



# Betrothed to the Alien Mercenary

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Science Fiction

**Description:** Trust no one. Hide who I am. Complete the mission. Easy... until I meet him.

**Evie**

When a dying Xurtal princess makes me promise to save her planet, I have no choice but to take her place. Me, a human girl, pretending to be an alien royal. To survive the assassination attempts, I need a bodyguard. Enter Aramon: cocky, infuriating, and scorchingly hot. He has to pretend to be my mate to protect me. A fake fiancé for a fake princess. What could possibly go wrong? But the way he looks at me feels anything but fake. And if he discovers my secrets, I'll lose more than my mission—I might lose him too.

**Aramon**

Playing bodyguard to a spoiled princess? Not my dream job. But the second I meet Evadne, everything changes. She's my perfect match, even if this is all supposed to be an act.

I've sworn to protect her, and it's more than duty now. It's instinct. The deeper we go into this dangerous game, the harder it is to let her go.

She may not trust me, but I'll prove one thing: this princess is mine, no matter what galaxy-shattering secrets she's hiding.

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# Page 1

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## Prologue

### Evie

“You have to promise,” Evadne implored. We sat huddled together inside a cold, damp cell, surrounded by darkness, shivering bodies, and the stench of despair. It weighed on me like nothing I’d ever experienced before, dragging me down into its greedy jaws. We were going to die, and nothing Evadne said was going to change that. I couldn’t hold the same kind of hope that she did; I’d seen more than enough darkness in my short life to know that this was the end. Her guards knew it too.

Theronix lay on his side, hands bound behind his back, muscles bulging from the strained position. There was no luster or glow to the gold markings that swirled over his arms, and his eyes were dark and sunken. Mikalys sat shoulder to shoulder with Zandrios, both completely apathetic to what was going on around them. There wasn’t so much as a hint of fire or will to fight; lack of hope had done that.

“Promise me, Evie!” Evadne insisted more firmly. Her red eyes gleamed scarlet in her beautiful face. It made my stomach twist to think of my friend and boss as beautiful because it was almost like calling myself beautiful. I was her body double, her perfect lookalike in case of a threat to her life—not that it was helping her now, or would ever again.

The crimelord who had captured our stealth ship a week ago had known which one of us was the real one. My DNA said enough: I wasn’t Xurtal; I was human. And he’d proceeded to cruelly brand the real Princess Evadne on her cheek so there could be no mistake.

“What do you want me to promise?” I said to my friend, my eyes lingering on the barely healed mark that bisected her pretty, emerald skin. There was no getting out of this, no matter what she thought—not for either of us. Nobody knew we’d been captured because our mission had been top secret and of great national importance to the entire Xurtal nation. This crimelord had found us by sheer chance, and he was doing a “favor” for a friend on Ov’Korad to end the meddling ambassador.

“I’m not getting out of this,” Evadne said firmly, and it made what remained of her guard shift uneasily around us. Those words felt like failure resting on their shoulders. When our cell door opened in a little while, I knew they’d rise and fight, even though they knew it was pointless. “Hush,” she said to her guard, though they had not made a sound. “This is true. Batok will soon tire of seeing my fear and end me, but Evie might live long enough to escape; he does not care about her.”

I knew what it was she wanted me to promise now, and my stomach sank. There were a lot of conflicted emotions in my relationship with Evadne: loyalty, friendship, resentment. I couldn’t deny her my promise when her pretty ruby eyes filled with tears. “My people count on you. You’re our only hope.” Her words triggered a sudden, vivid memory of my childhood back on Earth, one I was barely old enough to remember—watching a movie with my father, in which a princess implored a hero to save her people. Well, I was certainly in a galaxy far, far away. Evadne even had her lush strands of moss-green hair twirled into buns on the sides of her head.

“I promise to carry out your mission if I manage to escape,” I said to her. All her guards went stiff, and several pairs of eyes shifted from their dark, emotionless looks to something that glinted with a hint of their former fire. They knew what Evadne had asked of me, and what I’d sworn to do: impersonate her, not just for her safety, but fully. To lie to the Ovters and the Xurtal people for the sake of securing the treaty her people so desperately sought. It was even closer to blasphemy than what I already represented, and I could feel that in the burning of their eyes—their dislike for me and the disrespect I represented to their princess.

Despite my promise to be their people's salvation should I survive, they hated me. Nobody said anything, not even Theronix, the de facto leader of the guard after Platorix had been eaten by our captor. I curled into myself, huddling close to Evadne for warmth. Then the doors opened, and our numbers diminished.

I feared the swish of that door, feared the moment when she was taken, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. It didn't feel fast, and yet it felt like the blink of an eye when there was nobody left but Theronix and me. I didn't grieve for those we had lost, didn't even grieve for Evadne, though I missed her warmth. There was only numbness. And then, my number was up.

## Chapter 1

### Aramon

I watched the proceedings on the bridge with narrowed eyes, my foot tapping impatiently against the deck. It was driving my brother crazy, tension rising rapidly in his lean frame. Tough luck; I couldn't control my tension any more than he could control his, and the psychic circuit between us only intensified those feelings for both of us. What I needed was a good fight or a good fuck—I wasn't picky.

Jaxin was at the weapons station, his hands hovering over the controls as he awaited the captain's commands. I glared at those buttons as if they'd personally offended me. They hadn't, but Jaxin was about to if he fired a shot. I wanted that fight, and space combat just wasn't the same. Unless we were dealing with a supreme force, maybe. Some tense evasive flying would work too. I was a pilot, and by definition, pilots were adrenaline junkies. At least the kind I was.

All we could see on our viewscreen was the sleek, silver shape of a Star Class Cruiser and a small orbiting station beside a mining planet. This was no challenge for a beauty like the Varakartoom; she was a beast, and that ship was her prey. I grinned as

I pictured Vara chomping down on that shiny silver tail fin, sharing the image with my brother. He rattled in his navigator's seat, grinning back with his sharp, filed-down teeth. We were on the same page now, our focus locked on the ship as we craved the possibility of a fight.

“Easy there, Aramon, Solear,” Asmoded drawled softly, a note of bite in his voice that warned me I couldn’t step out of line. I swallowed a hiss and settled down, even though I didn’t want to. The captain was right: if I didn’t get my anxious, excited tension under control, Solear was going to leap out of his chair and attack someone. That, I couldn’t allow to happen.

The captain had seen what my impatience had obscured, though I’d sensed it: there wasn’t going to be a fight. Mitnick had everything under control, like always—the fucking bastard. Although, he had made a mess of things over the past few weeks, starting with his obsession with one silly human female. It still baffled me that two males I’d always greatly admired for their cool minds had done something as irrational as finding their mate. First the captain, now Mitnick...

I tapped a fist against my armor-covered chest when a strange, heavy feeling settled there. Do you feel that too? I thought as I glanced at Solear, and I knew instantly that he did. There was a pinched look to his expression, his bony brows lowered deeply over his eye sockets, red eyes glowing like the darkest Aderian wine. He hadn’t lifted his hands from the armrests he was gripping, but I sensed his desire to claw at his chest, a desire he was barely keeping in check. I quickly dropped my own hand and gripped the yoke to help him, anything to keep my brother from harm.

All too soon, the entire bridge crew seemed to deflate on the spot; the chance of any action faded as the Star Class Cruiser turned and headed toward Kertinal-controlled space. Mitnick was communicating with us, and only the news that he was bringing refugees made my attention spike. Refugees? Maybe there would be some pretty females in need of comfort; that would scratch the itch...

I followed the curious crew to the hangar bay where our favorite hacker and his mate had landed the shuttle. Not my shuttle, but an old junker of a thing not worthy of the name. Despite my warning before he left with his mate, the bastard had gotten my shuttle blown up down on that mining planet. I was going to have to make sure he understood what a grave mistake that was—I liked my shuttles in one piece. When Solear made a muffled noise at my side, I reined in my angry thoughts. This time, my anger hadn't riled my brother but amused him instead.

“What do you think? Pretty females, old males? Whatever Batok didn't eat had to be pretty skinny, don't you think?” Solear didn't reply, but I caught a warning glare from the captain. I rolled my shoulder at him and grinned. What? It wasn't like we were getting paid for rescuing them. He was getting all soft and polite now that he had a human female for a mate.

Mandy was with him, tucked beneath his arm, and my chest felt odd again. I liked Mandy a lot; she was brave, stood up to those around her, and, despite her diminutive size, everyone respected her. Yeah, she was a good match for Asmoded, but it still made me feel weird seeing her with him.

“Batok needed servants,” Tass muttered from behind me. “He wasn't keeping all those people just to eat them.” The lad had a point; a crimelord like Batok, a major player in the quadrant, would have a horde of servants to run his household. He'd keep the competent ones and eat the others, because as a Hoxiam, that's what he did. Maybe not all members of his species, but definitely him. Man-eater, devourer of flesh and souls. Look at me, getting all fanciful. I glanced at Solear to see if he'd caught that thought and sensed a hint of amusement from him.

Then, the sight of the shuttle captured my full attention, and I lamented loudly over the sorry condition of the vessel. It was absolutely no replacement for the shuttle Mitnick had lost. It was also much easier to tease my friend about the ship than admit that I'd been a bit worried about the winged male over the past few days, particularly

since he'd missed our meeting point and gotten caught by the Hoxiam crimelord instead. However, everything was sorted now, so there was no need for me to dwell on it.

When my eyes caught sight of her, I didn't know what hit me. One moment, I was pushing away my worries for Mitnick and my relief at seeing him and his human mate healthy and happy. The next, I was staring into a pair of ruby eyes, and the whole ship seemed to tilt on its axis around me. What had been up was now down, and down was up. The things I'd always known to be true about myself uprooted, like trees struck by a tornado.

Ruby eyes, silky emerald skin, and lush locks of deep moss-green hair hung like a cloak around her slender shoulders. A Xurtal female; I knew that at a glance, and yet...it was more than that. The pert little nose and the impertinent tilt to her luscious lips gave her away. I knew instantly that she would be a female with a mouth, ready to fight and to rebel.

My cock grew painfully hard, desire rushing through my veins. I wanted to conquer that female, own her, possess her. More than anything, I wanted her to own me right back; for her to claim me and let everyone know that I was worthy. That was a feeling I had never experienced before, and it shook me to my core.

Not just me, Solear was along for that ride, because I hadn't managed to shield anything from him. He growled, fists curling, and shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, readying himself for an attack. I flung out my arm and caught him across the chest before he could launch himself at her. My woman. For the first time in as long as I could remember, we were at odds. That desire for a fight roared to the surface in both of us, and the results were explosive.

## Page 2

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Evie

I was in a daze as I stepped out of the shuttle and into the brightly lit hangar bay of this new ship. Theronix was at my side, limping weakly and severely diminished in size. Out of Evadne's escort of two dozen, only the two of us had survived, and I thought that survival still remained highly debatable. This was a mercenary vessel, and I recognized the black carapace armor that each male wore in a heartbeat: mercenaries of the Varakartoom, the most notorious outfit in the entire Zeta Quadrant. Information on them had been part of the regular threat screenings I'd received as a key component of Evadne's security detail.

Theronix was too weak to fully comprehend what was going on around him, having been starved for most of our countless weeks kept in that cold cell. I'd been fed each time I'd been forced to serve the crimelord, or sit and look pretty while he conducted meetings. That last time, I had feared I'd end up dinner for the blue-furred Hoxiam; he'd been so freaking mad. But things had taken a surprising turn when his foot soldiers escorted us to the hold.

It could be that the mercenaries had taken us so they could sell us for a tidy profit, but when I saw that there were two human women happily greeting each other, I felt the first pang of hope. Surely two women of my own species wouldn't stand for slavery? I didn't have much time to contemplate that because, at that moment, my eyes landed on a very loudly speaking Asrai male. Something happened when our gazes connected that I couldn't explain.



My stomach swooped, though that could simply be hunger. The tingle lower in my abdomen couldn't be mistaken for anything but desire. I kept a fierce lid on the emotions, the way I'd been trained by my Xurtal teachers, not allowing anything I felt to be visible on my face. However, in my chest, my heart was pounding.

This Asrai was accompanied by a twin, a common occurrence in their species. Their tall, red-skinned frames resembled Xurtal males, but that's where the similarities ended. This particular specimen was tall and muscular, his physique perfectly outlined by tightly fitting black armor. From his bulging thighs to his sculpted abdomen and heavy pecs, nothing was left to the imagination.

His face was covered with the eerie, skull-like markings that all males of their species bore. They made it appear as though he had a skull for a face, with white markings outlining his eye sockets, covering his bald head, and accentuating the sharp jut of his cheekbones and jaw. In those deep sockets, his red eyes glowed scarlet—a sight I would have once found intimidating but had long since grown accustomed to. All Xurtal had red eyes, so it had become a familiar sight. Even my own reflection in the mirror revealed a pair of red eyes, tinted by a sleek, semi-permanent pair of contacts. While I could remove them if I so desired, I had the option to wear them indefinitely, as they were virtually undetectable.

I thought I saw desire spark in that ghoulish face—for me—because there was no mistaking the direction of his gaze. It warmed me to the bone, pushing away the pervasive, strength-sapping coldness from the crimelord's ship. The spell, however, broke when the Asrai's twin lunged for me, and the two males suddenly clashed in a wave of unrivaled violence.

That male did not desire me; he desired Evadne. That fight should remind me to keep my distance; it was like watching two feral dogs fight over a bone. They growled, hissed, and fought with their claws as they clashed, blood spurting from cuts. They were not holding back, despite being twins—or maybe because of it. They fought to

inflict maximum harm, inciting panic and fear in the hearts of all the slaves debarking the shuttle with me. It even roused Theronix at my side, and he threw out a restraining arm in front of me, as if that would protect me.

It was the horde of mercenaries in black armor, leaping on top of the fighting pair, that brought order back to the chaos. I stared at their efficiency in breaking up fights, certain they had a lot of practice at it. In less than a minute, it was over: one male was knocked out and dragged off, the other pinned to the floor by a Rummicaron cradling a large, portable laser cannon. “Enough, Aramon!” he snapped, his growl sounding vicious. “Blazing suns! Stand down.”

The male he had pinned went from being a wild, bucking creature to lying still beneath the larger alien. Then, he twisted his gleaming white head and aimed his red, glowing eyes in my direction. My belly swooped wildly, plunging all the way to my toes; even my damn nipples tingled under his gaze. Only my years of training kept my face blank as I weathered that wave of intense feeling. So his name was Aramon? I’d need to make sure to avoid him.

“This way,” a green-skinned mercenary with leafy hair said to me, jerking my gaze away from the pinned Asrai. I allowed myself to be led further down the gangplank to where the mercenaries were performing quick medical checks and handing out jumpsuits. Theronix stumbled after me, and the green Viridara male quickly ducked beneath his arm to guide the last member of Evadne’s guard to the nearest medic.

It felt strange to be separated from him, even if it was only for as long as it took to get scanned for any contagions. I eagerly shrugged the offered jumpsuit over the remnants of my stained flight suit, then waited as the mercenaries took longer to treat the Xurtal warrior. They were very professional and objective. I wouldn’t say kind, but definitely very used to dealing with a situation like this one. That surprised me, because none of my reading material on the notorious mercenary crew had mentioned humanitarian missions.

When I resumed my place at Theronix's side a little later so I could help him walk to the med bay, I felt eyes on me. I'd been very conscious of the Asrai's location the entire time and made myself keep my back to him, but that gaze burned, and I twitched, glancing over my shoulder. Our eyes met, and just like before, I felt that look. It scorched like flames, marking me deep inside beneath my skin where nobody could see. It took my breath away.

He was upright, standing unrestrained beside the Rummicarons, unbothered by the bleeding scratch on his cheek or the furrows on the side of his neck. A frenetic energy surrounded him as he bounced on the toes of his black combat boots, his hands moving rapidly in the air while he talked to the larger alien.

Rummicarons looked to me like sharks on two legs, with a fin rising from their back and a head with a giant maw. They suppressed their emotions, which made them cool and detached killing machines. This one was no exception, and he was cradling a big portable laser cannon in his arms. I realized that if I had to pick whom I'd end up stuck in an elevator with, I'd take the shark, and thinking that felt oddly like betrayal.

The Asrai male, Aramon, had his eyes locked on me. Despite appearing to hold a conversation with his crewmate, his gaze never blinked or wavered. He was fixated on me. That was going to spell nothing but trouble, and it wasn't even me he cared about. All he saw was Evadne, the carefully cultivated facade I maintained as the perfect body double for the Xurtal princess.

When I guided Theronix out of the hangar bay after the rest of the sorry, bedraggled crowd of slaves, I felt how the Asrai's stare intensified. That red gaze had turned into a fierce glare, and I felt his anger burn even fiercer than his desire for me had. I couldn't stop myself from looking again, and then wished I hadn't. No, that anger wasn't for me, he was glaring at Theronix. He was jealous.

## Chapter 2

Evie

I paced across the ready room with my hands tucked behind my back. My cloth slippers made a soft noise against the deck, and I missed my boots. There was nothing more satisfying than clomping rudely around the room with sharp heels and steel toes when I was riled. It was one of the things that Evadne and our endless line of teachers had tried to train out of me, and it was the one thing I had held onto with all my heart. I'd just learned to do it when nobody was watching—nobody that mattered, anyway.

Theronix sat in a chair at the long conference table, his hands placed on the metal surface in front of him, his posture ramrod straight. Ever the soldier. Two weeks aboard the Varakartoom had managed to greatly improve his health, but he was still working hard to regain the muscle mass he'd lost. Today, we arrived at Rakesh, a planet on the outskirts of the Kertinillian Empire, and it had taken us weeks in the wrong direction if I wanted to fulfill my promise to Evadne.

The truth was, if I could run away from it all, I would. I didn't want to impersonate a Xurtal princess; I never wanted any of this. Evadne was my friend, but she was also my employer—my boss—and she never let me forget it. Nor did Theronix let me forget what my place was now. "You have to keep your word," he said firmly. His red eyes glittered with hints of gold that betrayed the passion he felt for this subject. A subject we'd already discussed a dozen times over the past two weeks.

I rolled a shoulder and glared when he started to open his mouth to berate me for my very un-princess-like behavior. "I know," I said. "The fate of the entire Xurtal Kingdom depends on it." But I was not Xurtal, and I didn't really fancy putting my life on the line any more than I had already been forced to do. Nothing had ever been my choice since the moment I'd been rescued by the Xurtal military and brought to their planet. I'd only been seven at the time, scared out of my mind. Truthfully, nothing had changed; I was still scared out of my mind.

The only difference was that I was older, with more knowledge and more survival skills than I had ever dreamed of having. Right now, I knew I could take down Theronix with my hands tied behind my back, but that didn't really feel like a fair achievement. The warrior was still recovering from his ordeal, and I'd suffered far less during our captivity than any of the others in our entourage. Two weeks and a few booster shots from the mercenaries' very odd doctor had perked me back up in no time.

"I'm not going to break my vow." I had already decided that. No matter how I looked at it, Evadne had been good to me, kind, and yes a friend. I owed it to her to see this through; I owed my life to the Xurtal Kingdom. It wouldn't feel right to back down and let this mission fail without even trying, but I was quaking in my boots thinking about it. This mission was time-sensitive, and we were so very far away from where we needed to be.

Theronix had gone behind my back and spoken to the mercenary captain. In a few minutes, they were going to call the Xurtal Empire and discuss options. Theronix wanted me to pretend to be the princess in that talk, and I wanted to come clean. I couldn't lie to the king of Xurtal and pretend to be his dead daughter. I couldn't believe that Evadne's head guard was even proposing it, but he was convinced that while we needed to hire these mercenaries, we couldn't trust them. Thus, the ruse had to be kept at all costs.

I knew I'd fall in line with his wishes, because what options did I have? But it sucked, and I wanted to escape this room and run away from all of it. Instead, I took a deep breath, straightened my shoulders, and sat down at the head of the table as regally as I could. Every inch of me settled into the role I'd played since the time I was eight: the princess, the consummate elite and diplomat. Having shared every lesson Evadne had received growing up, and then a whole slew more—including martial arts and weapons training—it felt as simple as breathing.

My hands had only just settled demurely in my lap when the door to the ready room opened, revealing the bridge beyond it. The captain was a huge, black-scaled Naga with an impressive scowl, and he halted in surprise when he discovered that I was in his chair at the head of the table. It was the only chair someone of Evadne's status would have taken, so that's where I sat, but I felt his narrow-eyed, golden glare all the way down to my toes. The real princess would have taken that in stride, shrugged it off, but I already felt like such an impostor that it made my heart skip an anxious beat.

## Page 3

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Captain Asmoded seemed to conclude that this was the price of dealing with royalty and slithered into the room, the first hint of a mocking smile curling his firm mouth. His human mate was not with him, but he was followed by his second-in-command, a very angry individual of a species I did not know. The last male to enter the room was another unknown alien, a male with huge red and white wings and a feathered crest rising from his head.

I didn't know why I felt a sudden hint of disappointment when I realized that was all of them; the Asrai was never supposed to be here, he was their pilot, not an officer. I shouldn't even want to see him again, I shouldn't care one bit.

The captain dipped into a half-bow that would have been considered rude on Xurtal. "You're welcome to sit in my chair, Princess Evadne. Make yourself right at home." His voice was a deep drawl with a sibilant note, and my skin broke out in goosebumps upon hearing it. I had not interacted with the captain yet, and I'd never met a Naga before as they were rare in the Zeta Quadrant. He made a very primal part of my brain tingle with fear, warning me that I was in front of a monster, a beast, not a man.

"Thank you," I said politely. "I will." Stake my claim, sound cool as a cucumber; I could do this. "Have a seat," I added, and I gestured with a hand at the chairs still available at the table. Asmoded intended to mock me, but treating his insult as a genuine offer was my only way forward. I had to establish dominance in a room chock-full of testosterone.

A Naga face, as it turned out, was hard to read, so I was not certain if he was amused or annoyed at my brazenness. The winged alien was far more humanoid-looking, and

his muffled laugh was a clear indication of what he was thinking.

Once everyone was seated, I recognized the second-in-command as the real threat in the room. The Naga was frightening in a primordial sense, but this guy? His aura was so chilling that it seemed as though the temperature in the room had dropped. His silver eyes, under a pronounced frown, bored into me while silver curled and swirled across his black armor in peculiar, organic tendrils, reminiscent of kelp swaying in the current.

“You’ve already been briefed on the details of this mission by my personal guard,” I said, breaking the tense silence. “Are you prepared to take this on? My father, the King of Xurtal, will reward you handsomely for your services.” Of that, I had no doubt. The king would shower them with gold if it meant the salvation of the kingdom. But I couldn’t let on just how dire the situation really was—that was information nobody could know.

The unknown, creepy, gray alien curled his lips into a dark, derisive smirk. That grin made me feel as if he knew everything, as if all my secrets were exposed on my face for him to read. I flicked my eyes away from his mesmerizing gaze to look at the captain, finding it easier to continue talking, to perpetuate the lie that Theronix and Evadne wanted me to maintain.

Before long, the winged mercenary was establishing a connection with the Xurtal homeworld. I didn’t really expect the King himself to answer the call, but I knew Evadne would have felt a pang of disappointment when it was his closest advisor. I felt it on her behalf now that she could no longer feel it herself, and that was probably what convinced Pelarios that I was truly her. He dipped into a very deep bow that made my chest ache, and smiled warmly, his relief obvious. “Princess Evadne, it is good to see you.”

I did not even have to open my mouth to claim that I was her, he bought it just like



that. All I had to do was go along with it, and the ruse was complete. The negotiations went entirely through Pelarios after that, and I was happy to let him take the lead. When it came to hammering out the details of the mission and the requirements that the mercenaries had to meet to fulfill their contract, I perked back up. This was where I needed to have a say so I could increase my chances of survival.

I didn't know what came over me when I insisted on a close guard with expert flying skills. Truly, it was insanity, but once I made the demand, there was no taking it back. Leveling a determined look at the present males, I outlined my reasons. "Theronix is a commendable warrior, but he is currently injured and not in fighting shape. I need a close bodyguard who is, and one who will never leave my side. I need a guard who can whisk me to safety, no matter the obstacles, should the situation call for it.

The captain offered a first true expression of mirth, his fanged mouth spreading in a wide smile. "I know just the male for the job, but how are you going to ensure he's allowed into every meeting, and inside your chambers at night?"

Ah, damn. He was taking my words too literally; that wasn't what I meant... But when I glanced from him to Theronix, and then to Pelarios, I knew they were seriously contemplating it. The former because he knew my safety was the kingdom's last chance, the latter for the same reasons, but also because he thought I was the heir to the throne. "He'll have to be her fiancé," Pelarios said eventually, his gaze pensive. "The Ovters are very strict with their rules. It's the only ruse that will give a bodyguard the right access. They'll ban anyone else from the negotiations.

It wasn't even about the bedroom as the captain had implied, but that was all I could focus on. Aramon and I in one room, all night long. This was a terrible idea, and now I couldn't prevent it. "I believe I can make this work," Asmoded said, still grinning widely. "I'll send you the details of my man's fabricated background, and you can inform Ov'Korad."

By the time the meeting was over, I was a shaky, troubled mess. At least I wasn't worried about my safety and the success of this mission anymore. I had very different worries now. What if the captain wasn't assigning Aramon as my guard at all? Would that be a good thing or a bad thing?

He wasn't on the bridge when I glided from the ready room in my most regal strut, and I wanted to howl with frustration behind my cool mask. I never thought I'd be dealing with intense emotions like these, though they had trained me for the possibility. Trained... Pah, like you could train for the intense lust at first sight type of thing I was experiencing. It hadn't even waned a little, despite spending two weeks on the ship without ever laying eyes on this guy again.

I felt like I'd run a marathon by the time I'd managed to leave Theronix behind in the hallway and entered my small, private room on the ship. I was the only refugee they'd taken in who had been given a private room, thanks to Theronix advocating for my status with the captain. I had hated it before, but today I was grateful.

My hands trembled when I slipped into the small, attached bathroom and stared at my reflection in the mirror. Green skin, red eyes, green hair. It wasn't me—and yet, it was such a familiar reflection that, paradoxically, it was me. I was Evadne, and that's who the Asrai male had lusted after when we'd seen each other in the hangar bay that day. Not the real me.

I shrugged open my jumpsuit, baring my chest, and slid my hand down my belly to touch the piercing dangling from my belly button. This was a common decoration among Xurtal females. Xurtal was a planet covered in unusual, rich green sand that matched the skin color of the women in the east, while lush, green forests dominated the west. The planet was warm everywhere, and the locals' dress and customs had developed accordingly. This included the peculiar extra eyelids of the eastern tribes, a necessary adaptation to protect them from the sun's glare and blowing sand.

A flick of my thumb over the red gem at the center of the gold pendant, and my reflection in the mirror abruptly changed. Gone was the emerald skin, in its place a pale cream that lacked any hint of a tan after space travel and captivity. I looked waxy and wan to my eyes, fake. I was too used to seeing myself as a Xurtal female to find this reflection any less alien. "I am human," I whispered, but my red contacts and green dyed hair made a mockery of that statement.

"My name is Evie," I added. Evelyn. A name that had only helped to cement my fate as Evadne's body double, another similarity between us. "Evie Mordew." I was nobody, and it was no wonder that Evadne's people despised me for impersonating their princess. I hated myself for what I was, so of course, they did too. Theronix, standing guard outside my room, felt like another shackle. He was not there to protect the princess he loved; he was there to keep the fake that should have died in line.

"You can run away after this is done," I said. That was going to be a promise to myself. They would not need a body double to a dead princess once the treaty was sealed. After I'd fulfilled my promise to Evadne and her people, my obligations were met. I would run away and find a better life, find myself. I didn't know any more who Evie the human was, and it was time I found out.

The sound of the ship-wide intercom turning on nearly made me jump out of my skin. Suddenly, I was certain that someone was watching me. My hand flew to the button on my belly button piercing, activating my disguise in the blink of an eye. Its cloak of illusion settled over my skin with a painful tingle that would last until my brain adjusted. Sometimes that was a few minutes, sometimes it took much longer, and getting zapped by every object I touched was a given. The discomfort of the device had not been a concern to the Xurtal.

The dark voice that spoke made me shiver, even as I realized that he was not speaking to me. It was the cold second-in-command of the ship, the man they called the Sineater, who was announcing our departure and calling Aramon to the bridge.

Was this a 'human Evie' thing, to ask for a male like Aramon to be my bodyguard? I hadn't asked for him by name, but this meant they had picked him, didn't it? Doubts struck immediately afterward. No, we were departing; they just needed their pilot on the bridge. That was all.

So why couldn't my heart stop racing as I pictured the Asrai mercenary in his black armor, a grin on his ghoulis face? This was the worst moment to feel attraction for anyone, let alone one as alien as him. I had a mission to complete, promises to fulfill, and secrets to keep.

## Chapter 3

### Aramon

There was a party going on in the mess hall, and I was loath to miss out on it. I loved a good party, and I loved the brawls that always came from them even more. So I grinned wickedly at my departing back, and I could sense how much it entertained him that I was missing out. "Fine, whatever," I said, though he couldn't hear me from across the room. I waved a rude gesture that got the message across perfectly and made several of our crewmates laugh.

"It's not like we don't take down assholes like Batok on the regular anyway," I muttered as I stalked to the nearest elevator that could take me to the bridge. Restlessness coursed through me, but that was normal; I hated being between missions. Today, though, I felt another layer of tension that I couldn't place. I did not like delving into my thoughts to unravel them—I preferred avoidance.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:14 am*

I wasn't the same male as before, not now that I'd mether. Slear was in denial, but I had no need to do that, this was everything I'd ever wanted. It was surprisingly simple to follow my thoughts to where they needed to go: Mitnick and his human mate had shown us the footage of Batok's downfall. The diminished and nearly starved Hoxiam had been dragged from his ship by Kertinal warriors. It had given me such an immense feeling of satisfaction to see that, while at the same time, it made me feel upset that I had no hand in it.

Evadne was the reason. That bastard had killed her guards one by one and held the threat of death over her head for weeks on end. He had captured her, hurt her, and for all of that, he deserved far more than to rot in a cell on Ker. I wanted to kill him with my own hands and punish him for every hurt, big or small, he'd inflicted on her. My woman.

My fists were still clenched into tight fists by the time I stalked onto the bridge, any mood for a party vanished. If I didn't have an obligation to my captain, I would have gone to the hallway with her quarters. My feet itched to lead me there, and after this meeting was over, I knew I would go. Just a glimpse of her, a hint of her scent, and I'd feel calmer, more settled.

"In here," Asmoded called out, pulling me from the bridge and into the office that sat off the ready room. I passed the long conference table and glanced at the seat that the captain normally occupied at the head. Mitnick told me that our visiting royalty had taken that seat in a meeting this morning. It had angered Slear, but it had amused me. Sure, I didn't like it when anyone disrespected the captain's authority, but I liked her pluck.

My captain sat in his chair behind his desk, the long coils of his Naga body looped around him and sprawled beneath the heavy granite slab. His mate sat on the corner of the giant desk, perched against the gleaming black stone with one hip, her equally black hair tucked behind one dainty, curved ear. The captain had the tip of his tail looped around her hip, hugging her without arms, and I liked how that looked. They were a unit, a solid, united front. I got it now, and I really wanted it for myself. I was going to have that with Evadne. Sure, she was a princess—that was going to prove a little problematic—but I'd make it work.

"I've got a mission for you," the captain said bluntly when I sat down in the chair in front of his desk and propped my feet up on the edge. He didn't say anything about that, though usually, he'd use his tail to nudge my feet back to the floor. His gold eyes briefly eyed the toes of my combat boots, but unlike normal, he had no paperwork or datapads spread out on his desk. In fact, his desk was suspiciously empty, and Mandy's clothes were suspiciously rumpled. I sniffed deeply, trying to filter through the scents, but my sense of smell was not as good as that of many other species in the quadrant. I still imagined I could pick out hints of sex, and I started to grin.

"What kind of mission?" I asked, eager for it. Anything to focus my wildly spinning mind on would be good. I was used to being all over the place, and I tended to lean towards hyperactive, but the past two weeks had been extra crazy. Anymore of this, and either Slear or I was going to end up in another fight. Maybe it would be the two of us together, like in the hangar bay. Remembering that still made my stomach twist painfully, a sour taste filling my mouth. I hated fighting with my brother.

"You'll be Princess Evadne's personal bodyguard," Asmoded said, his tail nudging his mate a little closer to him. She wasn't looking at her mate but staring at me as if she thought the answers to the universe were written on my forehead. If she thought I was going to have some kind of response to that news, she was going to be sorely disappointed.

“Fuck yeah,” I agreed. “I can do that. How much does it pay?” Inside my head, a little voice laughed at the question. Pay? I was already watching her all the time; I’d guard her pretty body for free. My response was entirely in line with what the old Aramon would say, and it didn’t feel out of line with the new me either, if I were honest. I did know that I wanted that job with the kind of fervor that would have worried me if I’d seen it in any of my crewmates.

“Enough,” Asmoded said dismissively. “That’s not important. Listen, she specifically requested a multi-disciplined male, one capable of piloting any vessel in case of an emergency. That means you. Here’s the catch,” he paused to lock eyes with me, leaning forward in his chair so I knew he was being serious. Mandy did the same, her mouth twitching as if she was trying to battle amusement. “The only way you can remain close at all times, and that includes the negotiations the Princess is attending, is if you are her fiancé.”

Fiancé? I tried to wrap my head around that word for a few long, drawn-out seconds. Asrai were practical people; we sensed the bond, we consummated it, and that was that. Done for life. No paperwork required. As far as I knew, the Xurtal weren’t that much different. They had a mating drive, mating marks even. They were very demonstrative with their females, often with very public displays of affection. My cock grew hard just thinking about doing any of that with Evadne.

“Come again, sir?” I said, and Mandy clasped her hand over her mouth, muffling something that sounded very much like a laugh. She did not think I could play the loving male? Or did she think I could not do that for a posh, fancy female like a princess? Ah, princess. Now the word “fiancé” made sense—that’s how it went for royalty. It was a much bigger deal when you were in line to rule a kingdom. I tried to picture myself at the side of a queen and fell short. Okay, fuck, that would suck so much. I’d go nuts if I had to live in a fancy palace...

“You must pretend to be Princess Evadne’s male-to-be; she will be your betrothed. It

is the only way you can protect her inside the meetings and in her bedroom at night while on Ov’Korad. You understand?” I had known Asmoded long enough—over half my life—to recognize that the tone of his voice indicated he was holding in laughter. What was it with these two? Why did they think this was funny? But I loved mischief and chaos; I couldn’t fault them for loving some themselves. I appreciated it, even.

“Just to clarify, sir, you want me to pretend”—the word pretend twisted awkwardly in my mouth—“to be her male in order to protect her?” I thudded my boots to the floor and spread my arms wide to indicate myself. “You do know who you’re talking to, right?” I had never passed, and doubted I ever could, for anything worthy of royalty. I wanted it very badly, but they didn’t know that, and I would never tell. Not even Asmoded, who I trusted with my life.

“That’s right,” my captain said with a nod, serious now. “She requested someone with your skills. You’re the only option. It means a prolonged separation from Slear. Can you handle that? I can’t assign him to the general protective unit; he’s not stable enough right now. If you don’t think you’re up for it, let me know right now.”

“I’ll do it,” I snapped too quickly. I rose from my seat and started to pace, my eyes flicking from their faces to the walls, the door, and the viewscreen that displayed the stars outside. They were both quiet as they waited for me to gather my wits, but I wished they weren’t. I didn’t like the quiet with my wildly spinning thoughts.

The captain was right, Slear was getting more unstable, and it made me ache to think I might be losing him. I hoped that mating with a female would bring more calm energy into our bond, but it felt like he was fighting everything tooth and nail. He didn’t like change, and there had been a great many changes of late.

My eyes flicked to Mandy and her pretty, exotic eyes, her pale skin, and rosy cheeks. She looked so soft and so tiny, but she held so much power in her palms. She held our



captain's heart, and she had altered the way he ran the Varakartoom and the crew. Starting with the rule change about mates aboard the ship, and including the family time Asmoded now took with his mate and his son, Saisir. Those changes were tough on me, so it was no wonder Solear was losing it. And then there was Evadne and what she made me feel. I hadn't told Asmoded, and I usually told him everything—too much, if you asked him, but better too much than too little.

“And Solear? Do you think he'll manage?” Asmoded asked, with a genuine concern that I had to give a proper moment of contemplation. The truth was, I didn't know. I could sense him through our bond, and he was feeling mellow and happy, courtesy of the good wine and the bad ale Brace was serving in celebration of Batok's capture by the Kertinal empire. That kind of calm could last for days or change to anger and frustration in a heartbeat. The truth was, Solear had never healed from what we'd gone through as teenagers. I didn't think he ever would.

“I will talk to him,” I said firmly. I did know that I was doing this anyway. If I had to step aside and let another male pretend to be her fiancé, it would definitely drive Solear over the edge, it would drivemeover the edge. That was my woman, and no one else.

I barely listened as the captain outlined the details of the mission and my backstopped identity to go with it. He had already sent the details to my com device—he always did—and I'd study them later. I heard the pertinent things: stay close at all hours, never let her out of my sight. The mission would not start until we arrived on Ov'Korad and landed at the spaceport in Akrod, the capital city. Until then, it was going to be my task, and Solear's, to get us to the planet as fast as possible to make up for lost time.

By the time I was dismissed, I was eager to go, and they were eager to see me go, I was sure. My body couldn't sit still, and my pacing always got on people's nerves. I could still sense the way Mandy's eyes had tracked me all across Asmoded's office

by the time I'd located Solear. He'd left the party and was punching a bag in the gym with determined focus and a wild, feral grin on his face.

"Bro... We need to talk," I said when I reached the edge of the mat and wriggled the tips of my toes against it. "It's important." Solear rarely spoke out loud, and he never spoke to anyone but Asmoded or me. Today, he did not let his eyes stray from the punching bag, his posture perfect as he landed blow after blow—shoulders up around his ears, fists raised in front of his face. I could only see his back, but I knew his expression would be grim, his mouth pulled into a snarl.

He'd sensed that I would be leaving him for a while, and it had sent him into this mood. I hated that, and it made me bounce anxiously on my toes as I watched him pummel the living shit out of the bag. "No," he growled, speaking out loud because he'd blocked me from his mind. He never did that, and it had felt like a slap in the face when that wall went up.

"Come on, wouldn't you do the same if you were in my shoes?" He ignored me, punching the bag with even greater frequency. He hadn't taped his knuckles, and now I started to worry he was breaking the fine bones in his hands with the force of those blows. "Fuck, bro!" I broke the cardinal rule of the gym and stepped onto the padded mat while still wearing my boots. My fist closed around Solear's shoulder, and I yanked, pulling him away from the bag before he could connect with another strike.

The vicious, angry growl he directed at me was loud enough to make my ears ring; it would have made anyone else flinch back. I held firm because I knew in my heart that no matter what, Solear would always have my back. "I'm not leaving you," I said. "I would never leave you. You are NOT alone."

His fang-filled snarl abruptly stopped, but he snapped his teeth in my face to drive home the point. "It's always been just us two," I said, because I knew, even without our bond open, that's what he was thinking. "And that's not going to change. You're

my brother. I love you.” I let the feelings of loyalty I held for him fill my chest, fill my mind, and pushed them against the wall he’d put up between us.

“Liar!” he said, but then his red gaze lowered, and he leaned forward, pressing his forehead against mine. The bond between us opened a crack, and then all the way as he greedily pulled in my feelings and let them chase away the darkness in his own mind. Nobody understood Solean the way I did, and nobody but the captain knew that he was half feral only because he feared being alone so damn much.

“I’m not lying,” I told him. “Having a mate doesn’t mean I’ll turn my back on you. It means there will be more family for you to lean on—more people you can trust. I promise.” He didn’t want to believe me; he didn’t want to share me. I could sense that in his thoughts. But I could also feel his love for me and his desire for my happiness. It was probably the closest he would come to accepting the new situation.

“Listen,” I said. “I’ll be on this mission for a week at the most. After that, the negotiations should be over and done with. You know me—I couldn’t sit through more of that crap anyway. I’ll be back before you know it. And if you need company, the captain will be here. You trust him. He’ll give you what you need.” I firmly made myself believe that because I could not let Solean sense any of my doubt.

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Solear gave me a short nod, but I could feel that his mind was still in turmoil, still uneasy. He didn't give me a chance to say more, to offer him more assurances. It wouldn't work anyway. He stalked off, proverbial hackles raised, and stormed out of the gym without a backward glance. His mind wasn't filled with anger now; it was fear that controlled him.

I could chase after him; we were nearly always together, and these past two weeks had been an odd break from that. He had every right to be angry. Huffing, I shifted my weight back and forth and contemplated punching the gently swaying bag myself a few times. Violence tended to make me feel better; it was a good outlet for the wild feelings inside of me. But I had a feeling that nothing would help until Solear and I had made peace.

Turning on my heels, I fully intended to head for the deck where Evadne's quarters were located, but I jerked to a surprised stop when I caught sight of the Sineater leaning against a wall next to the door. That sneaky male was watching me from beneath his lowered brow, arms crossed over his chest. At his feet, his symbiont was sprawled in the shape of a Riho, easily three times the size a real Riho could be.

Rihos were clever, cute pets, coveted all across the quadrant. His symbiont managed to make the very definition of cute appear feral and mean—sinister. I had to be in a deep hole in my head to be disturbed by this pair. Unlike most of the crew, I normally didn't give a shit what they got up to. Sin was loyal to the captain; that was the only thing that mattered.

Giving him a glare, I started to walk past him, and then I wondered if he was here to feed on the negative emotions Solear and I were feeling, or if he simply wanted to

berate me for walking on the fucking mats with my boots on. The chaos-loving part of me liked either option, and of late, Sin had seemed to delight in sowing his own brand of madness.

“I know what you did with Mitnick,” I said, recalling how the Sineater had instigated a fight and prodded the normally rational male’s mating instincts, “but it’s not gonna work with me.”

Sin said nothing, but he raised one eyebrow, a sardonic smile curling his lip. That smile said, “Are you sure?” I bared my teeth at him and stalked past, my hand curling in a rude gesture behind my back. I could hear the dark chuckle that was his response; it echoed after me in the corridor. Unease crawled down my spine.

## Chapter 4

Evie

Theronix told me I shouldn’t do this; it was a mistake, but I couldn’t help myself. Ever since I’d learned that Aramon had indeed been assigned as my fake fiancé and personal bodyguard, I had wanted to see him again. I was starting to think I’d made up the whole attraction thing, the weirdness I’d felt when our eyes had met that day we’d been rescued—side effects of the wild rollercoaster of feelings I’d experienced when we’d been rescued.

“A princess does not mingle with the common crew. You know this, Evie,” my shadow said. His boots made no noise against the metal floors, his footsteps silent like a wraith. He was almost back to his old self, but I still saw hints of his ordeal in the shadows beneath his eyes and the pinch of his mouth. Theronix used to be one of my favorite guards; he tended to be more relaxed about the rules and not quite so offended by my role in Evadne’s protection. It didn’t feel like that anymore.

As the only person alive who knew who I really was, he seemed to think it was his duty to remind me of what I had to do and how to do it. I felt his anger and resentment over being in that position and having to serve at my side rather than at his princess's. I thought sometimes that he rather wished he'd perished like the others.

"I know, Theronix," I said firmly. "But I am doing this. I need to ensure the male they selected is up to the task. Our success will depend on it." He didn't say anything; he was angry that I had set this in motion. It stung his pride that I did not trust him to protect me by himself, but he knew he couldn't go into those meetings. I needed someone at my side if I was going to do this. We'd been thwarted by someone very powerful in getting to the planet, and I knew that some very influential Ovters had played a part in it—maybe even the Sythral who shared their solar system. They had a vested interest in stopping this.

We'd reached the bridge by then, which meant the discussion was over. Theronix would not be caught in public defying the orders of his princess, and though I was not her, for all intents and purposes I was. He crossed his arms over his chest, the gold markings that decorated them curling over his thick biceps. Like any proud Xurtal male, he did not cover his arms and left his marks on display for all to see. It was the scowl on his face that told me he was not about to forget this discussion, or my real place in the hierarchy.

The bridge doors swooshed open silently, and I stepped inside with my breath stuck in my lungs, but my head held high. I took it all in with a glance. The Rummicarón weapon master was at his station, the large portable laser cannon lying on the chair behind him. Asmoded, the captain, sat in his seat, and his mate sat in one of his coils next to him, a datapad in her lap from which she was reading.

I spotted the unfamiliar alien profile of the second-in-command of the ship, seated at his own station and deeply engrossed in whatever data he was reading. A sleek silver

hound sat at his knee, large ears perked as it stared my way. My eyes only skimmed over all these people, taking in their positions but little else. They didn't matter.

Then I saw him. Aramon sat at the helm, sprawled lazily in the chair with one hand on the ship's yoke, the other curled behind his head. He was the picture of casual relaxation, and I knew a Xurtal pilot would never sit like that. They were much too disciplined and rigid to do so, especially in front of their superior.

His twin was in the navigator's seat at his side, and he was the first to notice me. He went stiff as a board, his head slowly turning so his red gaze could lock with mine. Since he was identical to his brother, I almost expected to have the same visceral response to him that I had to Aramon, but there was nothing there. I felt a hint of something—unease, maybe—the longer he stared at me, but that all vanished when Aramon jerked upright and abruptly jolted to his feet. He spun around, and his skull-like features broke out into a wide, eager grin.

His gaze made my skin break out in goosebumps, made my nipples grow painfully stiff beneath my jumpsuit, and made my pulse leap in my throat. Yup, all the things were happening that had happened last time. I was very much in lust with this man, and he was right back in lust with me. No, not with me—with Evadne. I couldn't forget that.

"I've come to ask for a status update," I declared, my voice projecting across the bridge the way I'd been trained to speak. It immediately brought all eyes to me, and I had to suppress my natural inclination to duck my chin. I clung to every bit of my training to keep my cool mask in place and pretend that I wasn't about to melt into a puddle at Aramon's feet. Damn it, I hadn't even talked to this guy—this wasn't normal. A tiny voice in the back of my head said 'is it?' There was only one explanation for this, but I refused to see it.

Asmoded rose from his seat, twisting without moving his coils so his mate could keep

reclining in them. I glanced from him to the woman and felt a pang of... well, something. She was human like me, and the desire to talk with her was strong. Because of who I was supposed to be, she was keeping her distance, and I hated that. Evadne wouldn't have cared; she wouldn't want to hang out with anyone but ladies of her own kind and status.

“Your miraculous survival has been announced to the convening delegates on Ov’Korad. They were unwilling to delay the talks, so we are about to engage in some creative flying to shorten our travel time. Does that satisfy you, Princess?” The captain drawled the word “princess” as though it was an insult, and it made Theronix bristle at my side. He was about to make a stink of that, but the last thing we needed was to piss off our only means of safely arriving in Akrod.

“Hey, she’s a real princess. Show some respect!” The exclamation did not come from Theronix; it was Aramon. He shouldered his way between his captain and me, disregarding any protocol that demanded he keep out of my personal space. In fact, he rudely turned his back to me—his very wide, very muscular back. Fists planted on his narrow hips, he tilted his head at his boss as if he went toe to toe with scary, intimidating Naga on a daily basis. He probably did.

There was a hush that fell across the bridge, punctuated only by the rapid jiggle of a boot heel against the floor, courtesy of Aramon’s silent twin. All eyes were on Aramon as he squared off against the captain. I felt a flush of warmth that he’d do that, followed by a wash of shame because I was not a princess. It was very tempting to step closer, place my hands on Aramon’s back, and accept the protection he was offering.

“Step back,” Theronix said coolly, and he nudged Aramon’s shoulder with a closed fist. “Respect her from a distance.” That evoked several muffled laughs from the watching crew, but Aramon seemed undeterred. He didn’t budge from Theronix’s nudge either, not so much as an inch. He tilted his head back, angling it to glance



over his shoulder at me, with a mischievous glint in the one red eye I could see.

“I don’t think so,” he drawled with a smirk that even colored his voice. “I am her bodyguard. I can’t do that from a ‘respectful’ distance. You want me to pretend to be her fucking male, I’m going to have to get my dirty paws all over her if we want to make it stick.” He moved his hands in a casual ‘what are you gonna do about it’ type of motion, smirking even wider—almost evilly—when Theronix’s mouth grew tight. The words were crude, and they made arousal sear through my veins. I’d be damned if I didn’t admit that the idea of putting on that kind of charade turned me on. When was the last time I’d let any male touch me? I couldn’t remember.

“Enough,” I made myself say, and I shoved the violent feelings of desire, need, and desperate want away. “Theronix, this isn’t the Xurtal Kingdom. We must allow some leniency.” I didn’t dare to look at Aramon, but I could still feel his eyes on me as he looked over his shoulder, grinning as if he were having fun. “Thank you, Captain. I appreciate the update. In your current estimation, will we make it in time?”

The human lady had risen to her feet and moved to stand at her mate’s side, her arms crossed over her chest as she looked at me with a frown. Her eyes were roving over my skin, and it made me all too aware of the illusion that cloaked me—the current that tingled perpetually over my flesh to make the device work. She was suspicious, her face easy to read, but when she stepped forward and dipped into a bow, it was the first respectful bow I’d received since I’d boarded the Varakartoom.

“If I may?” she said, tilting her head to look from me to her mate, and when he nodded, she straightened her pretty green tunic. “We’ll get you to your destination in time, no question about that.” She flung her hand toward Aramon, and to my surprise, that made the huge, bulky Asrai slide to the side and take up a much more respectful position next to his chair. Almost, he looked like a soldier in an at-ease pose, legs braced, arms clasped behind his back. But his eyes still sparkled with a secret mirth only he understood.

“You know of the abilities of the Asrai?” the female continued, and I realized with frustration that I did not know her name. She was ethnically Chinese, but I recognized her accent as Australian. I’d never been to either country, and I never would, but I was struck with a keen desire to learn more—to hear her stories. My mouth was dry as I forced myself to incline my head regally in a nod to answer her question.

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“Then you must understand that, with the exception of an Akilidian navigator, nothing could rival a telepathically connected set of Asrai twins at the helm.” She was correct; such setups were the most coveted in the entire quadrant. The Asrai twins' ability to share information made their movements as a navigator and pilot pair uncanny. It was no wonder that the Varakartoom had a reputation for appearing out of thin air on more than one occasion.

This woman knew how to speak with tact and appeared to have a very good grasp of how tenuous the trust was between my party and hers. Every piece of information I had on the Varakartoom told me they were a crew of their word, but they just as easily took jobs on the wrong side of the law as the right side. I could not disregard Theronix's warning that they might sell me out if they knew I was not the real princess.

“Thank you,” I said, ready to withdraw and deal with the pounding of my heart and my clammy palms. It had never been this hard to pretend to be Evadne as it was now that she was gone. I wanted to go back to that moment when Aramon stood in front of me, standing up for me, that moment when, for a brief flash, everything felt all right. Since I knew that couldn't happen again, and since it was a fallacy anyway, withdrawing was the next best thing. I had what I came for—answers—and another look at the male that had my stomach in knots.

“Mandy is right,” Aramon said, just as I started to turn away. I froze, my chin lifting automatically to look him in the eye, and I felt that gaze like a punch to the gut. It was potent, full of heat and desire, and it pulled the same yearning out of me. “Solear and I, we'll get you where you need to go like this.” He snapped his fingers together with a loud cracking noise. “We were just about to announce an FTL jump when you

walked in, Princess. Why don't you watch?" He gestured at the jump seats located against the back wall of the bridge.

Theronix began to interfere immediately, his sensibilities too offended by Aramon's behavior to let it slide any longer. "Captain, I suggest you find a different male to fulfill the required position on Princess Evadne's security detail. This male is clearly unsuited. Princess, allow me to escort you to more appropriate seating." He clasped his hand around my elbow, and the insistent pressure against the sensitive nerves nearly made me buckle in reflex. He meant business, and he would never have made a move like that if I were truly Evadne. He was manhandling me while pretending to act like a gentleman.

I rebelled when I might have made a more sensible choice otherwise. A choice that wouldn't involve a male that set my blood on fire and made me feel like I was completely out of control while on the most dangerous mission of my life. "No, I wish to observe from here, Theronix." I twisted my arm in a practiced move designed to escape a too-tight grip, and I knew that all these combat-trained men on the bridge recognized that motion for what it was; I'd made no effort to hide it.

Aramon's head lowered, a growl rumbling in the air, and his red eyes glowed brighter from inside his deep-set eye sockets, the look made all the more sinister and macabre by the skull-like white markings that covered his face and hairless head. "The lady has spoken," he warned darkly, and then it was he who was moving to take my arm, gently, so very gently, and guide me to the jumpseat. He was grinning by the time the crew on the bridge started to murmur, and one even openly laughed.

As I arranged myself in the seat as though I were wearing a ballgown, rather than a gray, shapeless jumpsuit, I pinned Aramon with a fierce stare. I did not feel fierce like that, but I knew I had to put him in his place before he started to think he could get away with touching me uninvited. "Of course, Theronix has a point. You are extremely rude, pilot. I shall have to educate you before we reach Ov'Korad, lest you

get both of us killed.”

That made Aramon toss back his head and guffaw loudly and very rudely, as if I’d made one hell of a joke. “Fuck yeah, teach me, Princess.” The response made my belly clench with a sharp lance of desire, and instead of etiquette lessons, I was suddenly imagining Aramon on his knees between my naked thighs. Damn it, what was wrong with me?

“Very well,” I said through dry lips. “Proceed.” I gestured at the front of the bridge, “Take us to FTL.” There was a second of silence, followed by an annoyed huff from the captain, but then he started barking orders and making an announcement over the ship-wide intercom.

Theronix strapped himself into the seat next to mine and double-checked my harness before sitting back, arms crossed and a frown on his face. I knew that he was overstepping his position as head guard and that he would never have shown his displeasure that openly if I were Evadne. Suddenly, I feared that he was going to be the one to give the game away.

The captain’s mate, Mandy apparently, took the seat on my other side, and the captain himself personally came to double-check her buckles. He was tender as he pulled on the straps, then kissed her before slithering to his seat with a final, lingering touch of his tail around her ankle. She gave me a gentle, slightly awkward smile and winced when Theronix leaned around me to give her a warning glare.

Enough of that. “Will you tell me about the crew? I’d like to get to know them,” I invited the woman. That was all it took. She started to talk with a warm look in her eyes, describing the males aboard the ship as her family, though she admitted to being only a recent addition herself. I would have never guessed; she seemed right at home. I listened as she talked and asked questions at the right moment; I’d been trained by the best conversationalists. I could keep a conversation going in my sleep. My eyes

were stuck on the back of Aramon's head as he worked with his twin to launch us into speeds Faster-Than-Light.

It was one of the most awe-inspiring things I'd ever seen, and it drove home how connected an Asrai was to his twin. They did not need to speak out loud to communicate, effortlessly anticipating whatever the other needed. The jump through FTL was also nothing like any jumps I'd experienced before. It was... smoother somehow, but that made no sense. I'd flown with ships that were the best of the best before, ships straight from Strewn's best collection. Nothing but their skills could account for the way I felt as we hurtled at impossible speeds through space.

Aramon tilted his head and grinned at me over his shoulder, one red eye closing in a teasing wink. He knew I was watching him and flaunted what he could do without shame or humility.

## Chapter 5

Aramon

For three days straight, I'd been working closely with Solear through jump after jump. The Varakartoom needed to cool her engines after running this fast as often as she had, and that was when I'd been summoned to see the Princess. I was ready to burst from my skin in excitement; my body felt achy from the work and from her absence.

It had been good for me—and good for Solear—to work so closely together. I felt that with him being in my mind as much as he had been, he was finally starting to understand what I felt for my Xurtal beauty. It was reaching the point where I worried he might fixate on her, and if he did, I knew my instincts would compel me to fight. I hated fighting with my brother, but nobody got to lust after my woman. The Princess was going to be mine. The ship was already abuzz with talk about it, and I let them

talk because I wanted everyone to know I had staked my claim.

I ducked into the mess hall, my belly filled with fire, my eyes immediately searching for the moss green and emerald of the Xurtal homeworld. Her scent hit me first, the hints of something floral and sweet, notes that were all feminine and all her. She stood by one of the long tables near the viewscreen faux windows that lined the longest wall of the mess hall. Her back was to me, and I admired her curves, outlined by the simple gray jumpsuit.

Despite not owning any clothing worthy of a princess right now, she still made that plain suit look like the finest dress. It was because she was so fucking graceful and sexy, her chin at a dainty, royal angle, her shoulders and spine perfectly straight. When she turned on her soft slippers, it was like she'd just executed a turn in a dance or some shit; that was the only way I could describe the way she moved.

A lesser man than I would have felt self-conscious, but that wasn't in me. I knew I was out of her league—miles and miles out of it—but I didn't give a damn. That woman was my mate, and by the time this mission was over, this fake marriage was going to be very, very real. To do that, I knew I had to be unapologetically myself and trust that the mate bond had matched me with a female who could appreciate that. But I also knew that some compromises might have to be made. I was terrible at that, but I'd figure it out.

“Aramon, thank you so much for coming,” Evadne said, her voice perfectly pitched to reach my ears without seeming to raise her tone. Her eyes were a warm ruby, and a soft smile graced her lush mouth. I could sense her attraction to me, and I was going to work with that. It was going to be fun.

I raised a hand and waved, my energy levels rising in her presence. My thighs ached as I forced myself to restrain the urge to bounce on the balls of my feet. That didn't work out the way I wanted; I found myself striding across the room in a rush and

invading her personal space before I could grasp at some semblance of control. I tended to invade space all the time—it was one of my favorite tactics to put people on edge—but that’s not why I did it with her. I just wanted to be closer, as close as she’d let me.

“Morning, Princess,” I drawled. The heat in my belly was blazing brighter, and I knew she’d see it in my eyes. If she wasn’t a princess, if she were an Asrai female, I would throw all caution to the wind and pin her to the table behind her, kiss her right that instant. Since her ramrod-straight spine made me feel like she had her hackles up, I refrained, but barely. The hint of restraint and resistance she was showing, they were a turn-on; I wanted to taste it.

“Are you ready for your lessons?” she said, but when I opened my mouth to reply, she rushed on. I was pretty sure that was against her etiquette and protocols, and it made me grin; she was nervous. “I thought we’d start with the rules of dining. Overters are very strict about their rules and protocols, so we must adhere to them as best as we can.” She kept rambling, something about eyeballs and Ovter tongues, but I stopped paying attention and fixated on her mouth.

Her lips were dark green, but her tongue was a deep pink, and I wanted to have a taste. Her scent was all around me, and when I shifted closer, she did not move back. I wondered what her guard would think if he saw us right now. He’d have a conniption, no doubt, and I craved seeing that. I loved chaos, loved poking them where they were most sensitive, and that male was very sensitive about a lot of things.

“Are you even listening?” Evadne asked in a firm tone that managed to penetrate my rapidly spinning brain. I yanked my thoughts back from the dangerous precipice just in time, or I really would have leaned in and closed the final distance. She was frowning, but her scent had spiked with her heat. I could see her pulse pounding rapidly at her neck and the way her perked nipples poked against the fabric of her



clothing.

“Definitely not,” I said with a smirk, and laughed when that made her eyes grow huge with surprise. I was willing to bet my little princess had never had a male say that to her, but I didn’t like lying, and speaking my mind often had fantastic results. Not always what I wanted, but fun all the same.

“This is important, Aramon!” she said. Unfortunately, she seemed to realize how close I was standing and jerked back with a surprising amount of grace; that stuff was ingrained in her. A whisper of her slipper as she glided her foot back, not a single glass or piece of silverware jangling as her hip pressed against the table. I wanted to make her lose her poise so badly that it was tempting to reach up and ruffle her moss-colored hair.

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“Life or death important!” she added when my shrug made it clear I didn’t care. “If we fail at this mission...” her breathing faltered as her voice trailed off. For the first time, I was seeing a hint of vulnerability behind the cool, carefully controlled mask. It halted me in my tracks, my eyes locking with laser focus on hers. My mind stretched, reached, but she had no psychic ability to connect with. My brain wasn’t wired to connect with anyone but Solear anyway; I didn’t know why I even tried.

“Tell me,” I demanded, my senses still ached and shifted in my mind, trying to reach for something that could never be. Even if she were Asrai and had her own twin to share telepathy with, it was very rare for mates to form a similar bond. I wanted it anyway, but that was my hallmark, wasn’t it? To want all the things I could never have: revenge, family, power, fun—those kinds of things. And now, love and a psychic bond.

The desire to lock minds with her was so strong that Solear stirred in the back of my head. For a moment, it felt like he was seeing what I was and feeling what I felt. He slipped away as quickly as he’d come, leaving behind a warmth that felt like a hug and an apology for not being able to give me what I wanted. He understood my need and knew, like me, that it could never be.

My pretty woman swallowed, her emotions sliding from her face like water. The mask was back in place, but I’d seen what she truly felt, and I wasn’t going to let this go. “Tell me, Evadne. I can’t be what you need if you don’t talk to me. Let me protect you.” I meant every fucking word, the way I’d never meant what I said before. There was no doubt she could tell how fervent I was by the tone of my voice or the way I leaned protectively toward her.

“Evie,” she murmured, her voice pitched low as if she were telling me a secret. “You can call me Evie when we’re alone, okay?” I liked that—Evie. It was pretty, and it was private. A secret name between lovers. I started to grin as I pictured it, and pictured her Xurtal guard going green with envy if he knew. I liked that very much, and I was going to take every opportunity I had to call her by this name.

“Yes, Evie,” I agreed, but if she thought this would deflect me from what I truly wanted to know, she was dead wrong. She had also neatly backed herself into a corner against the edge of the table. When I took a step, our bodies almost touched, and she braced her hands against the edge and leaned away. It arched her spine and brought her breasts up toward me, the upper slopes of the soft globes visible inside the v-neckline of her jumpsuit. “Stop avoiding the question.”

“Stop avoiding your lessons!” she snapped, and the sharp edge of her tone made my cock jerk eagerly toward her. I was a total deviant and proud of it. I grinned, my mouth stretching wide, and watched as her cheeks flushed a darker green. Interesting. I hadn’t known Xurtal females could flush like that, but I liked it. I could feel the warmth radiating from her skin; I was getting to her.

“Don’t you know me? I’m a total slacker. I didn’t even finish school. You couldn’t have picked a worse male for this mission if you tried. Well, except for my twin, I suppose. He’s more inclined to bite one of those officials than bow to them.” I tilted my head and tapped my chin as if pondering those options, and I saw her eyes go wide. She was picturing me leaping across the table to bite an Ovter like I was some kind of rabid animal. Beautiful.

“But you’ve got me now,” I added. “And I will see this through, Evie. I’m your male, your protector.” A grin stretched across my mouth as I turned my tone seductive and dipped my head to murmur in her ear: “Your fiancé.” Her breathing shuddered, and I nearly licked the pretty, round shell of her ear. Instead, I made myself demand an answer yet again. I could not let this go on—not when there was clearly a threat to

her safety, and my mission details included nothing about why she was even going to Ov’Korad. As her fiancé, I needed to know, or this mission would definitely fail.

“You are telling me everything now!” I demanded, infusing command into my voice. I tended to be laid-back, but when it came to protecting those I cared about, nothing was off the table. Speaking of tables... that was an option. She’d talk if I pinned her to that shiny surface and licked her neck, down into the tempting valley between her breasts. It was a no-lose plan. My hands clasped her waist, marveling at how small and frail she felt beneath my palms.

I didn’t count on the sharp elbow that suddenly came flying forward, catching me in the throat with a stunning blow. I spluttered, stumbling back as I fought for air through my suddenly bruised voice box. “The fuck, Evie?” I groaned, feeling utterly betrayed by the move. I was trying to help her, didn’t she see that?

My princess was straightening herself primly, her hands gliding over her body in ways that made me jealous. She looked cool, but I could see the anger simmering behind her ruby eyes and in the pinch of her lips. She was furious with me, but I didn’t understand why. As my mate, Iknewshe felt the bond. So why wouldn’t she let me touch her? We needed each other, didn’t we?

“Don’t tevertouch me without permission,” she said firmly. It was the little catch in her voice that got to me. A tiny tremble in the last word, a little hitch in her breathing. I was attuned to every change, every move she made. I’d messed this up; it was inevitable that I would, so I wasn’t surprised. I could roll with the punches, and she had a mean elbow jab. My throat still ached something fierce. As I straightened, I rubbed at my throat and wondered if she’d purposely struck me there because it was a soft target above my armor.

Her eyes locked onto the motion, and something flickered behind them; then they darted from me to the lowered hatch that separated the kitchen from the mess hall. I

could tell her that Brace wasn't there—he'd ducked into his private rooms as soon as I'd arrived—but she seemed uncertain. Then her shoulders squared, and she pierced me with a firm look. The type of look that made a male want to swear obedience on the spot. Too bad that I'd never obeyed anyone in my life—well, except the captain. I wasn't about to start obeying my princess, not unless I felt like it.

“What I say cannot leave this room, you understand?” she said solemnly. I nodded fervently; that was easy to promise. Except for Solear, who'd be able to snatch information right from my head, I wouldn't tell a soul. Not even the captain. Okay, maybe the captain if he asked me, but I didn't think he'd ask. I liked having secrets with my woman. That felt good, like I held parts of her she did not share with anyone else.

“The Xurtal Kingdom is small, a single planet in a single solar system. But it is rich in resources, one resource in particular that is highly coveted by the rest of the Zeta Quadrant.” She paused, perusing my face, but I didn't know what she expected to see. I didn't know where she was going with this information; it was all public knowledge. “Particularly,” she added, “Xyraxin.”

“Which is coveted for weapon manufacturing,” I said, leaping to the right connections now. I knew Xurtal was rich, but rich in that? It was clearly not public knowledge. The species wasn't known for their weapons or exports either—not that kind of export. So, they weren't selling it, but their neighbors might want it.

Evie nodded. “Because we refuse to be the planet known for selling weapons of mass destruction, there are strict limits on how much can be mined each year. To protect us from invasion, we've formed an alliance with several other smaller nations, but that alliance might soon fall apart.” My mind whirled as I considered all the complications. A failing alliance meant Xurtal would be open to invasion, and I could think of at least six factions in the quadrant that would jump at the chance to get more Xyraxin. No wonder my princess was desperate to stop that. The Ovters did not seem

like the most likely choice to form a new alliance with, though. They did not like outsiders, and the Sythral were right next door. They would definitely want to get the Xyraxin for themselves.

“Ov’Korad is simply neutral ground, away from prying eyes,” Evie said, anticipating my next question. “Alliance prospects are meeting me there. That’s why this is so time-sensitive. If I don’t get there at the appointed moment, it will be rude, and their diplomats will not stick around to wait for me. Do you understand? We could be dining with other royalty. You have to know how to behave; we can’t afford to offend anyone.”

It was on my lips to demand to know why she’d requested me for this mission if it mattered that much, but I knew. It was the mate bond talking, her desire for her male to be the one to protect her. Maybe it wasn’t that at all; maybe she had not requested me specifically. I couldn’t recall what the captain had said when he briefed me.

“Permission to touch your hand?” I said, grinning when that made her mouth form a lovely little circle. She was caught off guard and stuck out her slender green fingers before she could think better of it. I snatched up that hand and raised it to my mouth, pressing my lips to her silky flesh before she could change her mind. “I understand. Where do we start?” And then, because that’s simply how my brain worked, it leaped to more teaching options. “Will there be dancing lessons too?” I could already picture our bodies rubbing together in a dance; that would be a lesson I’d sign up for in a heartbeat.

Startled, she shook her head. “No dancing,” she said faintly.

## Chapter 6

Evie

I paced inside my small quarters, my slippers swishing softly against the deck in a most unsatisfying manner. Restless energy coursed through me, and I tried in vain to settle it by talking myself through the plan. It only made me more stressed. Aramon was a nightmare to work with. The male was more interested in flirting or asking questions than doing what he was told. He was going to screw up on day one and bring this whole mission crashing down around me.

My hand pressed against my belly, feeling the slight bump of the piercing there and the device that transformed me from plain Evie into Evadne. It was turned off right now because I needed relief from the constant tingling along my flesh, and I wondered what Aramon would think if he saw me now. He would probably pull back in revulsion because his green beauty had been replaced by a pale, waxy shadow. I didn't even want to look into a mirror right now; I couldn't stand it.

My last attempt to teach the Asrai male any kind of manners had been this morning, and, to my great embarrassment, Theronix had insisted on seeing my progress. It had been absolutely grueling, and my guard was now convinced he should squash the entire plan. I wasn't sure if he was wrong. It had been all but impossible to make Aramon sit up straight and use the right utensil at the mock-meal. He did it on purpose—I knew that—but Theronix didn't see it.

Truth was, I wasn't sure if Aramon would stop behaving like an ass. Part of me feared that, but a bigger part was convinced that when the stakes were high, he'd back me. I wanted to believe it so badly it ached. There was no way I could forget that first meeting three days ago. The intense way he'd kept demanding I tell him the truth; he'd been relentless, and I felt like he was on my side, so focused because all he wanted was to keep me safe.

My skin tingled on my hand where he'd brushed his mouth; the audacity of that move still scandalized me. Evadne would have had him thrown in the brig for that kind of insult, but it hadn't felt like an insult to me. And I had jabbed him in the throat with

my elbow a minute before that. That made us even.

On the upside, I was not nearly as worried about having to be the one doing the negotiating once on Ov’Korad, or about being found out because of a mistake I made. My biggest concern was getting my fake fiancé to fall in line. I’d already memorized his fake background and the supposed way we’d met. They’d cleverly made him a minor noble in one of the thousands of Asrai noble houses in existence; nobody would question that.



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The story was that he'd been the one to rescue me, and a whirlwind romance had followed. With Evadne's father, the King of Xurtal, endorsing the fake marriage, nobody would question it. It would allow Aramon to be at my side during all my negotiations, and having a guard present felt like the only way to come out of this alive. I was absolutely convinced that someone had leaked Evadne's traveling plans to Batok, which had caused her death. When they saw her 'alive' at the negotiations, they would try again.

A knock came at my door, and my hand flew to my belly in reflex; the device switched on with a tingle. It felt like static electricity clung to me, and everything I touched would give an annoying little shock. I didn't check to see if I looked right but headed for the door. There was only one person who'd knock like that: Theronix.

He gave me a once-over with a frown, then nodded, which came close to saying, "You'll do." No words were exchanged when he turned and walked away. I fell into step behind him, my nerves fading to the background as I assumed my role as the dutiful princess. This was it. We had landed at the spaceport in Akrod, and once I deboarded the ship, there would be no more privacy. I would have to be Evadne every hour of the day and night. My skin ached just thinking about it.

Then I spotted Aramon waiting for me at the airlock, accompanied by a dozen mercenaries in their black armor. He was not wearing his, and that was the biggest shock of all; I'd never seen him in anything other than that matte black carapace and combat boots. Today, he was wearing a long red robe with wide sleeves and gold embroidery. Beneath it, he was shirtless, his muscled chest and abs on full display above sleek leather pants and tall lace-up boots.

It was the current fashion for Asrai nobles and thus the perfect disguise. When Theronix missed a step, I knew he'd seen it too. Suddenly, it didn't seem like Aramon would mess this up; he looked exactly right. I was the one who looked out of place in a plain gray jumpsuit. If we'd arrived a day earlier, I would have taken the time to buy more appropriate clothing, but that was not an option.

It wasn't until I delicately placed my hand in the crook of Aramon's elbow that I noticed the strain on his face. As he started to escort me into the airlock, surrounded by a dozen mercenary guards, I realized it was exhaustion. Had he not been sleeping? Oh... It clicked in my brain too late to do anything about it. He'd been flying the Varakartoom through jump after FTL-jump, with only the smallest of breaks in between, during which he'd spent all his time with me to follow lessons on etiquette.

The man had run himself ragged to get me to Akrod in time. But we were on time. This was the appointed meeting day, and the rest of the week had been set aside to finish our negotiations. We'd flown here from Rakesh in less than a week—a feat I knew was nearly impossible. Most ships could not sustain that much FTL, and if it wasn't the ship, it was the pilot and navigator who needed the rest. What Aramon and Solear had done... it was a miracle.

He was getting paid a fortune to do this, but it still felt like he'd done it for a reason other than money. I could not forget the intense way he'd questioned me during our first attempt at lessons—the gleam in his eyes, the way he'd curled his tongue around my real name. All of that had felt like my safety was the only thing he cared about. That couldn't be true; it was simply his job, and he thought he was protecting a princess, not a fraud. I was an impostor in so many ways.

“Ready, Princess?” Aramon drawled in my ear, his head bent to mine, red eyes glowing in his white-marked face. I did not know enough about his species, I realized. Suddenly, I wondered if his skin would be tough or feel like bone. It certainly looked like bone, as though he wore his skull outside his flesh. It should be

so freaking creepy to stare into a face like that, but it made me feel safe.

He was also taking liberties again that he shouldn't, and I could feel Theronix's disapproving stare on the back of my head. We weren't in view of anyone; we were simply entering an airlock aboard the mercenary ship. He shouldn't have been touching me until we stepped outside and the charade began. I did not tell Aramon to let me go. His arm against mine, the brush of his body against my hip—it felt good. The scared girl in me wanted to cling to him forever.

“Not at all,” I whispered back at him, shocking myself with the honesty. Once I'd said that, it felt natural to keep talking. “I'm terrified I will either fail or be killed.” I was a human girl from Earth, not a noble-born princess of Xurtal; this was never supposed to be my burden to carry. But thinking of Evadne's burn-marked face as she made me promise to see this through was enough to harden my resolve. I owed it to her and to the Xurtal people to give it my best shot. Nobody said I couldn't be scared while I did it.

“Don't worry, Evie,” Aramon whispered back, his elbow shifting to press my hand more tightly against his side. “I've got you now. You're safe.” I believed him. I truly believed that he would keep me safe. As long as he thought I was Evadne, he would keep that promise.

The airlock hissed as it finished its cycle, and a handful of mercenaries left the ship in front of us, fanning out in perfect formation. They made for an impressive sight in their black armor, each male big and muscular, with a laser rifle at the ready. Captain Asmoded had put the Rummicarón male in charge of this operation, and he was doing so by leading the charge. Cradling a huge, portable laser cannon in his bulky arms, his maw open to display his razor-sharp teeth, he had to be a terrifying sight for the Ovt delegation waiting for us on the tarmac.

As Aramon escorted me down the gangplank, his body moving sinuously at my side,

at ease in the long, loose robe, I put all my focus on the delegation. Three Ovters in white uniforms, officers of the esteemed Akrod police force. A white-speckled male stood in front of them, wearing the traditional desert-yellow robes and sash. That was their prime minister—his picture had been in the portfolio Evadne and I had studied before coming here. They had turned out in full force to meet us, which was reassuring. There would be no attempt on my life by any Ovt faction with him accompanying me. Their prime minister was respected and loved.

They greeted us curtly, as I knew they would, and then led us to a smaller transport ship nearby. “Because of the secrecy of this meeting and its sensitive nature, we thought it best to hold it outside of Akrod’s perimeter.” The prime minister came up to my shoulder, but no taller. That was a very respectable height for an Ovter, and he seemed not in the least bothered by being the smallest when my guards surrounded us.

“Thank you, Sir Kjana. That is very wise. We must not draw any further attention; maybe the ploy will confuse my would-be assassins.” He nodded in response, then licked his left eyeball with his long tongue. That wasn’t rude in their culture, but it made my stomach turn to witness in person. They could not blink; this was their way of keeping their eyes moist and clean.

“Yes,” he huffed, his tone crisp as he outlined the facilities at this secret retreat where my negotiations would take place. I got the feeling he was rushed for time, but I was too important a visitor to slight. The Xurtal Kingdom had promised the research-mad Ovters a sample of the Xyraxin as payment for this service.

“Watch it, buddy,” Aramon suddenly snapped. I winced, my shoulders going up as I flicked my eyes from him to the Ovter police officer who had gotten too close. I had not realized that Aramon was wearing a gun, but it was in his hand now, aimed at the male’s head. “No hard feelings,” Aramon drawled in the stunned silence, our party grinding to a stop a few steps from the parked short-range transport. “Too many

assassination attempts on my darling fiancée of late, you understand?”

The smaller male gave Aramon a once-over, his hand on his own pistol, but he nodded and stepped back with a nervous grin. It was the prime minister himself who moved to smooth over the situation. “Yes, most unfortunate, this assassination business. My condolences for the deaths of your protection detail; they died with honor.” His next words were a blur. I said my goodbyes politely by rote, guided by Aramon’s prompts.

My mind was back on Batok’s ship and the cold, damp cell where the evil Hoxiam had kept Evadne’s guard and the two of us. The dread I felt each time the door opened and another good Xurtal male perished. It didn’t seem to me like death was honorable when you ended up as food for a greedy, evil alien. What a stupid thing to say. Those men would be alive if not for the machinations of one faction, or more. Batok himself had admitted that he was doing a favor for someone on Ov’Korad. Was it one of the males escorting Prime Minister Kjana?

“You okay?” Aramon asked quietly. Gentle pressure from his hand guided me to a seat at the center of the small craft. He sat down next to me and spread his robes in a perfunctory manner, then sprawled back in a lazy pose that was absolutely unsuited to a Xurtal official. But maybe it wasn’t so out of place on an Asrai; they were known to be entitled, self-possessed, and lazy.

His pose made his robe fall open, and suddenly I could see far too much naked flesh. His chest was a work of art, all sculpted planes covered with firm red skin that gleamed and shimmered with hints of gold and burgundy. The leather pants and weapons belt gave him an air of danger, and the hot look in his eyes twisted my stomach into knots. The cold that had pervaded me vanished beneath that look, pushing the bad memories away and reminding me that I had survived.

Then he lifted his arm and slung it around my shoulder, and it was easy to curl my

legs onto the chair beneath me so I could rest my head against his shoulder. Nobody should bat an eye at that, because the Xurtal might not approve of laziness, but they were very expressive with their affections.

## Chapter 7

### Aramon

I did not know what had happened, but all my protective instincts were on fire. Evie had withdrawn inside her mind, a cool mask in place that helped her politely end the meeting with that fancy, high-placed Ovter, but that was it. She was like a machine as I guided her aboard the short-range transport, barely paying any attention to her surroundings and clinging to my arm for guidance. She did not even notice when I tried to argue with the Ovt pilot crew that I would fly the shuttle myself.

It felt like she did not come alive again until I curled my arm around her shoulder. Then she surprised me, and I was not the only one. My pretty princess curled herself against my chest, her head resting on my pectorals, her silky hair brushing my chin. Her guard hound, Theronix, glared at me from where he sat in a seat against the wall. Jaxin grinned at me from the other side, waving a thumb in a ‘nice job’ gesture that he’d learned from Mandy and Harper—a human gesture.

There were no Ovt officials that accompanied us, and the pilots filed into the cockpit and shut the door behind them with a final click. Tass and Flack had checked the area, so I knew there was no further danger, but still something felt off. First with my princess, and now with the ship.

With twelve of my crewmates aboard the shuttle, nothing short of a missile would be a threat. Still, I could not shake my restlessness, and my legs started aching from how tightly my muscles were clenched. Since we could not be sure if cameras were watching us or not, I had to keep playing my part, but I decided that pulling out a

datapad wouldn't be out of character for a spoiled Asrai brat.

Solear stirred at the back of my mind, and I knew it was because he sensed my distrust. I didn't even need to ask him for what I wanted; the Varakartoom's sensor data started streaming to my datapad almost immediately. Thanks, bro. That was exactly what I needed. My eyes raced over the data to assure myself that our departing vessel was not being followed.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:14 am*

“What are you doing?” Evie asked after a few minutes. She started to lift her head as if intending to shift away, and I tightened my arm, pressing her close. She resisted for two seconds, then relented with a soft sigh and settled against my chest again. That felt so fucking right that it briefly distracted me from the datapad. I dipped my head and pressed my nose into her silky hair, inhaling deeply. She smelled good, and I wanted her scent all over me.

That made Theronix frown even harder, his expression turning a marvelous kind of sour, so I did it again. I wouldn’t have noticed it if not for that, but I did. Evie’s hair was an odd shade right where it grew out of her skull. If I wasn’t mistaken, the roots of her hair were a shade of red. Not green—red. I had never heard of a Xurtal female with hair that wasn’t green; I thought they only came one way. But Evie’s hair was definitely growing out a pretty shade of coppery red. Was it an aberration she had to keep hidden as the crown princess? Or was this something else?

I yanked my head up and locked eyes again with Theronix, and this time, he didn’t look like he’d swallowed a Keftir whole. He had gone pale, and his eyes held a worried, frantic look. This male would suck at Keflo; too bad we hadn’t played a few hands. I could have cleaned him out. Leveling him with a glare, I tried to warn him to get his act together. Whatever he thought I’d found out, we couldn’t let anyone else know—not if it was a secret that could endanger my woman.

All of this had distracted me from what I was truly worried about. Thank the blazing stars for my brother. A warning spiked through our bond:incoming danger.I jerked to my feet, causing my female to tumble back into her seat. My eyes flew to the datapad and then to Jaxin. “Check the cockpit, now! Our flight path just diverted from our submitted flight plan.” I held the datapad up as evidence, but my superior officer



didn't need it. He jerked his fingers at two of my crewmates, and they raced to take up flanking positions on either side of the door.

I didn't wait to see what they'd do, but spun to Evadne and pulled her up, then urged her around the seats we'd previously occupied so we could take shelter. The rest of my friends circled us protectively. I heard the loud thumping as they demanded access, and the short silence that followed before they blew the lock. That was followed by an "Ah, damn it! Aramon, get in here."

I shared a look with my female, her ruby eyes huge in her face. "What's happening?" she asked, but I had no time to answer; Slear's urgency hadn't abated one bit. Something was still going wrong. We'd been double-crossed by this Ovt pilot crew, if not the prime minister of Ov'Korad himself.

"Guard her with your fucking life!" I demanded of Tasseloris, and I pushed Evie in the direction of the Viridara male. Then I was on my feet, leaping over the seats and sprinting for the cockpit. I saw immediately what Jaxin had discovered after breaking down the door: the cockpit was abandoned. A lifted floor panel indicated the secret way the pilot pair had abandoned ship. Either they'd jumped with personal gliders, or they'd slipped out on takeoff, moments after switching the shuttle to autopilot.

I did not hesitate to throw myself into the empty pilot chair and grasp hold of the yoke. They had not bothered to lock the computer systems of the small ship, a glaring oversight that was going to be our salvation. We were headed straight toward the face of a red lance of rock that rose like a forbidding hand straight out of the desert. I wrested control of the ship in the nick of time, swerving the nose of the vessel around the mountainside, so close the tip of our wing might have lost a lick of paint. My elated whoop echoed through my psychic bond with my brother, but he did not share my mirth.

That was all I needed to know, and though I did not see the threat yet, I called out a

warning anyway. “Jaxin, protect Evie!” I demanded. “This isn’t over.” I heard him rush away to do what I wanted—a novelty in and of itself; I could not recall a single instance when the cool-headed weapon master had obeyed me.

A war raged inside me that I wasn’t used to. Happiness because I loved the thrill of danger; I was in my element right here. This was what I needed to stay sane, to feel in control of my life. But this was a ship with my Evie aboard it, and that made all the difference. I still wanted to fight; I wanted to fly this vessel through the sky at breakneck speeds and shake off whoever was chasing us. Evie’s safety was more important, and my eyes were rapidly searching for the way out.

Go to the meeting place—the fancy retreat that was hosting this intergalactic diplomacy meeting? Or should I turn this vessel around and head straight back to the Varakartoom? Over the huge spaceport city of Akrod, it was unlikely they’d dare to strike again. They would not risk such open violence or risk harming civilians by causing this ship to crash into a fancy Ovter skyscraper.

I saw it now—a blip on the ship’s sensors, confirmed by Solear’s mental shout. I heard Jaxin thunder back into the cockpit behind me, rapidly speaking on his com, but I paid the words no heed. My brother had already given me all I needed. “Brace yourself. Hold the Princess! This is gonna be rough.” I did not like the thought of anyone holding my woman but me, but I trusted my brothers-in-arms to keep her safe when I sent the ship into a rapid spin.

So far, I’d kept her headed in the same direction, barely scraping by that rock spire. A male could be forgiven for thinking the ship had missed it by a hair somehow—a fluke of chance. This missile rocketing our way was their take-two, to make sure we were well and truly obliterated. I had to give them credit for their daring and the clever assassination attempt. They knew they wouldn’t get past a Varakartoom mercenary, let alone twelve of them; this was their only option.

Everything spun, but my body was well-versed in any kind of g-forces. I braced myself accordingly, held on tight to the yoke, and kept even tighter control of the ship. Around me, males swore, someone screamed, and metal groaned and creaked ominously. This was a simple, low-altitude, short-range transport; it wasn't meant to twirl through the air in a spiral, but spin it did.

Sand exploded to our left, debris flinging through the air and hitting our vessel. A shock wave rocked us, and then it was over. I leveled off our flight path, bringing us out of the erratic spiral, and set a course for the retreat's location. Solear's anxious energy leveled off in the same way the ship did. All clear. Still, I did not let go of the yoke or trust the ship to autopilot. My eyes never left the scanners, and when I saw one of our newer recruits from the corner of my eye, I barked at the Tarkan male to park his ass and watch the sensors for any sign of danger.

I wanted very badly to get up at this point so I could locate my female, my fiancée, the woman I was to protect. Jaxin's presence kept me from doing so; my task wasn't over yet—not until we'd safely landed at our destination. Of course, Evie wasn't about to let anyone walk all over her. I heard her voice as she projected her words, not raising her tone in a way that could be considered shouting, but clear as a bell. "I want to see him, now. Are you going to stand in my way?" Ouch. She sounded spitting mad.

It came as no surprise when, not even a minute later, she was escorted into the cockpit by a bashful-looking Tass. He pretended not to see the curious eyes of the Tarkan recruit in the seat next to me, his fists tightly clenched around his weapon. "Sir, the princess wishes to see you. Also, her personal guard has been injured." My eyes shot from my screens and the yoke to the open door, past my pretty female, as if I would be able to spot Theronix with a whole crowd of crewmates in disarray inside the vessel.

Evie looked haughty and cold as ice as she glided around Tass's bulky frame to stand

at my side. “That was another assassination attempt, wasn’t it? How did you know?” I flicked my thumb to engage the autopilot, then reached for her small wrist. I paused at the last moment, mischief dancing through my veins when I said, “Permission to check for injuries?”

Her pretty mask broke for a brief second as she parsed my question, and her hesitant nod was all I needed. My fingers closed around her wrist, brushing along her silky flesh. The touch made my fingertips tingle oddly, but maybe that was simply my excitement, the rush of a battle-high after such a narrow escape. With a slight yank, she tumbled into my lap. A pretty squeak left her mouth, followed by two well-aimed strikes that made my ears ring. “What the hell?!” she demanded in my face, her teeth bared in an angry snarl. I loved that snarl; it was perfect and cute with her blunt, straight teeth.

“I asked permission this time,” I pointed out mildly. “I gave fair warning.” Her ruby eyes were spitting fire at me; she was so mad, and I was eager to see what she’d do next. Her small body was a curvy, warm weight on my thighs. Without my usual armor to restrain it, my unruly cock grew firm beneath her soft rear. Her angry eyes went wide, and then her expression morphed. The princess was back.

“That is true,” she agreed, and she regally tipped her chin. “Forgive me for hurting you. That was uncalled for.” I sought her gaze and had to conclude that she truly felt bad for striking me in reflex. I didn’t blame her; in fact, I appreciated her fast reflexes. They would serve her well. Curling one arm around her slender waist, I tucked her closer and shamelessly pressed my cock against her ass so she wouldn’t mistake it for anything but what it was—my desperate need for her.

Her scent was filled with a note of her own heat, a hint of arousal, and I struggled to hold back a growl. “You can’t hurt me, princess,” I said, then stuck up my middle finger with my free hand when that made Tass snort from behind me. Like the thumbs-up signal, we all knew what Harper meant when she did this. Then my

thoughts arrowed after a stray thought that floated to the top of my brain: Evie had said “hell” when I caught her by surprise just now.

She drew herself up in my lap, primly crossing her arms over her chest but not moving to get away. Actually, I was damn near certain that she wiggled her bottom against my rampant cock on purpose—the tease. “We both know that is not true, Aramon. You spluttered very lovely last time I hit you, if I recall correctly.” I ignored the outright laughter of my two eavesdropping crewmates, my mind flashing briefly to when she’d struck me in the throat in the mess hall. I had deserved that one; I shouldn’t have pushed her when she wasn’t ready.

What was I thinking again? Right, hell. She said hell. Every time she spoke, it was in a beautiful, cultured tone, her mastery of the Xurtal language perfect. But when I’d tumbled her into my lap, she’d yelled, “What the hell!” and it hadn’t been in the Xurtal tongue. That had been English, the language both Mandy and Harper spoke. I wouldn’t have recognized it otherwise, but I’d had a run-in last night with Harper that had caused her to yell that exact phrase. Apparently, females didn’t like it when you ate their last sweet pastry, but I’d been so damn hungry I just wanted calories, even overly sweet ones.

“Fair enough,” I agreed, my thoughts spinning with what this could mean. It was tempting to ask my brother for help; he could hit up Dravion, the ship’s doctor. Maybe the half-Grolarnx had discovered something unusual on his medical scans of her. Though unlike her guard, she had not needed much medical care when she’d first arrived aboard the Varakartoom.

I discarded the idea after a moment, but only because I didn’t want to involve Solear when I didn’t have to. He was already resistant to his closest friend finding their mate, and he could impulsively end up spilling his guts to the captain. If it was a secret that belonged to Evie, I could not share it with anyone. But keeping secrets from Solear felt wrong.

“We’re almost at the retreat. Let me take control again. Tass, warn Jaxin. And you,” I turned to the Tarkan recruit just in time to see him avert his gray gaze down to the sensors. I struggled to recall his name—was it Rauk? Raukash, maybe. “Keep your eyes peeled to that fucking screen, not my fiancée.” That made Evie shift in my lap, her eyes flying from the viewscreens to my face. She heard the possessiveness in my tone; she knew there was no reason to call her that. Everyone here knew the betrothal was a sham.

I gave her my best cheeky grin, and then I ignored the pounding in my pulse and the ache in my cock. I’d make her see soon enough.

## Chapter 8

Evie

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:14 am*

Was insanity contagious? I was starting to think that Aramon's particular brand of crazy was rubbing off on me. First, I'd curled against his chest, like it was completely normal for me to do so. That it had felt right—safe—had been the reason I'd stayed. I was so damn tired of feeling scared, and he had so much zest for life. Nothing daunted him; nothing seemed to bother him. He was the very definition of rolling with the punches, and I wanted a little of that for myself.

Now I was letting him hold me in his lap, all casual, while his erection pressed against my ass. It was utterly insane to remain where I was and let him get away with this. Evadne would have done much more than share a little banter and a slap against his ear. I'd held back at the last moment because I didn't actually want to hit him; it had been a reflex from the surprise. But I was beginning to think that I should slap some sense into him, or maybe I needed to slap some sense into myself. I was still sitting in his lap...

I could get up at any time; I knew he'd let me go if I did. Aramon was a lot of things, but I'd quickly learned that if I set my boundaries, he'd come right up to that line but never cross it. He was a little hard-headed about where my boundaries were until I pointed them out, though. If Theronix saw me right now, he'd be furious. But the more I thought about it, the more I stopped caring about what Evadne's last remaining guard thought.

I was risking my life for this cause, and it was perfectly acceptable for lovers and mated pairs to sit this cozily together in Xurtal culture. We weren't risking the mission by sitting like this, so he needed to stop worrying. I deserved something for myself, and I really wanted to soak up some of Aramon's strength and protection.

Ignoring the curious eyes of Aramon's colleagues was harder than I thought it would be. The Viridara male had only briefly left the small cockpit to warn the Rummicar on in charge of my protective detail. He'd returned shortly after and kept smiling every time our eyes met, as if we were sharing a secret. Maybe I was reading too much into it; maybe he was just happy for his friend. Didn't they know that once this was over, Evadne would disappear from their lives and leave Aramon in the dust?

Yeah, Evadne would, but I was not Evadne. As Evie, could I stick around after the mission was over? After Xurtal had its treaty and their safety was once again guaranteed? The option felt dazzling once I'd thought of it, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't push it away. It was too tempting, too tantalizing.

Those thoughts had to be pushed to the back of my mind when Aramon expertly brought the small ship down for a landing inside the protective courtyard of the retreat. The pearly white building was set next to a lush oasis with many yellow and pink trees on tall, nearly translucent trunks. A lake of shimmering water lay next to it, and vines had been encouraged to grow over the building's exterior.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that Aramon knew how to expertly fly a ship such as this small, short-range transport. When he landed it, it was with the gentlest of thuds from the landing gear, but then, he'd managed to make this ship do a freaking corkscrew earlier. Already, my decision to involve him in my protection was paying off. If not for him, we'd all be dead right now. If only I had as much faith in his acting abilities as I had in his flying skills.

The sight of a delegation of Ovters filing out of the arched, covered walkway that lined the courtyard was a sign. Time to get to work; nerves fluttered heavily in my belly. Was I going to have to dive straight into negotiations with the present delegates? I felt like a frumpy, rumpled mess, nothing like the princess I was pretending to be. It seemed to me that anyone would immediately see through the ruse; Evadne wouldn't show up to such important talks in nothing but a plain



jumpsuit. Not unless it suited her narrative.

As soon as the shuttle had completed its landing and post-flight checks, I rose from Aramon's lap. Instantly, the cool air inside the ship provided a stark contrast to my warm thighs and back. My flesh tingled, and when I glanced down, it was to catch Aramon's eyes firmly locked on my ass. I did not reprimand him for that. Instead, I forced myself to channel Evadne as much as possible and glide out of the cockpit without a backward glance.

Of course, escaping Aramon's presence was impossible. He was supposed to be at my side every moment we were here—that's what I'd asked for—and he wasn't going to let me forget it. Hot on my heels, he caught my elbow as I rounded the row of seats at the center of the shuttle. "Slow down, princess. What's the hurry?" he murmured, laughter tinting his voice.

I slowed my steps, my head swinging around to catch multiple stares from Aramon's crewmates. Then my eyes caught sight of Theronix, his arm slung over the shoulder of one mercenary, and a gash decorating his forehead. He looked angry but awake, and when his eyes landed on Aramon, the storm clouds grew worse.

I recalled the moment my supposed fiancé had sent the ship into that corkscrew. The Viridara male, Tass, had grabbed me around the waist and pinned me against the back of the seats. Nobody warned Theronix about what was going to happen, and he'd flown across the seating area and banged his head. While Tass had kept me safely braced with his arms, Theronix had been left to fend for himself, and he'd failed. Tass's arms had kept me pinned through the entire, crazy spiral. Honestly, it had felt like far too many arms to count holding me tight.

When the Xurtal male caught up to us, he said nothing about the way Aramon had slipped his hand around my middle. He didn't mention the assassination attempt or his head wound either, but I felt unable to let that slip. "Theronix, please let a medic

check that as soon as possible. You are still healing.” I tried to inject concern into my tone the way Evadne would in this instance, but it was clear he did not want to hear it. His frown only deepened; I’d offended him. I understood that. Evadne’s guards took great pride in their skills, and he was not in good shape. He wasn’t upholding his good name.

When he passed a mercenary who was Xurtal, like him, he ducked his head and refused to meet anyone’s eyes. Xurtal males were always prideful, and failing in front of his own kind was doubly painful. I recalled many a late night gossiping about such incidents with Evadne. Males in court would posture and brag, and anyone who didn’t measure up was laughed out of the royal tents.

By the time Aramon escorted me down the gangplank into the courtyard, my last remaining guard had gotten over his snit, or at least managed to hide it. He greeted the Ovter head of security in my stead, bowing politely before rushing to apprise them of the attack. He kept his voice low, not allowing me to overhear what was being said, but Jaxin butted in without hesitation. I felt a sense of relief at seeing that, and I couldn’t explain why I felt safer knowing that one of Aramon’s friends was part of that conversation.

Soon, Aramon and I were rushed into the cool interior of the building and out of the desert heat. One Ovter official led the way, dressed smartly in a white uniform, their preferred color of dress. “My deepest apologies, Your Highness. This is most irregular. We will perform a full security sweep; your safety is of the utmost importance to Ov’Korad.”

We were led to quarters in the south wing of the building, and then there was a whirlwind of activity as mercenaries tromped through the rooms for security sweeps. I saw them wield several scanners as they searched for bugs or cameras. They checked every nook and cranny, then stationed men on the balconies and outside my doors.

At least two Ovter security guards accompanied them on this task, waving their own devices around. I watched them carefully, wondering if they were doing their job or playing interference. The devices they wielded looked genuine; I'd seen Evadne's guard use them at every visit she'd made. But that kind of protection was not my strong suit—hand-to-hand combat, yes, I knew about that. The reality was, I was the protective measure, simply by being there. I never had to consider these kinds of dangerous details before, and it all came down to who to trust: the males the Xurtal Kingdom was paying, Ovt security, with a vested political stake, or Theronix

My eyes darted to the Xurtal guard, who had stationed himself just inside the door to the sitting room. He was leaning with his back against the wall in a subtle manner, propping himself up without really seeming to. The gash on his forehead had yet to be checked, and I was worried he might topple over if he didn't sit down soon. There was an unhealthy, silvery sheen that edged the markings on his arms. I knew what that meant: he was in a lot of pain.

I was about to open my mouth to say something about it—to hell with his pride—but one of the Ovt security guards passed right in front of me. Aramon shifted beside me, his body partially blocking the male from getting closer. Something tingled along my skin when all the green-freckled Ovter did was wave his device around. It wasn't the same kind of tingle that I had gotten used to since I'd activated my illusion device that morning. This was different, sharper. And then it went away.

The Ovter moved on, and I locked eyes again with Theronix. His suddenly went wide, and he started shaking his head adamantly in warning. I didn't know what it meant, just that he looked extremely worried all of a sudden. He lurched forward, his footsteps unsteady as he started plodding my way. His shoulder collided with a mercenary focused on a tall, elegant wardrobe against the wall.

The mercenary lifted his head. It was the Viridara male, but Theronix continued to collapse. At the last moment, he raised his hand and tapped his face, eyes still locked

with mine. Then he passed out, his eyes rolling into the back of his head. Several mercenaries, including Tass, reached out to catch him, their voices raised as they exclaimed in surprise.

My stomach went cold, and though I would have liked to race to the guard's aid, I couldn't. Aramon started to move around me, surprising me when it appeared he was going to assist Theronix too. I did not think there was any love lost between them, but it seemed Aramon's instinct was to help. I caught him by the lapels of his long, flowing robe and threw myself against his chest before he could slip from my grasp. Burrowing my face against his skin was a shock to my senses, one that I should not enjoy, considering how dire the situation was.

He smelled so good—warm, musky, with a hint of something salty, like the ocean. His flesh was firm, but his skin was surprisingly soft and smooth. I had meant to hide, to burrow against him so no one could see what Theronix had: the failing of my illusion device. I couldn't be sure, but it was likely the Ovter who had accidentally caused it to glitch. Hiding turned into seeking comfort for the sake of comfort as soon as Aramon closed his arms around me and held me tight.

“What's wrong, my love?” he murmured against my hair. “Don't tell me Theronix's collapse is what disturbs you. I don't believe it.” He rumbled a husky chuckle into the crown of my head, his nose buried in my hair. I didn't know how to answer him, but I knew the truth was about to come out, and I wasn't ready. Not by a long shot.

“It's not Theronix,” I agreed quietly. “Please just hold me. Don't let go.” He swore he wouldn't in a fervent whisper, and tension eased from my shoulders, but only a little. I slipped my hands from his lapels to glide them beneath his robe and over the sides of his ribs. His chest shook lightly, but he said nothing, and I wondered if I'd just discovered that he was ticklish. Now my hands were as hidden as my face, and if everyone would leave, my secret would be safe. Well, as safe as it could be, entrusted to Aramon. There was going to be no way he wouldn't find out.

“Then what?” Aramon asked, and the hint of concern I could hear in his voice made me mutter something silly about a wardrobe malfunction against his pecs. He was quiet, his body freezing against mine as he processed that, and then he laughed. “Seriously, princess? Your head guard collapses, and you’re worried about a crooked button?” But he raised his voice and addressed everyone around us with firm, cool authority that didn’t seem quite right coming from him. “Everyone out. Theronix needs more aid than a simple bandage. If our chambers are secured, my fiancée and I need privacy. Now!”

I did not witness it, but I could hear the quick shuffling of feet as male after male left the fancy apartment. The door thudded loudly as it shut, and then silence ruled. Still, I did not lift my head.

## Chapter 9

Aramon

I did not want to complain when my woman was hugging me this tightly, but it had been five minutes since the last male left, and still, she clung to me. Not in the sexy, I want to tear your clothes off kind of way, but in the I'm desperately hiding something fashion. I wanted to know what secret had come unraveled, and what she was afraid I'd discover when she let go.

Fashion fiasco my ass. Princess Evadne would have a much more elegant way to deal with such a situation; she wouldn't hide in my arms. She had burrowed against my skin, her face tucked against my sternum, and her hands pressing against my back. Her fingers were cold and clammy, and this room was anything but freezing. I was starting to get worried, and then Solear was starting to get uneasy because he sensed my worry.

"You're going to have to come out of there at some point, Princess," I joked. I didn't like the silence now that everyone was gone, but mostly, I didn't like how quiet my clever, brazen princess had gotten. This wasn't the same female who had verbally sparred with me back in the shuttle cockpit. "Come on, how bad can it be? You want me to shut my eyes?"

She sighed and then nodded against my flesh, her breathing tickling along my ribs. "Yes, please. That would help." Wait, she actually wanted me to close my eyes? No way. I swore I wouldn't let her out of my sight; it wasn't happening. My arms tightened around her as my mind spun. How many buttons had come undone? All of them?

“Nope,” I said, drawing out my denial with a satisfying hiss that I was certain did not translate the way it should. “You’re going to have to face me. Come on.” I slid my hands down to her hips and gently began to push. I didn’t really want to break the contact between us; if it were up to me, there’d be even more full-body contact, but this was important. I had to know what was going on.

She ducked her head down, the long green strands of her hair covering her face. Stubborn female. I opened my mouth to taunt her, to say something stupid so she’d get her hackles up. A little fire would do the trick; I’d prefer her mad over sad any day. I should’ve known that she was braver than that. Her chin came up just as I opened my mouth. I was staring into her face—her familiar, beautiful face—and everything clicked in my head all at once. “You’re human.”

I did not know what to think of that; there were a lot of things I was uncertain about. She seemed to be thinking a lot of things herself, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth, her eyes huge in her pale face, shiny with unshed tears. “Yeah... I am,” she murmured, still in the Xurtal language. “You can’t tell anyone; it would be the end of these negotiations. It would have devastating consequences. No one can know! Promise me, Aramon! Promise me you won’t say anything.”

I was nodding before she’d even finished talking, my fist rising to tap against my chest with a firm thud. “Of course, I swear. Your secret is safe with me, princess.” My words did not have the desired result; her eyes got even shinier, and then the tears spilled, rolling down her pale pink cheeks. She was lovely as a human, as lovely as she’d seemed to me as a Xurtal female. The sight of her tears made panic take hold of me that I couldn’t squash.

Her sadness was overwhelming. I felt it push against my mind, filling my chest until I felt heavy and sad myself. It spilled into the bond with Slear until he filled my mind with questions—questions that silenced as soon as he sensed Evie’s tears. You cannot let her cry, brother. It was the clearest, most enunciated thought I’d ever received from

him.

“Don’t you get it?” Evie said as she backed away, slipping from my grasp like water. Pacing across the room in her slippers, she seemed to need an outlet for the heavy feelings that filled her. “I’m not a princess, Aramon! I’m human; I can’t be the princess. The princess is fucking dead. Oh, damn it... Evadne is dead.” She shuddered, her shoulders shaking, and then she was sobbing.

Oh, fuck. What did I do? I followed after her, pacing across the room at her side while I begged Solean for help. You’re asking me? Are you nuts? I’ve never even spoken to a female... He had a point. He was no virgin, but I had always done all the talking for him when we crawled from pub to shady dive to bar in search of company and fun. Solean knew even less than I did about crying women.

“I know that,” I said, raising my palms in a surrender gesture. “I know that,” I repeated when she glared at me through a hunk of dark green hair and a fall of tears. “But it doesn’t matter, does it? I certainly don’t give a fuck. A job is a job.” But this wasn’t just a job; this was my mate I was talking to, and she sensed some of that. She had to. Truth was, I couldn’t give a Batan’s ass what the color of her skin was or where she’d come from. She was mine, the only thing in the universe that I could ever claim, and I would. I knew what was in her heart—or at least, I thought I did—and that hadn’t changed.

“I’m not Evadne,” she said, spinning away to cross from the fancy-legged chair to the tiny couch. The short distance did not seem enough, and she did it again, and again. Fists balled at her sides, her feet kicked furiously as she walked, but the soft slippers made very unsatisfying, gentle swishing noises. It wasn’t like my boots as I thudded after her with every step she took. She tossed a glare over her shoulder, ruby eyes glimmering. “And it’s not fair. I can’t even stomp around in these stupid shoes.” She raised a dainty foot and flicked the gray fabric slipper from it, followed by the other. Then, she wriggled her tiny toes against the silvery-white marble floor.



Her shoulders still trembled, her jaw was gritted, and her breathing shuddered, but she was controlling the sobs now. I felt a wave of relief at first, but the pain-filled look in her eyes made me think this change wasn't a good one. She was bottling everything back up, sticking her heavy emotions behind a brick wall. I could feel how they retreated from my mind, how the weight lifted from my shoulders. Solear offered me a soft touch of approval, as if he thought I'd done something right. But this wasn't right—it was very not right.

“Stop,” I said. “Come here,” I added when she didn't stop her pacing, now barefoot, which made even less noise. She glared at me, so I kept following in her steps, my legs eating up the distance between us in a few strides. Then I caught her by the arm and spun her back against my chest with a twirl. That made her gasp in surprise, but she did not retreat when her hands touched my bare skin. “I don't care if you're human or Xurtal. I'd still like you if you were a fucking Rhico. I've got your back, Evie. I promise.”

Only once the words had left me did I realize that some of her upset might be because I didn't know her name. That would do my head in if people kept calling me by the name of a dead person and expected me to be them. She didn't tell me not to call her Evie, though, but instead slid her arms around my middle and hugged me. That felt right; holding her in my arms felt like the best thing in the world. I couldn't believe she was seeking my comfort, I was the least likely person for such a thing.

I stroked my hand along her spine, up and down in a soothing rhythm. It eased my mind as much as it seemed to help her. Her breathing became slower, deeper, and eventually, she started to talk. “I don't think I've given myself a proper moment to really grieve Evadne's death.” It was jarring to hear her speak the name of the princess and not be referring to herself, especially when she spoke of death. It made my spine tingle with the urge to do violence, the beginning stirrings of an instinct to avenge my mate. But my mate was not dead; she was right here, in my arms where she belonged. This was a chaotic, confusing mess, and not the kind that I enjoyed.

“She made me promise, you know. On Batok’s ship, before she died. She made me swear I’d see these negotiations through to the end, that I’d save her people. Out of all her guards, only Theronix survived. So much death...” She shuddered, clearly overwhelmed by bad memories. Her sadness was not pushing against my brain the way it had earlier, but I could almost taste the darkness she’d gone through. Her words evoked the shadows from my past, pulling forth the taste of ashes, the sounds of the dead and dying. I had not been the one trapped beneath the rubble, but that fear, that panic clawed at my mind for a few terrible seconds.

All this time, Solear had been quietly observing from the back of my mind, offering his silent support. This was too much for him. His thoughts spiraled as, like me, he got trapped in the past—the memories. Unlike me, he couldn’t find his way out of that spiral without help, but he didn’t want mine this time. Care for your mate. Then his walls went up, and I sensed a complete withdrawal, one that would no doubt precipitate a rage born out of his trauma and fear. Find the captain. I tried to shout it after him, psychically, but I didn’t know if he heard.

“Aramon?” Evie whispered against my skin. “Are you okay?” She lifted her head, and I got trapped in her still watery gaze. It made no sense to me that a hug was all she’d needed to help, but it did seem like she felt lighter. The pain was gone from her ruby eyes, and her expression was softer, smoother.

Shaking my head, I didn’t know how to answer her question. This wasn’t about me; I wasn’t the one in turmoil or pain. Now that she felt clearer, my memories easily faded to the back of my mind. Solear was the one in trouble, but how could I explain that her sadness had sent him into a spiral? I lifted my wrist to touch my com device, my fingers flying as I hurled a message through the airways toward my captain. That was the best I could do from here, but it didn’t seem enough.

“I’m fine. It’s my twin that worries me,” I said eventually, only because I never minced my words, and she deserved to understand how this worked. Dealing with

one Asrai nearly always meant dealing just a little with his or her twin as well; our lives were very intertwined. “My senses got a little overwhelmed with your sadness and that... eh...” I didn’t want to make her feel bad when she already felt so sad, and I also didn’t want her to feel sorry for either of us. The past was the past.

“Tell me,” she demanded, and I had to smother a sudden grin. Back to acting like a princess. She might claim she wasn’t one—and I could see this was true—but she sure knew how to act like one. I’d forever think of her as my princess. Then my thoughts were buoyed by the prospect of our future, which now seemed far less complicated.

“I should tell you?” I asked, laughing. “You’re the one who just revealed the biggest fucking secret ever. Come on, you owe me an explanation first.” I did not let her withdraw when she started to push against my chest. Picking her up was child’s play; I carried her out of the seating area into the bedroom and sat down on the fluffy mattress with her in my arms. “Come on, tell me everything. You can trust me.” And then, because she seemed unopposed to my touch right now, I gave into the urges that rode me hard. I leaned down and nuzzled the side of her face, then nipped gently at the edge of her ear.

She shivered, and thousands of tiny bumps raised everywhere along her flesh. That was interesting; I didn’t know skin could do that, and now I wanted to see if I could do it again. She laughed, a soft, unrestrained giggle that made my pulse race and my cock twitch inappropriately in my pants. Truthfully, I didn’t care if it was appropriate or not, but instead of pursuing my desires, I focused on the issues at hand. “Is your device broken permanently, or can we fix it?”

“I don’t know yet. Let me check,” she said, then shifted across my thighs as if she intended to get up. That, I was not going to allow, and my arm tightened around her slender waist. A growl rattled from my throat, catching her by surprise; she raised startled eyes to my face, her mouth dropping open. “Okay, I’ll check from here.” Her

lips tilted into a smile, and I latched onto that. Her mouth was pink without the disguise, as were her cheeks, but the rest of her skin was pale as cream. I wanted to lick her, everywhere.

She slipped her hand between the buttons of her jumpsuit, touched her belly, and then fiddled with something. When her hand withdrew with a look of triumph, she was holding a tiny, shimmering gold pendant with a small red gem. I bent my head to study the tiny object, and she did the same. “I’ll try to reset it and hope for the best.”

As she fidgeted with the device, she gave me the answers I needed: the whole story. I did not think she left anything out as she spoke, and my mind filled with sympathy and anger. If I could, I’d reach back in time to hold the tiny girl she’d been when she first arrived on Xurtal. She should have been cherished, but she had been made into a weapon and a shield instead, all because her name, Evelyn Mordew, and face were similar to that of their princess. I wanted to barge out the door and snap Theronix’s neck for forcing my mate to be in harm’s way, to be the decoy for assassins. They had played with her life; they did not deserve her.

## Chapter 10

Evie

My device worked again after some fiddling. It had turned on suddenly, rushing energy over my skin that made my hair crackle, but it worked. Aramon's expression had grown dark and grim the moment it happened, and my chest felt light and warm because of it. He didn't care that I wasn't Evadne, that I wasn't a princess. He'd barked at me to turn the device off, frowning angrily, and that had made me feel like he preferred the pale, washed-out me over lush emerald skin.

"Your hair is dyed too, isn't it?" he muttered as soon as I'd switched the illusion off. I nodded, not certain where he was going with this. Then I was moving, Aramon rolling us across the bed until I was pinned beneath his huge, heavy body. He kept himself propped up on one elbow and grabbed a hunk of my hair with the other. "You're a redhead," he said. "Aren't you?" The wine red of his eyes glared at me in an accusing manner, and I wasn't sure what to make of it. When I dipped my chin slowly, my pulse pounding in my throat, his mouth split into a wide grin. "I knew it!"

He'd shrugged out of his long robe and was wearing only his leather pants. An array of clever pouches lay piled on the table next to the bed, chock-full of supplies he could hide beneath his 'costume.' What remained of his attire was even less capable of hiding his magnificent body than the black armor he usually wore. It made me all too aware of how close we were, how little space he'd allowed between us. Aramon, like me, felt the intense attraction—the passion that simmered beneath the surface. If I tilted my head a little, raised myself on my elbows, we could kiss. It wouldn't take more than a few inches, and it was so tempting to do that.

Right now, in the safety of these rooms, I was myself for the first time in a long

while. Aramon didn't hate what he saw; he liked me—he'd said so. I vividly recalled how he said he'd like me even if I looked like a Rhico, an alien that resembled a rhinoceros. Clearly, his tastes were varied.

I also recalled the anger he'd clearly felt when I told him about being kidnapped from Earth and my rescue by the Xurtal. It was hard not to feel grateful for all they'd done for me and how privileged my training and education had been. I'd also had a princess as a best friend growing up, but all Aramon heard was how they'd put me in harm's way my entire life. How they'd used me as a decoy for assassins, better me dead than their princess. And he was not okay with that.

He was also as changeable as the sea, flicking from one intense end of the spectrum to the other as easily as a switch. Angry one moment, cheerful the next. Maybe, like my haughty princess mask, that was an act, but he was quirky enough to truly work that way. I was okay with that because I was starting to believe that behind all that frenetic energy and rapid context switching, Aramon had a heart of gold. Flexible morals in some ways, yes, but when it came to loyalty, unbending. I had his loyalty somehow, and I wanted to do everything in my power to keep it. I had never had anyone so solidly in my camp before, and it felt good.

"Red, orange, copper," I said through dry lips. "Once the dye grows out, that's what it would look like, I think. I haven't seen my own hair color since I was eight." That made him frown again, so I hurried to distract him. I didn't want him to get off me either. It felt safe to be pinned beneath him on the bed, and something inside of me was allowed to stretch and unwind. I felt relaxed for the first time in years. "Your twin, is he all right?" I asked.

I had not forgotten that he deflected my question about it earlier while prying into my secrets. When my illusion failed and Aramon discovered the truth, I felt exposed, followed by a wave of overwhelming grief for Evadne and the guards. Zandrios, Mikalys, and even the former head of her guard, Platorix. All dead. All gone. And

that had done something to his twin, somehow. I didn't understand it, but I wanted to.

The genie was out of the bottle now. For the first time, I could stretch my proverbial wings as Evie, and Evie was curious. She didn't care nearly as much about being polite as Evadne did, either. Thankfully, Aramon did not mind context switches or mood changes.

His eyes glittered scarlet in his face, his mouth pulling into a grin that should have looked macabre with the skull-like markings, but it just looked like him—familiar by now. “Solear is not stable. He was buried alive for nine days when we were teenagers, trapped beneath rubble after riots and firefights broke out in the quadrant of the city where we lived. They were instigated by Jalima so he could move in afterward and set up shop for his drug-making facilities.” Aramon's chest rattled with a growl, but his words were coolly matter-of-fact as he continued speaking.

“The riots killed our father, who had hired Asmoded and his mercenaries to halt Jalima's advance. The captain rescued both of us, and we've been with him ever since.” That put the captain first and foremost on Aramon's list of people he was loyal to, I could see that immediately. “But Solear... he hasn't adjusted, he hasn't healed. He was trying to help me figure out how to comfort you, and then... you spoke of death, and I flashed back to the riots. That is not a good place for our minds to go.”

Aramon rolled to the side, doing what I hadn't wanted him to do: he retreated. So far, in all our meetings, he'd been the one to push while I cut him off or withdrew, but things were different now. He was a loyal male, but I could be loyal, too. I rolled to my side next to him and scooted closer, my hand sliding over his bare chest soothingly.

His arm was tossed up over his face, obscuring his expression, and he'd clenched his jaw. “I'm sorry. Is there anything we can do to help him?” I knew about being stuck

in the dark—it was bad—and I'd sooner not think of it if I could avoid it. To imagine that Aramon's twin lived with that kind of darkness all the time... it was sad.

I should have known this was a trap. Aramon was the most confounding male I'd ever met. His arm didn't lift from his face, but the other? It snapped out and caught me around the shoulders, hauling me on top of him with implacable strength. His chest shook, and now I recognized that for what it was: laughter.

I slapped his chest, but it was a half-hearted gesture. "How can you laugh right now!? You are crazy." And to add to the craziness, he was aroused, his cock a hard bar that burned with heat against my thigh. He lowered his arm from his face, his eyes twinkling like fireflies. That hand caught me between the shoulder blades—a firm, warm pressure that slid down my spine, and lower. Then he was cupping my ass, sending a spike of arousal through me at the unexpected touch.

"Because laughing is the only way you can deal with that shit. And that helped, by the way. Asmoded helped too; he sparred with my twin until he collapsed, and now his mind is open to me again." He winked. "He says thank you for the offer, but he'll find his own female." Then his expression sobered from mirth to something much darker, instantly looking grim because of the white markings on his face. "That was the right answer. I don't share my mate."

The word sent a bolt of lightning through my veins. Mate. Yeah, I knew that. I had known that from the start, even though humans didn't do that whole fated mate thing the way many species in the Zeta Quadrant did. There was only one reason I responded the way I did to Aramon, and that was it. "I'm glad you're not a princess, you know," he added. "I would have hated living in a palace." Then he tipped my chin up and covered my mouth, inhaling my surprised gasp and filling my lungs with his air, with him.

That kiss set fire to my blood; it roared through my veins with a heated tingle from



the crown of my head to the tips of my toes. Pleasure surged through my abdomen, clenching tightly, and Aramon responded with a wild growl against my lips, his hips bucking beneath me. Then we were rolling, nearly all the way off the side of the bed because he didn't do anything half-assed. With my head tilted over the edge, my neck was exposed, and he took full advantage, his sharp teeth nipping at my throat, his tongue gliding along my skin. "So pretty," he murmured, awe in his tone that could not be mistaken for anything else. "So mine."

I wanted to protest his claim, yet I didn't want to at all. The lost little girl inside me wanted to belong more than anything, and since Evadne's death, she'd been untethered, adrift. Another part of me wanted to know who I was without having to pretend to be Evadne. But could I do that when I was his?

When he lapped at the slope of my breast, such heavy thoughts fled from my mind. All I could focus on was the pleasure he drew from me, the way his presence surrounded me, warmed me, and yes, claimed me. Buttons popped and scattered as he yanked the lapels of my jumpsuit apart. I didn't care about any of that when he closed his mouth around my aching nipple and sucked. I jolted beneath him, moaned his name, and clutched at his head.

"That's it, princess," he drawled with a satisfied smirk, a smirk full of mischief. This time, being called princess did not feel like a weight on my shoulders; it did not feel like a reminder of the impostor I was. It felt like a caress, a compliment. That's how Aramon saw me: as someone special, someone to be treated with care. He dipped his head and licked a path to my other breast, then gave that nipple the same treatment.

I let myself have that moment to chase away the bad memories that plagued both of us, and by extension, Aramon's twin brother. Dragging my nails across his naked back, I felt each bump of his spine and then the edge of his pants. He growled when I did that, so I did it again. "Keep playing with fire, I dare you," he whispered in my ear, then bit me. Not a hard bite, but a nip against my sensitive lobe, and goosebumps

spread across my flesh.

I did not like to be dared, definitely not in a tone like that. My body rebelled, and with a few well-placed taps against pressure points, I had him rolling away from me. He landed with a thud on the floor, followed by a louder thump when he dropped his head against the tile and started to laugh. “Naughty, naughty female. I’ll get you for that.” He started to advance, and I scrambled backward on the bed, my hands and feet sinking into the soft mattress.

Rolling to my feet on the other side, I made the cowardly move of ducking into the bathing room. I was about to slam the door in his face when he slid his foot—his bare foot—between the door. I winced, yanking back the old-fashioned, rustic wooden panel at the last moment so I wouldn’t hurt him. Our eyes clashed.

Every inch of him was larger than life, flushed with power. His chest, a sculpted masterpiece beneath his red skin, rose and fell with barely controlled force, and his cock strained against the leather of his pants. It was a very impressive, very sizable bulge, and my core clenched as I vividly pictured what it would feel like inside me. Didn’t Asrai have rigid lines of bumps along their shafts? I vaguely recalled having a conversation about that once with Evadne, huddled under the blankets while she told me in scandalized tones what her friends had gossiped about.

“You cannot leave my sight. Captain’s orders,” Aramon growled. He was no longer the teasing, mischievous lover from a moment ago, but every inch the possessive male who had called me mate with a slip of the tongue. I’d seen the way a Xurtal male reacted when he encountered his female—they surrendered to their baser instincts. Supposedly, the Asrai weren’t that different, and he was exhibiting all the signs. His pupils were blown, his erection still hadn’t gone down, and his pulse was pounding so fiercely that I could see it throbbing in the thick vein along his throat.

Self-conscious, I yanked my jumpsuit closed over my chest. Of course, his cock had

stayed hard; my boobs were still out. “I need a moment, okay? It’s too much. I…” I wanted to go back to kissing him on the bed—that’s what—but this was not the time nor the place. People could be watching. The lives of millions of Xurtal depended on the formation of this new alliance. I had to be at my best, and I couldn’t let my own wants and needs take precedence. If Aramon really was my mate, he’d still be there when this was over, wouldn’t he?

“Leave the door open,” he snapped. It sounded like a concession, but he leaned forward on the balls of his feet and bounced. That buzzing, frenetic energy was back, restlessness shivering over his skin. He did not want to let me retreat; he wanted to push. When he spun away and stalked out of the bedroom, it felt like he took my racing heart with him.

I turned my shower to cold, and trembling, I got out not five minutes later to dry myself and stare at my bedraggled reflection in the mirror. I was being an idiot, and I needed to march out there and talk to him—get my facts straight and treat this like a negotiation. We needed some ground rules. I just couldn’t see how he’d want this pale, messed-up girl instead of the regal princess.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

Then my eyes landed on the shirt lying on the edge of the counter, and my breathing faltered. He'd been in here, and he'd left that for me. How much had he seen? If I knew him even a little, he had seen everything.

### Chapter 11

Aramon

“Her name really is Evie,” I said to Solear. I'd called him on my com device from the sitting area because holding an actual conversation was easier out loud. Our bond was strong, so strong that it stretched much further than was common for Asrai twins, but I liked to use my words, not convey things in emotions and fragmented phrases. “I promised I wouldn't tell anyone, so you can't either. Not even the captain, understand?”

My brother nodded solemnly, his expression still grim and dark but also exhausted. His lip was split and bloody from the sparring match with Asmoded, and as he sat shirtless on his bunk, I could see the dark black bruises that covered him. “Go see Dravion, please.” He shook his head this time, and I was not surprised—the stubborn bastard was too much like me.

“I feel like danger is around every corner, and she's been in danger all her life. How could they do that to her?” I snarled. “They used her as a decoy. They didn't care if she died, as long as their stupid princess survived!” Granted, from what I now understood of the situation, this mission was about averting a large-scale invasion of their world—it was significant. It still didn't make it right. I was not okay with the callous way they had treated my woman. Solear said nothing, but I could sense his

agreement. He didn't like that I was far away or that her secrets had stirred up our past, but he wasn't angry with her.

There was a knock on the door that interrupted my conversation, and before I could say anything, my brother disconnected the call. "Bro... not even a goodbye?" I muttered under my breath. I picked up my laser pistol before making my way to the door, pressed my back against the wall beside it, and tapped the panel so it would slide open. I stuck the barrel of my weapon in the face of the person on the other side, then laughed when I discovered it was Tass.

"Here are the boots you wanted me to fetch," he said dubiously, holding up a pair of specially designed combat boots in one hand. His skin was green like that of a Xurtal female, shimmering slightly with moisture; his species did not appreciate the dry desert heat. When he jiggled the pair of currently misshapen boots, that moisture dripped from his wrist with a splash. "Just because you're pretending to be royalty doesn't mean..." He trailed off when his words made the Tarkan recruit stationed outside the door chuckle. He glared at the stone-skinned male, thrust the boots against my chest, and stalked away.

I laughed too, pleased to have ruffled some feathers with my request. Tasseloris was a good warrior and an even better tracker and mapmaker; he felt like a little brother to me, which meant I had every right to tease him.

Thoughts of my brothers-in-arms faded to the back of my mind when I sensed my female behind me. The Tarkan saw her too. Raukash stiffened abruptly and raised his fist to his chest before dipping into a respectful bow. I didn't like the glint in his slate-gray eyes; the admiration was neither welcome nor appreciated. Reaching out, I whacked him upside the head, and he didn't even have the presence of mind to duck. "That's my betrothed you're staring at. You keep doing it, I'll scoop your eyeballs out with a fucking spoon. Got it?"

The male straightened abruptly and jerked out of my reach, wings flaring wide, his battle-form hardening his skin. Good. With a pleased grin, I turned my back on him and shut the door. My heart started pounding furiously at the sight that greeted me, and my cock instantly grew hard inside my pants. Damn, I didn't expect her to look this good in a simple spare shirt of mine. Why was that?

She stood in the doorway to the bedroom, her green hair lying over one shoulder and leaving wet stains on the dark gray shirt. Fabric clung to her flesh and ended mid-thigh; she wore nothing else. No, that was not true—she wore the little pendant that transformed her from a human into a Xurtal female. Her skin was a lush emerald green, and knowing what it concealed made it feel wrong. “Turn it off. We're alone again. Turn it off, now!” I growled, not caring how rude it sounded.

Her hand dipped to her belly, and, much to my disappointment, she pressed that pendant through the shirt. It flicked off in the blink of an eye, and she went from a verdant emerald to pale cream—the kind of cream I liked to pour by the bucket into my Chaff each morning. Brace stocked the rich-tasting Yikar cream from Sune's lush farm worlds, and her skin was that exact shade. Now I was hungry as well as horny. How had that happened?

I stalked across the sitting room, my bare feet making no noise against the silver marble, and came to a halt right in front of her. Too close, I knew I was, but I didn't care. I liked that it forced her to tip back her head to gaze up at me; her throat looked so vulnerable and soft. It was a struggle not to reach out and curl my fingers around her slender neck. Thankfully, I was holding a pair of boots, so my hands were full.

“Here,” I said roughly, and I shoved the items toward her. She fumbled to catch them, her eyes wide and still an inhuman red that I knew wasn't right. “So you can properly stomp around the next time you're upset.” That drew a smile from her mouth, and I couldn't resist. My hands were free now, after all. Leaning forward, I cupped the back of her neck and held her tight. Then, I pressed my lips to hers and laid claim.

When she did not resist, victory danced through my veins.

My breathing was ragged, and my cock painfully hard by the time I released her. Dragging my eyes from her flushed pink cheeks to her chest, I admired the way her breasts heaved and her nipples pressed against the gray fabric of my shirt. The boots I'd handed her were dangling from her fingertips at her side; she hadn't even looked at them yet. "You're welcome," I said, prodding her. She jerked back, a scowl settling on her face.

"Thank you, Aramon," she responded sweetly as she jiggled the boots. I knew she was being sarcastic, but I didn't care—I smiled. "We need some ground rules," she continued as she took a step back. I followed because it wasn't in me to let her retreat, I didn't like it. She took another step back, and I glided forward; now we were in the bedroom, and the huge, fluffy bed loomed behind her. "One," she said, raising a finger, "you sleep on the couch."

"No," I said immediately and shook my head. "We share. What are you afraid of? Have you seen how big that thing is?" I was not passing up the chance to snuggle with my female, and I was going to make her see that she didn't want to miss out either.

Her expression went tight, her mouth pinching with displeasure, but I ignored that. When she flicked up a second finger, I was tempted to grab her hand so she couldn't do it again. "Two, no peeking. Damn it!" Ah... she thought I'd looked when I left her the shirt, did she? She'd be right, but I had fully intended not to, I swear. I had only looked because she'd made such a sad noise that it had torn at my heartstrings. It was what had prompted me to call Solear for comfort.

"Okay," I agreed, and that made her expression grow less guarded again. When her third finger came up, I gave in to my impulse and grabbed her hand. With a little tug, she came forward, and I pressed her palm against my bare chest, right over my heart.

“I will not peek into the bathroom, but we are totally snuggling.” When her mouth twitched, I knew I’d made her smile, and she was trying to hide it.

“Three,” she started, and her smile grew wider. “I’m serious, Aramon! This is important to me.” I nodded and pushed my dislike for all these rules aside so I could listen; if it mattered to her, I had to try to listen. “Don’t threaten your friends, please. I’m not truly your betrothed; this is all a sham, remember?”

Frowning, I shook my head. That request didn’t even need a second to consider; the answer was very simple: “No.” I rushed to explain when she made an indignant spluttering noise. “Real or not to you, you’re my betrothed, and if they ogle what’s mine, they’re going to get what they deserve. I don’t compromise on that. Understand?” I wouldn’t feel bad for a second if I had to follow through on my threat to Raukash, and the male knew it. There would be no further incidents.

Her skin turned pink, first her cheeks, but it flushed down her throat and beneath the collar of the gray shirt. “Fuck, Aramon. You’re the worst, you know that, right?” I beamed at her, my toes wriggling in my boots. I liked that: the worst. Said with a blush and a smile, that could only be a good thing.

“Want me to show you how bad I can be, my love?” I suggested, grinning widely when her blush turned a brighter pink. She spluttered, her hand in my grip pulling as she tried once again to retreat. The knock at the door gave her a reprieve; her eyes went huge, and she dropped the boots I had given her with a thud, her hand flying to the piercing in her belly button. One blink, she was my lovely human mate; the next, I was staring at the Xurtal princess. Electricity crackled over her flesh—not visibly, but I felt it tingle over the fingers I held, a shock of static arcing between us as she yanked her hand free. Was that what she always felt when using that thing? That couldn’t be pleasant.

“Stay put,” I warned her, and I drew my pistol and went back to the door.



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Evie

He was impossible—absolutely, utterly impossible. Wearing actual pajamas was a nice change, though, and being able to turn off the illusion device when it was just us was a relief. My flesh was hypersensitive from it. It constantly caused discomfort when it was on, so being able to relax and recharge was a much-needed reprieve.

What wasn't relaxing was how little space this impossible male allowed between us. How he'd said no to my most important demands and then took up so much space on the bed that I felt like I couldn't escape him. Sprawled on his back, arms propped behind his head, he was a tempting sight, wearing nothing but a pair of pants. Tempting and sinister at the same time, with his skull-like features and ready but macabre grin.

Dinner had been served here, and we'd received an update from the Ovt security force. Jaxin had accompanied the uniformed male, and I'd heard their voices rumble as they discussed my safety while I hid in the bedroom. We'd also received a delivery, courtesy of the mate of one of the delegates I was here to negotiate with—a human woman who was mated to the current acting King of one of the many Tarkan Queendoms. She had sent a selection of clothes for me upon hearing of my misfortune and the loss of my luggage. What were the odds that someone here would be human and about my size?

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Now I had pajamas and several formal dresses suited for the warm weather, and, thanks to Aramon, also a pair of boots. Impossible man, but a kind man too. It was the best gift I'd ever had, and the most personal. How could I not like him for that? I glanced over at him and discovered that he was now drumming his fingertips against his tight abs. My mouth went dry with desire, and, to distract myself, I focused on the danger that hung over my head.

"We need to figure out who is behind these assassination attempts," I said. I started to list the options, but other than the Sythral and the Tarkan Queendom, which had set all this in motion, I couldn't really think of anyone. The Ovters had no stake in any of this; they had no force with which to occupy Xurtal if they were after the resources. The others at the table were either small players who needed an alliance themselves or peace-loving.

"Not the Sythral," Aramon declared. "They don't care about shit beyond their planet. They're total seclusionists." He had a point; I hadn't expected him to have that kind of insight. But as he started going through all the players we'd meet at the table tomorrow, I realized he knew a lot. Aramon had been everywhere in the Zeta Quadrant and then some. He'd spoken with crimelords and ended up on the most wanted list for the Rummicaron. He knew far more than his irreverent behavior and lackadaisical attitude made it seem.

"Enough of that," he barked when we'd been talking for over an hour, and darkness had long since fallen. Cold was starting to pervade the chambers, and I'd snuggled up under the thick blankets on the bed. I'd done that as close to the edge as I dared, hoping that would persuade him to keep his distance—but only because I wanted to curl up in his arms so much. He didn't seem cold, lying atop the blankets without a

shirt.

I was starting to think that I'd imagined that moment when he'd called me mate. I had to be mistaken, and I couldn't rely on anyone but myself. Of course, when Aramon turned off the lights and then stole my blankets, I had no choice but to chase after him, and that was my fatal mistake. A girl couldn't complain when the end result of our scuffle was lying curled up like a burrito in his arms beneath a pile of blankets. Not at all. Aramon had warned me that cuddling was not optional, and he hadn't lied.

Maybe I was a little touch-starved; it was too easy to give in. I didn't think I'd fall asleep, but that, too, was simple.

## Chapter 12

Evie

My nerves were on fire when I walked into the conference room that morning. Aramon was at my side, sauntering along like he had not a care in the world, his posture relaxed, his expression serene. Honestly, it wouldn't surprise me if he really was that relaxed. Theronix was in front of us, leading the way and scanning my seat and the pitcher of water in front of it for danger. The two meeting each other that morning had been the only tension-filled moment so far. Indeed, Aramon was very hostile towards Evadne's last remaining guard. And Theronix? He did nothing to hide his dislike of the Asrai male.

"All clear, your Highness," Theronix said as he dipped into a deep bow beside the chair. He held out a hand to indicate that I could sit down, but I refused. It didn't seem like the right mood to come to a negotiation table and sit at the head like an entitled queen. I wanted to be on my feet, greet every delegate personally, and I was certain that Evadne would have done the same.

We'd arrived first, guided here by an Ovt security guard and an Ovt official clad in beautiful gold and white robes. That male was going to preside over the negotiations as the neutral party; he was supposed to be there to keep things civil and streamlined. Since the Ovters and the Sythral were my best guess at being behind the assassinations, I could not help but stare at him with suspicion.

"You must tell your guard to step outside, your Highness," he now drawled. Fixing Theronix with a stern look from his large black eyes, the flabby jowls beneath his chin wobbled. It would have been very disrespectful to giggle, but the sight of those jowls definitely made me want to. It was too much like jiggling jello, and the green spots and paler green streak beneath his chin didn't improve that impression.

I looked at Theronix and noticed the way his mouth had tightened with displeasure. It didn't help that Aramon was grinning widely, far too pleased. "Of course, we must ensure not just myself but all delegates feel safe." I had been allowed into the meeting room first so my security team could make a proper sweep and ensure that nothing dangerous was left inside. The last mercenary was just filing out, but they were going to take up position right outside the door and scan everyone who entered.

With stiff shoulders, Theronix strode outside just as the first delegate arrived: a huge Rhico male wearing a silk cloak, red silk pants, and a large gold chain over his massive, muscular chest. I knew the male personally—or rather, Evadne did. He was one of the many sons of the Rhico Magistrate, the current ruler of their small collection of planets. They were new to the alliance but not new to maintaining friendly terms with the Xurtal. In the past, Evadne had flirted and danced with this huge male, and I knew she had a soft spot for him because he so clearly admired her grace and beauty. Privately, I'd always thought that was more about her status than anything else, but I hadn't dared to sadden my friend with that kind of input.

"Ah, beautiful, luscious Evadne," the Rhico drawled in a thunderous voice, his arms spread wide, his small, beady eyes locked not on my face, but on the cleavage visible

above the neckline of my borrowed dress. I dipped into a graceful bow, stepping one leg back and bending at the knees. My hip brushed against Aramon's thigh as I did so, and I realized he had frozen in place, his chest swelling and arms spread wide in a hostile posture.

"That is my fiancée you speak to, Rhico," he said in a deadly voice. The smile slipped from my face, and I whipped my head around to look at my bodyguard in shock. What the fuck was he up to? He couldn't talk like that to a male I needed to convince to join this freaking alliance. This diplomat, a lesser son, would be thoroughly offended. The Rhico did not mate for life, and they did not practice long-term marriages either.

Placing my palm on Aramon's flat belly, I could feel the tension that vibrated beneath his skin. His muscles were rock-hard, and it felt as though he were ready to leap across the distance right now to strangle Thrymnor. "Excuse my betrothed," I said politely. "Our relationship is very new. We are still in the Lurivan phase of it." I purposely used a word from his own language, one specifically used for the first few weeks of a new relationship, when Rhico males tended to be very possessive and volatile concerning their current mating partner. It made Thrymnor's expression go smooth and amused in a heartbeat, and I drew in a relieved breath.

"Ah, that is sad news indeed, Your Highness. Congratulations on your betrothal." He bent stiffly at the waist in Aramon's direction and stomped to the large, extra-reinforced chair at the table reserved for him. "I had always hoped to share a mating contract with you, but I see such dreams are off the table. For good?" The last he uttered as a question, but he clearly did not expect me to answer. His eyes took in Aramon's still-bristling body, and with a grin, he shook his head as if that decided things.

It had to look that way to him, because my bodyguard had slipped completely and utterly into the role he was supposed to play. He slung his arm around my shoulders,

his body pressing close, appearing every inch the possessive, mating-drive-struck Asrai noble in his fancy, gold-edged robes and tight leather pants. Only I knew of the weapons hidden in secret pockets and the concealed pouches that lined his robe and were belted to the small of his back—supplies and weapons for emergencies.

The Rhico was hopefully the only fractious moment as delegate after delegate filed into the meeting rooms. Some had a guard come in to conduct their own security sweep, but most seemed to trust that the location was secure, despite yesterday's delays. My heartbeat sped up at the sight of a human woman as she was escorted into the room on the arm of a large Tarkan male. She greeted me warmly, and I thanked her for the clothing she'd lent me. I wanted to keep talking to her, but the arrival of the Asrai nobles required my attention. They spelled trouble, clustered together and clearly thinking the very best of themselves.

That's when I thought Aramon was going to lose his shit. He had seemed ready to brawl after meeting Thrymnor, but that was relaxed compared to the tension that flooded his system now. I couldn't even tell how I knew that, because his posture sure as hell hadn't changed. It felt a little like it pressed against my mind, oppressed, filling me with tension at the sight of them. I could understand it, a little, Asrai nobles were generally not the most pleasant people to deal with. There were a lot of them: thousands of noble houses scattered throughout the Zeta Quadrant and across the many planets they occupied in tiny corners and fiefdoms.

I was starting to realize that Aramon had serious issues with Asrai nobles, but he didn't say anything. Taking the lead, I greeted each male politely and warmly, pointing them to the right seats. It was not my place to play hostess, but the Ovter male who was supposed to have sat down and was watching the proceedings with a glum expression, his arms crossed and his weird jowls still trembling.

With all of the delegates now at the table, it was time to start the meeting. The Ovt official introduced himself, then, in the most dull voice, started listing the credentials

of everyone present and the reason for this meeting. Only then did he allow me to take the lead. This was the moment I'd been dreading the most, but when Aramon gently squeezed my thigh beneath the table, I felt a surge of confidence. Rising to my feet, I opened the meeting in earnest, and the words came far more naturally than I expected them to.

Eight hours later, I was not nearly so confident or enthusiastic about making my case. I had a new respect for the jobs Evadne had done in the past. Yes, I'd taken her place at a banquet or two when she was sick or thought to be in danger, but I'd never done any real negotiating—nothing like this. Who knew that Thrymnor could be such a stick in the mud, like a pitbull with his sights set on only one thing: securing Xyraxin for his nation? The Asrai were disruptive and bored, and the Sune male was polite but dull, droning on endlessly, sometimes for so long that even our Ovt neutral party felt compelled to intervene.

The only bright note had been the Tarkan King, Kalzudaud, and his human mate. The two seemed as in need of this alliance as I was and came to my aid on numerous occasions. Aramon did too, but mostly to lend credence to the threats on my life.

Eight hours of my life, and we were no closer to an alliance or resolution. Some of the delegates present were still debating the validity of the supposed threats that I and the Xurtal Kingdom faced. The Viridara male, especially, seemed to believe I had made those up to push them into joining this alliance.

When Aramon escorted me out of the meeting that evening, after we'd shared a long, dull meal, I felt wrung out. Utterly exhausted, I tromped into our chambers after mercenaries had once again swept the place. This time, nobody got close to me with any of their devices, though I suspected that the Ovt security guard had triggered yesterday's malfunction. Aramon had carefully kept his body as a shield between me and any scanners as a precaution, but I didn't think it was necessary.

Once the door shut behind the last mercenary, I didn't know what to do with myself. I felt like throwing myself onto the bed and simply sleeping for a thousand years, but I was wired so tightly that I didn't think I could sleep. It was also not at all what Evadne would do—not when a bodyguard still remained in the room with her. But this was Aramon, and I should have known that he would not play by the rules—not any of them. Definitely not mine.

While I stood like a sack of sand beside the couch, hesitating about my next move, he shrugged off his robe with a casual grace. Then he prowled around the small settee on silent feet, despite the combat boots he wore. I felt trapped by his scarlet gaze, his eyes glowing within the dark hollows of their sockets. “Turn it off,” he commanded, his voice taut with an unidentifiable menace. It sent goosebumps prickling all over my aching, tingling flesh—a sensation that was far from pleasant. That ache radiated from the illusion device dangling from my belly button.

My hand started to obey his command automatically, and I realized we had reached this point in our relationship where I trusted him implicitly. He beat me to it, his long legs eating up the distance between us at a quick pace, his large hand reaching for my belly just as I did. Our hands collided, his first as it brushed over the piercing and the device. My fingers clung to the back of his palm, and I did not let go.



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As the electric current that continuously tingled over my skin flicked off, my breathing faltered, and my heart started to pound furiously in my chest. I did not dare to look away from his gaze, certain that he was going to make the next move. I wanted him to do it, to touch me, to hold me. Anything to make me feel better after how much I'd messed up today. If Theronix knew, he'd be in here, jumping down my throat to remind me what was at stake. I wanted to forget about princesses and kingdoms, valuable Xyraxin and alliances. I definitely wanted to forget about assassins out for my life.

What I did want was obvious. I'd wanted it from the start, for reasons I hadn't been able to vocalize—let alone admit to myself. I wanted to know where I stood. No more uncertainty, at least about this one thing. With his warm, calloused hand pressing against my belly through the thin fabric of the cool, formal summer dress, and his eyes boring holes into me, I spoke the question that had been plaguing me since last night: "What's going on between us, Aramon? Tell me the truth, please."

His eyes seemed to spark in the dark, gleaming from inside his eye sockets, his mouth forming into a ghoulish grin—a grin that made my toes curl in my sturdy boots, his gift from last night. It was impish, a little naughty, and pleased at the same time. I definitely should not have been able to read so much into that one grin, but I was certain I was right. Aramon was becoming easier and easier to decipher, but I still held my breath as I waited for his answer.

He raised his free hand and curled it around my throat, a gesture that was entirely possessive, a little threatening if it had been anyone but him. His fingers pressed tight against my skin, but not too tight, and they were a claim. That hand made me feel like he owned me, and it felt entirely wrong to respond to that with a rush of wetness and

an ache low in my abdomen. His grin morphed into a very serious expression as he drawled, “Don’t you know?”

I helplessly raised a shoulder but did not move my head an inch. He held me trapped in more ways than one. With his heated gaze, the warm glow of his eyes, and that possessive hold around my neck. I knew I could break that grip and leave at any moment. There were at least a dozen moves I could use to escape, but I didn’t want to.

His eyes slipped from mine to linger on my mouth before they slid even lower. Shamelessly, he perused every inch of my body, and I felt that gaze like a physical caress as it glided over my breasts, along my waist, and over the curve of my hips. “You’re mine, my love,” he said, his voice lowering until it was a deep rumble that bordered on a growl. “You are my mate, my woman, my princess.”

With a snap, his gaze jumped back to my face—not audible, but it felt like a rubber band that had stretched to its limit and now settled back into shape. Aramon did not lie. I knew that with every fiber of my being; he hadn’t once lied in the meeting today, either. He hadn’t needed to say a thing to maintain his cover; everyone had simply assumed he was the real deal.

I felt that truth settle over me like a blanket, warming me against the cold of the desert night. It was what I needed to give in to the pull I felt for him. My eyes left the warm glow of his and took their own path along his body, admiring him—from his wide shoulders and the warm red tint of his skin to his heavy pectorals and the sculpted lines of his abs. There was a sharp V that delineated his hips and arrowed into the waistband of his pants. Thinking about where that V led made my breathing hitch and my pulse stutter in anticipation.

I wanted him. He wanted me. Right now, it didn’t need to be any more complicated than that. Reaching out, I placed my palms on his chest. “Want to not take your eyes

off me in the shower?” It was a joke—but I was dead serious too, and not disappointed with his response. He threw back his head and laughed, his chest shaking beneath my fingers, his pulse pounding. Then his hand slid from my throat down between my breasts before joining the one still on my belly. The sensual caress made my legs tremble, but I didn’t need my legs anyway. Once he held my waist, he picked me up, and with a whoosh of rushing air, I was thrown over his shoulder.

His arm pinned my thighs to his chest, and the other slid over my thighs to stroke my now very prone butt. “You are not getting out of that one now that you said it, my love,” he growled. My body bounced and jiggled against him as he stalked from the sitting room, through the bedroom with its massive bed, and straight into the bathing chamber. “I am going to watch you so much you’re going to go crazy, and then I’m going to lick you, and fuck you, and lick you again. That’s a promise, got it?”

## Chapter 13

Evie

If I thought I’d be able to maintain even a shred of control, I was a fool. Once I’d tantalized Aramon with that offer, all bets were off. He didn’t even give me a chance to undress but set me on my feet inside the shower and turned on the tap. I couldn’t even get the world to stop spinning from moving so fast when water splashed on my head—cool but rapidly warming. My dress got stuck to my skin and turned nearly transparent. Aramon was caught in that same spray, droplets rolling down his shoulders, along his throat, and lovingly finding the path of least resistance between his pecs and abs.

“Blazing suns, that’s so fucking pretty,” he said, his words roughly translated, his tone husky and low. “Look at your nipples, pretty woman. Look at that! That’s perfection.” His hands reached to cup them, and I sighed, leaning into that touch. My nipples were diamond hard, aching points. The fabric felt rough against my sensitive

nerves, but that friction eased with the warmth of his palms. The way he was looking at me left no doubt that he found a wet, bedraggled Evie as sexy as a polished Evadne. Maybe he liked Evie even better, and that soothed an ache in my chest I hadn't even realized was there most of the time.

"Oh, yeah?" I dared to tease him. "What about without the dress?" I should have known that taunting him was like waving a red flag in front of a bull, and the result was inevitable. I shrieked with shock when he reached up a hand, caught the neckline of the dress with his claws, and, with a ripping noise, shredded the front all the way to my hips.

"Yes, much better," he agreed in a tone that was almost polite, as though we were talking about the weather. "Thank you for the suggestion, my love," he added with a grin. I opened my mouth to protest that this was a borrowed dress, that he had just destroyed the property of a Queen of Tarkan, but he didn't give me the chance. Dipping down, he pressed his mouth to mine. With pleasure dancing through my veins, I succumbed to the touch.

When our tongues touched and tangled, I was lost—caught in the maelstrom he created between us. My pulse did not pound in my throat; it pounded between my thighs with the building desire. It felt so good to cling to his shoulders and become a woman of passion and feelings only: a sensual creature of instinct. My back collided with the stone wall, and water sluiced hotly over every part of me. Aramon was a bulwark against the outside world, pinning me in the corner, where I was safe, where nothing could ever get to me but him.

His hands claimed me boldly, first my breasts, where he plucked at my sensitive peaks, then they freed me of more of the wet, clingy fabric. The dress fell in tatters at my feet, and I didn't even care because he'd cupped my ass and picked me up, spreading my legs so he could press his still pants-covered cock against my folds. I moaned for him, the sounds I made desperate and lewd, which spurred him on. He

muttered all kinds of dirty things to me, interspersed with a rainfall of compliments that fell on drought-stricken ears. He made me feel desired and beautiful, and he made me feel fully, undeniably me.

Then his hands slipped between us and found my wet folds and the sensitive bud of my clit. I came apart for him in seconds when he applied expert pressure with a pinch of his fingertips. “That’s it, beautiful. Come for me.” And I did. There was no other option but to shatter into a thousand pieces in his arms, to surrender to the tidal wave of pleasure that coursed through me. He growled when I shouted his name, and his face was a dangerous, macabre vision swimming in front of me—the red points of his eyes my center of gravity.

Aramon did not make anything easy, and this was no different. I was still panting through the last shudders of that fierce orgasm, but he was already back to stroking my clit, testing me this time and learning the shape of my most intimate parts. One thick finger speared into my passage, and I jerked in his grip, my heels digging into his ass and my nails into the skin over his shoulders. “Yes, that’s it,” he agreed. “You can come again; I know you can.”

He raised me in his arms as easily as if I were a dainty little flower. My legs went over his shoulders, my ass cradled in his large hands, and he replaced the finger in my core with his tongue. A growl rattled through my flesh, and then he sucked and licked, water dripping all over us from the array of showerheads, his skull gleaming in the bright overhead lights. “Aramon!” I shouted, head thrown back as that tongue slid up and started lapping at my turgid clit. I had nothing to hold onto now, could only balance in his grip and ride out the sensations. It was scary, and it was good, and I felt utterly spent and wrung out when my orgasm crested and crashed.

Limp and weak, my head reeling, he lowered me slowly into his arms, cradling me tenderly against his wide chest. I trembled, suddenly cold, though the water still ran hot over our flesh. Aramon’s leather pants had to be utterly wrecked, and they clung

to my skin as we stood together beneath the spray. “How was that for watching?” he asked, startling a laugh out of me. The laugh caught me by surprise. Emotionally and physically, I felt wrung out, but that laugh was good—it made my chest feel light.

“Perfect,” I told him. I did not think I could handle the rest of the promises he’d made me, but I was very willing to try. Resting my head against his pecs, I breathed slow and deep; I’d try in a minute, when I felt a little stronger. The water turned off then, and cold air struck my skin, raising goosebumps all along my flesh. I started to shiver immediately and burrowed closer against Aramon’s warm chest.

“Come here, my love,” he rumbled against my wet hair. Then, he picked me up bridal style and tromped out of the shower stall with soggy noises, as water dripped from his soaked pants onto the marble floor. He was tender as he wrapped me up in thick, fluffy towels and started to rub me dry. Then, he carried me—with still soggy pants—into the bedroom and slid me beneath the many blankets into the bed. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

I blinked after him, admiring his muscled back and narrow hips as he returned to the bathroom. The shower turned back on a moment later, and my ears perked up when I heard him growl, followed by a long, drawn-out moan that made my core tingle. Did he just go back into the bathroom to jerk off? Why?

My thoughts were confused and spinning by the time he returned, not even two minutes later. Dry this time and completely nude, his cock jutting proudly from his hips and still very much erect. “Still awake?” he asked, eyes twinkling as he turned to give me the best view of his cock, his hand lowering to stroke the rampant length. “Your turn to watch?”

I nodded immediately, now certain I had imagined the sound of that moan—or at least misunderstood what it meant. But Aramon’s brows lowered over his eyes, a frown marring his face, which was oddly handsome despite the ghoulish markings.

“No, you are too tired. I need you rested for all the things I want to do to you.” He opened his mouth, the tip of his tongue licking along one of his sharper canine teeth. “And there’s so much I am going to do to your sexy body, mate.”

Mate. There, he said it again. My body tingled with happiness, veins singing with pleasure. He really was my mate. I hadn’t imagined any of that lust-at-first-sight stuff. Aramon meant home in a huge, terrifying galaxy—a galaxy that had been out to kill me for as long as I could remember. But not really me: Evadne. I had just been in the way. I dared to hope that, with Aramon in my corner, I might finally be safe. Truly safe. Forever. There could be no place safer than at the side of a notorious mercenary, could there?

I slipped my arms from beneath the blankets and stuck them out to him, and he came to me immediately, his mouth splitting into a wide, happy smile. “Oh, yeah?” I said, falling into a by-now-familiar pattern. It was too exciting to tease him, to taunt him. Each time I did, I could not regret it. “Promises, promises. More actions, less talking.” That made him laugh—a deep, throaty sound that washed over me and warmed my skin. It was a pleasure to bask in his mirth and share his smile; it was so full of life. With Aramon, I knew he was always true to himself and always able to look on the bright side. I had never known how much I needed that in my life, but I truly did.

He sauntered closer, his cock swaying tauntingly. It was beautiful—thick as my wrist, long, and crowned with a rounded head so dark it was almost black. The patterned bumps along the shaft were just as Evadne’s gossip had promised. But Aramon’s cock had another surprise: a piercing. One ring through the round, flared head, and bars forming a neat ladder on the upper side. His heavy balls hung beneath that thick length, swaying as he strutted closer. He called me pretty, but truthfully, so was he, and he made my mouth water.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

He hummed deep in his throat as he came to a stop right beside the bed. I rolled onto my side and scooted closer, the cold receding as heat thundered through my veins. I licked my lips, noticing how that made the red glow of his eyes flare brighter and his cock twitch toward his belly. “Ah, sweet princess,” he said, his voice low and rough, “I wanted to let you sleep. You’re so tired. But how you tempt me... You tempt me so blazing much. Too much. Will you wrap those pretty lips around my cock?” When I nodded, he stepped closer, and that was all it took. I opened my mouth, licking his heated flesh as he shuddered and moaned, his hands clenching into fists against his thighs. “Yes, stars, that’s it. Suck me deep, pretty woman.”

So I did, hollowing my cheeks and sucking him deep. I could not hold him properly when I wrapped a hand around his length, and he curled a fist around mine and helped me stroke him in time with the bobbing of my head. His husky groans were all the encouragement I needed, but the taste of him was equally rewarding. I did not know what to expect; I had only ever been with a handful of Xurtal males. This male was nothing like them—his texture, his scent, and his taste all different. Better, at least to me. Aramon was like the scents and flavors I recalled from home: gingerbread, cinnamon, warm cozy afternoons.

Then he slid his hand into my hair, holding me in place so he could pump his hips gently into my mouth, his thighs quivering with each thrust. His jaw was clenched tightly, and his eyes burned holes into my face as he watched me suck his length. It was almost as satisfying to pleasure him this way, to let him use me for his own needs, as it had been to come apart in his arms in the shower before. Almost. My legs shifted restlessly beneath the blankets, my clit ached, and my passage flooded with wetness all over again. I was starting to think he was wrong—I wasn’t too tired. I needed him to fuck me right now.



I began to pull back so I could tell him that, but then his hips stuttered, and with a final thrust and a loud groan, he came. His seed flooded my mouth; it spilled from the corner and dripped down my chin. He tasted good, and he sounded even better, groaning my name: “Evie.” “Blazing stars, that’s good. So good, my sweet,” he groaned as the last of his seed spurted from the flushed, pierced tip. When he pulled back, I licked the semen from my lips, and he groaned again. “That’s so hot.”

Of course he’d think that. Pulling my arms back to curl them safe and warm under the blanket, I felt treasured when he leaned over to tuck the blankets more tightly around me. Then, he dipped his head to brush a kiss over my forehead, and he was gone again, strutting back into the bathing room. He had one hell of an ass—his cheeks tight and his thighs thick with muscle. It wasn’t a bad view at all, but I liked it even better when he returned to wipe up the wet puddles we’d left on the floor. I could appreciate a guy who cleaned up after himself, and I hadn’t expected that of Aramon.

“Let me pull on clean clothes and then we’ll cuddle, my pretty Evie,” he rumbled when he caught my stare. “You’ll need your sleep. I have so many plans for you.” Yeah, he’d said that and I couldn’t wait but now that the passion was cooling again, nerves began to flutter in my belly. Tomorrow, I’d have to return to the negotiations and try again. I did not hold out hope that I could make this alliance take shape without conceding to some kind of export agreement with all parties. It was the last thing the Xurtal Kingdom wanted, but it was still better than risking an invasion.

Aramon returned with pants on—a clearly new set of leather pants—and he was stomping his feet back into his boots. “Why are you getting dressed?” I wondered aloud, and he gave me a very serious look that sent a chill down my spine. Something was up.

“Just a precaution. I’m keeping watch; I don’t trust the situation. But you can sleep, Evie. I’ll keep you safe, as will my brothers outside. We’ve got Jaxin and Gamesh on guard tonight, too.” He had just finished pulling on his second boot when there was a

knock at the door.

## Chapter 14

Aramon

“Get dressed,” I ordered my woman, even though it was the last thing I wanted her to do. I wanted to keep her naked beneath the warm blankets, soft and sensual after our round of sex. If I could, I’d ignore that knock and get her to sleep in my lap, wrapped all warm and safe while I kept watch. She deserved all the rest she could get after that grueling day, but alas, it was not to be. This could be a threat to her safety, and I needed her ready at a moment’s notice.

I waited to see her nod before I turned for the sitting room and went to answer the door. It would have to be someone whom Jaxin was willing to allow entrance this late at night. Darkness had fallen outside the windows, a glittering sky of black studded with millions of stars. The empty expanses of the desert tempted me to go for a mind-clearing flight, but I would never leave my princess. Whatever Evie might say, she was still my princess, and I would continue to think of her that way. Mine.

“What do you want?” I barked, not caring how rude that sounded. I might have altered my tone if it was anyone but this guy, but I doubted it. I did not like the interruption, and truthfully, I would expect any Asrai noble to feel exactly the same. They were the rudest of all, and I didn’t give a Batan’s ass about upholding their good name; they didn’t have one to begin with. Today’s trio was a prime example of that.

Theronix’s expression grew tight, his dark brow lowering. Everything about this asshole was neat as a pin—military straight and regulation length. From the shaved hair on his head to the way he wore his sleeveless uniform, the golden markings along his arms glowed with luster and health over newly bulked-up muscle. I should

admire the male for working so hard to get back in shape after his captivity at the hands of the former crimelord Batok, but that stick up his ass made it impossible.

“Where is the princess?” he asked, his mouth a tight bud in his sour face. He needed to unwind—this dickhead wasn’t even fun to poke anymore. Honestly, I just wanted him out of the way now because I knew how hard he was pressuring my Evie to do a job she never should have been forced to fulfill. These Xurtal bastards had made her a shield to kill for their princess since she was eight.

What royal bastards did that to a child? It was wrong in so many ways that it got my blood pumping with rage every single time I thought about it. Evie never had a choice, and she continued to do this out of a misguided sense of loyalty. Well, once she’d secured this blasted alliance, I was going to make damn sure she knew she did not have to keep up the charade.

“My betrothed is sleeping,” I drawled, crossing my arms over my chest and blocking his path into our suite. He was not welcome here, and I was going to remind him of the claim I had on her as often as I could. I saw him inhale deeply, his chest expanding, and I was reminded that the Xurtal had a great sense of smell—much better than mine. Did he know that Evie and I had sex? I hoped he did; that would rattle his cage and let him know that he had lost control over her.

He bared his teeth and hissed, but he did not back away. I could see Jaxin over his shoulder, and the Rummicaron looked amused—something he should not have been able to feel, by all accounts. Maybe Jaxin was good at faking that shit, but I was pretty sure he had failed his all-important Rummicaron conditioning and felt all the emotions he was supposed to suppress.

“I demand entrance,” Theronix said, jerking my attention from my superior officer back to his assholiness. I could feel the presence of Solear at the back of my mind, peering with intense dislike through my eyes into the Xurtal’s face. I knew he could

sense that double glare; it was an impressive Asrai feat that most never considered.

“Blazing stars! Don't you ever stop to think, ‘Whoa, I’m being such a jerk. I should apologize for my behavior?’” I said, grinning. My words made Jaxin flinch in surprise, his grey features coloring with an emotion I couldn’t decipher. Theronix was caught off-guard as well; his mouth dropped open before he could snap it shut, growling in outrage.

I think he would have attacked me if not for Evie’s timely intervention. Too bad; I would have welcomed that fight. “Theronix, what do you want this late at night?” Her melodic voice sounded so posh and fancy when she pretended to be Evadne, and I was very tempted to say something to make her unravel that act so I could hear and see the real female—my woman.

I turned a little so I could get her in my sights and had to suppress the instincts that surged inside me. Even Solear agreed inside my head that it was starting to look very wrong to see her with the illusion device. He had given us privacy when I’d ravished her, but he was fully present as soon as I’d grown tense from the knock on the door.

Still, she looked stunning in a simple nightgown and a robe tied with a sash, the red being a favorite color for Xurtal females to wear. She stood with a hand against the doorjamb that separated the sitting room from the bedroom, and she looked so elegant like that. Her green hair lay in tousled waves over one shoulder, and her dress and robe clung to every sexy curve.

“We need to discuss the negotiations. I received word from Xurtal; you’ll need to hear this,” Theronix said. My attention snapped back to the jerk in uniform, and I wanted to grab him by his starched collar and toss him out the door. Evie was more impressed by his impertinent tone; she gestured him in with a graceful hand, and I had no choice but to step back and let the bastard in.

He strode past me with a triumphant look on his face that did not become a proper Xurtal warrior. I was very tempted to remind him of that, but Evie was already talking rapidly as she recapped today's events. "What did Xurtal say? Did they have any news? How is Queen Ashcrao doing? Has she passed yet?" I recalled that this was the Queen currently part of the alliance, and with her passing, a very war-hungry crown princess would take her place. Xurtal and other Tarkan Queendoms heavily feared that she'd demand Xyraxin and start conquering others.

Theronix shook his head but waited to speak until Jaxin had closed the door behind him, giving us privacy to talk without anyone listening in. It was obvious, when he glared at me, that he expected me to leave the room too, but I made sure to go to Evie's side and curl my arm around her shoulders. I was not going anywhere, and I wanted her to know she was not alone—she had me.

His expression darkened, flicking from me to Evie and taking in her state of dress and mine. "I see you've sunk to new lows: sleeping with the hired help. I expected better of you." His scathing tone immediately got my hackles up, and I was ready to bite his head off for that remark. "You don't talk to my fiancée that way," I snapped, reining in my desire for violence by the breadth of a hair. The male had no idea how close a call it was, but I knew Evie sensed it by the way she stiffened under my arm. This close, I could see her heartbeat racing in the pulse at her throat, and I didn't want my precious woman to feel lessened. Not because of this jerk, nor because of anyone else.

"She's your fake fiancée," Theronix drawled smugly, as if he held all the cards. I dipped my eyes to Evie to see if she'd dispute it. She knew she was my mate and could say that, claim the betrothal as true right this instant. She didn't, and for a second I was the one feeling lesser, unworthy. But she didn't mean that, she wanted me, I knew it. I couldn't let it bother me; she was simply unwilling to share that with this jerk. Really, he didn't need to know.

Feeling like he had now sufficiently put me in my place, Theronix started talking—first to deny that the Queen had perished, but then adding that her demise was likely imminent. He then began berating my female about her role in the negotiations, reminding her repeatedly that she could not give away any rights to the Xyraxin. The longer it went on, the angrier I became, fuming silently at first, until my frustration morphed into a soft growl. Solear was pacing in the back of my mind like a mind-broken Ferai beast.

Evie listened silently, her poor heart pounding in tune with her anxiety, but she did not object to anything Theronix said. When he started to comment on her attire and her choices again—the ones regarding me—I had enough. He could whine about the negotiations, but he wasn't going to be in that room, so he could jabber all he wanted. Evie could do it her way once he was gone. But us? Her choices? No, that was a line he did not get to cross.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

“Enough,” I growled, and I stepped in front of Evie to block the bastard’s line of sight. “You are done. You have nothing constructive to say. You can get the fuck out of here.” I raised my hand to grab him by the shoulder and steer him away, and he turned with me, taking three steps toward the door. He was protesting loudly, but he was moving, and that’s why I didn’t expect the move. I should have, and Slear screamed in my mind as we both noticed it, but too late.

A blow struck me in the neck—not one of those cute, dainty ones Evie had laid on me, though the move was similar. He hit my vocal cords, silencing my growl, and a sharp pinch told me he’d struck me with an injection. Whatever it was, it acted fast, rolling over me like a tidal wave of heaviness. My body went limp; I sank to my knees and crashed heavily onto the fancy marble floor. That floor was hard, and I felt every bruise as I struck it with my head and shoulders, pain radiating through my kneecaps.

Whatever he’d injected me with, it was a paralytic, but it did not dull my mind or my nerves. I continued to feel and hear everything that happened around me. First, I heard Evie’s shocked squeak and an angry demand for Theronix to explain himself. I could not see her, but I could see the bastard’s boots as he stood over me.

“They don’t see the danger!” Theronix spat. “But if you are killed, the delegates will know. They will fear for their lives and surrender to our terms. Pelarios will have this treaty written and signed before noon. This is how you can serve the Xurtal Kingdom. Prepare yourself for your final act.” Then the bastard had the nerve to add, “This is a great honor. Now kneel and receive your fate.”

I howled in my mind, but I could not make my vocal cords obey. No, I couldn’t do

anything—I couldn't even breathe. Ah, stars, what had he dosed me with? Evie—where was she? I couldn't see her, and now my vision was growing dim, spots dancing in front of my eyes in dizzying patterns as the world went gray around the edges.

“Honor? Fuck you, Theronix! If you want to kill me, you can try, but you won't succeed!” Ah, brave woman, I loved those fighting words, but I feared the worst. I knew my Evie, knew her strengths and weaknesses from the way she moved, but I'd seen the Xurtal spar in the gym. I knew he was formidable and almost completely back in shape by now. She did not stand a chance.

I saw only a pinprick now, with everything else black except for a narrow spot of gray. The foot of a table leg, the edge of a rug, that was all I could see. I heard everything though, and it sounded awful. Fighting was supposed to be fun, but this wasn't fun at all. Listening to Evie as she struggled with that man, it was the worst thing I'd ever gone through. I'd sat with Solear in his mind while he starved and the rubble pressed down on him for days and days. To feel so helpless while my woman fought for her life? That was a fate worse than death.

First, I heard her scream and Theronix curse. I could hear them trade blows and the clatter of something as it crashed to the floor and broke. Then, I heard thudding and a muffled sound I could not place, and I vividly pictured the bastard with his hands around my female's throat. No. Enough! I couldn't take this. I would not lie here and do nothing while she lay dying. It did not even cross my mind that I was dying as well, my lungs as paralyzed as the rest of me, unable to draw in breath.

Solear, I said in my mind, reaching out to the raging, terrified presence of my oldest ally, my best friend, my beloved brother. I need you right now. Calm down. You will save us. Understand? Come. NOW. The raging, fearful shape of my brother shifted where he rode in the back of my skull. My words reached him in that deep place of fear—the fear of abandonment, of being alone, of losing those he loved. And he knew



what I was asking of him: a practice both thought impossible and cursed by my kind.

Solear did not hesitate, not for a moment. His presence surged inside my brain, filling me, swelling along the pathways that threaded through my mind and my flesh, knitting us together as Asrai twins. For one second, I could see through his eyes—vividly and in bright color. He was on the bridge and had suddenly risen to his feet, startling those around him: the Tarkan grunt at the helm, the Rummicar on at the weapons station, and Sineater in the Captain's seat.

“Something is happening to Aramon,” I heard the second-in-command say as my brother's body thudded heavily to the floor, echoing what had happened to me. And then I was back in my own skin, but I wasn't alone—Solear was with me. We surged to our feet together: heart pumping, lungs heaving, and vision flaring back to life. Neither of us had to think about what to do; we moved as a single unit, one entity.

There she was, on her back on the cold floor with Theronix on top of her, his hands around her slender neck. We leaped together, flooded with rage, and crashed into the bastard. Rolling along the floor, we traded blows—the Xurtal male caught completely by surprise and unprepared for the strength of a doubling Asrai. This power came at great cost, and that was soon apparent, but it was all we had needed to win this round.

Blood dripped from our nose, and our head felt like it was ready to burst, filled to overflowing with two minds instead of one. Fire raced through our veins and made our heart ache in our chest. Theronix fell from a final blow, and then we, too, collapsed with agony bursting along our nerves. It was a pain so awful, so indescribable, that we knew why this was cursed. And yet, we did not regret it—not when we saw Evie rise, gasping and panting. She made it.

## Chapter 15

Evie

Aramon!” I screamed through a crushed windpipe, as I struggled to get up and reach him. Chaos surrounded me, but my eyes had only one focus: him, my mate. He’d collapsed next to Theronix, and he wasn’t moving again. This time, I feared it was final because blood was dripping from his eyes, his nose, and even his ears. It looked awful to see all that red coat his ivory, skull-like features. It pooled beneath his head, staining the white marble floors.

I did not know how Jaxin had known something was wrong, but they burst into the room just as Aramon wrested Theronix from on top of me. Jaxin was restraining the bastard, and someone at my side was steadying me, helping me up. They tried to steer me away from Aramon, but I wouldn’t let them. Wrenching my arm from the grip on my elbow, I stumbled forward and threw myself down at Aramon’s side.

“No! Come on, wake up, Aramon. What’s wrong? What did you do? Come back to me! That’s a fucking order! Do you hear me? Come back right this instant. I need you...” Wiping the blood from his face with my robe, I searched for a pulse but couldn’t find one. I whirled on Theronix and jabbed a finger at the Xurtal male. “Tell me what you injected him with! What did you do?!”

Two mercenaries held him between them, his arms tightly restrained behind his back, but the male was not resisting. He laughed. “What do you think? There’s only one poison that makes a male bleed that way.” That was not true. Sadly, there were many poisons that could, and I’d had to learn about all of them—their tastes and their symptoms. But I knew instantly which poison he talked of, as it was considered so cruel and awful it had been banned on Xurtal. There was no cure.

My heart dropped in my chest; pain seemed to swallow me whole. I could not lose him—not like this. Not my always-so-irreverent, full-of-life Aramon. Not him. A sob rose in my chest, and I muffled the sound with a bloody hand, trembling all over. “Aramon, please...”

“It’s not poison,” someone said, but that came to me from far away, beyond the rushing in my ears. I couldn’t breathe, though not because of the bruising around my neck. I couldn’t breathe through the fear. Hands were reaching past me for my mate, but I felt as feral as Aramon’s twin sometimes became. I slapped the first hand away by instinct, striking it on the wrist with a hard blow. The second I caught with a pinch at a pressure point in the elbow, then threw myself forward to protectively cover Aramon’s prone body.

“Don’t touch him! Aramon, wake up! Please!” I ducked my head and pressed it against his chest, searching for a heartbeat. If it wasn’t poison, then what? Why wouldn’t he wake up? I wanted him to open his eyes and grin that cheeky, slightly sinister grin. I wanted him to laugh and ask me why I was making such a fuss. I wanted my loud-mouthed, often slightly obnoxious Aramon back.

I could not hear a heartbeat. I could not hear him breathe either, and panic clawed at me, filling me. There was so much of it that it felt too big to keep inside, and it spilled over—spilled in tears, in wrenching sobs, in the words that fell from my lips. Maybe it spilled in other ways too. I’d never know, because the mind of an Asrai was as confusing as it was complex.

“Ah, sweet princess, why do you cry?” I swear that sounded like his voice, and he was saying exactly the things I had imagined he would say. “See? I knew she loved me. You lose, Tass.” It felt like a warmth enfolded my head, but that had to be the lack of oxygen from my stupid, useless crying. Then it felt like warmth against my back, just like it felt when Aramon held me. “Princess, I’m okay. I’m here. It was just a little stint of doubling—nothing to worry about.”

It was the mixture of words, which I did not expect, that made me flick my eyes up to his face. There was that grin, but I had to be imagining it; I still couldn’t sense a pulse inside his chest. His red eyes were stained with blood at the corners, but they glimmered with life. His hand slid up my spine, curling gently beneath my hair to

touch the bruises that marred my flesh. His expression went dark as a thunderstorm. “Where is that bastard? He needs to pay for these.”

“Aramon?” It really was him, but how? I grabbed his hand and pressed it to my cheek, leaning close. His fingers were warm, and they wriggled in my grip before settling against my face. “How is this possible?” I recalled his previous words: he had said doubling, that it was doubling that had done this. But that word held no meaning for me in this context.

He sat up slowly, but he caught me around the waist and pulled me into his lap. I went willingly, refusing to let go of him for even a moment, and threw my arms around his neck to hold him close. My fingers roamed over his bare skin to test how real this was. He felt alive—everything about him seemed alive—but I was certain I still felt no pulse in his neck, and I kept checking for it.

“It’s bloody illegal, that’s what it is,” Jaxin barked out, startling me. I had forgotten about our company, about anything but Aramon’s apparent death-but-not-death. Awareness rushed in, and I felt unease shiver down my spine at how absorbed I’d been in him. Anyone could have sunk a dagger into my back while I’d focused on him; I would have never noticed.

The head of my security detail stood behind me with his portable laser cannon cradled against his massive chest with one arm. His black armor gleamed, but blood streaked along his left palm as he held the gloved hand out and pointed at my mate. “Those idiots doubled: Solear joined Aramon in his body to save you from that nutcase and warn the Varakartoom that you were in danger.”

I glanced from the weapon master to the others—Tass, the Tarkan guy, Raukash, and a human male I hadn’t noticed before. Then I glanced at Aramon, my eyes widening with confusion. Solear in his head? Sharing a body? All those things seemed as implausible and unscientific as they were bizarre. He rolled a shoulder. “Don’t listen

to what he says. I'm fine, anyway. Where did you take that asshole? I'm not done with him."

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

He rose to his feet fluidly and picked me up in his arms as he did it. I found myself cradled bridal-style against his chest, my robe flaring open and exposing my legs beneath the short nightgown. Aramon noticed it at the same time I did, and our eyes clashed. Then he grinned. “Fine. It can wait until tomorrow.” He wagged his brows cheekily.

“No, we need a medic right now!” I demanded. “Better yet, a doctor.” I wanted someone in here this instant to take care of Aramon. He needed a full workup, scans of his brain and heart. I wanted someone to tell me that he was fine because I still couldn’t wrap my head around that possibility.

To my surprise, Aramon rumbled a very vehement agreement. However, when that was followed by, “You’ll have to turn on your illusion device. Will that interfere with his scans of your neck?” I realized he wanted the doctor for me, not himself. It was also the first time I realized that my illusion device had gotten turned off in the scuffle. None of the mercenaries had so much as batted an eye at my changed appearance, and Aramon had gotten me too used to seeing my own skin. I hadn’t even noticed. I couldn’t believe I’d made that kind of mistake, and it made my heart race when I realized what had happened. I was a fool, and this could spell the end of this alliance before it even began. Word would get out now—I had no doubt.

“No,” I said, but thinking of this failure to keep the secret, and the possibility of relief, suddenly made me all too aware of every ache and bruise. My neck was the worst, but I’d suffered scrapes and bumps all over, including several lacerations on my feet from a broken vase. “I want the doctor for you, you idiot. You just fucking died.” Now I was slipping up and using the all-purpose English swear word; it was too easy to let it slip into my vocabulary, and somehow there seemed to be a perfect

match for its use in Aramon's native language, and he liked to use it a lot.

There was a sudden silence after my words. The mercenaries with us seemed frozen in place. Then the one human guy barked a laugh, muttered "fuck" under his breath, and shook his head, which made Aramon turn to him and growl, "Watch your fucking tone, Thatcher. Gene mods and cybernetics or not, I will kick your fucking ass." And there he went, swearing with that word that translated to "fuck." The guy, Thatcher, raised his palms in surrender, but he still chuckled, and his eyes were on me.

"A doctor can be called," Jaxin interjected before Aramon could start in on the guy a second time. He seemed to want to, but he shut up as his boss started talking. "But I do not think it's wise to call for one. We can't be sure they are trustworthy. I could request Dravion to do a house call, but it will take a bit longer for him to get here... And you know how he is about leaving the Varakartoom."

Aramon huffed, clearly unsettled by this information, but he did not protest. "Fine, just bring me the medkit in that case. I'll take care of my mate myself." Another sudden silence fell, and I glanced from Thatcher to Jaxin to Tass to watch their expressions. Not surprised exactly, they were all watching me to see if I'd deny it. I wouldn't. I clung more tightly to Aramon's neck and wished they'd leave. I was grateful for their rescue, of course, but I was feeling far too naked at this point: no illusion, only a flimsy nightgown and thin robe. It was damn cold too, and I was painfully aware of my nipples poking at the silky fabric.

"Fine. If I may suggest, your Highness," Jaxin said, directing his words at me with a polite and deferential tone that we all knew I did not deserve. They could plainly see I was a fraud, but Jaxin dipped into a polite bow as if I were still the Xurtal princess. "Leave the bruises; nothing says 'assassination attempt' better than visible injuries to those delegates."

To the sound of Aramon growling furiously that he'd never let that happen, the three

mercenaries left the room. Almost, I'd call Jaxin's rapid departure fleeing, but that was a little too undignified for the massive weapon master. Once the door shut behind them, Aramon stalked from the sitting room to the bedroom and gently laid me down on the bed. When I refused to let go of his neck, he was forced to sit down on the edge next to me. "Idiot? Did you really call me an idiot just now?" he murmured into my hair, a hint of laughter in his voice.

"Yeah, you're an idiot," I said, doubling down. Ah, damn it. I still didn't understand what the hell was going on, and if there wasn't going to be a doctor, Aramon would have to do the explaining. "Tell me what this doubling is. Is Solean okay? Did it hurt him too?"

The knock on the door prevented Aramon from answering, and I finally released him. He returned in a flash, his boots thudding against the floor as he jogged back in with a large matte-black crate in his arms. The bed dipped when he set it down at my feet, and I gave in, letting him take care of some of my aches and scrapes first. I was not feeling up to physically wresting the handheld medical scanner from him, and that's what it would have come down to. "But not the bruises around my neck. Jaxin is right; it will be the most convincing evidence."

Aramon started to protest again—vehemently, and with a lot of swear words, some I'd never heard before. When I pointed out that prolonging these negotiations was like prolonging the threat to my life, he shut up, his teeth snapping together. "As soon as the alliance is signed, the assassins stop having a reason to kill me. I'd be safe. I can deal with a little discomfort for a few hours. I'm tough."

"I know you're tough," he said immediately. "But I hate that you'd be in pain. It's wrong. You should never be in pain. Never." He said it in such rough, heartfelt tones that I felt seared to the bone. I couldn't recall when anyone had ever cared that much about my feelings. Not even Evadne had ever said anything like that, and she'd been basically my only friend.



“I’ll be all right,” I told him, hiding a wince when talking made my throat ache. “And now you need to stop avoiding my questions and talk.” That made him laugh—obnoxious male that he was—and, while shaking his head, he kept working on the cuts on my feet. His hands were infinitely gentle as he rotated my ankle to get a better angle, and I let him care for me because it was nice. But I was starting to struggle with the impulse not to clobber him over the head if he didn’t start talking.

Like he sensed how my thoughts had turned violent, he smirked over my toes at me. Then, he finally handed me the scanner and started to explain. “Asrai twins or triplets often share a psychic gift. Most commonly, it’s telepathy, but there are other options. Solear and I are strong telepaths. Our gift became stronger because of what Solear went through as a teen—caught beneath rubble for over a week while I couldn’t find him.”

He fell silent but, this time, it wasn’t to avoid the conversation—his expression turned introspective as he remembered the past. I took the chance to run the scanner over his chest, checking his heart first. Though I was not a trained medic, I had basic first-aid training that had been meticulously kept up to date. The scanner told me there was nothing wrong with Aramon’s heart; it was beating at a perfectly optimized ten beats a minute. I did a double-take at the number and then searched for my datapad to locate what the average heart rate should be for a healthy Asrai male. I was certain that ten beats a minute was not normal.

“Doubling is, like Jaxin said, a banned practice in nearly every Asrai fiefdom. It’s dangerous, painful, and often results in death for one or both twins.” He said that so casually that my heart dropped into my stomach. Death? He’d risked death to save me—risked the life of his brother to do it. How could he do that? I opened my mouth, a protest on my lips, but he raised a hand to silence me.

“It was our choice, and it was the only choice. I was dying already. Theronix injected me with a paralytic, and it had stopped my lungs from working. If Solear had not

come into my mind when he did, I would have died, you would have died, and then Slear would have died of sadness. What would that have achieved? Nothing. It was our only option, and it was our risk to take.”

He picked up the scanner, stared at the reading of his impossibly slow heart, and chuckled. “Ah, that used to be more like forty. No wonder you couldn’t find my pulse.” I hadn’t told him that. How did he know I had been unable to locate his heartbeat? “Side effect,” he said with a casual shrug. “The body is not meant to contain more than one Asrai soul, mind, entity—whatever you want to call it. It overloads the nerves, the heart, the muscles—everything. Briefly, we were super strong, and that allowed us to defeat Theronix. Then the strain became too much, and we collapsed.”

I didn’t think he realized how easily he called himself and Slear’s combined essence ‘we’ when he spoke about it. It was clearly natural to him, but I still struggled to wrap my head around it. He talked about great strain and overloading, but none of that could be picked up on the scanner. The only sign of change was his lowered heart rate, but that did not seem to worry the scanner. “Fine, you’re okay,” I agreed, “and it saved us. But you’re still seeing Dravion when we get back to the Varakartoom. Promise?”

He grinned and nodded, his smile radiant.

## Chapter 16

### Aramon

She fell asleep quicker than she herself wanted to; I could see it in her face—the way sleep caught her by surprise. I had never planned to sleep tonight, but now I was definitely too wired to even attempt it. My entire body buzzed and hummed with energy, a side effect of a successful doubling; it would fade, though my heart would

always remain more powerful, slower, and quicker to heal.

As a young boy, I'd read countless illegal publications about the phenomenon, and that was one of the things the scientists had yet to explain. It was going to be an advantage in the future, so I could only be happy about tonight's results. No, not entirely. My eyes slid to Evie's slender, pale neck and lingered on the dark ring of bruises that had formed there. They were still deepening, a ring of purple and black in the unmistakable shape of fingerprints.

She was a brave woman, willing to do whatever it took to see this mission through to the end. She had no idea how badly I wanted to burn the entire Xurtal Kingdom to the ground for what they'd put her through, for what they'd demanded of her. I knew she did not do this out of loyalty to Theronix. If she had any loyalty left, none remained now. She did it because she cared about all the innocent people on the planet who had nothing to do with what had happened to her. I was neither that good nor that kind. They could all burn if it were up to me.

Sliding lower on the bed, I gently tucked her into my arms and took comfort in knowing that she was safe right now. We'd weathered this storm, and we'd come out victors with the next and the next. For tonight, I'd keep her warm and shelter her with my body. Tomorrow, I'd make those lazy delegates sign that fucking treaty, even if I had to hold a gun to their heads.

When she started to stir a few hours later, I'd been stewing in my anger at the situation and my rage for Theronix. Solear had reached out to calm me, but each time he did, he spun off into his own anger, unable to find a cool-headed anchor in me the way he usually did. At least I knew that the captain was at his side, there for him when I couldn't be.

"Hi," Evie whispered softly, rolling over. Her warm smile as she greeted me soothed the frayed edges inside of me, the way I usually did for my brother. She was

beautiful, but it bothered me that I still had not seen all of her without the Evadne mask. Her red contacts were still in place, as was the green dye in her hair. I had contented myself during the night to steal peeks at the coppery red roots near her skin. That was her—the real her.

“Hi, my love,” I said, giving in to one impulse I could surrender to, not the vengeful, murderous ones, but my passion for her, my desire to claim my mate. When I couldn't fight, I needed to fuck to relieve the tension coursing through my veins. I wanted, needed that with her, right then. She sighed against my lips as I moved close to kiss her, her hands reaching up to cup my head and hold me. I didn't have words the way I usually did, nothing rose to the tip of my tongue. I simply needed to be with her, and no one else.

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We were on the same page, our tongues gently sliding together, passion brewing but still slow, waiting to explode. I wanted her to know how much she meant to me, so I made myself take the time. This shouldn't be rushed. It felt like I was worshipping her as I trailed kisses along her cheek and down her neck, gently caressing her injuries before sliding lower. I was going to make it my mission to worship every inch of her skin.

When I sucked a nipple into my mouth through the silky fabric of her nightgown, she arched her spine and moaned. Her legs moved restlessly beneath the blankets, and that patience I'd been fighting for started to slip, just a little. She smelled ready, and when I slid my hands between her thighs to test her wetness, I knew she was ready. Wet and warm, silky soft, ready to receive me.

But I wasn't done worshipping her yet. I needed more—her taste in my mouth, in my veins, filling my lungs. The desire to cover myself with her scent as I covered her in mine was overwhelming. I had never been one to deny myself anything—there was no point in suffering. Spearing her core with two fingers made her tremble beneath me, arch her back, and tilt her hips. She was offering herself to me, and I intended to take everything she had.

I spread my fingers wide inside of her, which made her moan and thrash her head against the pillows. When I threw her leg over my shoulder and dipped low, she clutched at my shoulders, urging me on by pressing her hips up and canting them toward my face. Oh, yeah, I was going to feast on those pretty pink petals. My first long lick made my head spin; she smelled so good, tasted divine, and though my cock ached fiercely to sink into that precious channel, I settled down to take my time.

Licking the tiny pink bud at the top of her slit made her moan shamelessly, and when I licked and fucked her with my fingers at the same time, she shattered. “Ah, Aramon... Fuck that feels good.” Her sounds only spurred me on, and I set out to do it again, and again.

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Evie

I was falling apart, and I didn’t care. Aramon held me together with his hands while he drove me to the brink with his mouth. Like in the shower last night, he kept coming back for more, as if this was the best thing he’d ever done, like he never wanted to leave.

“Please,” I begged when my clit got too sensitive after the third orgasm. With my hands, I pushed against his shoulders, then his head, but he didn’t want to let go. “Too much,” I said, twisting my hips away. That made him jerk his head up, his red eyes glowing with a feral light from inside his dark eye sockets. My skin broke out in goosebumps beneath that gaze; it wasn’t quite right. It was the gaze of a beast, a predator, a male with power, and he was willing to use it.

For a breath, we stared at each other—prey and predator locked together. I felt the pounding of my heart in my throat, and my muscles slowly began to grow tense. I did not know what he was going to do, and that unpredictability made the moment stretch out. His mouth opened, his tongue flicked out, and he ran the tip over the front of his teeth, his head slowly tilting while he kept staring. “Too much? Impossible...” he drawled, his voice dark as sin.

He let go of my hips and prowled up my body, his arms caging me to the mattress as he planted them on either side of my head. My clothing had shifted and become dislodged from his touches; the nightgown was rucked up around my waist, and my

panties were simply gone. But he was still wearing leather pants, the material stretched tight over his hard cock. I could even see the shape of the ring at the head pressing against the leather—it was that tight.

“You can take more,” he said to me, “much more.” It was a threat rather than a promise; he wasn’t asking for permission for what he had planned. I didn’t mind because I knew he’d never harm me, and the sight of his cock trapped behind his leather pants had me aching for more. I wanted to find out what those piercings would feel like, what the ridges would do to me. I wanted to know what it would feel like to be claimed by my savage, alien mercenary.

His biceps bulged as he shifted his weight to one arm and lowered his hand to free his cock. “You can take this, can’t you, my love?” His fist closed around his length as he pulled it free. The dark head gleamed, and the piercing glittered when it caught the light. My core ached for him even as I feared it; he was big, and it had been a while since I’d last done this. “You can,” Aramon repeated firmly, as if he knew what I was thinking.

Hooking my leg over his arm, he pinned it to my chest. That position opened up my core to him and he looked his fill with a satisfied grin, giving his cock a few experimental tugs. “So pretty. Pretty once stuffed with my cock. It’ll look so good, feel so good. You want to feel good, don’t you?” I nodded immediately, my mouth too dry to answer him any other way, but thankfully that was good enough.

He shifted on his knees, and I could feel the leather of his pants brush against my ass, the heat of his thighs warming my skin. Canting his hips forward, he lined the pierced head of his cock up with my opening, and we both hissed. He was warm, and just that butterfly touch sent heat spiraling through my bloodstream. It didn’t look like he’d fit; the head was thick and rounded, and when he started pressing in, it felt like too much. It burned.

“You can do it. You will do it,” Aramon ordered, and he kept pressing forward, an inescapable force. Once past the first tight ring of muscle, I felt like I’d run a marathon: my chest was slick and I was panting. My nerves felt like they could not decide between pleasure or pain. Then, the piercing scraped over my G-spot and I saw lightning—a sharp burst of pleasure that had me convulse beneath him. He laughed in triumph and his hips surged to meet mine, embedding him even deeper in my core. Now, I felt the natural bumps that lined his cock and I felt the row of the bars that pierced the topside of his shaft like a ladder.

He pulled back, able to move only an inch inside my tight clasp, and then pushed back in with a powerful thrust. I slid across the bed as more of him sank inside, and pleasure danced like bubbles through my veins. He was too big, and it should have hurt, but he was making it work. He was stretching me, filling me; we were headed for a single resolution, and once in motion, it was impossible to stop. The bumps and piercings rubbed along my passage, stimulating my nerves and the thick head and ring hit my G-spot each time he thrust back inside.

The orgasm that crested this time came bearing down on me like a freight train. I screamed his name, clawed at his shoulders, and was met with a pleased, husky chuckle. His hips picked up the pace, pumping roughly into me, thrusting through the tight clench of my orgasm. He did not let up; he did not let me adjust, and I found that I didn’t need it. I could take him, just like he’d told me I would. Every textured inch slid into me now, and it felt so good.

His skull-like face was tight with his own rising pleasure, a macabre grin dancing on his lips. Every exhale was a rough burst of air that coasted over my heated face and cooled the wet fabric that clung to my breasts, courtesy of his mouth earlier.

“More?” he said, and though phrased like a question, he did not wait for an answer. He hauled me closer in his arms, coming down on his elbows, and increased the pace even more. Now, there was pressure from his pelvis against my clit with each thrust,



and I could not hold on any longer. I came on his cock a second time, and this one struck so hard that my muscles seized around him. He couldn't pull out or back in—I held him that tight. His eyes gleamed, fire dancing in the dark sockets, and as my pleasure began to ebb, his cock jerked hard and hot; thick seed burst from him with a rough shout. “Fuck, Evie. That is so good.”

He groaned as his cock kept jerking with each rope of seed, and as the pressure mounted inside of me, I felt another wave of pleasure rise and crest—not quite an orgasm, but close. Dizzy because I'd held my breath without noticing, the world spun around me, but the red glow of his eyes anchored me. He collapsed forward, shifting to a shoulder at the last moment so he would not crush me. “Ah, Evie...” His mouth was right at my ear, nuzzling the side of my face tenderly. He didn't say anything else, and I had a feeling that, for once, my Aramon was lost for words.

It didn't take him long to catch his breath—a slow minute, and that was it. Then he shifted onto his elbow and rose above me. His cock was still buried deep, and the shift made me aware of our cooling bodies and my highly sensitive nerves. When he pulled out, a gush of wetness slipped from my passage with him, and he groaned. “Fuck, that's a pretty sight.” Reaching out with a hand, he swirled his fingers through the stickiness dripping from my opening. Then he smeared it into my folds with a satisfied groan. “All mine.”

## Chapter 17

### Aramon

I was very disappointed that there wouldn't be time for more cuddling. There should always be cuddling after sex, especially with my mate, but she insisted she had to get up and get showered for the next round of negotiations. I sulked about it until my eyes landed on the bruises that marred her neck. Then, I was as eager to get this over with as she was. Once everyone saw how that bastard had marked her, she would

finally let me heal them.

Then I thought about the Xurtal male who had done this, and my blood felt like molten lava in my veins. Fury and rage clashed in my head; the murderous desire to get my hands on Theronix so strong that it drew Solear's attention. I will help. Good thing I could always count on my brother for a little plotting of murder and mayhem, because there was no way I was letting that bastard walk away. Absolutely no way.

"You can't kill him," Evie said. She was braiding her hair with agile, clever fingers. The result was something pretty and complicated-looking, but it hadn't taken her more than a few minutes to do one side. Now, she was working on the other. She had already turned on the illusion device that dangled so temptingly from her belly button. Her flat stomach was left exposed by the dress she'd pulled on, and I kept getting distracted by her curves and her exposed skin. Still hot—even green.

I shrugged at her astute comment. "Why not? He deserves it," I growled as my hands clenched into fists, picturing wrapping them around his neck. First, I'd have to find out where Jaxin had taken him and whether he'd even told the Ovt guards—the ones who pretended to guard this location but really just lazed around in the sun all day. Then I'd slip in, take care of it, and I knew my friends wouldn't even bat an eye once it was done.

"He only did what he did to serve the greater good of the Xurtal Kingdom," Evie said as she finished tying off her last braid. "It wasn't personal." To my ears, she sounded uncertain, as if she were wondering internally if it was personal after all. It sure felt personal to me. "He said that if I were dead, Pelarios could finish the negotiations, and all delegates would be properly aware of how big a threat is out there. They would sign without demanding Xyraxin." She rose to her feet with a final toss of her braids and smoothed her hands over the silk skirt that draped around her hips in delicate folds. "Done. Let's go."

She moved to step past me, but I caught her by the wrist. My fingers wrapped all the way around—a shackle against her flesh—but her skin shocked me, courtesy of the illusion device. She had to be so blazing uncomfortable, but you couldn't tell from her serene expression. "I don't give a Batan's ass about the greater good of the Xurtal Kingdom. I only want to keep you safe, understand?"

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She had frozen in place when I restrained her, her head down as she glanced at my large, red hand around her slender wrist. Then she tilted her chin, and our eyes collided, her expression still cool and serene—the princess once again, instead of the Evie from an hour ago, the one screaming my name as she came on my cock. “I know that, Aramon. The sooner this is over, the better. Please.”

She did not say what that please was for, but I understood. “Don’t go after him.” I couldn’t promise her that. I wouldn’t give her my word if I did not intend to keep it. “Later,” I said, and that had to be good enough. When she nodded, tension eased in my chest, but it came back when we moved to leave for the conference room. I wished I was wearing my armor, which I was so used to that it felt as comfortable as my own skin. In my Asrai noble attire, I could not carry as many supplies or weapons as I’d like, but I’d strapped what I could into hidden pockets and pouches against my back.

Evie glided along on my arm as I escorted her from our chambers to the meeting space. She might not have been a true princess, but damn if she didn’t know how to walk like one. She’d also chosen her dress and hairstyle very carefully, pulling everything away from her neck so there was no way to avoid seeing those bruises. The illusion device had altered the way the light reflected off her skin, allowing people to see her pale, human tones as green, but the device did not diminish the dark, finger-shaped shadows.

When we strode into the meeting room, everyone was already there—quite the opposite of yesterday. Jaxin had arranged that to allow for the maximum impact of those bruises. I’d never realized what a tactician the Rummicarons male was, but I shouldn’t have been surprised; they were known for their cool, calculated plans. As

Evie and Jaxin had planned, everyone looked at her when we arrived, and gasps went up all around the table.

The Tarkan King rose to his feet, leathery wings flaring wide, as he rumbled, “Who did that to you, Princess Evadne? Was there another attack?!” His voice carried, silencing anyone who hadn’t been paying the proper amount of attention. This was when the Ovt referee took notice, rising with a trembling of his puffy jowls, green spots flaring brightly across his face and chest. The three Asrai males also came to their feet—two of them, twins, sharing a look that communicated far more.

The Rhico didn’t lumber to his feet, but he shook his head furiously. “Ah, Evadne, what a despicable act. Has the male responsible been caught?” My fists grew tight, and anger flooded me. Caught, yes. Punished? Not yet. But I would get to that, as promised, later.

At least it appeared that the Viridara male was properly appalled. As the biggest voice demanding proof of these threats that Xurtal and Evadne faced, that was a good sign. He seemed properly impressed that the danger was real now, just as Evie had hoped to demonstrate with this tactic.

“Ah, you poor thing,” the only human present said when the male voices had died down. That was the mate of Kalzudaud, the acting Tarkan King of Daudiras. She hurried around the table to place her hands in Evie’s, holding her as she peered left and right to study the markings. “I’m a doctor. Let me take care of those; they look nasty.”

Blazing stars, that was a bad idea. If a doctor took scans of Evie, they’d know she wasn’t Xurtal; we couldn’t have that. But Evie smiled gently and nodded. “Thank you, Caitlyn. I would appreciate that. Last night, when this happened, we did not want to cause a disruption.”

Her words made the twinless Asrai scoff loudly, a snarl curling his lips. I snarled back immediately, stepping in front of my woman and holding out my arms protectively at my sides. “Oh, really? Who’s to say it wasn’t her betrothed who did that? Could have been a little bedplay gone wrong, and they figured they’d use it to convince us. Huh? Raise your hands, Asrai. Show us how those fingerprints match!”

He went too far; words failed me as I leaped forward across the table to grab him by the neck. I’d show him by giving him a set of my fingerprints for comparison. Nobody spoke of my Evie that way. A vicious snarl met mine as he raised his hands to block my reaching hands, too little, too late. He was no match for my strength and training, for the strength of my doubly enhanced heart. My fingers closed around his neck, clenching tight, and I shook him for good measure. “Say that again! I dare you, say that again, you bastard. Nobody insults my princess.”

They had to peel me off the bastard with combined forces. The Rhico hauled me off him by the back of my neck, Kalzudaud yanked me by one arm, and the Sune male, Actor, had shifted to his hybrid form and clung to my left. The twin Asrai did not help their kinsman from the ground where he remained; instead, they leaned over him to spit in his face.

“Only you would say something that despicable. No wonder your father has yet to find you a bride,” came the words from the Viridara male. He had not stuck out a hand to help but leaned back casually in his seat as he observed the chaos. Then he glanced at me and nodded politely, and I felt something strange happen inside my chest. Did a high-born, noble Viridara male just acknowledge me? Treat my feral anger as right, as true? For a blinding moment, I stood there, surrounded by males much better than me, and felt like I belonged. But that was crazy to think.

Then I glanced over my shoulder at Evie and realized that she’d pressed her hands to her heart, looking at me with emotion swimming in her eyes. Caitlyn was next to her, holding a tissue regenerator but not using it as she too stared at the chaos I’d caused.

No, I hadn't caused this. That stuck-up Asrai noble had, and he'd lost any goodwill with the others, even his own kind.

Kalzudaud was the last to let go of me, but his hand became a clasp around my shoulder that offered support rather than restraint. "I do believe it might be better if you leave, Tophear," he rumbled in a voice like an avalanche. "You cannot go around accusing a princess and her consort of such things."

It did not satisfy my need to beat the crap out of that pompous ass, and that desire was fueled by my need for vengeance against Theronix. Still, it was nice to see the male sprawled out on the floor in front of me, stared out of the room by everyone present. Disapproval shadowed many faces, and for once, it wasn't directed at me. He rose to his feet with a snarl, wiping the spit off his face with the sleeve of his long, deep-blue robe. As he walked away with his head held high, he made sure to give me a wide berth. I grinned at his departing back.

I followed him, making sure he could not come near my mate and strike her in a fit of anger. It was not out of the realm of possibility; the Asrai could be petty like that, and I was willing to count myself among them. Not that I'd ever strike Evie—but strike someone because they pissed me off? Anytime.

When I returned to my mate's side, I was quick to draw her into my arms, and she came immediately. "Are you okay?" I asked her, pressing my forehead to hers. It felt good, even when her illusion device gave me a tiny, impertinent shock. It felt good to be able to do that in front of all these people, and nobody questioned my right to do so. She nodded, leaning a little further into me, her hands pressed against my chest. She was shaken by the situation, but she was trying not to let anyone see it.

"For the record," Caitlyn announced, her voice and accent reminding me of Aderians rather than the three humans I knew from the Varakartoom. Evie didn't count in that way because she spoke Xurtal rather than her native tongue. "My scans indicated a

slightly smaller hand than those of Aramon. It wasn't him, but we already knew that, didn't we?" She said the last part so sternly that it made me smile. Maybe shedidsound a little like Evie.

After that, I had to allow Evie to take the lead again and start the negotiations. I didn't like it, but the atmosphere was better, more hopeful, as everyone sat down in their chairs. Caitlyn spent a moment beside Evie, working on her neck with her regenerator, but that did not stop my pretty princess from speaking.

Too bad these talks were so boring, though I enjoyed seeing Evie command so much respect as she discussed the terms of this alliance with the remaining males. It became apparent that Kalzudaud, the Tarkan, and his human mate wanted this alliance as much as Evie did. The Viridara were now convinced of the danger and ready to hammer out the details, which left only the Asrai on the fence. I did not think they would remain there for long; Evie was simply too tempting, too clever, and too sympathetic a princess not to want to help her and her supposed people.

Still, bored out of my mind with nothing to do but watch, I let my mind wander, and then my hands started to wander too. I slid one hand over Evie's thigh beneath the table and delighted in discovering the silky texture of her skirt. So pretty, so soft, and that lush thigh only needed to part a little, and I could stroke her even prettier folds.

She did not part her thighs when I nudged them, clenching them tightly shut, but I wriggled my fingers until I could slide them higher beneath the hem of her skirt. She stuttered on a word once, her breathing hitching with the rise of her desire, and I wondered if I could stroke that little bud until she came, right here, in front of everyone. Would she be able to do so without giving the game away?

"Ahem, it is noon," the stuffy Ovt referee said with a rasp of his throat. I flicked my eyes from Evie's face to his green-mottled gray one and grinned. His tongue flicked out and licked his left eyeball, then the right in rapid succession. "It is time to take a



short recess and have food. I shall have it brought in now.” He rose to his feet, his round belly trembling like his weird, flabby jowls. For an old Ovt male, he’d aged in remarkably flexible fashion. It dampened my amorous mood a little, but not enough.

Evie shot to her feet when the Ovt did, shooting me a glare as I folded my hand innocently over my belly. “Yes, a short recess, thank you, Frazil. I think we can all use a bit of a break.” She dipped into a perfectly poised, beautiful bow that curved her spine and drew my eyes to her sexy rear. Then, she took my hand and yanked me with her to one of the balcony doors. King Kalzudaud laughed, his wing curling around his mate’s shoulder as he winked at me.

“What is it, sweet mate?” I asked Evie as soon as she slammed the balcony door shut behind us. My senses were on high alert immediately; the area was exposed, and I kept my body between her and the desert stretching out in front of us. Lush plants twined over the balcony railing and around the side of the building, but the oasis was only feeding a few trees before giving way to the endless sands on this side. A hover vehicle, like a rover or cruiser, could fly up and take a shot at her right now, and I was her only shield.

Or, an assassin could climb up the trellis and attack us silently. I peered over the edge to make sure no one was approaching, and took note of the handful of parked hovercycles in the shade of the nearby trees. In case of an attack, I could also climb down with Evie and use those to escape. Perfect. I could use a bit of flying since it had been days by now, and there was something so fun about flying a hover cycle. The open air in your face added to the thrill.

“Aramon!” Evie exclaimed from behind me, and when she moved, I moved with her so her body remained blocked from any outside watchers. I did not like to turn my back to a potential threat, but I wanted to see her face. I knew why she sounded annoyed, and I wanted to bask in that for a little, because teasing her was fun.

She had her hands on her hips, curled into fists, and beneath the short, silky hem of her skirt, her feet tapped impatiently inside the combat boots I'd given her. "Do I have to remind you of the stakes? You can't mess this up! I want this over with; I need this alliance. We both do! We can't get away from Xurtal without it." Yeah, we totally could and they would burn, but I didn't give a damn. However, she did, which meant I cared...a little.

I braced my arms on either side of her head against the door and leaned in close. It made her breathing hitch, and her breasts rose, giving me a tantalizing view over the edge of her neckline. "We did not screw up. The Tarkan King likes seeing us united. The Viridara now believes the threat is real and must be addressed. You are almost done with this, and then I'll take you far, far away from here." It was very tempting to add that I'd screw her brains out in celebration, but she was still a little angry.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

So I dipped my mouth to hers and claimed her, kissing her with slow, tender moves, long, slick strokes of my tongue, and gentle nibbles on her lush bottom lip. She melted in my arms, her curves pressed against me and my cock, an aching bar against her soft belly. When I pulled back, she chased my mouth with hers, and I knew she forgave me. Sliding my hand along her bare waist, over the silk skirt on her hip, I started to bunch up the fabric so I could resume doing what I'd been after in the meeting. She didn't stop me, a moan trembling on her lips.

It was the sound of something high-pitched, just on the edge of my hearing, that made me raise my head and still my movements. Tilting my chin, I glanced over my shoulder and searched the empty desert for a sign. There! The silhouette of a small vehicle arrowing away from the oasis. I had a bad feeling about that, so I raised my hand to my com device. "Jaxin, someone just left. What's going on?"

Evie's expression went from confused to worried, but I didn't have time to explain. Catching her around the shoulder, I turned her to the door and hurried her inside, where I knew it was safe. An Ovt servant was pushing a cart with food into the conference room just as we entered, the same male as yesterday. He smiled cheerfully before raising the covered lid over the top dish. My vision narrowed to pinpricks, my instincts roaring. No, that was wrong.

"A bomb!" I shouted, and I spun with my mate, throwing us back out onto the balcony. The explosion followed us, blasting through the room with force and fire. Heat seared my back, debris flying after us like missiles, but I did not pay attention to any of it. Rolling with Evie in my arms, our bodies slid to a stop against the railing. I kept her covered protectively, my heart thudding heavily in my chest with each slow contraction. "Are you hurt?" I asked through the ringing in my ears. I could not hear

her answer, but she mouthed something. Her eyes were alert, without pain, so I had to assume she was fine.

Rising slowly to my knees above her, I scanned the demolished room behind us. With the alliance nearly taking shape, it seemed those who sought to stop it had taken far more extreme measures. I saw several bodies sprawled beyond the broken table, though they were stirring slowly. The Tarkan King and his mate were nearby, hovering in the air. My warning had caused the male to take his human to safety just in time. His stone-skin ability had protected them both from harm.

Already, I saw my brothers rushing in from beyond the broken doorway to lend aid and search for any more danger. The poor Ovt waiter was dead, but my warning might have saved the rest. I did not stick around to find out. Sharing a look with Jaxin, I nodded before snatching Evie and throwing her over my shoulder. Then, I went over the balcony railing and, with my claws, slowed our descent down the sandstone wall until my boots thudded into the sand.

Racing beneath the trees, I perched Evie on the saddle of the nearest hover cycle and set about hotwiring the thing in record time. We were up in the air and speeding away in less than a minute. Whoever the bastard was that had set off that bomb, I was going to catch him and make him pay. But first, I was going to take my princess to safety.

## Chapter 18

### Evie

A freaking bomb? I couldn't believe that my enemies would go that far. Maybe Aramon was right to believe that the alliance was almost complete. I hadn't been as hopeful, but someone else had to be—or this wouldn't have happened. The image of the destroyed room was seared into my mind, and I was still trying to make sense of

what I'd seen.

If Aramon hadn't seen the bomb before it went off, I would have been dead; we'd been moving directly toward it. I recalled vividly how he'd thrown us back onto the balcony we'd just left, his body shielding me from the blast. The scent of blood had filled my nose, but smoke and ash soon replaced it, and the chemical vapors from whatever had been in that bomb burned my nostrils. Now, I couldn't smell anything, but I could see how tattered and torn Aramon's robe was. His red skin masked any visible blood, but I was certain it was there, as several large splinters and pieces of wood protruded from his back.

I sat in his lap with my legs wrapped around his waist. My back was facing forward, so I had no idea which way we were going. I knew, however, that we were racing through the sky at rapid speeds. The air whipped through my hair, tugged at my braids, and tore at my skirt and flowy blouse. I had a perfect view of the oasis and the sandstone building next to it, with a stack of smoke spiraling into the air.

The poor waiter was dead. I doubted that the Ovt male had known he was about to serve a bomb. I recalled Aramon's shout and the door opening to the hallway as he did. I was pretty sure the Tarkan King had gotten away with his mate, but others hadn't been so lucky. My brain already struggled to recall who or what I'd seen: red skin, but also red blood. Had the remaining Asrai died? Thrymnor was probably fine; his thick skin must have protected him. I could not recall what had happened to the Viridara delegate or the Sune delegate. If any of them had died, we would have to start all over again.

Any worries about the possible failure of forming this alliance faded to the back of my mind when I caught sight of several dark spots. I squinted, trying to make sense of what I was seeing, and then drew in a shocked breath. "We've got company, Aramon," I shouted over my shoulder. The wind caught my words and whipped them away, but I saw Aramon clench his jaw. He hunched forward over the handlebars of

the hover cycle he'd stolen, and I was forced to cling more tightly to his neck as he increased our speed.

Then the first sharp spire of rock whizzed past me on my left, too close for comfort. I fought to hold back a scream. The blips were coming closer, resolving themselves into the shapes of several skimmers—very fast flyers meant for a single person. There were hover cycles too, and several other flying vehicles, but they were not as fast as the skimmers. They weren't as dangerous either, because a skimmer could be outfitted with lasers. When the first fired a shot that crackled over our heads, I knew they meant business. That was a kill squad on our tail.

"Hold on," Aramon said, and the male was actually grinning, a laugh tinting his tone. "This is going to get a little hectic." He spun our vehicle with a quick twist of his wrist, and then we were careening in a different direction, darting left and right around several more rock spires. The landscape was transforming from sandy desert to rocky desert. Red stone rose first in spires, and then in twisting cliff walls that forced us to turn and spin in rapid maneuvers, or crash against the stone.

I held my breath at first, too scared to so much as blink, but when spots started dancing in front of my eyes, I had to inhale. Dust made me cough, but I did not dare cover my mouth—I couldn't let go of Aramon's neck or I'd fly off this bike and fall. At these speeds, it seemed inevitable that we'd crash, but my pilot was handling the bike around each turn like a dream. The skimmers chasing us had more trouble, and when the first hit a rock and exploded, Aramon whooped with elation. "Fuck yeah! That's what I'm talking about!"

That was his plan? To race through this maze and make the chasers crash? It seemed utterly crazy, but when a second fared the same fate, it became believable. I did not question how Aramon could keep up with the turns at these speeds—I'd asked for the best pilot there was to be my bodyguard, and he was delivering. I just never thought I'd actually need this skill to escape. Then the skimmers soared higher, their flight

capabilities better than that of our hover cycle. They flew above the rock and the narrow ravines, safe from crashing, and we'd already outflown the rest of the chasers. I saw no sign of anybody but the three remaining skimmers.

"Don't worry. Solear and I have a plan," Aramon said, his hand spinning the handlebars of the hover cycle casually. I could see it from the corner of my eye if I twisted my head—his steering and the rocks rising in front of us. Oh no. Was that a mountain? We were racing up its slope, steadily climbing into the air. Now, there was no protection from the ravine walls, and the skimmers seized their opportunity, coming in close and firing their lasers.

Aramon braked so abruptly that I nearly flew from his lap; his arm around my waist held me and prevented me from taking that fatal tumble. When the world righted itself around me, I realized that two of the three skimmers had crashed, struck by friendly fire when we suddenly dropped out from between them. That was the craziest maneuver I'd ever seen, but it had worked. How had that worked?

The last remaining skimmer spun around and faced us, revving furiously to gain speed. I thought it was going to crash into us when Aramon headed straight for it, swerving left and right to avoid the strafing laser fire. At the last moment, he ducked us beneath the vessel, avoiding a crash. I had a perfect view over his shoulder of the skimmer turning and chasing after us again. It was faster than us and rapidly closing the distance. Through the transparent dome of the skimmer, I could see straight at the pilot. An Ovt male. So, our supposed neutral, safe haven had betrayed us after all.

The mountain rose at a sharp incline, but eventually, we were going to run out of that rising slope. When we did, would we careen down another slope on the other side? Or would our runway abruptly terminate in a cliff like many of the mountains and cliffs we'd already passed?

The skimmer was so close that I could see the color of the pilot's spots—bright silver

and purple. He was going to pull the trigger at any moment, and we'd be done for. There was nowhere to go. "Hold on, this will be awesome!" Aramon said, and he did not sound scared or worried; he sounded like he was having the time of his life. As the skimmer's nose got close enough to bump our exhaust, we dropped, plummeting down at a steep angle.

I had my answer: we were flying off a cliff. The skimmer went straight while we went down, and I could watch its silver underbelly soar over my head. The plummet flung me up into the air, held only by one of Aramon's arms. Then his other arm came up past my head, holding a laser pistol, and he fired. It was a single shot, arcing overhead and striking the skimmer in its tailfin. One shot was enough.

The skimmer tumbled and careened in a crazy spiral, and so did we. Too high for the hover cycle to propel itself into the air, we were tumbling and spinning wildly as well. The engine spluttered, but Aramon kept us tethered to the machine, his boots hooked beneath the metal footrests. He was laughing, his fist shaking in the air with a rude gesture aimed at the retreating, failing skimmer.

"Aramon!" I shouted, my eyes taking in the rapidly approaching ground. "We're going to crash! Do something!" At this point, I didn't know if there was anything he could do; I'd never been on a hover cycle that had gone too high. I just knew that it was virtually impossible to extract them from this kind of dive once they'd entered it. Interestingly, my crazy Asrai mate didn't seem worried.

When the ground came close, the engine made a different noise. I heard it, but Aramon had been waiting for it. His leg moved, kicking hard against the side of the bike, and his free arm abruptly jerked at the handlebar. "Hold on," he shouted, as if I weren't already clinging to him for dear life. He sat down, hunched over the bars, forcing me to lean back and watch the world in a crazy, upside-down pose.

But the bike was going, the engine humming smoothly as it got back into range,



propelling us into the air and aborting that fatal fall. In less than a minute, Aramon spun us into a graceful arc around a large boulder and brought the hover cycle to a stop. Dust arced into the air behind us, but that was the only sign that we'd been going too fast; the landing was perfect. The silence that followed our landing made my ears sting in the absence of the rushing wind. We'd made it. I slid on wobbly legs from his lap and collapsed on the hot desert sand, but I was never getting onto another hover cycle with Aramon ever again.

"Thanks, bro," Aramon said out loud, but I knew he wasn't talking to me. Even if he was, I was too busy being grateful that I was alive to respond. My heart was racing, my palms were sweaty, and sand stuck to the back of my neck from cold sweat as well. All my careful braids had been ripped apart by the harsh winds our speed had generated, and I didn't even want to check my panties to see whether I'd soiled myself or not. When we fell, I was certain we were going to die. When those skimmers fired at us, I thought we were goners. Too many near-death experiences in a row—there was only so much I could take. This was the final straw.

"Your com device, please," Aramon said. He stood next to me, casting shade over me with his wide shoulders. I saw only darkness against the glare of the sun and the glow of his red eyes inside his dark, deep-set eye sockets. I raised my wrist limply and let him take the device from my skin without asking why. "Thank you, Evie," he said politely. Too politely. He had to be up to something, or he wouldn't be so nice. Suspicious now, I forced myself to sit up and was just in time to see him raise a rock and smash it into my com with a crash.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

“What!? Why did you do that? We need to call for help!” I said, my voice hoarse and my throat sore. I must have been screaming more than I thought throughout that wild, crazy ride. I touched a hand to my skin, but the bruises from last night were still gone, healed by Caitlyn and her tissue regenerator.

He cocked his head my way, a grin splitting his ghoulish face. “We cannot risk anyone tracing us until it is safe for you to return,” he said. Then, he followed that up by smashing his own com device, turning to the hover cycle, and smashing some key part on its dash as well. “There, untraceable,” he added. “Ysa will be disappointed, but at least she can be proud of me for hotwiring that bike as fast as I did. Don’t you think?” I had absolutely zero idea who this Ysa was that he spoke of, but when he came to pull me to my feet, I let him draw me into a hug.

Already, the crazy events and the heat were getting to me. I felt exhausted, dried out, and my head was beginning to pound with a headache. Aramon offered me water from a canteen, and I drank greedily. Having lived in the desert half of Xurtal for most of my life, I knew how to deal with this kind of climate, but I thoroughly hated it. Preserving water was not what would keep us alive; too often, I had heard horror stories of people dying of thirst in the desert with a full canteen of water. Not me. Dehydration struck quickly and harshly.

When he brushed his hand over my belly and turned off the illusion device, I felt marginally better immediately. The constant tingle and hum of electricity over my skin had become something I ignored, but it was exhausting. I never realized how much until its constant presence was suddenly gone. “You must strip off all of your Evadne costume,” Aramon said. “We will count on hiding where you are by finally making you look like Evie for once.”

It felt wrong to pull the case for my contacts from a pocket and take them out; I'd worn them near constantly since I was eight. But what he said made sense: if I did not look like Evadne, they would not be able to find her. It was the best disguise there was. Once I'd taken out the contacts, I felt exposed in ways I couldn't explain. I wasn't even certain what color my eyes were anymore—blue, brown, green? Would Aramon like me when my eyes weren't Evadne's pretty ruby?

He stuck a finger under my chin and forced me to raise my face to his—forced me to face him, even though I wasn't ready. It felt like I could sense him all around me, but he was only touching me with that one finger. A warmth spread over me, one that didn't come from the punishing Ov'Korad sun. "Ah, there you are, Evie. My pretty little human. Green—why am I not surprised? The Xurtal must have thought it prophetic to see their coloring reflected in you. Red hair, green eyes." Oh... he could be right about that. I'd never considered it, but, like my name sounding so much like their princess's, that could have played a part in why they'd made me her double. The Xurtal were big believers in fate.

"Put this on," Aramon said after he'd taken his fill of staring into my eyes. He pulled a pouch free from beneath his tattered robe and pressed it into my hands. "It'll protect you." That was all the explanation I got, but when I opened the small package, it revealed a black suit of armor like the ones all the mercenaries of the Varakartoom wore. Aramon had his own package, and he was already shrugging out of his Asrai noble clothing.

When the robe dropped, I finally got a good look at his back and drew in a shocked gasp. "Fuck, Aramon! You need medical care; that looks awful." Splinters of wood—some small, but some as thick as a finger—stuck from his flesh. He looked like a porcupine with all those raised spikes sticking out of his flesh. Blood had dried around some of the wounds, but others had not even bled. All of it looked painful, but he was moving like he didn't even notice.

“Give me the medkit.” I did not question if we had one or not, if Aramon had packed armor and a pistol, he would have packed a medkit too. He was too concerned about any of my scrapes and bruises to go without one. Indeed, when I called for one, he pulled one free from a pouch he’d dropped at his feet, the handheld scanner twirling in his fingers as he turned my way.

“You first,” he said. His skull-like features pulled into a wide grin, and his scarlet eyes twinkled with glee. He dipped into a bow. “You’re not anyone’s princess but mine now, Evie, so you can’t boss me around.” I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at him, but in the end, it was easier to give in and let him scan me. Faster.

## Chapter 19

### Aramon

I was dying for Evie to wash the dye from her hair so I could see her in all her glory. It was clear that being “just” Evie made her feel uncomfortable. She’d been forced to play someone else for so much of her life that she didn’t know how to be herself. I’d teach her. I was very good at being me. It wouldn’t be long until she proudly embraced being Evie and showed off her pretty green eyes and red hair for the whole quadrant to see.

The bright Ov’Korad sun was harmful to her skin, turning it red across the bridge of her nose. It also brought out tiny brown dots on her neck, her arms, and even her belly. They appeared most abundantly on her face, and I absolutely adored them. They tempted me to kiss every single one, but it was time we couldn’t spare. With only limited food and water, I had to get us to shelter quickly.

Thankfully, I’d been smart enough to pack armor suits for both of us, along with weapons and medical supplies. With my psychic bond to Solean in place, I also had an open line of communication directly to the Varakartoom, where he remained. If

we needed help, they could swoop in and rescue us at any moment—a safety line our enemies would never suspect existed. Though fabled, Asrai psychic bonds were usually very limited in their range. Not so with Solear and me; we had never been far enough apart for the bond to break. At this point, I did not think there was a distance large enough to do so.

Evie looked sexy in the armor, but I was worried about the effects of the sun on her fair skin. To keep her safe, I activated the helmet, ensuring that she'd be protected from any further sunburn as we traveled. Then the two of us climbed onto the hover bike, and I directed it toward the nearest town. As an extra bonus, it also kept the dust and sand out of her face. When I raised mine, we could use the inner mics to communicate directly without the aid of a com.

I peppered her with questions to keep her distracted from the chaos we had left behind, and, for a time, that worked. She sat behind me on the hover cycle, her arms around my waist and her head pressed against my back. It stung a little against the still-healing wounds, but that was a price I was more than willing to pay. Besides, what the tissue regenerator hadn't fixed yet, my natural healing capabilities would take care of in the next few hours. I'd be right as rain by evening.

When we reached the nearest town a few hours later, I half expected it to look like the desert towns I recalled from my Asrai birth world, or even like the towns that dotted the Xurtal deserts—a mixture of tents and small stone buildings with thick walls to insulate against the heat. The small Ovt town we were approaching looked nothing like that, but I should have remembered what Ov'Korad exported: mushrooms.

There were tall white spires with homes and deep caverns dug beneath the desert. High-tech sails of shimmering silver spanned most of this town to supply solar power, and an artificial oasis had been created around the deeply bored well to supply water.

When Evie saw it, she drew in a shocked gasp. “What is that? Is this one of Ov’Korad’s famous farming towns?” She had to know more about it than I did, but I knew the mushrooms this planet supplied to the rest of the quadrant were pretty vital. They were the basis of many rations and long-lasting foods; some ships had food replicators that ran exclusively on the mushrooms they grew here. It was no wonder that they remained a powerful player in the quadrant while occupying only a single planet.

“It must be. We’ll get a room at the inn and sit tight until I get the word that it’s safe to return.” She objected to that, which I fully expected and ignored. This Xurtal alliance had to form fast, she argued, and if she ran and hid after this attack, it could fall apart. Maybe, but maybe not—we did not know for sure. What I did know was that someone had tried to blow up my princess and everyone she was talking to. I was not going to make her an easy target with those bastards out there lying in wait.

The inn was a tall spire with many tiny windows set at intervals in its thick walls. A flashing neon sign sat at the top, and lower above the entrance, it declared it the Shroom Hole, which made me laugh. That was a stupid name, and the innkeeper, who came out to greet us, looked equally silly with a round cap on his head shaped like the cap of a mushroom. It had glowing purple lines along the edges, which made me think that’s what the Ovt mushrooms looked like, and they were proud of it somehow.

This mushroom farmer-turned-innkeeper was nervous when he saw the hover cycle with the damage I’d done to the dash. It didn’t take a genius to realize the bike had been stolen, and that trouble was brewing if he let us stay. But money always talked, and he was more than willing to take my coin. The room he took us to was small and the bed lumpy, but the walls were thick, which was a blessing. It also took us out of the heat and the scorching sun, allowing Evie to lower her helmet once inside.

“Stay here,” I warned her, and I slipped the single pistol we had into her hand. “Shoot

anyone that isn't me, okay?" She gave me a suspicious look but took the pistol, her slender body perched awkwardly on the edge of the too-small, lumpy cot. Without her helmet, her green hair was very obvious, and we needed to do something about that fast. The innkeeper hadn't seen her face yet, but if they caught sight of the green hair, they might make the connection if those chasing us spread the word of who they were looking for. I needed to fix this.

"I'm getting us supplies and something for your hair," I said, pointing at the mossy locks that lay in a tumbled mess around her shoulders. Even windblown and sunburned, she looked gorgeous, and it wasn't until Solean prompted me on our status that I got moving. She laughed huskily as I snapped upright and stalked out, and the sound chased me down the stairs.

Touching my chest, where my heart pumped slow and steady, I focused on Solean. He was never good at forming words to send my way; it was always in images and feelings with him. Since our doubling and meeting Evie, he'd gotten better at it, though—a clarity to our bond that surprised me.

First, he sent me an image of the bomb's aftermath, then a tally of the casualties. King Kalzudaud has taken command. He felt conflicted about that, but he also gave me the impression that Asmoded, the captain, approved. The Tarkan has contacted Xurtal and pushed the survivors into continuing discussions. That was good news; if they were talking with someone on Xurtal now, that might mean Evie was safe.

I still went to see the innkeeper and demanded the supplies I wanted. Some had to be sourced from their general store, but I got what I needed twenty minutes later. A little Ovt boy ran in with my most important things in a basket, out of breath and rapidly licking his dry eyeballs free of dust. "Sandstorm coming," the Ovt proprietor explained as he tucked his son against his side with his long, prehensile tail. "You will have to stay inside for the next few hours."

That was only going to benefit us, and I had an extra bounce in my step as I headed up to our room to share the good news. Evie greeted me with a gun aimed at my face, but she dropped it immediately and threw herself into my arms, squishing the basket between us. “Damn it, Aramon. You were gone so long! I was getting worried.” I had never had anyone worry about me other than Solear, and that felt very different. I had to admit that I liked it—my female was waiting for me, worrying whether I was safe.

“Sandstorm, we’ll have to stay in,” I said to her, and then I ushered her into the tiny bathroom with the dye stripper. “Take care of this first, and then we’ll go down and have dinner. I’m starving after all that fun.” Of course, nothing ever went as planned, and when Evie returned from the bathroom a little while later without the green dye in her hair, my plans were definitely derailed. All those lush coppery locks and the soft freckles the sun had brought out were too much of a temptation.



*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

“No, sex first,” I told her. “Then dinner.” She laughed, thinking I was joking, but she knew I meant it when I picked her up and threw her onto the bed. I did not let her out of that room for an hour, and by then, our stomachs were both rumbling.

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Evie

I didn’t have to second-guess myself or doubt my attractiveness when Aramon’s response was as enthusiastic as that. It felt good to just be me again, and I was starting to believe that Evie was exactly what my crazy, sexy mercenary wanted—not the fancy princess; that was never going to work for him. We were matched as mates because we both liked the same things, and it wasn’t fancy food and fancy clothes. When we ate mushroom burgers with greasy, fried Haras sticks last night, that seemed like one of the best meals I’d had in ages.

Waking up as myself and in my mate’s arms also felt like things were finally going right. But how could I think that when a bomb had gone off and we’d been chased across the desert by a dozen hover vehicles and a handful of skimmers? Those hover vehicles would still be out there, searching for us, and they could easily deduce which town we’d gone to. This should be a dream: finding my mate and discovering how strong and brave he was. It felt like I was still trying to surface from a nightmare, and I had yet to locate the way out.

Who was behind these attacks? Ovt agents had played a role—that was a fact—but had they been hired, or were they acting on behalf of the Ov’Korad government? I could not make an accusation without definitive proof, and I was starting to lose the

desire to see this through. It would be so easy to run away.

Now that I looked nothing like Evadne, it would be simple to disappear into the night with Aramon and leave others to deal with this mess. The question was: could I live with the guilt if an alliance failed to take shape without my help and an invasion leveled Xurtal? Aramon wouldn't lose a wink of sleep—I knew that. He wasn't wired the same as most people; he cared, but only about those who mattered to him. The rest might as well not exist.

He was tucking what little remained of our gear into the pouches on his armor, the gun already strapped to his thigh. I knew he had more weapons; I'd seen knives and even a garrote wire, but he wasn't sharing. I was a trained fighter, but I was comfortable with not being armed and letting him do the fighting. I'd never wanted to be a fighter; it hadn't been my choice. Aramon was all about letting me be me. Evie did not want to fight. She didn't know what she wanted yet, but she knew she wanted the chance to find out.

When we left the inn at the crack of dawn, the sandstorm had passed but had left a fine layer of dust over everything. The solar sails were coated with something that allowed the sand to slide right off, and it lay in large drifts throughout the town. Already, many Ovters were out and about, shoveling the sand back to clear the paths—an endless fight against the encroaching sand. Since I'd lived for most of my life in a similar desert—with green sand, rather than this pale white—I knew all about the ways sand got into everything. I was very ready to leave deserts behind me, never to return.

“Solear says it's safe to go back. The Ovt referee has vanished without a trace; he was likely the reason that bomb was there, spying on your progress,” Aramon said as we walked past a sand pile to reach the parked hover cycle. He gestured with a hand. “It would have been devastating, but apparently, Theronix threw himself onto the bomb at the last moment. I don't know how he got out, but he did, and he saved the

day.”

I halted in my tracks and stared at Aramon’s back as he kept walking. “Hang on, Theronix threw himself on the bomb?” With a sinking feeling, I knew that meant the guard was dead. He’d gotten out from wherever the mercenaries had been holding him, but his final act had been to save me and the others—not kill me. I guessed it could be said that he’d always been all about saving Xurtal, and that attempt on my life really hadn’t been personal.

Oddly, I even felt a bit of grief for him. We’d survived a lot together—weeks of captivity, years of training, and protecting Evadne. The truth was, I had always felt that he’d carried a torch for the real princess, and once she’d died, all he had left was his loyalty to Xurtal. I was just a painful reminder of everything he’d lost.

“Hey, where’d you go?” Aramon asked, coming back to take my hands in one of his. With the other, he cupped my chin, tilting my eyes up to his face. It felt odd to stand out in public as just me, and I felt plenty of eyes on me from the curious locals. I felt naked without my hair dye, my contacts, and the illusion device. I had taken it off that morning, as there was no point in wearing it if I didn’t have the other two.

“Just sad, I guess. I didn’t think I’d be, but none of Evadne’s guard, or Evadne herself, deserved what they got. They were good people, Aramon.” He huffed, his mouth twisted with disbelief, but he didn’t correct me out loud. I knew I’d been dealt a raw deal by fate, by the Xurtal, and now by these assassins. But they had been my family, in a way—even Theronix. So, yeah, I was sad.

He pulled me into his arms without another word, holding me tightly as I allowed those feelings to fill me before sending them away. He held me so tightly that I felt safe enough to unravel for a little while, before I pulled myself back together. He held me tightly enough that it felt like those emotions had a safe place, that I was safe.

When I was done feeling sad, Aramon led me to the hover cycle, and we got on and flew away. I didn't know what our next move was going to be. Without looking like Evadne, I couldn't waltz into the negotiations. As if sensing my thoughts, Aramon's voice came to me through my helmet's tiny hidden speaker. "We are meeting a shuttle from the Varakartoom. Solear and Asmoded will be there. The captain will know what to do next. Don't worry, Evie. By this time tomorrow, it will all be over. I promise."

I hoped so, I really hoped so.

## Chapter 20

Evie

The sight of the sleek black shuttle parked in the distance made my heart leap in my chest. That was our meeting spot; it was safety, an end to this terrible burden. Aramon said his captain would know what to do, and I could sense how deep his faith in the scary-looking Naga ran. It was easy to put the same faith in the male, even if I worried a tiny bit that he'd be upset to discover the trickery Theronix and I had performed.

The shuttle was still a few hundred feet away—a shiny obsidian shell with its engines glowing faintly with a blue hue as they powered down. Aramon steered our pilfered hover cycle closer, its engine humming gently as he kept us low to the ground to avoid detection. We were almost there, and I craned my head to peer around my mate's shoulders, hoping to catch a glimpse of Solear or the captain.

Nothing yet, and then the hatch opened, and I saw movement. Black armor—or were those black scales? I squinted but couldn't bring the figure into sharper focus. Aramon braked so suddenly that I flung forward, first colliding with his back, then slipping past him to careen ass-over-teakettle along the loose sand. The helmet and

suit, which covered every inch of me, protected me from getting a mouthful of the fine white grains or scraping my skin raw, but I still felt bruised and battered when I rolled to a stop.

“Ah, fuck! Evie, are you hurt?” Aramon said. He’d parked the bike and was rapidly closing the distance between us. Instead of helping me to my feet, he threw himself down on the sand next to me, his hand coming down on my back to press me down with him. Instantly aware that something was really wrong, I lowered myself to my elbows and peered over the edge of the dune we lay against.

“Not hurt,” I whispered, though that wasn’t true, but a few bruises didn’t matter in the grand scheme of things. Now I could see who had exited the shuttle, and while I was right about the black suit, it wasn’t the armor suit the mercenaries typically wore. It was a male, standing with his hands on his hips as he peered in our direction. We’d approached enough that, without the swaying of the bike, I could see who we were dealing with.

It wasn’t anyone I knew, but I recognized the species. “I was right! Aramon, I was right. It is the Sythral! Look!” He did not respond; his expression was grim. Then, I realized what I should have from the start. If a Sythral male was on the Varakartoom shuttle, what had happened to Solear and Asmoded? And Aramon’s argument still stood. The Sythral were a nasty species, but they were also very secular and rarely left home. With exceptions like the now-defeated crimelord Drameil, most never left their planet or interfered with the politics of other planets.

“That bastard has my family,” Aramon muttered instead of responding to what I said. “They knocked Solear out before he could warn me. I did not sense that he was in danger, Evie. How could I not sense that? But he roused just in time and warned me. We’ve got to free them.”

“Okay,” I agreed immediately. Not long ago I had decided that I did not like fighting,

and that I would leave it to Aramon, whodidlike it. But this was his family, of course I'd fight to save them. "Give me the gun. I'll lay down cover fire and you sneak around." He shot me a feral grin, tapped the side of his helmet to lower the protective, transparent face plate, and then he was off.

I waited as long as possible, but when Aramon got closer, it was inevitable that they discovered him. As soon as the Sythral turned to raise a gun at my mate, I squeezed off a shot. I did not aim to scare; I aimed to score a hit. This was the target that deserved all my rage—the one that had played a hand in the attempts on my life and in the death of Evadne and her guard. He deserved a laser shot to the chest. This felt like life or death, and I wanted to be the one who came out victorious.

My blast struck true, hitting him square in the chest and causing the Sythral to stumble back. At that moment, Aramon leaped from his hiding place with a feral growl, and the two clashed. Now, I could no longer fire, or I'd risk hitting my mate. Waiting patiently was also not my strong suit, so I searched the dunes around me. Certain there was no sign of another threat and the Sythral was still the only visible opponent, I climbed to my feet and ran for the shuttle.

Solear and Asmoded had to be inside, tied up. If I could free them, it would turn the tide of battle. And if they weren't in there? I could still put the barrel of my gun to the back of that bastard's head. Up close, I would not miss.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

I never saw the strike coming. There was a sudden lance of pain to the back of my neck. Even through the armor, it was crippling. I sank to my knees, tumbling forward with a last view of Aramon as he fought the Sythral. No, it wasn't a Sythral—the male had worn a mask. That was the last I thought before blackness claimed me.

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Aramon

It was a trap. I knew that as soon as my first blow struck the male across the jaw, and his skin split and cracked beneath my knuckles. It revealed that I was not fighting a clever Sythral, the orchestrator of all this death and chaos. No, this was only a simple goon—a sacrificial pawn to serve as a distraction. The Krektar male barely passed for a Sythral up close, his tusks pressing against the ill-fitting mask, his body too stocky. I should have seen it sooner, and now it was too late.

With a final strike against his rock-hard jaw, I sent the male sprawling. I climbed to my feet and scanned the sands for any sign of Evie or other dangers. I saw nothing, and fear grew in my chest. Then I heard it: the hum of a hover cycle. I spun and realized the bike Evie and I had abandoned was rising into the air. “No!” I screamed. Breaking out into a run, I chased after the vehicle. There was a male astride it in white clothing, and across his lap was Evie in her black mercenary armor. Her long red hair waved like a flag in the wind as they sped away, taunting me.

“No!” I screamed again. They had her! They had my mate. How had the tables turned on us this quickly? Rage always simmered in some part of me, quick to incite, quick to flare, but today it turned into a conflagration of fire and anger. When I got my

hands on the bastard who'd stolen her, he was going to regret ever having been born.

"Aramon!" The shout barely reached me, but I could not chase after Evie on foot, and I had halted just in range. Panting from exertion, from the desert heat, and from the fight a moment ago, I clutched my fist against my side and searched the dunes. Which way did they go? They'd sped around a dune, and now I couldn't see or hear them. Where did he take my Evie?

"Aramon!" the voice shouted again, penetrating the haze of anger and fury that had sunk its claws into my brain. "Aramon! Come back here! That's an order." Oh, the captain wanted me. For the first time in my life, it was tempting to disobey a direct order from the one male in the universe to whom I owed everything. The father-but-not-father, the male I trusted beyond trust—the captain. Turning on my heel felt like betraying my mate, and each step I took toward the shuttle felt like putting a thousand miles between myself and Evie. Somehow, I did it.

My feet were heavy, my chest aching, as I stepped over the collapsed form of the Krektar in disguise and onto the shuttle. There they were: Solear and Asmoded. My brother lay collapsed against the deck, bleeding from a gash across his white skull. He was breathing, but he was not conscious. It was Asmoded who had called to me, tied to a chair, his long, powerful tail locked to the deck with maglock bands. Their blue forcefields hummed and crackled against his scales.

"They took her, Captain," I said. "They fucking took my Evie." His golden eyes glowed at me, and when I looked into those shimmering orbs, it felt like they were telling me everything was going to be all right. For the first time in my life, that look did not feel as reassuring as it normally did. All right? How could anything be all right when Evie was in the hands of some evil, power-hungry bastard? If they had harmed so much as a hair on her head, I was going to lay waste to their entire world.

Moving stiffly, I freed Asmoded from his bonds, my body trembling with rage. The



captain was talking, and it calmed me down, but that calm was merely a drop in an ocean of rage. When Slear woke, he'd be a feral, untamable beast. It was surprising that I was not tearing everything to pieces around me myself. But what good would that do for Evie? The shuttle was our only chance to follow her.

"The Varakartoom has a trace on the armor suit she's wearing. Fly this shuttle, Aramon. Find your mate." I flicked my eyes from my captain to the pilot's chair he was pointing at, and, with a heavy feeling in my chest, I threw myself into the seat and did as I was told.

## Chapter 21

Evie

They had taken off my armor. It was the first thing the bastard who snatched me did when he thought he'd put enough distance between us and Aramon. I warned him that he'd made a grave mistake—Aramon would stop at nothing to get me back—but the Kertinal male who had stolen me just laughed. His mistake. Even with at least a dozen notches in his spiraling horns, I knew Aramon would make mincemeat out of him. Those notches might signify twelve kills, but only an insecure idiot would feel the need to brag about that.

With my hands tied behind my back, my body draped over the back of the hover cycle, and his tail the only thing holding me in place, I didn't dare throw myself over the side. We were moving too fast, and I wore only panties and a flimsy blouse. The bastard had even taken my boots—the very boots Aramon had given me. I was beyond mad, but I was also terrified. Without the armor or a com, could Aramon even find me? The hover cycle left no trace as it swept over the desert.

Then we reached the camp, and my heart sank in my stomach. This was bad, and it wasn't at all what I had expected to discover. The shapes of the tents were exactly

like the ones I'd lived in back on Xurtal, with their distinct triple peaks and the colorful bands of green and red painted along the edges of the thick, heavy cloth. I recognized the handful of Xurtal males who stood guard around the biggest tent too—males I'd seen training back on Xurtal, males with whom Evadne's guards had regularly hung out. I might have even dated one of those guys.

They were the personal guard of Pelarios, and I was not surprised to see him step out of the tent beneath the shaded canopy to watch us land. The Kertinal male parked his stolen—previously stolen by us—hover cycle a short distance away, at the center of the camp. Then he jerked me upright by my hair, ignoring my pained yelp and protests. Dragging me across the hot, white sand, he tossed me to the ground at the advisor's feet with a casual flick of his wrist.

I landed badly on my hip and shoulder, but I'd managed to protect my hands, which were awkwardly bent and twisted behind my back. The momentum carried me forward, and I rolled to a stop right at the toes of Pelarius's shiny boots. The Xurtal advisor had been in the service of Evadne's father, the King of Xurtal, for as long as I could remember. But he was not old yet—older, perhaps, but definitely not some graybeard.

His golden markings glowed with luster and health along his bare, muscled arms, and a short gold vest was the only decoration on his chest. Once a warrior and a general in the Xurtal army, he rose through the ranks quickly. Stern-faced, he was a male always surrounded by rumors. Some attributed his swift ascent to his status as the King's sister's favorite, a female who had never found her mate. I had never given credence to these rumors, yet I couldn't help but wonder if some of the other, darker ones might hold some truth. Like the whispers of his scheming to murder his opponents, anyone who stood as obstacles to his climb to power.

“Ah, Evelyn Mordew,” he said, “I had a feeling it was you, not Evadne, who'd survived Batok's hospitality. Evadne was never as tough, never quite as clever as you

were.” Though meant as compliments, in theory, each word landed like a blow. He’d known all along? Was he here to punish me for impersonating Evadne when the princess was dead? It was the only legitimate reason I could think of for his presence, but my heavy heart and aching belly told me he had far darker motivations.

“Too tough, as it turns out. But exposing you as a fraud will work just as well for what I have planned. The alliance will fall apart when those delegates realize they’ve been tricked by a lowly human.” He smirked, flicked his long braid of black hair over his shoulder, and lowered himself to a crouch next to my head. When he reached out a hand, I wasn’t fast enough to dodge it, and he curled his fingers tightly into my hair. “You shouldn’t have stripped the dye from your hair. We’ll have to reapply it to make the transition more striking.”

I curled my lip and spat in his face. This was the bastard responsible for Evande’s death; he had as much as admitted it now. Why he could possibly want the alliance to fail could have only one reason: he wanted to grasp power over Xurtal, and he needed a powerful ally to do it—one he had to buy with Xyraxin. When the alliance failed to form, the new Tarkan Queen that would succeed Ashcrao would be able to strike; and with Pelarios having so many loyalists inside the military, the army would make way for her.

Pelarios hissed, wiping my spit from his face with a hastily proffered handkerchief. Then he raised his hand to strike me, and I jerked back from the blow, unable to dodge, as he still gripped me by the hair. I tasted blood, but he’d held back, thinking I was weak. My teeth ached, my lip was split, but it could have been much worse. A Xurtal male was far more powerful than a human woman.

“You’ll pay for that,” he remarked with a malevolent glare, rising to his feet. “Lock her up. We’ll get Imala in there to fix her up. I will be speaking to the delegates in an hour.” He addressed two of his guards, dismissing me as though I no longer mattered now that he’d had his say. That was nothing new. The two warriors reached down to

pull me to my feet by my arms, and I went willingly. There was nothing I could do to fight this, not from here. It sucked, but it felt like all I could do was wait and hope for the best—stall and give Aramon the chance to find me.

The guards escorting me did not care that the white sand burned my bare feet. Maybe they did not know that it would; maybe it was malice. Regardless, I had blisters along the soles by the time they reached a small tent and brought me inside. There, a raw mat of woven weeds native to Xurtal covered the bottom, providing coolness against my abused feet. There was nothing inside the tent except the poles that held up the triple peaks. They branched out from the center in three directions, and that's where they sat me down and tied me up.

Nobody said anything; it was all done in silence. I met their eyes, glaring at them, but that was the extent of my defiance. They were only pawns, simple soldiers obeying their commander. Did they choose to follow a traitor? Yes, but could I blame them for following someone as charismatic as Pelarios? No. I had believed he was a good guy, too. I thought that if he could talk to Kalzudaud and the other delegates, everything might turn out fine. Never for a moment had I suspected that he was staging a coup and that he'd go as far as seeing the crown princess murdered to do it.

Once the tent flap closed behind them, I was stuck in the warm, dry heat inside the tent, but it was better than the scorching heat outside. My legs and face had been burned by the sun, and my feet ached. I felt thoroughly miserable. Here I'd been trying my hardest to save a kingdom that didn't even care about me, and as a reward, I was going to get thrown to the vultures. I shuddered, suddenly cold, and my belly turned queasy, my head pounding the longer I waited. I knew the signs: the beginning of heatstroke.

Things were getting more dire by the minute, the hot tent smothering. My body was switching between cold and hot, my mouth was dry, my head aching. If Aramon did not find me soon, I was going to expire. Hell, if Pelarios didn't have his meeting

soon, he would have nothing. That might save the alliance, actually, but I did not feel like dying for the Xurtal cause.

By the time a Xurtal female entered the tent, I had collapsed in my bindings and thrown up my breakfast. I stared at this supposed Imala through blurry eyes and wondered if I was mistaken—or if this wasn't one of Evadne's much younger sisters. Power-hungry, or ensnared by Pelarios's charisma? Whatever her role, she took one look at me, screamed, and ran from the tent, dropping her hair-dyeing supplies at my feet.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

Even sick and possibly dying, I knew the value of those chemicals. With blistered feet, I scrambled over the mat and managed to roll the container closer. I almost had it. If I could just break the lid and tip it over behind my back, I could burn through my ties. But Imala was back with help before I managed, and a guard roughly kicked my ankle to stop me from knocking it over. “What do we do?” the female asked, and her cultured, posh accent confirmed what I had already suspected: a sister of Evadne, another Xurtal princess.

I was freed from the bindings, but, sadly, too weak to fight free of the pair of strong warriors Imala had fetched. I could tell her what I needed, but would that save me or doom me? At this point, it was becoming harder to think and harder to know what I should do. Imala was Evadne’s sister; shouldn’t she be an ally, my friend? Or did she hate me because I survived and her sister died?

When everyone just stood around me, staring, I opened my mouth and croaked, “Heatstroke. Damn it. Cool me. Water.” It seemed like the last thing I wanted—to cool my body when I was shivering badly—but I knew it was the only way to live. The Xurtal knew how to treat this condition because even the most seasoned of their warriors and hunters could be struck by it out in the Xurtal deserts. They had just never seen its symptoms in a human.

My words jerked one of the guards into motion, and he raced out of the tent, returning what seemed like the blink of an eye later. With him came a flood of ice and water. It felt like it rained down on me, but when I surfaced, I discovered that they’d thrown me into a tank of it—wasting their precious water supplies on lowly me. I was trembling, aching, and sick as I hung onto the edge of the open tank, but clarity came back with each slow breath I took.

I had nearly died because of their carelessness, their cold disregard for my well-being. This was the final straw; I was done giving a crap about their people. Closing my eyes, I ignored everyone around me—even the princess as she started fussing with my wet hair so she could dye it green once more.

Aramon had to find me; I was too weak to escape now. Heat had caused this, it was the worst enemy. I wasn't out yet though—I still had breath, and now I had things that weremine. Like Aramon's love, the mate bond, and a future with him aboard the Varakartoom. I was given a chance to see parts of the quadrant, make friends with the women on the ship, and carve out my own place. I could be something other than Evadne's double, the fake princess.

Drawing in a deep breath, I focused on all those feelings, all those wants, and desires. Aramon was a psychic being, forever entwined with the mind of his twin. When he was in desperate need, that's what he'd drawn strength from. Humans had no hope of ever matching that, but maybe, if I thought hard enough, he'd sense something. Feelsomething. It was a last, desperate effort, but since it was all I had, I gave it my best. There was no one here to tell me it was impossible, except me, and I wasn't going to.

Aramon, I'm here. Find me.

## Chapter 22

Aramon

Solear was vibrating in the navigational seat next to me, his feet jiggling against the deck with tension. I felt oddly calm in comparison, but maybe that was because he was drawing all that anxiety from me, taking it as his own. I wouldn't put it past him, but I was too wrung out, too worried to sense it.

Asmoded placed his hand on my shoulder. “Almost there. We’ll find your human. Don’t you worry.” His low, sibilant voice was soothing, but his words made me twist in my seat in surprise. I thought Evie and I had kept her status as a body double and a human a secret, but it was clear now that Asmoded knew. I hadn’t told him, which left... I twisted to the side and gave Solear a glare, but my brother hunched his shoulders and kept his focus on the readings in front of him, the cable that plugged him into the navigational computer pinched between his shoulder and the side of his head.

“Don’t look at Solear like that, you hothead,” Asmoded said, and his hand held me a little tighter, squeezing to grab my attention. “I knew right away. Her scent. Besides, the illegal illusion device is clever, but it’s not good enough to fool Dravion’s machines.” So the ship’s doctor had known too, but neither my captain nor the doctor had decided to act on this information. They’d kept Evie’s secret. I knew they were good males, and that sealed it in my mind.

“Evie had no choice,” I growled defensively, though I saw no judgment on my captain’s face. He smiled—a tilt of his lips that revealed the sharp points of his fangs. It wasn’t a friendly smile; it was satisfied, victorious. I didn’t understand why he would look like that, but I didn’t care. All that mattered was that we found my mate as soon as possible.

“We will,” Asmoded agreed, and I realized I must have spoken those thoughts out loud. “Look, it’s there.” Solear drew my attention through our bond at the same time, and I forced myself to focus on the shuttle. It looked like any other stretch of the desert: dismally empty and barren—sand dunes and rock outcroppings, but not so much as a hint of vegetation, nor a hint of my mate.

Urgency pounded in my veins, drawing on my slow-beating heart and crackling along my skin like electricity. Something was wrong. Something was happening to Evie right now. It felt like she was dying, slipping from my grasp like grains of sand. My



lip throbbed dully, as if I'd bitten it, but I couldn't recall doing that. I hadn't been struck in the face by the disguised Krektar either, so it could only have one source: Evie was hurt.

Despite seeing nothing at the location our tracker had led us to, we had no choice but to land and look for clues. I was thirsty as I stepped out of the ship, but that thirst rapidly transformed into a pounding headache as I followed my captain onto the sands. The Asrai were not desert dwellers like the majority of the Xurtal; we preferred temperate climates. Still, my armor kept my body at the perfect temperature, designed to work in space as well as protect me from fire. A little desert should have been nothing, but I was sweating and panting as I trudged after Asmoded.

His long, serpentine body had no issue with the loose sand. He slithered along it, eyes peeled to a handheld scanner, and in seconds, he'd located the right spot. With a few flicks of his tail, sand shifted and slid, and there it was: Evie's suit. Even her boots lay in a pile that had been covered by the ever-shifting sand. The bastard that stole her had stripped her of every protection and any ability we had to track her.

I picked everything up, especially the boots, which I knew she treasured deeply. Pressing them tightly against my heaving, sweaty chest, I locked eyes with Asmoded and ignored how worried my captain looked. "We have to find her now. She's dying. I can feel it." I tapped my fist against the toe of the boot pressed to my heart, the sound echoing hollowly. "Heatstroke."

Asmoded never questioned how I knew, neither did Slear. My brother was always silent, but he'd followed us down the ramp of the shuttle. Now he curled an arm around my shoulders, his hand tight as a vice. "We will find her," he said with a snarl, his sharp teeth bared to the fierce glare of the sun. "Close your eyes. You know what to do."

Ah, Slear, where would I be without you? I thought and of course, he was right there to catch that thought. Nowhere, bro, nowhere. It felt like my laugh was stuck in my chest, and my brain ached when I did as he suggested and closed my eyes to everything around me. The immense heat from before had faded, and now I was shivering with cold. I hooked into that cold, grabbed hold of it with my mind, and then I chased that vein of ice back to the source.

I had never done this before; it was an experience truly new to me, maybe even new to the Asrai as a whole. That could not stop me from doing it, from chasing that path with all my might, blazing through it with heat to combat the ice. I'd sensed her before and thought it was wishful thinking. Now I could not let any doubts hold me back: there was a bond, and I would find it, open it as wide as it would go. And then I'd find her.

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Evie

The dye would not take. I thought that was hilarious and kept laughing like a maniac, much to the frustration of the guards and the poor, confused Princess Imala. She was a small, delicate woman with the face of a baby, no older than sixteen. I was starting to think that she had no power here and might be as scared as I was about her future. Okay, maybe she didn't fear imminent death the way I did, but she was definitely not the one calling the shots, as she would have been back home.

"Please help me figure this out," she hissed under her breath, her eyes darting fearfully to the pair of guards who remained. After my ice bath, they had not left. They'd dragged me from the cold water at some point, and I remained huddled on the mats like a drowned little Batan. My blouse clung to my skin, making the pale green fabric see-through and treating them to a view of my breasts. They kept staring, but I did not have it in me to care. All I could do was keep that light burning in my

mind—the one that focused on all my feelings for Aramon. All my love for him, and hope that it called to him—hope that it was enough.

“Sorry, princess,” I drawled, flicking a still-wet hunk of hair out of my face. The green dye had stained my fingers, but it ran from my copper strands without affecting the color. Whatever the stuff was that had stripped the original dye from my hair, it was preventing new dye from taking. That was such a surprise, and I loved it—a fuck you to Pelarios and his nefarious plans. “Can’t help you. I have zero reason to even try.” When that made one of the guards glare, I stuck my tongue out at him, doing my very best to channel all of Aramon’s chaotic energy.

She sighed, her red eyes wide and fearful, but she seemed to conclude that there was no point in continuing to try. With resignation, she washed her latest attempt from my hair and skin. When she rose to her feet, her own demure white shift was splattered with green, but none of that green remained on me. She ignored the guards as she leaned forward and held out a hand, and I took it awkwardly with my still-bound ones, now tied at the front. With surprising strength for her small frame, she hauled me to my feet, then kicked off her slippers and nudged them at me. “Put those on, or you’ll slow us down.”

Nobody believed that, but the guards did not protest when I stepped into the slightly-too-small shoes. They would prevent further burns on my feet when we went outside; the young princess was very gracious in offering me that mercy. Her skin was tougher, more heat-resistant. She would not suffer burns from the sand the way I did. But for a princess to go barefoot? Pelarios and any of these Xurtal warriors would have a fit about it.

She must still have some respect and power here—more than I thought she did—because one of my guards ducked aside to halt a warrior for a few quickly whispered words. By the time we’d trekked from that smaller tent back toward Pelarios’s big central one, two things had happened: one, the young princess had been

brought new shoes; and two, my see-through shirt had dried in the sun.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

I was sensitive to the sun's bright shine, my head aching if I peered too closely at the glowing orb. It was starting to dip toward the horizon; soon, night would fall, and with it, the intense cold of a desert night on Ov'Korad. If I remained dressed as flimsily as I was, I'd find myself dying of hypothermia next. How fun. Was it a record to suffer from both in a single day? Hot and cold.

Thinking of temperatures, I became aware of a blaze of warmth at the back of my skull, and I got lost in thought as I focused on that. Was it Aramon, or was it the mate bond? Many species talked of such a bond; it was never a tangible thing, it was the instant attraction that bloomed between two people. It was the promise of love, the promise of strong offspring. But, what if it could be more? What if Aramon really could find me with it?

Imala escorted me into the main tent as if we were gliding into a party at court, ready to dance all night and celebrate midsummer or the solstice—some of Xurtal's most exalted happenings of the year. Only, I was dressed in rags, with still-drying hair and a split lip. I was walking to what could very well be my execution.

The tent was filled with a large table and chairs. A viewscreen had been hung from one of the tent walls, and Pelarios was pacing in front of it. "Ah, there you are," he said when we ducked inside, but he halted abruptly, his expression turning sour with distaste. "Why is her hair not green? And where is the illusion device? We had extra contacts, too. She should be wearing those, Imala." He paused, his expression growing even darker when the young woman did not cower as he expected her to. "I can still pick one of your sisters instead."

The threat hung heavy in the air, and I could feel how the words struck Imala, like

they were blows. Her lower lip trembled briefly before she got control of it, her expression turning cool and steely. I was impressed; Evadne didn't have that kind of control at that age. She'd always been more temperamental and headstrong—more prone to gossip and flights of fancy than was supposedly appropriate for a princess. “They are not here, sir,” Imala said with perfect, calm diction. She managed to sound serene, with a kind, beatific smile.

Pelarios turned to his guard, angrily instructing them to locate what he needed. They ran out as if there were fire at their heels, but he seemed calmer when he turned back to focus on Imala and me. Maybe the young princess impressed him with her cool head and her perfect manners. I could see that.

“Yeah, I suppose there is a reason I picked you over Candala or Evrana,” Pelarios mused, confirming my suspicions. He intended to mate with or marry poor Imala once the dust settled on his coup—a way to legitimize his claim to the Xurtal throne.

“And the hair?” He flicked a claw at my wild red tangles with a curl to his mouth—not quite distaste, but coming close. It was obvious he had no patience to deal with any of these setbacks, but it was also obvious that he'd risen to the status of advisor for a reason. He knew how to roll with the punches, adapt on the fly, and his ambition clearly knew no bounds.

“The dye stripper that was used prevents new dye from taking. It is impossible, sir,” Imala said, her voice as serene as an angel. It was like she was sticking a dagger in his side when she smiled pleasantly, infuriating him without ever saying anything wrong. He knew it, she knew it, and I could see it in the glint in her ruby eyes. I needed to take a page from her book—channel that nasty, backstabbing side that was so appreciated by the royal Xurtal court.

“Fine, you are dismissed,” Pelarios grunted, waving a hand at her. She dipped into a bow, turned, and strode out of the tent. It felt a little like I'd lost my ally when she

left, but that was stupid to think. I could not forget that Imala was probably going to do anything she could to ensure her survival. She'd shown kindness, but that did not mean she was on my side.

Alone with Pelarios, I waited because stalling for time was my best bet right now. It was tempting to jab at him, to hurl insults, but that might only accelerate the plans he had for me, which was the last thing I wanted. So I forced myself to stand tall, though my legs wanted to tremble; I was still cold after that ice bath, and now the coolness of the desert was creeping in.

As it turns out, his backup plan was a wig. They pulled it onto my head roughly, not bothering to properly secure it, but they needed my help with the contacts, which I could refuse. I fought with two guards, but my cold muscles were quickly sapped of strength. Pinned to the ground by one male, they tried to force open my eyes with little success. Pelarios stood over me, huffing in anger. I could not see it, but I knew he was pinching his mouth, frowning, and wearing the thunderous expression well-known to the court.

"Fine, no contacts, it's time! At least tell me we can turn on the illusion?" That was when they put me through the humiliating process of yanking up my shirt to reveal my belly button—my very bare, piercingless belly button. I had never been happier than I was at that moment that I'd taken the horrible device out that morning. It was still in a pouch attached to the suit of armor, and that Kertinal hireling had tossed it into the sands far away from this camp.

Laughing in victory, I lay there on his soft rugs, pinned by two warriors. "You lose," I said. "There's no big reveal without that, is there, Pelarios? You fucking lose." I cackled when he growled in fury and laughed even louder when he snapped at his guards to leave. Yeah, screw you. Sucks when you can't do what you want, doesn't it?

When the guards left, he turned on me, and everything became deadly quiet inside the tent. Still lying prone on the ground, my hands tied in front of me, I could see him round the table like a predator. His expression was cold as ice, his red eyes glowed like coals in his handsome, beautiful face, beneath perfect, thick black hair. It struck me how different yet similar he looked to Aramon—red eyes, red skin—but Pelarios was so handsome, so attractive. While Aramon looked ghoulish, with his sinister skull-like markings, he was nobody's definition of handsome, but to me, he was.

Aramon's scarlet eyes were warm and full of light, while Pelarios's red orbs were cold and evil. There was darkness hiding behind that pretty facade, while Aramon was exactly what you got. Chaotic, a little morally skewed, but so loyal and sweet. I love you, Aramon, I thought as Pelarios pulled back his leg and kicked. I love you, crazy Asrai. Come for me.

The blow landed in my belly, and I did as I'd been taught to lessen its impact: rolling with the force and tightening my abs to protect my vulnerable organs. The second kick came faster, punctuated by a growl. I rolled and avoided it, coming up to my knees and catching a third with my bound hands. He did not expect that. When I twisted with all my strength, he flipped and thudded to the ground.

Rising to my feet, I stood over him and planted my foot on his throat. I'd lost the princess's slipper in the scuffle, but I dug my heel in deep. "Fuck you, Pelarios. You're not going to win. I'm going to expose you for the traitor you are!" My shout brought the guards back to the tent, but Pelarios moved faster.

Though spluttering through a bruised set of vocal cords—one of my signature moves—he grasped my ankle and tossed me to the ground without effort. I rolled again, tried to come up fighting, but he was faster, and now he wasn't holding back. A blow landed on my face, sending me spinning, my vision bursting with black and white. And then he was on me: another kick to my belly, and then to my hip and my back. I coughed up blood all over his pretty carpets when he paused to growl at me.



“You are going to obey. You are going to admit to impersonating Evadne. You are going to tell them how you lied,” he said. Then, he turned to the viewscreen and tried to make a call. If that connection went through, he would reach Kalzudaud and the rest of the delegates. Would I be able to beg them for help? If I told them I was just a simple human Pelarios had kidnapped, would they believe me?

My body ached all over. I couldn't take much more punishment than this. My ribs were cracked, and my hip ached so badly that I couldn't move my right leg. The heat I felt in the back of my head could just mean I was about to pass out, but I did not want to believe that. I had to keep hoping.

The call did not connect, and Pelarios pulled on his long, thick braid in frustration. “Why is this not working? It should work!” He twisted to look at me, and I could only see him in a blurry, vague outline; my left eye had swollen shut. “What did you do?” The sound of an engine roaring interrupted his question, and he twisted to look at the guards hovering at the entrance, afraid to get closer and incur his wrath. “What is that?” They were only too happy to dart outside to investigate.

He stalked closer to me, dipping down to grab me by the hair and raise me off the rug. “Did you do this?” he demanded, and I shook my head. Sounds came from outside: the engine cutting off, followed by laser fire and the shouts of men. It sounded like a fight.

I wasn't certain if I had anything to do with it, but as Pelarios raised a fist as though he was about to strike me, I could only grin. The heat at the back of my head was growing, like it was about to explode, rising like the sun, eclipsing everything. It filled my mind until all I could perceive was not Pelarios's treacherous face, but an overwhelming whiteness. Hello, my love. “What now?” Pelarios demanded at the same time.

I smiled. “Now, you die.”

## Chapter 23

### Aramon

I could not sit still enough to land the shuttle myself, pacing and bouncing around the interior as if I had itching powder in my suit. Asmoded had taken over at the helm without a word, and I only needed the bond with Solear to feed him the right direction for Evie. I was doing it, just like he said—locating my mate through a psychic bond. It was the stuff of fables, but I didn't have time to marvel at it or wonder what it meant.

Evie was hurt, and she had gotten even more hurt in the last minute. I was going to gut the bastard who did this to her, skin him from head to toe, boil him alive. I was going to pay him back for every blow he'd struck against my mate, tenfold. Baring my teeth, I howled with fury at the closed hatch of the ship, wishing I could propel us to her faster. I knew that Asmoded was talking to people, arranging things—clever, smart things.

Even enraged with worry and fear as I clung to what had to be the back of Evie's mind, I could recognize the deep rumble of the Tarkan delegate's voice. They were telling the delegates that Evadne had been kidnapped—other things, too. Something about a Xurtal traitor and a second lost princess. There was only one princess who mattered: mine.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

Then the camp came into view, and I rushed over, bracing myself on the backs of the seats to get the best view. A Xurtal camp, struck up in the middle of nowhere in the desert. Colorful green and red bands decorated each triple-pointed tent dome. Some tents were large, others much smaller, and a contingent of Xurtal warriors guarded the camp. Briefly, my heart sped up when I caught sight of a green-skinned Xurtal female. But it wasn't my Evie; it was a much smaller, frightened girl.

Our shuttle landed, and the hatch had barely opened when I stormed out, my helmet covering my face and armor protecting me from any potential laser fire. The captain might have shouted something about not killing, but that was an impossible command. If anyone stood between me and Evie, they were going to die. My mind was locked on only one thing: the flame that was my mate, sputtering and flickering with pain. He could not sense it, but I could. Any delay, and I might be too late.

I tore into the first group of warriors with nothing but my claws, leaping onto them and pummeling them with unbridled fury, my rage finally unleashed on a target. As they fell, Evie's flame seemed to grow brighter until, suddenly, she was there—her thoughts and feelings laid bare to me. Hello, my love, I shouted to her, triumphant. Through her blurry eyes, I could see my true enemy. And when she told the bastard he was about to die, I felt so damn proud of her.

The tent. I knew where she was, so I shredded the fabric wall with a knife and leaped through as the last syllable left her lips. I saw her: prone on the floor, blood on her lips, barely dressed, bruised, and burned. Still, she was radiant to me: beautiful, proud, all that bright defiance aimed at the asshole who dared to strike my woman. He was poised to do it, and he would regret it for the rest of his very short life.

With a roar, I was on him, and then my mind became nothing but a black hole of rage. In the instant I'd seen Evie, I'd seen the damage that bastard had done, and I responded in kind: a strike to the belly, a blow that shattered his hip, one to break his fucking nose. Lost to the battle rage, I did not surface until Evie's mind brushed against mine again. A gentle touch, like the petal of a flower striking water: love, bright and warm, and then a tiny hint of worry.

I wrenched myself back from the precipice with gargantuan effort, but I did it. Who wouldn't come back for a touch that sweet, a touch I certainly did not deserve but craved anyway? Turning from the crumpled mess that remained of my opponent, I rose to my feet and spun, searching for Evie.

She was on the ground, lying limply with her eyes closed. Her chest still rose and fell in a slow rhythm, but she was not moving, and she looked awful. Her fair skin had been burned by the sun in many places, her silky blouse torn and stained by something green. Blood dripped from the corner of her mouth at an alarming rate, and I could feel her pulse slowing, fading. She was dying.

To the sound of combat still raging outside the tent, I sank to my knees at her side and flipped on my newly acquired com. "Dravion, what do I do? How do I help her?" With my other hand, I had already pulled the handheld scanner from my medical supplies, which sat in a small pouch on my hip. I saw no visible wounds, so she had to be bleeding internally.

"Give her one of the hypo shots; it should tide her over until I can get there," the ship's doctor responded immediately, without delay, as if he'd been waiting for that call. I reached for the hypo injector he mentioned and jabbed it into Evie's bruised thigh without hesitation. Whatever Dravion said would help, I'd do. At the same time, I clung to the soft light that remained of her mind—her soul, or whatever you wanted to call the part of her that made her who she was. Stay with me, Evie.

Then Solear landed on his knees next to me, holding a tissue regenerator, his mind a bright flame beside Evie's tiny, slowly fading flicker. "Keep her here," he demanded of me. So I did. I held her as tightly as I could, with my hands and with my mind. Don't go. Stay. I love you, mate. My Evie, my Evelyn Mordew the brave. Warrior princess. Soulmate. Stay... Stay!

Dravion came out of nowhere, slithering into the tent on his many tentacles and hauling boxes of supplies effortlessly with him. Dravion never left the Varakartoom; he feared the reactions of others at seeing him too much and preferred the peace and quiet of the ship. But he'd come, and he must have been close already to arrive so quickly. If Dravion was here, Evie would be okay. There was no better healer.

With a sigh, I sagged forward, rested my forehead against hers, and let myself slip into her mind completely. There, I could tell myself that everything was going to be fine.

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Evie

Everything was different when I woke up. I was comfortable, lying on a soft mattress, and warm, but not too warm. Nothing hurt, and breathing was easy, so my ribs were no longer cracked. I noticed all those changes in a heartbeat, but it was the difference in my head that was slower to rise to awareness. My head was different—very different. It was like someone had turned on a portable heater in the back of my brain, except it wasn't unpleasant. It felt good, cozy.

Blinking my eyes, I fought against their heaviness. I couldn't make sense of why my head felt the way it did, so the least I could do was try to make sense of where I was. It didn't feel like I was alone, but when I blinked open my eyes, I discovered I was all by myself in a room: pale walls, a single painting across from me, a cluttered desk to

my right, and several more medical cots to the left. A med bay aboard a ship. I even recognized which med bay, because I'd been there before.

Sitting up made my hip ache, and that small twinge of pain set off a little niggle at the back of my head. Not even two seconds later, a door swished open, and there he was: my mate. Aramon wore a frantic expression on his dramatically marked face, the bone-white of his skull-like features gleaming beneath the bright overhead lights. "Evie! Don't move, my love. You'll hurt yourself!" He came to a halt at the side of the bed and, with a big hand, carefully started to lever me back down. "Sleep, rest, you'll feel better soon." I'd never seen him so worried, but my hip twinged again as I let him push me back against the mattress. When my hip ached, he was the one who winced, his expression turning grim. "I'm so sorry! I'll get Dravion."

He turned and started to race back out of the med bay, but I managed to catch his fingers just before he slipped from my grasp. "Stay, please. What happened?" I recalled Pelarios—flashes and snippets of the beating he'd given me. I recalled defying him and telling him he was about to die, but everything after that was a big blank. Aramon must have come; he found me. I felt a niggle of something, the faintest stirring of recollection, and then, suddenly, the memory fully bloomed: Aramon whispering in my mind, the knowledge that he was there. That salvation was within reach.

"Yes," he nodded. "I'll always come for you, princess. I'm your male, your bodyguard. And you? You're my heart and soul." I did not question how he knew what I had been thinking—I could sense it now, and I was starting to understand. That little heater, that sun—that was Aramon glowing at the back of my brain. He was just a thought away. Oh boy, what had I gotten myself into? This was Aramon, my Aramon. He was going to peek at what I was thinking all the time now. He wouldn't be able to help himself.

That should be off-putting, but when all that warmth, all those thoughts, were so

filled with love and loyalty, how could I resist? He wasn't shy about sharing his own thoughts—which was not a surprise—offering them to me like little treasures. It wasn't until I took the first proffered thought that I sensed his fear of rejection. Oh, my poor mate, he thought he was not worthy. How could he think that?

“Aramon,” I said out loud, because some things deserve to be said out loud and see the light of day. “I love you. You were the first person—the only person—who ever cared about me. Really cared. You're my male, my protector, and you make me feel safe. Don't you know how much that means? I've never felt safe—never. But I do now. With you.”

Aramon was rarely lost for words, but he was now—his red eyes gleaming suspiciously. He seemed as caught up in powerful feelings as I was, and it felt natural for him to dip down and carefully hug me. It felt right to fling my arms around his neck and hold on tight.

That's how Solear and the doctor found us a while later. Any apprehension I'd previously felt at seeing a creature that was at least part Grolarnx slipped away. Aramon trusted this male without question—I sensed it immediately—so I could only do the same. “Her hip,” Aramon told the doctor. “It hurts her.” That made the tall, gray-skinned creature smile placidly, his pink-and-blue tentacles writhing and swaying gently beneath him in a hypnotic pattern.

“I see, and what does my patient think?” he said in a gentle, soothing tone. “Shall I have a look?” One tentacle held up a handheld medical scanner, and when I nodded, it moved closer to hover over my hip. Aramon swayed to the side, but he did not let go of my shoulders, so I did not let go of his neck, even though it was getting a little awkward to hold him.

As the doctor worked, I shifted my eyes to Solear and took a good, long look. I realized I had not properly met Aramon's brother, but it felt like I knew him anyway.

At first glance, he looked mean—feral, even. But through Aramon, I could sense what lay just beneath the surface, and it wasn't what you'd expect: shyness, fear of being alone, and this worry that I wouldn't accept him or let him into the unit that Aramon and I now formed.

“Hi,” I said to him, smiling gently. “I’m Evie. It’s really nice to finally meet you, Solear. Is it okay if I love your brother—like, a lot?” I held my breath as I waited for his answer and feared that all he was going to do was stare at me with his dark red eyes from beneath his lowered brows, his sharply filed teeth bared at me in what appeared to be a snarl.

Then it came—first, a gentle prodding through the warmth that was all Aramon at the back of my mind. A little growl and a huff from my mate as he twisted to glare at his twin, and I realized Solear had tried to trace his brother’s bond into my mind. He didn’t know how to communicate except through the psychic plane. “It’s okay,” I said, even if it was a little scary. The truth was, if I wanted this to work with Aramon and me, I needed to be friends with Solear. They were a package deal: Asrai twins. Their lives would always be entwined.

Aramon huffed again, finally shrugging out of my arms to rise and glare at his brother, arms crossed over his armor-clad chest. “Be respectful. No peeking where you’re not welcome! Got it?” he said to Solear, and only after another long, silent moment did Solear nod. Then a nudge came again, soft as a whisper, and when I focused my attention on it, it bloomed into a single thought:Hi.Nothing more, just that. I did not think Solear could see a thing inside my head, but he could use Aramon as a conduit to send his thoughts.Hi.It was a start.

Smiling, I waved at him.

## Chapter 24



Evie

“I can walk,” I said with some annoyance, but Aramon ignored that, as usual, and picked me up so he could carry me from our bedroom to the mess hall. The asshole was grinning from ear to ear, well aware that there was no feeling behind that little bite. It was impossible to stay mad at him for anything because he was so incredibly sweet and concerned all the time. Honestly, I was pretty sure it was harder for him than for me to deal with the recovery process.

Pelarios had done a lot of damage to my body, especially my hip, which had been shattered. Dravion was an excellent doctor, though, and he had done his very best to restore the bone. The process had required several pins and plates to hold everything together. I kept joking that I was now a cyborg, but that only made Harper—a fellow human woman on the ship—laugh. Aramon would simply stare at me in utter bafflement whenever I used that word. Apparently, there was no such thing as a cyborg, and the word didn’t translate. Too bad, I’d been holding out hope that some of the action heroes my dad used to love could be real.

After the disastrous events on Ov’Korad, I’d been whisked onto the Varakartoom and had been unconscious for two whole days while the doctor fixed me. Because of that, I’d missed the outcome of the negotiations with the delegates—which was probably a blessing. Kalzudaud and his mate, Caitlyn, had held down the fort, pulling the remaining delegates into a united front in the aftermath of the bomb. I’d been told that, once Pelarios was defeated, the young princess they had discovered at his camp, Imala, had insisted on being taken to the retreat and had done an admirable job of hammering out the final details.

Aramon was convinced that Kalzudaud and Caitlyn knew I was human and that they'd always been dealing with an impostor, but Imala had kept up the pretense. She had told the delegates that a traitor, Pelarios, had killed the true Evadne in the desert and that she had witnessed this. I was almost sorry I'd missed the sixteen-year-old princess wrangle those delegates into signing the treaty, but she had done it marvelously. Her clever lie had also freed me from all my ties to the Xurtal Kingdom. I was free to be Evie without an ounce of guilt because the Kingdom was safe and my promise to Evadne was fulfilled.

"Thinking of Imala again?" Aramon murmured in my ear, a hint of laughter in his voice. I couldn't help it; that young princess had reminded me so much of Evadne, yet not at all at the same time. I was pretty sure Imala would make one hell of a queen one day—a better queen for Xurtal than the king who currently ruled it.

She'd sent me a missive after the dust had settled, along with a fee for my services rendered. A very high fee. I was shocked to realize that the gift of that money—enough to start a new life somewhere lovely several times over—forced me to confront the truth: I had never earned a salary, not a single dime. As Evadne's double, I had simply been enlisted to do the work, but they had never paid me for it, let alone given me a choice.

"We are NEVER going to Xurtal," Aramon said. It was something he repeated often. I knew why: he was so mad on my behalf that he feared what he'd do if he got there. I'd caught many a stray thought about leveling their desert cities and burning their forests. It always cheered me up—my protector, ready to end worlds on my behalf.

"Yeah," I said to him. "I keep thinking about what to do with all that money... I've never had money to spend before." It seemed strange to buy things with money when everything I needed had always been provided. But those things were clothes that made me look like Evadne and food to keep me in shape—never things I'd picked for myself.

Aramon had already introduced me to online catalogs and helped me pick out clothes I liked for myself. They'd been delivered right to the Varakartoom's hangar bay and carried up by a very excited Tasseloris, who happened to take the delivery. Today, I wore a yellow dress that swished around my thighs and felt comfy over the soft gray leggings I had paired it with. Evadne would never have worn yellow—too gaudy—but I loved it. It was cheerful.

“You'll figure it out,” Aramon assured me calmly. That calm was deceptive; he was never truly calm. There was simply too much energy in his system. “You've got all the time in the universe,” he added. “Now, are you ready for your surprise?” When I nodded, he swept through the door into the mess hall, and we came to an abrupt halt.

The previous mess hall had been all gray and utilitarian, with its metal tables bolted to the floor and metal chairs that could magnetically lock to the deck. I'd been in there plenty of times while pretending to be Evadne, and I'd always felt like I was walking into a freezer while I was in there. It was not an inviting place, but none of the mercenaries had seemed to care.

The transformation was baffling, and I didn't quite understand why it had been done. It wasn't like I was particularly fond of the location. But the company that greeted us with a cheerful “surprise!” was just as much of a surprise. My eyes didn't know what to look at first, and I felt a little unsteady—off my footing. Literally, because Aramon was cradling me bridal-style in his arms.

The tables were replaced with beautiful wooden trestle tables, thick, sturdy, and, though clearly not new, imbued with a lush, warm vibe. The chairs were similar, but all their legs still had metal tips so they could be magnetically locked to the deck when needed. Very clever. One wall had been repainted in a warm green, and the huge viewscreen that normally displayed statistics about the ship's current condition was showing beautiful landscapes—landscapes that might actually be of Earth, but it had been so long since I'd last seen the planet that I couldn't be sure.

In front of the counter where the ship's chef always placed the food he cooked, both of the Varakartoom's women stood: Mandy and Harper, whom I'd met and talked with a few times during the handful of days I'd been recuperating. They were both wearing pretty dresses and smiling warmly. The third woman with them confused me for a moment; she did not look like royalty in a simple shift dress. That was Caitlyn, the mate of Kalzudaud, King of Daudiras.

"It's a party. Smile, my love," Aramon whispered in my ear. He lowered my feet to the floor slowly, but he did not let go of my waist until I was well and truly steady on my feet. Then he backed away with silent steps, though one hand reached out at the last moment to nudge my shoulder forward.

"Come on," Harper said with a grin. "We've got cake, chocolate, and real coffee. Also, a wide selection of teas, because you probably have never had coffee." The woman took over where Aramon had left me—not that he'd truly left. I could feel him hovering in the back of my mind. He was eager but, at the same time, worried and struggling to keep walking out of the mess hall when I wasn't comfortable yet. Resolved to make this easier on him, I made myself smile, but that smile quickly turned real when Harper flung her arm around my shoulder and hugged me to her side. "Welcome aboard, Evelyn. We're so excited to have you!"

The next four hours were eye-opening, educational, and just plain fun. Once I'd gotten over the shock and my surprising shyness, it became easy to talk with each of these three women. Caitlyn had never met Mandy or Harper either; she was a little older and highly educated as a doctor, with credentials from Aderia. Her life and mine were like two sides of a coin—both rescued young by an alien species after being abducted but so very different at the same time.

Aramon was right: she and her mate had known immediately that I was not Evadne, but they understood the importance of this treaty, so they had kept silent. Now that Caitlyn knew my story, she was even happier that they had chosen to support me

rather than distrust me. Caitlyn was here now because she had insisted to her mate on letting me know that I had friends. I had never had friends who were truly mine before; they had always been Evadne's, and I was merely pretending to be her when interacting with them.

Now I knew why Aramon had been buzzing with so much energy this morning. He'd set all this up and somehow managed to keep it a secret. The transformed mess hall was part of how they wanted to make me feel at home. But that was as much a gift for Harper and Mandy as it was for me. "It was about time," Mandy said at one point, laughing, her hand clutching her flat belly as she held on to a tasty pastry dripping with chocolate. "I've been poking Asmoded about fixing up the mess hall for weeks now."

I had received new contacts while undergoing surgery, and they had done wonders for how most of the ship looked. However, the mess hall remained a dark and gloomy place. I couldn't talk about these contacts, which helped guide me through the ship without the aid of a computer or a guide. It was supposed to be a huge secret, and Caitlyn could not know, but that didn't change the festive mood.

By the time I ran out of energy, we'd talked about so many things so freely. I felt like I knew these three women better than I'd ever known any of Evadne's friends. Everything was shared freely and warmly, and they were so supportive when I wasn't sure if I liked something or not. I had definitely discovered that I LOVED chocolate, though, and we were very lucky that the ship's chef had started stocking up on the stuff as soon as Mandy became a permanent resident on the ship.

"Party's over, ladies," Aramon suddenly announced from just inside the door. I hadn't heard him arrive, but I'd sensed his presence growing stronger at the back of my mind. He wasn't invading my privacy, but I knew he'd been keeping tabs on whether I was happy and not in pain.

“Aw, already?” Harper pouted with a laugh. She was the most outgoing of the other three, with a ready smile and a million questions. “I still want to pick your brain over Xurtal court intrigue! There has to be a fantastic story there.” She aimed that at me, and I felt the beginnings of another smile as I thought about it. Yeah, I could probably dish out a lot of fun details about Xurtal court life. It might be cathartic to discuss them with someone as interested as Harper.

Mandy patted Harper’s hand. “Aramon is right. We promised to have Caitlyn back in time with her mate. You are departing for Daudiras soon, correct?” When Caitlyn nodded regally, I grinned because she managed to look so queenly while being so down-to-earth at the same time. “And I think you are flagging, aren’t you?” Now she curled her fingers around mine, giving them a gentle squeeze and a warm, friendly look full of understanding.

Yeah, I was. I was exhausted from being upright this much for the first time after my injuries, but I wanted this moment to last as long as possible. It felt so free, so fun, like I’d found my own little place with them, just like I fit with Aramon. When I nodded, I sensed that my mate hurried over, and his palm landed between my shoulder blades—warm and steady. I leaned into that touch, only then becoming aware of the soft throbbing in my hip.

“I’m sorry to go!” Caitlyn said. “But we’ll stay in touch, yes? We need to do this again soon!” She departed first, dipping to hug me before gliding from the room. She picked up a Tarkan escort at the door, clad in a leather weapon skirt and wearing a purple sash with a gold emblem on his bulging biceps. Once she was gone, Aramon had me say goodbye to the other two, and then he swept me in his arms. This time, I did not protest that I could walk; I was all too happy to lean against his chest and soak up the safety he offered.

“Thank you, Aramon. I didn’t know I’d like that or needed that,” I murmured. Mandy and Harper had made me feel so welcome, which took away the worry that I wouldn’t

manage to fit in aboard the ship. I'd never lived on a ship before, but I really wanted to try it, because I had decided that I wanted to see as much of the quadrant as Aramon had.

"Any time, princess," he said, the door opening to our little set of quarters. We'd gotten our own private room, and it was the first time Solear and Aramon didn't share a space, but both males seemed to have adjusted—though I had a feeling that sometimes Solear came in and slept on the couch just to be close. I had decided that wasn't going to bother me; he gave us privacy when we wanted it. I tried to look at it as though I'd gotten a brother as well as a mate. Already, Solear tended to get more protective of my personal space than Aramon did, and that made me feel safe. The scared little girl who had never gotten to heal—she was getting better.

"I love you, Aramon," I said to my mate as he carried me straight through our tiny living room into the bedroom. Solear was not there, but I saw evidence that they'd shared a few drinks and played Keflo together. He lowered me gently to the bed, his face split wide in a happy grin. He didn't say it back—not with words—but my head filled with it, flooding with all the intense feelings he had for me: love, lust, protectiveness, so much tenderness, and an unending desire to make me happy.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

Yeah, that scared girl I used to be? She was gone. Now it was time to unfurl my wings, find out who I wanted to be, and fly. And who better to have at my side to do that than a pilot?

### Epilogue

Evie

“Ah, Aramon,” I moaned, my skin tingling, my body thrashing beneath my mate’s weight. He kept one firm palm pinned to my sternum, preventing me from moving away, while the other guided his cock. The blunt, round head with its piercing teased my clit, leaving my orgasm hovering just out of reach. “So close,” I panted as he stroked through my folds. Each brush of that cock head against my slick opening made me groan and yearn to press down. If he could just slide inside, it would feel so good.

“Oh yeah?” he asked darkly, his mouth twisting into a sinister grin. In his dark eye sockets, his red eyes glowed like coals, fixated on my folds and the way he manipulated my body, playing me like an expert. At this point, he was the expert on all things Evie. A month together had been more than enough for him to perfect all the ways he knew how to pleasure me—or so I’d thought. Then he surprised me with this weekend getaway and showed me just how inventive he could be.

“Not yet,” he warned, retreating so that I panted with frustration. That had become his favorite game: bringing me to the edge and then pulling back. It was frustrating, but damn, if the payoff wasn’t always worth it. Growling with annoyance, I canted my hips, spreading my legs wider to invite him in. Then I bit my lip, which he found



endlessly fascinating, and just as I knew it would, it pushed him to the edge.

Growling, his grasp changed as he curled his hands around my hips; he hauled me close and sank his cock deep inside. Teased to the edge over and over, it was too much for my body—the drag of the nubs that lined his shaft, and the bars that lined the upside like a ladder, served to set my nerves on fire. I shattered with a shout, my nails biting into his forearms where I gripped.

All my muscles clenched and flexed around his thick invasion, making him tremble from the tight grip. His eyes glowed like fire, and his mouth twisted into a macabre grimace as he battled his own pleasure. “Not yet,” he growled—repeating his earlier words, but this time, to himself.

“Yes!” I demanded. “Now.” Shifting my legs, I dug my heels into his ass, curled up, and caught him around the neck with my arms. Pulling him down against me, I kissed him and then bit his lip. That did it, just as I knew it would. With a feral noise in the back of his throat, his hips jerked forward, and he started pumping into me with rough, deep strokes. At the same time, I bombarded his mind with all kinds of sexy images—memories of things we’d done last night: in the bathtub of this fancy hotel, against the wall just inside the door, and how I’d sucked his pretty cock in front of all those glass windows.

“Not fucking fair!” he snapped against my lips. Then he came, his body pushing deep, cock sinking into me as it spurted wave after wave of seed inside me. With a feeling of triumph, I let myself be caught on the waves of his pleasure and let them tip my body over the edge as well.

Later, we lay curled together, side by side, staring out of the window and over the cityscape to the huge, lush forests beyond. Darkness was just beginning to fall, and we hadn’t even managed to leave the bed yet. “When do we have to get back to the Varakartoom?” I asked. Not that I wanted this quiet interlude to end, but I knew there was only so long we could be away before it became too much of a strain on Aramon

and Solear's bond. I wanted Aramon's twin to accept me, not resent me.

"Not yet," Aramon murmured sleepily. "They are prepping for a mission, but I'm not required to be part of it." I smiled but didn't say anything. My mate claimed he hated downtime and being between missions, but I had a feeling he wasn't hating it this time. "The Varakartoom is berthed over there," he added and, with unerring precision, pointed to the right side of our view, where the spaceport stretched out. We were on one of the Viridara planets, and everything about their world was green and plant-covered, even the port, which made it hard to see much of it from here. Yet I knew he'd pointed right at the ship—or rather, at Solear on it.

I might not have been able to see the ship itself, thanks to the tall trees that blocked the view, but when a shuttle rose, its blue engines glowing, I could see that very clearly. "Is that one of ours?" I asked, staring at the trail of blue lights as it darted through the air and headed straight for the woods beyond the city.

Aramon raised himself on his elbow behind me and squinted at the window for a better look. "Oh yeah, definitely. That's shuttle three. I recognize that light trail anywhere." I smothered a laugh. Of course, he did! He knew every single thing there was to know about the flying vehicles aboard the Varakartoom—and the Varakartoom herself—which he often lovingly called Vara for short.

"Is it supposed to do that?" I asked when I noticed the light sputtering, then flaring brightly. My tone made him raise his head again, and then he leaped over my side and out of the bed, his hand reaching for his com.

"Fuck. Varakartoom, come in!" he said. But before the call could connect, he started cursing even louder. The shuttle's light had spluttered again, but now we could see it was rapidly descending, spinning wildly. I didn't need to know a thing about ships to know that was bad. It looked like it was crashing. And then the ship was simply gone—vanished without a trace into the deep, dark woods of Viridara Three. With a bleak expression, Aramon turned to look at me. "They lost contact."

“Who was on that shuttle?” I asked, worried that it might be Slear, though I knew that Aramon’s twin hated flying with anyone other than his brother. I had the answer before my mate could even open his mouth. The information came from Slear, filtering through the bond with his twin. “Ah no, not Tass.” Not the young Viridara male who’d taken on the daunting task of sharing a bunk with Slear. I liked him. He was sweet. “Did he survive?”

Aramon’s mouth grew tight, and for a moment, I thought he might not answer me. I read it in his mind, because he couldn’t shield a feeling as big as the one he was experiencing now. No, Aramon didn’t think so. “There was an explosion—a really big one. There’s no way Tass could have jumped ship before it blew. He’s dead.”

THE END