

Chapter 1

“I am Her Royal Highness Princess Evelynne Sophia al-Heru deMolay of Atlantl.” The stranger’s face in the mirror did not look impressed.

She squinted into the reflective surface, clenching her face into an exaggerated grimace, and then relaxed it again, some part of her hoping that the action would somehow morph her features back into their familiar appearance. It didn’t, of course.

Her hands went of their own volition to her neck, absently brushing it, still unused to the coolness there. Her whole head felt strange, she realized, as though a huge weight had been removed. Which it had, she supposed. Fingers long used to brushing lengths of flame-coloured hair behind her ears tried to do the same now and encountered...nothing. Those shoulder-length tresses were gone now, leaving behind a short crop of spiky red hair.

Her fingers did encounter the arms of a pair of square-framed glasses, their lenses — actually nothing more than thin pieces of glass, since they were functionally unnecessary — providing little windows through which blue eyes viewed the world.

It was definitely not the face of someone destined to become the ruler of one of the most powerful nations on the planet.

“I am Sophia Temonet Doherty.”

Ally Tretiak — Her Ladyship Corporal Dame Alleandre Tiffany Tretiak, Heir Consort and Knight Errant, Bachelor of Science, to use her every epithet — found Evelynne sitting on the tiny balcony, looking out over the lights of the city, and spent a moment just looking at the woman whom she loved deeply. The two weeks since they had arrived had been deceptively quiet, but that had not lessened the stress that they both felt. The violence and turmoil they had both fled back in Evelynne’s homeland of Atlantl were the source of the tension, as was the sense of impotence at their inability to affect matters, a sensation that neither found familiar or comfortable. The continued stress had etched premature tension into Evelynne’s expression, despite everything Ally had tried to do to alleviate it.

“Are you planning on standing there and staring at me all night, or are you going to come over here and kiss me?” Evelynne asked, her voice laced with humour.

“Well, as tempting as gazing at you for hours might be, if it’s a choice between that and kissing you... Can I do both?” Ally took the two steps required to move to Evelynne’s side.

“I wish you would,” Evelynne said, snaking an arm out to draw her down into a passionate kiss. Finally they broke apart. “Hello, Ally, love.”

“Hey, Evy,” Alleandre Tretiak greeted warmly. She carefully lowered herself into her lover’s lap. “How did it go today?”

“Not too terribly,” Evelynne replied, wrapping her arms around Ally’s waist. “I managed to do a whole two loads of washing all by myself.”

Ally chuckled. “You sound so proud of yourself.”

“Hey, give me a chance. I’ve never even had to think about doing my own laundry before. This is a big thing for me,” Evelynne protested.

“I know, and I’m proud of you,” Ally said, dropping an affectionate kiss on her lover’s head. She hesitated. “You did separate the colours, right?”

“Of course I did,” Evelynne said, frowning. “Some things are just common sense. Of course, it helps when the instructions on the detergent specifically tell you to do so. Stop laughing.” She poked Ally in the ribs, turning her chuckles into a familiar involuntary squeak. “How about you? How was your day?”

“Mmm.” Ally shrugged, her tone noncommittal. “I got some leads. Nothing spectacular, but I should be able to bring in enough to at least maintain the illusion that we need to make money. There’s a tutoring service hiring for the college and high schools.”

“I wish I could go and do something. I’m going to go insane if I have to stay here all day. Damn it, Ally, I was born to do things, not be a stay-at-home wife!”

“I know, and I’m sorry you have to right now. All I’m asking is that you wait a bit, get used to just being ‘Evelynne’. Or ‘Sophia’. Please? You’re the most important thing in my life. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

As usual, Evelynne crumbled before the openness of Ally’s face. “I know. It’s frustrating, that’s all. We did all this so that I wouldn’t have to be shut up for months or years. I need to be doing something.”

“I understand. Please, just give it a little longer for us both to get a feel for this place. We’ve only been here two weeks, and we’ve only had this apartment for two days. Please just be patient.”

Evelynne sighed. “All right. But I’m not going to sit around doing nothing forever.”

“I’d never ask you to,” Ally replied, pleased to have settled Evy for a little while longer. She nuzzled her nose into the short red hair next to her face. “Have I told you how hot your hair looks like this?”

Evelynne reflexively raised her hand to run her fingers through the short locks. “It still feels strange,” she admitted, then smiled wryly. “And yes, you may have mentioned that a time or two. Since when have you had a hair fetish?”

“I don’t know. I just have. Which is weird, since neither you nor Annie had short hair when I met either of you. I suppose it shows that I’m drawn to more than just physical looks. Not that having a stunningly beautiful fiancée is a bad thing.”

“My, you are laying on the charm tonight,” Evelynne said, chuckling. “However, for me it’s these that are going to take some getting used to.” Her fingers lightly brushed the curve of Ally’s right ear, where no less than six earrings adorned its previously unblemished skin. “Is it still sore?”

“A little,” Ally admitted. “They ache a bit, and sometimes they catch when I’m putting on a shirt.” She closed her eyes and purred as Evelynne caressed her ear. “But when you’re doing that, I don’t even notice. You can do that all night if you want.”

“Are you trying to seduce me?”

“Well, kind of,” Ally admitted, and even in the dark Evelynne could feel her flush. “Is it working?”

“It’s working,” Evelynne admitted. She hesitated. “I’m sorry I haven’t wanted to make love since we left. It’s just that—”

“It’s okay; I understand. You’ve been under a lot of stress. You never have to apologise for not wanting to...well, you know. And while I would always appreciate an explanation of why you might not want to, you never have to explain until you’re ready. Right now I know why, and I’m willing to give you as much time as you need.”

They didn’t need to discuss out loud the events that had led them to this time and place. The attacks in Atlantl — what the Atlantlan media was already calling the “Invasion”, and the American media was stubbornly calling the “Rebellion” — were barely three weeks past, and both women were still coming to grips with the repercussions. Not only was Evelynne having to deal with the fact that her homeland had been the target of mass bombings, and the deaths of thousands of subjects to whom she already felt responsible, but also the events within the Royal Palace in Jamaz itself, where they had been caught in the fighting, a traitor had nearly abducted the Princess, and Ally had been forced to defeat an entire squad of enemy soldiers single-handedly. Then had come the flight from the Realm, as the Crown Princess and her Consort were

placed under a variation of the Geranin Protocol, hiding away the sole remaining Heir to the Thrones. Under “normal” circumstances, both would have been accompanied by their full Atlantlan Guard units, but Ally had managed to convince the King and Queen that they would be far easier to hide without another dozen people — especially if they hid in the very last place anyone would expect them to go.

“You’re too good to me,” Evelynne murmured, burying her face in Ally’s throat. She was able to feel the accelerated pulse beating against the fine hairs on her cheek, and felt even more guilty for denying Ally the intimacy she desired — although her much shyer fiancée would never explicitly admit it. “You’re going to make someone a wonderful wife.” She pressed a light kiss to the hollow of Ally’s throat, pleased when Ally’s breath hitched.

“You, I hope,” Ally said.

“Of course me,” Evelynne murmured, beginning to nip at the side of Ally’s neck. “Why? Do you have some other options in mind?”

“Not r-really. Although I’m still waiting on Angelina Jolie.”

“Well, she can join us on one condition: that she loves you as much as I do. And that’s a pretty tall order.” Evelynne pulled back slightly and frowned. “Are you levitating?” she asked.

“I didn’t want to squish you.”

“Well,” Evelynne said, reaching up to slowly undo the top button of Ally’s shirt, “stop. I am in the mood to be squished.” There was no verbal reply, but the weight in her lap increased suddenly, confirming her suspicions. IT’S NOT AS IF YOU WEIGH ENOUGH TO CRUSH ME ANYWAY, she said much more intimately, her warm, loving thoughts bypassing Ally’s ears entirely as they entered her mind. She moved on to the next button.

“God, Evy,” Ally breathed, almost collapsing into a puddle, before stiffening suddenly and grasping the hand that had been stealing into her shirt. “Not here, okay?” She glanced out into the darkness beyond the balcony, as if expecting to see a news helicopter filming their every move.

“All right,” Evelynne agreed, using her hand to trace circles on Ally’s belly instead. “Would a more private location work for you?” Ally nodded shakily. “Then what are you waiting for?”

Moments later they were inside, leaving the lights of Horton City, Pennsylvania, to themselves.

Vision: The moon shining on clouds, seen from above. A rat in an alley, unaware of the cat about to pounce. A red-haired woman arching beneath the body of another. A man watching a rugby game on television, yelling at the screen. A crab walking across the ocean floor, investigating an old tire. The interior of a heart, steadily pumping.

Sound: A train rumbling along the tracks as it continues accelerating. The bark of a dog. The quiet hum of fluorescent lights. A breathless gasp. The scratching of tiny claws over a wood floor. The drip of water into a pool.

Fading like a dream upon waking, as she slowly rose — or fell — to a different level of consciousness, senses attempting des-perately to report to a brain overwhelmed by sensation. Gradually feeling the confusion fade, allowing thought to resurface.

“Claire? Claire, can you hear me?” Sound, a real voice, cut through the cacophony of imagined sensation.

Claire. *That’s my name*, she realised. She couldn’t remember who exactly was talking, but was reassured that at least it was a real person, and that she could actually spare the mental power to process the thought. In fact, now that she was aware of it, she could tell that one of the montage of images overlapping in her vision was somehow more real than the others, and she concentrated on bringing it more clearly into focus.

Slowly it sharpened into a worried face, capped by short blond hair. Behind it other faces were looking down, although they were obscured by the glare of the fluorescent lights on the ceiling.

Finally, the last of the ghost images and sounds slipped away, leaving behind only a vague memory of their existence, like a barely remembered dream, and Claire realised that her body was aching and her head was pounding. It was still an improvement.

"Claire, you all right?" The face was delicate and fair-skinned.

Claire blinked and groaned and began to sit up, aided by the strong hands on her shoulders. "Yeah, I am, Corey," she replied hoarsely and swallowed against a surge of nausea. "Or I will be. Could you get my pills out of my bag?"

"Already got 'em," Corey said, holding out a couple of small white tablets. He looked up at one of the onlookers' faces. "Could you get her some water?"

"Miss Jones, are you all right?" This time the speaker was an elderly gentleman in a suit who knelt down beside her.

"I will be," Claire repeated. "Just give me a minute. It's a condition I have."

"Epilepsy?" the older man enquired. "Do you need an ambulance?"

"Not quite," Claire replied. "Really, I'll be fine." She looked up and smiled as a young woman returned with a paper cup of water which was hesitantly held out. Claire reached out to take it, suppressing the small surge of hurt with the ease of long practice as the other woman flinched slightly as their hands met. "Thanks."

The young woman who had passed it over gave a slightly uncomfortable smile, as though apologising for her reaction. The show apparently over, the small crowd dispersed.

"Well, if you're sure you'll be fine..." The older man looked at Claire carefully, questioning. "Then will I be seeing you in class tomorrow?"

"I'll be there," Claire promised. "Thanks, Dr. Schmidt. I'll just sit here with Corey for a while."

"Very well," the professor said and patted her on the shoulder. "Take care." Even though another professor might have offered more assistance, neither Claire nor Corey was offended by Dr. Schmidt's absent-minded attitude. They both had an advanced math course with him, and were fully aware that he related much more readily to numbers and theorems than to mere human beings.

Dr. Schmidt walked away, leaving Claire and Corey to lean back against the wall, ignoring the curious glances of other students passing by. Thankfully, there weren't many, only those who were also taking advantage of the small college's night school.

Claire leaned her head back against the wall and closed her eyes, pleased beyond words that her mind was once more quiet and calm, even if the headache hadn't abated.

"You sure you're okay, Claire?" Corey asked. "That looked like a bad one."

"Well, it sure wasn't a walk in the park," Claire snapped, and instantly regretted her sharp tone. "Sorry. I just have a headache like you wouldn't believe." She ran her fingers into her long black hair and began a massage of her scalp that brought mild relief.

"Oh, I believe it," Corey replied, taking the opportunity to look at his friend more closely.

Claire's long, ruler-straight hair normally fell past her shoulder blades, and currently hung in slight disarray over her face, concealing the strong cheekbones and round eyes that bespoke an ancestry that could be traced back to Africa. The thing that caused most people to take a second look was the fact that, rather than the dark skin that most expected, Claire's skin was a patchwork of the expected milk-chocolate colour and an equal amount of nearly pure ivory, creating random patterns that covered her body like a zebra's coat. When Claire shook the hair, also sporting a blend of near-black and gleaming white, back from her face again, Corey could see her eyes, equally mismatched,

one a dark brown, and the other an incredibly pale blue, bearing a pink tinge that was characteristic of albinism. The pale left eye was set in the midst of a section of white skin that covered an irregular area of nearly half her face, and the skin beneath it was stained by a deep blue bruise that corresponded to the nearly black one under the other eye. Such bruises were common after one of Claire's attacks.

"Okay, I'm up," Claire said after a few more minutes of rest, and Corey leapt to his feet to help his still-shaky companion to stand.

Keeping a firm grip on Claire's arm, Corey guided them both towards the exit to the college building. "You should really think about taking tomorrow off. Call in sick."

Claire winced. "I wish. I just can't afford it. Utilities are due at the end of the month, and at the moment I can just barely afford to pay for them, assuming I don't eat for two weeks. And no, I won't let you pay for both halves again. You need to eat, too. And I know what you're saving for."

Corey had no response to that. "Well, we'll get by somehow."

Ally awoke with a start and spent several moments blinking in confusion. She normally woke very quickly when the need arose, moving from sleep to full wakefulness without a pause. However, Evelynne had been particularly amorous the night before, and had seemed determined to make up for the previous weeks of abstinence. The result was a thoroughly sated, mildly aching, and completely exhausted pair of women.

That exhaustion was what was making Ally's thoughts come so slowly, and it took her a moment to identify the sound that had awoken her. The knocking — pounding, really — at the front door of the apartment echoed through the bedroom, even muffled by the closed bedroom door, and Ally reflexively threw back the blankets and sat up, peeling Evelynne's arm away from her waist. Evy made an incoherent sound of protest and raised her face from where it had been pressed against Ally's back to blink up blearily at her.

"*Isheset?*" she queried fuzzily. "What...?"

"Someone at the door," Ally said, reaching for her glasses on the nightstand. "Stay here. Go back to sleep."

"With that?" Evelynne asked, her voice muffled by the pillow into which she was burying her face. She stiffened suddenly as a thought occurred to her. "Is it trouble?"

Ally strove to make her sleep-deprived brain function fully, extending her perceptions outward towards the presence at the door. This particular talent was never one of her strongest, and was even less effective now, but she was able to get a vague impression of the mind outside their apartment. The primary emotion was annoyance and frustration, verging on anger, but without any kind of homicidal impulse or real threat. The fragile thread snapped before any more impressions could be read, but it was enough to reassure Ally somewhat. "I don't think so." She winced as the pounding reached a new level. "Stay here."

Standing, she wrapped a thick terrycloth robe around herself, wincing at the chill air that permeated the apartment. It was early summer, but the region was experiencing an unpredictable cold front. The more normal warm weather that they had been enjoying the previous evening had obviously passed, and even if it wasn't like the depths of winter, it was still enough to chill the floors uncomfortably. *Didn't notice last night, though*, Ally thought, blushing slightly at the memory. She quickly passed through the small living room — minuscule compared to the rooms Evelynne had been used to living in — noting its bareness and making a mental note to find some decorations somewhere.

"Damn it, Roger, you'd better not be hung-over again!" A loud, angry, and obviously female voice could be clearly heard through the front door now. "I told you, one more time and you're fired!"

Ally took a moment to peek through the peephole in the door, confirming that there was in fact a woman on the other side of it. The image was too distorted to determine details, but there was nothing about her that seemed particularly threatening. Satisfied that there was no immediate danger, Ally cracked open the door and peeked out. "Um...hello?"

The woman stopped her arm in mid-knock and frowned, her expression moving from annoyed to confused to disgusted in the space of a few breaths, giving Ally a chance to get a better look at her. She was of medium height and build, probably in her early or mid-thirties, and her dark complexion was complemented by her jaw-length black hair. When she spoke, her voice betrayed an accent that did not seem typical of the region. "Oh, great. Who are you, one of Roger's latest bimbos? Never mind. Is he awake, or is he still stoned out of his pitiful excuse for a mind? If he is, you can go and tell him that he's fired."

"I don't know any Roger," Ally said, finally able to get a word in. She opened the door a little further. "Or at least none from around here. We — I just moved in here a couple of days ago. Do you have the right apartment?"

The woman's eyebrows rose. "He's gone?" she asked, ignoring the question. "Well, shit." She rubbed her forehead with her fingertips. "You say you moved in a couple of days ago?" Ally nodded hesitantly. "Damn it, he's gone then. Without a word or anything." The woman sighed. "You new to the city?"

"Yeah..."

"I don't suppose you happen to be or know a decent bartender or waitress, do you? One that can start on really short notice?"

"Uh, no. Not really," Ally replied, more than a little stunned by the turns in conversation.

"Damn. Worth a shot." The woman fished in a pocket and came up with a colourful business card, which she handed over to Ally. "Listen, I'm Narmin. That's my place. Come around some time and have dinner on the house. My way of apologising for waking you up. Or not." Narmin looked more closely at Ally's neck, and then glanced beyond her. "Nice work," she commented.

Ally's head whipped around to see Evelynne standing hesitantly near the door to the bedroom, also wrapped in a dark blue robe.

"Pardon?" Evelynne asked.

"The neck," Narmin explained. "It's impressive." Ally's hand shot up to belatedly cover the large red patch on the side of her neck. Narmin's eyes looked up and down her body. "I can see where the inspiration comes from, though." Reaching Ally's flaming red face, her expression instantly turned apologetic. "Oh hey, I'm sorry. I really seem to be putting my foot in it today. Come on round and I'll throw in a round of drinks with your meal." Suddenly a beeping sound filled the air, and Narmin looked down at a small pager clipped to her belt. "Damn, gotta go. Sorry again for disturbing you. Please, go back to...whatever it was you were doing." With that, she was off, powering down the hall at a brisk pace.

Ally slowly closed the door and turned to Evelynne, the business card still in her hand and a slightly stunned expression on her face. "Well, that was interesting," she said bemusedly. She glanced down at the card, noting the title "Narmin Baihum, Manager" under the name of the establishment. "'The Sixth Age Bar and Restaurant'. Well, I suppose we have a free meal at least."

Evelynne walked closer, rubbing at her eyes. "I suppose," she agreed. She squinted at the clock near the door and groaned. "It's way too early." She buried her face in Ally's shoulder.

"Love, it's almost eight-thirty."

“So? If I recall correctly, you kept me up until three last night—”

“I kept *you* up?”

“—and then again at four-thirty and six,” Evelynne continued as if Ally hadn’t spoken. “So yes, this is way too early.”

“So, what? You want to go back to bed?”

“Well, if you insist,” Evelynne replied, her voice bland as she turned and began to walk back in the direction of the bedroom. “Really, Ally, you’re quite insatiable.” The grin now hidden from Ally’s sight was at odds with the mildly chastising tone of her voice. “You really should see someone about that.” Her voice faded as she disappeared through the door, leaving Ally standing in the middle of the bare living room, her eyebrows threatening to merge with her hairline.

“Oh, I intend to,” Ally muttered as she belatedly began to follow. “Right now.”

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