

Chapter One

The night air was cold on her skin.

Evie Mason liked it. She liked that she could feel something other than anger.

She liked that it took her mind off the nightmares.

Her muscles tensed, images trying to push through her brain.

No. The nightmares had taken enough from her tonight. She was *not* thinking about them.

Instead, she thought of all the things she missed. Rock music, ice-cold Heineken beer on a hot day, Reese's peanut butter cups. Mmm, nothing went together like peanuts and chocolate.

The snow-covered grass of the palace gardens crunched under her feet. A dusting of the tiny flakes had fallen earlier, covering everything in a glittery, otherworldly shimmer.

She was in a *palace*.

She looked back over her shoulder at the stone structure built into the mountainside. The ebony rock was threaded with gold veins, and had been carved into buildings that looked both strong and elegant. Like something out of a dark fairytale.

She was just a regular woman from Earth in a freaking alien palace.

Her gaze shifted upward to the unfamiliar groupings of stars in the night sky overhead.

Her belly coiled into tight knots.

She was a long, *long* way from Earth.

Yep, no peanut butter cups around here.

Evie sucked in a deep breath, trying to push through the tightness in her chest. The cool

night air chilled her skin. Her white nightgown and light sandals were too flimsy for the wintry night, but she didn't care. She *wanted* the bite of the cold. She wanted the pain.

She squeezed her eyes closed and pinched the bridge of her nose with her fingers.

She was *not* going to fall apart.

"I am Evie Mason. I am Evie Mason." It was a furious whisper. One she'd been repeating every day, over and over, for the last two years.

For two years she'd been nothing. A prisoner. A test subject. A thing.

She'd had to fight to remember who she was, every second of every day.

Sometimes, it all felt like a bad dream. From the day the exploration ship she'd been the logistics manager on had been attacked by aliens, outside of contact range with the Jupiter space station where they'd been based, she'd been living a nightmare.

Everyone aboard had died, except her.

She'd ended up in a cell. Sold.

Then she'd fallen into the hands of the Sarkans and their dirty, evil Zhylaw scientists.

A muscle ticked in her jaw. She breathed deeply again, her hands balling into fists.

Two years. Two years she lived in a cell aboard the Abiosis science space station.

There had been so much pain and suffering.

The head Zhylaw scientist, Naberius, had taken her blood constantly. He'd poked holes in her, hooked her up to machines. He'd used her blood to create his abominations in his lab. Wild, horrifying creatures.

Rage welled inside her. It lived and breathed there, and refused to go away.

She released a sharp breath. "Yeah, well, Naberius is dead."

She'd helped kill him herself. And she wasn't a little bit sorry about it.

Power trickled along her veins. She felt it pulse inside her.

No.

“I am Evie Mason.” Another desperate breath. She tried to wrestle with the rising energy.

I don't want you. Just leave me alone.

The molten rage and the power didn't cool, but they receded.

Like a monster sliding back into the swamp.

She rolled her eyes. Her brain was extra overactive tonight. But glad to feel a little normal once more, she started walking again.

Not that her new powers would stay dormant for long. She rubbed the center of her chest. Naberius had changed her.

Evie would give anything to be normal, but like going back to Earth, she was terrified that it was an impossibility.

Gritting her teeth, she lifted her chin. The hedges in the garden were well-maintained, and she could smell something pretty, flowering somewhere. Fascinating stone sculptures dotted the grounds.

Most of them were just abstract hunks of rock carved into interesting shapes.

She turned a corner and almost ran into one. It reared over her like a giant beast.

Her vision blurred and her nightmares came rushing back.

Shadows. Pain. A strange red glow. A throb of energy. Terror.

“*Jesus.*” Her chin fell to her chest, and she dug her fingernails into her thighs. She fought the images back.

The bad dreams had been strong tonight, wrenching her from her light sleep. Just strange, half-formed images that flashed in her head. Some had been Naberius, the faces of the scientists, the lab workbenches, and the blood-soaked straps.

No. Fuck that. She was free.

She'd been rescued by enemies of the Sarkans.

She looked into the night sky again.

She was now on a planet called Taln in the Sarkany System. She was on the other side of the galaxy to Earth.

Her belly did a terrible swirl. She was too far away to ever go home.

That anger inside her churned again, twining with her new, unwanted abilities. It felt like something alive inside her that wanted, no needed, to be set free.

Gritting her teeth, she kept walking across the grass. The statues changed from abstract pieces to men and women.

They were all humanoid. Talnians. Apparently an advanced alien race—the Creators—had seeded the systems of the galaxy with life a long, long time ago. So, all the species across the Milky Way came from similar breeding stock. She paused in front of one statue carved from dense black rock, crisscrossed with gold veins. It was of a tall woman in a long dress, a delicate crown on her head. Some Talnian queen of old.

Evie stroked a line of gold in the rock. *Beautiful.*

The hedges opened up to garden beds. Even though it was cool and snowy, flowers that had adapted to the colder climate bloomed. Sweet, floral scents filled the air.

Then she rounded some bushes and gasped.

The view of the city of Gearma was breathtaking.

The snow-capped mountains were stunning, with sharp, jagged peaks that caught the eye. The buildings of the city sprinkled down the hillsides to the valley below, clinging to cliff faces, and glowing with golden light.

She now knew Gearma was the capital of Taln, where the planet's king—Conqueror Graylan Taln Sarkany—ruled.

The wind caught her hair. She was supposed to leave for the neighboring planet of Zhalto soon. Shockingly, there were two other human women from Earth here in the Sarkany System. Mal West and Poppy Ellison had been testing an experimental starship when they'd

been flung through a wormhole and found themselves on the other side of the galaxy.

Mal now lived on the planet Zhalto, and was in love with Zhalto's overlord, Rhain Sarkany.

Evie let out a breath. Sometimes it was all too much to take in.

Poppy was living on the planet Damar, a forest world filled with alien wolf shapeshifters, and she was now mated to the emperor, Brodin Sarkany.

The women had survived, fallen in love, and found a place to belong.

Evie didn't belong anywhere.

Hell, she never had. She was just the poor girl, with no mother, who'd never fit anywhere.

She heard a noise.

She turned her head, staring through the dark garden. Was someone else out here?

Moving silently, she slipped through the vegetation.

Then she stumbled to a halt.

The man stood on a large, square stone platform. It had four pillars in the corners, but no roof. The pillars glowed dully, giving off a low, gold light. There was no snow on the platform, and the man had his back to her.

She sucked in a breath.

He wore fitted, black pants, and that was it. Her gaze snagged on the broad expanse of muscled back, covered in bronze skin.

Supple, corded muscles moved and flexed. He was a strong, muscular man in his prime. He stepped, swiveled, and lunged, slashing a hand through the air.

It looked like some sort of badass tai chi.

He jumped and kicked, and her belly clenched in a different way.

Oh, God. Heat flashed inside her. It was the first time she'd felt desire in two years.

Of all the people to spark it, it had to be *this* man.

It was very clear he was a warrior. He turned and she saw the sharp angles of his handsome face. His black hair was cut short, and in the faint glow from the stone, she saw a glimmer of gold reflecting off his eyes.

Conqueror Graylan Taln Sarkany.

He leaped again, all strength, control, and power.

For the first time in eternity, Evie felt more than fear or anger.

She felt hot, liquid desire.

Her hands clenched in her gown.

No harm in looking at the attractive, alien king, Evie. But that was all, just looking.

Sitting on the platform around Graylan were several rocks of different sizes, all somewhere between the size of a baseball and basketball.

She frowned. It looked like something bigger had been smashed into pieces.

Then Graylan planted his feet and raised his arms.

Raw power radiated off him.

His focused gaze was on the rocks, and she had a chance to take in that arresting face. He emanated an intensity that made the hairs on her arms rise.

She shivered.

The rocks rose into the air, hanging there for a second. She swallowed a gasp.

Then the rocks started to whirl around in a vertical circle.

All her muscles froze. There was a crackling throb of energy in the air.

Graylan moved his hands and the rocks moved, doing his bidding.

Wow.

Mal and Poppy had told her a little about the history of the Sarkany System. There was a red giant sun with five planets: Andret, Zhalto, Damar, Taln, and Sarkan.

Several centuries ago, a giant solar flare had ripped through the system, affecting all the

inhabitants.

Andret, closest to the sun, had been destroyed and was now just a hunk of rock. The Zhaltons had developed abilities to manipulate the magnetic energy field of their planet. They were powerful warriors with deadly abilities. The Damari had been affected differently—becoming wolf-like shapeshifters—fast, wild, and dangerous. The Talnians could wield the geological forces of their planet, and command the rocks, the dirt, the water, and apparently even cause earthquakes.

The Sarkans had been out of range of the full effect of the flare. They hadn't developed any powers, and instead had become warmongers. They used advanced technology to create weapons to gain an advantage.

The leader of Sarkan was King Zavir, and he was trying to take over all of the system.

The kings of the other planets were allied in the fight to beat him.

He was also their father.

Zavir. Her throat tightened. She'd never met him in person, but he was the one who'd funded and ordered the scientists on the Abisos space station to do their work. He was the one who'd allowed Naberius to treat her like a lab rat.

He was to blame for her captivity, and the suffering of so many.

On the platform, the rocks whirled, shifting to spin around Graylan's body.

Incredible. She took a step forward.

Suddenly, his head lifted, and his gold gaze met hers.

All that contained power...she fought a shiver.

He was good to look at, but she knew he was used to being in charge and giving orders.

Everyone jumped for him.

And Evie was done obeying anybody.

The rocks stopped, hanging in the air.

What would happen if he ever let all that control loose?

Then the rocks lowered gently to the platform, and he straightened.

“You shouldn’t be out here, Evie.”

Graylan watched the woman from Earth walk out of the darkness.

He scowled. She wasn’t dressed for the cold. The light nightgown that swished around her small, curvy body was thin.

Her dark hair was choppily cut. No doubt done by herself, since she’d been in captivity. But it bared her slender neck. It made him wonder what it would feel like to curl his hand around it, to feel the smoothness of her skin.

He clamped down on that thought.

Instead, anger coiled inside him. She was so small, almost delicate, and the idea of her being caged and abused had his control cracking.

His power stirred, but he leashed it ruthlessly.

She had pale skin that might tan in the sun, given the chance. She was short by Talnian standards, with curves, and pale-green eyes.

Eyes that stared at him now, filled with defiance.

It made Gray want to smile.

Naberius hadn’t broken her.

“You said I wasn’t a prisoner,” she snapped. “I’m done staying locked up where people put me.”

“I meant that it’s cold, and you don’t have a coat.”

She hesitated. “Oh. I don’t mind the cold. I haven’t felt it for a long time. It doesn’t get cold on a climate-controlled space station.” She paused. “It feels good, even if it hurts a little.” Then her gaze moved to the rocks at his feet. “What are you doing?”

“It’s an exercise to channel and control my power.” He waved for her to join him.

She rolled her eyes.

“What?” he asked.

“Just an imperious wave. No, ‘won’t you join me, Evie?’” She stomped up the steps.

Gray cocked his head. “I make a habit of being efficient.”

She snorted. “You’re just so used to giving orders with a wave, you don’t even realize it.”

“I don’t issue orders all the time.”

She rolled her eyes again.

“You roll those pretty green eyes any harder, and they’ll fall out.”

She glanced at him, then looked down. “Oh, the stone floor’s heated. That’s why there’s no snow and why—” her gaze moved to his chest “— you don’t have a shirt on.”

He felt her gaze like a touch, and his muscles tightened. He saw her eye his abdomen, then lick her lips.

Gorr. The heat that shot through him made him grit his teeth.

Suddenly, he really wanted to touch her pale skin.

No. He couldn’t touch her.

There were a hundred reasons he couldn’t. The most important was that she’d just escaped captivity and was recovering. That alone should be enough.

And the truth was, Gray couldn’t have any woman.

Evie shifted, and her nightgown moved, plastering against her body. He saw the outline of slim legs, the curve of her hips, and the shadow of her nipples and full breasts clearly defined.

And his body responded, blood heading to his cock.

Find some control, Graylan.

Evie had been through a terrible ordeal. She had his protection, and that of his brothers and their women.

And Gray had his duty. To his planet, his people, and what lived inside him.

Evie brushed back her dark hair. “So, you come out in the dark and wave rocks around?”

The irreverence startled a laugh out of him. Most people in his life were circumspect about what they said to him.

“I couldn’t sleep.” No, thoughts of Zavir had ricocheted in his brain. It made sleep impossible. His *gorr* of a father would never stop. He needed power like others needed air to breathe.

Gray’s abilities stirred.

Zavir had concocted a terrible scheme to cause genocide on Taln, to annihilate Graylan’s people.

Rage welled. A light tremor shook the ground under his feet.

It was tiny, but Evie clearly sensed it. As she looked down, her brow creased.

“This exercise centers my power,” he told her.

“So, you can move rocks. What else?”

“I can command the soil, rock, and water. Talnians are connected to all the geological forces of the planet.”

“I hear that your people can cause earthquakes.” She kept her gaze steady on him.

He kept his gaze steady on her. “Is that a question?”

She tilted her head. “Can you cause earthquakes?”

“Yes.”

It was the very tip of the things he could do.

“And everyone on Taln has this ability?” she asked.

“Yes, to differing degrees. For some, it’s not as strong. They can shift the soil or move a rock. Others tend to have an affinity for different abilities, more in tune with water or rock.”

She nodded.

“And training helps us learn control, and to refine our skills.”

“When did you start training?”

“When I was three years old.”

She blinked. “So young.”

“I needed it.” His abilities had been too powerful. “And the connection to the planet’s energy is strong, a compulsion. We want to use it.” He walked down the stone steps, and stepped barefoot onto the grass. He started to wave a hand, but paused. “Evie Mason, would you please join me?”

She smiled. “Why yes, Conqueror. Thanks for asking.”

His lips quirked. She was a refreshing change. “Kick off your shoes.”

She did as he asked. For a second, he looked at her feet. They were slender and well-formed.

He mentally shook himself. Here he was, obsessing over her feet. *Gorr.*

She stepped onto the grass. “Ooh, it’s really cold.”

Gray felt the beat of his planet beneath him. A deep power that pulsed through him like a heartbeat. He let the geothermal heat move through him, pulling it up, his body a conduit. The patch of grass around them heated and the snow melted.

“Oh my God.” Evie laughed.

Gray realized it was the first time he’d heard her laugh. He liked the sound.

“Can you feel the pulse of Taln under your feet?”

She shook her head. “At home, on Earth, some people talk about communing with nature. Grounding in the Earth’s energy.” She laughed again. “I’ve never believed it.”

He held out his hand. She stared at it a beat, then gingerly put her hand in his.

Gray felt a jolt. She jerked, and he knew that she’d felt it, too. He closed his fingers over her slim ones.

“Thadd and Annora told me that you can absorb power?” he said.

First Claw Annora Rahl of Damar had rescued Evie from her cell on the space station, along with Captain of the Guard Thadd Naveri of Zhalto. The pair were keen to see her thrive.

“Only because of what fucking Naberius did to me.” Caustic anger snapped through Evie’s voice. “He cut me open, he did things, he changed me.”

Gray noted the panic in her eyes, her chest rising and falling fast. He felt the anger throbbing off her.

That anger would save her.

His anger had saved him, too, once.

“Breathe, Evie. Change doesn’t have to be bad, but you shouldn’t fight it. Just breathe.”

Green eyes locked on his. “I don’t want it. I just want to be normal.”

“Hoping for things you can’t have will drive you crazy.” Gray knew that, and it was why he couldn’t let himself get too close to this woman. “Breathe.”

They breathed together. He felt a tingle where their fingers met.

“Absorb some of my power,” he said. “Feel the natural energy beneath you.”

The tingle between their fingers increased. He stroked her palm. Her skin was warm and smooth.

Graylan was a tactile man. Touch helped ground him, especially when his energy surged.

Evie sucked in a deep breath. A gold ring appeared at the edge of her eyes, glowing brightly.

“I can feel... A deep well of power. In the ground. In you. Everywhere.”

His energy pulsed, and hers pulsed back.

Gray sucked in a breath. He’d never experienced anything like it before.

“I...” She shifted closer. “I need to touch you.”

Gorr. He shouldn't do this, but he couldn't stop himself. He nodded, and she pressed her hands to his bare chest.

His energy boiled in response—hot and wild. Desire flared inside him like a supernova.

She smiled. “God, do you feel like this all the time? Hot? Powerful?”

Gray cleared his throat. He needed a distraction, or he was going to kiss her.

Then drag her down on the snow-wet grass and fuck her.

“Follow me.” He stepped away, and the connection between them broke. Instantly, he felt the loss.

Focusing, he lifted a palm. A second later, the snow rose up from the grass in a swirl.

“Oh!” Evie watched, delight on her face.

Gray whirled the snow around in a circle, then exploded it out, then coalesced it back in again.

He stopped it, hanging in front of her. “You try.”

“I don't think I can manage that.” She lifted her hand. She stared hard, her brow furrowed.

He touched her arm. “Relax.”

She shivered, but nodded.

The snow moved to the left, then the right. It wasn't elegant, the movements jerky.

She laughed. “I'm doing it.”

He smiled back. “You are.”

She didn't have his control, but she whirled it in a long line. He took over, swirling it around them, so it looked like white smoke. With a laugh, she held her hand out, running her fingers through it.

He slowed it down to a gentle twirl.

“Amazing,” she said.

They stared at each other, caught up in the snow circling around them, entrapping them in

a small, private bubble. There was barely any space between them, and he was close enough to see that her nipples were hard points.

He wanted to touch them, taste them.

They're hard from the cold, you rock-headed gorr, Graylan. Remember, she's healing.

He cleared his throat.

She took control of the snow again, learning to spin it. She was smiling.

Suddenly, a small tremor hit.

Graylan felt the burst of ragged energy. Taln was a geologically active planet, so small quakes were a normal part of life.

It was over before it began.

The snow dropped down, slapping to the grass.

Evie swallowed convulsively, her hands balled. Her happiness was gone.

"Evie? Are you all right?"

She didn't respond, staring past him to the mountains. She rubbed her chest with the heel of her hand.

"Tremors are normal." He shifted closer, fighting the urge to pull her into his arms.

"Evie?"

She startled. "Sorry, I..." She shook her head. "So earthquakes are common here?"

"They happen. It's nothing to worry about." Although they'd been having more than usual lately. He tilted his head. "Something's bothering you."

"I had a nightmare earlier." She shook her head. "It's nothing. I should have expected it. Jeez, one minute I feel happy and light. The next—" she made a face "—the rage and fear takes over." She made a choked, furious sound. "I'm sorry, you must think I'm crazy."

"Evie." He wanted to touch her, but he forced his hands to stay at his sides. "You're entitled to those feelings."

She spun. “I *hate* it. Before, I was a calm, easy-going person.” She looked back. “I’m not sure I’ll ever be that woman again.”

She was probably right. He knew that traumatic situations left their marks, some visible and some not. “Give yourself time.”

She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

“You should go to bed now,” he said.

Her chin snapped up. “Like a child? Like a prisoner? Shall I lock myself in my cell?” Before he could respond she deflated as quickly as she’d started. “*Ugh*, there I go again. The anger just bursts out.”

“Give yourself some time. You’ve only been free for a few days.”

She nodded, but looked dejected. Then her gaze met his again.

He couldn’t look away. What was it about her that he found so fascinating? Not the pretty exterior, although it was attractive. No, it was that burning, inner core of strength and defiance. That, he found irresistible.

She stared back. “I’d better go.”

“Yes.”

Neither of them moved. One of his hands curled into a fist.

Then she gave a slight shake of her head. “Good night, Graylan. Thanks for showing me the snow.”

“Good night, Evie.”

She hurried away, looking like a mountain sprite from his childhood stories.

He turned to view the mountain range that ringed his city.

His father had tried to destroy Taln. He’d tried to destroy Evie, an innocent woman.

But she’d survived.

And Taln would, too.

The power in Graylan coiled, searching for a target.

Gray couldn't have Evie, but he could avenge what had been done to her.

You'll pay, Zavir. I vow it.