



IVY BARRETT

BOUND

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Bound

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This book is intended for *adults only*. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults.

## CHAPTER 1



*T*ense and silent, Cara sat on the luxury transport, hands clasped in her lap. She stared out the viewport, watching the strange orange and gray planet gradually decrease in size as the ship moved farther and farther away. Everyone claimed Altor was her planet of origin, but she'd spent twenty-two of her twenty-five years on Earth. Her name had been Aspen Hays then. She'd lived a very different life. She might go by Cara Slanar now, but she wasn't sure who she was, much less where she belonged.

Her 'parents' sat facing her. Only she hadn't known these people existed sixteen days ago. Cara, along with her two sisters, had been snatched from Earth and brought to this star system without their permission. According to these strangers, Cara and her sisters belonged to a powerful group of females called conduits. Odd that their magic had never revealed itself while they were on Earth. She still hadn't seen any tangible evidence that magic existed.

"Are you going to sulk all the way to the Citadel?" Lezod Slanar, the man claiming to be her father, demanded. His cool, clipped tone made his disapproval obvious.

She glanced at him then back out the viewport. If she didn't have anything nice to say, she wouldn't say anything at all. The old adage had served her well for the past few days. When she first arrived on Altor, she had kicked and screamed. She refused to do anything she was told and barricaded herself inside her bedroom. The approach had earned long hours of solitude and a few missed meals. Maybe the silent treatment

would finally convince these people to send her home. Probably not. She was too valuable.

Grinnel, Cara's alleged mother, crossed the aisle and sat beside her. "Your attitude is childish. You need to stop—"

"You said that about my 'temper tantrums.'" She accented the phrase with air quotes as she turned from the viewport. "I'm being docile now and you're still upset. Make up your mind."

Lezod and Grinnel were both dressed in tailored gray suits. Lezod's was charcoal, while his wife's was many shades lighter. The same could be said of their coloring. Lezod's hair was coffee brown, eyes the color of honey. Grinnel's blonde hair was so light it appeared silver in a certain light, and her eyes were powder blue. Cara wasn't ready to admit it, but her own coloring seemed to blend theirs. Cara's honey-blonde hair had always been naturally highlighted with strands of platinum, and subtle flecks of amber peppered her blue irises. Unlike the severe elegance of her parents' clothing, she had been given a formfitting navy-blue sheath dress to wear that was so short it barely covered her rear end.

"We have done little to correct your behavior because young males of our species thrive on challenge." Grinnel spoke quietly, hands folded in her lap. She always looked freshly pressed and serene, another indication that she wasn't Cara's mother. Most of Cara's friends described her as lively with a fiery temper. "Taming a feral female will greatly appeal to many of them."

"Feral?" Cara objected. Stray cats were feral. She was an educated, independent woman, not a wild animal. "I am not feral. I'm pissed off. There is a significant difference."

"You are rude and disrespectful," Lezod countered, glaring almost as intensely as Cara. His cold gaze shifted toward his wife and he switched to Altorian. Apparently, he didn't know Cara had been injected with medi-bots and a nano-translator right after breakfast. "This should be the proudest day of our lives, but I am not sure this person can be deprogrammed. I will never forgive your mother for stealing our sweet, innocent Cara from us."

He was right. She was no longer sweet and innocent. She was strong-willed and opinionated. On Earth strength and ambition were celebrated. Here they were considered character flaws.

Frustrated and demoralized, Cara turned back to the viewport and tried hard to ignore her parents. This had been the longest two weeks of her life, and it had all begun with a surreal nightmare. She'd been sitting in the parking lot of a restaurant in Juneau, Alaska arguing with her boyfriend. Bill had been so secretive, so dismissive lately that she was ready to end the relationship. Then the passenger door was jerked open and a strange-smelling mist filled the cab. Bill slumped over the steering wheel as a huge soldier in tactical gear pulled her out of the truck. Sudden weakness crept over her body and then everything faded to black.

She woke up in a small windowless room, disoriented yet terrified. It was only after one of the guards slipped a meal tray into her cell that she started to fear she was on a spaceship. The guard hadn't been a lizard-skinned, bug-eyed alien, but he definitely wasn't human. She'd been on the first ship a day, maybe two. Then Flora, the older of her two sisters, had stepped into the room. She gave Cara a hug and told her that everything was going to be all right. She promised that they would meet again soon and assured Cara that someone would explain what was going on when she reached her destination. That had been over two weeks ago, and she hadn't seen Flora since.

When Cara was moved to the second ship, she'd been put into a cabin with her younger sister, Raina. They quickly determined that neither of them understood why they'd been kidnapped, but Flora seemed to know a lot more than they did. That wasn't really helpful because Flora had been taken away before she could explain anything.

About an hour later, their grandmother walked into the cabin looking sad and regretful. Iris was in her mid-sixties. Her light brown hair was liberally threaded through with gray and her eyes were also light brown. "They've only allowed me fifteen minutes, so please let me finish before you start asking questions."



Cara had been shocked to realize her entire family had been taken, so she sat quietly and listened while Iris spoke.

“You were born on a planet called Altor. That is where we are heading now. The people on this ship believe they are rescuing you, but Autumn and I had very good reasons for why we took you off world. My bloodline carries a very powerful... I guess you would call it magic. We are known as conduits, and without us other empowered people are unable to reach their full potential.”

Despite her intention to remain silent, Cara couldn't help but ask, “If we have this powerful magic, why have we never seen you use it? Why have none of us even sensed it?”

“Autumn and I bound your abilities when we left Altor, but I was not strong enough to maintain the spell once Autumn died.”

Why did she keep referring to their mother by her first name? It was not her usual habit.

Before Cara could ask about the anomaly, Raina's gold-green eyes narrowed and she asked, “What does a conduit do?”

“We are part of what is called a power triad. As the name suggests, there are three parts—a source, a controller, and a conduit. The other two gifts are relatively common, but conduits are rare. So rare in fact that we have been hunted and enslaved down through the ages. Laws were passed designed to protect us. Unfortunately, the policies weaponized our abilities and enabled those with wealth and authority to determine how our abilities would be used. Autumn and I didn't want to subject you to an environment that seemed to value your abilities more than your thoughts and feelings, so we left.”

“Why is Mom suddenly Autumn?” Cara arched her brows. Her heart was racing and she wasn't sure why she felt so agitated. “You've never referred to her like that before.”

“I gave birth to three daughters—Grinnel, Settari, and the woman you knew as Autumn. Each of my daughters also gave birth to at least one girl. You are my granddaughters, but only

Flora was Autumn's daughter." Iris looked at Cara. "Your mother is Grinnel, my oldest daughter. Aspen is not your real name. Your Altorian name is Cara." Her gaze shifted to Raina as she said, "My middle daughter Settari is your mother. Your Altorian name is—"

"Raina is the only name I have ever known," she insisted hotly. "I'm not changing it now."

Cara understood Raina's decision, but she wasn't sure she agreed. If Aspen Hays was a fabrication, she didn't want to continue living a lie. The problem was she wasn't sure if Iris had been lying then or if she was lying now. "You referred to Autumn in the past tense but not your other daughters. Are they still alive?"

She nodded. "Your parents and Raina's are alive and anxious for your return. Raina has two younger sisters. You have three older brothers."

Cara glanced at Raina, needing to see how she was reacting to this fantastical tale. Did it matter that they were cousins rather than sisters? They had been raised in the same house, slept in the same bed for the first six years of their lives. Cara wasn't sure why, but it mattered to her. It all mattered. She would not perpetuate Iris' lie!

Anger lit Raina's gaze, making her eyes gleam with emerald fire. "So according to you, we aren't ordinary humans scratching out a living in a secluded part of the U.S. We're alien refugees with magic powers and our mother is really our aunt. Also, our long-lost families are waiting on Altor to welcome us home." A soft scoff illustrated just how ridiculous Raina found the tale. "You should write for a soap opera."

Cara stood and moved closer to Iris. The cabin wasn't large, so they soon stood toe to toe. "You took us to Earth without our parents' permission, didn't you? That's why the Altorians consider this a rescue. *You* are the kidnappers. You and *Aunt* Autumn."

"This is nonsense, Aspen. I don't believe a word that comes out of her mouth."

Unfortunately, Cara believed Iris was finally telling the truth. “We’re on a spaceship, for God’s sake. If this isn’t real, then how do you explain what’s happening right now? And my name is Cara, not Aspen.”

Raina pivoted toward Iris as she challenged, “Show us. If this conduit thing is real, do something magical.”

“It is not that simple,” Iris said. “I have been separated from my triad for two decades and my age—”

“You’re full of shit,” Raina concluded. And then called out, “Get this person out of here. I’m finished listening to her lies!”

The door burst open and an armed guard dragged Iris from the cabin. His alien origins were even more obvious than the guard Cara had seen before and a shiver dropped down her spine.

“This isn’t real,” Raina insisted, but the wild look in her eyes told Cara that she was terrified that it was true. “It can’t be real.”

Raina was taken to a different location as soon as they arrived on Altor, so Cara faced the next two weeks entirely on her own. There was no denying that she was on an alien planet. Altor bore little resemblance to Earth. She met her biological parents and they quickly confirmed much of what Iris had said. Living in denial was nearly impossible when everything around her supported her grandmother’s story. Like it or not, she was Cara Slanar, an Altorian conduit.

The only part that had yet to be confirmed was the magic. No one had conjured a rabbit, or made anything disappear. If she was a powerful mystic, why didn’t she feel any different than she had on Earth?

“If you would simply talk to us, Cara, this would go more smoothly.”

Grinnel’s coaxing tone drew Cara back to the present and the ordeal awaiting her at the Citadel. She’d spent the past two weeks learning everything she could about Altor. Most Altorians had some sort of paranormal ability, but only the best and most powerful were chosen for training at the Citadel.

Of those chosen, only a few dozen qualified to form power triads.

Reluctantly, Cara found the idea exciting. She had watched too many superhero movies to not secretly wish she had a paranormal ability. And then she found out how power triads worked. Sources and controllers were always male, and conduits were female. Triads weren't just military teams. They were domestic units. They shared their lives and their bodies with each other.

Growing up in Alaska hadn't given Cara a lot of opportunity to explore her sexuality. She wasn't a virgin, but having sex in the back seat of a car was about as adventurous as she'd ever gotten. So when she learned that she would soon have two mates, she found the idea titillating. Then her research revealed that Altorian males were sexually dominant. Having sex with a couple of gorgeous men was a fun fantasy, but she had no interest in putting up with two overbearing jerks for the rest of her life.

"We do not want to make this decision without knowing your opinion on any of it," Grinnel was saying. "You are leaving us no alternative."

The absurdity of the statement made Cara laugh. "I don't want to be a conduit! Send me back to Earth."

Grinnel sighed, starting to look as frustrated as her mate. "You were born a conduit. It is not something you choose. Refusing to cooperate with this process only hurts yourself."

Rather than reply to the statements, Cara asked, "Where are my sisters, or pardon me, *cousins*? I want to see them, at the very least talk to them."

"Holo-comms are privileges, and you have not earned any," Lezod reminded her.

Leaving her room was a privilege. Walking in the garden was a privilege. Using the entertainment library was a privilege. Access to the central data stream was a privilege. She had heard it all before. If she didn't bow to their will, her life

would remain a living hell, or at least a limbo of utter boredom.

“Did you even glance through the dossiers I gave you?” Grinnel continued, ignoring Cara’s question entirely.

Cara had done more than skim. She’d carefully studied each one. There was nothing else to do while locked in her bedroom. The reports had been surprisingly comprehensive. Each applicant had recorded a video introduction, as well as including video clips from work and leisure activities. She’d been able to witness their behavior in a variety of situations, including how they behaved around females. Of course, the clips were carefully curated by the applicant to make them look good.

“I looked at them,” Cara admitted. “Altorian males are esthetically pleasing, but they are also aggressive, chauvinistic, and condescending.”

“The applications were submitted before you were involved. They were compiled with Altorian females in mind. We expect our males to be strong and protective. We do not consider those qualities chauvinistic. Several of the teams asked if they could submit an application packet specifically tailored to you, but I felt like that would be dishonest.”

Finally, something on which they agreed. She looked at Grinnel and nodded. “Thank you. None of these males are going to change who they are because my cultural expectations are different from theirs. Lying to me now will only make things worse in the long run.”

Grinnel hesitated, appearing uncertain. “You are part of Altorian society now. Is there any chance you will adjust your cultural expectations to more closely match ours?”

Cara had actually thought about this a great deal. “I was an exchange student for my junior year of high school. I went to a country called Japan. I worked hard to learn their language and become acquainted with their culture and traditions. I felt it was important to be respectful because I was the visitor.”

“Is that yes or no?” Lezod grumbled impatiently.

“I would approach this situation in exactly the same way—if I had come here willingly.”

Lezod shook his head and looked at his mate, switching to Altorian again. “She cannot be trained until she is broken. We must keep that in mind when we choose her mates.”

Cara didn’t bother telling him that she could understand him. It was more than likely that her prospective mates would feel the same way, so she better figure out what she was going to do about it.

Tense silence descended as they continued on toward the Citadel. Her parents hadn’t given her much of an idea what to expect. She knew they had narrowed her choices down to three teams, each containing a source and a controller, but they had not told her which teams they had selected.

The Citadel came into view a few minutes later and Cara sucked in a deep, shaky breath. She felt restless and agitated, wanting to be anywhere but where they were going. “If I don’t like any of these guys, will you start the process over?”

Grinnel started to respond, but Lezod cut her off with an upraised hand. “If you do not like any of these males, you will like the others even less. These teams are the very best, the most powerful and accomplished. Any of them would be capable of protecting and providing for you, and that is all that matters.”

“You can’t force me to marry someone.” *Can you?* The final question echoed in her mind. This wasn’t America. Arranged marriages might be the norm on Altor. Her research hadn’t contained a lot of specifics about how triads were formed.

“‘Marry’ is a human term. Contracts for the services of a conduit are negotiated by her parents. The conduit’s approval is not necessary. Your cousin Flora was bound by such a contract. You were contracted also, but your betrothed mates chose to claim another female because they believed you were dead.”

“What about Raina?” She was almost afraid to ask. “Is she bound by a contract?”

“I would be shocked if that family had been able to attract a top-level team.”

His voice took on a condescending coldness that made Cara ask, “Why is that?”

Grinnel shot him a warning look and Lezod smirked. “We do not socialize with the Borak family. That is all I will say on the subject.”

His evasion required no explanation. She could read between the lines. Her parents were rich, like billionaire rich. Their sprawling estate and elaborate mansion made that much obvious. Apparently, Lezod considered the Borak family beneath him. She shifted her attention to Grinnel. “Isn’t Raina’s mother your sister? Are you too good to ‘socialize’ with your own flesh and blood?”

“I will always love Settari, but her choice in mates was... unfortunate.”

Cara didn’t even know how to address such snobbery, so she just shook her head and looked out the viewport. The Citadel loomed before them, the shape strangely familiar. The top section spiraled into three wide, rotating rings. Docking and loading bays dotted the smaller ring at the bottom of the structure. Suddenly she realized where she had seen the shape before. “My grandmother has a Christmas ornament that is shaped just like that.”

“Each trainee is given a miniature of the Citadel when they complete their studies,” Grinnel explained. “Odd that Iris wanted to commemorate an institution she claims to despise.”

Most of Cara’s interaction had been with Grinnel or staff members. She was finding Lezod’s personality abrasive. Rather than responding to his attitude, she looked at Grinnel. “What happens when we get there? Is this like speed dating or will we interview each team separately?”

“It is more accurate to say that they will be interviewing you,” Lezod answered for his mate. “These teams have applied to be considered for the power triad program, but they must

officially submit an offer for you. At that point, I will approve, reject, or make a counter offer.”

*He* would make the decision, not her. Was this a hint of things to come? If all Altorian males were this sanctimonious, she was doomed. Then a thought occurred to her. If no one had offered for her yet, maybe she could behave so badly that no one would. Before she traveled down that road, she needed more information. “What happens if all three teams decide that I’m more trouble than I’m worth?”

Lezod rolled his eyes and sneered in Altorian, “She will be face down over someone’s lap before we make it to our room.”

“What the hell does that mean?” she demanded without thinking about the fact that she wasn’t supposed to understand Altorian.

His head whipped around toward his mate. “When was she injected with translation nanites?”

“This morning, dear,” Grinnel admitted with a smile. “Ephrod Laeth insisted that she be the one to conform to his needs, not the other way around.”

Lezod chuckled. “Sounds like Ephrod.”

And that was one strike against Ephrod before she even set eyes on him. Not a good start.

They were cleared for approach a short time later and Cara tried to calm herself as the transport maneuvered into a landing bay. Her pulse raced and her mouth went dry. She suddenly had a very bad feeling about this.

“Come,” Lezod ordered as he moved toward the front of the small ship. The cockpit was enclosed, so Cara had never seen the pilot, but the rest was one open space. “We are late. They are waiting for you.”

Refusing now served no purpose. They would simply drag her there kicking and screaming, which would likely amuse her prospective mates. She decided to conduct herself as if she deserved respect, hoping that at least one of the teams would respond accordingly.



She climbed down from the transport and smoothed her too-short skirt into place before crossed the landing bay. Everything seemed cramped and dingy. Everyone spoke of the Citadel with such reverence. She'd expected something more impressive. She emerged into the corridor and her feet refused to move. The long, narrow corridor with its exposed utilities and rust-stained joints gave her a profound sense of déjà vu. "I've been here before," she muttered as her steps began to drag. This was where she had been moved from one ship to another on her way to Altor. She reached out and touched Grinnel's arm. "Is Flora at the Citadel?"

"Yes, dear," she admitted without breaking stride.

"What about Raina? Is she here too?"

"Raina is with her parents and will remain there until her mates are chosen and her training begins," Grinnel explained in the same casual tone.

"I know you don't like Raina's parents, but I happen to love my cousins very much. Can I speak with her, maybe visit her?"

"Her name is Luna, not Raina," Grinnel reminded with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Incensed by her mother's nonchalance, Cara dug in her heels and put her hands on her hips. "If Flora is here, I want to see her. Now." She didn't yell, at least not yet, but she made it obvious that she wouldn't let the matter drop.

Lezod turned to face her, his features tense with annoyance. "Flora is in training. Trainees are not allowed visitors. It would be too distracting."

Altorians and their ridiculous rules. Cara took a deep breath, determined to remain calm and respectful. "If I could speak with her for just a few moments, see that she is unharmed, and \_\_\_"

"I said no." His gaze narrowed and his chin lifted. "You must stop arguing every time you do not get your way."

"This is ridiculous," she flared. "I just want to make sure she's okay."

“Is there a problem?”

The sharp, authoritative voice made Cara snap her head to the side. A middle-aged female with dark brown hair and amber-colored eyes stood a short distance down the corridor. She was dressed in the same matte black uniform that Cara had seen others wearing. Were they all Citadel employees? The female’s hands were clasped behind her back, giving her a militant bearing.

“A simple misunderstanding,” Lezod assured the newcomer. “We will be with you momentarily.”

Pausing to glare at her father, Cara strode past him and approached the female. Clearly her father had no intention of taking her to Flora. Maybe this person would be more reasonable. “Do you work here?”

“I am Supervisor Winlos,” the female informed. Her tone implied that Cara should understand what that meant.

“My cousin Flora is here somewhere.” Cara used the same even tone she had employed earlier, hoping it would be more effective now. Surely, someone in this star system would respond to politeness and logic. “I have not been allowed to see her since we were taken from Earth. I am concerned about her wellbeing. Can you please arrange for a quick meeting or even a holo-comm?”

“Your concern is a serious insult to her mates, and your father explained why you cannot see her.”

Trepidation closed around Cara’s belly, squeezing like a fist. If Flora was really fine, why wouldn’t they allow a quick meeting? She had been worried about both her cousins, but Flora in particular. Flora had seemed so different the last time Cara had seen her. It was as if her will had been sucked out, or crushed by her two ruthless males.

Apparently, it was time for a little human stubbornness. “Fine,” she snapped. “I’ll find her myself.”

Sidestepping the scowling supervisor, Cara took off down the corridor. She wasn’t sure where she was going, but she had to start somewhere. Someone knew where Flora was, and Cara

didn't care if she had to pound on every door in the place, she would see for herself if her cousin was being abused.

She turned a corner and darted down an adjacent hallway. After passing several shuttle bays, she came to a massive cargo area. She needed to get off this level, maybe ask someone where the training took place.

The rhythmic pounding of booted feet drew her attention to the corridor behind her. Two uniformed guards came into view and ran directly toward her. Damn it. Supervisor Whatsername must have summoned help.

*This is foolish. You have no idea where to look.*

Ignoring her rational inner voice, she continued to indulge the rebellious impulse. She ran faster, looking for a stairwell or ladder. Flora had to be on another level. There was nothing but empty ships and storerooms down here.

"Stop her," one of the guards called out as she approached a team of workers.

She turned and headed down an adjacent hallway. The guards were gaining on her, but it didn't matter. She was tired of being good, of doing what her captors said and accepting all the changes without argument or struggle. No one gave a shit what she wanted or thought, so why should she cooperate?

A hand closed around her upper arm and Cara cried out. "Let go!"

"Sorry, mistress," the guard said softly in Altorian.

She yanked against his hold, fighting back tears as he pulled her back the way they'd come. "I just want to see my cousins." Emotion burned the back of her throat and tears blurred her vision. She wanted to see Flora and Raina, but she also wanted to return to the life she had known with them. Being dragged along by an armed guard was more proof that her wishes and her opinions no longer mattered. She was a commodity, an empowered vessel others wanted to possess.

Her parents were nowhere in sight when they reached the original hallway, but Supervisor Winlos was waiting. The

guard positioned Cara to face the supervisor and then stepped back.

“Such shows of defiance will not be tolerated by your potential mates,” Winlos said firmly. “You will learn that lesson very quickly if you do not take my warning seriously.”

Using anger to drive back her self-pity, Cara just glared, but her father’s prediction echoed through Cara’s mind. *She will be face down over someone’s lap before we make it to our room.* Cara could only think of one reason a woman would be placed face down over a man’s lap. Did these Neanderthals spank their females? The idea was too preposterous to take seriously, so she disregarded it.

“Where did Grinnel and Lezod go?” She was furious with both of them, but she was curious why they’d deserted her.

“Parents are not allowed to watch the assessment.”

Assessment? She didn’t like the sound of that. Would the males be assessing her or would she assess them? Somehow, she doubted it would be the latter. “I’d rather not go in there alone.”

“The males are held to very strict standards of behavior,” Winlos explained. “If any of them violates the rules, they will be escorted from the room immediately.”

She probably meant the statement to reassure Cara, but all she could think about was how different Altorian standards of behavior were from human. “Will you please answer one last question?”

Winlos triggered the door as she said, “It depends on the question.” She motioned for Cara to enter the room.

Cara stepped inside, but looked back as she asked, “If nothing is wrong with Flora, why won’t my parents let me see her?”

Winlos remained in the hallway. “You know the answer. Do not ask about her again.”

“I don’t know!” Cara yelled as the door slid shut between them. “I honestly don’t understand!” She kicked the door in

frustration then turned around. Six sets of eyes stared back at her curiously. “Sorry.”

The room wasn't large or impressive, much like the rest of the Citadel. The perimeter walls were lined with armless chairs and padded benches, but everyone was standing. The males congregated in groups of two, as if they didn't want to get too close to the competition. Cara knew all their names from studying the dossiers but she was anxious to actually meet them. In the dossiers, the teams had been numbered. She hoped the numbers didn't indicate priority for her parents. If that were true, her preferences were reversed from theirs.

“What do you not understand?”

She wasn't sure who had spoken, but it was unlikely that any of these males would react differently. Altorian customs might seem strange and unfair to her, but they were all well acquainted with them.

Not surprisingly, Chancellor Ephrod Laeth approached her first. He was one of the planetary leaders, so he likely felt it was his right to begin. He was the controller for team one. The male standing a step back from him was Boslit, team one's source. Both wore dark blue business suits not unlike what one would find on Earth.

Was it coincidence that the dress her parents had chosen for her was also dark blue? The possibility made her intensely uncomfortable. Despite their wealth and authority, team one was by far her least favorite. “Chancellor Laeth,” she greeted with a tentative smile. “It's nice to meet you.”

His jaw worked and his eyes narrowed as he stared down at her. “It is customary for someone of my station to instigate the formal greeting. I will ignore the infraction because of your primitive upbringing.”

*Wow, nice to meet you indeed.* She lowered her gaze and took a deep breath. Less than a minute in his presence and he confirmed all of her misgivings. This jackass was even more of an arrogant prick than her father, and she hadn't thought that was possible. “I apologize. The information I was given didn't detail greeting protocols.”

“Ignore him,” someone advised, his voice much warmer than the chancellor’s. “We cannot expect you to follow our rules when you aren’t aware of them yet.”

Glancing up to locate the speaker, she found him standing to Ephrod’s left. He had reddish brown hair and amber-colored eyes. “My name is Skolat, and this is Idrix, my source.” Skolat was team two’s controller. Both males wore fitted blue uniforms edged in gold.

Maybe the color of her dress was coincidence after all. She dipped her head rather than sticking out her hand. Shaking hands was a human custom. Altorians seemed to love formality, so she said, “I’m honored to make your acquaintance.”

“You are a long way from home,” Idrix said with a friendly smile. “I hope your journey wasn’t too unpleasant.”

It wasn’t really a question, but his smile encouraged her to share. “The actual journey was over before I realized what was happening. The next two weeks were more challenging.”

“No doubt.” Merrik insinuated himself between Skolat and Ephrod. He was team three’s source and the best-looking male in the room. His size and muscular build had confused her when she’d studied his information. Judging strictly by appearance, she would have thought he was a controller. “It had to have been quite a shock to find out you were an alien.” His shoulder-length hair combined blue, gray, and white into a color Cara had never seen before. His eyes were deep red, like burgundy wine.

His teasing tone put her at ease while his sexy half-smile sent her pulse racing. “I’m still adjusting to all the changes.”

“I’m Merrik, by the way, and this is Tov Nee, commander of the *Agitarri*.” He motioned toward a dark-haired male with piercing ice-blue eyes. A close clipped beard framed his mouth and accented his strong jawline.

Tov ambled forward and held out his hand.

Surprised by the human gesture, she placed her hand on his. His long fingers closed and he raised her hand to his lips. Both

Tov and Merrik wore snug synth-leather pants and loose-fitting shirts. They looked more like pirates than soldiers.

“You never answered the chancellor’s question.” His deep voice seemed to rumble through her entire body and then his lips brushed against her skin. Warmth cascaded through her torso and pooled between her legs. Her nipples hardened and her core clenched. Holy crap, she was in serious trouble if the faint brush of his lips could do that to her. “Why were you upset when you first entered the room?”

She hesitated. Altorian males preferred submissive, obedient females. It was unlikely any of them would have approved of her behavior in the corridor. “It was nothing. I will deal with it later.”

Tov’s brows drew together and his lips thinned. “Answer the question.” His tone became inflexible.

In her opinion, Tov and Merrik were the most interesting of the three teams. And it wasn’t just their handsome features. Their videos had been lively, their accomplishments more varied than the other teams. The chancellor bragged about his privileged upbringing and the generational wealth of his family. Skolat and Idrix were both career military and their attitudes reflected that fact. Tov didn’t just command the *Agitarri*, he owned it and fifteen other warships. He decided when and how his fleet would be used. Team three seemed independent, even a bit rebellious, and that appealed to Cara greatly. Why not tell Tov and see what he did with the information?

“I was taken from Earth with my two cousins. We were raised together so I think of them as sisters. I have not seen or spoken with either since our rescue and I am worried about both. When I realized that my older cousin, Flora, was here at the Citadel, I asked if I could speak with her. All I want is a quick interaction to be assured that she is not in danger or being abused.”

“Altorians do not abuse females,” Ephrod insisted, sounding insulted by the possibility. “Your concern is foolish.”

“She has only our word on that,” Skolat pointed out. “Is your cousin already in training?”

“She is,” Cara admitted with a sigh.

Skolat looked at his source then shrugged. “Trainees are not allowed visitors. However, you can rest assured that she is being provided for and protected. Every trainee is.”

“Oh, I think we can do better than that,” Tov said, his ice-blue gaze smoldering. He looked at Merrik and asked, “Is your aunt in residence?”

“I haven’t spoken with her in a couple of weeks, but I see no reason why she would have left.” Gazing off into the distance, Merrik said, “Commsys, page Provost Nadis Korla, urgency level moderate.”

“One moment, Commander Lilika,” the communications computer responded.

“Can I comm you later, Merrik?” a female voice sounded a short time later. “My new trainee is in the middle of an exercise she has never attempted before.”

“This will just take a second. Who is mentoring Flora, the female they just recovered from Earth?”

The unseen female chuckled. “That would be me.”

“Flora’s cousin is with me and the lack of communication has her half-convinced that Flora is being tortured. I know an actual visit is forbidden at this point, but can you please activate video long enough for Cara to see that her cousin is alive and well?”

“Only for you, Merrik. Only for you.” A holographic scene flickered to life in front of Merrik. The room depicted appeared to be a small lounge or spacious office. Flora knelt in the middle of the floor on a padded mat. Her eyes were closed, features peaceful as she made a repetitive series of motions with her hands. “See, no bruises or dried blood. But I really need to supervise her progress. I will speak with you later.”

The comm ended and Merrik looked at Cara. “Feel better now? Obviously, Flora is unharmed and doing well. Also, my



aunt is highly sought-after. It is an honor to be mentored by her.”

“Thank you,” she said earnestly. “That meant more than you know.”

Merrick inclined his head, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Would you care for a drink before we start the assessment?”

She desperately needed to calm down, so she nodded. “That would be great.” Merrik walked off across the room and her gaze naturally gravitated back to Tov. “And thank you for making the initial suggestion.”

“It was nothing. Now, you have us at a disadvantage, Cara.” Despite the sensual purr in his voice, Tov’s gaze never left her face. “You were given detailed information about us, but we know very little about you.”

“He’s right,” Skolat joined in. “Tell us about Earth.”

Merrick returned with a stemmed glass filled with a pale pink liquid. Their fingertips brushed as she took the glass from him and sensations tingled up her arm. Team three was her favorite. She’d known that before she met them. Unfortunately, she was not the one making the choice.

Discouraged by the thought, she lifted her glass and took a tentative sip. The taste was unfamiliar, yet light and effervescent. She took another drink and smiled. “It’s nice. What is it?”

“The best vineyards in this star system are found on Pyron,” Ephrod told her. “That brand is one of many I stock in my private wine cellar.”

If her father made her marry this jerk, she would smother him in his sleep.

“You, me, and millions of others,” Tov dismissed the boast with a wave of his hand. “Pyronese wines are one of the most popular in our galaxy. It is like a human bragging that they buy beer.”

“I asked her about Earth, not liquor,” Skolat reminded impatiently. “Tell us about your world.”

“Earth is divided into countries, and each country has its own personality.”

“Tov said you are likely from America. Is that true?” Skolat asked.

“It is.” She looked at Tov, unsure if she should be impressed or insulted. “Why was that your assumption?”

“Fugitives must blend with local populations while still having access to accurate information and some way of supporting themselves. Those goals seemed easiest to achieve in America. Likely somewhere relatively remote.”

She shook her head, amazed by the accuracy of his deductions. “I live in Alaska. It’s very much as you described it.”

“That would be more impressive if you were not the only one who has actually been to Earth.” Ephrod tried to mimic Tov’s dismissive tone, but failed.

“That’s not true,” Tov smirked, his pale blue eyes gleaming. “Merrik has been to Earth too.”

Intrigued, she looked from Tov to Merrik and back. “When did you last visit Earth? How many times have you been there?”

“We have been six, no, seven times,” Merrik told her. “And the last trip was about two years ago.”

“Have you ever been to Alaska?”

Tov shook his head. “I have heard it’s quite beautiful.”

“People travel from all over the planet to enjoy the scenery and wildlife.” The conversation was making her homesick. She had almost accepted that her chances of ever seeing Earth again were extremely remote, but that could change if her mate owned a fleet of starships. Team three was likely her parents’ least favorite. Would it be possible to change their minds?

“You do not have simulators that can accurately reproduce the environment?” Skolat asked. “Why is it necessary to travel

there?”

Ephrod made an impatient sound and rolled his eyes. “I told you, Earth is still extremely primitive. They cannot even leave their planet.”

“We have been to our moon and sent unmanned vehicles to other planets,” Cara corrected.

“Do not argue with me, girl,” he snapped.

Cara hated being called girl, especially in that condescending tone. “It was a clarification, not an argument.”

He strode toward her, anger blazing in his dark eyes.

Suddenly, Tov was there blocking the chancellor’s path. “I was not finished speaking with her.”

“She is being disrespectful,” Ephrod persisted. “I tolerate insolence from *no one*.”

“As soon as she is yours, you can discipline her whenever and however you choose. But she is not yours yet.”

The chancellor’s chin lifted arrogantly. “I am close friends with her parents. This is a formality, nothing more.”

She’d been afraid of that. Instinctively, she moved closer to Tov.

Ignoring Ephrod’s hostile stare, Tov asked, “Did you have a vocation? How did you fill your time?”

“I worked in a gift shop. It wasn’t glamorous, but it helped Grandma pay the bills.”

“This is a waste of time. None of this information matters. Are you a virgin?” Ephrod asked, the hopeful catch in his tone unmistakable.

“Are you?” she countered, no longer interested in playing nice with him. “My sex life is none of your business.” Ephrod might well be the rudest person she’d ever met.

“If the others wish to socialize with you, they can do so after the assessment. Take off the dress. I want to see what your parents are offering.”

Her eyes widened and she sucked in a ragged breath. “That better be Altorian humor. I am not amused.”

He just smirked and ran his gaze boldly from the crown of her head to her toes. “I do not repeat orders.”

What the hell was wrong with him? She looked at Tov and then Skolat, but neither made a move to assist her. “Is he serious?” Her pleading gaze landed on Merrik next, though she wasn’t sure why.

“It is customary,” he told her, and even his eyes were starting to smolder. “We have the right to examine you.”

“Examine me how?” she cried. “What exactly does that mean?”

“Attendants,” the chancellor called out. “We require assistance.”

Apparently summoned by the phrase, Supervisor Winlos pushed the door open. She moved into the room followed by two uniformed males.

“I suspected you would be difficult,” Winlos said, her disapproval obvious.

Not waiting to see what they were going to assist with, Cara sprinted for the door. One of the males caught her around the waist and Cara went wild.

## CHAPTER 2



“*H*ow would you like her, Chancellor Laeth?”  
Winlos asked casually.

“Naked, secured, and fully denuded, if she is not so already.”

Denuded? Cara wasn't sure what that meant and she had no intention of finding out.

She fought with all her strength, screaming, twisting, and kicking. Fear gave her a burst of strength, but the attendants simply held her and waited for her to tire herself out.

“Let go of me! I didn't agree to this. Please, call my parents. This can't be what they had in mind.”

“That is enough,” Winlos snapped. “Your potential mates have every right to examine you. This assessment is the primary reason you are here.”

The attendants soon had her totally naked despite her best efforts to stop them. One of the males held her in place while the other rolled a padded bench to the middle of the room. Her parents had brought her here knowing this would happen. It was so perverse, so wrong, she felt tears gathering behind her lashes. Shame washed over her in churning waves. Her potential mates just stood there staring, even Merrik and Tov. She desperately wanted to cover herself, but the attendant held her firmly. The bench was positioned, the surface raised to waist height, and then the attendants started to lift her onto it.

“Wait,” the chancellor ordered. “I want to assess her before you strap her down.”

Alarmed by the order, Cara tugged against the attendants' restraining hands. If all they were going to do was look at her, why did she need to be strapped down?

"Of course, sir," Supervisor Winlos said.

One of the attendants grasped the back of Cara's neck and bent her over the table. Her arms were stretched out to the side and they moved her legs apart. Her hair was gathered and moved off her back, partially obscuring her vision. She heard feet shuffling and sensed someone, or several people, behind her. Her heart thudded and her breath came in angry pants. They were judging her body, assessing her value, her worth. The realization made her struggle all over again, but the attendants simply tightened their grasp, holding her firmly in place.

"Her skin is so pale." Skolat's voice was hushed and husky. "Is she ill?"

Tov chuckled. "Judging from her muscle tone and the lushness of her curves, she is perfectly healthy." His warm hand ran down her spine and squeezed one 'lush' ass cheek. At least she presumed Tov was touching her. He repeated the caress, squeezing the other side. She squirmed, restless and agitated. This wouldn't be so humiliating if the others weren't here watching.

"One of the fun things about skin this light is how quickly it pinkens," Tov told them. "May I demonstrate?"

The question didn't make sense. May he demonstrate what?

"I will allow it," Supervisor Winlos decided.

Tov smacked Cara's ass twice, one stinging swat on each side. She gasped and whipped her head around glaring, but Tov stood just out of her line of vision.

"A harder spanking will result in lovely pink handprints."

"Continue the demonstration," Skolat urged. "Redden her entire ass. I want to see if it makes her wet."

"I will spank her," Ephrod insisted, shoving Tov aside.

"I gave Commander Nee permission for the demonstration," Supervisor Winlos reminded. "He will proceed."

“Why am I being spanked?” Cara objected. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Misbehavior is the most common reason for discipline,” Winlos told her. “But sometimes it is used to reinforce the males’ dominance. You will submit whenever your mates feel discipline is needed. That is part of being a conduit.”

“That’s utter bullshit! None of these jerks are my mates,” she argued. “I shouldn’t have to submit to anything!”

“Proceed, Commander Nee. Clearly, this female needs discipline.”

Tov swatted her bottom several times as if getting her nerves used to the sensations, then the smacks became more intentional. Each slap was a hard, stinging impact that rocked her against the table. Then heat spread over her cheeks and sank into her muscles.

She balled up her fists and clenched her teeth. Anger gave way to humiliation and finally resentment. She was a toy, a plaything they could position and abuse. Only she didn’t really feel abused. Her bottom ached, the impact stung, but a strange sort of longing unfurled within the pain. This felt familiar, as if they were fulfilling a need she hadn’t realized she possessed.

“Look at that.” Skolat brushed his fingertips over one burning cheek, intensifying the sting.

She hissed, then moaned as she imagined his fingers easing between her thighs. He’d part her folds and push into her needy core.

“The color was shocking at first, but I really like it.” Idrix mirrored Skolat’s touches, adding to her discomfort as well as her restlessness.

As if hearing her thoughts, Skolat eased his hand between her thighs and lightly stroked her folds. “Nice and wet. May I finger her pussy?”

“I am sorry, sir,” Supervisor Winlos responded. “The parameters her parents outlined were very specific. Nothing goes inside.”

“Damn.” He removed his hand and stepped back. Idrix followed his teammate’s lead.

Someone grabbed both her ass cheeks and pulled them apart.

Cara cried out in shock as much as pain and tugged against the attendants’ hold. Her bottom was tender from the spanking, but what the hell was he doing? “There’s nothing back there that needs to be examined!” That had to be Ephrod. He was the only one twisted enough to want to look at her asshole.

Still holding her open, Ephrod confirmed her conclusion. “She will need to be stretched before she can take my cock. Her pucker looks virginal. Have you ever taken a cock up your ass, girl?”

“Get your hands off me!” she ground out between clenched teeth. Her dislike of the male had just turned to loathing.

Ephrod let go of one side of her bottom and circled her tightly puckered hole. “Answer me, bitch, or I’ll find out for myself.” His finger pressed against her opening.

“You *cannot* enter her, sir. You know the rules.”

Winlos’ warning was music to Cara’s ears. They were free to look, even touch within reason, but they could not penetrate her body in any way. Emboldened by the knowledge, she rolled her hips from side to side, dislodging his offensive hands.

Ephrod leaned over her and rubbed his erection against her tender butt cheeks. “Next time we meet, I’ll fuck all three of your holes one right after the other. Then I’ll sit back and sip Pyronese wine while I watch Boslit do exactly the same thing. You will learn your place once you are bound to us, girl.”

“Get off me,” she cried. “I’d rather die than bond with you!”

“Luckily, it’s not up to you.” He pushed off the bench and punished her still sensitive ass with a flurry of hard spansks. Before the supervisor could berate him, Ephrod ordered, “Strap her down tight and get all that disgusting hair off. She looks like an animal.”



Desperation welled within her as Ephrod's prediction echoed through her mind. Even knowing her efforts were futile, she couldn't stop struggling. She would not be left at the mercy of someone like Ephrod! She bucked and twisted, shouting every profane phrase she knew as they lifted her to the padded bench. She cried out as they positioned her on her back, arms stretched over her head. Her bottom throbbed, which accented the empty ache in her pussy. She refused to give it a name, but her body definitely wanted something.

Arm supports swung out from under the table and they strapped her down in three places. Her waist was anchored with a wide strap but they left her legs free. Thrilled by the oversight, she kicked and twisted, but as before, it did no good. Supervisor Winlos gathered supplies from a compartment under the bench. Cara wasn't sure what she was doing, but it likely had something to do with removing 'all that disgusting hair.' Cara had been shaving her legs since puberty and wasn't afraid of wax, so she wasn't overly concerned about the activity. She just wished it could have been done in private.

"This will sting, mistress, but the pain fades quickly," Winlos explained, then covered her underarms with a dense blue lather. It tingled, then warmed. The intensity continued to build as Winlos moved down Cara's body. Her mound was covered in foam before she realized that was Winlos' next target. And finally, with the assistance of her companions, Supervisor Winlos coated Cara's legs from mid-thigh down.

"What is that shit?" Cara arched and twisted, kicking out uselessly. The attendants just stepped back and let her struggle. "It's burning me."

"Breathe through the heat," Winlos advised. "It will pass."

She was right. The heat gradually faded, but Cara's pussy tingled and ached. She finally admitted what she was feeling. She needed to come, needed it badly.

The chancellor moved closer, his gaze narrowed and filled with lust. "Nortiff foam has a variety of uses." His mouth twisted into a cruel smile and he swiped her underarm with his

fingers, gathering some of the foam. “Many use it for discipline or to remind mouthy sluts of their place.” He smeared it over her nipples then watched her face as it went to work.

She gasped, then cried out as searing pain tore through her nipples. It hurt like hell, but her clit twitched and tingled, dragging her even closer to the elusive explosion that she needed so badly.

“Severe discipline is not allowed.” Winlos quickly wiped off the foam, but the discomfort lingered. “This is an official warning, Chancellor Laeth. Follow the rules of conduct or you will be disqualified.”

“I was just demonstrating another use for the foam,” he defended haughtily. “She is not accustomed to our ways. Tov did the same thing and you did not chastise him.”

“Commander Nee was given permission. You were not.”

Cara moaned in misery. Now her nipples throbbed almost as much as her behind. And her clit twitched and tingled, accenting the emptiness between her legs. God almighty, what she wouldn't give for a vibrator and a few minutes of privacy.

Tov and Merrik stood nearby, both looking tense and turned on. If the other four hadn't been here, Cara would have been tempted to let them scratch her itch. Her imagination was more than happy to provide a detailed image of the scene. She was still strapped down to the table, but Merrik stood between her thighs fucking her fast and hard with her legs draped over his arms. Her pussy tightened and she could almost feel his long, thick cock sliding in and out of her helpless body. A soft moan escaped her throat and heat washed over her flesh. Why had she imagined herself still in restraints? It didn't make any sense.

The rest of the foam was wiped off leaving her skin smooth and sensitized. The attendants applied a soothing lotion, gently rubbing it into her irritated skin. She closed her eyes and let the fantasy continue. Once Merrik was satisfied, Tov ordered her repositioned. She was bent over the side of the bench, legs far apart and arms strapped down to either side of her body.

Tov grasped her hips and entered her from behind. She felt her core stretch around his cock until the fullness became painful. He pulled nearly out, then thrust in fast, dragging a sharp cry from her throat. He fucked her even harder than Merrik, and slapped her ass in between brutal thrusts.

Her logical mind was horrified by the image, the savagery of the act. Yet her core fluttered and tingling heat swirled through her pussy. The sensations were similar to, but not quite an orgasm. She whimpered and twisted free of the attendant's light hold.

"Easy." Winlos placed her hand on Cara's shoulder. "They are nearly finished."

She was so confused by her body's reaction to all the unfamiliar sensations that she stared up at the ceiling and struggled to calm down. Tears spilled out of the corners of her eyes. Her emotions were raw and her body ached. She was so lost in self-pity that she didn't resist as her legs were positioned frog-style and secured to the bench. Her thighs were spread so wide that her folds parted and currents of air teased her needy core.

"I will be just outside the door if you need anything else," Supervisor Winlos said, but Cara knew the offer was for the males, not her. Winlos exited the room, followed closely by the attendants.

Cara kept her gaze focused on the ceiling as she shifted within her bounds. She was graphically displayed for the pleasure of these aliens, a sexual prize for the highest bidder. Well, let them look. Let them touch. Maybe their selfish exploration would inadvertently get her off.

As if hearing her discontented plea, a warm hand stroked along her upraised arm. "I know this is hard on you, but we will not harm you."

She reluctantly looked at Idrix. Sources seemed to have more compassion than controllers. Merrik stood on her other side.

"We're allowed to get you off, but only if you give us permission," Merrik told her with a sexy grin.

She sucked in a breath. Had he read her mind? He'd used the same phrase, a very human phrase. "Can you..." If she finished the question she'd have to admit to the thought and she didn't want the others to know how badly she needed to come.

"Wouldn't a nice hard orgasm make you feel better?" Merrik continued.

She glanced down and saw Ephrod and Boslit gawking at her. Suddenly, she shook her head and a harsh sob escaped her lips. She did not want to come while they stood there watching her lose control. "I just want this over with."

"Too bad." Idrix trailed his fingers down her side, skimming the outer swell of her breast. "I really wanted to see your expression when your orgasm took you."

She sobbed again and her breasts quivered, drawing Merrik's gaze.

"Are you sure, doll? You look pretty un—"

"She said no," Tov stressed from slightly behind his teammate. "We are not allowed to pressure her."

"Then let's get on with the assessment," Ephrod said in his cold, condescending tone. "I grow weary of all these rules."

They circled her like vultures eyeing their next meal. She tried to ignore them. The faster they finished this ridiculous ritual, the sooner she could put her clothes back on and get the hell out of this room.

"It was obvious she was shapely in that dress, but *damn*," Merrik said softly. "Her body is extremely pleasing."

Ephrod stood at the end of the bench leering at her pussy. He reached up and cupped her mound, squeezing rhythmically so the heel of his hand stimulated her clit. "I cannot wait to ram this cunt with my rod." He moved his hand to the front of his pants and rubbed his cock. "I'll pound you so hard that you will scream for mercy. There is only one way to tame a conduit and that is to crush her spirit."

She glared at him silently, but her mind sneered, *Over my dead body.*

*I'm not sure he would mind. That bastard will fuck anything unable to fight him off.*

She gasped and looked at Merrik. His secret smile confirmed that he was her telepathic guest.

*Be as disrespectful as you can. If we can provoke him into crossing the line again, he'll be disqualified.*

She wasn't sure Merrik would hear her thoughts, but she had to try. *Will you keep him from hurting me? I'm not sure it's safe to make him that angry while I'm tied down.*

*His life is over if he harms my mate in any way, Merrik insisted. Tov will get things started, and we will both challenge him, but he will react fastest if the insolence comes from you.*

*All right. I'll unleash my inner bitch.*

"You are the breast expert, Merrik," Tov said as soon as she finished her sentence. Could he hear her thoughts too? The timing made it seem likely. "How does she rate?"

Merrik reached down and gently squeezed her right breast. "Soft, yet firm, more than enough to fill my fingers." He lightly pinched her nipple, working it into a tight little peak. "Nicely responsive nipples. I give her top marks across the board."

Ephrod reached up and palmed her left breast. This put his face right above her pussy and he inhaled deeply as his hand squeezed much harder than she liked.

"Get your hands off me," she snapped, twisting in an effort to dislodge his hand.

"You did not complain when Merrik played with you." He pinched her nipple hard enough to make her yelp.

"You're not Merrik." She glared into Ephrod's beady eyes. "You repulse me. I'd rather fuck a dog than have you touch me."

Shoving Merrik's hand aside, Ephrod twisted both her nipples cruelly.

She cried out and tugged against the straps, waiting for someone to object. Was this allowed?

"I am one of the most powerful males on Altor." He slapped each breast once then unleashed his temper on her inner thighs. "It is an honor for your cunt to wrap around my cock."

She shook her head and clenched her teeth, refusing to give him the satisfaction of crying out.

"That's enough," Tov snapped. "Stop or I will call the supervisor."

Ephrod paused, but the cruel gleam in his eyes warned Cara that he wasn't finished. "If Winlos had a problem with what I'm doing, she would be in here already."

That's what Cara was afraid of. Winlos stood there watching while Tov spanked her ass until both cheeks were red and throbbing.

Tov moved closer to the end of the table. "Take a moment and calm down. You are being abusive."

"You have no authority over me, *Commander*." Ephrod delivered one especially vicious slap to each thigh, then glared at the other males. "Enjoy looking at her while you can. That tight pink cunt will soon belong to me and Boslit."

Genuine disgust twisted Cara's features. "You're deluded. I will *never* bond with you!"

"Is that so?" He palmed her mound, squeezing painfully. "You will struggle to walk by the time we finish fucking you."

"Only if her parents approve your contract," Tov reminded sternly. "She is not yours yet."

"This is all for show, and we all know it. She was mine the moment I decided I wanted her. No one refuses me." He parted her folds with one hand, leaving her core exposed and ready for penetration. "This tight pink cunt is mine."

Barely able to breathe, Cara forced the words past her dry mouth. “Fuck you! You’re a disgusting pig. I would rather die than belong to you.”

Ephrod scoffed. “You belong to me already.” He thrust his other hand forward, driving his fingers into her pussy.

Tov jerked him back by the hair and wrapped his arm around the smaller male’s throat. “You were warned!”

“Supervisor Winlos,” Merrik shouted. “Chancellor Laeth just broke the rules, *again*. We need assistance.”

Armed guards responded this time. They quickly surrounded Ephrod.

“You will never get away with this!” he shouted at Tov. “I don’t know how, but you clearly put her up to this.”

Tov didn’t bother reacting to Ephrod’s outrage. Instead, he moved to Cara’s side and asked, “Are you alright?”

“I am now,” she said softly, but her heart was still pounding.

Boslit started toward the door, then turned back and glared at Tov. “He is right. You provoked this. You knew that having him disqualified was the only way you would have any chance with the girl.”

“Believe what you like,” Tov said, but he didn’t quite conceal his triumphant smile.

Skolat waited until the door closed behind Boslit before he offered, “Well played, my friend, but Idrix and I won’t be that easy to defeat.”

“You and Idrix are worthy adversaries,” Tov responded. “Merrik and I welcome honorable competition.”

Cara was thrilled to have the odious chancellor gone, but her situation had not improved all that much. She was still strapped down to a table with four lusty aliens circling her naked body. “Will you please let me up?”

“Will you obey us if we do?” Merrik asked.

“If you agree to obey, it becomes a punishable offense if you do not follow a directive,” Tov warned.

Damn it. Wasn't anything better than remaining helpless? "I can't feel my arms, and my legs are starting to cramp. I need to change position."

"Easily arranged." Skolat unfastened the straps on her arms while Merrik unstrapped her legs. Skolat helped her sit up, and then he and Merrik together rubbed the circulation back into her half-numb limbs. "Feel better?"

"Yes, thank you." They were both standing right in front of her and she was completely naked. Without the discomfort of the straps, her sense of shame returned with a vengeance. Her cheeks heated and she couldn't meet their gazes. Her parents had spoken of unimagined power and a life-long bonding. They made it sound almost romantic, but Cara had never felt so objectified. "Can I please have my dress back?"

"We have not finished our assessment," Skolat told her firmly.

Merrick placed his hand on her knee and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Cara, look at me."

She shook her head. Merrik was too damn tempting. She couldn't think straight when she looked at him.

"He gave you an order," Tov warned. "Do what you're told or I'll demonstrate what happens when you disobey."

Reluctantly, she raised her face, but lost her nerve when her gaze reached Merrik's chin.

She heard him chuckle, then he tilted her head back until their gazes locked. Gods above, he was gorgeous. Exotic and undeniably non-human, but drop-dead gorgeous.

"We will give you options as much as possible, but this is one of those times when your choices are limited." Sources were much more seductive than controllers. They liked to tease and cajole, while controllers barked orders and doled out discipline. Merrik moved closer, smoothly edging Skolat out of his way.

The maneuver made her smile. This entire situation would be so much better if it were just Merrik and Tov.



“Forming a triad is a permanent decision, and offspring are very important to the entire community. For these reasons, all three members of the triad must be genetically compatible.”

“Can’t we just do a blood or saliva test?”

“It’s not that simple. One of the things controlled by genetic compatibility is sexual responsiveness. The more likely the triad is to produce offspring, the more readily they respond to each other sexually.” His thumbs caressed the insides of her thighs and his strange wine-colored eyes bore into hers. “In ages past, this was determined by allowing all the interested teams to fuck the conduit until it was determined which made her come harder and more often. For obvious reasons, most conduits disapproved of the practice. In fact, it is one of the reasons the conduits went into hiding.”

“I’m thrilled that you got rid of Ephrod, but I’m not fucking all four of you either.” Despite her insistence, talking about this was making her pussy ache again. She’d only had a few lovers in her entire life and none had tempted her like Merrik. She was honestly afraid he could talk her into anything.

“That is not what I’m suggesting,” Merrik assured her. “We need to kiss you and touch you, maybe taste your sweet pussy until you orgasm for each one of us.”

Her traitorous pussy clenched tight and her clit tingled as she imagined four pairs of hands and four hungry mouths moving over her needy body. “I don’t think I can do that. Not four at once.”

He grinned, flashes of ruby red sparking within his gaze. “How about just two of us? We need to determine your sexual compatibility. If all four of us aroused you at once, the outcome would be impossible to determine.”

She dared a glance at each of them in turn. “Tov was serious about the competition?”

“Let’s break you of that habit right now,” Tov said sharply. “You will never refer to us by name if you are naked. I prefer Master, and Merrik prefers Commander.”

Shocked, she turned her head so she could see Tov. “Seriously? You expect me to call you Master?” Her mind rebelled against the idea, but her body reacted with an unexpected wave of heat. The idea of Tov mastering her held undeniable appeal.

“When you belong to us, and I believe you will, it is one of many rules I expect you to follow.”

“Well, I don’t belong to anyone right now, so I will call you sir. That is also a show of respect, but I don’t find it quite so demeaning.”

“Until you are mine,” Tov countered, looking anything but pleased. “I will allow the compromise.”

Satisfied with the minor victory, she turned back to Merrik. “You were saying.”

“It’s going to be fun to watch Tov tame you.” Merrik predicted, then digressed. “You can give us permission to arouse you or you can refuse. This will not be forced upon you.” He moved his hands up and down her legs, his thumbs teasing the sensitive skin of her inner thighs. “However, the alternative is not nearly as much fun.”

She nervously licked her lips. “What’s the alternative?”

“We call a medical team and they will secure you to a treatment table and use instruments and stimulators along with our bodily fluids to determine how strongly you react to our unique body chemistry. Which situation sounds more enjoyable?”

She licked her lips and lowered her gaze. “Why can’t I just choose which team I want to join?”

“It has been obvious from the start that you prefer them,” Skolat said sharply. “We are well aware of their esthetic appeal, but physiological compatibility is more important than how much you like the way they look.”

“He is right,” Tov reinforced. “This test must be performed one way or the other. Your only option is here or in one of the clinics.”

“Just touching and kissing?” She rubbed her arms, covering her breasts in the process. “Nothing goes inside me?”

“Not even if you beg us.” Tov’s ice-blue gaze bore into hers. “This is about giving you pleasure. Why would you object to that?”

Because she was naked and they were fully dressed, or because they just met, or they wanted to control her for the rest of her life. They were all valid reasons to refuse.

“Make your choice,” Skolat urged. “This has gone on long enough.”

Merrick squeezed her knees, drawing her gaze back to his handsome face. “Don’t make this more complicated than it needs to be. Let your body respond to one team and then the other. It will soon be obvious to all of us which team you are meant to join.”

She nervously licked her lips, resisting the urge to wrap her legs around Merrik’s hips and pull him in close against her body. “Which team goes first?”

“We do,” Skolat insisted. “We are team two.”

“She has not agreed yet,” Tov pointed out. “Cara, you must say the words. Do we have permission to arouse you with our hands and mouths?”

She looked at Merrik and then Skolat. They both made her pulse race, but for very different reasons. Merrik made her horny. Skolat made her uncomfortable. She wasn’t afraid of him or repulsed by him, but wasn’t sure she wanted to make out with him either.

Apparently sensing the building tension, Idrix did what sources did best. He sauntered over to the table and ran his hand down her back. “Just say yes and we will do the rest. You are safe in our arms. No one in this room will harm you. You have my word.”

Anything would be better than having a doctor probe and prod. She looked into Idrix’s eyes and whispered, “Yes. I give you permission to touch me.”

“Finally.” He grinned and slid her over until she was directly in front of him. “I have wanted to kiss you since you walked into this room.”

His mouth covered hers and his tongue was in Cara’s mouth before she could tilt her head for him. He palmed her breast and teased her nipple with his thumb. It wasn’t the worst kiss she’d ever been given, but it sure as hell wasn’t the best. There was no finesse, no real emotion behind the exchange, at least not on her part.

Someone grabbed the back of her hair and turned her head sharply to the side. “Kiss me, girl. Offer me that soft wet mouth.”

Skolat’s order sounded so much like Ephrod that Cara shuddered. She licked her lips and reluctantly parted them. His mouth crushed hers and his tongue thrust deeply for a moment, then he caught her bottom lip between his teeth and bit hard enough to make her cry out.

“Lay her down,” Skolat ordered and Idrix immediately obeyed. “Play with her breasts. I’ll make her come whether she wants to or not.”

He sounded annoyed, but she wasn’t sure how to pacify him. She understood his frustration. She had given them permission to do this, but nothing about it was turning her on.

She was on her back again, but at least she wasn’t strapped down this time. Idrix squeezed her breasts and roughly sucked on her nipples. Skolat dragged her hips to the edge of the bench and draped her legs over his shoulders.

“If you continue to resist this, I’ll spank you even harder than Tov did,” Skolat warned. “In case you are wondering, discipline is now allowed. Defiance became punishable when you gave us permission to arouse you.”

Oh, shit.

Skolat lowered his mouth to her pussy and Cara closed her eyes. He went right to work on her clit, licking, flicking, and sucking until her hips bucked and her core fluttered. Her need

had been simmering all night, stirred by the unfamiliar situation and the provoking nature of being this vulnerable.

The tension built. She wiggled and moaned. “Oh, God,” she cried, shocked at how easily her body gave in. “I’m coming!” No one was more surprised than she was. And then she arched helplessly, bottom clenched tight as an orgasm burst inside her. Pleasure pulsed through her, fisting her hands and curling her toes.

Skolat prolonged the spasms with a swirl of his tongue then took his mouth lower and briefly explored her slick opening. Finally, he straightened and allowed her legs to slide down his arms. His gaze narrowed as he licked his lips. “I thought her taste would be sweeter. I don’t think we’re compatible.”

“Really?” Idrix took Skolat’s place between her legs and bent to lick her pussy. He also paused to analyze her taste. “I agree.” Stepping back, he looked at Tov. “We are not compatible with the female, but I am very curious to know if you are. May we stay as your team evaluates her?”

Cara sucked in a breath and sat up, drawing her knees toward her chest. She wrapped her arms around her legs and watched team three closely. *Please, say no.* She would much rather make out with Tov and Merrik without an audience. She was so tired of being on display.

“We welcome the witness.” Tov’s gaze shifted to Cara as he went on, “I suspect that her parents are going to fight our claim, so the more support we can muster, the better.”

\* \* \*

Possessive desire surged through Tov as he approached the raised bench on which Cara sat. This was the sixth time in the last two years that his team had tried to claim a mate. Each time Merrik’s unique physiology had kept the female from responding to them. Merrik was so upset the last time it happened that he tried hard to convince Tov to find another source. That wasn’t an option, of course. Tov had dreamed about their mate more than once. He knew she was out there.

Cara was clearly attracted to them. She had first been drawn to Merrik, which wasn't surprising. Females were always attracted to Merrik. But she had seemed equally receptive to Tov, even after he'd spanked her. That fact had given him hope.

Merrik reached the bench first but respectfully waited for Tov. Not only was Tov his commanding officer, but it was vital that Cara accept his authority. The power triad would not function correctly unless Tov was in control.

Cara watched him approach, but her uncertain gaze soon shifted to Merrik.

"Look at me," Tov ordered. "Keep those pretty eyes on me."

Licking her lips nervously, she took a deep breath and met his gaze.

"Earth is very different from Altor, so I want to give you a taste of what it will be like as an Altorian mate. Does that make sense to you?"

"Yes, sir," she said softly.

"Good girl. Then for the next few minutes you will do everything you're told. If you argue or refuse, there will be consequences. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. But may I please ask a question? I promise it is not argumentative."

He fought back a smile. Clearly, she was going to give him a taste of what it would be like to master someone raised on Earth. "Very well."

"Do the original parameters still apply?"

"Of course. We can touch and taste, but nothing goes inside."

She clearly felt empowered by the stipulation. It was written all over her face. Well, fucking wasn't the only way to demonstrate his dominance over her. He caught the underside of her knees and slowly opened her legs. Her eyes widened and she inhaled deeply, lifting her breasts in the process. She looked alarmed for a second then calmed, so he lowered her

legs to either side of the bench and drew her hips right to the bottom edge.

“Reach behind you and grasp the sides of the bench. Arch your back.” The position thrust her breasts out and made it hard to hold her head up. He ran his hand from her throat to her belly, skimming her breasts without stopping to enjoy their softness. “Your skin is so silky. You are a joy to touch.” As if to prove his point, Tov repeated the motion, running his hand over her with possessive thoroughness.

Merrick stepped up to the side of the table and mirrored Tov’s caresses. They stroked her front and sides from shoulders to knees. Their hands never stopped moving, but they intentionally avoided her most sensitive areas. She quickly grew restless and discontent, lifting her breasts and wiggling her hips.

“What’s the matter, doll?” Merrik whispered. “I thought you liked being touched.”

“This is teasing, not touching.”

“Both our hands are on you right now,” he gently mocked. “How is this not touching?”

“You’re supposed to be arousing me.”

“Your pleasure belongs to me, to us,” Tov stressed. “I decide when and how you will be touched.”

“Fine.” She let her head drop back and closed her eyes.

Tov caught her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, so Merrik quickly did the same. They squeezed together, demanding her undivided attention.

She cried out and lifted her head, looking at Tov angrily. “What the hell? That hurts!”

“I told you to keep your eyes on me. You are disobeying a directive.” They released her nipples, but their hands remained on her breasts, cupping and squeezing. “You must hold a position until you are given permission to move or until one of us repositions you. Do you understand?”

Rebellion sparked in her gaze, but she whispered, “Yes, sir.”

She was not yet his, so he let the subtle defiance slide. “Turn your head and kiss Merrik. Hold nothing back.”

Merrik slipped his hand into her hair and controlled her head as his mouth covered hers. She tensed for a moment at the unexpected aggression then melted, not just accepting the deep kiss but eagerly participating. Typical. Tov had never seen a female Merrik couldn't seduce.

Tov cupped one of her breasts while he bent to suck on the other. Her breasts were large, yet firm, and her nipple felt wonderful against his tongue. He couldn't wait to see them clamped or pinkened from his flogger. Unlike the chancellor, Tov had no interest in breaking her spirit. But she would learn to obey.

Continuing to tease her nipples with his mouth, he moved his hand lower. Her belly quivered and her hips rocked as she realized his destination. Tov took his time, caressing her hips and upper thighs before venturing between. Her pussy was damp, but just barely. She was not nearly as aroused as he had hoped.

Disappointment sparked within him and the demons he'd battled his entire life threatened his determination. Then he looked at his teammate. Tov had never encountered a female immune to Merrik's charm.

“What are you thinking about, Cara?” Tov infused his tone with stern demand. “I told you to hold nothing back. You should be wet by now.”

Merrik released her mouth so she could answer.

She looked at Tov, rebellion now burning in her gaze. “I don't want them to watch us. There is no longer a reason for them to be here.”

“I said they could stay,” he reminded. “That is reason enough.”

Lifting her chin, she crossed her arms over her breasts and glared. “Then don't blame me for not being wet. I've never done well in front of an audience.”

The belligerence in her tone told Tov all he needed to know. This was defiance, not awkwardness. She was doing it



intentionally.

Tov scooped her up off the table and carried her to a nearby chair. She wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder, likely thinking she had won. He sat down and allowed her to settle onto his lap. She looked up at him with the faintest hint of a smile bowing her lips.

She needed to listen to what he was about to say, so he let her misconception stand. “The vast majority of Altorian females are sexually submissive. With conduits, the need to be dominated was intentionally increased by the changes that were made to their genome. Were you sexually active on Earth?”

She nodded, but offered no other information.

“Were your partners able to make you orgasm?”

Her gaze darted away and she took a deep breath. “One was.”

“I’m surprised. Was he particularly skilled, or particularly aggressive?”

“Neither,” she admitted, still avoiding his gaze. “I experimented on my own, then told him what I needed.”

“Which was?” It was highly doubtful she understood her true sexual nature, so he was curious to hear her answer.

“A vibrator.”

He nodded. “Powerful vibration can trigger orgasm in most females, but the result is a weak and highly localized sensation. When we fuck you for the first time, your orgasms will pulse through your entire body.”

“*If* my parents accept your offer,” she reminded, glancing at him and then away.

He returned to the reason he had moved her from the raised bench. “You are intentionally sabotaging our compatibility assessment.”

Her gaze locked with his. “I will cooperate as soon as you make the other team leave the room.”

“It is not your decision to make. You are not in control of this situation. I am.”

She raised her chin, sounding almost haughty. “If you say so.”

“Sexual energy is necessary to stabilize and strengthen the triad. The need can arise in the heat of battle and privacy is not always an option. Also conduits are frequently disciplined in public or displayed after the discipline has been administered. Having portions of your body revealed will be a part of your existence from now on. You need to get used to it.”

“And I don’t have anything to say about it?”

“You do not.” Without allowing her arguments to continue, he flipped her over and slid her forward until her ass was at the perfect angle for a good, hard spanking. “This lesson has two purposes.” He slapped each cheek a couple of times before adding, “This is punishment for trying to manipulate us.” He delivered a few more spanks, this time a little harder. “You will also learn that resistance can be easily overcome with intensity.”

Tov’s hand fell fast and hard. She just lay there seething for a few moments, then came alive, rearing and twisting in an effort to escape his lap. He trapped her thrashing legs between his and placed his free hand between her shoulder blades, anchoring her in place.

He slowed his strokes, making each swat a hard, intentional lesson. Her rounded cheeks quivered and a strangled cry soon accompanied each spank. His palm stung as he warmed her pale flesh, mesmerized by the transformation. Her skin turned pink, then rose as the spanking continued. He had only meant to shock her out of resisting, but the scent of her arousal drove him onward. She wanted this, needed it, more than she understood.

Merrik sat sideways in the chair next to Tov’s, his gaze fixed on Cara’s pinkening ass. “Spread your legs. Your pussy should be visible while you are disciplined.”

“Why?” Cara cried, pressing her thighs even closer together. “One has nothing to do with the other.”

“Do not lie again or I will go get a strap. I can sense what this is doing to you.” Merrik activated the psychic link they had formed three years ago when they began searching for a mate.

Her emotions flowed into Tov’s mind, aching need restrained by humiliation. Her body clearly wanted the pain but her mind stubbornly resisted. Tov removed his restraining leg and waited for her to obey. When she remained motionless, he smacked the backs of her thighs, dragging an exasperated cry from their reluctant mate. “Merrick gave you an order.”

She eased her legs barely apart.

“Wider,” Merrik insisted.

“I hate you!”

Tov caught one leg, Merrik the other, and they spread her legs wide. “Much better.” Merrik traced her slit with his index finger, sliding easily in her wetness. “You don’t seem to mind our audience now.”

“Stop it,” she snapped. “It’s a delayed reaction. I *do not* like being spanked.”

“Lying to yourself is still lying,” Tov told her. Merrik moved his hand and Tov delivered several more slaps then stopped. His primary purpose was to focus her mind on what she was feeling rather than how embarrassed she was to be on display. Clearly, that goal had been achieved.

Merrick caressed her pussy some more, tracing her slit and circling her opening. “Gods, how I want to finger this wet little hole. Do you want that, doll? Do you wish my fingers could be inside you right now?”

She whimpered. “You can’t, so stop teasing me.”

A deep chuckle rumbled through his chest. “I’ve barely begun to tease you.” He bent and dragged his tongue from her clit to just below her puckered hole. “She’s sappy wet and so fucking sweet.” He repeated the caress over and over, then circled the entrance to her pussy, venturing as deeply as he dared without alerting the supervisor. “You have to taste her, Tov. You won’t believe how good she tastes.”

Tov picked her up again and carried her to the raised bench. He laid her back and pushed her legs up then out. He could see how wet she was and her scent was making him dizzy. His cock was rock hard, his balls drawn up tight and aching.

“Please, sir,” she whispered, expressive eyes pleading. “I really need to come.”

“I know you do, but as soon as you orgasm, we have to stop touching you. I couldn’t bear that right now.”

The confession seemed to surprise her. She tentatively grasped the back of her knees and held herself open for him. “My pussy is yours to enjoy.”

The statement sent a jolt of hunger pounding through his being. It was all he could do not to take out his cock and stake his claim right then and there. Instead he parted her folds with his thumbs and traced her slit over and over. She moaned and lifted, obviously liking how it felt. Her rich, sweet taste filled his mouth. Merrik was right. Tov had never tasted anything as addictive as their mate’s pleasure.

Feeling particularly aggressive, he jerked her forward and rubbed his cock against her pussy. The motion left wet smears on his synth-leather pants but he didn’t care. He needed more of her, all of her! Grasping the back of her hair, he kissed her savagely then paused and regained control over his instincts. He slowed down, sliding his lips over and against hers until she relaxed and accepted him. Then he eased his tongue into her mouth.

Gradually she responded, wrapping her arms and legs around him as her tongue slid against his.

When Tov finally released her mouth, Merrik was there to take his place. They kissed passionately while Tov returned his attention to the softness between her legs. She unhooked her ankles and bent her knees, opening her legs in unmistakable invitation.

Thrilled by the development, Tov decided to take things a step farther. “Let her go, Merrik. I want to watch her come.”

Merrick immediately released her mouth but didn't leave her side. He stroked her breasts instead, lightly pinching her nipples.

"Look at me, Cara. Look deep into my eyes."

"Yes, sir."

Their gazes locked and Tov covered her clit with his thumb. Then he reached lower and found her puckered back hole. "*All* of you." He rubbed together, her bottom and her clit. "That's what we want from you, what we need." His fingers slid back and forth and then around, creating a rhythm that soon had her gasping. "Come for me, sweetness. Come really hard."

"Please, sir," she begged. "*Please!*"

Unable to ignore the desperation in her tone, he bent and closed his lips around her clit. His fingers continued to rub her bottom, a silent reminder of her eventual submission. One firm suck ended her torment. She screamed helplessly, bucking against his mouth as the pleasure pounded through her. He sensed her euphoria, her shock at the intensity of her release. Once they were bound, he would feel what she felt and know what she knew. So would Merrik because triads shared everything.

He finally raised his head as she sagged limply against the padded bench, legs sprawled to either side.

"No one needs to ask if you three are compatible," Skolat chuckled as he pushed to his feet. "I think everyone in the Citadel heard her screams of pleasure."

"I wish it had been us," Idrix muttered as he followed his teammate toward the door. "Congratulations. Your mate is amazing."

Tov nodded, but both he and Merrik knew that proving their compatibility was the first of many obstacles they needed to clear before Cara would truly be theirs.

## CHAPTER 3



Twirling all over and blissed out on endorphins—or the Altorian equivalent—Cara sprawled on the raised bench trying to form a coherent thought. She'd never felt anything like the sensations Tov just unleashed, never imagined that such pleasure existed. She pulled herself together enough to close her legs and then roll to her side. She wasn't ready to look at Tov or Merrik. They would be smiling smugly, no doubt, thrilled by their victory over her reluctant body.

The ending was concerning enough. Like an addictive drug, people could be controlled by something that intense. The worst part was how it had started. Discomfort and humiliation had overcome her inhibitions. Tov, with a strong assist from Merrik, had skillfully controlled her through equal parts pleasure and pain. Even without Merrik's teasing, she had been close to orgasm from the spanking.

Someone touched her hip and she gasped, whipping her head around.

Merrick smiled down at her warmly. "It's just me. I thought you might appreciate a robe."

She sat up and he helped her into the spa-style robe. Glancing around, she noticed that Tov was nowhere in sight. "What happens now?"

"Supervisor Winlos will notify your parents of the outcome of the assessment. Because we are the only team left, Tov is

trying to arrange a meeting with your parents before they leave the Citadel.”

“Then I better get dressed.” She hopped down from the table and looked around. “Where did my clothes end up?”

“The attendants took them. They presumed you had lost the right to clothing when they were summoned to undress you.”

“Delightful,” she grumbled. “How do I get them back?”

“We are hoping that your parents will give us the right to claim you. That is frequently the case.”

And of course she wouldn't need to get dressed if they would only be stripping her naked again. A shiver dropped down her spine as she briefly imagined that being claimed by them would mean. All of her. Tov made damn sure she understood that nothing would be denied them, no pleasure, no demand, no... opening. She'd never had anal sex. Despite her friends' obsession with it, the idea had never appealed to her.

After a long pause, Merrik said, “If your parents still plan on taking you back to their estate, you will be allowed to dress.”

She crossed her arms as anxiety and a vague sense of loss curled through her. Had today been a preview of the future? Mind-blowing pleasure, but nothing resembling control or authority over her own life? “Everyone keeps bragging about how powerful I am. Aren't my abilities as a conduit the reason you're so desperate to claim me?”

“It is not the only reason, but it is important to us. Why do you bring it up?”

“I think my grandmother is full of shit,” she grumbled. “I don't have any abilities. My parents are deceiving you.”

He chuckled, his gaze locking on her face. “Your power is skillfully bound, but I can sense it. As soon as we are given permission to claim you, releasing your power is the first thing we'll do. A great many things will make more sense to you then.”

As usual, she had nothing but his word that any of this was true. Well, almost any of it. Hearing his voice clearly in her

mind had been closer to magic than anyone else had come. “Obviously, you’re telepathic.” She buried her hands in the pockets of her robe. “Can Tov read my mind and pass me his thoughts like you did?”

Merrik shook his head. “The soul bond will allow all of us to share thoughts and feelings, but Tov’s power is different from mine. He must be linked with someone to communicate mind to mind.”

She wasn’t sure how long his talkative mood would last, so she kept firing off questions. “Then how did Tov know what you were saying to me? It was obvious he understood what was going on.”

“We formed a psychic bond a few years ago. It allows him to access my abilities. However, it’s limited by proximity. Unless I am nearby, Tov is not telepathic.”

“I see.” Being able to speak mind to mind would be unique and interesting, but Iris had described so much more. Elemental magic and powers so great that males fought over the right to claim a conduit. Cara’s inquisitive mind demanded evidence, tangible evidence. “Can you show me? I know you’re a source. Don’t you have powers of your own right now?”

He moved closer, his expression intent and contemplative. “If it will make you more comfortable, I will show you.”

“I think it will really help.”

Glancing around the room, he didn’t seem pleased with his options. “I don’t think Zevon would appreciate it if I caught the furniture on fire. I guess it will have to be something a bit less impressive.” He held out his hand, palm up, fingers splayed.

Cara watched closely, unsure of what to expect. Energy streamed down his arm, creating a glowing ribbon just beneath his skin. The ribbon curved and twisted until it reached his wrist, then it separated into five smaller threads. The threads spiraled up his fingers until his fingertips glowed.



“If I release the stream, it will burn like molten lava.” His features tensed with the stress of holding back the energy. “Come here.” He suddenly closed his fist and rushed into the adjoining bathroom.

She hurried after him and watched in wide-eyed awe as a glowing, thick-looking liquid burst from his fingertips and cascaded into the metal sink. The streams sputtered and hissed as they circled the sink and finally flowed into the drain. The faucet activated and cold water washed over the sink revealing scorched indentations.

Reaching out her hand, she instinctively tried to touch the indentations. Merrik caught her wrist and prevented her from making contact. At least an inch separated her skin from the sink and she could still feel heat radiating off the damaged metal.

“Looks like I owe Zevon a sink,” Merrik concluded with a lazy smile.

“This is unbelievable.” She looked up at him and shook her head. “This kind of power is locked inside me?”

He moved her hand farther away from the sink then released her wrist. “It’s hard to explain if you’ve never experienced Altorian power. I am the reservoir, the well from which our energy will flow. Without you, I can only access a minuscule amount of it. And without Tov we would both be consumed by the intensity. It requires all three members of a power triad working together. There is mystic energy inside of you, but your function is different from mine. Does that make sense?”

“I think so.” They moved back into the main area as Cara processed what she’d just seen. “Have you and Tov worked with a conduit before?”

“We have worked with power triads before, but the three members were bonded with each other.”

“Are conduits really as rare as Iris claims?”

“Absolutely,” Merrik stressed. “It is a great honor to be—”

The door flew open and Tov stormed into the room. “That son of a whore refused to meet with us!”

Clearly, shocked by the news, Merrik turned toward his outraged teammate. “Have they heard the outcome of the assessment? How can they justify refusing to meet with us?”

“They are one of the founding families. They don’t need to justify their actions to the likes of me.”

Tov’s basic meaning was obvious, but Cara lacked context. Merrik, however, understood. They both looked furious.

“What is a founding family? And why does that excuse their rude behavior?”

Before Tov could explain, her parents walked into the room. Lezod spotted Tov, sneered disdainfully, and ordered Cara, “Get dressed. We are leaving.”

Anger snapped inside her like a spring. Who the fuck did he think he was? After everything she’d been through today, she refused to start the entire process over. “Why did you let them examine me if you had no intention of considering their contract seriously?” She still didn’t understand why Lezod had turned on Tov and Merrik, but it was obvious that he had.

“Your father doesn’t like it when his schemes do not turn out the way he anticipated,” Grinnel said with a faint smirk.

Cara couldn’t decide if she found her mother’s snark or her father’s deception more insulting. “Maybe it’s time to start letting full-grown women choose their own mates. Even a primitive planet like Earth has figured out the advantages of that.”

“The assessment is being reviewed,” Lezod told her coldly. “No decision will be made until President Raydo assures me that the proceedings were appropriate.”

“Appropriate?” she scoffed. “We have very different definitions of the word.”

“And when the security feed reveals that the only team not willing to abide by the parameters you established was the team you clearly expected to win?” Tov persisted, arms crossed over his chest. “Will Cara be ours then? Your biggest mistake was holding this here. Unlike chancellors and prefects, Zevon Raydo can’t be bought.”

Ah, now there was a name she recognized. Zevon Raydo had recently been elected president of the Citadel. He was making sweeping changes to Citadel polices, so he had many powerful enemies. He also had thousands of enthusiastic fans. Apparently, Tov was one of the latter.

Merrick moved up beside Tov, blocking Lezod's path to Cara. "We accepted this invitation in good faith. It will reflect badly on the House of Slanar if your word can no longer be trusted."

"I will worry about the House of Slanar." Lezod leaned far enough to the side that Cara could see him. "I said get dressed."

"The attendants have my clothes." She matched his impatient tone.

"Then that will have to do." He lunged forward and grabbed her arm and dragged her out from behind Merrik.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" She tugged against Lezod's hold, but he was stronger than he looked.

She reached for Merrik with her free hand as Lezod dragged her past. If someone had to have authority over her life, she would rather submit to Tov and Merrik than her father—or Chancellor Laeth!

Merrick shook his head, regret clear in his eyes. *We cannot interfere until the review is complete, but he cannot offer you to anyone else. Be patient. We will come for you.*

With a clearer understanding of the situation, she stopped struggling. Once they reached the corridor, her father released her arm. They only encountered a few staff members on the way to the departure ring and no one seemed surprised to see a woman dressed in a bathrobe.

Tov's warning about the need for sex in the heat of battle and being displayed after discipline echoed back to her now. Did she really want to be part of a society so desensitized to sex that it was nothing special, no more meaningful than a hearty meal? Thanks to the assessment, those situations were much too easy to imagine. Humiliation, pain, and staggering

pleasure all blended into a conflicted mess; was that really what the rest of her life was destined to be?

They reached the transport and a uniformed crewmember helped her onboard. The ship was slightly larger than a shuttle and infinitely nicer. There were two rows of forward-facing seats, but the center-facing seats farther back had built-in footrests. All of the seats were wide and deeply padded, clearly meant for comfort rather than safety. Cara sat near the back and her parents faced her.

“What is your objection to Tov and Merrik?” she asked once the transport had cleared the departure ring.

Lezod made a sound that was part sneer. His jaw clenched and anger reignited in his gaze. “No daughter of mine is mating with a filthy pirate. The blood of the founders flows through your veins. You were meant for better things than those two.”

“Who the hell were the founders? You keep saying that as if it explains everything.”

Lezod scowled at her. “You had access to the research library for weeks. What were you reading during all that time?”

“The history and development of the Citadel,” she countered sharply. She could see why Lezod and Ephrod got along so well. They were both sanctimonious snobs. “That seemed most appropriate to my situation.”

“Altor was the first planet in our star system to be colonized,” Grinnel offered before the budding argument could explode. “There were nearly a thousand people who established the first settlement. By the end of the first year only thirty-six families remained. They became known as the founding families. Your father is a direct descendant of Fizon Slanar, one of the original thirty-six.”

Personal accomplishments and character had always meant more to Cara than names and titles. But her mindset was American, not Altorian. “Where did the settlers come from? Which planet or planets established the colonies?”

“There are four inhabitable planets in our star system. All four were colonized simultaneously by the Sarlian Federation.

However, each settlement had a different set of challenges, each population different traditions. That is why the societies that developed on each planet are so divergent.”

More than happy to ignore Lezod, Cara focused on Grinnel. “When was this?”

“Just over five hundred years ago.”

“And the Slanar bloodline has been unbroken in all those generations?” That seemed highly unlikely. “There was never a couple unable to have kids, never a war or an epidemic that wiped out all the offspring?”

Lezod rolled his eyes, his expression petulant. “Did your research not mention the Controller Wars?”

“Don’t let him distract you,” Grinnel cautioned. “The Controller Wars were horrific. They affected every person in our star system, but they went on for decades and the conflicts woven through them were complex. We are not going to get into all of that right now. The answer to your question is twofold. The Slanar bloodline has always been prolific and has a strong tendency to produce male offspring. Part of that tendency is natural, but part is engineered.”

“With a few exceptions, Altorian technology has irradiated infertility,” Lezod summarized. “Our house has remained strong, because we made damn sure it did.”

As usual, she had analyzed the problem with a human perspective. Two weeks was not a lot of time to overwrite a lifetime of experiences. “How is wealth passed down on Altor? Does the firstborn son inherit everything, or is it divided evenly between all the offspring?”

A gentle smile curved Grinnel’s lips. “This is an oversimplification, but monetary assets are divided evenly between the offspring once both parents have passed beyond. Estates, and therefor titles, are prioritized according to size and the income generated by the property, then bestowed on the offspring as they are born. Arriving first is still an advantage, but the sex of the offspring is not a factor.”

Cara paused, trying to imagine what that would look like.

“You seem confused,” Grinnel noted. “Would a specific example help?”

“Very much. Thank you.”

“House Slanar currently holds six entitled estates,” Lezod explained, his voice filled with pride. “I am head of the house, so Slanar Estate is mine and will remain so until my passing. All of the other estates were distributed to my offspring as they were born.”

“We were able to keep the estates intact as we passed them on,” Grinnel added, “but often there is only one estate so it is divided between the siblings.”

Cara nodded, surprised by the equality. Everything else she had learned about Altor led her to believe females would have fewer rights. “It seems fairer than giving everything to the firstborn son.”

“Heavens above, is that how it’s done on Earth?” Grinnel seemed genuinely horrified. “And Mother claims that Altorians are chauvinistic.”

“Many countries on Earth have moved away from the practice.” Cara felt obligated to defend, but her mind quickly returned to Altorian customs. “If everyone already has their inheritance, what happens to Slanar Estate once you two have passed on?”

“Your oldest brother will become head of House Slanar, so the estate will belong to him and his family,” Grinnel told her. “Head of a noble house is the only position that requires a biological son.”

“I see.” That sounded more like what she had expected. Altorian males were dominant. Females could inherit wealth, but true authority was reserved for males.

“Your title is Pictar of Cessia, if you were wondering,” Lezod informed. “You should always be addressed as Lady Cessia. This also means your mates will become Lord Cessia.”

“It is an honor Ephrod was quite anxious to enjoy,” Grinnel told her. “Being Lord Cessia would open doors Chancellor Laeth simply will not.”

Of course. Ephrod had no real interest in her. He just wanted to be part of House Slanar.

Shaking away the disconcerting thought, she asked for one final clarification. “If you had six titles, but only four children, what happened to the other two titles?”

He seemed less annoyed now that they were discussing something close to his heart. “I retain them until my children start presenting me with grandchildren. A process that is taking longer than I had hoped. Your oldest brother has been bonded for six years and still I am waiting.”

She smiled, hoping to encourage his talkative mood. “Were you an only child?”

His gaze narrowed and tension returned to his lips. “Why do you ask?”

Not sure how she had upset him, she kept her tone light and conversational. “How did one person end up with six titles if they are given out as children are born?”

“Lezod had two younger brothers,” Grinnel told her. “Both died childless fighting the Torretians. Both of his parents are also gone, so their estates reverted to him.”

“Did either of his brothers have mates?”

“You ask the strangest questions,” Lezod grumbled. “The past has no bearing on the present or the future.”

She disagreed. The past determined personalities and traditions. It had everything to do with how people thought and reacted to present situations, and that shaped the future. Still, she wanted to finish one subject before she introduced another, so she kept the thoughts to herself.

The silence lengthened, growing tenser with each passing moment.

Finally, Lezod relented and answered her question, “Both of my brothers had mates when they died. What has that to do with anything?”

“I just wondered what happened to their mates?”

“They returned to their families. Slanar estates can only be held by those with Slanar blood. If either of those worthless females had produced offspring as was their duty to House Slanar, they would not be in their current predicament.”

She wasn't sure she wanted to know what he meant, but she couldn't help asking, “Which is?”

Once again, Grinnel supplied the detailed information. “Neither were able to find an acceptable mate the second time around. The only males who offered for them were so far beneath their station that both decided to remain with their families.”

It sounded like widows were no longer under the authority of their fathers. Still, their inability to find suitable mates seemed horribly unfair. “Why did no one of their station want them? Please tell me Altorian males are not obsessed with virgins.”

Grinnel smiled broadly, but Lezod was not amused. “Most realize it is unrealistic to expect virginity,” Lezod told her. “Offspring, on the other hand, is essential to those of our social strata. Neither of my brothers' mates were focused on motherhood and they suffered because of it.”

“What were they focused on instead?”

“Establishing their careers.” He shuddered in distaste. “The business world is no place for females. I don't care what the younger generation says.”

That made Cara smile. Apparently, the generation gap existed inter-galactically. “Thank you for indulging my curiosity.”

Deciding she had annoyed Lezod enough for the time being, she shifted her gaze and stared out the viewport but her mind drifted back to Merrik and Tov. According to the dossier, Tov came from one of the wealthiest families on Altor. Yet he still wasn't acceptable to her father. The Nee family had the audacity to earn their money rather than inheriting it. Tov's grandfather had started out with one ship and three generations later Nee Shipping manufactured thousands and Tov personally managed a fleet of sixteen. There hadn't been as much information about Merrik as Tov, but one thing was



certain. If her father couldn't accept Tov, there was no way he would approve of Merrik.

She sighed and closed her eyes. Merrik had promised they would come for her, but what would happen when they did? There was still so much she didn't understand, so many questions she needed answered. Suddenly, she opened her eyes and looked at Grinnel. "Are there images of a power triad in action? Am I allowed to see this power I'm supposed to possess?"

Grinnel looked at Lezod intently for a moment. Were they using their soul bond to speak mind to mind?

"The Citadel likes to control what trainees are shown until after their initial training has been completed. However, my sister's triad made the news feeds repeatedly. Would you like to see the female you knew as Autumn in action?"

Autumn, her Earth mother, was actually her aunt. And the more Cara learned about her, the more she realized that she had never really known Autumn at all. "That would make such a difference. You can't even imagine."

"Computer, access public records."

"What would you like to see, Lady Slanar?" a pleasant female voice asked.

"Play one of the news feeds featuring the liberation of Camp Umitoid," Grinnel instructed.

"There are numerous records documenting that event. Can you be more specific?"

"I need a video clip showing the power triad involved in the rescue operation," she clarified.

"I have three clips queued. Say play when ready."

"Play."

A holo-display appeared between the center-facing seats. Cara retracted her footrest and scooted to the edge of her seat. The file wasn't just video. There was audio too. Camp Umitoid was a collection of crude buildings surrounded by dense jungle. She heard strange creatures screeching in the darkness

and people talking but their conversations were either so muffled she couldn't make out the words or they were speaking a language she didn't know.

Who was her Earth mother about to liberate? Where was Camp Umitoid located? Two sleek Altorian fighters appeared at exactly the same time. She had seen images of them during her research, but the still images hadn't captured the menace of the spacecraft. They must have had some sort of cloaking technology because they just flashed into view. Beams of light descended from the ships to the ground. The beams brightened as they deposited a row of armed soldiers. Each ship transported the soldiers four at a time until there were two dozen soldiers rushing toward the shacks off to the right.

The last to arrive was a group of three. A burly, dark-haired male, a leaner male with burnished gold hair, and Autumn. Her long red hair was French braided down the back of her head, leaving her face fully visible. She looked slightly younger than Cara's memories and seemed shockingly comfortable actively participating in a military mission.

They ran toward a building set apart from where the soldiers had headed.

"What's in that building?"

Cara could no longer see her parents, but she heard Grinnel clearly. "Camp Umitoid was a notorious prisoner of war encampment in the wilds of Torret. Not only were our prisoners taken there, but prisoners from other wars were taken there to be interrogated."

"Torretian interrogators were, and still are, well known for their ruthlessness," Lezod explained. "They will not stop until they have extracted the information they desire."

"Or until their victims make up something they want to hear," Grinnel muttered. "Anyway, three high-level officers had been captured over the course of several battles. It was crucial that they be recovered before the interrogators broke them. Leadership decided to shut down Camp Umitoid once and for all during the raid."

Battered and half-starved soldiers streamed out of the buildings on the right. They were being loaded onto a third ship that had just arrived. Autumn and her mates faced the building on the left. One male stood on either side of Autumn, their arms wrapped around her protectively. The trio stilled and then the blond's hair began to glow. Soon Autumn's hair was incandescent as well and a stream of energy burst forth. Their backs were to the camera, so Cara couldn't see exactly where the shimmering stream emanated, but it was definitely coming from her Earth mother.

Unable to look away, Cara watched the stream fan out and flow around the building. Only the front door was left unblocked by the fluctuation wall of energy.

"Altorian energy manifests as fire," her mother explained. "But fire can take many shapes. The larger male is her controller. The smaller was her source."

"And all that energy is flowing through Autumn?" Her hushed tone revealed her awe.

"Keep watching," Lezod urged.

It took a few moments, but six blond males rushed out into the small clearing in front of the building.

"You left them in there to die?" an angry female voice accused.

Autumn's males ran into the building while Autumn ordered the six blond males to their knees.

Her back was still to the camera, so Cara couldn't see exactly what happened next. Autumn's pose became more aggressive. Her fists clenched and her knees bent, then the males started screaming. They clutched their faces and writhed as if they were in agony. Cara had no idea what was causing their pain.

"What is happening? What is she doing?"

"She insisted that she lost control during the inquiry, but autopsies revealed something very different. The fluid inside their cells boiled, literally melting the flesh off their faces."

"Turn it off," Cara cried. "I do not want to see that."

“Computer, end playback,” Lezod obliged. The display went blank and then the display itself disappeared.

Without prompting, Grinnel continued. “Only the cells on their faces were affected, so the act took a higher level of control than any conduit had ever achieved. Iris likes to pretend that they ran away because they disapproved of war. The truth is more convoluted. Both my mother and sister actively participated in countless battles. My mother was reluctant, even coerced, but my sister liked it way too much.”

Stunned by the images and the imaginings triggered by Grinnel’s words, Cara lapsed into brooding silence. Was that sort of brutality locked inside her nature? Would unleashing her power turn her into a brutal killer?

“Before you feel sorry for those Torretian monsters, there is one last detail you need to know.” Grinnel waited until Cara looked at her to add, “They tortured our soldiers in ways you do not want to think about. All three required extensive regeneration. One did not survive. Torretians are animals and their interrogators are beneath contempt. The only regret I have is that Autumn let them die too quickly.”

Cara knew Grinnel thought the words would soothe her, but they had the opposite effect. If Altorian females were naturally submissive, why the hell were her relatives so bloodthirsty?

\* \* \*

Shalia sat on her cushion in the corner of Emperor Jevara’s private quarters, watching and listening to everything that took place around her. The chamber was massive and filled with lavish furnishings. But each gilded vase or intricately carved table only fueled Shalia’s resentment. Such wealth was an abomination when it was achieved by starving one’s subjects or literally working them to death.

Her gaze landed on the emperor and for one blissful moment, unadulterated hatred burned in her eyes. Then she summoned her expressionless mask and sank deeper into the role she was playing. She was Jevara’s pleasure slave, an esthetically

pleasing receptacle into which he pumped his cum. He only acknowledged her existence when his passions stirred and the moment he finished, she ceased to exist. That dynamic gave her access to information no other rebel could hope to attain. The rebellion would succeed. Jevara's tyranny would end, and Shalia would be proud to have played a part in his downfall.

Left with nothing to do but think during the long hours of inactivity, her mind drifted back to how it all began. The rebellion was guided by a group of informal leaders known as the Assembly. The most dynamic and popular member was Laidon Feran. Most considered him head of the Assembly, but he insisted that he was simply a member with no more authority than all the rest. Technically, it was true. But every time a difficult decision needed to be made, all eyes turned toward Laidon.

The Assembly always met in a private social club tucked away within Soza, an elaborate cyber environment named after the ancient goddess of dreams. VR worlds were incredibly popular on Torret. The majority of the planet was underwater, so space was a luxury. It was easier, and more cost effective, to create entertainment venues with neuro-stimulators and sensory inputs than to tame the deadly power of the sea.

Their icons were intentionally fantastical and no one referred to each other by their real names. This meeting went on for hours and had been particularly contentious. Everyone was frustrated with the lack of progress the rebellion had made lately and Laidon was taking the brunt of his lieutenants' anger. It didn't seem to matter what the rebels did, Jevara just shrugged off their attacks. It was demoralizing for the fighters and humiliating for leadership.

When nothing productive had been decided after four hours of arguing, the members agreed to gather information and try again in a few days. Laidon had deactivated his sensory implants with a sigh and blinked open his eyes.

"We have danced with this bastard long enough," he'd grumbled. "We need one big, decisive move."

Shalia had rubbed her temples as the immersive signals gradually released. Laidon sat in his favorite sculpted chair. She faced him on the matching sofa. Laidon's apartment was compact, but nicer than hers so she usually came here for Assembly meetings. After a few intense months as lovers, they had both agreed that they worked better as friends.

"Are you thinking assassination or kidnapping?" She wanted to make sure his definition of a decisive move was the same as hers.

"Does Jevara strike you as the sort who would accept exile?" Laidon shook his head and released a deep sigh. "I understand why the others are hesitant, but we have no choice but to alleviate the threat permanently."

"We need to *kill him*. Some would even say murder. Are you sure you are ready for that reality?"

Laidon's features hardened, revealing his ruthlessness. "After what he did to Cressita and her friends, I could slit his throat, watch the life drain from his eyes, and I would sleep soundly that night."

They lapsed into thoughtful silence as they pondered the obstacles awaiting them.

"We need to get close to him," Laidon concluded. "Really fucking close. He seldom leaves the palace and his security is unrivaled. Opportunities do not come very often, so we have to be ready to strike when it does."

Pressing back into the softness of the sofa, she studied him. Like most full-blood Torretians, Laidon's hair combined strands of brown and gold. His eyes were leaf-green and his jawline was shadowed with whiskers. His features fell just short of handsome, which allowed him to move through a crowd unnoticed. Being memorable, like Shalia, was a disadvantage to a fugitive. "As I see it, there are two possibilities. One, we find someone willing to die for the cause and have them ambush Jevara."

Laidon shook his head. "Jevara is too paranoid to let anyone that dangerous near him. Everything he ingests is scanned for

toxins and he wears an energy shield just to walk around the palace grounds. The strike has to take place away from the palace, preferably off world. Accurate information is so crucial. We have to choose the perfect place and time. We will only get one chance to rid the universe of this monster. What was your second possibility?”

Trepidation banded her chest as she thought about what she was about to propose. Was she really strong enough to survive the sort of evil that went on at the palace? If even half the stories were true, she should run in the opposite direction. “There is only one way to get that close to Jevara. Pleasure slaves are irrelevant, invisible. Important conversations take place in front of them all the time. I could—”

“No fucking way,” he snapped, shooting to his feet. “You are not going to become Jevara’s body slave. Absolutely not.”

She crossed her arms and glared up at him. “Accurate information is crucial. You said so yourself. And I’m the only one who can get it for you. Besides, there is nothing Jevara can do to me that I can’t handle.”

“He could slit your throat,” Laidon argued, but already resignation was creeping into his gaze. “You have convinced yourself that you are dark and twisted, but you are not nearly as jaded as you think. There has to be another way.”

“I’m open to suggestions.” She knew there was nothing. She had spent the last month desperately trying to come up with something, *anything* that would spare her this fate.

“He won’t just fuck you, Shalia. He will hurt you in ways you can’t imagine, regenerate your body, and do it all over again. He seldom shares his toys, but he loves to display them, to demonstrate their complete obedience regardless of how badly he hurts them.”

“Better me than someone like Cressita,” she fired back. Then immediately, “I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair, but it was accurate. I look much younger than I am. I can—”

“Would you like to hear what he did to the last person he thought was a spy?”

“We have no choice, Laidon.” She pushed to her feet and skirted the table. “Jevara destroys countless lives every day. Someone must stop him and I am uniquely qualified to do this.”

“You will be isolated and helpless.” He put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed. “I will not be able to protect you.”

“It’s not your job to protect me.” She took a deep breath and filled her tone with conviction. “If there is any indication that he is suspicious, I will disappear. I have been eluding authorities since I was twelve. Palace guards are no match for me.”

He shook his head and ran his hand through his hair as he often did when he was agitated. “You will be our eyes and ears, nothing more. You promise not to slit his throat while he sleeps? I do not want your blood on my hands along with Cressita’s.”

“What happened to your sister had nothing to do with you, but we’ll save that argument for another day. You have my word that all I will do is gather information.”

He accepted her promise with a tense nod. Once Laidon made a decision, he focused entirely on achieving the goal. It was why the others turned to him so often. “One of the kitchen runners is on my payroll. I went to a great deal of trouble to acquire him and then found out about the toxin scanners.”

“That will give us a way to pass messages, so it wasn’t a total waste.”

“My thoughts exactly.” He crossed to the beverage dispenser and printed two drinks, wine for her and ale for himself. “I know the slave dealer that supplies the palace with pleasure slaves. A generous bribe will ensure that you are delivered to the palace, but he will have no control over what happens once you are taken inside.” Laidon handed her the wineglass before adding, “You are one of the most beautiful females I have ever seen, but Jevara’s tastes can be unpredictable.”

“I’m aware. That’s why I intend on becoming the one temptation no self-absorbed prick can resist.” Shalia grinned



with more confidence than she felt.

“And which temptation is that?” He still sounded less than enthusiastic.

“A blushing virgin.”

Two days later Shalia located a cosmetic physician willing to regenerate her hymen. The procedure had been outlawed decades before, but that only drove the providers underground. Within a week, she had been delivered to Mercelon Palace and was selected by the keeper of the pleasure den to serve the emperor himself.

Everything worked exactly as she intended. She was bathed, perfumed, and dressed in a gossamer gown that revealed more than it covered. But instead of being taken to Jevara’s private chambers, she was presented to him during a formal dinner for at least a hundred of his guests.

He told her to bare her breasts and kneel at his side, then continued on with the evening as if nothing unusual was taking place. He fed her from his plate and casually fondled her, but the nightmare really began when the meal was cleared away. Shalia quickly realized that Laidon was right. She was not jaded enough to endure Jevara’s brand of cruelty without losing part of her soul.

The first few nights had been the worst, but each time she thought he was losing interest, Jevara invented a new erotic game or painful humiliation. She had now been at the palace for three weeks and each time he motioned her over, she despised him a little more. He was an infestation that needed to be eradicated. And she was going to do everything in her power to ensure the success of the extermination.

Jevara had bent her over his desk a few hours ago, so she was invisible to him again. Better still, it was unlikely that he would remember her existence until after dinner. She should have several more hours of peace and quiet before she had to endure his touch again. If only he would say something meaningful, all of the rest would be worthwhile.

As if hearing her thought, Jevara accepted a holo-comm from one of his operatives. She hadn't figure out this one's name, but he was posing as a trainee at the Citadel. That was not an easy ruse to pull off. Only those with legitimate talent were accepted for training. It was not something that could be faked. With messy dark hair and pale blue eyes, the spy was handsome enough. But something about him made Shalia uncomfortable. His gaze saw too much and his lips confessed too little. She was not sure what they were, but this male had secrets.

"Your check-ins have become infrequent, Cylex." Jevara growled out the complaint. "Are you still dedicated to this mission?"

Cylex was a relatively common name. Still, paired with his appearance and abilities, Laidon might be able to figure out his identity.

"Of course I am, sire," Cylex insisted. "It is nearly impossible to contact you from the Citadel. I have to be on a ship or one of the planets to send these messages. I am doing the best I can."

"Get on with it then," Jevara urged. "What have you learned?"

"Everyone is buzzing about the three cousins Draven Aldar brought back from Earth. Most conclude that they are runaway conduits, but I have yet to determine the truth."

"Gossip does not interest me. I need confirmed facts."

"I am working on it." Impatience sharpened his tone. "Trainees are kept incredibly busy. It doesn't leave me much time for anything else."

"Fine. Comm when you know more." Jevara terminated the connection with a wave of his hand.

Shalia took a deep breath, dreading the moment when his gaze locked on her. Instead, he sent a comm request to someone named Azar Turin. Again, the name meant nothing to her, so she was surprised when his likeness formed. Azar was clearly Altorian. Why was the emperor of Torret contacting an Altorian? Their worlds were at war.

Azar had mahogany hair and green eyes. He was in his late fifties or early sixties. “Make it quick. I do not have a lot of time.”

Wow. That was not the level of deference usually offered to the emperor.

“Well, *General*,” Jevara stressed sarcastically. “That is unfortunate because I have a pile of universal credits with your name on them.”

“And what do I have to do for them?” Azar crossed his arms over his chest, looking dubious.

“The same as usual. Provide information.”

“Just spit it out,” the general advised. “What do you need to know?”

“Tell me verified facts about the cousins Draven Aldar brought back from Earth.”

“Fuck off,” Azar snapped. “One of those females is my daughter and the others are none of your business. All three are Altorian. They have nothing to do with you.”

“Are they conduits?” Jevara persisted.

Azar reached up and terminated the link.

“Well, that was rude.”

She wasn't sure if any of the information she'd just overheard was important, but she would write a detailed message to Laidon and pass it on after dinner. The kitchen slave who was acting as their courier had drawn her attention a few days after she arrived. She sent a quick update every few days, but this was the first time she'd had new information to pass on. Hopefully, it would not be the last.

Jevara started to turn his head, so Shalia quickly lowered her gaze.

“Come here, slave,” he ordered. “My thoughts are troubled, and I calm down faster with my cock in your mouth.”

## CHAPTER 4



Cara power-walked through the formal gardens behind her parents' massive house. A security drone shadowed her every move. She'd been allowed to roam the estate since returning from the Citadel, but the drone made it clear that Lezod and Grinnel didn't trust her. That was fine. She didn't trust them either.

The orderly paths and fragrant bushes had fascinated Cara the first time she'd seen them. Now she wanted to rip the plants from the ground and destroy the symmetry of the geometric design. Her blood surged and her heart thudded. She felt restless and angry, and she wasn't sure why.

Well, that wasn't true. She was furious with her parents for taking her to the Citadel knowing full well what would happen to her. She resented her grandmother and her Earth mother for forcing her to live a lie. And the more she learned about Altorian customs, the more convinced she was that she needed to escape, and not just this estate but the entire planet. All of those feelings were understandable. But she had also snapped at the staff and argued with anyone who dared to speak to her. Taking out her frustrations on others wasn't Cara's usual habit. Something was wrong, something serious and beyond her control.

She reached the end of the path and the high stone wall encircling the garden. Trapped. She was trapped by Altorian rules, trapped by her own physiology. Tov and Merrik had triggered something inside her. She didn't know exactly what they'd done or if it had been intentionally, but she couldn't

relax, couldn't sleep. Her body ached and all she could think about was sex. No, that wasn't accurate. All she could think about was sex with Merrik and Tov.

It had been six days since the assessment and each night she dreamed about them. The images grew more detailed and graphic. She touched herself while she fantasized about them, but that only made the dreams more erotic. She'd read reports about females losing control of their awakening power and harming themselves and others. She also read of females going insane when they ignored the warning signs.

Not willing to risk either outcome, Cara reluctantly left the garden and went looking for Grinnel. After Lezod left for work each day, Grinnel enjoyed a leisurely cup of tea in the morning room. Cara had witnessed the routine for the past six days, but she was still too angry to participate.

She stepped into the doorway, but didn't enter. The room was bathed in sunlight. It was cozy and inviting. Cara might have enjoyed spending time there—if Grinnel went somewhere else. “May I speak with you?”

“Of course, dear.” She deactivated the holo-display in front of her with a wave of her hand and set her teacup aside. “What can I do for you?”

Desperately searching for the least humiliating way to explain this, Cara finally said, “I have not felt well since leaving the Citadel. I think some sort of connection was formed between me and team three.”

“Are you having sexual dreams?”

Cara nodded. “Every night.”

“Is the hunger continuous or does it wax and wane?”

Crossing her arms, she looked anywhere but at Grinnel. “It isn't quite continuous, but it's getting there fast.”

“I was afraid this would happen. Your attraction to team three was obvious. Your father is still resisting the idea, but it might already be too late.”

“What are my options?” She dragged her gaze back to Grinnel, feeling slightly less vulnerable. “Will you let me contact them?”

“I will make the arrangements. Try to distract yourself. See if you can find a way of keeping your mind occupied.”

Cara nodded again and started to leave, then she added, “Please hurry. I probably should have told you sooner. I am... really struggling.”

“I understand.”

Turning toward the doorway, Cara forced herself to think through the sexual urgency. “Can they get me pregnant?”

“Our species must be bonded to create offspring. You were given medi-bots as well as the nano-translator before we took you to the Citadel, so diseases are not a danger either. Just relax and let them guide you through this. Everything will be fine.”

Cara prowled the house like a caged animal. She couldn't sit still, couldn't stop moving. Her skin felt electrified and her pulse raced. Waves of heat cascaded through her, pooling between her thighs. Her breasts ached and her core clenched, the emptiness unbearable. Time passed in a blur. She wasn't sure if it was hours or just a few minutes later, but she heard the angry rumble of a male voice or voices on the main floor. She crept down the front stairs, trying to figure out if the disruption involved her or if Grinnel and Lezod were arguing.

“No one would agree to this.” Tov's tone sounded more like a snarl. “The stipulations are insulting.”

“If you refuse, I will allow Chancellor Ephrod to claim her,” Lezod snapped, his voice just as hostile as Tov's had been. “The choice is yours.”

“Ephrod already refused you or we would not be here,” Tov shot back.

“Why would Ephrod refuse to claim her?” Merrik sounded confused by the possibility. “She is the prize we all covet.”

She should probably be offended that he thought of her as a prize, but it felt nice to be wanted. Back on Earth she barely drew the notice of young, successful men. Now some of the most powerful males on Altor were fighting over her. Cara reached the main floor and hurried toward the library where the conversation was taking place.

“My guess would be that Ephrod wants to make sure that she survives her awakening with her mind and power intact before he commits to the union.”

Pausing to one side of the doorway, Cara pressed her back against the wall. Judging by Ephrod’s behavior during the assessment, Tov was probably right. If she was damaged by her awakening, she would be no use to the arrogant chancellor. Still, the concern hung over her like a storm cloud. Could she really lose her mind if someone didn’t stabilize her power? And what exactly did that mean? It was pretty obvious that they would need to fuck her, but what else would it take to bring this hunger back under control?

As if hearing her silent question, Merrik said, “Awakening a female is intense and *intimate*, and you know how much stronger she will feel once her power is unleashed. It is highly unlikely that she will tolerate the touch of anyone else once we have done as you ask.”

“That is a chance I am willing to take,” Lezod said. “Deescalate this crisis and you will be allowed to court her. Refuse and you will never see her again.”

“There is only one reason for your stipulation.” Tov was no longer yelling, but his brittle tone was even more disheartening. Was there nothing about this that appealed to him? He had certainly seemed eager enough at the Citadel. “You won’t let us claim her because you intend to give her to Ephrod after we stabilize her power.”

“That would be my preference. I will not pretend otherwise. However, my mate has helped me see the value you and Merrik would bring to the table. I am willing to give the possibility more consideration.”

Value and benefits; Lezod sounded as if he was discussing a business venture, not a lifelong relationship. Would he be this cavalier if he had known her since birth? Would her happiness mean nothing to him? Tears stung her eyes and she pressed her hand over her heart, aching for something she had never really known. Cara had never gone hungry. She had been provided for and protected, but her primary caregiver was her middle-aged grandmother. Iris did the best she could, but her daughter was clinically depressed and her granddaughters ran her ragged. Though affectionate, Iris had always seemed overwhelmed.

“We will do it,” Merrik said firmly, snapping Cara’s attention back to the present.

“We will?” Now Tov sounded confused and she felt even more alone. “I want her as much as you do, Merrik, but this deal is ridiculous.”

The first half of his statement soothed the sting of his refusal. He didn’t want to start building a relationship with someone who would only be snatched away. Cara leaned closer to the opening until she could see the males. Tov and Merrik faced Lezod, so all she could see was their backs.

Merrick went on as if Tov had not objected. “We need a minimum of three days with her.”

“Agreed.” Lezod folded his arms over his chest as he focused on Merrik.

“And complete privacy.”

“You may take her to the guest house for the duration,” Lezod offered.

“We will take her to my estate,” Tov countered.

Lezod glared at him. “If you claim her, I will have you arrested.”

“Thirty days, and I want it in writing,” Tov insisted.

“Thirty days?” Lezod shook his head as he crossed to the beverage distributor built in to the adjacent wall. “I agreed to *three*.”



The other two pivoted and the new position allowed Cara to see all of their faces.

“Three days to stabilize her power,” Tov clarified. “Then thirty to court her. That means she belongs to us for thirty-three days without interference from anyone.”

Lezod paused to dispense a drink, but his expression was so hostile when he faced Tov again that Cara expected a refusal. “Why put her through a full courtship knowing you are not my choice?”

Challenge arched Tov’s dark brows. “What choice do we have when you intend to give our mate to another?” When Lezod just stared at him, Tov continued, “Everything will be detailed in the contract or there is no deal.”

Suddenly, Lezod’s eyes widened and his lips pressed into a tight line. “You are hoping that the soul bond will anchor spontaneously.”

Tov responded with a one-shoulder shrug, but a cunning gleam flashed in his eyes. “Spontaneous soul bonds are rare. Most believe they only happen when triads are destined to bond. I am confident that we are. You are betting that we are not. It’s as simple as that.”

Lezod stared past Tov for a long, silent moment. His expression was intense, yet unreadable. Finally, his gaze shifted back to Tov. “And if the link has not formed when the courtship ends? You will relinquish all claims to my daughter?”

His daughter? More like his property. It took more than DNA to be a father.

Tov hesitated. He looked at Merrik and a sly smile lifted the corners of his mouth. “It will not matter, but you may put that stipulation in the contract as well.”

She wasn’t sure why Tov’s compromise hurt, but she felt as if he’d kicked her in the chest. Negotiations and contracts, stipulations and deadlines. Was this all she meant to these people? She knew the answer, had known it since she was taken from Earth. She was a commodity, the worthless housing

for a valuable power. Why was she surprised that they were haggling over her?

She turned and headed back the way she'd come, but someone caught her arm and spun her around. She gasped and looked up into Merrik's burgundy eyes.

"Lurking in doorways?" he teased. "Even on Earth that is considered rude."

"I wasn't sure if I was allowed to participate in the negotiation." She wasn't really angry with him. Merrik was the only one whose defense had never wavered. She was infuriated by the absurd situation.

"The negotiation is nearly over." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and guided her into the library.

"I agree to that as well," Lezod was saying. "I will have the contracts drawn up immediately. You will have them within the hour."

"We will not touch her until the contract is executed, but I would like to depart right now," Tov told him.

Lezod nodded then looked at Cara. "For the next thirty-three days you belong to Tov and Merrik. You would be wise to obey them better than you have obeyed me."

\* \* \*

"Was there anything else?" Tomar, Laidon's older brother, asked impatiently. "The income reports have been wonderful and my afternoon is unusually busy. I don't really have anything to contribute."

Laidon smiled. With a thriving law practice, Tomar was always busy. "These monthly holo-comms were your idea."

Tomar had the decency to cringe. "I had no idea you would be such a competent manager when we launched the joint venture. I thought you would require a lot my guidance."

"I'll take that as a compliment." The joint venture started out as a bar renovation and gradually grew into Feran

Entertainments, a multi-city chain of neighborhood pubs. Each site had its own management team, but Laidon oversaw the entire network, ensuring that everything ran smoothly. And profitably.

Laidon worked from home unless he was doing onsite inspections. His apartment was small, but a home office was a more cost-effective solution than leasing office space. He removed the bed and replaced it with a convertible sofa. A workstation now covered most of one wall and he spent much of the day in the self-adjusting chair that intuitively conformed to his movements.

“I’ll let you and Boslin finish up.” Tomar reached forward then looked at their younger brother. “Let me know when Puritta goes into labor. We are all a little concerned after the last one.”

Puritta and Boslin had been advised not to have more children after ‘the last one,’ but Puritta was determined to give Boslin the son he had dreamed of his entire adult life. Even Boslin was frustrated by her insistency, but she was nearing the end of her term now and there had been no complications. Best of all, the baby was male.

“I will notify everyone,” Boslin promised. “But everything has gone really well so far.”

Tomar acknowledged the promise with a quick smile then closed his end of the connection.

“Does he honestly believe that his schedule is fuller than yours or mine?” Boslin griped. “I would love to have him follow me around for a day or two.”

Laidon chuckled. “He’s a lawyer. What do you expect? They are all filled with self-importance.”

“I’m pretty sure Tomar possessed that trait long before he studied law.”

“I cannot argue with you there.” Laidon yawned and stretched out his back. “Did the shipment I arranged arrive on schedule?”

“As always.”

The shipment Laidon meant had nothing to do with Feran Entertainments, which was why he had waited until Tomar left to bring it up. He never mentioned names or specifics to anyone unless they utilized the virtual social club. However, Boslin had been an active participant in the rebellion almost as long as Laidon. Tomar helped out from time to time, but he preferred indirect involvement. Laidon understood his older brother's concern. If Tomar's reputation was sullied by scandal of any kind, he would quickly lose his prestigious clientele.

"Have you heard from the party girl?" Boslin smirked at the nickname. That was how he had referred to Shalia ever since he met her, so the moniker worked well now. "Has her scheme yielded any results?"

Laidon paused, considering his response. He couldn't relay specific concerns, but he could speak in generalities. "She hasn't accomplished anything significant, and I'm about to yank her out whether she likes it or not. The bastard she is living with has been known to turn mean when he loses interest in his lovers."

All playfulness left Boslin's expression. "Is she in danger?"

"She has been in danger since she moved in with him."

"I know that, but has the danger escalated?"

Boslin was one of the few people Laidon had never lied to, never felt compelled to tell him what he wanted to hear. "I don't know. Her messages are becoming less frequent and less informative. He is wearing her down."

"Did you work out an exit strategy before she—"

Laidon's forearm vibrated indicating an urgent message.

"Do you need to take that?"

Activating his subdermal control pad, Laidon accessed his comm-queue. His most recent message was from Olzoth Bekar. It was the fictitious name used by the palace courier. "It's from the party girl. She must have sensed that we were gossiping about her." He tried to use the jest to ease the building tension but it didn't work. "Give me a few minutes then meet me in the social club."

“Take your time. I need to check on the girls before I fire up Soza.”

Laidon nodded then ended the holo-comm. He opened the message and read it twice before allowing himself to react. Shalia had been convinced that a body slave was the perfect spy. Until this moment, he had been afraid that her sacrifice was in vain. The information he’d just received was thought provoking, but was it valuable?

There were holes in the information, details that needed to be answered before he could decide what needed to be done. He ran several quick searches, filling in a few of the holes. The others would require in-depth research, so the inquiries would have to wait.

Closing out his comm-queue and database access, Laidon relaxed in his chair and triggered the sensory implants linking him to the immersive environments. Soza was auto-selected so his digital self soon appeared inside one of the common areas. This one was a small park, complete with charming fountain and flower-lined walkways. He had selected the park because of its proximity to the private club’s nondescript entrance, but he enjoyed the tranquil environment and frequently lingered long after the other members of the Assembly departed.

The social club’s door only opened for approved members and the interior had been reinforced with multilayer encryption on top of the security features offered by Soza. The extra protection had been inserted into Soza’s programming by a talented hacker who sympathized with, but was not an active participant in the Assembly. The intricate patch would also alert Laidon instantly if anyone attempted to circumvent the augmented privacy shields.

Like the park outside, the club was small and cozy. An automated bar ran along the far wall. A large oblong table dominated the floor space, while small round tables had been scattered in the peripheries. Laidon pulled out one of the chairs, but was too anxious to remain seated.

Boslin arrived a few minutes later. “Was the message helpful or are we planning an extraction for the party girl?”

“How much do you know about power triads?” Laidon had never discussed the subject at length with either of his brothers. Triads had been created by the rich and powerful so the bloodlines carrying the gifts tended to be wealthy. The worker class, his family’s class, was seldom involved.

Boslin shrugged. “I know the basics. Why bring them up now?”

“Many, maybe even most, of the conduits rebelled about fifty years ago. It is known as the Great Upheaval. Some went into hiding. Others simply refused to respond when summoned to the Citadel. Either way, their actions seriously compromised the power triad program for many years.”

Boslin was still looking a bit confused. “I remember the stories, but it happened before we were born.”

Undeterred by his brother’s impatience, Laidon continued, “Twenty years ago it was rumored that there was a group of conduits that fled the planet and took the next generation of conduits with them. Some say it was only a few, perhaps just one family, but most believe that the number is much larger.”

“Again, why should we care about any of this? Power triads have always created more problems than they solved.”

Laidon knew this meeting would be challenging. Boslin had good reason to resent the Citadel. Still, he had skills and connections that would be invaluable in the weeks to come. Besides, Laidon trusted his brother completely and this situation required trust. “Shalia confirmed that the events are real. Three of the runaways were just returned to the Citadel and Jevara is convinced they are all conduits. One has been claimed already, but Jevara is determined to get his hands on the others.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Boslin narrowed his eyes. “How does Jevara expect to accomplish that? The Citadel is a fortress.”

“He has a spy masquerading as a trainee,” Laidon explained. “And not just any spy—Cylex Mora, though he is using the name Bekar.”

“Seriously?” Boslin shook his head as he expelled a ragged sigh. They both knew Cylex well, had crossed paths with him long before the rebellion. Cylex had been Jevara’s primary henchman for more than a decade. He was ruthless and shrewd, as adept at assassination as investigation. “Cylex is a wily bastard, but no one fakes their way into the Citadel. He must have legitimate abilities.”

“The only thing that kept Cylex from being accepted right out of the academy was the planet of his birth. If he had been Altorian or even Pyronese, he would have become part of a triad years ago.”

Boslin paused to absorb that before asking, “How will his abilities help him kidnap the conduits? Surely they are being guarded.”

“According to Citadel gossip, the two unclaimed cousins have yet to begin training. However, it is just a matter of time until they do.”

“So Cylex is just waiting for them to show up?” Boslin did not sound convinced. “And then what? How will he kidnap two newly traumatized females?”

“He will probably act as if he is helping them escape. That shouldn’t be too hard to sell. Then he’ll load them on a shuttle and fly away. Getting into the Citadel is nearly impossible, but leaving is relatively simple.”

Boslin lapsed into thoughtful silence, his gaze staring through Laidon.

Ready to move on to strategy, Laidon offered the final revelation. “Shalia also learned of an Altorian traitor. His name is Azar Turin and Jevara referred to him as General.”

Boslin’s shoulders lifted in a vague shrug. “Does that name mean anything to you?”

“No, but it might to Zevon Raydo or Prefect Yites. That is what I need to find out.”

“The other world leaders know nothing about this?” Their gazes locked, Boslin’s expression intense and assessing. “This

information has great potential for Zevon, perhaps even the Altorians. But how do we use this to our advantage?”

“I am not sure yet,” Laidon admitted. “I only know Zevon by reputation. There is no way he would agree to meet with me even if I lied about my identity.”

“What about your friends from the academy? Are you still in touch with any of them?”

Laidon had attended a private military academy on Altor. They were known for academic excellence as well as rigorous military training. He had corresponded with several of his classmates until the emperor provoked the Altorians one too many times. “There is only one in a position to get me a meeting with Zevon.” Tov Nee owned a small fleet of ships. He worked closely with the Citadel but was not governed by it. If anyone could get Laidon a meeting with Zevon it was Tov. “It has been a long time since we’ve spoken. I am not sure how he would react to the request.”

Boslin shrugged. “There is only one way to find out.” After a tense pause, Boslin said, “I know you had yourself tested a few years back. Why didn’t you trust me enough to tell me what you found out?”

Laidon should have known that Boslin would figure it out. Nothing got past him. “I know how much you resent mystics. I didn’t want this to become a point of contention between us.”

Boslin averted his gaze and his jaw flexed before he asked, “That means you qualified as a mystic?”

“I am a controller, level six,” Laidon admitted. He had been dreading this day for three years, yet he was relieved to finally have his secret out in the open.

“How many levels are there?”

“Six.” Boslin’s gaze snapped back to Laidon, but his expression remained blank. Wanting the awkward conversation over, Laidon added, “My primary gift is clairvoyance, which is a common Pyronese gift. However, I scored high as an empath. I suspect our mysterious grandfather is responsible for my abilities.”



Boslin acknowledged the information with a nod. “Are you sure Shalia’s message is the reason you want to jaunt off to the Citadel?”

“I had the opportunity to take that path when I learned the results of my testing. I chose my family.”

“And yet you have not found your mate or even a long-term partner.” Challenge rippled through Boslin’s tone. “You might not have chosen that path, but you clearly long for it.”

He could make excuses, claim to hate mystics as much as Boslin, but they both knew it wasn’t true. Laidon was curious. He had been documenting his dreams for years and wondered how much more accurate his psychic impressions would become with the right training. “Between Feran Entertainments and the Assembly, I haven’t had time for courting.” That was certainly true. “I am not opposed to starting my family. You know I want children as badly as you do.”

Apparently ready to move on, Boslin chuckled. “Lotta has had such a mouth on her lately, I’ll let you have her. She just turned twelve. I thought I had a few years yet before her adolescent attitude took over.”

“If you and Puritta need a break, I can take the girls for a weekend.”

“As soon as you return from the Citadel?” Sarcasm sharpened Boslin’s tone but his smile finally reached his eyes.

“That will only take a few days,” Laidon told him. “I will try to take the girls next weekend.”

“Puritta and I will be happy to send them your way.”

\* \* \*

Cara’s assessing gaze swept the three rooms beyond the soaring foyer in which she stood. A mixture of frustration and curiosity churned within her belly. Tov and Merrik had barely spoken to her in the shuttle. They were not allowed to touch her until the contract was signed and it had yet to arrive. The

restless need that had churned within her for the past week was banked at the moment, present yet easily controlled. So she let the unfamiliar surroundings distract her, hoping to postpone the inevitable for as long as possible. To her right was a library/den complete with inset bookshelves and a fireplace. On her left was a dining room. The massive table could easily seat twelve. The room straight ahead was harder to define. There were casual seating areas, yet there was also a table and chairs.

Tov had insisted on taking her to his estate, so it stood to reason that this house belonged to him. The building was large, each room spacious, but it was not as grandiose as her parents' house. The floors were level and smooth, but exposed beams and rustic timbers made a very different statement than the lavish elegance her parents preferred.

"Have a seat," Tov said as he moved into the main living space.

"Would you like something to eat or drink?" Merrik took a few steps forward then paused, waiting for her answer.

"Is it too early for wine?" Tension had been knotting inside her ever since they left her parents' house. She could really use a little help calming down.

The question clearly confused him. "On Earth there are time limits on wine?"

His easy manner allowed her to relax a little so she moved deeper into the house. "In the country where I lived most didn't drink alcohol until after the work day."

"Many Altorians do not work during the day," Tov commented. "Such limitations make no sense here."

Deciding against a lengthy discussion on the social habits of humans, Cara simply nodded.

Merrik printed a glass of pink wine and handed it to her. His handsome face and muscular body made the hunger inside her surge, so she avoided looking at him as she accepted the wine. It was the same, or at least similar, to the one she had been served at the Citadel. She had enjoyed the taste then and she

liked it now. Besides, it gave her something to do with her hands.

Tov gave her a moment to savor the wine, then asked, “Do you understand what is about to happen?”

“Not exactly. I know it involves sex, but no one has explained the details.”

A muffled buzz interrupted Tov’s answer. He pushed up his sleeve and triggered a small holographic grid that emanated from the inside of his forearm. He read through some sort of document, told the program to input his facial scan, then closed the function with a sweep of his fingers.

Merrik went through the same series of motions then smiled at her. “It’s official, sweetheart. You belong to us for the next thirty days.”

“Thirty-three,” Tov corrected as he stalked toward her.

She stood her ground, refusing to cower like a frightened virgin. “You were going to explain what’s about to happen.”

“I have reconsidered.” He took the wineglass from her hand and passed it to Merrik. “I think it is best if we just show you.”

Her mouth dried out and her heart began to thud wildly in her chest. She wasn’t afraid, not really. But she was anxious and unsure. “I’m not ready for this. I need—”

“We know exactly what you need and will ensure that you get it.”

A wall was suddenly at her back though she couldn’t remember retreating. Tov towered over her, stern and imposing. His beard drew her attention to his lips, which were pressed into a stubborn line. She glanced up and his penetrating blue gaze seemed to pin her in place.

Unnerved by the power in his stare, she instinctively lowered her eyes. “I need time to accept this. Can we please slow down?”

He cupped her chin and tilted her head back until she looked at him again. “Are you honestly afraid of me? It did not seem so during the assessment.”

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. Tov was not as handsome as Merrik, but there was no denying his appeal. His sharp features made his look angry most of the time, but his incandescent eyes made her tingle and ache. “It’s not sex that frightens me. I’m afraid of the unknown, of mind links and elemental powers.”

“You must face your fears head-on. That is the only way to combat such uncertainty. Now get undressed. Further delays will increase your anxiety and make your need even more demanding.”

Her forehead creased as her brows drew together. “Just like that? Get naked and spread your thighs?”

“You will be spreading your thighs for Merrik,” Tov told her with a wicked smile. “My cock is going in your mouth.”

Her jaw dropped and a soft gasp escaped her parted lips. He couldn’t be serious. He expected her to get naked right here in the living room and let them fuck her at both ends?

“You’re disgusting,” she sneered and tried to shove past him. Tov caught her wrist and drew her away from the wall. Awareness arced between them, making her skin tingle and her breathing hitch. She glanced at Merrik as Tov dragged her to the center of the room. Merrik watched them closely, but made no move to interfere. A hint of amusement gleamed in his dark red eyes.

“Rule number one,” Tov began as they reached the sofa. “You will obey us without question or hesitation.”

“Like hell I will,” she objected, dragging her gaze back to Tov. “I will never agree to blind obedience. I don’t care how badly I need sex.”

A challenging smile shaped his mouth. “You want me to fuck you? I thought I was disgusting.” He released her arm as he waited for her to react.

She just glared at him and tugged against his hold on her wrist.

“You do not need to agree with these rules. You just need to be aware of them,” Tov continued as if her objection had not happened. “You will not attempt to escape this compound and

you will not intentionally endanger yourself. The punishment for either of those infractions will be severe, so do not test me on them.”

Why would she intentionally endanger herself? As for running away, where the hell would she go? The only people she knew on this Godforsaken planet were either in as much trouble as she was or part of the problem.

“System, decrease shading by seventy-five percent. I want to see you clearly.”

She didn’t understand Tov’s order until the tinting on the floor-to-ceiling windows decreased allowing her to see outside. Beyond the windows she could see a railed deck and a large body of water. Late evening sunlight shimmered off the vivid turquoise surface and even the cresting waves had a distinct green cast to them. It was beautiful and yet so... alien that it made her homesick.

After giving her a moment to appreciate the view, Tov continued, “You will begin your training without rights or privileges. However, we will give you plenty of opportunity to earn both.”

She’d heard a similar lecture from her father and reacted with anger and pride. All her defiance had earned was isolation and boredom. Logic urged her to try a different strategy now. Tov and Merrik knew more about her physiology than she did. It was simple self-preservation to obey. Within reason, of course.

Unsure what he expected her to do, she nodded.

“The proper response is, ‘yes, Master.’”

She tensed all over again. He had warned her during the assessment that he liked being called Master. “I’m only yours temporarily. May I please call you Sir instead?”

“You know the answer already. Why are you bothering to ask? I expect you to call me Master. And Merrik will be addressed as Commander.”

“Of course, *Master*.”

“Repeat the phrase without sarcasm this time,” he directed. “In fact, undress and kneel before us. It will put you in the proper frame of mind.”

Her hands closed into fists and her teeth clenched. She took several deep breaths and then looked into his eyes. “My parents gave you the right to fuck me, not treat me like a slave.”

“You were raised on Earth, so I will explain this once and only once. If you defy me after you understand Altorian expectations, you will be punished for your misbehavior. Do you understand what I have just told you?”

“Obey or else. Yeah, I get it.”

“The proper response is ‘yes, Master’ or ‘I understand, Master.’ Respond appropriately right now or I will consider it your first infraction.”

He was serious. The realization shocked her.

*It’s just a word, her inner voice chimed in. All this proves is that he’s an insecure bully. Call him whatever he likes.* “Yes, Master.”

“Merrik is our source. He is the well of energy that fuels our triad,” Tov told her. “You are the path, the channel through which the energy flows. And I am the controller. I hold it all together and keep you from being consumed by the energy. I cannot protect you if you resist me. You must submit. And I don’t just mean your body. Your will must surrender to mine. Do you understand?”

“Submission requires trust, and I don’t trust you,” she countered stubbornly, but already the hunger was starting to build. Her breasts felt heavy and her core clenched, anticipating the sorts of pleasure she had been imagining for the past few days.

“Once our minds are linked, you will understand that there are valid reasons for these rules. Until then, you will obey because I have a contract giving me the right to fuck you.”

*“I didn’t sign the contract. I didn’t agree to any of this.”* She wasn’t sure why she continued to argue. She wanted to have

sex with them, had thought of little else since leaving the Citadel. Still, the need to challenge him was just as real as the ache building between her thighs.

“The conversation is over. Undress and get on your knees.”

This was going to happen. That much had been obvious since she boarded their shuttle. Still, she saw no reason to give in without a fight. “I have no desire to be your plaything.”

“Your body vehemently disagrees,” Tov told her. “This combativeness is part of your awakening. Your instincts are urging you to challenge your potential mates. You want to make sure we are strong enough to protect you. And I must prove that I am strong enough to control you or I am not a worthy mate.”

Not caring that it proved his point, she continued to provoke him. “Anything you want from me you’ll have to take.”

“I have no problem with that.”

He lunged for her so suddenly that Cara cried out. With one vicious yank, Tov ripped her dress down the front. Her breasts swayed and her nipples tightened, more than ready for his fingers or his mouth. Merrik moved up behind her and tugged the ruined dress down her arms. She twisted and hit at both males to little effect. Merrik pulled off her shoes and then held her firmly while Tov rid her of her panties. Within moments she stood between them naked and incensed.

“Disobedience will be punished.” Tov boldly ran his hands over her squirming body, squeezing her breasts and pinching her nipples. “Disrespect will be punished.”

Despite her anger, his casual touches aroused her. Still, she wasn’t ready to give in. “Fuck you,” she sneered as he kicked her legs apart.

He gave her mound one warning slap.

She gasped and tried to twist away, but Merrik held her firmly.

Tov cupped her mound, making his claim on her body unmistakable. “Lies will be punished. Profanity will be

punished. Betraying either of us will earn an even harsher punishment.”

Carnal need was quickly eroding her indignation. She wanted their hands on her, needed them to hold her down as their cocks rammed into her aching pussy. “I might call you Master, but I am not your slave.”

“I agree.” His middle finger pushed between her folds and teased the opening to her body.

She trembled helplessly, wanting to resist, to prove that her will was just as strong as his, but she needed his touch too badly.

His finger slid up to her clit, rubbing gently and sending shockwaves of sensation all through her abdomen. Then he shifted his hand lower, entering her body for the first time. “You are my mate, Cara. Mine and Merrik’s. This will feel as natural as breathing once you accept who you really are.”

She shook her head as his finger slid in and out. “I don’t want this. I don’t want two mates.”

He slapped her pussy lightly, his flashing gaze revealing his disapproval. “That was a lie. Lies will be punished.”

“Can’t we just have sex?” she cried. “I know that’s what I need, but I don’t want all the rest.”

Tov shook his head as he cupped her chin and guided her gaze to his. “I was hoping we could do this gently, that you would simply yield. But I will break you if you continue to resist this. You are leaving me no choice.”

“Why do I have to make all the changes?” She twisted and tugged until Merrik released her arms. “Why can’t we compromise?”

“You don’t even know who you are.” Merrik placed his hands on her hips and pressed against her back. “You need to be dominated whether you admit it or not. Once your powers are stabilized and you understand what it means to be Altorian, we can talk about what will make you happy as our mate.”



“I haven’t agreed to mate with you.” She threw the argument over her shoulder, angry that Merrik had joined Tov’s side. “I didn’t agree to leave Earth.”

“This is your last warning,” Tov told her sternly. “You know the rules, which means you will be held accountable for your choices. Kneel right now or you will be disciplined.”

She looked into his eyes and said in a cold, clear voice, “Fuck you, asshole.”

Tov’s head dipped as if he were acknowledging her choice. Without a word he stepped past her and sat down on the sofa. Merrik spun her around, then urged her face down over Tov’s legs. It was obvious what they intended, but she didn’t care. Part of her wanted them to take control, to force her to their will rather than coaxing.

She struggled wildly, kicking and twisting. Tov pulled her arms to the small of her back and secured them there with one hand. Then he trapped her thrashing legs in between his. She tried to arch and free herself from his legs, but she was basically immobilized.

His free hand rubbed her upturned bottom, squeezing one cheek and then the other. “I think you want this just as badly as you want our cocks.” Tov spanked her then, smacking each side several times then rubbing to intensify the burn. “Such a good girl. Relax and accept your discipline.”

She clenched her teeth and fought back her cries as his hand fell over and over. Each impact stung and the heat quickly spread but nothing was as humiliating as the wetness that was gathering between her thighs. “Stop! Please, stop.”

“I don’t want to.” His voice rumbled with sensual promise as he delivered a flurry of swats. Then his finger dipped low, teasing her slit without parting her folds. “And you don’t want me to.”

“I don’t want this,” she sobbed in self-denial. Tears spilled from her eyes and her lips trembled. Still, her core seemed to melt and soften, readying itself for their possession.

His next few spansks were much harder. “Lying to yourself is still lying.” He slapped the other side several times, then lifted his leg off hers. “Open your thighs, Cara.”

“No,” she cried, knowing exactly what he’d find.

Merrick moved closer. “If you make me do it for you, there will be a penalty.”

She raised her head and craned her neck trying to see him, but her view was blocked by her own body. “What sort of penalty?”

“Spread your legs or you will find out,” Tov warned.

All of her resistance was counterproductive, but she couldn’t seem to stop. Maybe Tov was right. Some instinct was urging her to test them. She wanted him to prove that they were strong enough to control the situation regardless of the obstacles they might face.

“Let. Me. Up,” she insisted.

“You are not in charge, sweet mate. We are.” Tov spoke, but Merrik grasped her legs and urged them apart.

She tried to snap them back together, but Merrik slapped the inside of her thighs. He only delivered one slap to each side, but the contact was surprisingly painful.

“That hurt!” she yelled.

“You will hold each position until you are given permission to move,” Tov told her, warning clear in his deep tone.

Tov lightly rubbed her hot ass cheeks while Merrik traced her slit with his fingertips.

“So damn soft,” Merrik muttered. “And so very wet.” He slipped two fingers into her core, fucking her leisurely. “Are you still going to deny that being spanked arouses you?”

Why did they have to humiliate her like this? “I can’t control when I get wet. Can you control when you get hard?”

“What do you think about while Tov spansks you?” Merrik persisted. “What does it make you want?”

Damn it. She couldn't answer either of those questions honestly without admitting that she was turned on by the spankings. "I don't want to talk about this."

"That much is obvious." Merrik slipped his wet fingers free of her pussy and moved them up to her other opening. "There are all sorts of pleasures you will be experiencing soon that you will not expect to enjoy." He worked the tip of one finger just inside her rippled hole.

She squirmed. It felt wrong, slightly uncomfortable, but mostly humiliating. "Is this my penalty?"

He pushed his finger deeper as he said, "This is part of it."

She held still and tried to relax. Clenching her muscles wouldn't keep him out. It would just make it more uncomfortable for her.

"Your body belongs to us now." Tov released her arms, but placed his hand in the center of her back ensuring that she remain in position. "We will enjoy you in whatever way we choose because it is our right as your mates."

"You are not my mates yet," she pointed out, trying desperately to ignore the enticing slide of Merrik's finger.

"We will be." In and out, in and out, Merrik filled her ass while making her pussy ache for fullness.

"Open." Tov moved his hand in front of her face.

Reluctantly, Cara parted her lips and caressed his fingers with her tongue. The more demanding their orders became, the easier she found it to obey them. She closed her lips around Tov's fingers as he pushed them into her mouth. He tasted faintly of her. The realization sent a rush of arousal washing over her. He slid in and out, mirroring the rhythm of Merrick's finger.

It was so strange to simply lie across Tov's lap and let her mates play with her body. She remained as they had positioned her, legs open wide, mouth softly giving.

"Such a good girl," Tov praised.

Using both hands now, Merrik covered her clit with his fingertips and rubbed in firm circles. His other hand finger-fucked her bottom, thrusting into the virgin hole over and over.

“Come for us, mate,” Tov ordered. “Come right now.”

Cara had never come on demand before, but rippling tension passed through her core and her clit tingled beneath Merrik’s thumb. Surprised and a little afraid to realize how completely they controlled her, Cara cried out around Tov’s fingers. Sharp sparks of sensation burst inside her pussy and her bottom rhythmically tightened around Merrick’s fingers.

“Very nice.” Tov released her mouth while Merrik withdrew from her bottom.

But Merrik wasn’t quite finished with her. She felt something warm and slick slide into her bottom crack and then Merrik pushed against her bottom hole with some sort of toy. She couldn’t see what it was, but the tip was rounded and the shaft spread her ring wider as Merrik pushed it inside.

“What is that?”

“A training device not unlike the human butt plug,” Tov told her. “It will make it less painful for you to take our cocks.”

“You really mean to fuck me there?”

“I enjoy ass-fucking,” he said without shame. “Most controllers do.”

Merrick slid the trainer in and out several times before her body tightened around the base. “Do not expel it or we will make you take a much larger one.”

“Yes, Commander,” she whispered. Embarrassed and confused by her body’s ready acceptance of their domination, she pushed off Tov’s lap and then scrambled to her feet. The trainer felt strange. She glanced toward the stairs. Were the bedrooms on the second level? Being played with in the living room made her feel even more objectified.

She wasn’t sure if Merrik heard her thoughts or simply read her expression, but he took her by the hand and led her down the hallway. Each step she took shifted the butt plug, making

her restless. They passed a massive kitchen and then entered a bedroom with an adjoining bathroom. It didn't seem large enough to be the owner's suite. More like comfortable accommodations for guests.

“Get on the bed on your back,” Tov directed, his stern tone making it obvious that he expected to be obeyed.

## CHAPTER 5



So anxious she could barely breathe, Cara moved to the large bed and carefully sat down. Her bottom was tender from the spanking and the pressure on the trainer increased the fullness inside her. She pressed her legs together and started to cover her breasts but Tov shook his head in silent warning.

This room was too nice, too welcoming for what was about to happen. Her complete domination would make more sense in a medieval dungeon. Rather than easing the tension coiling inside her, it brought tears to her eyes.

“Lay back, legs wide open, ass right at the edge,” Tov continued.

Lovely. Stirrups and an exam table wouldn't have been any more humiliating. Cara used anger to strengthen her resolve. She lay back and drew up her knees, resting her heels on the edge of the mattress. They'd already seen her entire body. Hell, at the Citadel they touched and tasted her. It was much too late for modesty.

Tov moved up to the bed and swatted her hip. “I said open your legs.”

Drawing pride around her like armor, she glared at him as she opened her thighs. Her heels slid off the bed and her legs started to lower. Tov caught the backs of her knees and pushed her legs nearly to her chest, then he spread her legs open far enough to make the tendons protest. Without a word, he bent and traced her slit with his tongue.

A low groan escaped Cara's throat as Tov explored her pussy with his mouth. She'd expected him to open his pants and get right to business. Instead, he licked and sucked, teasing her clit and tasting her inside and out. Despite her recent orgasm, she felt another building, ready to explode. Instinctively, she pushed her fingers into his hair.

He shook his head until she lifted her hands.

"Arms over your head," he ordered, his lips still touching her slick folds.

Why couldn't she touch him? The order annoyed her, but she obeyed.

Tov pushed two of his long fingers into her core and sucked hard on her clit.

She gasped and bucked, unsure if she wanted to escape the forceful stimulation or surrender to the intensity. Tov didn't give her a choice. His fingers stabbed into her slick core while his lips drew persistently on her swollen clit. Soon she cried out each time his lips released and her hips rocked counterpoint to his fingers.

Her orgasm started to crest. The swell of sensation was ripe with promise. Tov released her clit and withdrew his fingers. "Your pleasure belongs to us now. You come when we allow it and never without permission." His gaze locked with hers as he reached down and rotated the butt plug, then drew it out of her clingy back passage.

Cara's sigh of relief was premature because he pushed it back in a moment later. He slowly fucked her with the trainer for a few moments then handed it to Merrick and took a different one from Merrick's other hand. It felt slick and cool as Tov positioned the trainer against her bottom. She closed her eyes as he started to insert it, easily guessing the reason for the switch. This one was bigger than the other.

Her bottom opened around the new toy, stretching slowly until she felt intensely invaded. The lubricant helped, but it was still uncomfortable. Tov slid it slowly in and out, his smoldering gaze fixated on her ravaged bottom. Then he bent down and

sucked on her clit. Soon the pull of his lips combined with the tantalizing discomfort of the toy and her senses burst into flame. Her nipples tightened and her clit pulsed.

“Please, please, may I come?” She lifted her hips, beyond embarrassment or shame.

Tov released her clit and looked into her eyes as he pushed the trainer deep into her bottom. “Not yet. You must learn not to be so greedy. Let the intensity build.” He straightened and stepped back.

She closed her eyes with a whimper and lowered her legs. His condescending tone pissed her off and she was desperate to recapture the sensations rapidly fading within her. Someone stepped up to the bed and moved her legs apart again. Opening her eyes, she found Merrik standing where Tov had been a moment before.

Instead of using verbal commands, Merrik simply draped her legs over his arms and pulled her even closer to the edge of the bed. Her butt was half on and half off the mattress, but he was supporting her legs. His burgundy gaze bore into hers as he found her entrance with the tip of his cock.

This was why she was here, what they all knew she needed, but a part of her still resisted reality. She’d never had casual sex, never indulged in a one-night stand. She’d known each of her lovers well and cared about them deeply.

*Then why did the relationships end?* her bitchy inner voice mocked. *These males have what you need. Stop whining and enjoy it.*

Merrik drove into her with slow yet steady pressure. Her core opened, then stretched. Her eyes widened and she gasped. “Oh, God,” she gasped, alarmed by his intrusive size.

“Relax, doll. Your body was made for this.” His hands shifted to her ass as he forced her to take another inch or two.

Her pussy ached, never having been stretched so wide. Deeper and deeper he pushed until his pelvis was flush against hers.

“See. A perfect fit.”



He tried to pull back, but she cried out sharply. Fear and discomfort had dried out her passage, locking their bodies together.

“Bad girl,” Tov growled. “You should be wet and ready for fucking at all times.”

Merrick slipped his hand between their bodies and covered her clit with his thumb. “Her training has barely begun. I think a little patience is in order.”

Tov said nothing but he moved closer to the bed and caressed her breasts. He toyed with her nipples, pinching and pulling on the sensitive tips until they became tightly beaded points, then he bent over her and sucked on one side and then the other. All the while, Merrik rubbed her clit.

Concentrating on the sensations, Cara held still and let the pleasure rise. Merrik still felt huge inside her, but the sting was easing. Tov kissed his way up her neck and claimed her mouth. His lips were warm and the taste of her pussy still clung to his tongue. Arousal pulsed closer to the surface with each moment that passed. Their hands roamed everywhere, squeezing her ass and cupping her breasts and gradually her body grew slick again.

Merrick drew out slowly, still rubbing her clit. Tov released her mouth and straightened. He was no longer touching her, but his gaze moved boldly over her entire body. Was he imagining himself between her thighs or did he find enjoyment in watching another male fuck her?

“Eyes on me,” Merrik cautioned.

She shifted her gaze to his face and re-centered her focus. It was Merrik’s turn and he wanted her attention. That seemed no more than fair.

“Wrap your legs around my waist. I need my hands.”

She hooked her heels at the small of his back as he arched over her body.

His cock was still deep inside her, but he wasn’t moving any longer. “I am going to enter your mind. There will be a few moments of pain, but try not to fight me.”

It was the only warning she got. His hips started rocking and his mouth covered hers as his energy thrust into her mind. Searing pain burst inside her, making her brain buzz as fire shot down her spine. Instinctively, she started to struggle, but he grasped her head and held her steady as his energy pushed deeper. It was like being fucked for the first time. He was forcing her to take something that didn't quite fit inside her. The stabbing heat throbbed for a few moments longer and then awareness overtook the pain.

Oceans of golden energy, largely untapped, spread before her. The shimmering liquid flowed around her until she was completely surrounded, engulfed. Why was Merrik showing her this image? She wasn't sure what he wanted her to know. Then her skin began to tingle and her muscles twitched. The energy sank through her pores, gradually saturating every cell in her body. Merrik wasn't showing her the ocean. He *was* the ocean. She was seeing the source that would fuel their triad.

*Don't be afraid, Merrik said. I am going to release your power. It will feel very strange until you understand what you are feeling.*

For a few moments he just fucked her, his mouth sealed over hers. Then another sharp pain burst inside her mind. This one felt different, not intrusive. It felt expansive, like a balloon rapidly inflating. She snapped her head to the side and sucked in air as the sensations became overwhelming. Energy built, stretching the boundaries of reality. She felt consumed, terrified, and yet exhilarated. It was easy to understand why those without assistance could literally go insane.

Merrick thrust fast and hard, his fingers digging into her hips. "Don't fight it, love. Let it take you. Resisting just prolongs the pain."

It didn't really hurt anymore, it just felt—fire exploded inside her mind, scalding surges of burning intensity. She screamed, tossing her head from side to side.

Merrick pounded into her, hard, deep thrusts that jarred her entire body. She thrashed, hitting out blindly and kicking weakly. He ignored her struggles and claimed her pussy with

his rock-hard cock. She arched violently, her back leaving the bed. He lifted her hips, thrusting even faster. Finally, he came, expelling a sound part growl, part groan. His cum felt hot and plentiful as it jetted inside her.

She went limp, her shoulders on the bed, hips suspended in his grasp. He carefully lowered her to the bed and separated their bodies. His seed dribbled out, likely making a wet spot on the bedding. She was too overwhelmed to be embarrassed. The entire universe was one pulsing blaze.

“What did you do to me?” She grasped her head, her entire body shaking.

Tov took Merrik’s place but quickly flipped her onto her belly. He dragged her toward him until her feet dropped to the floor.

“Wait,” she cried as he kicked her legs apart. “Something is wrong with me. My brain is on fire!”

“Merrick released your power. Now, I will help you control it.”

Cara thrashed and reared off the bed, unable to hold still. Tov caught her wrists and pinned them to the bed, pulling her upper body down in the process. Then she felt his cock drive into her pussy. There was no pain this time thanks to Merrick, but Tov still felt huge.

“Be still.” He held her arms as his hips started pumping, filling her over and over. “To control the burning, I must control you. Do you understand?”

“Fine. Whatever. Just make it stop.” Desperation and fear made her words sharper than she’d intended. What if he failed? Would she go insane? Would this fire consume her? Would it consume them both?

With the tip of his cock still buried in her pussy, he slowly withdrew the butt plug.

Trepidation dropped into her stomach and she fisted the bedding. “I don’t want you to do that.”

“Not yet, but you will.”

He pulled out of her wet core and positioned himself against her other opening.

“Please, not there.”

He ignored her protests because they both knew this was what she needed. The simple fact sent arousal cascading through her body. Her pussy fluttered and her clit tingled, but his attention was focused elsewhere. His rounded tip forced her ring open with gradual insistency. She cried out as the stinging heat echoed the burning in her mind.

“You’ll never fit,” she cried, but Tov kept right on pushing. “It really hurts.” And it did, but pleasure threaded through the pain, dark, decadent pleasure.

“You’re clenching. Relax and the pain will subside.”

A harsh sob shook her shoulders and she pressed her face against the bed. What if she didn’t want the pain to subside? He drove inward ruthlessly, giving her no choice but surrender. He took what he wanted, *controlling* her. Another rush of arousal swelled through the pain. Some dark, primal instinct made her lift her hips, taking him even deeper. How could she find anything resembling pleasure in this?

He didn’t stop until his long, thick shaft was lodged deep inside her. Then he wrapped his arms around her, covering her mound with one hand and collaring her throat with the other.

“Relax,” he directed as his fingers covered her clit. “I’ve got you. Let your body go limp.”

Gradually, Cara released the tension in every muscle until she rested heavily against the bed. The hand around her throat was firm without being hurtful. And his other fingers rubbed over and around her clit, drawing reluctant sensations from the overstimulated knot of nerves. As the tension left her body the burning began to ease. At least the burning in her ass. Her mind was still a conflagration of sensations and impressions.

“Good girl,” Tov whispered as he slowly drew his hips back.

She moaned. Without the resistance of her clenching muscles, his cock slid smoothly. He pulled free of her body, waited for her pucker to close, then pushed back in. Over and over he forced her body to yield, to surrender to his will. Each new

entry intensified his claim. He wouldn't be content until he possessed all of her, inside and out.

He paused again with his entire length deep inside her. "Such a good girl," he praised, still rubbing her clit with his fingers. He slid his other hand down to her breasts, squeezing the generous mounds and pinching her nipples. "Stay nice and relaxed. Let your master enjoy your tight little ass."

His words should have upset her. On any other day she would have rebelled, but she was worn down emotionally, tired of being afraid and alone.

He began to fuck her in earnest then, thrusting harder and faster than before. He withdrew his hands from beneath her and slid them down her arms. She wasn't struggling anymore, but he entwined their fingers, anchoring her upper body against the bed. For a long, silent moment he just enjoyed her pliant body, possessing her with slow, deep thrusts.

Then he arched over her, pressing his chest against her back. "This part's a little harder. Try to remain still."

Before she could guess what 'this part' might be, his presence pushed into her mind. He entered with the same steady insistency that he used when he fucked her. She gasped, then moaned as Tov completed the circuit connecting all three of their minds. The physical world blurred as she was pulled into a realm of psychic awareness.

Energy ricocheted across the connection, building speed and intensity. Power surged through her, churning like a volcano about to erupt. Tov wove his energy through the fire consuming her mind. He contained and shaped its destructive power without blocking her access to it. Every cell in her body thrummed with potential, yet the painful burning gradually decreased. It was orderly now, disciplined, under control.

*Better?* His deep voice sounded in her mind.

She felt muddled and her body was completely overwhelmed. There was no way she could answer that question honestly. She went where he led, no longer capable of doing anything

else. The deeper she sank into submission, the more peaceful reality became.

Gradually, the physical world refocused. Without the pain of her unbridled power to distract her, the possessive thrust of his cock felt even more intrusive. He held her down, immobilizing her against the bed as he enjoyed her tightest opening. She sobbed, confused, yet undeniably aroused.

Tov ran his hands over her body, squeezing her breasts and rubbing her back. “You were made for this, sweet mate. Made for us.”

Emotions and sensations inundated her mind, scalding desire and tenderness. She knew she was sensing her mates for the first time, but she couldn’t untangle the signals. Their emotions meshed with hers, triggering a spontaneous orgasm. She cried out in frustration and bliss. Even her pleasure was no longer under her control. Her pussy clenched rhythmically, tightening her back passage around Tov’s surging cock. Tingling heat raced along her nerve endings and bursts of pleasure detonated all over her body.

Tov pumped harder, his need to come blazing across their link. He grasped her hips tightly, his movements growing frantic. Finally, he thrust hard and came with a strangled cry. Each hot spurt of his seed sent a fresh spark of pleasure zinging through Cara. She closed her eyes and let the sensations take her. Tov wrapped his arms around her, his cock still twitching inside her. They floated together, utterly spent, yet replete.

“You are amazing, mate.” Tov kissed the nape of her neck a few moments later then carefully disentangled their bodies.

Overwhelmed and high on endorphins, Cara just lay there limply while they wiped away their combined juices and smeared a cool cream over her sore bottom hole. Merrick scooped her up while Tov pulled down the bedding, and then Merrick placed her on the bed.

“Rest for a while,” Merrick told her. “We will return with food.”

She nodded and curled up on her side. A lump of emotion clogged her throat so she didn't attempt to speak. She held her composure until the door closed behind them and then she burst into tears. They had shredded the last vestiges of her humanity. Being told she was Altorian was one thing. Feeling it for herself made it impossible to deny. Now she understood the change in Flora. Her cousin's power must have been unleashed on the spaceship that first day. She accepted everything so easily because lying to herself was pointless.

Cara indulged in cathartic sobs for a few minutes, but the emotions quickly blew themselves out. There was no escaping this new reality, no going back to her human existence. She wanted to be strong, to broker her new power into the best possible position for herself. The thought seemed nearly as futile as denying who and what she was. First and foremost, she needed to learn how to control the power Merrik and Tov had just unleashed. Until she understood what it meant to be a conduit, all the speculation in the world was a waste of time.

\* \* \*

The next three days passed in a haze of lust and frustration for Cara. Half the time Merrik and Tov treated her like a new girlfriend they were trying to impress, and the other half like a sex slave. They were attentive and accommodating one minute, and the next they ordered her to bend over a table or get on her knees and open her mouth. It was confusing, yet oddly arousing to know that they could demand access to any of her openings at any time.

Tov found reasons to discipline her at least twice a day. Usually it was just a hand spanking, but her temper had earned her a thrashing with a strap last night. And this morning Tov carefully flogged her breasts while Merrik was buried deep in her ass. Tov's ruthless skill had her screaming in pleasure as she came hard around Merrik's cock. With her breasts still hot from the lash, Merrik drew her arms behind her back and bent her forward so she could take Tov into her mouth. Then they fucked her together, filling her full of cum before they all went

down to breakfast. They allowed her to dress, but not to shower.

Now she squirmed on the kitchen chair as she forced herself to eat. She felt restless and needy and that made no sense. They had just finished using her body, possessing her with single-minded determination. How could she possibly want more already? Her bottom cheeks slid against each other, slick with Merrik's seed. *Wessin*, the Altorian equivalent of coffee, had washed the taste of Tov out of her mouth, but her lips felt swollen from the rough thrust of his cock in and out of her mouth.

"Pull up your skirt and shift your chair so I can see your pussy," Tov said as he casually munched on an Altorian pastry.

Did he feel as anxious as she, or had he simply noticed her squirming? Setting down the pastry she'd been munching, she did as he asked.

"Open those legs and scoot to the edge of your chair," Tov directed.

Not understanding her edginess, she gladly obeyed. She slid her hips right to the edge of the chair and then spread her legs wide, offering him an unobstructed view of her sex.

"Touch yourself just long enough to see if you are wet," Merrik joined in. He scooted his chair next to Tov's, which gave him the same view.

She didn't need to touch herself to know she was soaked. She'd been dripping since they fucked her upstairs. Still, Merrik had given her an order, so she reached between her legs and traced her slit. "Yes, I'm very wet."

"And are you still aching despite being fucked a short time ago?" The gleam in Merrik's eyes indicated that he knew the answer.

"Yes, Commander. Really badly." She rolled her hips, rubbing her hands up and down her bare thighs.

"Good." Tov grinned. "Then it is starting to work."



Confused by his reaction, she stilled. “What is starting to work?”

“Once a triad bonds, the female is not satisfied unless cum fills all three of her openings.”

Tov’s words brought her eyes open wide. “Each time we have sex, you both will need to fuck me... everywhere?” Despite the alarm in her tone, desire rushed over her in a long, tingling wave. It was easy to imagine being that needy. She was experiencing the urgency right now.

“No,” Tov smiled, but his smoldering gaze swept down her displayed body. “There are creative ways of assuaging the need. Fingers can gather cum from one hole and move it to another.”

“Or you can lick our cocks clean after we fuck your sweet pussy,” Merrik suggested.

She was really glad he added that last detail. There was no way any cock was going near her mouth after it had been in her ass. “Are you saying we are already bonded? Will this keep my parents from selling me to someone else?”

“The link is not anchored, but it is forming,” Tov told her. “That is the first step.”

All this talk of psychic links and fucking was making the urgency worse. She lifted her hips over and over, helplessly fucking the air. “May I please touch myself? I need to come really badly.”

“You don’t need an orgasm. You need our cum.” Tov pushed the dishes to one side of the table then motioned for her to approach.

Cara hurried to his end of the table, needing one of them buried deep and not afraid to admit it. Tov lifted her to the table and urged her over onto her back. Then he tossed up her skirt and stepped between her legs. She grabbed the backs of her knees and spread herself wide, making more room for him between her thighs.

He entered her roughly, filling her completely with one hard thrust. She cried out and came hard enough to arch her back

clear off the table. Her inner muscles rippled around his thrusting length, momentarily slowing his progress.

Tov chuckled. "I guess this feels good, naughty mate. But you did not have permission to come."

She didn't care and he didn't stop. He fucked her fast and hard until she came again, also without permission. Then he pulled out and Merrik took his place.

"Why did you stop?" she protested. Tov hadn't climaxed. His cock was still hard as he stroked it.

Merrik grasped her hips and thrust harder. "Aren't I doing it well enough?"

"Of course. I just didn't..."

Merrik pulled out and Tov pushed back in.

She licked her lips, hoping they would accept the silent invitation. She liked being filled at both ends, needed to know that she was giving them pleasure. But they remained focused on her pussy and all the stopping and starting was keeping them both rock hard. On and on they pounded into her. She'd lost track of how many times she'd orgasmed while they intentionally denied themselves.

Tov opened her dress and played with her breasts, cruelly twisting her nipples. "The marks are already fading. I need to flog you again."

She whimpered, but her pussy compressed, threatening to erupt in another orgasm.

Merrik laughed. "She likes that idea." He pulled out and Tov filled her, thrusting fast and hard while Merrik sucked on her nipples. They didn't kiss her, didn't touch her clit, and yet she teetered endlessly on the brink of orgasm.

"I'm not going to last much longer," Tov warned.

Merrik released her nipple and moved down her body as Tov's thrusting turned frantic. Tov came a moment later, jetting repeatedly. He quickly pulled out and Merrik pushed in. He thrust twice, then came as well, filling her pussy to overflowing.

Cara cried out sharply as sensations bombarded her nervous system. Tov squeezed her breasts, twisting her nipples, while her cunt tightened around Merrik's length. She covered her face with her hands, shocked at the greedy clasp of her core and the emotions triggered by their seed. It was unlike any orgasm she'd ever felt. It was undeniably pleasurable, yet primal, driven by instinct rather than conscious thought. As the urgency ebbed, she was left feeling peaceful and... complete?

Dazed and slightly sleepy, she lowered her hands from her face and looked at her potential mates. Tov absently stroked her breasts, but his gaze was fixed on her face.

"All better now?" Merrik's warm smile and the possessive concern in his eyes kept the phrase from sounding condescending.

She nodded and pulled her dress closed across her breasts, subtly dislodging Tov's hands. "It will be like that every time from now on?"

"Now that we know that the cravings have started, we'll make sure you get what you need," Tov assured as he helped her sit up.

Cum in all three holes. She shivered. Three weeks ago, the concept would have horrified her. Now it was simply one more change that she had to accept. Her physiology demanded continual saturation. She was a conduit, a centerpiece, the connection between three empowered souls.

Merrick eased out of her body and tucked himself away. Then he extended his hand and helped her down from the table.

Warm seed leaked from her pussy and Cara cringed. She was now slick front and back, well used and reeking of sex. "May I please shower? I'm going to leave wet spots on the furniture if I don't."

"I am not sure I would mind." Tov grinned at her. "Having our scent all over your luscious body makes me happy."

She was well aware of the fact. They always fucked her before they went to sleep and never let her shower until the morning.

“Please.” She was on the verge of tears and needed a few minutes alone to regain her composure.

“Go on, but we will discuss all the orgasms you had without permission when you return.”

“Yes, Master.” She ran down the hall, past the kitchen and into the guest suite, ignoring the slick wetness on her inner thighs. She turned on the water, quickly adjusting the temperature before she stripped off her dress. They liked to shower with her, running their soapy hands all over her body. It was a way of demonstrating their claim. She belonged to them. It was their right to touch her and care for her. It made Cara feel naughty, yet pampered in a way she had never experienced before.

She stepped into the shower and let the water saturate her long hair. Had she only been here three days? It felt like three years or three lifetimes. Unleashing her power left her with even more questions than before. Tov and Merrik patiently answered them, but so much of what they described was conceptual. They promised that everything would make sense once she started her training. Unfortunately, she couldn't be trained until she had been claimed by her mates.

Was she ready to bind the rest of her life to a couple of domineering males? She couldn't imagine being bonded with anyone other than Merrik and Tov. And yet she wasn't sure she could imagine a life spent with them either. Tov could be horribly cruel, and Merrik often seemed distracted. Her mind drifted back to the day they met as she shampooed her hair. They were the only team at the assessment that took her need to see Flora seriously. The others used the rules to dismiss her concern, while Merrik and Tov bent the rules to put her mind at ease. Bending rules seemed to be their specialty.

They all desperately wanted the link to spontaneously anchor so offering her to anyone else would no longer be possible. According to Merrik that was why they fucked her so often and why they wouldn't let her shower after sex. The more of their cum her body absorbed, the stronger the link would become. And now it seemed like she would be getting even

more than before. Each opening in her body would need to be filled before her libido would power down.

She sighed and turned off the water. She felt as if her autonomy were being eroded by her need for sex. She wanted to mean more to her mates than just an eager sex partner. She wanted to laugh with them, dream with them, and work together toward meaningful goals.

Tov and Merrik had been willing to talk with her about every subject she'd brought up so far. Could she trust them with her frustration and uncertainty? Was there anything they could do to reassure her? There was only one way to find out. She printed a new dress, tossed the dirty one into the recycler, and combed out her wet hair. Then she returned to the front of the house.

She found them out on the veranda enjoying the spectacular view. Merrik handed her a fresh mug of *wessin*, his gaze lingering on her face. "If we are one step closer to bonding, I'd like to know more about what my life would be like if we formed a power triad. What do you guys usually do when you aren't courting a potential mate?"

"Tov and I own a small fleet of ships and they are our primary source of income. I own less than twenty percent, so it is really Tov's company."

She hadn't realized it was a mutual endeavor. She thought Merrik was employed by Tov. "How did you two meet?"

"I went to work for Tov decades ago, back when he only had three ships," Merrik told her, but he averted his face when he heard the question.

His reaction was so odd that she couldn't help but ask, "Are you native to Altor?"

His features tensed and his voice grew mechanical. "My past is unpleasant and has no bearing on my life now. You asked about my shared history with Tov. I was there to watch him take three rusted-out relics and turn them into a state-of-the-art fleet."

“He is being modest,” Tov insisted. “I was lucky enough to be born into a family wealthy enough to provide venture capital, but Merrik and I built the fleet together every step of the way.”

There was way more to the story than they were saying, but it was obvious Merrik had no desire to share. “How does the Citadel fit into your shipping empire, or are they completely separate?”

“We are contracted by the Citadel on a mission-by-mission basis,” Tov explained. “If we accept the contract, we provide the ship, supplies, and often the personnel to accomplish the objectives.”

“You can refuse missions?” No wonder they seemed so different from the other teams.

“Can and frequently do.” Merrik looked at her again, the tension gradually easing from his handsome features.

“So, let’s get down to the specifics. What would my life look like if I allowed you to claim me? How would I fit into your world?”

Tov leaned his hip on the railing and crossed his arms over his chest. “We would take you to the Citadel so you could receive basic training from an experienced conduit. After you’ve learned how to manipulate the conduit, we would practice functioning as a team.”

“Once Zevon was comfortable with our level of control, he would send us on our first mission,” Merrik added.

“How often do you guys go on missions?”

Tov shrugged. “There have been times when we won’t hear from Zevon for a couple of months. Other times we will take back-to-back missions that last even longer. The average is about once a week.”

“And the rest of the time?”

Merrik smiled, clearly pleased by her interest. “We run a shipping empire.”

All of that sounded better than she’d expected. “We would live here?”

“Unless you prefer the Citadel,” Tov teased.

“No, here is much nicer.” She paused. She knew nothing about shipping, but she could certainly learn. “Would I be allowed to help you guys? I have to have tasks, goals, accomplishments or I’d go insane.”

“Of course,” Tov assured her. He pushed off the railing and faced her, resting his hands on her shoulders. “Triads share everything. We want you to be an active part of our lives. If you don’t find our business challenging or fulfilling enough, we would support you in whatever you want to do.”

Encouraged by their answers, and Tov’s attitude, she risked the subject she’d been dreading since she decided to talk openly with them. “Submitting sexually is starting to feel natural. However, I’m not sure I can, or that I want to, submit in other areas of my life. I would need our relationship to be cooperative. I want life *partners* unless we’re having sex.”

Tov ran his hands up and down her arms as he gazed deeply into her eyes. “There has been little time for anything but sex during these past few days. This is not how the rest of our lives will be.”

“Your ideas and opinions are important to us,” Merrik insisted. “We want to share our lives with you.”

“There is one other situation when you will need to obey without question,” Tov cautioned.

“During missions?”

He nodded. “While we are on missions, I become your commanding officer. You will need to obey me without hesitation or question.”

“I understand and it makes sense to me. I felt how dangerous the connection is without you there to control it.”

A faint humming made Tov look at the inside of his forearm. “It’s Zevon. He wants to speak with both of us,” he told Merrik. He bent down and brushed Cara’s lips with his. “We’ll be right back.”

They went into the house to speak with their commanding officer—at least he would be when they agreed to whatever mission he proposed. The thought made her smile and she moved to the railing and stared out over the turquoise sea. The late afternoon shadows made the water appear moss green, even less like the oceans on Earth.

She was thankful for the quiet moment to sort through all they had told her. She would have control over most of her life, be able to choose an occupation or responsibilities within their company. The nice thing about their mind link was that she knew they meant what they said. They wanted to share their lives with her, to build a future that would make all three of them happy.

Tov's angry voice snapped her attention toward the house. Was he shouting at Zevon? That was odd. They didn't just work together, they were friends. She couldn't make out his words, but Tov said something else and he still sounded angry.

Curious, and concerned that the development might involve her, she eased open the door and stepped into the dining room. Tov and Merrik stood on the far side of the living room. They had ended the comm with Zevon, but were discussing something in urgent whispers. The tension on their faces warned her that something had gone wrong.

“What's the matter?” She remained at the edge of the space, not wanting to intrude if the crisis was unrelated to her.

Tov glanced at her but didn't speak.

“She is a conduit,” Merrik was saying. “I do not think we can refuse.”

The tension grew palpable as Tov agreed, “Not without starting a war.”

“What's going on?” Cara persisted. “Is this about me?”

Merrik took a couple of steps toward her, his expression tight yet unreadable. “Your parents have sold control of your future to another interested party.”

“You are not in danger,” Tov stressed. “We know the other party and they will not harm you.”



She backed up, shocked and horribly disappointed that they would even consider passing her off on *another interested party*. “Who are they? What do they want with me?”

“We are not allowed to tell you. They want the opportunity to explain it themselves.” Tov did not sound pleased by the stipulation. “Your parents are the ones who sanctioned our courtship. We have no choice but to release you or your new guardians could have us arrested.”

“They are sending a shuttle for you. It will be here within the hour.”

“Just like that?” Her temper began to smolder, burning away the hurt. They had just been talking about the future, about sharing their lives with her. “It was nice fucking you nonstop for the past three days, but enjoy your new masters. There is nothing we can do about this.” She fisted her hands at her sides and glared at them. “Screw you! Screw you both!” Spinning on the ball of her foot, she ran down the hallway heading toward the guest room.

Both males hustled after her. Tov caught her arm and turned her back around. “This is not the end. We have to work through whatever process they select, but we will find a way to claim you.”

“How reassuring,” she sneered, jerking her arm out of his grasp. “I’m not willing to trust my future to some random process. I have no intention of being here when the shuttle arrives. If you aren’t willing to fight for me, I will fight for myself!” Tov and Merrik exchanged bemused glances, which only made Cara angrier. “You’re cowards, fucking cowards. I can’t believe this!”

“We are as frustrated as you are, but there is no reason for your fear,” Merrik told her as she rushed into the bedroom.

Ignoring him, Cara went into the bathroom and brought the utility printer out of hibernation. Closets full of clothing didn’t exist on Altor. A new outfit was printed each morning and the old garments were recycled. That wasn’t going to work while she was on the run, so she quickly navigated through the garments she had worn during her stay at the villa. She

selected them to print, one after the other. Thank God they were on land. Running away wasn't really an option while traveling through space.

"Stop." Tov pulled her hand away from the holo-control before she could launch the queue she'd just created.

She glared up at him and tugged against his hold. His fingers remained inflexible around her wrist. "Let go!"

"Zevon was the messenger, but the message came from Noratu Skore, one of Flora's mates." Tov paused, waiting for the implication to sink in. "Flora and her triad are now your guardians."

Cara stilled. "How did... Why would her mates agree to... I don't understand."

Tov released her hand and stroked the side of her face. "The message was not detailed. Flora wants to explain everything once you arrive."

"Arrive where?" Cara blinked back tears. She wanted to believe this was a good thing, that Flora would allow Cara to make choices regarding her future, to return something resembling control. Even so, she didn't want to leave Tov and Merrik. Her feelings for them were still conflicted, but they were by far the best option she had right now.

"We have told you all we know," Tov insisted. "We were not supposed to tell you anything, so act as if you are learning each fact for the first time."

She had no problem playing along, but why was Tov being so cooperative? He'd been bending or disregarding rules ever since they met. "Does Noratu have authority over you? Why do you feel obligated to abide by his wishes?"

Tov squared his shoulders, looking slightly offended by her questions. "Flora and her mates will decide who claims you. Creating a power struggle with them is counterproductive to our goals."

Merrik moved closer, gathering her hands between his. "We desperately want to bond with you. We are not willing to do anything that could compromise our future together."

Cara smiled. Tov had basically said the same thing, but it sounded much better the way Merrik put it. “All right. I’ll play along for a while, find out what Flora and her mates have in mind. But I will not allow anyone else to court me. I don’t think I could endure that.”

Tov pressed in against her side, wrapping his arm around her waist. “If it looks as if they are going to give other males access to you, we will spirit you away on one of my ships.” He turned her head to the side and claimed her mouth, his lips firm, tongue bold and demanding.

His emotions flowed across their link, saturating Cara’s mind with possessive desire. He didn’t just want her body, he already considered her his mate. The combustible need didn’t surprise her, but the deep longing was so very different from his severe exterior.

“We can sense you just as clearly as you sense us,” he whispered against her parted lips. “Signal us at any time and we will come get you.”

Merrik turned her head back around as soon as Tov released her. “You belong to us.” He kissed her just as passionately though his lips were less forceful, his affection offered freely. “We will not allow anything or anyone to change that simple fact.”

The shuttle arrived a short time later and Cara sat alone in dejected silence. She was looking forward to seeing Flora again, but she hated the uncertainty brought about by the new circumstances. Staring out the window of the shuttle made it easy to pretend she was on a small commuter plane back on Earth. Unfortunately, the unleashed power pulsing inside her mocked her efforts to turn back time. She was not human and pretending otherwise was a waste of time.

The topography of Altor was very different from Earth’s. Rather than large continents and expansive oceans, Altor was made up of long, narrow strips of land. According to Cara’s research, the land masses were called tepios. The bodies of water in between were known as aquinas. Tov’s estate was in a

city on Tepio C and the shuttle was headed to Hanoto, the largest city on Altor, which was situated on Tepio B.

Cara couldn't help compare her parents' house to Tov's and now Narotu's. All three would be considered mansions back on Earth, yet each was very different. Tov's house had a bold, rustic style. Her parents' was all stuffy luxury. Narotu's house was the biggest yet, the neighborhood most impressive. Built entirely of gleaming white stone and oversized windows, this house had sharp geometric lines and flat rooftops. The shuttle set down on a wide semi-circular drive and the pilot escorted Cara to the front door. Cara was taken to the 'morning room' by a middle-aged female with sharp gray eyes and salt-and-pepper hair.

"Make yourself comfortable," the female said. "They will be with you momentarily."

Cara hoped 'they' meant Flora and her mates. Dealing with Tov and Merrik was challenging enough. She would much rather have Flora there too.

Footsteps in the hallway announced her visitors, but Cara tensed when Iris and Raina stepped into the room rather than Flora and her mates. "Where is Flora?" she asked, not bothering to pretend she was glad to see her grandmother.

"It's nice to see you too," Raina muttered.

Cara walked over and hugged her cousin. "I'm glad to see you. I just wish you had chosen a different companion."

"Oh, I didn't choose her," Raina objected. "Iris is our warden until Flora arrives."

"And when will that be?" Iris likely knew the answer, but Cara kept her gaze fixed on Raina.

"Being hateful to me serves no purpose," Iris said angrily. "All I did was try to protect you."

"By forcing us to live a lie?" Cara whipped her head around and glared. "I am twenty-five years old. When did you plan to tell me the truth of who and what I am?"

"Would you have believed me if I told you?" Iris challenged.

There was truth in what she said, but it was also a copout. Iris and Autumn had fled to Earth hoping to protect the younger generation. Keeping the truth from them, however, was inexcusable. If they had been told while Autumn was still alive, she might have been able to train them, give them enough control so that they could have kept their power suppressed indefinitely. All the possibilities were irrelevant because Iris had not trusted them with the truth.

Dismissing Iris with a disdainful look, Cara turned back to Raina. “Where will I be sleeping? I would like to lie down for a bit, hopefully catch my breath before Flora gets here.”

“We’re staying in the guest house. I’ll show you the way.”

## CHAPTER 6



Cara spent the afternoon with Raina. They walked through the gardens and sat by the pool sharing all their frustrations about Altorian rules and the expectations of their families.

“My parents are horrible,” Cara told her cousin, not interested in going into details. “It was obvious from the start that the only interest they had in me was converting me into some form of profit. What about yours?”

Raina’s laugh was harsh and bitter. “Same thing. They sent me to the Citadel to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. If Flora hadn’t seen me and put a stop to it, I would likely be mated right now.”

“It’s a stay of execution, not a pardon,” Cara pointed out. “We are conduits. It doesn’t matter how loudly we argue or how much we object. We will be claimed by two aggressive males and we’ll spend the rest of our lives as part of a power triad.”

Rather than offer her opinion on the subject, Raina asked, “Why are you being so hard on Grandma? None of this is her fault.”

“I disagree. If she had been honest with us once we were old enough to understand, we might have been able to keep the Altorians from finding us.”

“We don’t know that.” Raina shook her head and sighed. “We were taken to Earth to protect us. You’re not being fair to her.”

Cara didn’t want to fight with Raina. She didn’t even want to fight with Iris. She was just hurt and unsure of what the future

held. She sat on the edge of the pool, her feet dangling in the water. Instead of responding to Raina's charge, she asked, "Why do you continue to use the name Raina? You're perpetuating the lie."

"It's the only name I've ever known," Raina pointed out. "Why switch to Cara? You spent over twenty years as Aspen Hays."

Cara shook her head. Her entire life on Earth no longer felt real. She started to tell Raina about Tov and Merrik, but thought better of it. She needed to know exactly what Flora had planned before she revealed that she had formed an attachment with a couple of potential mates. "Who and what I was on Earth has never felt so far away."

Iris exited the house and joined them beside the pool a short time later. Her steps were hesitant, expression cautious. "Flora and her mates just set down in front of the house. You two should put yourselves back together."

Raina, who wore a bathing suit, rushed over to where she had left her clothes and hurriedly dressed.

Cara drew her feet out of the pool and stood up. She still couldn't look at her grandmother without wanting to start a fight so she kept her face averted. She dried off her feet and slipped on her sandals. If casual clothes weren't sufficient, Flora could tell her to change. She was through taking orders from Iris.

"You can't ignore me forever," Iris said as Cara brushed past her.

"I can try."

Raina dashed into the house, clearly excited for the reunion. "Flora!"

Cara followed, unable to hide her reluctance. Flora likely thought she had rescued Cara, but Cara felt as if she had been ripped from the arms of... her mates? Was she ready to let Tov and Merrik claim her? Would she ever be happy if someone else controlled her life?

Flora stood in the entryway flanked by two large Altorian males. One had reddish-gold hair and eyes. According to Iris, his name was Noratu and he was Flora's source. The other male had long dark hair, not unlike Tov's. But unlike Tov, this controller had night-black eyes and was clean-shaven. His name was Draven.

"How did you convince her parents to release her?" Flora asked.

Cara wasn't sure if she meant Raina or her.

Raina threw herself into Flora's arms and hugged her tightly. Flora laughed, then said, "I missed you too."

Cara stayed back until Raina moved out of the way, then she hugged Flora as well. Her eyes were filled with tears, but it had more to do with Tov and Merrik than seeing her cousin again. Quickly reinforcing the role she was supposed to play, Cara pretended to know nothing about what was going on. She was curious to see how Flora would justify buying control of her cousins, and how much control Draven and Noratu would allow. They were Altorian males after all.

"My parents wouldn't tell me anything and Iris is being just as cagey." Cara glared at Iris again for good measure. "Do you know why we're here?"

"Your parents were horrible to you," Raina objected sharply. Raina had always been more willing to go with the flow than Cara. "Would you rather stay with them?"

She hadn't been with her parents. She had been with Tov and Merrik. "That's not the point and you know it."

"Girls, let's try to—"

Incensed that Iris would dare to intrude, Cara snapped, "You lied to me my entire life. I am through listening to you."

"Aspen, I know you're upset, but—"

Overcome by emotions she could no longer conceal, Cara felt a sob building in her throat. "My name is *Cara*. Aspen was a fabrication forced on me by two liars who claimed to love me! I reject your bullshit, and I hate all of you!" She ran down the



hallway and burst out the side door, sprinting toward the guest house.

She threw herself onto her bed and indulged in a good long cry. She ached for Merrik's strong arms and Tov's ruthless passion. She could sense them in the distance, which only made her miss them more. Would Flora allow her to bond with them if Cara told her that's what she wanted? Was it what she wanted? She enjoyed being with them, and not just in bed. But she could not live without control. She had to make decisions and offer opinions that others would honor. The dynamics of a power triad seemed very different from that.

Long minutes later, she heard someone enter the guest house. A soft knock made Cara glance over her shoulder. The door wasn't closed, but Flora was clearly waiting for an invitation. Her mates weren't with her and neither was Iris, so Cara sat up. "How brainwashed are you? Can you get us out of here? I might not belong on Earth anymore, but I want no part of what goes on at the Citadel!" Just thinking about the assessment brought a host of emotions flooding back through Cara. She had never felt so helpless in her life, never been so objectified. Yet each time Tov and Merrik touched her, the circumstances hadn't mattered. She had only wanted to please them, and be pleased by them. "Will you help us escape?"

She hadn't meant to sound so desperate, but the restlessness was rising again. She pushed her sleeves up and rubbed her arms. Hadn't they stabilized these yearnings when they unleashed her power? She stood, then dropped back down on the edge of the bed. She wasn't angry anymore, hadn't really been angry at Flora. She felt anxious and restless and most of all *needy*.

"Have the dreams started yet? Do you feel feverish, especially at night? Are you finding it hard to sleep?"

Cara still didn't know why she was here. Pushing to her feet, Cara started pacing, unable to remain still. Was Flora going to let her decide who she would mate with or if she wanted mates at all? Or was Flora simply another person determined to control her? "It's stress. My parents were abusive. You

wouldn't believe the things they allowed to happen to me. On Earth they would be arrested."

Flora moved closer and Cara noticed Raina lurking in the hallway. Should she go close the door? No, Raina had a right to know what was going on.

"What sort of things?" Flora prompted. "Altorians approach many things differently than humans do, but there are strict laws against abuse."

"I don't want to talk about it." Not until Flora explained what her mates intended to do.

"My mates represent you now. They are your advocates. If you were harmed in any way, they will see that the culprits are punished. Even if those culprits are your parents."

"I... you might not think it's as bad as I do." She looked at Raina warily. "You both seem pretty accepting of all this shit."

"Tell me what happened," Flora coaxed.

Still unbearably restless, Cara crossed her arms then uncrossed them as she leaned back against the wall. "My parents narrowed down my suitors to three teams of two. They showed me pictures and detailed resumes. Then they took me to the Citadel and let all six finalists *examine* me."

She was waiting for Flora's shocked gasp. It never came. Instead she asked, "They undressed you?"

"They didn't need to." Cara couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice. "I was stripped naked by Citadel staff and strapped down to a table designed for these examinations. It was obvious that this sort of horror goes on all the time. Women are treated like breeding stock, and you don't seem concerned about any of it."

Rather than responding to Cara's accusation, Flora said, "I need you to be brutally honest about this. Did you enjoy what was done to you, and not just your body? Did at least part of you respond to being dominated?"

Cara quickly looked away, not ready to admit how deeply she had been affected by the forced submission. "I didn't want to

enjoy it.”

“That’s not the same.”

“I know.” Cara felt her face heat and her core clench. “I was humiliated and angry, utterly helpless, and they made me feel things I didn’t want to feel. So many things.” And that had been the beginning of her sexual metamorphosis. The things Merrik and Tov had done since made the assessment seem tame.

“They aroused you?” Flora asked carefully.

Cara looked at her impatiently. “It was more than that.”

“They turned you on in ways you didn’t expect to find arousing.”

*The voice of experience?* Cara let her expression ask the question.

“Did they spank you?” Raina asked from the doorway, her cheeks deeply flushed. “Oh, my God, did the spanking get you hot? Is that why you’re so freaked out?”

“The physiology of Altorian females makes us naturally submissive,” Flora was quick to point out. “Living on Earth taught us to be—”

“I knew you wouldn’t think this was a big deal. That’s why I didn’t want to tell you.” Cara stalked over to the window and stared out into the gathering twilight. She still hadn’t explained what her mates intended to do. They could still auction her future off to the highest bidder. “You might enjoy being humiliated and having absolutely no control over your body’s responses, but I hated it.” Except when Tov controlled her body and Merrik was making her come so hard she saw stars.

“My mates are now the official representatives for you and Raina.” Flora sounded closer, but didn’t touch Cara or ask her to turn around. “They will assess the potential mates and screen out anyone who is unacceptable. Once they have narrowed down the list, the final choice will be up to you and Raina.”

Cara tensed. If it were just Flora, Cara wouldn't hesitate. But Flora wasn't in control. Her mates were. Could Cara trust her cousin's mates? "How is that any different from what my parents did?"

"Did your parents give you a say in any of it?" Raina asked from the doorway.

Cara blinked as she turned around and tears escaped to trail down her cheeks. She hadn't even realized she was that close to tears. "I don't want to choose my mates," she lied. Until she knew for sure that she could trust Flora's mates, Tov and Merrik would remain her secret. And her safety net. "I hate it here. I hate everything about it."

Flora moved to her side and wrapped her arms around Cara. "I know this is scary and it all seems so wrong, but you won't believe how fast that changes. Your power is stirring whether you want it to or not. Very soon you will need help controlling it."

Flora wasn't entirely wrong. Cara's power was already unbound, but she did need to learn how to control it. "I don't want to live the rest of my life on my knees, taking orders from two domineering males." There was truth in that statement. It was the aspect of being claimed that still had her concerned, even with Tov and Merrik.

"Do I seem subjugated?" Flora challenged. "You're here because my mates want me to be happy and they knew I was really worried about you and Raina. Does that sound like males determined to keep their female on her knees?"

Cara glanced at Raina then turned back to Flora. "I'll think about it."

"There is nothing to think about," Raina objected. "We have one month to decide who we want to bond with. That is the only choice we are being allowed. We both need to buckle down and make the best decision."

If that were true, her decision was easy. "I don't accept that," she said to maintain her role.

Raina threw up her hands. “You have never been rational. I don’t know why Flora expected this to be different. I’m going for a swim.” She spun on the ball of her foot and hurried off down the hallway.

Once Raina was out of sight, Cara moved to the foot of the bed and sat down. “Why did you give in so easily?” She knew the answer. Altorian males were nearly impossible for Altorian females to resist. Or maybe it was just conduits and their compatible males.

“My reasons would not make sense to you right now. Once you’ve decided on your mates, ask me again. I’ll explain the emotional evolution I have been through.”

Cara rolled her eyes. “That’s a copout.”

“I’m going to ask a personal question. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. Did you react more strongly to any of the males? Was one team more interesting than the others?”

Lucky guess. Well, telling her would bring Cara one step closer to full disclosure. “There was an informal reception when we first got to the Citadel. All the finalists were there and I really clicked with one of the teams. But when the examination began, they didn’t try to keep the others from touching me. In fact, the controller was the worst of all of them. It felt like a betrayal.”

“You are hurt and angry, and yet you can’t stop thinking about them?” Flora studied her silently for a moment, then asked, “What are their names?”

“I don’t want to see them again.” She wasn’t going to spill completely until she determined whether or not Flora’s mates could be trusted. “The controller is an arrogant jerk.”

“I just want to ask Draven if he knows them. Draven grew up at the Citadel. He knows everyone.”

Cara hesitated. It might be interesting to get an objective perspective. Her instincts told her she could trust Merrik and Tov, but it would be really nice to have some reinforcement. “The controller’s name is Tovastine Nee. The others called

him Tov. The source was Merrik something. I'm sorry, I don't remember." Flora and her mates could easily figure it out.

"Let me find out more about them. Clearly, there is some sort of connection between you. Let me see if they're worth a second look."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Cara fought back a triumphant smile. "As long as looking is all they do."

Flora just smiled. She crossed to the door, but Cara stopped her before she could leave.

"How long did it take you to choose?"

"I wasn't given a choice," Flora said over her shoulder. "I was claimed moments after the spaceship left Earth."

Cara felt her jaw drop. "Then how can you possibly be so calm, so well adjusted?"

"Call it luck or fate, destiny. All I know is I love my mates with all my heart and feel as if we have been together forever."

Shocked by her cousin's confession, Cara stared at the doorway long after Flora had gone. Was it possible that she had found the same sort of connection? From the very beginning she'd been drawn to Tov and Merrik. Their dossiers intrigued her and their willingness to act when others offered excuses revealed a depth of character she hadn't expected. She didn't want to tip her hand too soon, but one thing was already settled. If she had no choice but to join a power triad, she would be forming that unit with Merrik and Tov.

\* \* \*

Merrick read, then reread, the message Tov just sent to his comm queue. The meaning was obscure, likely some sort of code, and the fictitious name meant nothing to Merrik. "Care to explain?"

Tov's lips curved into an almost-smile. They loitered in the living room of Tov's house. They had spent a lot of time here in the two weeks since their courtship with Cara had been

rudely interrupted. They were waiting for Flora and her mates to accept the bonding contract they had submitted, so they didn't dare leave the planet. They were both restless and irritable. And the only thing that would improve their mood was to be reunited with their mate.

"Ayjetor is the fire-breathing monster from Sarlian mythology that brings about the end of all worlds," Tov reminded.

"I'm aware," Merrik muttered impatiently. "Why is Ayjetor sending you cryptic messages?"

"It is also the codename Laidon Feran used at the academy."

"What does Laidon want after all these years? Have you two even spoken since the war broke out?" Merrik couldn't help feeling leery of the sudden interest. Word of the rescued conduits had spread quickly, especially after Flora's exceptional performance during recent missions. Was it possible that Laidon was attempting to get his hands on Cara or Raina?

"The message doesn't explain," Tov admitted. "It just asks me to meet him at one of the taverns we used to frequent in our youth. It's here on Altor so it would take less than an hour by shuttle."

"He probably wants money," Merrik decided. "The rebellion has suffered several costly setbacks in recent months."

Tov shrugged. "I am not sure I would mind if that is his purpose. Someone needs to overthrow Jevara. Why not Laidon? It has been years since we interacted, but Laidon was impressive when I knew him."

Merrik considered the issue for a moment in silence. The Torretian emperor was a tyrant. No one could argue that point. But was an armed insurrection the answer to such corruption, or would Torret simply exchange one tyrant for another? Tov was a good judge of character. His empathic abilities made it nearly impossible for others to lie to him. Still, Merrik preferred to make up his own mind about trustworthiness.

"Thanks to Noratu, I have no plans for the evening." Merrik sounded more accepting than he felt. Usually if something felt

like a setup, it was. Tov seemed determined to reignite his old friendship, so Merrik would ensure Tov's safety.

"The message doesn't give a specific time." Tov rubbed his chin as he considered their options. "Let's go enjoy a drink or two and see if he shows up."

Merrik nodded. They could use a distraction.

They walked outside and boarded the short-range shuttle. It was small and maneuverable, perfect for urban settings. Merrik was a better pilot, but Tov preferred to remain in control. Not surprising given his basic nature.

The bar was in the heart of Hanoto, the sprawling metropolis on Tepio B. Most considered the city the Altorian capital. As they reached the outskirts, Merrik couldn't help wondering what Cara was doing. Their mind link was still active, but her emotions were banked, present yet muffled. They shared dreams nearly every night, but that wasn't the same as being with her. He missed his mate terribly, and knew Tov did too.

They'd had no choice but to release her—temporarily. Holding a conduit against the will of her parents or guardians was a serious crime. Still, they would not let her go without a fight. Cara assured them that no other males were allowed near her. Flora thought it best if she focused on training for a while. Merrik didn't disagree, but the separation was torture.

As Tov indicated, it did not take long to reach their destination. However, the designated tavern was in a particularly dangerous part of Hanoto. The academy had moved to a new location about three years ago and the neighborhood suffered greatly because of the loss of revenue.

Merrik wasn't sure how to mitigate the danger. "I am not sure we should set down, but I hate to send you in there alone."

Tov shot him an impatient glare. "I can take care of myself."

"I never doubted that you could. I was just concerned that—"

A sleek Torretian fighter nosedived right in front of the shuttle. The displaced air rocked the smaller ship violently.



“What the fuck are they doing?” Tov’s hands flew through the holo-grid as he brought the shuttle back under control.

Merrick activated aft targeting sensors, determined not to be caught unaware again.

The fighter’s second pass was slower but it deployed some sort of cable. The leash shot toward the shuttle then connected with the hull, creating a sickening *thunk*.

Merrick fired twice, demonstrating their intention to defend themselves. The fighter didn’t bother avoiding the pulses. Their shields simply absorbed the energy.

“Why aren’t they firing?” Tov mused. “Why start a fight and not go on the offensive?” He activated the shuttle’s battle shields. The system quickly drained the power stores, so it was only used as a last resort.

The fighter casually towed the shuttle away from the city, drawing it higher into the air.

Tov tried reverse thrusters and sharp course changes, but the fighter didn’t react to any of it.

A portal opened directly in front of the fighter and Merrik looked at Tov. This felt deliberate, intentional. But why would Laidon go to all this trouble? Tov shook his head in disbelief. Before Merrik could ask Tov why the rebel leader would arrange this abduction, the fighter glided into the portal, dragging the shuttle behind like a pet.

“This cannot be random, but who would... Laidon.” Tov answered his own question, coming to the same conclusion as Merrik.

The disorienting surge of hyperspace lasted only a moment and then they emerged in a planet-less void. The fighter released the tether and moved off.

“Where the hell are we?” Tov grumbled under his breath as he urgently worked to determine their position.

Before Merrik could decide on the best course of action, a midsized warship deactivated its refraction shields and hung in space directly in front of them. Merrik quickly adjusted the

magnification on the main viewers so they could see the entire vessel. Not surprisingly, it appeared to be of Torretian origins.

The shuttle's main viewers flickered to life and Laidon's image appeared on the display. The bastard had the audacity to grin. "Sorry about the dramatics, but Jevara has every bounty hunter in the galaxy looking for me."

"That was more than just dramatic and you know it," Merrik snapped. "It was dangerous." The shuttle was not capable of creating a hyperspace portal, so they were trapped here until Laidon took them back.

"If you will hear me out, I will make it worth the aggravation." Laidon accented the promise with an engaging smile. The rebel leader could be ruthless when the need arose, but he had built his following through compelling arguments and charm.

"This is a piss-poor start for a potential alliance," Tov stressed. "You have ten minutes. Use them wisely."

"Why don't you come aboard," Laidon suggested. "Let's have a drink and catch up, then I will explain."

"Nine minutes," Tov corrected.

"Fine." Laidon's chin lifted and he took a deep breath before he started his explanation. "I have a spy in Jevara's household. She has learned several facts that could benefit Zevon. I am willing to barter for the information, but I will not simply give it to him. I need someone who can put us in the same room to begin the process."

"Which is where I come in?" Tov asked, his gaze narrowing.

"Yes." Laidon stood a bit straighter, his shoulders squaring. "I have been trying for over two weeks to get a meeting with Zevon. He won't even agree to a holo-comm. The only way he will take me seriously is if someone he knows and trusts is there to vouch for me."

"I was more inclined to do so before this little stunt," Tov grumbled then went on, "What is your price for this mysterious information?"

“That depends on Zevon. Only he can determine the value of what I have learned. But I am hoping this will be the first of many exchanges. I need allies and so does Zevon. We both know he is surrounded by fools.”

That much was certainly true. Zevon was a battle-tested warrior who was practical to the marrow of his bones. His recent election had shocked everyone. Zevon included. The board of governors, on the other hand, were ideological fools. Politics shaped every decision they made. All they cared about was amassing wealth and maintaining power.

Tov studied Laidon for a long, silent moment. “I have known Zevon for many years, but that does not guarantee that he will agree to meet with you.”

“All you can do is ask,” Laidon said lightly, but determination burned in his green eyes.

“What will you do if he refuses to take the meeting?” Merrik wanted to know.

Laidon sighed, but the intensity of his gaze did not decrease. “I will find another way. I have no choice. This has already taken much longer than I expected.”

Tov shook his head. “You pull something like this with Zevon and you will not live long enough to regret it. Zevon Raydo can be merciless when crossed.”

“Then talk him into meeting with me.” All playfulness fell away. “Every minute my friend is with Jevara, she is risking her life, not to mention her sanity. Jevara has been known to make his toys disappear as soon as he is finished playing with them.”

Tov stilled, his expression growing even grimmer. “You said your spy was in Jevara’s household. She is one of his pleasure givers?”

Laidon nodded and his features tensed. “She is smart and proficient with weapons as well as hand-to-hand defense, but the danger is accelerating. No pleasure giver has managed to hold his interest for long and she has been with him for weeks. Needless to say, I am worried about her.”

“With damn good reason.” Tov shook his head, then released a ragged sigh. “I will talk to Zevon. But even if he refuses, we need to get your friend out of there.”

“We?” Challenge rippled through Laidon’s tone, but he also sounded hopeful.

Tov smirked. “The Citadel prefers frontal assaults. I’ve always found stealthy operations more effective.”

Merrick was glad Tov hadn’t mentioned Cara. Merrik sensed no deception in Laidon, but Merrik wasn’t taking any chances where their mate was concerned.

“I gladly accept your offer, but my information is good,” Laidon persisted. “Convince Zevon to meet with me. He will not be disappointed.”

After another thoughtful pause, Tov nodded. “I will contact you through Ayjetor as soon as I hear back from Zevon. Now put this shuttle back where you found it! If you want to form an alliance with the Citadel, I have work to do.”

\* \* \*

Cara stood back from the ‘firing lane’ in one of the Citadel’s many training rooms. Raina was positioned behind a small barricade attempting to manifest a fireball or energy pulse strong enough to destroy the target at the other end of the lane. It was an exercise Cara had mastered without much effort. Watching her cousin struggle, even after two weeks of intensive training, was making Cara feel horribly guilty.

Flora, Cara, and Raina had only spent two days together when Flora and her mates were given their next mission. Not trusting Iris to supervise Cara and Raina, they were taken to the Citadel so they could begin their training. Cara’s opinion of the Citadel had not changed since the first time she had been here. The facility was old and run down. This was the headquarters for the most powerful mystics in the star system. She had expected something more impressive.

At least their mentor made a better impression than their surroundings. Provost Nadis Korla was personable and skilled. She didn't stand on formality and never bragged about her many accomplishments. Cara liked her immediately. Nadis also seemed familiar, but it took Cara a couple of days to realize that Nadis was the trainer Merrik had contacted during her assessment. Cara had never seen the trainer, just heard her voice, but Cara was certain they were one and the same. Nadis didn't mention the incident, so Cara followed her lead.

"Focus on the target rather than your hand," Nadis suggested.

Raina nodded and tried again.

Uncomfortable watching Raina struggle, Cara shifted her attention to Cylex. The buff Altorian male had been waiting on the shuttle when Cara and Raina left for the Citadel. And he'd been with them ever since. Cara wasn't sure why they needed a bodyguard. The Citadel was secluded and had its own security force. Even so, it was obvious that Cylex wasn't going anywhere. He had dark hair and blue eyes that were even lighter than Tov's. He never smiled and seldom spoke, but those pale blue eyes continually scanned their surroundings. More than once Raina had said that Cylex made her feel safe. Cara had the opposite reaction. Knowing that she was in enough danger to be assigned a bodyguard had Cara jumping at shadows.

"Goddamn it," Raina cried as the sparks on her fingertips sputtered out again. "Why can Cara do this so easily when I am utterly useless?"

"You are not useless," Nadis insisted. "Comparing yourself to anyone else is pointless. Each conduit's abilities are unique."

"I meditate endlessly and construct detailed visualization. But as soon as I try to manifest what I'm seeing it just fizzles out." Emotion thickened Raina's voice and tears gathered behind her lashes. "We are from the same bloodline. Why is Cara so much better at this than me?"

Nadis turned to Cara, challenge burning in her eyes. "Are you going to allow her to believe this is her fault when you know that is not true?"

Cara sucked in a breath. How long had Nadis known? It was a stupid question. Nadis was the most popular mentor by far and for very good reason. She had likely known as soon as Cara walked into the room for the first time.

Raina stared back, clearly confused by their mentor's question. Nadis was right. This wasn't fair to Raina.

"It's not your fault," Cara admitted. "My power has been unleashed while yours is still bound. That's why everything seems easier for me."

Raina moved closer, her expression conflicted and uncertain. "But how? I thought our mates were the only ones who could unleash our power."

"A couple of weeks ago, my energy became so unstable that my parents had to allow my potential mates to finish releasing it." A heated shiver passed through Cara as she remembered all the erotic acts that process had required. "They did not claim me, but we were courting when Noratu's message arrived."

"Does Flora know about this?"

"There are no secrets from bonded mates," Cara reminded. "The mind link makes it impossible. Besides, the message stated that the deal Tov and Merrik had negotiated with my parents would not be honored. Clearly, they knew I was being courted but wanted to start from scratch."

Raina's brows scrunched up over her nose. "You sound angry. Do you want Tov and Merrik to claim you?"

"If I have no choice but to be part of a triad, I want to form it with Tov and Merrik. However, I'm not sure I want to be part of a triad. I would rather have control of my life, guide my own future."

Nadis smiled knowingly. "You are not just a conduit, Cara. You come from one of the most powerful bloodlines in history. You will be part of a triad. Your basic nature will leave you no choice."

It was hard to argue with that. Repeatedly since coming to the Citadel, she had been dream sharing with Tov and Merrik.

They swore they were not creating the erotic dreams intentionally, and she knew she wasn't. Still, more often than not when she drifted off to sleep, she ended up in their arms.

"Does your certainty have anything to do with Merrik being your nephew?" Cara softened the accusation with a smile.

Nadis did not seem insulted. "I honestly believe Merrik would make any female a wonderful mate, but that was not the primary reason for my comment. I am sensitive to psychic energy. I know you are still linked with Merrik and Tov. Shielding your mind was one of the first skills I taught you. If you have serious doubts about bonding with them, why have you allowed the courtship to continue?"

It was a damn good question. She had wondered more than once if she could prevent the shared dreams from occurring, yet she had never even tried to keep them out. And the nightly sessions were interactive. She was an eager participant, not a helpless victim.

"If you want Tov and Merrik, why pretend that you're considering other teams?" Raina added. "I know Flora has been sending you profiles just like she sends them to me."

A guilty smile tugged at Cara's lips. "I haven't even opened the messages. If she won't let me bond with Merrik and Tov, I will leave the star system. I will not be forced into the Altorian equivalent of a loveless marriage."

"Flora and her mates went to a lot of trouble and spent a great deal of money so they could offer you choices. It is not their intention to force you into anything," Nadis objected.

"They are offering us choices within the expectations of the Citadel," Cara argued. "I'm not sure I want to be a conduit."

Nadis shook her head. "Being a conduit is not something you choose. You were born a conduit. Your physiology makes you feel incomplete without the other two parts of your triad. You will always crave what only your bonded mates can give you. The need is literally programmed into your DNA."

Cara started to argue, but she knew Nadis was right. "It's hard to set aside twenty years of social programming. The

characteristics that are valued on Earth are so different than what is expected of an Altorian female.”

That brought Nadis’ brows together. “You do not have to answer this if it makes you uncomfortable. Did Tov and Merrik expect you to be submissive in and out of the bedroom?”

“I wasn’t with them long enough to find out. We had one conversation about the future and then the message came from Flora and her mates.”

Nadis was still studying Cara closely. The female was much too perceptive for Cara’s comfort. “Why haven’t you told Flora about any of this?” the mentor challenged.

Cara licked her lips, feeling defensive and slightly guilty. “There hasn’t been time. I’m always with you and she is always out on a mis—”

“That’s nonsense. Try again.”

With a long, shuddering sigh, Cara admitted, “I’m afraid. It is so easy to forget who I am when I’m with them. All I can think about is making them happy whenever they touch me.”

“But don’t they make you happy too?” Raina asked, obviously confused by Cara’s hesitation.

“It’s overwhelming. Trust me, it’s really overwhelming.”

“Choosing your mates is the most important decision you will ever make,” Nadis stressed. “I urge you both to take your time and carefully consider your options. Start with a solid foundation of trust. Then add open and honest communication. Developing a friendship with your mates is just as important as sexual chemistry. Make sure you both choose wisely.”



## CHAPTER 7



*I*nfuriated by the persistent telepathic signal pinging away inside his mind, Cylex slipped from the training center and hurried toward the nearest storeroom. He was so damn tired of Jevara's pettiness and his irrational demands. Cylex was just about ready to hop on the next commuter transport and leave the star system for good. A ragged sigh followed the thought. It was impossible and he knew it. His three younger sisters would be unprotected if he left. Two were employed, yet naive. He had kept them insulated from the uglier realities of life. He wanted them to enjoy their innocence as long as possible. The youngest was still in school. The only way he could leave was if he took them with him, and he couldn't afford that option right now.

Cylex paused for several deep breaths, regaining his composure. He could not reveal his frustration to the emperor. He must appear like a loyal servant, even if that loyalty was wearing dangerously thin. He activated the subdermal comm-link in his forearm and responded to the telepathic page.

"It has been nine days since your last check-in," Jevara sneered. His miniature holo-image shifted and wavered, flickering for a moment before it stabilized. "Where in all of hell's realms have you been?"

"At my post, sire. I warned you that my new position would make it even harder to communicate. Not only am I inside the Citadel, but I am seldom left alone." He wasn't sure why he had been chosen to guard the conduits, but the assignment was a double-edged sword. It forced him to interact with his

targets. He knew their names and personalities. He had seen them lose their tempers and laugh, even break down in tears. In a word they were 'real' to him now. Guarding them also gave him access to information he was no longer certain he wanted to pass on. Jevara was an amoral tyrant and Cylex found the thought of assisting him in any capacity repellent.

"Even bodyguards have to piss."

It took everything Cylex had not to glare openly at the petulant emperor. "Did you need something specific?"

"I need some godsdamn information! Have you forgotten the reason you're there?"

Cylex tensed. He really hated this worthless piece of shit, and it was getting harder and harder to conceal the fact. "The conduits were uncomfortable with me at first, but they are starting to speak openly in front of me. I am confident that they will soon say something actionable. When they do, I will immediately report it to you."

"You have been shadowing them for almost two weeks. They did not say anything 'actionable' in all that time?" Jevara's brows arched nearly to his hairline. "I think you are full of shit."

The feeling was mutual. "I am sorry you feel that way, sire. I am doing the best I can."

"It's amazing how much more people can accomplish with the right motivation." Jevara made an intricate series of gestures with his left hand and a different holo-image took over Cylex's display. Anias, the oldest of Cylex's sisters, sat playing some sort of table game with a beautiful dark-haired woman. Both were dressed in the sheer dresses of Jevara's pleasure givers. Understanding slammed into Cylex, momentarily robbing him of breath. "She has been bathed and prepared for my pleasure." Jevara's image replaced the other scene. "As of right now, I have not touched her. Tell me something I do not already know or I will walk down the hall and bury my cock deep in her sweet virgin body."

A strangled growl escaped Cylex's throat before he regained the ability to speak. "If you touch her, I will kill you."

"I have no doubt you will try, but sweet Anias will have been fucked by every guard in this palace long before you arrive. Now *talk*."

Days ago Cylex had decided not to tell Jevara anything more. Raina and Cara had potentially dangerous abilities, but they had yet to harm anyone. They did not deserve what Jevara had in store for them. But neither did Anias! How could he protect Raina and Cara without allowing his sister to be abused?

He scrambled for facts that would not endanger the conduits, something true yet harmless. He could only think of one and he wasn't sure it would satisfy Jevara. "One of the girls is dream sharing with her potential mates. They have not yet claimed her, but it is only a matter of time."

"Interesting. Why did you keep this from me?"

"I did not think it relevant. The males are on a spaceship, so they could not claim her if they wanted to. If that changed, I would have informed you."

"Which conduit is stronger?"

Cylex tensed, already feeling guilty about what he'd shared. "They are both pretty useless right now. Their mentor is teaching them the skills they will need once their power has been unleashed, but the courtships have not officially begun. We have plenty of time."

"Are either of them still a virgin? You know how I love virgin cunt."

The evil gleam in Jevara's eyes made Cylex clench his teeth. The emperor was truly depraved and Anias was now entirely at his mercy. "I have no idea."

Jevara studied him intently for a long, tense moment. "You have played spy long enough. You have twenty-four hours to bring me one of the conduits. I do not care which one."

"But, sire, I cannot accomplish that in a single day. I need time to plan and set things in motion."

“Fine. Three days, but not a minute more. If you fail in this, you will find me balls deep in your sister’s ass!”

Unable to conceal his loathing any longer, Cylex fisted his hands and glared at his nemesis.

“Do not test me on this, Cylex,” Jevara warned. “If you betray me, your sister will be the centerpiece at my next dinner party.”

Jevara ended the comm and Cylex punched the nearest wall. Pain shot up his arm and white noise filled his ears as his knuckles connected with riveted metal. A red haze passed over his vision but he managed not to make a sound. Jevara’s sexual excesses and his obscene dinner parties were notorious. It was one of the reasons Cylex had hidden his sisters off world. This was not the first time Jevara had threatened them. Cylex’s chest burned and he drew in a quick breath. Apparently, he had not hidden them well enough.

Anias had just turned nineteen but she was incredibly innocent. She had spent the last five years focused on her younger sisters. Cylex provided for them financially, but Anias took care of them. She was selfless and sweet. It was unthinkable that her first sexual encounter would be with someone as repugnant as Jevara.

Regaining as much calm as he could muster, Cylex left the storeroom and returned to the training center. He walked over to Nadis. “I need to speak with President Raydo. I will return as quickly as I can.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked, glancing around the room with obvious concern. “Should we move to a more secure location?”

“It is a personal matter. The trainees are not in danger.” And he would make damn sure it stayed that way.

She nodded though worry still shadowed her gaze. “I will let Zevon know you are coming.”

\* \* \*

Fortifying himself with a deep breath, Tov raised his knuckles and knocked on the door to Zevon's office. Usually Zevon's assistant sat at a desk in the outer room, but the young male was nowhere in sight.

"It's open," Zevon called.

The door was ajar, so Tov widened the opening and walked inside. The office was large and ornately decorated, a sharp contrast to the personality of its occupant. Zevon was a no-nonsense soldier and a highly skilled controller. He was more comfortable sleeping in a primitive tent than in the luxurious apartment reserved for the Citadel's president. He had been elected as a disruptor, an agent of much needed change.

Tov looked around, allowing his distaste to show. "How can you stand this office? The decor is... distracting."

"I have been too busy putting out fires to worry about the decorating," Zevon dismissed.

"It has been what, nine months? Are the governors still resisting every change you make?"

"I expected that," Zevon insisted with a slightly curled lip. "But it's not just the governors. Each day brings more disgruntled department heads and frustrated mystics. This place has been mismanaged for decades."

"And you are no longer allowed to exert your authority with your fists," Tov pointed out, hoping to lighten his friend's mood.

"That's the worst part," Zevon agreed, finally relaxing. He stood and came around to the front of the desk. "Were you just checking in to make sure I hadn't put my fist through a wall?"

"I was hoping you'd had time to consider the message I sent you earlier."

Zevon shrugged. "I skimmed through it, but I'm not sure I see the benefit of joining forces with the Torretian rebels."

"That's why Laidon wants to meet with you. He has information that he insists will benefit us greatly. I don't see a

reason not to listen to what he has to say. He also has a friend in serious danger and he needs our help to—”

A rhythmic beeping interrupted Tov and a disembodied voice said, “Sorry to interrupt, sir, but this is important.” Apparently, Zevon’s assistant had returned.

“Go on.”

“Cylex Bekar is headed up here. Provost Nadis did not say what he wanted, only that it seemed urgent.”

“It better be urgent if he left Cara and Raina unprotected,” Tov growled out, more than annoyed by the trainee’s choice.

“Should I tell him you are with someone?” the assistant prompted.

“No,” Zevon decided. “When he arrives, send him in.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Should I come back?” Tov asked, anxiously glancing toward the door. “There are important elements to our conversation that I have yet to explain.”

“Stay.” A faint smile tugged at one corner of Zevon’s mouth. “I am pretty sure I know what he wants, and you will want to hear it.”

Tov had no idea what that meant, but he knew better than to argue with the president.

Cylex arrived a short time later. His purposeful steps faltered when he spotted Tov but he focused on Zevon and greeted, “Thank you for seeing me, sir.”

Zevon leaned against the front of his desk, his expression grim. “You have chosen to leave your post without permission. This better be important.”

“May I speak frankly, sir?”

“Of course.” He crossed his arms over his chest and watched Cylex intently.

Tov shifted his gaze back and forth between the two. Zevon might know what this was about, but Tov had no idea.

“Jevara sent me here to spy on you, sir. I am very sorry that it took this long to admit.” Cylex rushed through the confession as if the words burned his throat.

Tov looked at Zevon, bracing for his reaction. Zevon chuckled, the response shocking Tov and Cylex. Why would Zevon find this amusing? Tov sure as hell did not.

“You just cost me a hundred credits,” Zevon said.

Clearly confused by the statement, Cylex asked, “How so? If I may ask.”

“Draven bet me a hundred credits that you would confess to being a spy. I was certain we would need to confront you before you admitted the truth.”

“You knew he was a spy, yet you allowed him to guard my mate and her cousin?” This was unbelievable. And he’d said Draven knew about this also. Tov would be having words with Flora’s mates as soon as he finished here.

“Relax,” Zevon urged. “They were never in any danger. We have monitored every move he made, every message he sent.”

Cylex clasped his hands behind his back and his features hardened into an expressionless mask. “What will become of me now?”

“Draven knew you were hiding something the first time he saw you. He suspected you were working for Jevara, but he also thought you were a great candidate for recruitment. Was he right?”

“This is why I was assigned to Raina and Cara,” Cylex was obviously piecing it all together. “You wanted to see if I would pass on what I learned.”

“Yes,” Zevon admitted. “You learned all sorts of things that Jevara could have used, but you chose not to tell him any of it. Why?”

“I work for Jevara out of necessity and because he has threatened those I love. The threats have escalated drastically, and now one of my sisters is in imminent danger. She is the reason I am here. If you will allow me to mount a rescue

mission, I will tell you everything I know. After seven years in Jevara's service, I know a lot."

Zevon unfolded his arms and moved behind his desk. "Everyone has information they want to sell today." His eyes narrowed as he sat down. He glanced at Cylex then shifted his gaze back to Tov. "Is your rebel friend nearby?"

"He is within streaming range."

"Have a seat." He motioned to the chairs in front of his desk. "I would like to question them simultaneously. By comparing their information, I should be able to establish the validity of each claim. The information will only match if it is factual, or if they are in league. But that is highly unlikely."

"It's a good idea," Tov agreed. He had considered Laidon a friend at the academy, but it had been years since they interacted, even casually. It would be nice to feel more secure in the renewed friendship. Besides, if they were going to mount a rescue mission for Cylex's sister, they might as well rescue Laidon's friend too.

Activating the control matrix in his desktop, Zevon pushed his hand into the holo-grid and launched a quick series of commands. "He is clear for streaming."

Light flickered in Tov's peripheral vision as Laidon materialized beside the chairs. He looked rather mussed and tired as if he'd slept in his clothes.

"Thanks for seeing me," Laidon said.

"You fucking traitor!" Cylex vaulted out of his chair and leaped over Tov's legs. His shoulder collided with Laidon's chest, propelling him over backward.

Fists were flying fast and hard before they hit the floor.

Zevon shook his head as he hurried out from behind his desk. "I guess they know each other."

Tov grasped Cylex's arm and tried to pull him off Laidon. Laidon used the pause to place an especially vicious punch. Blood gushed from Cylex's nose and he twisted free of Tov's hold, attacking Laidon with renewed aggression.



Zevon motioned Tov back and they let the other two brawl for a few moments. They rolled across the floor, pummeling each other with equal force. A chair toppled and the table collided with the wall as the enemies rolled one direction and then the other.

“Enough!” Zevon shouted after each had had ample opportunity to express his hatred.

Laidon shoved Cylex off him then scrambled to his feet. “What the hell is he doing here? This fucker is Jevara’s henchman!”

“Says the faithless traitor,” Cylex countered, wiping his face with his sleeve. It did little more than smear blood across his cheek and chin.

“You cannot trust one word he says,” Laidon insisted, pointing at Cylex. He wiped away the blood from his mouth, creating a smear similar to Cylex’s. “He has been Jevara’s right hand for years.”

“Is this personal or political?” When the combatants continued to glare at each other, Zevon asked Cylex, “Why do you hate Laidon so vehemently?”

Without breaking eye contact with his enemy, Cylex replied, “The conflict is personal. I apologize for reacting the way I did. It was a shock to see him at the Citadel.”

“What are *you* doing here?” Laidon asked bitterly. “Are you playing both sides against each other now?”

“Regardless of your feelings for each other, it seems to me that you two have an awful lot in common,” Zevon told them.

Laidon scoffed. “I have nothing in common with that amoral coward. I have always fought for my beliefs.”

“You do not know me,” Cylex snapped. “Do not pretend that you do.”

“Sit down, shut your mouths, and I will tell you what is going to happen.” Zevon waited until they complied before he continued.

There were only two chairs, so Tov remained slightly back, silently observing. He had done his part. Laidon was in the room with Zevon. Maybe he should discreetly slip from the office and check on Cara and Raina. This was a secure facility, but knowing that they were currently unguarded did not sit well with him.

Easily guessing Tov's quandary, Zevon ordered, "Stay. You are right in the middle of this mess."

"Yes, sir."

Zevon moved behind his desk and sat down, pressing back into his tall chair. "You both claim to have information that I will find valuable. You also claim that Jevara is threatening someone you care about to ensure your cooperation. Jevara is holding Cylex's sister. Laidon, who is he using to motivate you?"

"My situation is more complicated," Laidon told him. "Shalia is a rebel operative. She is the source of much of my information. As of right now, Jevara is not aware that she is a spy but that could change at any moment."

Stroking his chin thoughtfully, Zevon directed, "Tell me the three most important facts this operative passed on to you."

Laidon gazed straight ahead. "The first was that you have a Torretian spy posing as a trainee. Though the information is still valid, the warning appears to have arrived one day too late."

Zevon waved away Laidon's complaint. "The warning is appreciated, but we have always known. Give me another fact."

Laidon remained tense, but he looked at Zevon. "Jevara is working with an Altorian general named Azar Turin. He has a blood tie to one of the conduits just recovered from Earth."

"That useless bastard. I was not aware of that one, but I am not surprised. Azar is only loyal to himself. Prefect Yites needs to know about this. The Altorians trade with Azar on a regular basis." Zevon reached over and sent a quick message, likely to Prefect Yites, then he studied Laidon for a moment in silence.

“I will rescue your operative because it’s the right thing to do, but I do not yet see the value of a formal alliance.”

“I can give you the names of the Torretian operatives scattered through your troops, as well as those embedded in the government of Altor,” Cylex offered.

“Is this a bidding war?” Laidon sneered. “I have ships and skilled fighters, some still hidden within Jevara’s troops.”

“That could be helpful for a surprise attack,” Zevon agreed, fighting back a smile.

Tov watched his friend closely. Zevon was enjoying the conflict a little more than he should have, perhaps. These males clearly hated each other and weren’t afraid to use violence to express their enmity.

“I know the regional leaders that support the rebellion but are too afraid to speak out openly,” Cylex claimed. “With a few comms I could double the size of the resistance. Would that make forming an alliance worthwhile?”

Laidon scoffed and rolled his eyes. “You are not part of *my* rebellion, and I say you’re full of shit.”

“Well, this is an interesting dynamic,” Zevon mused. “Neither of you can offer enough to benefit me on your own, yet together you might become a valuable ally. So the question becomes, what will it take for you two to work together like civilized beings?”

“Rescue my sister and I will forget about the past,” Cylex offered.

“I agree,” Laidon stressed. “Rescue Shalia and I will gladly move on.”

“Now that is an interesting offer,” Zevon admitted. He stared past them, silently considering the options for a moment. Then he looked at Tov. “Is the *Agitarri* available?”

“It is, but rescue missions are most effective when they are fast and stealthy. I would suggest one of my smaller ships.”

Zevon nodded. “I leave the details to you. Put together a team that includes these two and rescue both females.”

“Of course, sir.”

“There is a complication I’ve yet to explain,” Cylex warned.

“Let me guess.” Tov moved closer to Zevon’s desk, angling himself so he could see more than the backs of their heads. “Jevara wants one of the conduits in exchange for your sister?”

Furrows formed in Cylex’s brow. “He does, but how did you guess?”

Tov shrugged. “Jevara is amoral and ruthless, but he is also predictable. As soon as word reached him that the Hays bloodline is capable of power exchange, I knew he would not rest until he controlled Cara, Raina, or both.”

“What is power exchange?” Laidon wanted to know. “I’ve never heard the term before.”

“Some conduits can transform one type of mystic energy into another, Altorian Fire into Torretian Water and so forth,” Cylex explained. “It is a rare gift, but many in their bloodline have possessed it.”

“Which one of the cousins has been able to transform energy?” Laidon asked.

“Flora, but it is likely they all can,” Tov told him.

“This isn’t a complication. It’s an opening,” Zevon said. “Jevara has given us a legitimate reason for you to return.”

“If we are willing to use an untrained conduit as bait,” Tov argued, angry that Zevon would even suggest it.

“What about a newly bonded conduit with enough training to quickly become lethal?” Zevon countered. “Nadis told me that Cara’s power has been released and I’m pretty sure you and Merrik are responsible.”

Tension banded Tov’s chest as his emotions twisted into an indistinguishable mess. “We have yet to claim Cara. Is that what you are suggesting? Are you going to allow us to claim her?”

“Is that what she wants?” Zevon’s brows arched in challenge. “If her guardians approve the match, will Cara willingly submit to you?”

“Yes, sir. She will.”

Zevon pushed to his feet. “Laidon and Cylex, report to Tov in the morning. He will brief you on the mission then.”

“Yes, sir,” Laidon agreed and left the office.

Cylex stood also and headed for the door.

Zevon stopped him. “Say nothing to the females. This should come from Tov and Merrik.”

“Understood.”

Once the door closed behind Cylex, Zevon sent a comm inquiry to Draven Aldar, the controller in Flora’s triad. He responded immediately from the control center of a spaceship. “What can I do for you, sir?”

“I need to speak with your mate. In fact, I’d like to speak with your entire triad.”

“Noratu and Flora are in our quarters. Give me a few moments and I will return the comm.”

The holo image blinked off and Tov released a ragged breath. “Are you going to ask or order?”

Zevon smiled. “That depends on them. I will start by asking, but this needs to happen. Stay off camera until we find out how this is going to go.”

Tov nodded. He would rather not make an enemy out of Flora and her mates, but he would gladly take Cara in whatever way he could get her and he knew Merrik felt the same.

Draven reactivated the holo-comm as promised. Flora and Noratu were with him. “Is there a problem, sir?”

“I am not sure yet. Were you aware that Cara’s power has been released?” Zevon began.

“Provost Nadis told us that she suspected that was the case, but Cara’s parents denied it,” Draven explained.

“It is not only true, but I’ve found the team responsible.”

“Tov and Merrik,” Flora guessed, but she smiled as she said it. “I’m pretty sure they’re dream sharing too.”

She didn’t seem angry. Maybe this would be easier than Tov had feared.

“You do not seem upset by this development,” Zevon noted. “Are you going to approve their request to claim her?”

“The final choice is up to Cara, but we have discussed it at length and have no objection.”

“Good. I have need of Cara for an upcoming mission and I am not comfortable sending her unless she is part of a power triad.”

“What sort of mission?” Flora wanted to know.

“Mission parameters are always confidential and you know it. I will inform Tov and Merrik that they have been approved to claim Cara. I am glad we are all in agreement.”

“Wait. I need to make sure Cara is okay with it too,” Flora objected.

“Well, do so quickly. Time is of the essence.”

\* \* \*

Cara focused inwardly, allowing her surroundings to blur. Locating her energy and channeling it through her hands had become routine. She could release bursts of fire, even continual streams of energy, easily hitting the targeting sensor at the end of the lane. She had successfully performed the exercise so many times that it left her restless and ready for more.

“Close your eyes,” Nadis suggested. “Use your gift to locate the target rather than depending on physical sight.”

Closing her eyes, Cara sensed the holo-target, feeling its position within the room, then she released a cautious pulse. The familiar chime of the targeting sensor confirmed that

she'd been successful. Another image formed within her mind, vivid and tempting. She saw Merrik's handsome features tense with passion as he thrust deep inside her, and she felt the vast store of energy available to him. She wanted that power flowing through her again, challenging and exhilarating her. She was a conduit. Forming a power triad was the purpose for her existence. Nadis was right. Cara would never be satisfied with any other fate.

"That was very good." Nadis always kept her praise casual. Encouraging Cara without demoralizing Raina was quite a balancing act. "Continue, but do not tire yourself out. Your body is still adjusting to its new capabilities." She turned back to Raina, who was utilizing the firing lane to Cara's left. "Did the new technique work any better?"

The access implant in Cara's forearm vibrated, indicating an incoming comm. Flora had sent the request, which was curious. Her cousin knew she was training. If this weren't important, Flora would not have interrupted.

Cara accepted the holo-comm and moved to the room's perimeter. "Hey, stranger," she greeted as Flora's miniature image stabilized. "I thought you'd forgotten about us." It had only been three days since they'd spoken, but Flora was fun to tease.

"Why didn't you tell me that Merrik and Tov released your power?" Flora's features were expressionless, her voice conversational.

Cara glanced at Nadis accusingly, but she was busy instructing Raina. "I knew I could trust you, but there are no secrets from bonded mates. I wasn't sure what to make of yours."

Flora accepted the excuse with a nod. "Are you even considering any of the other teams?"

No longer seeing a reason to lie, she admitted, "No. I want Tov and Merrik."

"I'm glad because Tov is on his way down there right now."

Cara felt her eyes widen. "They are going to claim me today?"

Flora chuckled. "You just told me that's what you want."

“It is, but I was thinking you would approve our courtship, not jump right to claiming.”

Challenge arched Flora’s brows. “Have you been dream sharing with them?”

Okay, so she knew everything. “Yes, but—”

“Zevon needs you bonded for some sort of mission. Tov will have to explain the details. Zevon wouldn’t tell me. You said you want these guys. If you do, now is the time.”

“I do,” Cara said with more conviction. “I’m a little freaked out by the timing, but I know I want them.”

“Good.” Flora smiled encouragingly. “I guess all that’s left to say is congratulations. I hope you’ll be as happy as I am.”

Stunned by the sudden turn of events, Cara stared blankly at the room at large. This was what she wanted, what she’d been dreaming about since she was taken from Tov and Merrik. Still, she had so many questions. First and foremost, what was this mission and how long would they have to prepare? Having access to her mystic energy gave her more control than Raina, but it was nothing compared to the abilities of a power triad.

“What’s going on?” Raina asked, closing the distance between them.

Nadis followed, her expression knowing.

“Tov and Merrik have been given permission to claim me.” Cara looked at Nadis. “Did you tell Flora that they released my power?”

“Flora and her mates are your guardians. It is my responsibility to keep them informed of your progress.” Nadis’ brows drew together, creasing her forehead. “I thought this was what you wanted.”

“It is. This just feels really sudden.”

Tov strode into the training center, ending the conversation. He walked up to Cara and asked, “Did you speak with Flora?”

Cara nodded, her throat suddenly tight, mouth dry.



“It is my intention to take you to my ship so Merrik and I can claim you. Do you have any objections?”

She licked her lips and swallowed past the lump in her throat. “No. I am ready to be your mate.”

Raina cried out happily and gave Cara a hug. “I guess I need to get serious about finding my mates now. I’m the only one left.”

“I’ll see you in a few days.” She looked at Tov and asked, “I will see her in a few days, won’t I?”

“We might be gone a bit longer, but you will return to the Citadel for further training once the mission is complete.”

Cara thanked Nadis for her patience and support, stressing how beneficial she’d found the instruction. After giving Raina another hug, Cara headed off with her soon-to-be-bonded mate.

“Flora mentioned a mission,” Cara said after a silent pause. “What are we going to do?” They were clearly headed to the departure ring, likely a shuttle bay.

He looked at her, possessive passion burning in his pale blue eyes. “Tonight is for you, me, and Merrik. Nothing else matters but creating the strongest bond possible. Once that is accomplished, I’ll explain what the mission entails.”

“It is going to drive me crazy. Can’t you give me a hint?”

He smiled and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “I don’t want anything to distract you once we reach the ship. Two females are being threatened by Jevara. Our mission will be to rescue them.”

“I like the goal, but how in the world will we accomplish that?”

“I gave you the hint you requested. Now, do not ask again or I will consider it defiance.”

A shiver dropped down her spine at the sensual threat. It had been two long weeks since she felt the hot sting of Tov’s palm smacking her bottom. Her inner submissive was hungry for his control. She shrugged off his arm and muttered, “Whatever.”

His brows arched at her dismissive tone. "I see your attitude will require adjustment before we begin. Provost Nadis might prefer comradery to respect, but I do not."

They reached the departure ring and Tov escorted her onto the tiny shuttle. This was a short-range, four-seat model, which meant his ship must be nearby.

"Are you wearing panties?" he asked as soon as the hatch was secure.

"Running around with my pussy exposed during training seemed kind of rude." She kept up her belligerent tone, knowing full well where it was leading.

He activated the main controls and set the shuttle in motion. "Take off your panties, raise the back of your dress, and bend over my lap."

The command sent a wave of heat cascading through her body. God, how she'd missed this. The shared dreams had been intensely erotic, but all they had done was fuck. She wiggled out of her panties and lifted her calf-length dress. He helped her down over his lap and stroked her upturned cheeks.

"Did you masturbate while we were separated?"

She tensed. He wouldn't like her answer, but he could easily sense a lie. "Just on the nights we didn't dream share."

His hand fell hard against one side and then the other. "Your pleasure belongs to us. You know this."

"But you weren't there," she objected.

He spanked her again, several hard swats on each side. "We gave you orgasms during our dreams. Correct?"

"Yes, Master." *Whack, whack.* The sharp sound of flesh hitting flesh was just as stimulating as the sting. Her core tightened needfully and she pressed her thighs together. "Being without you makes me greedy."

"You are even greedier when we're together." A flurry of hard smacks followed, making her squirm and moan. "Open for me. I want access to your pussy."

She moved her legs apart and rolled her hips, freely offering her body.

He traced her slit, his fingers sliding easily across her slick flesh. She shifted restlessly. His touch felt good, but that was not where she needed his fingers.

“Ask nicely,” he prompted.

“Please, Master, rub my clit.”

He circled the sensitive bud, drawing sensations into her core. His fingers flicked her lightly then circled some more. She relaxed and let the pleasure take her. Tension gathered, the tingling start of a powerful orgasm. Suddenly he slapped her pussy, the impact centered above her clit.

She cried out, more from surprise than pain. “What did I do?”

“Nothing.” He slapped her pussy again. “I wanted to remind you that your body is mine to enjoy in any way I see fit.” He pushed two fingers into her core and fucked her with long, slow strokes. “So wet and hot.” He worked a third finger inside her and stretched her inner muscles. “So ready for my cock.”

“God, yes. Please, Master.”

“Not yet.” He pulled out and spanked her harder than before, each slap resulting in a bright burst of pain. But that only made her desire burn hotter. “Which do you prefer? My fingers or my hand?” He finger-fucked her fast and hard, then spanked her folds, the wet-sounding slap humiliating as well as painful.

“Fingers,” she cried, squirming in an effort to avoid the stinging impact. The tender abuse was painfully arousing, but her orgasm remained just out of reach.

He pushed back into her pulsing center, fucking her slowly again. “I like using my fingers too.” He withdrew the wet digits and slid them up to her other opening. “But here is where I like to use them.”

Cara moaned as he breached her tightest opening. Her body accepted their cocks without pain, but it still felt naughty

whenever they used her anally. He slid in and out, in and out, while her pussy ached for attention.

“Soon this will be my cock,” he promised, his fingers moving faster. “We will fuck all three of your holes, sweet mate. We will finally take you together, Merrik in your pussy and me in this tight little ass. When you drift off to sleep you will be exhausted, sore, and dripping with our seed. Do you want that as much as I do?”

Another moan escaped her as she imagined the hours of carnal pleasure awaiting them. “Yes, Master, so very much.” She tightened her bottom around his surging fingers, but that just accented the emptiness in her core.

“Soon, my love.” Tov slowly drew his fingers out and lowered her dress. He helped her up and she moved to the seat beside his as he went to wash his hands.

## CHAPTER 8



Merrick stood in the shuttle bay anxiously waiting for Tov and Cara. Tov had never doubted that this day would come, but Merrik had started to wonder. Being compatible with a female did not ensure that they would be chosen to claim her. Merrik knew that from experience. They were social outcasts, operating on the fringes of society. Most of the power players at the Citadel did not consider them worthy of a conduit.

But the past no longer mattered. Cara would soon be theirs, and not even the rich and powerful could take her away from them.

The shuttle glided into the bay a short time later and his pulse thudded even faster than before. The hatch opened and Cara climbed down from the small ship.

Merrick paused for a moment and just watched her. Her beauty was undeniable. From her wavy golden hair to her blue eyes and nicely curved body, everything about her reflected good health and vitality. But Cara was so much more than her outward appearance. She had adapted to the rapid-fire changes with courage and composure. She was kind and sweet, yet wonderfully spirited.

No longer able to resist his need to touch her, Merrik rushed forward and swept her into his arms. His mouth found hers and lingered, communicating tenderness and passion. “You are finally, *officially* ours.”

“That means you belong to me too,” she reminded as he released her.

“I am going to check in with the bridge crew,” Tov told them. “I will be there shortly.”

“Fine with me, but I have every intention of starting without you,” Merrik warned.

Tov chuckled. “Do you honestly imagine that I kept my hands to myself on the shuttle?”

Merrik hadn’t thought of that. “How far did things progress?” He wasn’t jealous, just curious.

“Some creative finger play. She is barely warmed up.”

He nodded and took Cara by the hand, leading her out into the corridor. They strolled along in silence, Merrik paying more attention to Cara than their course.

She reached the end of the corridor and stopped. “Which way? I don’t know where we’re going.”

Merrik smiled and motioned to their right. They took an elevator to the upper deck where the officer quarters were located. Merrik had a separate cabin from Tov’s, but that would likely change after they claimed Cara. Triads that remained happy seemed to share every area of their lives, not just sexual partners. Tov’s cabin was slightly larger than Merrik’s and it had a much bigger bed. It was the obvious choice.

Merrik’s cock was painfully hard by the time the door slid closed behind them. Knowing that she would be their bonded mate before this night was through was intensely arousing. “Would you like something to drink?” he forced himself to ask, not wanting to seem like a savage.

“I don’t think I can wait any longer.” Not bothering with the fasteners that ran down the front of her dress, she pulled it off over her head. She turned around and bent from the waist as she tugged off her boots. The position gave him a fabulous view of her pussy and ass. Her cheeks were slightly pink. Tov must have spanked her.

He stepped up behind her as she started to straighten and wrapped his hand around the back of her neck. "It's a sacrilege not to take advantage of such a position." He kept her bent nearly in half as he caressed her pussy with his other hand. "Why are you so wet? What did Tov do to you on the shuttle?" The physical evidence made it easy to guess, but he wanted to hear her say it.

"He spanked me," she admitted in a hushed and husky tone.

He stroked one silky cheek and then the other. "Your cheeks are barely pink. Is that the only place he spanked you?" He teased her folds, which were flushed and slightly swollen. When all she did was moan, he caught her clit between his finger and thumb, pinching it lightly.

"My pussy," she gasped out. "He also spanked my pussy."

Releasing her clit, Merrik traced her slit, skimming across her opening without delving inside. "Did he finger you?" Her scent was intoxicating, her flesh soft and warm.

"Yes, Commander." She sounded as needy as he felt and it spiked his desire to fuck her.

"Like this?" He pushed two fingers into her cunt, imagining that it was his cock.

"To begin with."

He watched his fingers disappear into her dusky hole, fascinated by the way her body gripped him. "Where else did he put his fingers?"

"My ass," she whispered. "He fingered my ass."

Merrick continued to finger-fuck her pussy, but he teased her pucker with his thumb. "I know how much you enjoy that. You try not to, but you do. Did he let you come?"

"No. Will you, *please*?"

He chuckled then pulled out and slapped her behind. "Not yet." He drew her upright and led her to the dining table. "Up you go." Lifting her by the waist, he sat her on the cool surface then knelt in front of her. "Lean back, but rest on your elbows. I want to see your face while I devour you."

She complied without hesitation, obviously eager to be devoured.

Draping her legs over his shoulders, Merrik lowered his head between her thighs. He slowly traced her slit with his tongue, savoring her softness and the evocative taste that was hers alone. He found her clit and circled it, loving the way she wiggled and moaned. She rocked her hips, rubbing herself against his mouth. Her eagerness fueled his desire and he grew more aggressive. Merrik held her open with his thumbs and drove his tongue into her pussy.

*Mine.* The declaration reverberated through his mind as he stabbed into her as deeply as he could. His heart thudded in his chest, his cock echoing the rhythm. He was feasting on the juices of his soulmate. The realization was humbling.

He withdrew long enough to mutter, “Gods, you taste good.” Then he fucked her again, penetrating her silky body over and over again.

“Please, Merrik,” she cried, desperately lifting her hips. “I really need to come.”

“No.” He sucked on her clit, teasing her right to the edge of orgasm.

“Then stop,” she pleaded, tugging on his hair. “Please, please, no more.”

He pressed his lips against her and sucked her juices into his mouth. “I can’t get enough of you.”

“I ache,” she whimpered. “I ache so damn bad.”

Unable to resist her miserable tone, he whispered, “Come, baby. Come for me.” He caught her clit between his lips and sucked in slow, deep pulls.

She screamed, arching wildly as her body convulsed.

He pushed three fingers into her rippling cunt and kept the pleasure rolling through her. She shook and moaned, then shook some more. He released her clit and licked around his fingers, then pulled his fingers out and pushed his tongue deep into her silky hole.



“Thank you,” she whispered then sighed deeply. “I needed that so much.”

Lifting his head from between her thighs, he finally pushed to his feet. Her legs slid down his arms and he caught them in time to wrap them around his waist. He pulled her up and kissed her on the mouth. She returned the kiss boldly, undeterred by the taste of her release on his tongue.

“Bedroom, now.” He helped her down from the table and watched the enticing roll of her ass as she crossed the cabin. “Kneel beside the bed.” He pulled off his shirt as she obeyed, then sat long enough to rid himself of his boots and pants. She had seen him naked before, but her gaze still moved over his body with obvious appreciation. “You look hungry.” He grinned as he approached her.

She licked her lips and returned his smile. “I’m ravenous.”

“I want to kiss her before you fuck her mouth,” Tov said as he entered the bedroom.

“You’re right,” Merrik decided. “I was being greedy.” He pulled her back to her feet and turned her to face Tov.

Tov framed her face with his hand, their gazes locked. “You are incredibly important to us. I hope you understand that.”

“It still feels strange to know that I’ll be bonding with both of you, but I’ve always wanted to share my life with someone.”

Merrick reached around and cupped her breasts, squeezing firmly. “Will anyone do as long as they share your life?” he challenged.

“Of course not. I had my eye on you two from the beginning. You are both wild enough to keep things interesting, yet caring enough to fight for me.”

“We will always fight for you,” Tov vowed, his expression fierce.

“And we will take care of you for as long as we’re alive.”

She reached back and rubbed his hip. “Is there some sort of a bonding ceremony? Are there traditional vows that we need to

recite?” Cara rotated her body so she could see both of them. “I want to do this right.”

“The physical act is all that’s required by the Citadel,” Tov told her. “But I know enough about human customs to understand what you need. I vow to love and protect you, to remain faithful to you, and to support you in any way I can.”

She started to speak, but words seemed to fail her. Her lips trembled and tears filled her eyes.

Tov pressed his hand against the side of her face and stroked her lips with his thumb. “Why are you crying?”

“Do you mean all of that? I didn’t realize that you love me.”

Tov shook his head, clearly confused by her reaction. “How can you not know that we love you? We have offered you access to our minds for weeks.”

“She has never used a mind link,” Merrik realized. “She did not understand the offer.”

Cara nodded. “By the time Nadis taught me how to access a transfer link, our connection had atrophied.”

“Let’s do something about that right now,” Merrik suggested. “We can tell you how deeply we love you, but it will mean more if you can just feel it.” He urged her back into Tov’s arms as he said, “Kiss her while I repair my end of the connection, and then we will switch.”

Tov was more than happy to cooperate. He slipped one hand into her hair and wrapped his other arm around her waist. Their mouths locked together, the kiss deep and urgent.

Merrik splayed his fingers against the other side of her face and slowly sank into her mind. As she’d said, the connection they’d formed when they released her power was barely detectible anymore. He poured energy into the link, reinforcing and expanding the bond.

She gasped, then shuddered. “Oh, wow.” She turned and faced Merrik, her gaze filled with warmth and affection.

Wanting to bring Tov back into the mix, Merrik took her face between his palms and kissed her deeply. He waited until he

sensed Tov's energy in her mind before he began sharing his emotions with Cara. Tov did the same and soon she sagged in his arms, sobbing against his chest.

"Sweetheart, what is this?" He eased her back so he could see her face. "We were hoping to reassure you."

"I knew you were attracted to me but..."

"We love you, feel like we have always loved you," Merrik stated emphatically. "No, it's even more visceral than that."

"We feel as if you are part of us, the missing part," Tov suggested.

"That is it exactly," Merrik agreed. "The first time I kissed you I felt as if I had finally located the missing part of my soul."

Crossing her arms over her breasts, Cara kept her gaze downcast. "I definitely care for you guys, have from the start. But I've been so afraid of what you make me feel that I've sabotaged my own feelings."

Merrick tilted her head back and pushed affection into her mind. "We have the rest of our lives to work out the details. As long as we are all headed in the same direction, the rest is just a matter of time."

"We are," she assured them, shifting her gaze from one to the other. "All these concepts are just new to me, but I'll catch up. I promise."

Merrick bent and kissed her, allowing his body to speak more eloquently than his words ever could.

When Merrik released her, Tov turned her toward him and kissed her also. *Each time our bodies join, the sexual energy will reinforce the soul bond. You will never be without us again.*

"Back on your knees, love," Merrik urged when Tov lifted his head. "We have another use for that soft wet mouth of yours."

Tov grinned. "Fabulous idea." He began to undress as she moved to the bedside and sank to her knees.

Merrick stroked his cock as he ambled toward their kneeling mate. He pushed his fingers into her unbound hair and guided his cock to her mouth. She licked his entire length, wetting his skin so her lips would slide more easily. Then she slid her legs apart and stared up at him, the picture of willing submission. Her fingers wrapped around the base of his cock and she slowly took him into her mouth.

“Lovely,” he whispered as he pushed deeper.

“I certainly can’t argue with that assessment.” Tov moved closer, stroking his cock as he watched Merrik slide in and out.

She reached out and wrapped her fingers around Tov without disrupting her rhythm with Merrik.

Merrick tilted her head back, giving him deeper access. He wasn’t yet making her swallow his entire length, but the urge to dominate her was rapidly building. Impact play might not appeal to him, but he controlled her in other ways. Reaching down, he caught her nipples between his fingers and thumbs. The rocking of her body tugged on her nipples, adding a sharper edge to the pleasure.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” Tov encouraged. “Pinch harder. I want to hear her cries.”

Merrick obliged him, cruelly squeezing her sensitive flesh until Cara protested with a muffled cry. Then he pulled out of her mouth and said, “Your turn.”

Tov took her face between his hands and drove his cock clear to the back of her mouth. She gagged for a moment then tilted her head back and took him even deeper.

“Such a good girl.” He pulled nearly out, then thrust his entire length down her throat. “Swallow it all. You know how much I like that.”

Stroking himself with one fist, Merrik watched Tov fuck her face. He was much rougher than Merrik, but she didn’t seem to mind. She closed her eyes and took what he gave her as her pussy grew wetter and wetter.

Tov pulled out and motioned him forward. Merrik returned to their mate and slipped between her waiting lips. Tears trailed

down her cheeks, as Merrik made her take his entire length. He touched her mind and found her aching with need, but drunk on submission. His thrusts were slower, but just as deep. Tov wasn't the only one who enjoyed having his entire length buried in her hot mouth.

Merrik felt his balls tighten and his cock buck inside her. He wasn't going to last much longer but he wasn't ready for this to end.

"She has two other holes in need of cum," Tov reminded.

More than happy to give in, Merrik stopped holding back. He pumped fast for a moment longer then came down her throat. He pulled out while his cock was still pulsing and his seed was smeared across her tongue.

She licked her lips and sucked in a ragged breath, but that was all the break Tov allowed her. He fisted the back of her hair and shoved his cock well into her mouth. "Suck hard, mate," he ordered and her cheeks hollowed as she obeyed. Using fast, shallow strokes, Tov triggered his orgasm. He let his head drop back as he filled her mouth full of cum. "Swallow every drop."

Her throat worked and her cheeks hollowed again. She licked and sucked so he was perfectly clean when he pulled free of her clinging lips.

"Good girl." He bent and kissed her forehead. "Now we have some hope of making this last for you."

\* \* \*

Floating in an endorphin haze, Cara staggered to her feet. Swallowing their cum always made her feel dreamy, but it also left her pussy aching for more. She wanted to be pressed between them while their cocks stretched her front and back. She'd imagined it for weeks, but even in her dreams they had refused to demonstrate.

Tov motioned toward the bed and said, "My turn."

She sat on the side, not sure what he had in mind. Was he ready to fuck her or did he want to lick her pussy?

“Lie back and lift your feet to the edge of the bed,” he instructed.

She did as he asked, but the position could still accommodate either activity. She glanced at Merrik. He stood off to one side watching her intently. But for the moment, Tov was in control.

Tov knelt beside the bed and spread her legs even wider. “I want your taste in my mouth when we fuck you, but you do not have permission to come. Do you understand me? No coming.”

“I understand.”

“I understand, *Master*,” he corrected.

“I understand, Master. I will not come.”

His mouth settled over her slit and Cara sucked in a deep breath. She remained still and quiet, allowing her master to enjoy her body. This was about his pleasure, not hers. Hers would come later.

His tongue stroked up and down, pushed briefly into her core, then settled over her clit. Tension gathered beneath his lips and her clit began to tingle. Shit. Already her body was ready to detonate. This might be harder than she thought.

She recited the names of her teachers and then the presidents back on Earth, but nothing blocked out the sensations created by the sensual slide of his tongue. “Please, stop,” she whispered, helplessly lifting her hips. “It feels too damn good.”

“Resist the pleasure or I will discipline you,” he warned then went right back to licking.

Her inner muscles clenched and her clit twitched. She covered her face with her hands and moaned. “I can’t... hold it back.”

“You better.”

His lips closed around the sensitive bud and sucked, released then sucked again. The third time he latched on hard, spasms of pleasure rippling through her pussy. She cried out, trembling with the force of her release.

“You were told not to come,” Tov reminded sharply.

She lowered her hands and glared at him. “You did that intentionally.”

“Did I?” His expression was grim, but triumph lit his gaze. “Why would I intentionally make you lose control?”

“So you could punish me.” He’d already spanked her on the shuttle, but apparently he wanted more.

“I am your master. Do I need a reason to discipline you?”

“No, but I respond better when you do.” She drew her legs together, panting softly.

“Let us worry about your responses.” Tov crossed the room and opened a compartment inset in the wall across from the bed.

“Spread those thighs,” Merrik ordered. “No one gave you permission to cover yourself.”

She opened her legs with a sigh. Clearly, there was no way of avoiding what Tov had in mind. She might as well glean whatever enjoyment she could from his chosen means of punishment.

Tov returned, carrying a flogger, or the Altorian equivalent of one. He swung it sharply and the strands made a whooshing sound. “Hands and knees. Stay on the bed.” The implement was one of his favorites. The strands could produce a mild sting or hurt like hell depending on how hard he swung it.

Cara rolled over then bent her legs beneath her. Her feet hooked over the edge of the bed.

“Head down, and open your legs,” Tov ordered. “I want access to your pussy.”

Dread washed over Cara as she complied. Tov had never spanked her pussy with anything other than his hand. She had a horrible feeling that was about to change. Her inner muscles fluttered and her clit twitched. Apparently, her body was not as upset by the idea as her mind was.

Tov dragged the flogger from the nape of her neck to the bend of her knee then lightly slapped her bottom. “Why are you being disciplined?”

“Because you teased me until I came.”

The next swat was significantly harder. “True,” he admitted. “But there are more important reasons. Name one.” He swung the flogger again.

The sting lit up her skin and made her muscles clench. She forced herself to relax as she said, “You enjoy hurting me.”

“Yes, I do.” As if to prove the point, he flogged her upturned cheeks in silence for a few moments.

She breathed through the intensity as the pain began to compound. Heat spread across her skin and sank into her muscles as the flogger continued to connect. Occasionally a stray strand snapped against her pussy, making her gasp and jerk away.

“Remain still and quiet. Accept what I choose to give you.”

She fought the urge to move when he struck her next, but a cry burst from her throat. Already she felt lightheaded and her nipples were beaded tightly.

He paused and swiped the inside of her thigh. “Why am I flogging you?”

She knew what he wanted to hear, but wasn’t quite ready to admit it. “Merrik enjoys watching you punish me.”

“Yes, I do,” Merrik admitted proudly.

Tov swiped her other thigh, then showed her his wet fingers. “Someone else enjoys the punishment.”

She pressed her lips together and refused to look at him.

He brought the flogger up between her thighs.

She cried out and arched her back. The pain was bright and biting.

He shoved his fingers into her mouth. “Suck it off. What does that taste like?”



“Pussy,” she whispered when he freed up her mouth.

“It tastes like sopping wet pussy.” He flogged her ass again, a little harder this time. “Say it, mate. I want to hear the words.”

She took too long and her pussy paid the price for her stubbornness. The strands fanned out over her entire mound and inner thighs. “I like it!” she yelled. “No, I love it when you discipline me. I crave it when you don’t.”

“Nicely done. Now embrace the pain and see if you can come.”

He started at the backs of her thighs, slapping one side and then the other. She breathed through the sting, letting the intensity wash over her. She cried out sharply when the strands hit the inside of her left thigh, and started sobbing when they connected on the right.

“Come for me,” Tov ordered as he flogged her aching pussy.

She pressed her face against the bed and yelled in frustration. She was so damn close, but her body refused to let go.

He swatted her again, centering the strands over her clit. Her body pulsed, but the tingling ebbed without releasing. “Come or I will find a harsher implement.”

Desperate to please him, she reached between her thighs and spread her folds, exposing her sensitive clit. “Please.”

“I will hit your hands like that,” he pointed out.

“I know.” She kept herself open, submitting more deeply than ever before. After a brief hesitation, he brought the flogger up between her legs. The sting reached her fingers first then her pussy exploded with sensations. A plaintive cry tore from her throat, but she held the position. He swung again. Needle pricks bit into her folds and her clit detonated with painful pleasure. She screamed into the bedding as she came in shuddering waves. Her hands slipped off her sex and fisted beneath her. The sensations were so intense that they surged into blistering pain before flowing out into tingling bliss.

Her body was still rippling when Tov pushed his cock into her core. He grasped her shoulders and fucked into her fast and

hard. She shifted her arms and braced for him, keeping her body from sliding up the bed. It felt perfect to be taken so roughly after such an intense punishment.

His hips smacked her tender bottom while his cock pounded into her swollen pussy. She came again, the sensations less explosive, yet just as welcome.

Her arousal had just begun to build again when Tov pulled out. "This isn't fair to Merrik."

She extended her arms and looked around for her other mate. Merrik stood at the foot of the bed, absently stroking his cock. Rather than approaching the side of the bed so she could take him in her mouth, he crooked his finger, indicating that she should come to him.

Cara crawled across the bed and raised her arms to Merrik. He picked her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He quickly positioned his cock, then lowered her onto his hard length. She groaned as his thickness filled her. Tov came up behind her and smeared something cool and slick over her other opening. She'd known this was where they were heading ever since they were given permission to claim her. But now that the moment was here, she was uncertain.

Merrik supported her with one arm while he stroked the side of her face. "You are our mate, Cara. This is perfectly natural, maybe even destined."

She smiled. Even if destiny was sentimental nonsense, she loved that he used it to reassure her. "I know, and I want this just as badly as you guys do. It's just intimidating because I've never done it before."

Tov fisted her hair and drew her head back and to the side. "Who does this ass belong to?"

His cock was positioned against her pucker, his intention unmistakable. "You, Master. You and Merrik."

"Then you will relax and let us claim you," he said firmly. "You will do so right now."

Soothed by his control, she responded, "Yes, Master." She rested her head on Merrik's shoulder and pressed her face

against the side of his neck.

Tov advanced with steady pressure, forcing her body to open for him.

Cara remained still, submitted to his will. Her body stretched. The pressure was more intense than usual because of Merrik's presence inside her pussy, but it wasn't really painful. She clutched his shoulders and inhaled deeply, needing his scent to reassure her.

"Almost there," Tov muttered, and then his pelvis pressed against her bottom cheeks.

She exhaled slowly, pleased with herself for taking both of them.

"Our bodies are joined," Merrik told her. "Now we must join our minds."

She wasn't sure what he meant. "Didn't we do that already?"

"The link is active, but we need to anchor it," Merrik explained.

"We're about to make it permanent," Tov added. "This is your last chance to change your mind."

"I have no intention of changing my mind," she insisted, tightening her inner muscles around both of them.

They pushed into her mind together, dragging a moan from her throat. Their energy meshed and melded as the psychic link grew. With mesmerizing skill, Tov wove their beings into one indistinguishable cord. Merrik sealed the cord with raw energy, protecting and securing the design.

Tov lifted her body, sliding her nearly off their cocks. Then he lowered her. The motion was slow and careful, at first. She relaxed within their hold, content to give pleasure to her mates. Tov slid her up and down while Merrik steadied her hips and caressed her breasts.

*You feel so good,* Merrik's deep voice sounded in her mind.

*We have dreamed about this for so long,* Tov added. *We've dreamed about you.*

She couldn't move in this position, could only relax and let them fuck her. Their cocks slid into and out of her body, filling her completely with each stroke. Her pussy was stretched so tight that Merrik's shaft rubbed against her clit continually. Another orgasm quickly built and her pussy fluttered.

"Please, Masters, may I come?" she pleaded when the tingling began.

"Yes," Tov growled against her hair. "Come and keep on coming."

Happy to oblige, she surrendered to the pleasure with the next firm stroke. Her muscles clenched hard enough to make her cry out. Coming was painful with both of them inside her, but that only made the orgasm more intense. She shook and dug her nails into Merrik's shoulders as her first orgasm quickly led to another.

They weren't gentle after that. Holding her in place, they thrust up into her willing body. Hard, deep thrusts that jarred all three of them. Her breasts bounced and she dropped her head back, tightly closing her eyes. She felt consumed, possessed—utterly claimed.

Merrick staggered backward and sat down on the edge of the bed. Tov followed, bending his knees to keep his cock inside her. Then Merrik thrust up into her each time Tov pulled back. The new angle and the opposite motions pushed and pulled sensations through her entire body. She reached back and grabbed Tov's hips while Merrik slid his hands up to her waist.

There was a oneness to this joining that hadn't existed before. Their emotions flowed through her, filling her as completely as their cocks. Longing and instinctual need, they ached to be with her, to teach her and learn from her, to grow old at her side. The richness of their feelings soothed her fears as nothing else could. She surrendered more of herself to them, offering her heart as never before.

"Yes, my love. Open for us. We are one, now and forever." Tov cupped her breasts, squeezing possessively.

Then something shifted inside her mind. Like a circuit suddenly coming to life, the conduit activated as it never had before. She instinctively pulled Merrik's energy into her mind then saturated the ravenous cells all through her body. Tingling sensations streamed down her arms and legs, and her body began to vibrate.

Suddenly, Tov collared the front of her neck with his long, firm fingers. "Pull it back," he ordered. "Do it now."

Her hands and feet felt hot. She glanced down and gasped. Her nails were glowing bright red and smoke rose from her fingers. Her mates had stopped thrusting and Merrik stared up at her with obvious concern.

Tov tightened his fingers, exerting his authority without restricting her breath. "Do not resist me." His being flowed into hers and effortlessly pulled the energy up her arms and legs. Her breasts felt heavy and her pussy grew even wetter, but she was no longer concerned about inadvertently shooting fireballs into Merrik.

"Thank you," she murmured. "I'm back in control."

"No, my love." Tov shifted his hand and kissed the side of her neck. "I am in control."

He was right. She pressed back into his chest, savoring the security of his presence in her mind.

"Ride our cocks," Merrik suggested. "I want to watch you pleasure yourself with our bodies."

Shifting her weight to her knees, she braced her hands against his chest. Then she rolled her hips, using their motion as a pattern for hers. She drove her pussy onto Merrik as she pulled off Tov. Then she reversed and took Tov deep as she slid off Merrik.

It took a few rotations to find the exact angle that let her accomplish both. She abandoned herself to the decadent pleasure, eagerly fucking her mates while their hands roamed over her body. Tov pinched her nipples, sending sparks of pleasure/pain deep into her chest. Merrik rubbed her clit,

stoking the embers of her arousal and focusing her more fully on the physical.

“It feels better when you guys do it,” she decided, but didn’t stop. He’d given her an order, so she did her best to comply.

Merrick chuckled and moved his hands to her hips, resuming his hard thrusting. They moaned in union—all three of them. It was definitely better with the males in control. Soon Tov was driving into her too, reinforcing the conclusion.

Her next orgasm struck without warning. She screamed, shaking violently as her core rippled around Merrik, which tightened her back passage around Tov. Merrik followed her over, spilling his seed in rhythmic spurts as he growled out his pleasure. Tov came a few seconds later, both arms wrapped around her trembling body. She dropped her head back onto his shoulder, still panting harshly.

She couldn’t move and was incapable of thought, but emotions surrounded her. Lingering desire, awe, and joy. And more than a little gratitude. It was impossible to determine where each emotion originated, so she didn’t even try. She made her mates happy, which thrilled her. In fact, everything about this bonding thrilled her. She was content and excited about the future for the first time in years.

Gradually, reality came back into focus as Tov eased back and separated their bodies. “You are amazing, mate. We couldn’t have asked for more than you have given us tonight.”

She looked back at him and smiled.

Merrick stroked her hair, drawing her attention to him. “He’s right. This was more than I ever imagined, and I’ve imagined this forever.”

She smiled at him too. “I never dreamed I would have two mates, but I have no complaints about either of you.”

“Liar,” Tov challenged. “You have plenty of complaints, but we intend to fix that. Now that we are bonded, many of the pressures are removed. We can focus on constructing a life that fulfils all three of us.”

She crawled off Merrik, moaning as his cock slipped free. “You can start by explaining why this had to be done so suddenly.” She turned around and looked at Tov. “Who are we rescuing and how are we going to accomplish it?”

“You know all you need to know for now,” Tov said firmly. “This is our bonding night and we are going to remain focused on each other.”

Cara harrumphed, allowing her lips to form a mostly playful pout. “I will lay awake all night trying to figure it out. You might as well just tell me.”

“He said no,” Merrik reinforced. “Keep it up and your ass cheeks will be nice and red while we enjoy a nice long shower.”

A shower sounded wonderful and the spanking would likely come later. She had no doubt the night’s activities had just begun. “Fine, make me wait. You guys are good at that.” She pivoted on the ball of her foot and headed for the bathroom.

Her mates followed half a step behind.

\* \* \*

Dressed and ready for the day, Cara walked out into the main living area of Tov’s cabin the following morning and found Flora sitting at the table with Tov and Merrik. “This is... unexpected.”

Flora smiled. “I guess that’s better than unwanted.”

“At the risk of sounding rude, what are you doing here?” Cara slipped onto the remaining chair and picked up one of the sandwich-like items stacked on a tray in the middle of the table. She had eaten them before and found them palatable. Altorian bread was more like a pita and she had no idea if the slightly chunky filling contained animal, vegetable, or minerals. She was simply too hungry to care.

“I began my training as part of a power triad,” Flora said casually. “Your power was unleashed but you didn’t have access to your source. Do you understand the difference now?”

Cara shivered. Suddenly having access to Merrik's energy had just about gotten him killed. "I almost lost control when the conduit activated for the first time."

"If it happened while they were claiming you, it's completely understandable. Nadis said you are a quick learner and mastered the skills even faster than I did. Now you simply need to put it all together."

"We're on a spaceship," Cara pointed out. "How do I practice without burning a hole in the hull?"

"One of our cargo bays has been converted into a temporary training facility," Merrik told her.

"It's time for that long-awaited explanation." Tov filled a mug with *wessin* and slid it across the table toward Cara. "Pertinent fact number one, Cylex is a Torretian spy."

"Our bodyguard?" She glanced at Flora, struggling to keep the accusation out of her tone. "Didn't Draven assign him to us? How could he have been so wrong?"

"He wasn't. It was a test. Draven wanted to see if Cylex would pass on the information he learned while guarding you and Raina. He didn't, at least not anything important. And Cylex confessed before he had any idea that Draven knew."

Unsure how she felt about that, Cara turned back to Tov. "What does this have to do with our rescue mission?"

"Jevara gave Cylex three days to bring him one of the newly rescued conduits. If he fails to do so, Jevara will murder Cylex's sister. Anias is being held in the palace to prove to Cylex that Jevara means business."

"Lovely." She shuddered. Anyone who would threaten an innocent was reprehensible. "Can we rid the universe of this bastard while we're there? The more I learn about Jevara, the more convinced I am that death is the only solution."

She'd been looking at Tov, but Merrik responded. "Our mission objective is rescuing the hostages, but we're not ruling anything out."

"You said hostages. Who is the other one?"



“One of Jevara’s pleasure givers is a rebel spy,” Tov explained. “If Jevara realizes why she is really there, he will slit her throat without hesitation. Laidon is so worried about her that he went to Zevon for assistance.”

Zevon ran the Citadel, but she couldn’t place the other name. “Who is Laidon?”

“Leader of the Torretian rebels,” Merrik informed.

“Yeah, I guess that was self-evident.”

“We only have three days to work with, and it takes a good chunk of one of those days to reach Torret,” Flora concluded. “That’s why I’m here. Not only do you need to start functioning as a power triad, but we need to determine if you’re capable of power exchange.”

The entire Citadel was buzzing about Flora’s ability to convert one form of mystic energy into another. “My mother didn’t even qualify as a conduit. What makes you think I have this extremely rare ability?”

“We don’t know for certain. That’s why I’m here. We need to find out what you can and cannot do before you rush into battle.”

Cara stared at her cousin suspiciously. She knew Flora’s mannerisms too well to not recognize bullshit when she heard it. “You’re lying to me. Why are you lying?”

“Every word I just said was true,” Flora objected.

“Then they are a manipulation of the truth. What’s really going on?”

Flora sighed then shook her head. “I’m not supposed to tell you until after I’ve assessed you.”

“Then learn how to lie.”

“Fine,” Flora harrumphed and Cara laughed. They had both learned the sound from their grandmother.

God, it felt good to argue like sisters again. “I really miss you, dork.”

“I miss you too,” Flora said with a smile.

“So tell me what you can,” Cara suggested. She had never been good at waiting for secrets to be revealed. She was too much of a control freak to enjoy being surprised.

“We have reason to believe that the ability is not as rare on Earth as it is in this star system.”

That brought Cara’s eyebrows up and made her lean forward. “Are the rumors true? Are there other conduits hidden on Earth?”

“According to Iris there were fifty-two when they left this star system. She has no idea how many are still alive today.”

That wasn’t surprising. Most rumors had elements of truth woven through them. “And what does this have to do with power exchange?”

Flora’s eyes gleamed with anticipation, as if she were just to reveal that Cara had won the lottery or something equally exciting. “Iris claims that we are all second-level conduits.”

“Okay, I’ll bite,” Cara muttered. “What’s a second-level conduit?”

“Someone born with the ability to be a conduit but also given various gene therapies engineered to make us even more powerful. According to Iris, finding out about the second-level experiments was the reason they ran.”

“Can we really trust any sentence that begins with ‘according to Iris’?”

“Ordinarily, I would have agreed with you, but Zevon’s programmers broke the encryption on files at the Citadel that confirmed a lot of what she claimed. He has launched a full-scale investigation into the program.”

“That is all interesting—and disturbing—but I don’t think it pertains to me. You have Torretian blood from both your parents. Both of my parents are Altorian. In fact, Lezod can trace his bloodline back to the formation of the planet or some such nonsense.”

“There are two other members in your triad.”

The implication in Flora's words made Cara look at Tov and then Merrik. "Race has never been important to me, so I never thought to ask about your origins. Are you guys from one of the other planets?"

"My paternal grandmother was Torretian," Tov told her. "She died before I was born."

It took Merrik longer to respond. His jaw clenched and his gaze suddenly looked more red than usual. "I never knew any of my family members. I have a vague memory of a woman who was likely my mother, but I never knew her name. I was living on the street when Tov found me."

She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. "I'm so sorry."

He pressed back into his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "I do not want your pity. I have never been a victim. I survived on the streets alone and thrived as soon as I was given the opportunity to improve myself. The Citadel analyzed my genetics when I applied for training. I have genetic contributions from all four of the planets in this star system, as well as a species the computer could not identify. In human terms, I am a mutt."

The label made her smile. "I had two dogs while living on Earth. Both were mutts and both were awesome."

Merrik nodded once, but his expression began to relax.

"Anyway," Flora brought Cara's attention back to her. "Because of the unique genetic makeup of your mates, your chances of power exchange are even better than mine."

Cara smiled, excited by the news. "I say we find out."

The males had no objection, so they all made their way to the converted cargo bay. The area was small, but empty so there was nothing to destroy even if one of Cara's fireballs got away from her. Merrik opened the doors, removing the front wall of the room. A modified energy field kept them from being sucked out into space, yet it would allow pulses of energy to pass right through.

“Why don’t you guys get used to how the power triad feels and then I’ll see what else you can do?”

“Would you like a chair or a crate or something?” Cara asked as Flora glanced around the empty bay.

“I’m good.” She simply slid down the wall and sat cross-legged on the deck.

“Do not let her distract you,” Tov warned. “I’m not above disciplining you in front of your cousin.”

Cara placed her hand on his chest and said, “I would rather have you reward me with a nice hard spanking when we return to our cabin.”

His stern expression melted into a sexy smile. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Cara had seen recordings of power triads in action, her cousin’s included, so she knew how it worked. She stood flanked by her mates. Their arms wrapped around her back. Merrik would feed her energy, Tov would control the intensity and speed, but it was her responsibility to shape and target the flow, so she needed her hands free.

“Display target one,” Tov said to the computer and a holo-image appeared in the center of the energy field.

Cara had been burning through targets for weeks. She just had a much larger store of energy to draw from now. But Merrik didn’t just allow her to access his energy, he skillfully fed it to her. She’d intended to create an apple-sized ball, but the pulse that burst from her hand was roughly the size of a Volkswagen Beetle.

Tov chuckled. “I think you are trying a little too hard. This mission calls for subtlety, not demolition.”

“Sorry. I just wasn’t expecting it to be so easy. I’ll tone it down.”

“Easy?” Flora slid back up the wall and moved closer to the newly bonded triad. “That was easy for you?”

Cara shrugged. “All of this has come easily to me. What I lack is control.”

“Then I need to try harder,” Tov said softly. “You are still like a wildfire in my mind.” Tov pushed one of his hands up into her hair, making a loose fist. Then he wrapped his other around her throat, his fingers firm but not hurtful. “Try it again.”

Cara tensed for a moment. The pose was aggressive and so reminiscent of last night that desire washed over her. They had fucked her three times. Each time had been unique and overwhelming. When she finally fell asleep she was—

“Focus,” Tov chided, fingers subtly tightening in her hair.

Centering her mind with a slow, deep breath, she stared at the center of the target. A thin stream of light arced across the room and shot through the bullseye.

“Much better,” Merrik praised.

They practiced for a couple of hours, alternating the size and shape and finally progressing to targets that moved. Cara found it easier to concentrate with the physical reminder of Tov’s control. Each time she became distracted or started to lose control, his fingers tightened and his presence in her mind became inflexible.

“Do you use visualizations?” Flora asked when they took a short break around midmorning.

“I started with visualizations, but I’ve always been a tactical learner.”

“Even if you weren’t programmed for power exchange, your abilities are really impressive.”

Cara smiled, pleased by the praise.

“Are you ready to challenge yourself?”

Cara looked at her mates. “Are we?”

Merrick shrugged. “You two do all the work. I’m just the Energizer Bunny.”

His reference to an Earth ad character was so unexpected that Cara just stared at him in shock. Then she looked at Flora and they both cracked up.

“Was that not the appropriate mascot? Batteries are a primitive energy source. Are they not?”

“No, it was perfect,” Cara assured him. “But it also made me picture you covered in bright pink fur with a bass drum strapped to your belly.”

“The visual was priceless,” Flora agreed.

They got back to work, Flora guiding them through numerous unfamiliar exercises this time. As Cara warned, visualizations were less effective with her than they had been with Flora, so Flora tried a different approach. She eased into Cara’s mind and performed the skill, allowing her to feel it once or twice before Cara attempted it on her own.

“Clearly, you can manifest fire in your sleep,” Flora concluded. “See if you can produce anything else.”

“Guide me through it once,” Cara suggested. “That has worked with everything else.”

Cara felt her cousin slip into her mind and resisted the urge to push her out. It felt natural for Tov and Merrik to flow through her, but it still felt intrusive when anyone else’s energy mixed with hers. Still, they had done this numerous times and Flora was skilled and focused. She quickly demonstrated the transformation then withdrew from Cara’s mind.

Following her cousin’s example, Cara accepted the energy Merrik fed her and let it fill the conduit. Her fingers warmed. She felt Tov’s hand tighten against her throat and she pulled the flow of energy back.

“Water, not fire,” he insisted. “Fire is not challenging for you.”

She smiled because he was right. Manifesting fire was second nature. It required no effort at all. She forced out all the distractions and focused on reproducing the transformation Flora had demonstrated. Cara’s fingers tingled and her palms turned cold. She slowly released the flow of energy and droplets of water beaded on her skin. Merrik pushed another surge of energy into her mind, and Tov carefully controlled it as Cara shaped bigger droplets. They repeated the process over and over until water streamed from her hands.

“I hate you.” Flora pouted good-naturedly. “It took me weeks to control the exchange that well.”

They experimented with the other two elements for the next several hours. With extreme concentration they were able to produce several gusts of air, but they were unable to manifest earth.

“I think I’ll send for my ride,” Flora decided. “What you need right now is practice and experimentation. Oh, make sure you test your current limits before the mission. They will change greatly over time, but you need to know what you can dependably accomplish before you find yourself in danger.”

“Understood,” Tov said as he held out his hand in the human way. “Thank you for your assistance. We accomplished much more with your help than we could have on our own.”

“Anytime.” She shook Tov’s hand, hugged Cara, then shook Merrik’s hand. “Good luck with the rescue. I’ll be praying that everything runs smoothly.” She looked at Cara and smiled. “We’re all confident that you’re ready for your first mission. You’ll be fine.”

Cara accepted the encouragement with a nod, but tension knotted her belly. Flora’s first mission had been to blow up three malfunctioning ships on a largely automated moon. Cara’s triad would be walking into an enemy stronghold and facing off with Jevara himself. She wasn’t sure she would ever be ready for that.

## CHAPTER 9



Tov rubbed his forehead and sighed deeply as Laidon and Cylex started shouting at each other *again*.

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” Cylex snarled, features twisting with resentment.

“You know nothing about the inner workings of the palace,” Laidon countered just as vehemently. “All you have ever done was—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Merrik yelled, coming up out of his seat. “You sound like a couple of adolescent girls fighting over the same boy.” Merrik looked as if he might reach across the table and bash their heads together. And Tov was ready to let him.

Laidon and Cylex had boarded the *Agitarri* earlier that morning. The rescue mission launched tomorrow so this was the final briefing. The entire team sat around a table in the room adjacent to the command center. The space was part office, part conference room, part lounge.

They were now an hour into the briefing and Cylex and Laidon were still arguing about everything. “Do you want to rescue these females or not?” Tov asked impatiently. “Fixating on the past is a waste of time and energy.”

“Have you two ever talked it out?” Cara had barely spoken since they entered the room. She didn’t know what to make of Laidon and she was still angry with Cylex for deceiving her. “Sometimes misconceptions contribute to conflicts and can be easily resolved.”



“There are no misconceptions,” Cylex insisted. “Laidon betrayed me. And when I had just about forgiven him for the first time, he betrayed me again.”

“*I betrayed you?*” Laidon laughed, a harsh, humorless sound. “You became our enemy’s right hand! All I did was—”

“Sorry I asked,” Cara cut in. But instead of reverting to tense silence, she focused on Cylex. “Why did you go to work for Jevara? From what I hear, he is an utter waste of oxygen.”

“I had no choice,” Cylex gritted out between clenched teeth. “The situation I find myself in now is not unique. I have been coerced every step of the way.”

“There are always choices,” Laidon said, though his tone was less provoking than it had been before. “You knew I was about to build an army to resist Jevara. Why didn’t you join me?”

Cylex shook his head. “Turning yourself into a fugitive is a lot easier when you have only yourself to think about.”

Resentment erupted in Laidon’s eyes, but Tov shut it down before the argument could reignite. Motioning Merrik back into his seat, Tov said firmly, “From this moment on, anyone who speaks of anything other than the mission will not participate. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Commander,” Cylex said.

“Please continue,” Laidon urged.

Tov paused to reorganize his thoughts. He had already outlined the basic plan but hadn’t even started to identify possible problems.

“There have been so many interruptions,” Cara said. “Can you please take me through the entire sequence of events before we move on?”

“Of course, mate.” Damn, it felt good to say that word and know that it was true. “The *Agitarri* will remain shielded and on standby during the entire mission. Because he is so recognizable, Laidon will remain aboard. The rest of us will approach the palace in the *Anolox*. As far as the Torretians are concerned, the smaller ship is the only ship.”

“Tov and I will pretend to be Cylex’s private guard as he presents you to Jevara. The emperor is expecting us, so there is no reason to believe we will not be allowed to visit,” Merrik took up where Tov had left off. “Jevara will have you taken to the women’s quarters to be prepared for his pleasure. He has never touched a female until she has gone through this process so the risk to you is minimal.”

She looked wary, but just nodded.

“As soon as you reach the women’s quarters, Shalia and Anias will approach you. They were notified of the plan so this should happen immediately. Once they are near you, signal Laidon and then get as close as possible. The molecular teleporter will stream all three of you onto the *Agitarri* and the ship will jump to hyperspace.”

“I don’t like that part,” she insisted. “We should wait to make sure you guys get out safely before we take off.”

“I agree,” Laidon said. “The females will be safely aboard the warship. I think we should wait until you three are onboard the smaller ship at the very least.”

Tov glanced at Merrik. Using their mate as bait went against every protective instinct they had, but a mission could not succeed unless the assets were used appropriately. “All right. The *Agitarri* stays until we are aboard the *Anolox*.”

“Thank you.” She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

The banked embers of his desire flickered to life, but he forced the feelings back into hibernation. Now was not the time. They would have one more night to indulge their passions before this mission began. “While the palace guards escort you to the women’s quarters, Cylex will tell the emperor that he has new information regarding the other conduits hidden on Earth. Cylex will insist that the contact will only pass information to him, so he needs to head to Earth as soon as possible.”

“Jevara wants as many conduits as he can get his hands on,” Cylex reiterated. “He will believe the story because it is what he wants to believe.”

“That means we should be able to walk out as casually as we walked in, board the *Anolox*, and both ships will jump to hyperspace. If all goes as planned, we will be on our way home before Jevara realizes that it was all a ruse.”

“Jevara will send hunters after you.” Cara looked at Cylex, compassion clouding her gaze. “You will not be safe as long as that bastard is alive.”

“That is true of so many people and most did nothing to deserve his enmity. As Laidon is happy to point out, I did this to myself.”

Her expression hardened and her gaze became fierce as she turned and looked at Tov. “We need to take Jevara out while we have the chance. We might never get this close to him again.”

“We would all be slaughtered where we stood,” Cylex said before Tov could answer. “I want him dead more than you can imagine, but now is not the time.”

“He’s right, Cara,” Laidon said softly. “Obviously, I would not utter those words unless they were true.”

“This is a rescue mission,” Tov stressed. “Anyone who does not remain focused on the mission objectives will endanger everyone else. Now, start listing all the things that could go wrong so we can decide what to do about them.”

“My access code could have been disabled,” Cylex said. The women’s quarters were protected by additional shielding that prevented molecular teleportation into or out of the area. Cylex had a code that allowed him to temporarily disable any security feature. His expression turned thoughtful, but his gaze locked with hers. “If that happens, you, Shalia, and Anias will need to leave the women’s quarters. That means getting past the guards. Shalia is a highly trained soldier, and you have abilities even without your mates, but it won’t be easy.”

“One of the guards assigned to the area is a rebel,” Laidon chimed in. “I’ll make sure he is on duty tomorrow night.”

Tov nodded. “That should help. Keep going. What else should we anticipate?”

For the next two hours they picked apart the plan, discussing anything and everything that could possibly give them trouble. Once they were all convinced that they were as well prepared as possible, Tov insisted that they share a quick meal. He was hoping to build a little camaraderie. Cylex and Laidon did not need to become friends, but they had to function as a team. The first few minutes went smoothly. Then Cara decided to poke the sleeping bear.

“Cylex, you are not allowed to speak while Laidon answers this question. But think about what you are going to say because I’m going to ask you the same question.”

Tov groaned inwardly and reached for her mind. *Leave it alone, love. That’s an order.*

*We’re not in bed or on the mission. And this wound is in serious need of lancing.* Then she quickly asked her question before he could stop her. “Laidon, what *specifically* happened that made you hate Cylex so badly? It’s obvious that you used to be friends.”

She might be right about lancing the wound, but that wasn’t going to keep him from spanking her fabulous ass for ignoring the order.

Laidon’s gaze narrowed and Tov thought he would ignore the question. Instead, Laidon took a deep breath and responded, “I was a palace guard, Cylex was an investigator. After two years in Jevara’s court, we both decided that he was evil incarnate.”

She looked at Cylex and said, “Yes or no. Do you agree with that assessment?”

“Yes.”

Already Cylex’s tone was tight with resentment, so Tov tried again. *Drop the subject. They will not stay civil for long.*

She ignored him. “What happened after you realized that Jevara was evil?”

“We both joined the military. It was a demotion, but we didn’t care. Life within the palace was intolerable.”

Leaving Cylex out of it this time, she prompted Laidon, “Go on.”

“The military wasn’t much better because Jevara was still in control. One of the first missions we were sent on was the one that started the war.”

Tov had been about to put an end to the conversation, but Laidon was revealing facts he’d never heard before. Maybe Cara’s instincts were right and all these two needed was to talk through the conflict.

“That must have been horrific,” she said, sounding sincere. “I’m sorry you had to endure that. What did you do next?”

“I became a rebel, while Cylex—”

“We are talking about you.” He nodded once but did not elaborate. “Are your differences purely ideological? This conflict feels personal to me.”

Cylex stood up so quickly his chair nearly toppled. He glared at Tov and sneered, “Do your orders only apply to me and Laidon? If you want us to stay focused on the mission, you need to muzzle your mate.” Then he stormed from the room before anyone could respond.

“It is doubtful Cylex will ever tell you his side of the story, so I will tell you what he would claim,” Laidon volunteered. “He insists that I used the rebellion to seduce his lover. She was later killed in a raid that I led, so he blames me for her death.” Laidon looked at Cara, his expression turbulent. “I know your intentions were honorable, but some conflicts cannot be resolved.” He nodded to Tov and Merrik, then left the room as well.

“Security code nine-seven-three. Disable the door and activate privacy protocol level one.” Merrik’s expression was hard, yet his eyes were burning.

Tov wasn’t sure if Merrik was just anxious to fuck their mate or if he was reacting to her flagrant disobedience.

Cara nervously licked her lips as she looked at Merrik. “Are you mad at me?”

“Do I have a reason to be?”

She scooted her chair back from the table and stood up. “I know Tov told me to stop, but they really needed to—”

“Excuses are meaningless when it comes to disobedience. Tov is your commanding officer. He stated that anyone who spoke about anything other than the mission would not participate. Did you hear him give that order?”

She sighed and lowered her gaze. “Yes, sir. But the meeting was over.”

“Had you been dismissed?”

Another sigh escaped her mouth, then she muttered, “No, sir.”

“He was attempting to create camaraderie with the meal and you sabotaged his efforts.”

She glanced at Tov, genuine regret shining in her sky-blue eyes. “I’m sorry, sir. You are in charge of this mission. I should have followed your lead.”

Merrick had no intention of letting it go with a simple apology. “What happens when you intentionally disobey us?”

Tov generally instigated her discipline, but Merrik was doing a wonderful job. Tov sat back and watched her squirm.

“I am punished so that I don’t repeat my mistakes.”

She was dressed in faded jeans and a clingy top today. He wasn’t even sure where she had gotten the outfit. Probably her cousin Flora. What interested him was the sturdy leather belt threaded through the loops on the jeans. Using his eyes, he told Merrik that he wanted the belt.

Merrick nodded once then fought back a grin. “Undress completely. Fold each garment and place it on your chair.” She kicked off her shoes and toed off her socks, then unfastened the belt. But when she started to wiggle out of the jeans, Merrik stopped her. “Pull the belt free and hand it to Tov, then continue undressing.”

Her eyes widened and a pleading quality came into her eyes. “I am sorry. I shouldn’t have questioned them about the past. I

knew you didn't want me to do it."

"Then why did you?" Merrik asked sharply. "You were told to stop not once but twice."

She sniffed and Tov realized she was weeping. Concerned, he lowered his mental shields and let her emotions flood his mind. She was frustrated with herself and deeply sad that she had disappointed them already. He fought back the urge to reassure her. That would come after the lesson.

"I asked you a question," Merrik reminded.

"I honestly thought it would help them."

Merrick's tone was cold and autocratic as he ordered, "Undress and get on your knees."

With obvious reluctance, she pulled the belt free of the loops and handed it to Tov. Then she wiggled out of the jeans, pulled the top off over her head, and paused to fold them up. Her undergarments followed and soon she was naked and kneeling in front of Merrik.

"The others did not hear Tov tell you to stop. What they did hear was you disregarding the order he had given all of us. You put him in an impossible situation. Either he refuses to let you go on the mission or he allows you to disobey. Either way, he looks foolish in the eyes of two very difficult soldiers."

"I thought the meeting was over," she argued.

"I did not ask for another excuse. I am explaining why you are about to be punished."

"Yes, sir. I am listening."

"Your mouth has been the source of this problem, so I am going to punish your mouth. You were disrespectful to Tov, so he will punish you when I am finished. Do you understand?"

She looked utterly dejected. "Yes, sir."

It was refreshing to see Merrik exert firm control. He tended to spoil her.

"Open your mouth and slide your legs apart. You do not have permission to touch me or to come."

“Yes, sir.” She quickly licked her lips, then opened her mouth and waited.

Tov’s cock immediately hardened, his balls tight and achy. She was the picture of submission and nothing was more arousing to Tov than Cara’s total surrender. Her eyes were tear-bright and vividly blue, her skin glowing with a lovely pink flush. Her hands rested lightly on her thighs, which were spread so they could see her pussy. Gods, how he wanted to fuck her, to possess the body she was offering so captivatingly.

Merrick casually played with her breasts, handling them with cool indifference. He squeezed the soft mounds and pinched the nipples. All the while she knelt there with her mouth open, expression revealing her misery. She hated being humiliated. She hated it because her body loved it. The more they objectified her, the harder she came, and they all knew it. Intelligent, independent females weren’t supposed to enjoy being used.

“Open your pussy lips for me. Show me that needy hole.”

Her hands trembled as she reached between her thighs and did as she was told.

“You are damp, but not yet dripping. Let’s see if we can change that. Do not let go.” Merrik took out his cock and slipped it into her mouth then tangled his fingers in her hair. His gaze locked with hers as he tilted her head back, then he pushed inward slowly, not stopping until his entire length was down her throat. He held himself there for several cruel seconds before pulling back so she could breathe.

“Bad girls get their faces fucked nice and deep.” He slid in and out, the motion smooth yet ruthless.

Tov rubbed the front of his pants. Merrik didn’t get in these moods often, but it was fun to watch him when he did.

Over and over he dominated her with his cock, controlling her head, her breath, and her building arousal. “Fuck yourself with your fingers, but do not touch your clit. You *do not* have permission to come.”



She made a distressed sound, but obeyed without hesitation. She released her folds and pushed two of her fingers into her passage. The angle of her arm pushed her breasts together and drew Tov's attention to her pebble-hard nipples. Desire rushed through him, threatening his control. His cock ached and his balls pulsed. He needed to be inside her and he didn't care which hole.

Her emotions flowed freely into Tov's mind. She was painfully aroused. The slight fullness of her fingers felt nice, but she needed so much more. Images swirled through her mind, and some were surprisingly dark. He saw her restrained to the bed, strapped down tight while they fucked her. Merrik crouched over her face while Tov pounded into her pussy. This wasn't the first time she had fantasized about being tied down. They would definitely need to explore her fascination with bondage.

Merrik pulled back with a throaty groan and filled her mouth with cum. "Don't swallow yet," he ordered as he withdrew. "I want you to think about the power of your tongue. It can give pleasure or spread chaos. You chose chaos today, even after Tov's warnings."

She nodded, tears escaping the corners of her eyes.

"Now, swallow all of it."

Her throat worked several times before she opened her mouth and whispered, "Thank you, Commander."

He patted her cheek and chuckled. "You can remove your fingers from your pussy, love."

She moved her hands to her thighs and looked up at Tov through tear-spiked lashes.

Tov stood up and looped the belt. "I told you to stop twice. I know you heard me because your reply was disrespectful." He pointed to the table.

She struggled as she rose and moved to the end of the oblong table. More tears escaped as she bent over and lowered her upper body to the tabletop. She moved her feet apart and rolled her hips, tilting her ass up and displaying her pussy.

Tov paused and looked at Merrik. “Print some sort of shirt that fastens down the front.”

Merrick looked curious, but went to the utility printer in the corner to do as Tov asked.

Tov shifted his attention back to their waiting mate. The need to shove his cock inside her almost overrode his need to instruct her, but Merrik was right. This was an important lesson. She could not undermine his orders even if she thought her reason for doing so was valid. They might be lucky enough to pick and choose their involvement, but they were a military unit and needed to behave accordingly. “Do you deserve to be spanked?”

“Yes, sir,” she sobbed. “But can you please use your hand instead of the belt? Straps hurt so badly.”

Rather than offer a verbal response, he simply swung the belt. The swat was light, a warning and a warmup. She gasped, clenching for a second before making herself relax.

“Count for me, mate. I don’t want your mind to wander.”

“One.” Her voice sounded thick and sad.

He swung again, hard enough to make a lovely mark across her pale cheeks.

“Two.” She breathed, rolling to the balls of her feet then back down.

He paused in between each swing, watching her closely, enjoying her struggle.

“Three.” She gasped and wiggled, so he checked her emotions. Merrik had been harsh with her. Was she overwhelmed? She was lost in the painful pleasure, but her biggest challenge was keeping her orgasm at bay. Tov smiled. She was their mate. There was no doubt about it. He should have realized that she was equal to any challenge they threw at her.

The next few swings were a bit harder and she cried out, “Oh, God,” before providing the number.

His cock demanded attention as the scent of her arousal filled the air. He wasn’t sure if he’d make it to their quarters before

he fucked her.

Her juices dribbled onto her inner thigh with the last firm swat.

“Ten,” she yelled, her hips swaying from side to side. Her entire bottom was striped with crimson and Tov was as desperate as she.

“You are so damn beautiful like this.”

“Please,” she sobbed harshly. “Please, fuck me. Master, I need you so badly.”

Powerless to resist, he freed his cock and moved up behind her. “When I have finished fucking you, I expect you to apologize.”

“Of course, Master. I am truly sorry.”

He thrust into her pussy hard, but just rested there as he explained, “You will apologize to Laidon and Cylex so they know you were disciplined.”

“Yes, Master.” Her second agreement was much less enthusiastic.

He took a few moments to soothe her before he began. “You took the correction very well.” He rubbed her back and kissed his way down her spine. “You were so good in fact that I will let you come while I enjoy your tight pussy and ass.”

“Thank you, Master.” A violent shiver passed through her body and she lifted her hips. Clearly, the thought of coming agreed with her.

After a few slow strokes, he rode her fast and hard. Neither of them would have been satisfied if he were gentle. “Come, mate. I want to feel your needy cunt squeeze my cock.”

She lifted into his next thrust and her inner muscles convulsed so hard he nearly lost control and spilled his seed. He paused, waiting for the urgency to abate, then he slid up to her tight back opening. “Naughty girls get fucked in the ass. Were you naughty?”

“Yes. Oh, yes, so naughty.”

He chuckled. Clearly, she wanted this as much as he did. He thrust his entire length into her bottom, dragging a cry of pleasure from his mate. He fucked her ass just as hard as he'd fucked her pussy. She lifted against him, her pleasure bombarding his mind. "Come for me, Cara. And keep on coming."

He slipped his hand between her thighs and rubbed her clit as he thrust into her over and over. She came screaming, so he rubbed some more and made her come even harder.

The firm grip of her ass was bliss and holding back his own orgasm was taking every ounce of control he possessed. His pelvis slapped against her belt-stripped bottom. He moved both hands to her hips and thrust even harder. By the time he finally lost control and filled her full of seed, her voice was hoarse from screaming and he'd lost count of the orgasms he'd forced from her trembling body.

"You are such a good girl." He pulled out and paused to watch his seed slip from her well-fucked ass. It slid along her slit and mixed with the slickness on her inner thighs. "I love you, mate." He bent and kissed the small of her back, then stroked the welts he'd left on her cheeks.

"I love you too."

He helped her up from the table, but stopped her as she reached for her clothes. "Your punishment has one final component. You must apologize."

She released a shuddering sigh. "Yes, Master."

Tov took the shirt from Merrik and helped her fasten the front. It fell to mid-thigh and concealed the details of her figure. Without allowing her to comb her hair or remove his cum from her thighs, he used the access panel in the table to send a comm-request to Laidon.

The rebel leader's image appeared on the wall display, life-sized and interactive. "Is there a problem, sir?" His gaze darted toward Cara then jerked away.

"My mate has something to say to you." He looked down at Cara expectantly.

“I am sorry, Laidon. I had no right to pry into your past, especially when we had been ordered to remain focused on the mission. It will not happen again.”

“Very good,” Tov said. “Now turn around and pull up the shirt so he can see your ass.”

She looked horrified, but slowly turned her back to the camera and drew the shirt up to the waist.

“Cylex will appreciate this more than me, but I understand the need for consistency.”

“We will see you in the morning.” Tov waited until she released the shirt and turned back around before he contacted Cylex.

Cylex nodded approvingly when he saw her punished cheeks. “Thank you, sir. My faith in your leadership has been reinforced.”

“Get some sleep. We need you sharp tomorrow.” Tov deactivated the comm system and told the computer to hibernate. A fresh rush of tears assailed Cara as they walked down the hall to their cabin. “Do you understand why that was necessary?”

“Yes. Your authority as team leader had been challenged. You had no choice but to reestablish it.”

Merrick scanned open the door and they all stepped inside. “We promised to listen to your ideas and allow you as much freedom as possible. There were two exceptions to that commitment. What were they?”

“In bed and on missions.”

“Very good.” Tov kissed her lightly on the mouth. “Then we will talk about this no more.”

Merrick bent and kissed her too.

She dried her tears on the back of her hand, then nodded toward the bathroom. “May I go take a shower?”

“Of course. Take a nice long shower and have a good cry, but I want your attitude restored when you join us in bed.”

“It’s hard to stay mad at you when I’m still giddy from all those orgasms,” she admitted with a reluctant smile. “I’ll be there shortly. Warm up the bed.”

“That was the plan.” He swatted her lightly on the butt. “Get moving!”

“Yes, sir.”

\* \* \*

“Is the entire planet under water?” Cara looked at her mates, at the main display, then at her mates again. The mission team had gathered on the bridge of the *Agitarri* as they emerged from hyper space. Everyone was anxious to get underway, but Cara had never seen anything like the floating city that they were approaching.

“Haven’t you seen images of Torret?” Merrik asked, his brows drawn together.

“I’ve been in this star system less than a month. My research was focused on the Citadel and Altor.”

“The vast majority of Torret is covered in water,” Tov confirmed. “The atmosphere is not breathable either, so all of the cities are domed.” He increased the magnification on the sprawling complex that was their destination. “This is Mercelon, Jevara’s private playground. The cluster, as Torretian cities are known, is actually rather small. Some of the more populous clusters go on for miles.”

Captivated by the unique arrangement, Cara studied the city, or cluster, in silence for a moment. There were six large domes and countless smaller ones. All of the spheres were connected with transparent corridors. She couldn’t help thinking of the hamster habitat she’d had when she was ten, but she kept the comment to herself. “Why did the Torretians settle here if the planet is so inhospitable?” Then a thought occurred to her. Maybe it was only inhospitable to humans. “Can Torretians breathe underwater or something?”

Laidon laughed and moved closer to the command station where Cara was standing with her mates. “I can confirm that we do not breathe underwater, nor do we turn into fish when we are submerged.”

“All of the planets in this star system were colonized by the Sarlian Federation,” Cylex told her. “They intentionally sought out inhospitable environments to see if they could overcome the challenges.”

“Torret might not have landmasses or a breathable atmosphere,” Laidon went on, “but it has other resources. We have harnessed the power of the churning currents, so we never lack for energy. Fish and fast-growing plants mean no one will ever go hungry.”

Cara smiled. Clearly her reaction to his home world had struck a nerve. “I guess it’s easier to live underwater than in space and that’s where the Citadel is.”

“Precisely.” He nodded then stepped back.

“Many of the clusters are quite beautiful,” Tov concluded. “All Torret needs is a better system of government.”

They reached their destination a short time later and then everyone but Laidon transferred to the *Anolox*. It seemed more natural for Cylex to pilot the sleek fighter, so Tov and Merrik sat in the second row of seats. Cara sat beside Cylex, her bound hands resting on her lap.

They were immediately cleared to land, which was a good sign. Still, Cara’s heart was pounding. Cylex flew toward one of the smaller domes. A section of the dome retracted, allowing the ship to slip inside. Cylex landed smoothly on the designated platform and then they were lowered into a much larger area.

Cara looked around in wonder as Cylex led her off the ship. Tov and Merrik, who were both dressed in the matte black uniforms of Citadel guards, were one step behind. She used her excitement to appear anxious and uncertain. A triple row of ships rested to each side a wide aisle. The station wasn’t that different from the lowest level of the Citadel, except for

the transparent outer wall and the schools of fish zipping by at regular intervals.

Cylex grasped her bound wrists and hurried her along. “Stop gawking.”

She made a face at his broad back and earned a chuckle from one of the workers. She was dressed in the loose-fitting garments worn by the trainees at the Citadel. They were anything but flattering, but that worked to her advantage. The last thing she wanted was for Jevara to find her attractive.

They took an open tram to one of the large domes and Cara felt her eyes widen and her jaw drop. “Holy fuck,” she muttered under her breath. The palace was stunning, all done up in ivory and gold. She’d seen images of Versailles and the extravagance of Dubai, not to mention the temples she’d toured in Japan. None of it was this ostentatious. Marble floors gleamed beneath her feet, and every surface seemed to glimmer or shine.

She looked up at Cylex and whispered, “Clearly he’s compensating.”

He coughed, straightened his uniform top, then glared at her. “Such sarcasm will accomplish nothing. I cannot let you go.”

It was a subtle reminder. She wouldn’t be smarting off if this were real. She would be terrified.

They were waved through one security station after another. Cylex was well known in the palace, but most looked at him with fear or hatred, not respect. Merrik and Tov walked along behind them, silent and watchful. If it weren’t for their comforting presence, she would be a lot more afraid.

*Are you okay?* Merrik asked as they turned down a side corridor.

*So far. Ask me again after we’ve spoken with Jevara.*

They reached a massive double-doored entrance flanked by grim-faced guards. They snapped to attention and moved in front of the doors, blocking Cylex’s path.

“I’m expected,” he said impatiently.



“No one enters while armed.” One of the guards pointed to the table beside the door.

“I have never had to disarm before.”

The other guard shrugged. “If you refuse to take off your weapons, we are supposed to take her in alone.”

“And my guards? What good are they to me without their weapons?”

“They are not allowed to enter,” the first guard stressed. “Only you and the female may go inside.”

Cylex tensed, shoulders thrown back. “That is *not* acceptable.”

“Tough shit,” guard one sneered. “The emperor said if you complain we can make your guards return to your ship.”

“We will wait here, sir,” Tov answered before Cylex could respond. “That is much better than the alternative.”

Cylex accepted the decision with a tense nod and unstrapped his weapon’s belt. After laying the device on the table, he grabbed Cara’s arm and motioned toward the doors. The guards shoved them open and Cylex dragged her into the throne room.

She dug in her heels and tugged against his arms, not having to pretend to be terrified. Her heart was thudding double-time within her chest. Her mouth was so dry she couldn’t lick her lips and unshed tears were blurring her vision. Tov and Merrik were supposed to be right behind her, not out in the hall.

*We’re still here, baby,* Tov soothed. *Never doubt it.*

She wasn’t sure what she’d expected a planetary tyrant to look like, but the overly thin, ferret-faced jerk on the throne was not it. His garment—she wasn’t sure what it was called—was elaborately decorated in gold. Apparently, that was his favorite color. The top was loose and open down the front to the middle of his chest. It was too long to be a tunic, but she could see some sort of pants peeking out below.

“Lower your eyes, female,” Jevara snapped. “Your gaze is insulting.”

She immediately lowered her gaze, but her teeth pressed together. She wasn't close enough to make out his eye color, but his wavy hair was blond.

"She is certainly nothing to look at," Jevara decided. "Have you seen her in action?"

"I have. Her skills are progressing more quickly than her cousin's. But her full power will not be unleashed until she is bound to the other two parts of the triad."

"How would you like to be one of her mates?"

A long pause followed as Cylex struggled for the best response. "I would like that very much, sire. Unfortunately, I do not believe we are compatible. I have been in close proximity to her for weeks and do not feel a strong attraction."

"I was under the impression that compatibility was determined by tasting a conduit's pussy. Have you aroused her and tasted her juices?"

"I was posing as her bodyguard, sire. That would never have been allowed."

"Well, it's allowed now. Female, undress. I want a better look at you."

"Sire, may I make a suggestion?" Cylex cut in.

"You don't want to lick her pussy?"

A certain timbre in Jevara's voice made Cara's instinct activate. Something was wrong here. Jevara was toying with Cylex. She wanted to warn him but wasn't sure how. They were not linked telepathically.

"I would enjoy tasting her very much," Cylex insisted, "but I would enjoy it even more if she had been bathed and was restrained on an examination table. If we are compatible, I will likely fuck her immediately. From what I understand the urges are extremely strong."

"I will have her prepared, but I do not want to hear you complain when I take my turn. And because I like you so very much, I will only fuck her ass. That way there will be no doubt about who put a child in her belly."

Cara had been objectified by the males in this star system ever since she arrived, but she had never felt as humiliated as she did at that moment. Then another realization unfurled within her mind. Shalia had been at this monster's mercy for weeks now. Cara shuddered. She did not care what she had to endure. She would get the hostages out of here regardless of what it took.

She heard the doors open and two of the palace guards grasped her upper arms.

"Come, bitch," one snarled as they led her away.

They were different from the two guarding the door. She had no idea where these two had come from.

"I have good news for you, sire," Cylex was saying. "I have a new contact on Earth and she insists that she knows the location of the other conduits."

The door closed behind her so she couldn't hear the rest of the conversation. She didn't dare look at either of her mates, but she carefully shielded her thoughts and warned them, *Jevara doesn't believe a word Cylex is saying. Cylex is in serious trouble.*

*Understood. Get out of here as quickly as possible, Tov stressed. We will do the same.*

After hearing Jevara's plans for her, she didn't have to be told twice.

She walked along between the palace guards. They held her upper arms, but neither dared harm her. She was too valuable and Jevara hadn't played with her yet. Deciding to stall and give her mates enough time to rescue Cylex, she twisted violently, freeing herself from their grasp. She sprinted down the corridor in the opposite direction. She didn't make it far. One of the guards caught her arm and spun her around.

"Do not try that again!" His hand remained locked around her upper arm. "I cannot discipline you, but there are those in the women's quarters who can."

Emboldened by the admission, she went wild, kicking and twisting, then going completely limp. The guards ignored her

struggles and simply raised their arms until she hung suspended between them.

“Fine,” she snarled. “I’ll walk.”

They lowered her until her feet barely touched the floor, but they watched her much more closely as they continued down the corridor.

“How can you work for him? What if I was your mate or your sister?”

“He has fucked my sister and I don’t have a mate.” Fury flashed through the guard’s dark eyes as he spoke the words. “We are all his playthings. There is no help for it. You must endure.”

“That’s ridiculous.” She pulled against their hold, but they dragged her along with effortless ease. “There are those who want to help you, are eager to help. All you have to do is ask.”

“Then ask them to save you from his cock because it will be up your ass before this night is through,” he sneered at her. “Now, shut the fuck up and walk!”

They reached another double door, this one less decorated than the other had been. The hateful guard pounded with his fist, but neither entered with her. Apparently, they weren’t allowed inside the women’s quarters.

Heart thundering, Cara searched the sea of curious faces for the two she had been shown on the ship. *Come on, come on.* She did not want to spend another moment inside this horrible place. Shalia had long, bluish-black hair and lavender eyes. Anias’ hair was golden brown and her eyes were light blue.

Shalia shoved her way through the crowd and hurried toward Cara, dragging Anias along behind her. Shalia was even more beautiful than her image, but gray smudges shadowed her eyes and Cara couldn’t miss the haunted look in their strange purple depths. Anias just looked terrified.

Even before they reached her, Cara sent the signal to Laidon. Shalia and Anias wrapped their arms around her, but nothing happened. Cara sent the signal again, slapping the subdermal trigger repeatedly like the button on an elevator.

“The shields are still up,” Shalia confirmed Cara’s deepest fears.

“Then we fight.”

Shalia nodded as she shifted position, putting Anias behind her.

There were two burly guards blocking the doorway, but it didn’t look like they were armed. Why wouldn’t they have guns? Did they value females so little?

Shalia read her expression and said, “They’re afraid we’ll swarm the guards and take their weapons.”

That just made her job easier. Cara drew energy into the conduit, feeling lost without access to her mates. Suddenly, more energy flowed into her being, vibrant, potent energy. Source energy. Not pausing to analyze the phenomenon, she pelted the guards with sparks of fire, enough to sting and make them flail without catching them on fire.

“Get away from the door or I’ll torch you,” she shouted.

“Sure you will,” the bigger of the two scoffed.

She manifested a condensed ball of fire and pitched it just above his head. “Next one hits you center mass.”

He scurried to one side while his partner did the same.

That was easy. Maybe too easy.

Dismissing the thought, Cara heaved open the door and they ran out into the corridor. She paused, signaling Laidon one last time. It was a long shot, and it didn’t work.

“We’re screwed,” she admitted.

Shalia nodded, then turned and ran down the hallway to their left. Was that the way she’d come? Cara had been too busy arguing with the guards to notice. At that point she’d expected to leave via molecular teleportation.

“Do you know where you’re going?” she called out, fighting hard just to keep up. Shalia was fast, fast and motivated.

“Are your mates still in with Jevara? You are clearly a bonded conduit.”

Smart woman. “Yes, and yes.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere near him,” Anias cried, tugging free of Shalia’s hold.

“Your brother is there too,” Cara told her before the frightened girl could bolt. “Don’t you want to see Cylex?”

Tears streamed down her cheeks, but Anias kept pace from that point on.

Cara heard the weapons long before they reached the throne room. Shalia darted to one side of the double doors while Cara stayed on the other. The fact that she’d paused to assess the scene instead of rushing in blindly said a lot for Shalia’s training and her ability to remain calm.

Peeking into the room, Cara took in the scene with one long glance. Cylex crouched behind a toppled table, while Tov and Merrik were using the throne for cover. The emperor was nowhere in sight, of course. Cowards always made others fight their battles for them.

The combatants seemed evenly matched. Their party would fire and then the guards would volley. The only imbalance was the fact that there were eight guards. Eight against three didn’t seem quite fair.

Cara reached for Merrik. *Do you have more energy for me, love? That was amazing, by the way.*

*Why are you still here?* Tov growled in her mind. *You should be aboard the Agitarri.*

*Shields are still up,* she told him. *Laidon didn’t even respond when we reached the hallway. We’re going to have to fight our way back to the Anolox. It’s our only hope.*

*Fuck. Just fuck!*

The males continued to fire at the guards, but suddenly Cara felt a dizzying surge of energy saturate her system. Better still, she felt Tov’s steely control as she threw the first fireball. Unlike the unarmed guards in the women’s quarters, these

jerks were actively trying to harm her mates so they got good and singed by each burst of energy.

Soon several of the guards turned and started shooting at the doorway.

*Stop holding back, mate, Tov ordered. End this!*

He was right. Each time she tried to discourage them rather than actually harm them, she risked the lives of her team. Pausing to absorb as much energy as she could, she let Tov take control of the conduit. The next pulse burst from her chest rather than her hands and it knocked all eight of the guards off their feet. He forced a second pulse from her and she guided it into the guards' weapons. The alloy heated, fusing until the weapons became useless. Stunned, but still breathing, all eight guards lay there moaning as the three rebels jogged out of the throne room.

Anias flew into Cylex's arms with a happy cry, but a quick hug was all they had time for right now. The danger was not just real, it was compounding.

Cylex pushed his sister behind him and took the lead. He knew the palace better than the others, so no one argued with the move. "We can't risk taking a tram. We would be too vulnerable." Instead he led them down into a dank warren of utility tunnels.

Cara could hear the trams whizzing by overhead, so she knew they were on the right track. It felt like they jogged forever, but that could be because every shadow and noise made her jump. Merrik reached down and took her hand.

"You saved our asses back there." He smiled at her, obviously sensing that she needed the encouragement.

"How did you pass me energy? I thought triads had to be touching to function."

"No clue. I felt your need and just reacted."

"And that last pulse wasn't fire," Tov told her. "I'm nearly certain we manifested air."

Flora had claimed that she and her cousins were a new breed of conduits. Cara was starting to believe it.

Cylex warned them all into silence as they climbed a metal ladder and emerged in the large open room where they'd left the fighter. Cara scanned the rows of ships and spotted the *Anolox*. Clear down at the other end, of course.

"Separate into small groups and just casually walk down there like we belong here," Shalia suggested in a stage whisper.

Cylex didn't look pleased with the suggestion but he nodded.

"You and the girl first," Tov ordered. "Then Merrik and Cara. Shalia and I will bring up the rear."

Cylex took Anias by the hand and led her toward the ship. Merrik waited until he was halfway there before he motioned Cara to begin their trek. Walking normally was agony. Everything inside her wanted to run. Cylex reached the ship and activated the hatch. He helped/threw Anias into the ship then climbed in after her. They were nearly there when a shrill alarm began to pulse and flashing lights spun crazily all around them.

No need for subtlety now. The last four sprinted to the ship and dove on board. Cylex took off a millisecond after the hatch sealed. He flew toward the open end of the room. Massive doors were closing but the progress was mercifully slow. They flew out through the energy field long before the physical barrier prevented their escape.

Fighters swooped toward them from all over the cluster. Several were firing as they flew. None were in range, so Cylex simply ignored them and jumped to hyperspace.

For a long silent moment time seemed to pause. Everyone was struggling to believe that they were still alive and on their way home, or at least on their way to freedom.

"I can't believe we pulled that off," Shalia finally broke the silence. "Where the hell is Laidon?"

"He was on the other ship," Tov told her. "The much larger warship that was going to tear the cluster apart if all else failed."



“I see.” She blew out a shaky breath and pressed her hand over her chest. “And where are we headed now? Obviously, anywhere on Torret is no longer an option.”

“The Citadel,” Merrik told her. “Laidon is hoping to negotiate an alliance with Zevon.”

“If today is any indication, it’s a damn good idea.” She collapsed back into her seat and closed her eyes, but she was smiling.

Anias was sobbing so hard that Cylex turned over the controls to Tov and went back to calm her down. He wrapped his burly arm around her and pulled her against his side. “You’re safe, sis. It’s over. You are safe.”

The tender moment made Cara smile. She hadn’t realized Cylex had it in him. He’d seemed so cold and distant while he was standing guard.

Merrik reached over and intertwined their fingers. “I believe your first mission was an absolute success. You took every complication in stride and saved the asses of your teammates in the process. When Zevon hears about this, he just might give you a medal.”

The ship basically flew itself in hyperspace, so Tov turned around and faced them. He dropped his voice, not wanting to disturb the others. “It all felt a little easy to me. I can’t shake the feeling that we are missing something important.”

Merrik glared at him. “You have always been a pessimist. What could we possibly be missing?”

“I know what he means,” Cara said. “Jevara was screwing with Cylex. It was obvious in his tone and expression. The emperor knew something that we didn’t.”

“I sensed it too,” Cylex interjected, his tone calm and conversational. His sister was more or less asleep. He was trying not to upset her. “I kept waiting for him to order the guards to drag me off to the detention level. I still don’t know why he didn’t.”

Disconcerted by the conversation, Tov checked in with the *Agitarri*. Laidon assured him that everything was fine, that the

Torretians had never given any indication that they were aware of the warship's presence. "We are just being paranoid," Tov concluded. "We spent so long anticipating complications that we can't accept victory."

"What were the mission objectives?" Merrik asked, challenge clear in his tone.

"Rescue the hostages," Tov obliged.

"And did we accomplish that?"

"Check and check," Shalia perked up, pointing at herself and then Anias. "Not only did you get us out of that hellhole, but the rescue was accomplished without significant loss of life."

"I don't think we killed anyone," Merrik clarified.

"And none of us were hurt," Cara added. The mission looked pretty damn good in retrospect.

"Then, no more pessimism. Let's decide how we want to celebrate instead," Merrik suggested.

"All I need to celebrate is the two of you," Cara told them, tenderness and anticipation filling her heart. "But I'd like to go to Tov's estate. Then we can take a nice long bath. Just thinking about that monster makes my skin crawl." Her gaze shot to Shalia as she heard her own words. The poor woman had been Jevara's plaything for weeks. Cara wasn't sure if she was emotionally strong enough to survive that sort of abuse.

Shalia was staring out the window beside her. Hopefully she hadn't heard Cara's careless comment.

"We'll have to make a quick stop at the Citadel, but we should be home long before bedtime," Tov promised her.

"Sounds good. I'd like to say goodbye to Raina anyway. Our departure was really sudden."

"Anything you need, my love. It's yours."

The statement would have been sweet if Merrik had said it. Coming from Tov, it brought tears to her eyes. They had all come so far, had grown so much. And their journey together was just beginning. They were a bonded power triad now, field

tested and proven effective. More important, at least in Cara's opinion, they loved each other deeply and would fight like hell to make each other happy.

She relaxed back into her seat and finally allowed herself to enjoy their first victory.

The End

## AFTERWORD

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## BOOKS OF THE EXCHANGED POWER SERIES

### *Controlled*

When alien warriors landed on Earth and carried her off, they didn't pick Flora Hays at random.

They came for their mate.

She will be stripped bare, spanked until she begs them to claim her, then tamed with one desperate, shattering climax after another as they mount and ravage her.

But she will do more than just take what they give her. The elemental power they wield can be channeled only by one like her, and with their fire burning within her she will fight by their side.

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## BOOKS OF THE KOBAR MATES SERIES

### *Theirs to Punish*

**For Anna Corvina, preparing human females for breeding was just a job.**

Until today...

Today she became the property of three Kobar warriors.

It shouldn't have been possible. She wasn't even supposed to be entered in the lottery, but her sharp tongue got her in trouble with her stern, infuriatingly sexy alien boss and he apparently decided that a painful, humiliating public spanking was not a sufficient reminder of her place.

Anna knows what comes next, and that only makes it more shameful.

Soon she will be bare and on display for her new masters, and then there will be no hiding the arousal glistening on her thighs as she is punished, trained, and used in any way they please.

Soon there will be no denying that her body aches to be bred.

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### *Theirs to Command*

**Yesterday Marissa Scott thought she would never be selected for breeding.**

Today she stands naked before her new masters with her tear-stained cheeks blushing crimson, her bottom burning from a stern reminder of her place, and her helpless arousal on full display.

But it isn't just the thought of three Kobar warriors ravaging her without mercy that terrifies her.

It is what these brutes will do once they've claimed her.

She knows they will share her.

She knows they will use her in ways more shameful than she can imagine.

But worst of all, she knows they will make her beg for all of it.

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### *Theirs to Correct*

**Emily Delacroix ran when she was chosen for breeding. The Kobar captured her anyway.**

Now as she is made to lick her arousal off the fingers of the brute who just spanked her, the only thing more humiliating than her body's shameful betrayal is knowing full well what comes next.

These three fearsome warriors aren't just going to claim and ravage her in every way possible.

They're going to breed her.

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### *Theirs to Tame*

**Victoria Somersby swore she would never submit to the Kobar breeding program.**

Then she was taken captive...

As the leader of the human rebellion, she vowed that no matter how roughly and shamefully these alien brutes might punish, use, and ravage her, she would never truly surrender to them.

But that promise proves hard to keep with her traitorous body bare and bound, her bottom burning from a stern lesson in obedience, and her helpless, desperate need on full display.

She fought so women would not be bred. Now she will beg for it.

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***Theirs to Control***

**To Bailey Mitchell, the Kobar were just test subjects... until she was taken for breeding.**

Studying a huge, intimidatingly sexy alien in the safety of her science lab was one thing. Being carried off over his shoulder with her bottom already burning was something else entirely.

Now her specimen has made himself her master, and he won't be keeping her for his use alone.

She will be punished, claimed, and shamefully ravaged by not one but three Kobar warriors.

Together they will teach her what it means to belong to them.

Then they will breed her.

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## BOOKS OF THE VENTORI MASTERS SERIES

### *Trained for Their Use*

On Earth, Amanda Powell is as good as dead. With her father in way too deep with a ruthless cartel, it is only a matter of time until his enemies come after her. If she wants to stay alive, she has only one choice. She must get off the planet by any means necessary, no matter the price.

In desperation, she offers herself to a pair of Ventori mercenaries in return for safe passage on their ship. For two years, she will be the property of these stern, handsome aliens, and during that time they will have the right to do with her as they please. They will take her hard and often, in the most shameful of ways, and any protest will earn her a painful, humiliating spanking.

But as they set about training Amanda for their use, the two battle-hardened warriors find that their beautiful human slave appeals to them in a way they did not expect, and some deep, primal part of them demands that they claim her as their mate. When the intensity of their need for her grows beyond their control, will Amanda's presence prove catastrophic for everyone involved?

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### *Claimed for Their Use*

Held captive by a brutal drug cartel and facing an uncertain fate, the last thing Jessica Saint Claud expects is to be rescued by two huge, fiercely handsome alien warriors, but the real shock comes when the two Ventori commanders make it clear that she now belongs to them. They will use their beautiful little human as thoroughly as they please, and she will submit or be punished.

To Jessica's surprise, her body responds powerfully to their bold dominance, and it quickly becomes clear that she is an ideal match for them both. As their primal need for her grows stronger, her new owners cannot resist taking her over and over in the most shameful of ways, wringing more pleasure from her naked, quivering body than she would have thought possible.

But when Jessica's impetuous behavior leads the Ventori High Council to demand a demonstration of her suitability as a mate, she soon finds herself blushing crimson as she is stripped bare, soundly spanked, and then claimed publicly by both of her masters at once.

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### *Tamed for Their Use*

Though she is grateful to the Ventori who rescued her from a notorious drug cartel, Nichole Romano is none too pleased at being held in their custody and tested for her compatibility as a mate. Her patience runs out when two huge, handsome warriors carry her off against her will, but despite her fury she is quickly stripped bare and her defiance merely earns her a sound spanking.

Sintar and his brother Tarlon promptly set about training their new mate, but to properly tame the headstrong little human they will need to both punish her sternly and thoroughly for any disobedience and claim her beautiful body hard and often in the most shameful of ways.

Nichole's shock at being treated in such a manner is accompanied by intense, helpless arousal which leaves her confused and humiliated yet begging desperately



for her mates to take her even harder. But can their mastery of her body break down the walls she has built around her heart?

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***Chosen for Their Use***

When Kyla Harms' plan to help her friend escape from the protective custody of the Ventori goes badly awry, she is saved by the intervention of LeAuntiez, the companion, advisor, and bodyguard of Chancellor Bronsen. Upon arriving at the home of the two powerful, stunningly handsome aliens, Kyla quickly discovers that their dwelling is not the only thing they share.

Bron and LeAuntiez have chosen Kyla as their mate, and she soon learns that when she behaves badly they will not hesitate to strip her bare and punish her quivering bottom both inside and out. She is overwhelmed by shameful, desperate need long before the first stroke of the belt lands, and by the time her correction is complete she is begging to be claimed hard and thoroughly.

As her beautiful body is used and enjoyed in every way possible, sometimes by one of her mates and sometimes by both of them at the same time, Kyla cannot deny her intense arousal at being so completely and utterly mastered. But when the scheming of a determined band of enemies puts all of their lives at grave risk, will Bron and LeAuntiez be able to protect their little human?

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***Mastered for Their Use***

Erin Dorati didn't ask for help from the Ventori, and just because they freed her from the human thugs who were holding her captive doesn't mean she's going to put up with being kept in custody by her supposed rescuers. She's certainly not going to just lie there and take it while three of them evaluate her suitability as a mate, but when she nearly perishes in the wastelands during a failed attempt at escape, it is one of the infuriatingly sexy aliens who saves her life.

Urrya, Oseth, and Azra intend to share a female, but when the battle-hardened warriors inform Erin that they have chosen her, she does her best to pretend to hate the idea. Their visits to her dreams tell another story, however, and they quickly set about mastering both her body and her mind, teaching her how pleasurable it can be to surrender herself completely to her mates.

Their bold dominance arouses Erin deeply, and despite her efforts to deny it, her need for them merely increases each time she is stripped bare for a painful, embarrassing correction of her behavior. Her bond with her mates grows stronger as she is claimed ever more thoroughly, sometimes by all three of them at once. But when the alien scourge who nearly wiped out the human race attacks Erin's new home, will she lose everyone she cares about a second time?

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***Kept for Their Use***

Jasmine Aldrich has spent years perfecting the art of enticing and manipulating men, but now two stern, sexy aliens have decided to claim her for themselves and she is totally unprepared for what is in store for her. These huge, handsome brutes aren't just going to strip Jasmine bare and teach her what happens to a naughty little human who teases her mates. They're going to punish, use, and enjoy her beautiful body as thoroughly, as shamefully, and as often as they please.

Kellan and Zilrath come from different worlds, but they plan to share Jasmine all the same, and she will soon learn the hard way that any attempt to play one of them off against the other will end with her cheeks blushing crimson and her bottom burning hot and sore both inside and out.

Despite her best efforts to keep control, as Kellan and Zilrath bring her to one quivering climax after another Jasmine finds herself surrendering ever more completely to their demands. But when a fellow human tries to turn her against them, will she side with her planet or her mates?

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### ***Enslaved for Their Use***

Lorna Mortenson has been looking after her family since her parents died while she was still a teenager, so when her sister is kidnapped by aliens of the rogue Yashonty species she considers it her responsibility to bring her home, even if it means setting herself up to be abducted as well.

Though she succeeds in getting herself taken captive, once Lorna is in Yashonty custody she quickly discovers that she will be not only a prisoner but also a slave, and her body is now the property of two masters who intend to use her as thoroughly and shamefully as they please.

Despite her best efforts to carry out her plan, Lorna's attempts to keep in contact with Earth merely earn her a painful, humiliating punishment. Even with her cheeks blushing crimson and her bottom sore inside and out, however, her helpless arousal is undeniable, and she cannot help begging her masters to claim her properly. But will she ever be more than just a slave to them?

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### ***Captured for Their Use***

Taken prisoner by the fearsome Yashonty, Celeste Mortenson is given a choice. She will be given either to General Ram or to four of his warriors. Ashamed at the thought of being shared, Celeste chooses Ram, but as the battle-hardened brute strips her, spansks her, and claims her hard and thoroughly, she quickly discovers that he can easily make her blush crimson all on his own.

When a Ventori commander arrives to negotiate with Ram and promptly tries to fight him to the death over Celeste, however, it soon becomes clear that she is bonded to them both and she will be shared after all. More disturbing still, both of them have gone into rut and they won't merely be using her in any way they please, they will be mounting her and breeding her like wild beasts.

Though she is shocked to be ravaged in such a humiliating fashion, her body's response to their rough dominance is even more alarming, and with every stern punishment and every shattering climax she can feel the moment she surrenders completely coming closer. But will their love for Celeste bring about an alliance not only between her mates, but between their worlds as well?

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### ***Auctioned for Their Use***

After she is captured by Yashonty marauders, twenty-four-year-old college student Brianne Mortenson is put up for auction. Bare and on display, she blushes crimson as her naked, quivering body is teased and inspected by potential bidders, but the real shock comes when she learns that she has been bought by not one but two huge, intimidatingly sexy alien brutes.

King Eltor of Rylar and his brother General Sarnak have quarreled in the past, but when it comes to taming their newly purchased pet they are of one mind. She will surrender herself utterly and completely to even their most shameful demands or she will be swiftly and sternly punished.

As Brianne's new owners set about mastering her ever more thoroughly their dominance proves more deeply arousing than she would have thought possible, but do they intend to keep her as their mate or is she just a plaything to be used and then discarded when they are done with her?

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## BOOKS OF THE CAPTIVES OF STILOX SERIES

### *Their Defiant Human*

After she defies the leaders of a warlike alien species, beautiful human scientist Andrea Raynier is taken captive by a bold, handsome Stilox warrior named Mal Ton. Fearing that her knowledge could be used to design weapons, Andrea vows never to cooperate, but she quickly discovers that Mal Ton is more than ready to do whatever is needed to compel her obedience.

Andrea soon finds herself naked, bound, and quivering with need as she is sternly punished and thoroughly claimed by Mal Ton and his colleague, Doctor Roark Talbot. But will mastering her body be enough, or will Andrea's captors seek to conquer their defiant human's heart as well?

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### *His Feisty Human*

Mal Ton has spent his life fighting for the survival of his people, often deep behind enemy lines, and he has never been hesitant to properly master a woman if her breathless, quivering surrender to his stern discipline and skillful lovemaking would aid his cause. From the moment he first sets eyes on Lorelle, however, it is obvious that the beautiful, spirited human will be different.

Despite the intense lust brought on by a cleverly-designed alien virus, Lorelle has kept herself under control over the long weeks since she was abducted from Earth. But with each passing hour, her helpless arousal drives her closer to madness, and she has grown desperate by the time rescue arrives at last in the form of a huge, handsome Stilox warrior.

Lorelle's situation is dire, and Mal Ton is left with no choice but to take matters into his own hands. After spanking her bare bottom soundly to overcome her foolish reluctance to submit to the treatment she requires, he claims her hard and thoroughly, bringing her to one shattering climax after another until the need which threatened to consume her is finally satisfied.

The passionate coupling serves its purpose, but Lorelle's desire for her rescuer does not abate. When it becomes clear that an irreversible bond has been formed between them and they are now mated for life, will Mal Ton be prepared to do whatever is necessary to tame his feisty human?

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### *Conquering His Captive*

Three years ago, nanobiologist Cassie Myer was tricked into helping an enemy of her planet's government complete an important mission. When she is suddenly contacted again by the same handsome, boldly dominant seducer, she promises herself that she will not fall for his charms a second time, even after he rescues her from an even more dangerous adversary.

Fane has loved Cassie since the day he met her, but loyalty to his cause has kept him from claiming her... until now. With her unique skills in urgent need among his people, he is left with no choice but to compel her cooperation, even if that means stripping her bare, spanking her thoroughly, and then teasing her beautiful, naked body until helpless, desperate arousal forces her to surrender completely. But will Cassie stay by his side once she is no longer his captive?

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### *Mastering Their Human*

Though Kellan Felix is a military commander not known for his soft side, when he sees Brianna in one of his interrogation rooms naked, vulnerable, and on display, he is all but overwhelmed by an intense need to comfort and protect the beautiful little human. But before he can take Brianna in his arms and claim her as his own, he must learn the truth about her presence on his planet, even if that means spanking her bare bottom hard and thoroughly until she learns to obey.

As a lawyer used to fighting her battles in a courtroom, Brianna is utterly unprepared to be thrust into the midst of a bitter conflict on a far-off world, but in spite of everything her body's reaction to Kellan's bold dominance cannot be denied, and she soon finds herself writhing in ecstasy as the huge, handsome alien warlord brings her to one helpless, shattering climax after another.

The situation becomes more complicated, however, when an ancient being takes an interest in Brianna. To confront this threat to the woman he has already grown to love, Kellan must enlist the aid of an old ally with powerful abilities of his own, but will the two men end up fighting over Brianna or sharing both her body and her heart?

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### *Sharing Sarah*

Though the highly advanced treatment saved her life, Sarah Wylie has been adrift since her condition was cured and she lost her prophetic gift. In desperation, she has experimented with ever more forbidden and dangerous ways of recovering her abilities, but it is only when she is sought out by a being of vast power that she is truly given a chance to fulfil her destiny.

But what this ancient entity demands of her will not be easy. Sarah will be required to surrender her body to be taken long and hard by not one, but two men, who will strip her bare, spank her thoroughly, and bring her to one shameful, quivering climax after another until she has been utterly and undeniably mastered. Only then will she be ready to withstand what must take place.

Though brilliant scientist Allen Lansky and battle-hardened soldier Rayden Kolter could not be more different, they each have a place in their heart for Sarah, and when they are called upon to claim her as theirs and dominate her completely, they stand ready to provide what she needs. But can they put pride and stubbornness aside and join together to do what must be done?

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