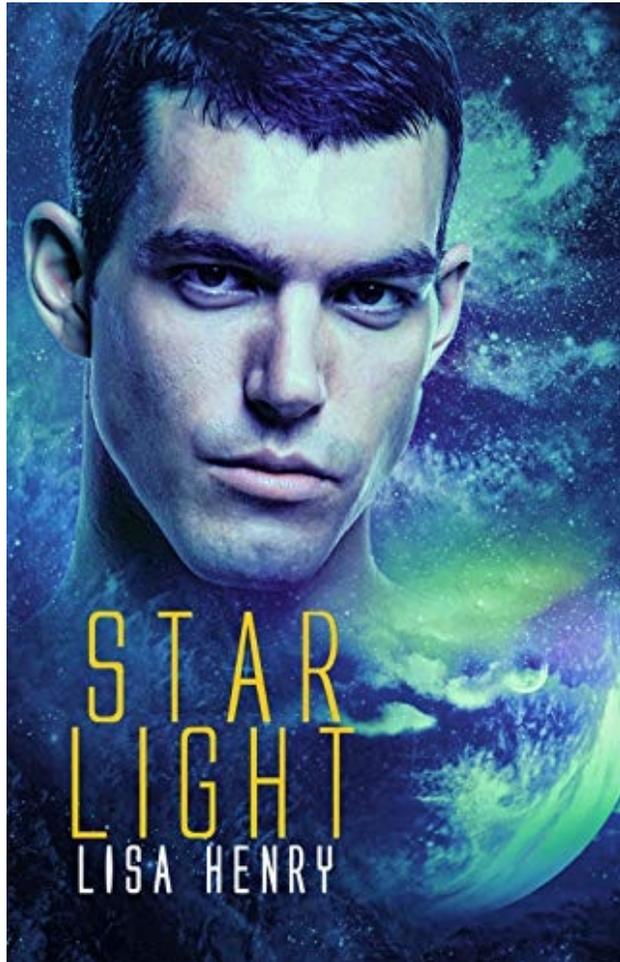


Brady Garrett is back on Earth. He's living with his partner Cam and they're raising his sister Lucy together. Life is better than some feral reffo from Kopa has any right to hope, and Brady knows it. He's even grateful for it, most of the time. He loves Cam, even though he's afraid that he's not good enough for him, and he's still having nightmares about the alien Faceless.

Cameron Rushton loved being a pilot once, and he still feels the pull of the starlight. He's building a life with Brady now, and with Lucy. Life is good, even if it's not without its complications. Both Brady and Cam are dealing with the endless cycle of interviews, tests, and questions that the military hierarchy hopes will reveal the secrets of the aliens who could very easily destroy humanity. They have each other though, and together they're making it work.

But from out in the black, Kai-Ren is still watching and everything Brady and Cam think they've won, they stand to lose all over again.

Starlight



Brady Garrett is back in space, this time as an unwilling member of a team of humans seeking to study the alien Faceless and their technology. It's not the first time Brady's life has been in the hands of the Faceless leader Kai-Ren, and if there's one thing Brady hates it's being reminded exactly how powerless he is. Although dealing with the enigmatic Faceless might actually be easier than trying to figure out where he stands with the other humans on board, particularly when one of them is his boyfriend's ex.

Cameron Rushton loved the starlight once, but being back on board the Faceless ship forces him to confront the memories of the time he was captured by Kai-Ren, and exactly how much of what was done to him that he can no longer rationalize away. Cam is used to being Brady's rock, but this time it might be him who needs Brady's support.

This time Brady is surrounded by the people he loves most in the universe, but that only means their lives are in danger too. And when Kai-Ren's fascination with humanity threatens the foundations of Faceless society, Brady and Cam and the rest of the team find themselves thrust into a battle that humans have very little hope of winning, let alone surviving.