

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



Talson's Test

Marie Harte

Book two in the Talson Temptations series.

Zaret Talson 'Or Fal—Z—knows what he wants, and it isn't a mate. But when he's besieged by dreams of a sexy woman scorching the skies when she's not entwined with him and his brother, he fears the dreams are a sign of his future.

His brother looks forward to the threesome—all the fun without the commitment. Z wants to run the other way, because he'll be tied to her if she proves to be his. He's foreseen it.

Adri 'San Fal may look human, but like Z, she's Otra, an alien species not altogether welcome on Earth. Part of a particular clan of Otra who can handle fire, she's blonde, unlike the majority of her kind. Hiding in plain sight is easy—until her past finds her. Desperate to escape, she runs into the one man destined to be her doom, or her salvation.

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Talson's Test

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TALSON'S TEST

Marie Harte

Chapter One

Planet Werfal 7, Year 2109

Zaret Talson 'Or Fal breathed deep, inhaling the sweet fragrance of home. The honeyed spice of blue and pink moonflowers floated on the wind. Soft, silken sheets cradled his body, providing a feeling of safety and security he'd never truly felt on Earth. On Werfal 7, the Otra—what humans called his kind—ruled. They had little fear of outsiders or offworlders, secure in their place in the universe. Unlike the fear-based humans.

Though alike in appearance and basic physiology, the two races could not be more different. He frowned, the recollection of his last trip to the southern sections of Earth intruding into his dreams. The feel of human fists, the press of violence and his own rage threatened to tear his subconscious, so he threw the memory away.

Awash in bliss once more, Z let his mind wander, carried by Otra hands and thoughts stroking him with reassurance. In the dim recesses of his mind, his *psychei*, that psychic part of his consciousness, touched his father and step-mother, his brothers, his friends and relatives spread over short distances. Sensations of peace and harmony filtered through him in a rainbow of soothing darkness.

Feeling cool air over his face and curling warmth under his palms, he smiled and let the dream state take him deeper. Ah. Yes. There she was. Surrounded by long, blonde hair that moved like *veeri* silk with the wind, the woman turned to him, her face marred by a frown. Not the smile he'd anticipated.

Still, his pleasure in just seeing her continued. Such exquisite form. Bountiful breasts tipped with coral-colored nipples. A flat stomach, the soft curve of her hips, the long, lean legs that when parted, bared a full, ripe bud. It would swell between her legs,

just for him, hidden between the feminine folds that grew wet when he kissed her, touched her, fucked her...

She swore. Her violet eyes flashed, going from purple to black. Then fire consumed her. Her entire body lit like a torch, and she stretched her arm toward him, her finger pointing the way as flame leapt the distance to connect them in a fiery blaze.

The stench of burnt silk woke him from sleep.

"Dammit, Z. Wake the hell up." Val's deep voice surprised him, as did the large hand shaking him by the shoulder. "I've been calling your ass for an hour, but you refused to answer. I left three hot women with Romy to save you from yourself, once again."

"Huh?"

"It's me, your favorite brother, braintrust." Val's annoyance should have amused him, but these nightly occurrences worried him. "If you don't snap out of this you're going to burn the house down."

Z blinked, trying to make some sense of it all. Seeing Val's concern, he quickly released the smoking sheets under his palms and sat up. Sweat beaded on his chest and forehead, despite the cool temperature of the room. He focused on Val, working to control his latent *psychei*. "Sorry." A lame apology, but he had trouble meeting Val's gaze. His nocturnal problems had become an almost regular event the past two weeks, and he knew if he didn't get a handle on himself, Val would seek help for him. Whether he wanted it or not.

Z cleared his throat. "What did you say about Romy?"

Their younger brother could be a handful. He gave the appearance of being the quiet and calm one, but they both knew better.

"He told me to keep an eye on you. Had a feeling you needed me." Val snorted. "Of course, that didn't keep *him* from staying with my sexy new friends while I busted my ass coming back to save you."

"You didn't save me." How embarrassing to be rescued *again* by his younger brother. He gave a subtle glance to the burned sheets. He'd have to replace them or his mother would find out. Then she'd tell his father, and he'd be forced to explain.

"Whatever. Did you dream about the blonde again?" Val waited expectantly.

Z didn't want to think about her. Just remembering the beginning of his dream had blood racing to his cock, the flesh turning steel-hard.

Val smirked at the tent growing in Z's lap. "So it was the blonde. Obviously fire wasn't the only thing on your mind. So was she naked again?"

Wishing he'd never shared this particular dream with his brother, Z concentrated on releasing the sexual tension growing within him, a difficult feat when his brother continued to talk about her.

"Big tits, a narrow waist." Val brought his hands closer, approximating her size. "Hair so light it's white. A face that would put Naveeri to shame." The popular actress had been a staple in the 'Or Fal brothers' fantasies for years. "Did you fuck her before she fried you this time?"

"Would you shut the hell up, Val? Just forget I ever mentioned her."

The twinkle in Val's eyes made him groan. "Now, now. Come on, Z. Tell me again. So I'm behind, giving it to her good, and you're what, cheering for me? My own private support group?"

Though the Oтра were much more open about sexuality than humans and considered sharing partners a normal occurrence in certain situations, Z didn't like thinking of the woman with Val. Not unless he was also there, taking the lead.

His cock twitched, and he wanted to throttle his brother for stirring him needlessly. "Shut. Up." An unwilling image formed, that of his brother and him taking the blonde, using her with pleasure, creating new life where before there was none. *Oh hell, what does that mean?*

"I can see fire's the last thing on your mind." Val chuckled and nodded at the straining sheet covering Z's erection. "And now it's on my mind as well. I'm going back out. Try not to burn down the house while I'm gone. In fact, fix the problem in your lap and I guarantee you'll be out before the second moon falls." Val walked to the door and paused. "Seriously, though, Z. Talk to Dad tomorrow, will you? I'm starting to worry about you. Romy said you're getting worse."

"Nobody asked you to interrupt my sleep."

Val tapped his forehead with his little finger, an equivalent to the human's middle finger. "Yeah, right. Good night, loverboy." *Try putting out her flames instead of burning up your sheets*, he added mentally.

Once the door closed, Z stared down at his throbbing erection and tried to put the blonde, the fire, and his infernal nightmares from his mind. He would not be controlled by his dreams or his raging hormones. Hell, if this continued, he might think he'd entered The Testing.

Unnerved at the thought, he hastily denied it. The Testing, a time when male Otra sought their mates. Z was relatively young, thirty-four, and years away from settling down with one person. Hell, his father had been sixty-seven before he'd mated his birth mother. Given their longer lifespan, it only made sense a male should take his time exploring his sexuality before accepting a life partner. Convinced he'd let Val and the nightmare stir him past reason, he put the thought from his mind and concentrated.

True Otra managed their *psychei*. He would use his psychic gift to explore the future, not follow one potential path on the straight and narrow.

With a disgusted groan he turned on his belly, trying to ignore the discomfort between his legs. He thought about his youngest brother's coming nuptials. Technically his half-brother, Roarke was part human and part Otra. Otra from their father, and human from Shea, a woman they all considered their mother. Roarke now made his home on Earth, on the western coast of the States in Port Watch. He and his mate, Jamie,

were perfect for each other—both young and headstrong, physically and mentally compatible.

Which put Z in mind of his compatibility with the woman from his dreams, unable to resist the comparison. In their many dreams, she'd made him come with little effort, but her inclination for burning things to a crisp put a real damper on a tenable future. *Imagine living with a woman who tried to set fire to you nightly.*

Recollections of burned flesh and smoldering metal warred with his raging desire. Yet in the end, desire won out. He couldn't stop thinking about her mouth and those beautiful breasts.

With a reluctant groan, knowing it was the only way to ease into sleep, Z rolled to his back and reached for his cock. He closed his eyes, seeing the blonde over him instead of his hand. She rode him hard, giving no mercy, her sleek walls clasp his shaft as she rose up and down, slamming hard over his cock and arousing his innermost hunger.

Faster and faster his hand moved as the scene changed. Her lips closed over his flesh, her skilled tongue flickering and stabbing with pleasure while her hot mouth took him closer to the edge. He could see her on her knees before him, one of his fists wrapped in her white-blond tresses as he thrust into her mouth, all the way to the back of her throat.

She'd try to assert her dominance, but she'd submit, willingly, to the stronger male. Fucking her mouth, pushing in and out, deeper and harder, he'd take her until she succumbed and drew his seed from him with a moan.

Then suddenly Val was there in his place, fucking her mouth while Z took her from behind. On her hands and knees, she serviced them both, caught between men who knew how to pleasure her. He pistoned inside her hot, wet pussy, finding a home in the erotic haven of her body. Val shuddered and cried out as he came, spurting inside her mouth. Watching her swallow his brother's essence, that which would pave the way for

their future, finally catapulted Z to climax. With a harsh groan he spilled, his orgasm slamming through him with such force he saw stars.

As he came over his hand, the shudders continued, bringing both the temporary relief and peace he sought. He cleaned himself with a nearby shirt and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

The next day, he woke feeling refreshed. Memories of Val in his bedroom were hazy, more like a dream than reality. Relaxed and well-rested, he performed his morning routine in record time, then left to find the rest of his family.

One practice of the humans he'd never understood. They had such loose family ties. In Otra culture, families stayed together until they formed life bonds. Yet even after, they remained close. Though Roarke currently made his home on another planet, he did his best to visit often during the year. Z, Val and Romy still lived in the family home and would until they mated, probably in another twenty to thirty years. Though they took jobs elsewhere, this would be their permanent home until they expanded the family. He wondered if Roarke ever found it lonely to live so far away.

Z entered the kitchen and saw everyone already gathered around the meal table, speaking in English. A concession to Jamie, no doubt. The family normally spoke common tongue, native to the planet and their people.

His father quirked a brow in his direction. "Welcome to the land of the living."

Z ignored the unasked question, seeing the glance that passed between Val and his father. *Dammit.*

He scowled, matching his father's expression. He knew they looked enough alike to be twins. Rhenec Talson 'Or Fal still had the build and mien of a warrior half his age, and he knew it. He never let the rest of them forget it, either.

Roarke, the youngest Talson, cleared his throat, thankfully distracting their father. He wrapped an arm around Jamie, his pretty human, and smiled. "I just wanted to say thanks again to all of you for coming together on such short notice."

"Like we'd miss your wedding," their mother scoffed. Shea could have passed for Otra. Though fully human, she had the dark hair and dark eyes of their kind. Unlike Jamie, whose auburn hair and light brown eyes declared her uniquely human.

"Hell, I can't believe Roarke found a woman who'd take him." Val shook his head. "I still can't believe it."

"Dick," Roarke muttered.

"Roarke Talson, you watch your mouth." Their mother glared.

Everyone laughed as Roarke flushed and stammered an apology, the huge bastard making Jamie and Shea look small.

Z grinned. "You afraid of puny humans, bro?"

"He is if he knows what's good for him." Jamie winked and shot Roarke a naughty smile.

Z liked her. She gave as good as she got. And any woman that could put up with his taciturn brother deserved praise.

"Sweetheart, I'm just sorry you met him first."

Roarke glared at him and opened his mouth as if to say something. But after a glance at their mother, he closed it.

Romy smiled. Quiet, thoughtful and just as much a hell raiser, he had everyone fooled into thinking him harmless. As if. He cast Z an amused glance.

Quit reading my thoughts, Z sent him.

Then stop broadcasting. Romy turned to Roarke. "We're fortunate to be getting such a wonderful sister to add to our family."

Shea hugged Jamie. "So lovely."

"And hot." Val raised his brows. "Come on, Roarke. That's a compliment."

Roarke said something under his breath, and their father interrupted, "Yes, Valis. However well intended, you're acting like—"

"Your father," Shea answered tartly.

Everyone laughed and caught up on the goings on at Port Watch. Roarke mentioned the potential growth at his lane of the family business—Talsen Shipping.

"And with Jamie's help, we're going to expand into the Outer Ports, maybe even hit Werfal 5."

Rhenec snorted. "Good luck with that. Those people are barbarians."

Shea grinned. "Takes one to know one."

"Damn right." His father laughed. "But if I hadn't raised my own barbarians, Roarke never would have seen what a gem his Jamie really is, would you, son?"

Roarke's large grin was worth all the ribbing, and Z considered how happy his brother seemed with the right woman by his side. Though Jamie would never know Selection, an Oтра female's version of The Testing, she complemented his brother. The pair would have happy, healthy children. A vision of two little miniatures of Roarke hit him hard.

"You okay?" his father asked.

Z blinked and shook his head. "Yeah."

"Oh man, I don't even want to know what you just saw," Roarke groaned. "So don't tell me." When Jamie started to ask, he waved her away. "Don't ask."

Feeling smug knowing what the others didn't, Z whistled but said nothing.

"It feels like yesterday you four were still in training pants." Shea sighed.

Jamie laughed, the men complained. Shea always managed to make them feel all of five years old.

Romy reached across Z to grab several sweet fruits from a nearby tray.

"Hey."

"I asked you to pass it before, but you were zoning into the future." Romy didn't apologize. Little bastard never did. "Something we need to talk about, and I'm sorry to bring it up at such a happy occasion."

The family quieted. Romy knew things even Z didn't. Powerful, and growing stronger every day, Romy could do things other Otrá only dreamed of, though he thought his gifts a big secret. "Rumor has it Chartrell Shipping is vying for our contract with New Hattan's Outer Port."

Whew. Business. For a moment, Z had worried Romy might mention something about his troublesome nightmares.

"Yeah, I heard the same thing yesterday," Val added with a frown. "Seems to me they have an uncanny interest in our clients."

"That's the third one this month." Rhenec looked thoughtful.

Z shrugged. "I can look into it, if you want."

Roarke nodded. "You should. I'm getting a bad feeling they're going to make a run at Port Watch. The bastards don't care who they step on to try to one-up us. Not that there's a chance in hell — ah, heck — they can."

"Roarke has a point." Jamie discussed a few options she'd proposed to secure Port Watch's shipping lanes. Smart girl. Z approved, especially when he saw the warm look in his brother's eyes as he regarded her.

"I've a couple ideas about that." Their father frowned. "I think —"

"That's enough," Shea said firmly. "Roarke and Jamie are going to be married tomorrow. And you all want to discuss shipping?"

She glared, and even Jamie flushed.

"I'm sorry, Shea, it's just —"

"No, dear. I'm not upset with you." Shea smiled at Jamie. "You're the daughter I've always wanted. And I told you to call me Mom, just like my boys do."

Jamie beamed. "Okay, Mom."

"Suck up," Val whispered under his breath.

Romy laughed, and their father coughed to muffle his obvious amusement.

Shea would not be deterred. "I want the rest of you to focus solely on tomorrow. My baby boy is getting married."

"Mom." Roarke rolled his eyes.

"Hush, Roarke." Jamie put a finger over his lips. "Your mother deserves this. I can't imagine what it would be like to have a bunch of boys after raising my sisters."

"You will," Z couldn't help teasing.

Roarke swore, and Jamie frowned in confusion.

"Oh, that's wonderful." Shea laughed, then explained. "Zaret sees the future, Jamie. So you're going to have boys, hmm? How many, Z? When?"

Jamie paled, and Z decided to put her mind at ease. "I was just teasing, Mom."

"Asshole." Roarke's epithet reached him at the same time Jamie's wide eyes settled on him.

Roarke had found a keeper with his human mate. Her coloring intrigued Z, the light brown of her eyes as unusual as her flame-colored hair. She was pretty and exotic, so human. Z had detected a hint of *psychei* within her, surprising him. She and his brother suited one another, without a doubt. Their children would be well loved, and handsome as well.

A sudden flash of pale skin and blonde hair, of purple, almost black eyes burned through him. Dream walking, a bridge of fire. Flesh mingled and lovers caressed, audible grunts and groans of raw sex filled his senses. Two men, one woman, joining to share in unimaginable pleasure...

"Zaret!"

He blinked to find everyone staring at him. "What?"

His father glanced pointedly at the fiery tablecloth in front of him, and he hastily dumped his juice over it. Jamie's eyes were huge. Shea looked concerned. The others stared at him in shock, all except for Romy, who nodded.

Fuck.

"Son, we need to talk."

Chapter Two

Z flushed, extremely embarrassed he'd lost control. He'd been dealing with the dreams for months, and the last two weeks had been the hardest. But he'd never come so close to losing it, and in front of his family, no less. What the hell was wrong with him? He was far from ready for The Testing, wasn't he?

Panicked at the thought, he blurted, "It's nothing. I haven't been getting much sleep and I—"

His father's gaze narrowed, and Z wished he had Romy's strength to block out the psychic intrusion. Unfortunately, his talents lay elsewhere. Like in foolish flashes of the future. Creeping tendrils of energy sifted through his mind, like invading ants prickling his skin. He itched, but he couldn't scratch the areas of his brain his father furrowed through.

After what felt like forever, his father retreated.

"I hate that." Z glared.

His father glared back. "How long has this been going on?"

"For at least two weeks," Romy spoke before he could even try to avoid answering.

Traitor, Z pushed the thought.

As usual, Romy ignored him.

"Longer than that," Val added, ignoring Z's anger. "He brought me into a few of his dreams as far as a month ago."

Rhenec's eyes narrowed. "You should have told me, Zaret." He turned to Roarke and Jamie. "I need to talk to my idiot son for a moment. I'll rejoin the festivities soon enough. Please excuse us, but this can't wait. Z, come with me."

"It's no big deal, Dad." Z smiled at Jamie, who looked as confused as the rest of them. "So, Roarke, where are you taking her for —"

Rhenec stood and grabbed Z by the arm, forcibly reminding him his father was still a power to be reckoned with, one who refused to be ignored. At his size, Z rarely had anyone forcing him to do anything. "This shouldn't take long. We'll be in my study, not to be disturbed," he warned, directing his attention to Val and Romy, the family troublemakers.

Romy shrugged. *Good luck, Z. Dad has that look in his eye. You're in it deep.*

Val grinned. *Better you than me. I told you to talk to him.*

"Rhenec, what's going on? Is the boy all right?" Shea looked worried.

He sighed. "I'll tell you about it later, *veyu*. Just, let me deal with this, now."

Shea glowered and promised Rhenec a look that said "we'll talk about this later". "Fine. Jamie, Roarke, let's talk about tomorrow. Boys, you'll stay right here with me. I have a few things I need you to do."

Val and Romy groaned. Trapped, like rats on a sinking ship. Z tried to look smug as he was dragged from the kitchen by a man three times his senior. He followed, resigned to the fact his father knew about his problems and curious as to what Rhenec might know about his dreams.

The moment the study door closed the two in privacy, Rhenec shoved Z into a chair with so much force, Z instinctively braced for battle. Not a weak Otr by any means, Z found himself unable to move from under his father's *psychei*. Caught by eyes that had turned molten silver, Z fought his father's burning stare. But in his struggle to control the sudden maelstrom of his thoughts, he faltered.

Purple eyes burning with heat, white-blond hair shrouding a body made for sin, Val, a ship on fire, metal burning, floating in space, naked breasts, a spark of life balanced, waiting, the future unleashed like a supernova about to explode. Images flashed and a dark, oppressive force pushed him down. The pressure squeezed the breath out of him.

"Zaret, breathe. Breathe deeply, Son."

When he finally caught his breath, he saw his father staring down at him with an odd expression on his face. Rhenec appeared pleased, worried and in awe. "The good news is that you're experiencing something completely normal, though extremely rare."

"I...am?" *What the hell just happened?*

"Very few Otra experience the *tranzwal*, so I never thought to mention it. It's so unique as to be almost forgotten." Rhenec stared at Z thoughtfully. "The last occurrence of a *tranzwal* in our family happened over seven hundred years ago."

"Seven hundred?" Z blinked. "What the hell is a *tranzwal*?"

"Think of it as destiny's guiding hand. The visions, dreams, you've been encountering involve someone very close to your true path. The blonde." His father cleared his throat. "She, ah, you had a keen interest in her, I couldn't help noticing. Not that I blame you." He grinned. "She's the key to your future. Whether that means as a partner in life bond or not, I can't say for sure. She may in fact be the one who introduces you to your mate, or to a future you're meant to live."

Rhenec grew serious. "The fires you've seen and the ability to draw fire while asleep, that troubles me."

"Why? All Otra control the energy within our bodies. I could burn those papers on your desk now if I wanted to."

"With a massive amount of concentration, yes, because it's not as strong in you as your ability to foresee the future. But the flames from your dream aren't within you. They come from someone else. That encounter with the ship bothers me."

"Piracy," Z offered. He'd been thinking about the battle he'd envisioned since he'd begun having the dreams. "The space explosions are results of battle. It's piracy, Dad. I know it."

Rhenec frowned. "That's not good news, especially with the reports I've been getting about our rivals." He shook his head. "But that's not the point. I don't think you recognized it, but I did. The port you saw the woman in, the one where you first see

her? It's the site of our newest acquisition in New Hattan. I was thinking about placing you on the next freighter heading there, but now I know I will."

"New Hattan? I don't know. Roarke's wedding is tomorrow, and after that I have pressing matters at the docs on Port Nule."

"Of course you'll attend the wedding." His father spoke over him as if Z didn't have an option on what to do. "After that, you're going to New Hattan. I want you there to look into things."

He grimaced. "I thought Roarke was handling the Earth-bound freight."

"In Port Watch, yes. But in New Hattan, I want one of our own."

"Dad—"

"No. You're going."

Though he was a grown man, a warrior and independent businessman in his own right, Z still answered to someone higher. Rhenec Talson 'Or Fal was still the head of the household, as well as his boss. "Shit."

"Exactly. You have to make this right. The Testing is upon you."

Z blanched. He didn't want a mate, and certainly not one from an alien species. He needed a female capable of sating his *psychei* as well as his lusts, a woman to understand Oтра needs. One with dark hair and dark eyes that would turn silver when she accessed her full *psychei*, someone to match him in every way. Much as he loved Shea, he knew what she and his father shared was a far cry from the bond Rhenec and his birth mother once had.

"This can't be The Testing. The woman is blonde. She's not our kind."

"She's Oтра," his father disagreed.

Z didn't believe him. "Since when?"

"There is one very sheltered, extremely private clan on the outer skirts of civilization. The 'San Fal. Those barbarians I mentioned earlier? Your blonde is one of

the most unique females of our species. I'd almost say I envy you." A large grin appeared on his father's face, and he began laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, Zaret. Blessings upon you, son. The 'San Fal are known for their hostility, ferocity and sheer stubbornness. Their women are warriors in their own right, pyrokinetics."

"Great." Unnerved that his father might actually be correct about The Testing, Z tried to ignore his instinctual excitement at thoughts of a woman tough enough to handle him. An Oтра who could manipulate fire?

"If you're facing her fire, prepare to get burned." Rhenec's eyes flashed.

Z thought to the woman and breathed deep to still the echoes of hunger. "I'm not going through The Testing."

"Oh yes, you are," his father said with satisfaction. "And it's about time. I'm tired of you playing around."

"Dad, I'm a hell of a lot younger than you were before you met my mother."

"Times are different now. We're no longer at war. There's no need to put off a family, to sacrifice your happiness for the good of the colonies." Rhenec frowned. "The Testing is a gift, Zaret. It paired me with Isira, the great life bond I'll never forget. Even now a part of her lives on in me and Shea." At Z's surprise, his father nodded. "Of course your mother approved. It was her spirit that guided me to Shea in the first place."

"I didn't know that."

"Yes." Rhenec smiled warmly. "But don't change the subject. Your Testing is an important part of who you are. The fact you're pulling this woman's fire through the *tranzwal* tells me she's most likely yours, son. Embrace it."

Z scowled. "You just told me she's part of a bunch of aggressive barbarians, that I should prepare to get burned."

"But a burn can be a good thing, especially coming from a woman like that." His father grinned. "I may be older than you, but I know beauty and strength when I see it. That one will handle you."

"That's what I'm afraid of," he muttered.

His father laughed. They rose and headed toward the door. Rhenec clapped him on the back. "Oh, one other thing."

"Hell. What now?"

"Val has to go with you. I think you know that."

The fucking Testing. "Please tell me you're not saying what I think you're saying." Two men to prepare the woman for mating. Sexual intimacy to broaden the match, to ensure the way for the future to begin.

His father looked pleased. "You couldn't ask for a better *eda* than Val."

"Yeah." Z's already sour mood grew worse. His brother would tease the shit out of him about this mess. He knew it. "He's more than ready to find the blonde and get started." *More than I am. Of course, Val doesn't have to life bond with her. He just has to align her psychei with mine and enjoy her sweet pussy.* "So if she bonds with him and me, then there'll be no mistake, right?" The potential to be wrong about his future existed. Maybe his father was right; the blonde would lead him on his true path. She didn't necessarily need to be a part of it.

He had a hard time thinking about no more sex with other women. No more partying, no more fun. A mate and children were sure to follow. *Shit. Not now.* He was in the prime of his life.

His father nodded. "Don't fight it, son. Look at Roarke. He's happy with Jamie."

"Yeah, but they fit. And he's different than we are."

"Yes, but he's not that different. He'll live a good two to three hundred years. His *psychei's* strong."

"And Jamie?"

"Her too. As long as the love is there, the bond will see them joined. The only difference between Roarke's mate and yours will be the lack of an *eda*. And of course their young may or may not have a full *psychei*."

An *eda*, so that when the time came to produce young, the female would be fertile, her womb receptive to Oтра offspring. Hell, there went his mind again. Kids.

"I envy you the journey, Zaret. Such fun in the hunting." Only a bonded male would think of hunting down a mate as fun.

"Thanks a lot." But thinking about finally slaking his hunger for the lusty blonde had Z's body humming with anticipation, despite his desire to remain free of an Oтра wife. "Now let's focus on happier things. Like *Roarke's* wedding."

* * * * *

New Hattan, Earth

Adri 'San Fal, or Adrienne Sanfal, as she called herself when in New Hattan among the humans, pulled a visor down over her eyes to catch the flying strands of hair obscuring her vision. She had a hard enough time trying to navigate on a hovercycle at low speed, but in the splattering wind and rain blowing around her face, her hair added yet another impairment to driving safely.

As she buzzed through the busy streets, she let the exhilaration of freedom overtake her. Just her against the elements, a woman in charge of her destiny and her destination as she made several turns to join her best friend for a drink.

No men telling her what to do. No arranged mating, forced life bond, or that dreaded Selection. A time in an Oтра woman's life to be dreaded. Females only entered Selection at certain periods in their lives — when psychically matured and ready to mate, or when ready to procreate — neither of which she intended to do anytime soon.

The only drawback of New Hattan, and Earth, that she could see were the humans' intolerance of her kind. Progress had been made in the last few decades. Oтра were no

longer hunted down for sport, and laws had been passed adding their species to the American Constitution, at least. Other parts of the world had different stands on an alien presence in their midst, but the northeastern states were the most liberal. Hence her sojourn to New Hattan.

Revving her bike into an open parking space a block from the bar, she parked and removed her helmet. A few minutes later, she spotted Sheila standing outside the noisy bar.

"Finally." Sheila sighed with exasperation. "I've been waiting for ten minutes. I had to turn down three offers for a blowjob and two cops wanting to haul my ass downtown for soliciting."

Adri laughed. "Maybe if you dressed a little more conservatively, that wouldn't be an issue." Sheila's skirt cupped her ass, the low cut of her blouse called attention to her breasts, barely covered by a lacy demibra, and her fuck-me pumps gave her an added few inches, putting her chest at eye level with most men. Her overdone mascara and intense makeup only added to her problems.

"Suck it, Sanfal. You know I was on a story."

"Did you get what you needed?"

"I sure the hell did. First drink's on me."

The pair entered the bar after being waved through by Miguel, the bouncer. Though more an Irish Pub than club, the bar attracted a diverse crowd, especially on a Friday night. Criminals, cops, straight, gay, human and Oтра, O'Malley's catered to a good time had by one and all, where people could come to forget about their problems for a while. A strict no-fighting rule was enforced by the many bouncers in the place, which accounted for the high number of Oтра normally in attendance.

Adri didn't mind it so much. She kept an ear out about the new Oтра in town, careful to steer clear of anyone who even sounded like a 'San Fal while listening for news from home. And with her looks, no one ever associated her with the aliens.

Blonde hair, violet eyes she tried to pass off as dark blue, and a normal, even temperament.

After they passed Miguel, Sheila glanced over her shoulder at him once then pulled Adri with her toward their usual spot at the end of the bar. Bless Tony, but he'd kept their seats open for them.

"Don't think I haven't forgiven you for breaking Miguel's heart."

Not this again. "Sheila, I told you not to set me up on any more blind dates. I don't want a man right now." *At least, not that man. I want the one with dark hair and wickedly bright eyes, the one who knows how to give me what I need.* Her screwed-up libido went crazy when she remembered her vivid dreams. *He does not exist.*

"That's so not normal." Sheila grabbed Adri's helmet and tucked it under her chair on the floor. With a critical eye, she studied Adri from top to bottom. "You have the hair pulled back, which only emphasizes that killer bone structure. Nice boobs hidden behind that leather jacket, and a tight ass no one can see in those baggy jeans."

"Sheila, you're embarrassing." Her friend's assessment garnered the attention of several men nearby. To them, she frowned. "Ignore her."

"I don't know," one of them said to another. "I like her ass."

The other guy laughed and suggested something that made her blush.

"I knew you'd never done it that way," Sheila said in a low voice, just having to comment on the rude guy's words about anal. "I have. It's comfortable if you have the right guy, and the right prep involved."

Adri groaned. "Would you shut up about sex and men already?" She looked for the bartender and frantically waved him over. "Tony, two beers."

"Coming up."

She turned back to Sheila. "I think all this undercover work as a prostitute has skewed your view on sex."

They discussed Sheila's current story through one beer and into another. "I've worked my ass off on this assignment. Who knew shipping news could be so deliciously dirty?"

Adri agreed. "I never would have pegged the western sector as the center for corruption in town. Good work. Finch will have to give you a raise now."

"So you'd think," Sheila grumbled. "If that dickhead makes me proofread one more trade story I'm gonna puke. He's just using those as an excuse to corner me in his office. Like I can't see through that."

Adri grinned. "Oh, I don't know. I think the little snot likes you."

"Please. Now you're making me sick."

"Come on, Sheila. You know you want him. All that arrogance is just a cover for a dominant male. Isn't that what women want these days?"

"Who knows?" Sheila tipped back her bottle. "Hell. What do you want?"

"Me?" A vision of her dream man, the giant with glowing eyes and strength in spades came rushing back. "Nothing."

"Bull. You're hung up on a guy. I know it."

"Why are we talking about me? You're the one with the interesting love life."

"Well, I'd have a better one if I looked like you. No, don't deny it. You know it's true."

"Do not." She hated when Sheila brought up her looks.

"Oh? I have much more luck with men when I'm blonde. Like you. When I..." She leaned closer. "Pad my bra to get bigger breasts. Like you."

Adri couldn't help laughing. "Please. It's a fact guys seem to like blondes and boobs. So what?"

The bartender stopped by and she tried to pay the tab, but Tony refused their money. "Ladies' Night."

"Nice of O'Malleys to finally show some appreciation for the people who draw most of his customers." Adri nodded at the thought of spending less to drink more and decided she'd get tanked, or as tanked as she was able. She had the weekend off for a change, and wanted to be as *humanly* irresponsible about her free time as possible. Damn but she loved it here. "Well, I'm waiting on your argument, Sheila."

"Just admit I'm right, Adrienne." Sheila finished the rest of her beer and signaled to Tony for another. "I'm going to get sloshed tonight. So we'll add drunk to my blonde-and-boobs resume. Then I'll get lucky. Maybe even pick up a studly alien on my way home."

Adri shook her head. Otra were nothing but trouble.

"I saw that. You don't like them, do you? Or is it just men you don't like? You've been hurt in the past, I know it. Tell me." Sheila nodded in sympathy.

"God, Sheila. You have such an imagination tonight. I told you before I'm just picky. When the right man comes along, I'll know it." *Or the right men. Why have I been seeing two men in my dreams lately instead of that one? Please don't tell me I've somehow phased into Selection.*

"So it's just a matter of not finding Mr. Right? That's my excuse." Sheila snorted with laughter. "Or so I keep telling my mother. She's killing me. Every time I come home, another one of her friends knows a nice young man looking for a wife. Looking to get laid, more like it."

Adri shook her head. "So cynical for one so young."

"Pot calling kettle, hello. You're younger than I am. What are you? Twenty-four, twenty-five?"

More like forty-six. Otra matured slower than humans, and when they hit their prime, their aging nearly stopped. When Adri had reached twenty-two, her cell growth had involuntarily slowed. But for all she knew about the worlds beyond Werfal 5, she might as well have been a naïve teenager. "Yeah, twenty-five." A nice number.

"So is your dad bugging you?" Her mother had died during Adri's fifth year, leaving her alone at home with a father and six brothers, not to mention all her cousins and uncles. Too many men spouting too many orders. Was it any wonder she'd needed to escape the insanity?

"Not so much anymore." *Not since I took off nine months ago in the dead of night. And if I'm lucky and keep a low profile, he won't find me anytime soon.* "But you know how parents get. They want the best for us, they just don't always ask us what we want."

"So what do you want?"

"Freedom," came the automatic response. A truth she could only hope wouldn't be taken away from her before she was ready to go back. If she ever was.

Chapter Three

Adri smiled at her friend and ordered them a round of shots, interested in having some fun for a change. They pounded back a few drinks then returned to their previous conversation. "I'm not ready to settle down," Adri admitted. "I like it here in New Hattan, on my own." *On Earth.*

As if Sheila had read her mind, she asked, "Have you ever thought about moving offworld? My cousin regularly shuttles to Werfal 6 and back, and she loves it." Sheila leaned close. "She said until you've had Otra sex, you don't know what you're missing. Ever thought of doing it with one of them?"

I am one of them. "Uh, not really." She wanted to accuse Sheila of having sex on the brain, but lately Adri did too. She hungered, she craved, and her dreams made it worse. She wanted to confide in her friend but couldn't take the chance.

As much as she loved Sheila, Adri was aware of Sheila's shortcomings. The woman gossiped like nobody's business. If word reached Adri's peers about a blonde Otra, she knew the information would get out. And sooner rather than later, 'San Fal warriors would find her and whisk her back home into an arranged mating. Like she'd told Sheila, her father's idea about what would make her happy wasn't hers.

"I would do one in a heartbeat," Sheila continued. "Ever since I broke up with Justin, I've been wondering what it would be like. You know, they say Miguel has a little Otra blood in him."

"So why don't *you* go out with him?"

"But he's Justin's best friend. Don't you think that's tacky?"

"Considering you caught Justin with his secretary, I don't think tacky applies. I think if you're that into him, you should try him on for size. Isn't it you who always says, 'try before you buy'?"

"Applies to shoes *and* men." Sheila grinned dopily, unable to handle her alcohol.

"You're such a lightweight." Adri finished her third beer, completely levelheaded. Unfortunately, alcohol didn't affect her kind the way it did humans. For Adri to become the tiniest bit drunk, she'd have to imbibe almost a keg of beer. She didn't want to think about the calories loaded in a keg. Despite her high metabolism, she had to work out to maintain her figure.

Sheila turned the topic from sex to the office, and soon the two were laughing about their associates. "You'll never guess what I heard from Randy today," she slurred.

"Tell me."

"Remember." She paused to lower her voice. "This is hush, hush." Which came out as *shush shush*.

"Randy?"

"Oh yeah. Well, his brother works at the top of Chartrell Shipping. I heard they're starting a war."

"With who?" Otra ran Chartrell shipping, then again, Otra ran all offworld charters. Humans hadn't yet revolutionized the technology to pilot through the wormholes bridging the distance between their galaxies.

"Against Talson Shipping. Randy said his brother said his friend said they want control of the Outer Port. And they're going to do whatever they have to to get it."

Good lord, getting to the bottom of Sheila's gossip gave her a headache. But she had to admit that was interesting news. The first Adri had heard all day. "Why would Chartrell do that? They have controlling interest in the southeast and just a toehold here. Why make enemies with Talson Shipping? Heck, the Talsons handle their lanes so well they have controlling interests in the Northeast and Northwest. They've decimated any and all competition both on- and offworld."

"You got me. Frankly, I'm more interested in what they say about the Talsons themselves."

“Oh?”

Adri had heard a lot about the reclusive shipping magnates. Mostly speculation about Roarke Talson’s heritage—human or alien? Neither seemed to matter, considering the man ran the Port Watch docks like a small scale dictator. He got results. Professional and timely, he’d ensured the Port Watch lane of Talson Shipping had a spotless reputation. Of the other Talsons, no one knew that much. Only that in Otralore, the ‘Or Fal had a hard reputation as legendary warriors who didn’t bow to defeat.

For all their business prowess, information on the family members was incredibly hard to come by. But not, apparently, for Sheila. “Yeah. Talk about tall, dark and handsome.” She burped politely, ever the lady, and Adri grinned. “It’s not funny. Talson Shipping is not a laughing matter.” Her perfect imitation of their boss sent Adri into laughter.

Sheila grinned, and they shared a moment.

“I forget sometimes I’ve only been here for six months. Seems like we’ve known each other forever.” And Adri meant that. She would always treasure this time spent in New Hattan with Sheila and her other friends. Women who thought and spoke of everything, from emotions to shared feelings to dating and sex. She loved being able to discuss datable men. Nearly everyone she knew at home had some tie to her father. So annoying.

The ability to experience life without constraint was like a drug she never wanted to do without. Addictive, it would be hard to break when her father or brothers found her and dragged her home. As they eventually would.

“Anyway, the Talsons are all really tall, really dark and to-die-for handsome. In fact...” Sheila paused to take another swig of her beer and pointed at the reflection off the mirror in front of them. “Those two could pass for Talsons right now. Really intense, except for the blond hair.”

Blond hair? A shiver worked up her spine. Adri slowly turned around. Unlike most typical Otralore, who possessed long, black hair, black eyes that continually flashed to

silver and back, and the handsome faces and thick bodies of men used to warring with other colonies, the men Sheila pointed at stole Adri's breath.

In them, she saw her doom.

Not Talsons, but two of her father's warriors and her most persistent pursuers, Rand and Jace 'San Fal. The blond barbarians from Werfal 5, as her clan was typically known. It should have been impossible; she hadn't heard a whisper of 'San Fal movement in months, nowhere near New Hattan at least. Yet the longer she stared, the more certain she became that they'd come for her. When they spied her, neither looked particularly surprised.

The two men drew steadily closer, their eyes glued to her. Without a word, Adri looked for Tony. "Tony, see that Sheila gets home safe, okay?"

The minute the bartender nodded, Adri raced into the crowd, pleased to find it so packed tonight. She hurried for an exit. No way in hell would she go back home yet. If they thought otherwise, they'd soon learn their mistake. She ran out the back door and down an alley. Then she crossed another street and bypassed two more crowded bars. But when she scooted down the back alley toward her apartment, she ran smack into trouble she didn't need — two men who'd recently starred in her dreams.

But it was the taller of the two that struck her more.

He'd haunted her for months.

Z caught the slender blonde by the waist to steady her. But before he could say anything, she gasped and froze, and he saw her clearly for the first time.

His hands tightened on her waist, and he swore he felt her warm beneath his palms. Heat and desire blossomed in an instant. Her eyes darkened from deep indigo to black striated with silver and, if he wasn't mistaken, a hint of red burned in her pupils. So fucking sexy.

And too damn familiar. "*Shit.*"

"No kidding," she rasped. She locked gazes with him, and no one and nothing existed but the two of them.

"Z? What the hell, man?" Val's voice came as if from a great distance.

"You there, release the female." More strange voices, people that didn't belong around this female—*his* female.

Instinct grabbed hold of him and wouldn't let go. He broke his stare from the woman in his arms and turned to watch the intruders.

Val took a few steps back from him. "Holy shit, Z. You're *on fire*."

He ignored Val and glared at the males advancing. "Get the fuck out of here. We're busy." And just as soon as he could, he planned to be busier—deep inside the woman in his arms.

The men paused, large warriors intent on capturing the prize Z now held. Both men had fair hair, like the female. And like her, both flared with power. Otra.

She frowned at them. "Jace, Rand, go home."

One of them shook his head and withdrew a long blade from behind his back. He held it in his hands, and in seconds it turned from silver to red, blazing with heat. "No. You're mine, Adri. I was promised you."

The other male frowned. "I was promised her. Tearn said you'd accepted your place as my second."

The men could argue until the next moon, but Z didn't care. He let go of Adri to point a hand in their direction, not sure what he meant to do. But a surge of anger balled in his chest, and he released a startling psychic blast by fisting his hand then releasing the energy in their direction.

A bolt of fire washed from his palm and engulfed the men. They yelled, but didn't burn from the fire. Apparently the 'San Fal were immune to the element. Terrific.

Something about handling fire himself bothered him, but the pounding in his cock stole every thought but one. "Val, see to them, would you? I'm busy here."

Val gaped, staring from the men still caught in a ball of fire to Z pushing the woman – Adri – against the closest brick wall. Z *had* to fuck her or he'd lose his mind.

"You never fail to surprise me, big brother." Val shook his head and walked down the alley that remained empty. No doubt those nearby wanted nothing to do with dangerous aliens invading their precious city.

Z disliked the feel of so many humans so close to him and his prize. He couldn't understand how Roarke lived on this planet. Then he looked down at the woman who had yet to protest his hold, and his thoughts fled. For months he'd felt her body clasp his, had lost himself and his seed in her honeyed depths. Her eyes had called to him, warning and challenging, all with the promise of the future buried deep.

He didn't want The Testing. Didn't want her to be a receptacle for his lust. But she shifted and her scent hit him, the powerful perfume of fiery arousal. Her flesh burned his fingers, making them itch to touch more, to experience all of her.

Though he was tall, she fit his frame, her head coming to just below his chin. A veritable goddess, golden all over. But those eyes... The dark purple flickered with silver, and she licked her lips, hungry for just what he had to give her, he could only hope.

Nothing mattered but tasting her, touching her. *Fucking* her.

He put what he'd heard together. "Adri 'San Fal?"

She nodded. "Your name?" she whispered as she raised her hands to circle his neck.

The feel of her palms broke him, turning him to ash as he drew closer. "Zaret Talson 'Or Fal. Z."

The moment she grazed his raging erection, he groaned and closed his eyes, trying to capture a hold on the discipline that threatened to desert him.

"Kiss me, Z." Adri's breath washed over his neck and chin.

"I'm going to do more than that," he admitted. "And I don't care who's watching."

"Watching –?"

He caught her lips with his, lost in her taste as he swam deeper into the lust drowning him in need. Soft lips, powerful energy, sexy curves. Her tits were so full against his chest, her waist narrow, her belly flat as he ground against her. Z needed to come, to shove inside her hot cunt and fill her.

"Shit, Z. Here?"

He tuned out Val's voice as he worked Adri's pants down her hips and ripped her shirt and bra apart. A startled moan met his ears, but he didn't care.

"Fuck. You're beautiful." He sucked a hard nipple into his mouth, distantly aware of her clothing burning away. Nothing mattered but fucking her, and he sucked hard, pleased when she cried out and clutched his head.

As much as he wanted to explore her, to wait and plunder all her depths, Z teetered dangerously on the verge of coming. He yanked open the fastening on his pants and pushed them open to reveal his cock. Wet at the slit, his shaft needed ease, now.

He kissed her as he reached between her legs, needing to know if she could take him now. His fingers slid between her folds, gliding through her arousal with ease. He pulled away and lifted her in his hands.

"Oh, Stars." She groaned. "Your hands are so hot."

"That's it. Wrap those legs around my waist and angle up. I want that pussy ready for me. Now, Adri. Oh fuck, I'm gonna come hard up in you."

"Please. I'm burning. I need you." Her flesh warmed even more as she spoke.

He couldn't be sure of anything but her, lost to a hunger so intense he could no longer function. He felt on fire, and he had a hard time seeing through the blaze of need encompassing his entire being.

He pulled her closer to his body and sighed when her tits rubbed his chest. He could feel her right through the thin t-shirt he wore, and the pleasure scorched him. "That's it. Right there, *veyu*. Perfect," he purred as he nudged her pussy with his cockhead. Seating himself at the mouth of her sex, he pushed deeper. The hot moisture

beckoned him, and then she nipped his neck, the sharp bite of pain undoing his discipline.

"Do it, damn you."

He helplessly obeyed. Surging fast, he shoved through the tight walls of her cunt and came to the very heart of her womb. He couldn't move any deeper, and joined so close, he could feel every part of her *psyche* flaring, waking as she met his.

"Yes. Oh, please." She arched her neck back, and he zoomed in on her pulse as he began hammering inside her.

Hard, fast jabs, seeking the pleasure they both needed. The fulfillment to ease her and to begin The Testing.

Fucking her against the wall felt both dirty and incredibly arousing. Lost in the haze of need and beyond caring about anything, he pounded into her, past her startled cry as she came, through one brutal orgasm that whipped through him with the force of a firestorm, and into another.

His cock took on a life of its own as he fucked Adri, pouring himself into her, physically and psychically. She murmured his name, drugged on their union like him. The fire around them burned brighter, but the heat eased as she clenched around him again, pulling more cum from his rock-hard cock. As if he hadn't already once filled her, he raged and swelled, swearing as she milked him of the rest of his seed.

Panting as he started to come down, he gradually grew aware of their place in the alley, and of the scorched wall and ground around them.

"You done yet?" Val called from a distance away.

His brother stood with his back to them at the nearby entrance to the alley. Anyone could have walked by and seen them mindlessly fucking, but Val had been standing by to protect him. *Them*—Z corrected, and looked down into Adri's eyes once more.

No longer dark, but lighter and almost purple, the woman glowed with deep satisfaction.

"You're beautiful." He spoke no less than the truth. She was femininity personified.

He pulled back but remained joined to her, still inside her. From this vantage he could see her full breasts, the berry-red nipples beaded and flushed. Her lips looked swollen and slick, and he bent to kiss her again.

"Dammit," Val swore. "I can't block people from nearing forever, Z. And those assholes with the swords are pushing hard against my hold."

Z reluctantly disengaged from Adri, wishing he could go right back for another round. Which was crazy. Even Otrá needed a short respite after coming that hard. Yet he wanted to fuck her again. And again. And again.

Then he blinked at her. "Where did your clothes go?" He looked down at himself, still fully dressed. But around them... He swore. "What's this black soot all over the place?"

She flushed but didn't cross her arms over herself or try to hide her body. "Blame yourself. You pulled my fire, you big oaf."

"Oaf?" He should have been more irritated with her sudden pique, but he found himself wanting to soothe her. To please her.

The woman suddenly scowling at him as if he were the enemy packed an undeniable wallop. Her hair, those eyes, that figure that curved in all the right places with legs that went on forever. Hell, he wanted to fuck her again so bad he had trouble breathing. Bizarre feelings for a man used to getting any woman he wanted at the crook of a finger.

"What did you do to me?" She looked around her, then down the alley at Val. "Is this some weird trick?"

"What the hell, woman? You ran into me, sucked me into your sexual fantasies, and then —"

"And then you took my fire away! You used it on Jace and Rand, which I can't fault you for. But then you used it on *me*. What were you thinking? You torched my clothes, you idiot." Her anger only made her more attractive.

He narrowed his eyes. Sexy or not, the woman couldn't talk to him like that without repercussions. "Wait a second, sweetheart. It's not my fault you're hard up for some cock. You were the one coming on to me. Those big eyes, those full lips. Hell, those nipples have been hard the entire time I've been standing here. It's like you're almost begging me to bite them."

The need to do so rode him hard until she punched him in the chest. Not that she'd hurt him, but she'd distracted him before he did something equally stupid. Like fuck her again, in the middle of downtown New Hattan in a dirty alley. Christ.

"Ow." She cradled her hand against her chest. "How about you quit being an ass for a minute. Give me your shirt, at least. You made a mess in me. I cannot *believe* I let you do that."

He didn't like the way she made him feel. Caught between wanting to fuck her and spank her, his frustration grew. "Fine." He handed her a spare tissue from his pocket that she quickly used to clean herself and tossed to the ground, amidst the other trash. Then he pulled off his shirt and put it over her head. She swam in it, but at least she was covered. The hem of the shirt came to her mid-thigh, but if she bent over, he'd see everything. He swallowed hard and looked over his shoulder at Val again.

How the hell could he explain this? Better yet, how could he convince his brother not to tell anyone about this? Ever? "Hey, Val, can you go grab the vehicle and swing by to pick us up? I'll meet you at the front of this building." He nodded to the lone door in the building behind him, then wanted to smack himself. Val hadn't seen anything because he had the good sense to keep his eyes fixed on danger around them. Threats from outside the alley, especially from the 'San Fal assholes.

Z mentally sent him a picture of what he intended.

"Okay." Val sighed, then sent back with his mind, I'm so fucking hard it's taking all I can not to come while people pass us by looking mighty curious. The 'San Fal dicks are still on fire and stuck in a closet on the other side of the street. But as soon as I release my telekinetic hold, they're gonna bust free. And brother, catching a glimpse of you fucking that gorgeous woman is something I don't think I can forget. In an alley? What were you thinking? And bro, you were on fire.

Val hurried away from the alley. Z yanked Adri into his arms, conscious of her bare feet, and shoved through a huge door in the building next to them. He ignored her sputtering and cries to be let go. To Val, he answered, *I'm not sure of anything right now. I think I'm caught in The Testing. She said I pulled her fire. All I know is that I was in heaven a few minutes ago, and it's feeling like I'm going to get there again. Real soon. We need to get somewhere private, like yesterday.*

Yeah, that or get arrested. I see lights coming down the street. Hole up in the building until you see the hovercraft, all right?

Z sent him a mental affirmation.

"Hey, big man." Adri tried to squirm free, to no avail. "Where are we going?"

He grinned down at her, surprised to find himself amused. "Big man. I like that."

She rolled her eyes, but he could see her fighting a smile.

"Has it struck you as odd that we just fucked like crazy in the alley, and I want another go around? You?"

"Yes," she hissed, and he suddenly noticed her cheeks had turned a bright red. "And I wish I didn't know why. But in case you haven't paid attention to the hoots and hollering around us, this building is full of nosy people."

He blinked and glanced around him, seeing several people standing around in the hallway, surrounded by thumping music and a large keg. What appeared to be a residential building in the midst of a house party. More than one interested male stared at Adri in wide-eyed wonder. "Shit."

"Yeah, genius, you said that before."

He moved faster through the hallway. "In all my dreams, you never had a smart mouth. You set crap on fire, set *me* on fire, but you never mouthed off."

"Too bad this isn't a dream."

"No kidding." He spotted a tough-looking dude covered in tats, saw the obvious interest in the guy's leer, and growled at him. The guy must have seen the real threat in Z's eyes, because he backed from his open door and into his place, fast. "Hell, we need to move your pretty ass before I have to fight more guys wanting a piece of you."

She said something he couldn't quite make out.

Hurry up. I'm here. Val's mental prodding relieved him.

"Finally. He's here."

"No kidding. I heard him."

"You heard Val?" He tapped his forehead. "In here?"

"I'm Otra. Of course I heard him."

Interesting, and something else they'd need to look into once they found a safe place to recuperate. Though telepathic by nature, most Otra needed an invitation to share in non-familiar pathways. That Adri had so easily jumped into his communication with Val bothered him.

"If we're lucky, we can avoid the police, the 'San Fal after you, and the humans gaping at your fine ass. But I'm telling you right now, if I don't get you out of my arms soon, I'm going to fuck you again right here, in the middle of the damn party."

Her eyes darkend. "Right. So what are you waiting for? Move faster."

They exited the front door into Val's waiting vehicle.

One dilemma solved, at least. Except once Z joined her in the car and Val raced away, back toward their hotel, the confines of the vehicle made everything more...intimate.

Chapter Four

Adri clamped her jaw shut, too aware of the half-naked giant next to her. Oh God, he was so incredibly handsome. All muscle. Shiny silver eyes, a square jaw. And that cock... Huge and thick, he'd fit inside her as if made for her. Her mouth watered, and she had the horrified notion she might have entered Selection not for a mate, but to beget children.

Talk about an end to any possibility of freedom. Someday she wanted a male and young, but not anytime soon.

"Adri, I swear, if you keep doing that I won't be responsible for my actions."

Even his low, gravelly voice aroused her. She coughed to clear her throat. "Doing what?"

He leaned closer. "You're looking at my cock and licking your lips. Baby, I can put two and two together like the next guy. You keep asking for it, you're going to get it."

His erection, prominent through his trousers, promised definite enjoyment if she chose to go for it. Which she might if she couldn't stop thinking with her libido. Just more proof she'd entered Selection. Dammit.

She deliberately turned away from him and watched the city pass by as they sped...somewhere. "Where are we going?"

"To our hotel," the man from the front, Val, responded.

"Who *are* you two?"

"A nice question to be asking now." Z shifted in the seat next to her, and it took all her control not to turn back to him, peel his pants apart, and take him to the back of her throat. "I told you before. I'm Z. That's my younger brother, Val, driving us."

Val turned completely around, having obviously set the autopilot. His gaze lingered over her body, caressing her without touching. "Hello, gorgeous. So you're the one he's been dreaming about, hmm?"

"What exactly does that mean?" And should she confess she'd had a few dreams of her own?

"I wish I knew what it meant," Z muttered. "From what I know, you're important to me."

"But we've never met." Not in real life, before today.

"My father called it the *tranzwal*. You're my..." He paused.

"Your what?" He'd called her *veyu* before, which meant "beloved". But from what she'd observed, men often spoke love words when impassioned. Great Suns, but she'd just met this man. How could she burn for his body? More importantly, he wasn't 'San Fal. So how had he contained her fire?

"You're going to be important in my life, okay?" He didn't sound happy about the fact. "In fact, I think you're probably going to introduce me to my *iriu*."

"Yeah? I'd say you two already met," Val said drily and turned back around. "Dumb ass."

"Shut up, Val." Z ran a hand through his thick hair. "Dammit. I'm not ready for The Testing."

"Oh hell. No. No way." Adri moved as far to the door, away from Z, as she could. "You're in The Testing?" That in addition to her Selection would add up to no good. "I don't want a mate. Not yet. I just escaped Werfal 5 a few months ago. I'm finally free and liking my life. I don't need you to complicate it."

Z frowned, his light gray eyes growing even lighter. She felt his *psychei* warm hers, as if the threads of their beings had formed a bond growing stronger with each passing minute. "Yeah, well, back at ya, sexy. I didn't ask for The Testing, but now that it's here, you're a part of it. Just go along and we'll get through this. I'm sure you're not the one."

"Oh?" And why couldn't she be his mate? Wasn't she smart enough? Pretty enough? Good enough? She blinked. Smart enough? Hell no, because an intelligent woman wouldn't be annoyed he didn't want her, she'd be *thrilled*. The fact she wanted to claim him as more than a great lay worried the hell out of her. Her Selection plus his Testing could only mean a bad end — *a permanent mating plus children*.

"Val's my *eda*." His second, the male necessary to find Z's mate. And she'd been dreaming about him too. "Just let him feel you out, we'll rule out our future together and go our separate ways." Yet he sounded unsure. She wondered if he knew more than he'd said. "Then you can find your mate, and I'll muddle along avoiding mine."

She snorted. "Not every female wants a male."

In the rearview mirror, Val's grin widened. "You like females?"

She flushed when Z looked more than interested as well. "No. I just don't want to settle down any time soon. I spent the past decades trapped beyond civilization in the outer colonies. I don't need anything but time and space to be my own woman. When I'm ready, I'll find my *iriu* and make a family."

Val shook his head. "You've been in New Hattan too long. That's human thinking." He turned to look at them. His eyes narrowed on his brother before shifting back to her. "When the universe speaks, Otra listen. Once you enter Selection, you'll have to heed your *psychei*. You won't be able to stop." Just what she was afraid of.

Val continued. "And Z, much as you don't want to admit it, buddy, you've been dreaming about her for far too long for this to be a coincidence. What? You think we just randomly ran into her?"

Z's mouth thinned. "And saved her ass from those two goons." He glared down at her. "What the hell was that about, anyway?"

She sighed. Might as well tell them. Not as if they'd want anything to do with her father, only the biggest criminal in the colonies. "I wanted to come to Earth, but Father wouldn't let me. He's been on my case to find a mate and carry on the family tradition.

The 'San Fal females are strongest when it comes to handling fire. And he wants a new generation to carry on the family pride." She made a face.

Z mirrored her disgust. "Yeah, well, I'm the oldest. My mother and father are constantly on my ass to procreate. And then my baby brother got married. Not Val, the youngest of us."

"How many are you?"

"Four. I'm the oldest. Roarke is the youngest, the one who just got married. Then there's Val and Romy. Plenty of other Talsons to have kids for the parents. You'd think the pressure would be off me, but now my mother is all over *me* to step up. Like we have to go in order now that Roarke's taken care of." He snorted.

She nodded, empathizing. For a moment, they shared a common space, dwelling deep within each other's minds. Comfort and ease made her feel almost loved... "Get out of my head!" She nearly fell on the floor in her haste to get some distance.

He blinked and shook his head hard. "Dammit. You get out of *my* head. I don't need this now. I'm too young for permanence. And stop laughing, Val. This isn't funny."

Val continued to chuckle. "It really is. You have the hottest chick I've ever seen, barely dressed beside you. You just did her, in public, *twice*. And yeah, I felt the psychic back blast of your orgasms, you asshole. Do you really think you're going to sit there and pretend she's not yours? Maybe you are the dumbest one in the family."

Adri felt Z's anger, and to her shock, his rage sparked her lust anew. Not an answering anger, but a need to soothe the savage Otr brewing for a fight. And she knew of no better way than pleasure.

"Oh man. I don't want to do this." Yet she did. The closer she drew to him, on her knees as she crawled between his legs, the more open his mind became.

Val groaned. "Come on, you two. Not again. I almost came in my pants last time."

A glance behind her showed Val turned back around and slumped down in his seat, the top of his head barely visible to her.

Z's lids shuttered his eyes, and his gaze lingered on her mouth. "Not a good idea, Adri." Yet he encouraged her by running his fingers through her hair and cupping her cheek. His thumb caressed her lips. "You are so fucking sexy. I can't stop imagining coming all over those lips. I want to watch you suck me dry."

Val cursed him.

She blew out a breath. She couldn't deny her Selection any longer. Not when she experienced such overwhelming desire to claim Z as her own. He'd taken her fire. *Shit*. She knew what that meant. But did he? "I know what you want. You think it, and I see it in my head. It's like we've done this before."

"In my dreams we have," he confessed.

"Hell. I-I can't help it." She slowly unfastened his pants and pulled apart the enclosure holding the fly together. His gaze felt like a physical touch, so intent it made her burn.

He cupped her chin. "I know, baby. And I'm sorry. Because I can't help it either." He helped her scoot his pants down, and then he was right there in front of her. That thick girth begging her to taste.

She placed her hands on his muscular thighs to steady herself and leaned close. The male scent of him was clean, overpowering and addictive. She licked up and down his long shaft, gratified when he groaned and arched his hips, pushing toward her mouth.

"That's it. Oh Stars. I'm trying like hell to keep a lid on this, Adri. But I can't." The admission cost him. She could feel his attempt to rebel, could sense the strain in him to resist her, and she accepted her need to relieve him. In helping him, she'd help herself. Her *psychei* promised repletion if she'd stop fighting so hard and just believe.

Believe in what, she wasn't yet sure. But then he pushed her head down, and she could no longer think.

His cockhead slipped between her lips and surged inside her mouth. Slowly, steadily, the whole of him continued to press forward until he hit the back of her throat. But Adri didn't gag as she normally would have. Her body seemed to have accepted all of him. They fit together, the rightness of his presence inside her lighting her own need to come.

She experienced his desire. And it stoked her own. They drew closer to climax together, awash in his feelings, in her pleasure in tasting him.

He moaned her name. "I want to come down your throat, and I know you want to swallow me. I'm feeling your needs, *iriu*. Your taste and touch, and my own through your senses. Fuck me, but I've never sensed anything like this in my life."

He'd called her *iriu* — his other half, his mate. A man she didn't know had started to reach out and secure ties between them. Peace, need and arousal mixed, until she couldn't sense a difference between their feelings, between him and her.

She sucked on his cock, bobbing slowly over his shaft while she played with his sac, the way she could feel he wanted her to. His balls were hard and tight, and she grazed his flesh with the pricks of her nails, captivated when he stiffened and suddenly released in her mouth on a moan. His orgasm slid over him like honey, slow, sure, and thick. No rush of seed, but a milking sensation of bliss that didn't diminish his urgency to finally cease this torment.

He continued to come, and her vaginal walls clamped down in response. He tasted like *kiwai*, an island treat that never failed to please her. Tart yet with a bite of sweet, the fruit had always filled her with energy and purpose. Like Z.

He tugged her gently by the hair, and she let him fall from her mouth. Before she could move, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Tasting himself on her lips, she imagined. His fingers sought and plunged into her pussy, and he groaned.

"You came hard. But I bet you were empty, weren't you? You need me. You need us." He nodded to Val. "I can't deny it anymore, Adri. I'm in The Testing, and you're a part of this."

She groaned. "And I'm in Selection. I can feel it."

He stilled. "You are?"

"Yes," she said, miserable, because her body still ached for him. "I've been dreaming about you and Val for a while, but I've been seeing you for months."

"In your dreams," he murmured, searching for something in her face.

She sighed. "In my dreams. But I'm not ready for a mate. Not yet."

"Me neither." He kissed her again. "But my body doesn't know that. I need to fuck you again, Adri."

"And I'm a mess," Val added from the front seat, sounding disgruntled. "I came in my pants thanks to you two. Now we have to find some way to sneak into the hotel and finish this. Because I'll be damned if I'm going to shoot inside anything but your *iriu* next time, Z."

Adri and Z froze in each other's arms. The reality that they were in fact mates almost certain.

"I'm not really your *iriu*." She wanted him to agree with her.

He nodded. "Probably not. We haven't courted. Not even been introduced to each other." He paused. "But maybe." His gaze centered on her lips.

"Maybe isn't a yes."

"Right." He lowered his hands to her hips and squeezed. "We really need to get into our room. Damn, but you're making it hard to think of anything but sex. And if you're in Selection, you know why."

She felt herself flush. "I know. I can't help it. My damn hormones are all over the place." She sounded defensive, and that embarrassed her.

To her surprise, Z squeezed a hug out of her. "It's okay. Not your fault."

"Then why wasn't I running to the 'San Fal sent to bring me back? Jace and Rand are strong men. They'd give me powerful progeny."

He squeezed her, and his eyes darkened. Now black orbs striated with silver, he broadcast his anger as well as his desire. "I'll give you powerful progeny. Me, Adri 'San Fal. No one else," he hissed.

Before he could do more, the vehicle braked hard. They jerked and she would have fallen if Z's large hands hadn't been wrapped around her body. Then Val was there, out of the car and dragging them with him to the back entrance of the hotel. The travel to their room on the thirtieth floor took place in seconds. Lost in Z's gaze, she had a hard time focusing on anything but him.

Images of his family, his homeworld, and her in myriad sexual fantasies swirled in his mind. And then, there. Three laughing children, two boys and one girl, dancing around them as they picnicked with her father on Werfal 5...

She gasped and pulled out of his arms with a strength she hadn't known she possessed. Not surprised to see her arms ablaze, she held her hands in front of her, defensive and bewildered.

"What the hell was that?" She blinked, not sure when they'd entered this private suite. An expensive room filled with crystal sculptures, plush furniture and a banquet of food available at the touch of a button. She recognized a high-end gourmet transponder that teleported food for those who could afford it.

"That was my gift," Z explained and took a step closer. "I'm clairvoyant. And if what I saw comes to pass, then you are indeed my *iriu*."

"But not until I pave the way for your future," Val said. He removed his shirt with precise movements, affected by their desire. "There can be no surer sign that you're meant to be together. His Testing, your Selection. If you were truly in heat, you'd have taken the 'San Fal warriors after you. But you chose my brother. Why is that, do you think?"

He joined Z, both brothers shirtless and exposing too much muscle for a simple woman to see without wanting to touch.

She clenched her hands into balls and the fire burned hotter. “Just...*wait*. I know this is normal for us, but I... My mother died when I was young. My father raised me with several brothers, but none of them knew much about Selection. From what I’ve learned, Selection is a time of extreme imbalance, when my system seeks to provide me with a mate, or when I’m at the optimum readiness to bear a child.”

She blew out a harsh breath. “I don’t want a mate or children just now. So how do I get rid of this?”

Z’s gaze fixed to her breasts like beacons of need.

“You’re not helping,” she snapped at him.

“Well, fuck. Your tits are perfect, and I’m a man.” He glared at her, his eyes flashing with energy. “I don’t want a mate any more than you do. I like women. I like dating or fucking whenever and whoever I want to. You’re going to tie me down.”

“Right. So stop this.” She waved at him, and trails of fire lit up the already bright room. She could see too much of the Talsons. Val’s excited stare, his erection tenting his trousers. Z’s incredibly broad chest, the muscles bunched at his biceps. He towered over her and even his brother, huge and imposing. And his cock strained at his pants, thick and filling as she spoke.

She could feel his arousal in the center of her womb, and she ached to feel him inside her once more.

“I can’t stop *this*,” Z bit out. “No matter how much I might want to.” Something inside him seemed to change. “You’re mine, *iriu*. Time to face the truth.”

The certainty of his words filled her, a psychic sense of fatality, a surety that she’d found the part of herself missing for so long.

“I feel it.” Val moaned. “You’re coming together. Your bonds are tightening, but there’s still a gap I need to bridge for you. Let me. Come on, you two. This hurts.”

Z blinked and turned away from her. “It does?”

Concerned for Val as well, but not sure if she was feeling Z's overwhelming emotions or her own, she took a step in his direction. The fire on her arms faded. "You hurt, Val?"

He lunged for her, capturing her in his arms.

"Get off me!"

"Yeah, it hurts. My cock is harder than steel. Now time to put out my fires, you little demon. Friggin' 'San Fal. Figures you'd find a ballbuster for a mate, Z." Val shook his head. "Now let's get this done, shall we?"

Chapter Five

Z had to admit, watching her struggle aroused all of his energies. His brother ripped the shirt off her, leaving her good and naked. Then his hands were on her, trying to contain her explosive escape before she reached the door. Val grabbed her and before Z could stop them, the pair fell to the ground.

Adri still struggled, but she was slowing down. And Val... Val's attention shifted to other, more pleasant things.

"Wh-what—Oh, please. Don't." Adri gasped as Val closed his mouth around her nipple and sucked. "Don't stop."

Z grinned and took off his clothes. Not that he worried Val would ever force himself on an unwilling woman, but it had looked touch and go for a moment there. Except he'd known, deep down, that Adri fought herself, not them.

The stubborn blonde had a fool notion he wanted a slave, someone to order around, to serve him. Though the idea of her on her knees, sucking him to bliss, had merit, he had no use for a woman who couldn't think for herself. Though he didn't know her, he wanted to know her.

Small details about the woman, her wants and needs, had seeped into his brain while they spent time together. They had more than sexual chemistry in common; he also sensed a core of integrity in her. Their *psychei* allowed him to look deep inside her, and had he more of a mind to linger there, he would have. But his body wouldn't let him.

He couldn't fathom how he could still be so hard for her. He'd come three times in just one day, and he wanted more.

Val rolled the woman on top of him and gripped her ass. "Z, take her. I need to get naked, fast."

Z dropped his trousers, now fully naked, and took Adri in his arms. She didn't put up a fight this time, and he wanted to feel her body-to-body. Before, in the alley, he'd been wearing clothes. But now nothing separated them.

She blinked at him, in awe, he hoped, and not horror. The woman looked her fill, focusing on his mouth, his chest, and yes, there. On his cock.

But she didn't limit herself to watching. She took him in her hands and squeezed.

"Oh fuck." He jerked, arousal burgeoning to new life inside him. "Adri, baby, easy. I don't know how you're doing it, but you've got me hard and near to coming with just a touch."

"Me too." Her breathy voice earned another groan out of him. "I've had sex before, but I've never been an exhibitionist. But I let you take me in that alley. And now, with your brother here, I just don't care." She kissed his chest and pumped him, stroking with hot hands. "I want to feel you come deep inside me again. And I want your mouth on me. Everywhere."

She didn't have to ask twice. Z bent to take her nipple in his mouth. The bud tightened between his lips, and he sucked harder, nipping with his teeth when he felt her need for more pressure. Then Val was there, at her back, caressing her flesh and palming her tight ass.

"Oh yes," she moaned and let go of his hair. She wound her arms behind her, around Val's head.

She turned her head and kissed him, and Z dropped to his knees, worshipping his *iriu* like a goddess. He pulled her folds apart, enthralled by the wet, pink flesh between her legs. So full, so sweet. He leaned close and licked her, gratified by her answering cry.

He continued to lick her, eating the delectable pussy until she came hard over his tongue. And still, he needed more.

"Into the bedroom. Now," Val said, his voice thick, nearly unrecognizable.

Z rose on unsteady feet, overflowing with energy needing an outlet.

His brother's eyes flashed bright, so light they looked white. Power there. And then Z felt Val drag him behind them into the room using invisible hands. Telekinesis.

There, in the bedroom, Val laid Adri on the bed. Her body was flushed, her eyes shuttered, her nipples hard and her pussy nice and wet.

"The Testing commences," Val announced in a ragged voice.

"Thanks for consenting to be my *eda*, Val. It means a lot to me."

Val snorted, his irreverent humor welcome. "As if I had a choice."

Adri leaned back on her elbows and stared at the two of them. Through her he could see that he and Val wore identical expressions of desire, but his also possessed warmth and affection. He rounded the bed to stand next to her, while Val knelt on the bed between her legs, spreading her thighs wide.

"You please me, Adri, you truly do." Z spoke the truth, breathing hard as he watched Val press his face to her mound, opening his mouth to breathe in her scent, her sex.

The minute Val's lips touched her, she arched into the heat of his mouth. Z and Val both groaned, empathically sharing her desire.

"More," Adri moaned, gripping at the bed, needing contact with something real to convince her she wasn't dreaming. She'd never before felt such pleasure, and knowing Z watched made her that much more aroused. But he didn't content himself to solely observe.

She glanced at him and found his gaze glued to hers as he gripped himself, his eyes silver with pleasure. Val stroked her labia before thrusting his tongue inside her, and as she gasped, Z matched her breathing. Lowering himself to his knees, he leaned forward, catching her nipple in his teeth.

"Yeah," Val murmured. "Suck them, hard. She liked when you did that before." He blew over her clitoris before latching on, just as Z worked her breasts. Val stroked with his tongue, inserting first one finger and then two into her slick passage, and she felt the tremors begin. He worried her tight little bud into an explosive orgasm under the watchful eyes of his brother, her *iriu*. And as she came, she felt a subtle energy blanket her.

"Now, Val." Z groaned. Val pulled her to the edge of the bed and thrust into her, hard, filling her emptiness, finally. As he did, Z leapt onto the bed and straddled her neck, pushing his cock between her lips. She accepted both men eagerly, needing to return the energy that continued to shake her foundation.

Val's large cock slid deliciously deep, over and over as he thrust in and out. But Z mesmerized her. Their gazes locked as he fucked her mouth, that thick cock stretching her mouth and invading, as the power of his masculine strength sought a home in her feminine seat. Heat blazed and eased, building and falling time and time again while he took her. While his brother fucked her.

"You're mine, Adri." His deep voice commanded her to believe, to obey in the way only truly mated Otra could conceive. With mind, heart and soul, and lastly, with body. He continued to thrust, his movements growing faster as her next climax rushed to overtake her.

Val's sure strokes refused to abate. The steady drumming of his energy both welcoming and distracting. He was longer, but not as thick as Z. And he stole her breath with each push, a breath she couldn't take with Z's cock in her mouth.

Lightheaded, she feared she'd black out. But the psychic hold Z had on her told her otherwise.

"Oh yeah. That's it. Fuck, I'm coming." Val jerked and stilled inside her, his seed coating not only her womb, but her very being, making way for the Otra who would be her true mate, her *iriu*. The man who watched her as if he owned her. Only after Val had come did Z let himself go.

And she opened her mouth wider, prepared to swallow every last bit of him.

Zaret couldn't believe the intense pleasure coursing through his blood. Like a blazing fire, it surged and spiked, pushing him closer and closer toward an inferno of lust until he was consumed by it. To his shock, a burst of what felt like love threaded through his climax.

He swore and flooded her mouth with seed. The orgasm seemed to last forever, his bliss an ongoing, living thing as he shook under hers and Val's enduring pleasure. The massive energy flooding the room tapped everyone's *psychei*, beginning the claiming as surely as if he'd signed a matrimonial contract.

After he finished spending, he withdrew from her mouth and moved to the side of the bed, noting her exhaustion. Val looked on the verge of falling asleep despite still being joined to Adri.

Val shook his head and pulled out, his cock shiny with her cream. "That was incredible. I'm not sure what I was supposed to feel, but I lost more than my seed. Energy just poured out of me. It was weird, but man, what a high." Val grinned and started laughing.

"He sounds drunk," Adri whispered.

"So do you." Z felt lazy and lay down beside her. He tucked her curves against him, awash in her heat that soaked into him like a warm bath.

"The first part's done now. You're bridged. Together. Joined. Fuck me, you two are potent." Val stumbled from the room and left them alone together. Love for his younger brother swelled. So giving, so incredibly unselfish for Val to tie himself to Z and his mate for all time.

In the Oтра culture, there was nothing as sacred as The Testing, no bond more meaningful or permanent than that between an *iriu* pair. Through Val, a psychic foundation had been laid. Now Z and Adri could firm that bond into a lifelong link that would last through this existence into the next. The Testing had come, and she'd more

than passed. Had Adri not been his *iriu*, the sex would have been good but not so all-encompassing, or so his father had warned him. But this. He felt Adri in his blood and heart, in his brain. The woman dwelled at the fringes of his *psychei* now. And he had to wonder if this deep bond was due to her Selection as well.

Selection, the time in a female's life when she chose a mate or conceived a child. Thoughts of a child made his cock swell, and Z's vision blurred at the beauty of their coming together. Hell, he hadn't cried in thirty years. What the fuck was wrong with him?

He shook off the excess emotion and sought refuge in sleep. But the dreams that came were more intense than they'd ever been.

The emergency beacons flared. Several crew lay unmoving, bloodied and injured. Enemy vessels neared, the probability of survival lowering with each second that passed.

"Dammit, Adri, it's too much. Pull back!" he yelled but received no answer in return.

To his horror, she lay behind him. Blood fell from her nose, eyes and ears. Her entire body was covered in flames, and behind her Val stood with a phaser in hand, his gaze silver bright and locked on something behind Z. Then pain, a fissure of energy growing from his chest. He thought he heard her cry out, but then darkness consumed him...

He woke choking on a scream, Adri leaning over him in concern.

"Are you okay?"

He felt smothered and scrambled out from under her. "Be right back." Racing to the lavatory, he shoved his head under the sink, easing from the heat burning his brain. But he couldn't cool off. To his shock, his arms burst into flames, then his chest and legs. As he stared into the mirror, pinpoints of red grew in his silver eyes, overtaking his sight until he saw nothing but a raging inferno.

"Into the water with you. Come on." Gentle hands pulled him into the shower and eased cold water over his body. The water and her hands cooled him down, and Z blinked to find Adri wet and naked and standing with him.

"Am I still dreaming?" He glanced around him, seeing, smelling and hearing the humanity in the distance. Not Werfal 7 then. Not home.

"You're with me and your brother in New Hattan, remember?" Adri rubbed some scented soap into his skin, her touch soothing his tension.

"Oh, that's good."

"Bend down. You're too tall." She stood on tiptoe to reach his neck, and he bent down, liking the fact he loomed over her. The woman needed to be dominated, caged, brought to heel. But only under him.

The earlier delight he'd felt watching his brother take her vanished under extreme jealousy.

"Um, Zaret? Are you okay?"

Zaret. He liked her using his full name. "Where's my brother?"

She shrugged and rubbed his neck, then massaged the soap over his shoulders and down his biceps. "In the other room, I guess. I don't know."

"Good." He gave her a quick, hard kiss. "I don't want you near him again."

She blinked. "Um, why?"

"I—because I—shit. I don't know." Disoriented, he leaned back against the shower wall. "I'm sorry. This is so much, so fast. I mean, we don't even know each other, and we're mated. And you're going to be hurt, and I don't know how to stop it."

She stared, wide-eyed. "Say that again?"

He swore. He knew better than to blurt out the future. Sometimes he did more harm than good. "I'm supposed to be the one taking care of you." Tenderness swept through him. These bursts of emotions were making it hard for him to focus on any particular one. "Let me wash you."

"Okay, I guess." She leaned back and soaked under the spray of water. "You were hot before because of me. I'm sorry."

He lathered her up, moving over her shoulders to her breasts and down. But he wanted his touch to be sensual, comforting, not sexual. He wanted to show he cared for her. How strange to suddenly feel for this woman. Yet he did.

"How was that your fault?" he asked, recalling what she'd just said.

"You somehow tapped into my fire. The 'San Fal control fire. That's our skill set. Our *psychei* is geared toward heat. But I've never heard of another Oтра clan being able to harness such power." She frowned. "My father and brothers are strong, but not as strong as me. And yeah, I'm bragging."

Her smile stole his breath. "So the women are stronger?"

"Yes." Her smile faded. "Which is why our males are so set on finding and keeping 'San Fal females. I was raised on Werfal 5, surrounded by men all the time."

He stilled, not liking the tone of her voice. "You weren't hurt by any of them, were you?"

"No way." She looked him right in the eye. "I won't tolerate abuse. Not from anyone."

"Good. Because I hear of anyone giving you any problems, they won't live long enough to apologize."

She opened her mouth and closed it, eyeing him with uncertainty. Her gaze moved from his wide shoulders to his large hands. "Yeah, I can see you not having a problem dealing with abusers."

"No one hurts what's mine." He hadn't meant to grit that out, but the thought of anyone harming her made him see red.

"Easy." She covered his steaming hand with her own and looked at him with curiosity. "You really don't like the thought of me in trouble, do you?"

"No."

Her slow grin took him aback. An ache swelled in his breast, a need to comfort, to protect, to love her growing inside him. Spreading like a damn disease. "What are you doing to me?"

"What, Z? What am I doing to you?" She watched him with an expression he couldn't read.

"I don't know. I feel things. For you. I don't know you, but I want to. I think... I need you, Adri. And not just for sex." Did he sound as confused as he felt?

"Well, it's mutual." She sighed. "Can you rinse my hair?"

He hurried to take the rest of the soap from her, soothing her with a gentle touch that had her wavering on her feet.

"I'm sorry. But I'm so tired. I just need to sleep."

He turned off the water and found a few towels to dry them off. "Come on, baby. Let's get you back to bed. The rest of this can wait until tomorrow." Or later today, as the case might be.

He carried her back to bed and tucked her in. The poor woman was already asleep, and already moving toward him in the bed. He hugged her tight and closed his eyes. He didn't dream, not at all.

* * * * *

The next morning, Z, Adri and Val sat around the small dining table in the suite, feasting on Otra berries, omelets and bacon, an Otra favorite. One thing the humans knew how to prepare.

He took a long swallow of caffeine. "Drink your coffee with the berries, baby. They'll perk you up some. You need the energy." She looked tired.

After a few bites of his own meal, he noticed the silence and looked up. "What?"

Val grinned. "A little motherly this morning, aren't we, big brother?"

"Fuck off – I mean, screw off, Val."

Adri bit her lip, but he could see her smile. The gesture made him feel ten feet tall.

"You think that's funny?" he asked her.

She shook her head and lifted the coffee to her mouth after taking a few bites of the energizing Oтра fruit. "Not at all. Hmm. That's good. Just what I needed."

"Not all you need," Val murmured, looking her over like a prized steak.

Z growled, "Watch it."

Val blinked at him. "What's up? We're not done with The Testing yet. You're kind of possessive all of a sudden."

Z was, and he didn't understand why. "I, ah. Sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me."

Adri sighed. "We need to talk about all this. If Val is your *eda*, and you're in The Testing, then we really are *iriu*."

Z frowned. "I didn't know there was still a question about that." He leaned closer and kissed her with possession in mind. "You're mine, Adri. Say it."

She glared back at him. "I just spent the last nine months trying to be anything but under a man's thumb. We may be mated, but that doesn't mean you can tell me what to do."

Before Z could argue, Val cut in. "Explain that, Adri. Maybe it would help us all if we knew more, like where you came from. What you're running from."

"I grew up in Werfal 5, like I told you. What I didn't tell you is that my father is Tearn Rem."

Zaret and Val shared a look. Z turned to her, his gaze incredulous. "Not Tearn Rem, the most wanted man on the Outer Colonies. *That* Tearn Rem?"

"Yes." She sounded so miserable.

Without meaning to, he pulled her into his lap and stroked her hair. "Oh man. Well, I guess it could have been worse. He could have been a human pirate. At least he's Oтра."

"Better not let Mom or Roarke hear that," Val murmured.

At Adri's look, Z explained. "Our birth mother died a long time ago, and our father remarried a human. Shea Talson, our mom. My youngest brother came from her."

"He's half human."

"Yes."

She didn't seem to have a problem with that. "But you seem to hold him in regard."

"We do. Hell, we love our baby brother. Shea too. But they seem so unlike the other humans we've met. Roarke's mate, Jamie. She's human too. But so strong, so different from the ones we've come into contact with."

Adri snorted. "I hate to tell you this, but most humans are like that. I have a feeling you've been dealing with the large underbelly of society. The humans who work shipping and the docks are usually aligned with the criminal classes on Earth. I've spent the last months working at the Shipping News, so I'd know."

"Maybe." Z liked how she felt on his lap. And Stars help him, but his cock couldn't stay soft near the woman.

"Zaret." She shifted and flushed.

Val raised a brow but said nothing about her embarrassment. "Your family," he prodded Adri to continue.

"They mean well, but I was raised with all boys. They know little about Selection, or what girls want. My father loves me. My brothers do too." She met Z's gaze. "All six of them."

Val had the nerve to laugh.

"So why did you run away?"

"Because my father thinks that marriage and children will make me happy."

"But..." Z needed to hear what she desired, and he wanted to satisfy her.

"But I need more. I need to be on my own. To see new worlds and experience life. A little danger won't hurt me."

Remembering his dreams, he frowned. "It might."

"And I might be hurt riding my hovercycle. The point is, for the last nine months I've been on my own, and I've never been happier."

"Then I came along and you're stuck with another male."

"Another overbearing male," Val added.

"You're not helping." He shot his brother a rude gesture and turned to his *iriu*. "I wasn't looking for this, but we're tied. You feel it too, I know."

"I do."

He didn't like her looking so glum. "Adri, I don't know your family, but the Talsons, the 'Or Fal, aren't dictators. My mom lives side by side with my father. Roarke's pretty little mate won't bow to him."

"Ever." Val nodded. "That woman is going to give him fits, I can tell."

Adri smiled. "I think more males need that."

"Honey, most Otra are built to give our mates what they want and need. If we're going to make a go of this, you need to know that."

"So if I want to go offworld?"

"We'll go. Adri, I run Port Nule, Wefal 7's lane to New Hattan. From an Earth perspective, I live offworld."

"Hmm, I guess you do." Her eyes sparkled. "Do you have a newsprint there?"

"Hell. I'm not sure."

Val shook his head. "We don't, and we should have one. We could really use the added information on other shippers and galaxy trade, don't you think?"

Val glanced from Adri's hopeful face to Z. *Think, Z. Your mate needs something you can provide. Speak, freak. Tell her what she needs to hear.*

Yes, tell me. Adri grinned at Val, who stared at her in shock.

"She can hear us?"

"Apparently." Z wanted to frown, but his smile continued to grow. "You're a troublemaker, I can feel it."

"That's not all you can feel." She wiggled on his lap. "What about you, Zaret? What is it you want? Women and parties? Lots of sex? Currency?"

"I—" His blood centered between his legs in his erection. "Fuck. Stop moving, woman."

Val sighed. "You have no discipline, bro. So easy."

"Shut up. You try having a conversation with her in your lap."

Val's eyes narrowed. "Hmm, good point."

Adri sucked in a breath when Z's fingers slipped between her legs. "Um, Z? I thought you were feeling possessive. As in, no sex in front of your brother anymore?"

"I was. But I changed my mind." He pushed his hand between her legs and cupped her. "I need more. Val, finish what you started yesterday before I remember I don't share."

Val chuckled. "Finally. I've been waiting. The energy's building again, and you feel it, don't you?"

"Do I ever," he and Adri said as one.

"Now finish eating, *iriu*. It's time to get back to The Testing."

"I thought we'd finished yesterday." She wiggled again, putting a fire back in his cock.

"Your Selection, maybe. But I feel more distance between us. And that's the only thing between us I won't tolerate. I can handle arrogant 'San Fal. Even Tearn Rem. But you not all the way linked with me won't work." His aggression levels rose, and he couldn't stop himself. Z lifted her in his arms and carried her away from the table. "Now let's finish this, Val. Once and for all."

Chapter Six

"Zaret, I need you, *iriu*." Adri knelt on the bed, on her hands and knees, facing Val. Like Zaret, he had the brawn and strength of an 'Or Fal warrior. But he was leaner, less intense than his brother. And he didn't call to her the way Z did.

She cupped Val's sac and licked the sides of his shaft. A glance up at him showed him clenching his teeth as he struggled to hold on. She tasted the seed at his tip and felt him on the edge of orgasm. The energy roiling in his *psychei* settled closer to hers and Z's. But it wasn't quite there yet.

Behind her, Z poised, his emotions crashing. Affection, lust, need and a painful welling of what almost felt like love coalesced into a ball in his chest. For such a powerful warrior, he seemed to have no problem letting himself emote, though she could tell he wasn't at all comfortable about his uncontrollable passion.

Val moaned. *Damn it, Z. Fuck her already. I know it's a meaningful moment, but Christ, you two are killing me! I can feel everything from both of you, and I'm torn between crying and coming, so hurry up.*

But Z wouldn't be rushed. The tease spread her legs wider and pushed his tongue over her clit, licking her pussy with slow strokes that drove her insane. Then, to her shock, he moved from her pussy up, rimming her anus.

"Oh Stars." She gasped as he toyed with her ass, the nerve endings overly sensitive to anything he wanted.

"I'm going to fuck you here too, baby. But not today. I don't think Val has the patience to hold out that long."

"Asshole."

"Yeah. And a tasty one at that. You should see how tight she is. So hot and firm."

"Shit. Come on." Val groaned and thrust deeper into her mouth.

Adri worked not to gag. Her body would accommodate anything for her *iriu*, but his *eda* had to work with her.

"Sorry, Adri. I can't help it. Your mouth is killing me. I need to come."

"Not yet," Z ordered. "Not until she's creaming all over my tongue."

Adri wouldn't take long, not when he continued to play with her, his desire and affection growing with intensity. She felt her taste on his tongue, and felt the slight burn of penetration when his finger rimmed her ass. Dual sensations, in addition to the desperate need Val held on to, his *psychei* aching with it. She came hard, trembling under his touch. Yet she needed more.

"Please, *iriu*." She knew how much Z liked her calling him that. But did he realize that in allowing him to claim her, she'd claimed him right back?

I know, and I love it. You're mine. And yeah, I'm yours, baby. All yours.

She sucked Val harder, driven by this first instance of Z's voluntary telepathy. Though she'd conversed with him before, this was the first time he'd answered, mind to mind. *Zaret? You'll let me into your mind?*

Honey, you've been in there from the get-go. Yesterday, last week, last month. Hell, the first time you invaded my dreams you stuck in there and wouldn't go. He leaned back from her, and then she felt his cockhead prodding her entrance.

"Then fill me up, *iriu*. Stop stalling." She licked the underside of Val's cock, feeling how hard he was, how he trembled under her touch. His energy whispered to hers with each pass of her mouth over his shaft.

"Yeah, cut it out," Val added out loud, breathless. "Fuck her already. She needs it. Fuck that hot little pussy. Like I'm fucking those beautiful lips. Here it comes, Adri. All in you." Val groaned and shot inside her mouth, his seed sliding down her throat with the press of power.

Z slammed home in one huge, hard thrust. "I'm going to fuck you so good, baby. Oh yeah. Fuck, Val. Give her more. So much light."

Silver bands of *psychei* ran through her, from Val into Adri and deeper into Z. Z pulled back then rammed inside her again. Huge, hot thrusts with a rhythm that stole her breath. Right now, on her knees, with Val's cock in her mouth and Zaret filling her pussy, Adri felt owned.

Possessed and domineered by the large warrior behind her. And she loved it.

She groaned and pushed back, but Z gripped her hips and pistoned into her with a hard, steady drive that marked her as his.

"That feels so good," Val moaned, his cock hard again, as if he hadn't just come.

Adri continued to suck him as she encouraged Z, drawing his plunging cock farther inside by subtly raising her hips. Z squeezed her ass cheeks, and the sensation of tightness increased.

"Now, yes. Oh yeah, *now*," Val said and came hard a second time, prodding another orgasm in her.

Adri groaned and swallowed him, and she knew Z caught the echoes of their climaxes, pulling at him until he came. Swelling to an unbearable size, he stuffed her full and stilled, flooding her until she could feel his cum sliding down her thighs, mixing with his freed *psychei* binding them together.

Val pulled out and swore. "Christ, I need a drink." He stumbled off the bed to a nearby chair. He closed his eyes and within seconds was sound asleep.

Adri glanced over her shoulder and stared at Z with smoldering eyes she could feel heating up. "I love you inside me." She rotated her hips, amazed at Z's size within her. But more, she couldn't believe the emotions stirring in her *iriu*, and in her.

Affection for this male she barely knew had turned into a strange kind of—*love*. She couldn't say why or how she knew, but her *psychei* recognized his own as a part of her. He was unselfish, caring, stubborn and aggressive. Her mate would never let her go

without, nor would he tolerate anything but her all. The same demands she'd make on him, and she accepted them without hesitation.

Z remained within her, though he'd finally started to soften. He leaned down to hug her tight. *Veyu, I'm in you. And I'll always be a part of you, the way you are with me. You know that now, right?*

Yes.

The Testing... I wanted to outrun it, but I'm glad it caught me. So fucking glad.

Tears filled her eyes, but she couldn't help the surge of emotion hitting her hard.

"Shh, I know. It's been an intense two days. It's okay, baby. Easy." He kissed the top of her head and lulled her into sleep.

Finally sated, at least for the time being, Z gathered her to him, placing her head on his chest as they lay on the bed. His heart had finally calmed, and he knew hers was the same. They were in tune now, her *psychei* with his, her body with his. Though they wouldn't necessarily always share thoughts unless they both wanted to, they now shared one spirit.

The sane part of him knew he should rebel, but he couldn't. She now dwelled within him, and he couldn't imagine not feeling a part of her anymore. Between one breath and the next, she'd infused herself into his soul. His fears that one day he might be mated to someone he didn't even like didn't return. And he knew them for the false doubts of a confirmed bachelor.

His *psychei* could never ally with someone with whom he had nothing in common. That sixth sense humans felt but could never quantify made up an Otr's life. Without *psychei*, he was nothing, a shell of the 'Or Fal warrior and man he'd been raised to be. In Adri, he could sense a life partner. Granted, they still knew very little about each other.

He knew how she tasted, the soft moans and mewls of pleasure she made when she came. The important things, he thought with a grin. But her favorite color? What she did for fun? What she liked and disliked? Where she'd choose to live with him? From

what she'd mentioned, she didn't want to live on Werfal 5—thank God—or in one particular place all the time. Like him, she wanted to travel.

Well, besides sex, we have that in common.

Before returning to Werfal 7, he and Adri needed to spend quality time together. So they could learn about themselves and each other without the interference of Z's loving, but interfering, family.

And he'd make sure they had that time.

Hours later, when they woke, he looked for his brother and found a note telling him Val had booked another room for the next few days. Apparently his little brother knew him better than he knew himself. Z grinned, called Val and thanked him.

"Well, spend your time wisely. I told Dad I'd use the time to check on a few of our shipping concerns. But you don't worry about it, bro. While I'm working my ass off, you enjoy that tasty little piece of—"

Z disconnected the call before he was forced to pound his brother into tomorrow. After cleaning up, he dressed and realized Adri had nothing to wear. After doing a bit of research, he found her apartment and called Val back to ask him to bring her a bag of clothes, to make up for being an ass earlier.

Val dropped off the bag without another word, then left with a sad glance at the bedroom door.

When Adri woke, she'd have a few of her things to make the transition easier. They'd spend time together. She could see he wasn't an ogre, he'd learn how better to please her, and they could figure out how they'd mold the future, their way.

Z entered the bedroom and lay next to his *iriu*, absorbed with her flawless skin, her pale hair and her exotic beauty. So wondrous, this woman. His body and mind burned for her. Literally.

Feeling the love brought forth heat, and he fisted his hand, not surprised to see a fire there. It lingered in his open palm but didn't hurt his skin. He played with it, using

the flame to highlight Adri's soft curves. With a gentle fist, he extinguished the fire. But the blaze in his heart continued to burn as he watched her sleep.

How had he ever thought he didn't want The Testing? Only in his ignorance had he tried to avoid his *iriu*. After feeling this, he thoroughly respected how difficult it must have been when his father lost his first wife, Z's mother. Just a short time after a full bonding with Adri and Z was a mass of nervous energy and devotion. And hell, maybe even...love.

Hell, I'm a fucking greeting vid. Wincing at his loss of manly stoicism, he nevertheless appreciated his good luck. Vague recollections of fire and a nervousness about the future tapped at the back of his mind, but then Adri blinked up at him and smiled.

* * * * *

They spent the evening wandering the docks. The next day they took in a movie, and Adri learned that when Z said he hated womanly drama, he meant it. He'd made so much noise in the cineplex the attendants had tried to order them to leave. Then they'd seen Z's size and politely requested he go, much to her misplaced amusement.

He made her laugh. He annoyed her with his overbearing attitude, yet he also pleased her. Men liked to look at her. She'd grown up knowing that, especially on a planet where the ratio of men to women was five to one. Yet in New Hattan, whenever a man looked a little too interested for too long, Z called him on it. The humans backed down immediately, rightfully wary of the six-foot-six bruiser. But even the Oтра they encountered took pause before engaging Zaret. To her bemusement, she liked his strength.

Growing up on a world where men bullied because they could, she'd hoped to eventually find a gentle *iriu*.

Z never bullied her, though. He prodded, he cajoled, but if she said no about something, he would concede to her, unless it involved her safety. There he refused to budge.

"Come on, big man. In here." She pointed at O'Malley's and waved to Miguel.

Z frowned. "Who the hell is that?"

She rolled her eyes, secretly pleased at his jealousy. "The bouncer and a friend – just a friend – of mine."

They neared Miguel, who eyed Z up and down before nodding. "Go on in. Sheila's waiting for you." He grinned, and she knew her friend had gotten lucky.

"Thanks. Come on, Z."

"Talson." Miguel nodded with respect, but before Z could answer, Adri dragged him inside with her.

"Now remember, Sheila doesn't know. None of them do. Don't say anything, okay?"

He sighed. They'd argued about this too. He wanted to be honest, and he didn't understand why she would refuse to tell her friend about who she really was now that they had bonded. She'd already quit her job. Adri knew she'd have to tell Sheila, but she would do it when the timing was right. To admit to Sheila, in a bar, that she'd been lying for half a year didn't seem right.

She found Sheila guzzling a drink and laughing at something Tony said behind the bar. Tony glanced up at her and waved.

"Another friend of yours?" Z growled.

"Can it, Zaret."

"I'll try."

"Adrienne, finally!" Sheila waved her over.

"Adrienne?" he murmured.

"Shut up. And be nice, or no sex later."

He frowned but didn't say another word. To his credit, he put up with Sheila's blatant ogling. Nor did he say anything when her friend tried to put her hands around his arm.

"Oh my God. He's huge." Sheila batted her eyes at him. "Are you sure you're into real blondes?" Sheila shook out her now-red hair. "Redheads have more fun."

"I'm sure you do. You're cute." Z smiled.

Sheila practically melted, and Adri decided she'd been as nice as she could be. *Stop flirting with my friend. You're mine.*

His smile widened. *Sure thing, baby. So maybe later, I can get a taste of that ass, hmm?*

She flushed. He'd been bugging her to take her everywhere. Some stupid, barbaric practice of "owning" a woman the 'Or Fal ceded to. Then again, she had a feeling the 'San Fal males were the same. She'd once or twice heard rumors that her brothers' girlfriends couldn't sit for a week after some alone time with the guys. Then again, that ew-factor had kept her from investigating the full truth.

As if the thought had conjured them, Jace and Rand, two men she'd been hoping had left the planet, appeared at the doorway to the bar. Except this time they had two of her brothers with them.

"Hell. Zaret, we have to leave."

"I love when you call me Zaret." He leaned down to kiss her, and her insides turned to mush.

"Oh man, is it hot in here or what?" Sheila fanned herself and winked at Adri when Z let her go.

"Well, I'll give you one thing. You sure can kiss."

He chuckled. "Anywhere you want my lips, baby. They're yours." Then he glanced at the doorway and nodded to the back. "Come on. We need to fix this now."

Adri groaned.

Sheila perked up. "What's going on?"

Just what Adri didn't need. Everyone knowing there was going to be a throw-down out back between opposing aliens. "Nothing. A few guys Z knows from work. We'll see you tomorrow." Adri leaned close to whisper, "After I get lucky tonight."

Sheila gave her a high-five and no more problems about leaving.

Once out the backdoor in the alley, Z turned with Adri, forcing her behind him, and confronted the others. She wasn't surprised to see all six of her brothers had joined the party.

"San Fal." Z nodded. To her surprise, Val and another male who looked just like him appeared at the other end of the alley. "My brothers. You know Val. That's Romy, the baby."

Not the baby. That's Roarke, Romy sent them both.

Z grinned. He didn't seem at all worried about her kin, and she wondered if she should warn him her brothers had a lot more firepower than Jace and Rand.

"She's ours, Talson. Give her back." Jace held up his sword and everyone watched it glow red.

"You haven't learned a thing. She's not a possession, dickhead. Why don't you just ask her who she'd rather be with?" Z sighed.

Adri didn't know what to say. She had assumed she'd be fought over like a thing, the way the males in her family usually treated her. They loved her, but they had a hard time talking to her, instead of around her.

Zaret didn't. He turned to her. "Adri, baby, who do you want to be with? Do you want Jace and Rind?"

"That's Rand." Rand's face turned red.

Her brothers watched without expression.

"Whatever." Z shrugged. "Adri?"

Thrilled to be asked her opinion, she opened her mouth to give it when Z interrupted with a mental warning. *Swear to the Suns, you try to screw me with this, and I'll paddle your ass before I fuck it tonight. Tell them how much you love me so we can go back to the hotel and get busy.*

She turned to him, her hands on her hips, and asked out loud, "How much I love you? How about you confess how much you love me instead?" *Fuck my ass? Bullshit. If you aren't careful, I'll fuck yours.*

She didn't expect Z's huge grin, or the laughter that followed. Jace and Rand, as well as her brothers, looked horrified—and they hadn't even heard the part about her ass. Romy and Val chuckled and exchanged something, what looked like currency, if she wasn't mistaken.

"So much time away from home has eroded your discipline, little sister." Her oldest brother Kels scowled. "This is how you show respect to a warrior? But then, maybe this 'Or Fal is not a warrior, hmm?"

Z ignored him. "Fine. I love you. Now, *iriu*," he said in a louder voice with a telling look at the 'San Fal warriors, "tell Jason and Rand how much you love me."

"It's Jace." Jace glared. "Jace 'San Fal."

Adri could feel her own laughter bubbling up. The big guy had openly admitted he loved her, and he didn't lie. She felt the affection from deep within. The 'Or Fal were a different kind of Oтра. No 'San Fal would ever openly acknowledge feelings for a female, and never in public.

"So unworthy." Kels frowned. "Come, Adri. Time to go back home."

"I don't think so." She shook her head and stepped in front of Z, tired of running from her problems. "Zaret Talson 'Or Fal is my *iriu*. I claimed him as mine, as he claimed me. I love him."

A warm burst of energy filled her from head to toe, Zaret's love clear in every breath he took, and every breath she shared.

Kels didn't seem to care.

"Thank you, *veyu*." Beloved. "That's just what I needed to hear." Z kissed her on the lips, regardless of their audience. Val and Romy soon joined them, and Z gently shoved Adri behind him. "Now, it's time you 'San Fal learned that it's best to be civilized away

from the Outer Colonies. We can do this here, or you can wait until I come out to visit Tearn Rem later in the month. But your sister, Adri Talson 'Or Fal, is *mine*."

Before Jace or Rand could move, Z pulled her fire and enveloped both men in a dark flame that seethed with his annoyance.

Her brothers looked shocked, and even Romy seemed impressed. Val had seen it before, and he seemed bored. She heard him mentally send Z, *Quit showing off and finish. Dad wants a look at your hot girlfriend.*

Z slapped him in the back of the head with the hand not on fire.

"Ow!"

She's my mate, not my girlfriend, dickhead.

Val turned to Adri and bowed his head, his cheeks flushed. *Sorry, Adri. No offense intended. But you are hot.* Before Z could slap him again, he added, *Fire-hot, literally.*

She clasped his hand and squeezed, trying not to laugh at him. Romy, she noticed, had no such compunction. He shook his head, chuckling.

Adri cleared her throat. "It's okay."

Jace had managed to slip free of the flame and rushed Z with his sword at the ready. "No, it's not okay. The female was promised to me."

Her brothers murmured to themselves and watched with interest. She'd known it would come to this. "Z—"

"Adri, stand back. Romy, Val. Don't interfere."

His brothers flanked her, and she had the feeling if she even tried to help, they'd stop her. So she let the testosterone all around her flow and stayed the sole, sane one.

True. She recognized Romy's voice inside her head, though she'd never heard him before. *But we can't help it. It's hard to overcome a primitive need to defend one's female. And you're his, Adri. In every sense of the word. Blessings, Sister.*

Z took a few steps forward and away from her. He met Jace head on, without a weapon. But faster than she could fathom, Z disarmed Jace and wrapped him in a headlock that had the idiot's face turning purple.

In a calm voice, Z said, "Now, I can snap your neck, or you can let go of your sorry claim to my mate." He raised his glance to her brothers and Rand. "That goes for the rest of you. You make one move toward my *iriu* I don't like, and I'll fuck you up. Hard. Try me."

She blinked, unsure of this Zaret. He seemed deadly, and she had no doubt he meant every word he said.

But never deadly to you, veyu. I would never harm you.

She basked in his concern but didn't do anything to distract him as he faced off against his opponents. She knew her brothers and had a good idea of what they might be capable. Then Z clenched his hand and everyone watched as his fist burned bright.

Kels nodded. "You have our sister's fire. You wear her mark. Our father will be expecting you." To Adri's surprise, he nodded his head in a show of respect, one her brothers followed.

Rand made no move to do the same, until Kels punched him hard. Rand cried out and crumbled to his knees, but he offered the same respect.

"Zaret? If we could have our brethren back?" Kels asked.

Z glanced down at Jace and dropped him unconscious to the ground. "Sorry. Didn't mean to choke him out."

Kels grinned, actually smiled at her *iriu*, and then turned to her. "Well done, Adri. You chose a warrior to mate. I never thought you would. Father will be pleased."

"Even though he's not 'San Fal?"

"He held your fire. Of course he's worthy. If I'm not mistaken, his flame would rival your own for power." Of course Kels would respect that. It grated on him that a

female held more firepower than the males. For Zaret to display such a bright flame put him in good stead with her chauvinistic family.

Z crossed to her and pulled her with him to her brothers. "Go ahead. Tell them goodbye, like a good little sister."

She glared at him, less than happy that he seemed to hold with traditions. Females in their places, showing due respect to Otrā males.

But when she finished hugging her brothers goodbye, Z added one final warning. "Know this. I treasure this female above my own life. Any one of you thinks to take her from me, her family or not, I'll cut you down where you stand. And if I should fall, they'll make sure justice is done to Adri's satisfaction." He nodded behind him at his brothers. "Understood?"

A strange light lit Kels's eyes. "Very well." He winked at her. "I can't wait for Father to meet your *iriu*, little sister." He said something to her brothers she couldn't quite make out, and they erupted into laughter.

Z looked pleased enough, until he saw her displeasure. "Now *veyu*. Don't be like that. Remember how much you love me."

Her brothers laughed louder.

Chapter Seven

Adri awoke four days later pleasantly sore between her legs with a knot in her neck. Her pillow, a muscular biceps that smelled better than chocolate, shifted under her head and forced her to leave the warm haven his body projected sooner than she would have liked. With a sigh, she stared at the male perfection lying so close and tucked a stray strand of his silky black hair behind his ear.

Such a strong, uncompromising face. She petted his smooth cheek. So powerful, so hard, she reflected, glancing at his cock and marveling at its length as he stirred. *I had that up my ass?* She blushed at the things she'd done since meeting her *iriu*. In her entire forty-six years, she'd never had sex with two men at once, never even fantasized about it. Yet in the span of one week, she'd not only fucked two men, she'd had her mate orally, vaginally and anally at the snap of his fingers. And she'd never come so hard.

Rising slowly from the bed, she pondered her new circumstances and entered the lav. Idly drifting from one glorious recollection of the previous nights' escapades to another, she let the hot shower soothe her sore muscles. Zaret was a hell of a lover and a powerful *iriu*, but not a very comfortable pillow.

The curtain to the shower suddenly opened and she stifled a shriek. Zaret stood there looking extremely satisfied. "Thought I'd join you."

His erection grew as she stared, bobbing slightly when he took her silence as consent. Then he entered and began washing her, his large hands gliding sensuously over her body, and all thought vanished like steam rising in the air.

"You're curved in all the right places."

She sighed and let him tend to her, growing more and more aroused.

"I need you, *veyu*. My cock is hungry for another taste of that fine ass."

She shivered, excited and nervous at the same time. He'd breached her with tenderness before, but he was so big. Uncomfortable, painful, and yet so sexy she'd cried out when she'd come. And he wanted to do it again. His needs stoked her own, and she agreed before she thought too much about it.

Zaret knew, and he grinned.

"Bastard. You like knowing it's unnerving."

"Yeah. Adds to the spice." He winked and she smothered a smile.

She knew he'd never hurt her, but sexual pain, for some bizarre reason, turned her on. She'd never known that about herself before, but Zaret showed her new facets of herself every day.

He nodded to the bed and waited for her to precede him. When she came abreast of him, he pulled her to his front, letting her feel his hard length against the small of her back. "I'm hungry for you, baby. So hard. I want you to lube me up nice and wet."

She shivered and grabbed the jar by the bed. Dipping her fingers in it, she applied the gel to his cock. Playing with him made her more than wet, and by the time she'd covered him from his cockhead to his balls, she ached to feel him inside her.

Reading her mind, he gave her a cruel smile and nodded to the bed. "On your hands on knees, and spread your legs wider. You need to make room for me, baby."

She braced herself, waiting, but then he surprised her. She heard a drawer open, and then something soft and wet nudged into her sex.

"Here you go. Let's fill up that wet cunt."

She moaned, loving when he talked so frankly. He didn't go easy either. He shoved the dildo inside her, one that matched his dimensions.

Needing him to take her, she shifted on her hands and knees, waiting. Then he smacked her hard on the ass.

"Hey."

"Stop moving. Or maybe you'd like me to smack you again?" The playful man liked stimulating her past her comfort zones. But the thought of him in her ass was enough to throw her into a fiery passion. "No? You're too hungry to feel me up your ass, aren't you?"

"Zaret."

He leaned next to her and dipped his fingers into the jar, then settled behind her again. "Call me Master."

"Dammit. No."

He inched his finger along her hole, rimming her with slick digits.

The sensation blew her mind. "Oh yeah. Stars. Please." She clenched around the dildo, needing more pressure. Needing him to *move*.

"Please, what?" His deep voice thrilled her. Her *iriu* wanted her, badly. She could hear it in the thrumming pleasure of his breathy commands.

"Oh hell. Master. Okay?" She caught her breath when he shoved his finger deeper, then added another. The thick sensation, especially when he rubbed against the skin separating her rectum from her pussy, had her moving against her will. She pushed back, fucking herself on his fingers.

"That's a good girl. *Veyu*, you set me on fire. My fingers are so hot right now, deep inside your tight ass." The gravel in his low timbre signaled his end, so she wasn't surprised when he removed his fingers and pushed against her anus.

"Push out. Fuck, yeah, that's it. Let me in." He continued to prod her, sticking himself inside her bit by bit, not rushing, but not letting her stop him either.

Zaret dominated, and they both loved it. When he finally seated himself the entire way inside her, he paused, his grip on her hips bruising, but so good.

"Z, you're too big."

"And you're perfect. So tight around me. I love my balls against your wet slit. Stars, *veyu*. You were made for this. You were made for *me*." He pulled out and slowly

pushed back in. He reached around and found the dildo, and then he flicked a switch on it.

The damn thing started vibrating, and she nearly lost her mind. "Oh, oh yes. Zaret. Master. Fuck me. Fuck me hard."

He swore as he took her ass with deep, penetrating strokes. And as their desire grew, he slammed harder and harder inside her. To her shock, the heat of contact made everything more pleasurable. Especially when she felt his *psychei* burst into fragments of unimaginable pleasure. Energy filled the room, bathing them both in the glow of desire.

He came inside her just as he twisted his hips and gave her the pressure she needed to orgasm. She clenched hard around him and the dildo, and the tension made her head spin.

Together, they fell into a well of tortured bliss, the ecstasy overpowering.

Moments later, Z withdrew and pulled the dildo from her body. After he cleaned up and saw to her comfort, he had the nerve to enter her again, this time to bathe her sex with more of his seed. His stamina was unparalleled, especially because he somehow had her just as crazed for him, just as needy.

An hour and several positions later, Adri and Zaret left the shower for a second time. Dressing in the last set of clothes Val had brought her, she knew she needed to return home to pack up the rest of her things. Since she'd never known how long she might stay in any one place, she didn't have all that much to transport. Some clothes, a few memories captured on holovid, a trinket or two, but nothing more.

To Zaret, she said, "I suppose I need to pack. Or are you planning on us living here? Your family does hold the Outer Port."

Zaret finished dressing and kissed her soundly on the lips. "I don't know, Adri. This is all as new to me as it is to you. Talson Shipping has business all over Earth, as well as several ports on Werfal 6 and 7. I told you I run our interests on Port Nule, but there are many places we could live. What would you have us do?"

She loved the fact he honestly cared about her feelings. Zaret treated her like an equal, and every day she grew to love him more. "I love the freedom of not living under my father's thumb here in New Hattan, but I miss the Oтра. I miss our culture and the clans. And now that you've pretty much declared me untouchable, it seems like we can go anywhere."

Zaret nodded. "Personally, I'd like us to live on Werfal 7. I love my family. You'll find the Talsons aren't like other Oтра. We're somewhat human in the way we interact with one another, mostly because Shea wouldn't let my father be any other way. Women's equality, sharing emotions and feelings." He made a face. "That's what we're all about."

"Sounds perfect to me." She beamed at him. "I know my family didn't make the best impression, but they do love me. Unfortunately, they are as they were raised. The few female friends I had at home married and left Werfal 5 twenty years ago. The 'San Fal are a mostly male-dominated clan."

He blinked. "Twenty years ago? How old are you?"

"Forty-six. Why?"

He gaped. "You're a cradle robber! I'm nearly half your age, *veyu*." His grin turned into a laugh.

"Yeah, ha ha. Wait until my family learns you're just a baby."

"I'll show them a baby." The glance he gave her belly should have alarmed her, but to her astonishment, it made her want to go back to bed and try again.

She let out a loud breath. "Perhaps we shouldn't talk about age, hmm?"

"Whatever you say, Adri. So about your father... I don't want you to worry about him anymore. You're mine now. Part of my family, and we 'Or Fal protect our own." He looked deeply into her eyes, and she could see the strength and power that made him and his family legends not only in the shipping world, but in history of their culture. The Talsons had always been legendary. And now she'd mated one.

Z continued. "I've dealt with my share of pirates, thieves and offworld aliens intent on an Oтра dinner." A glint of steel and humor lit his eyes. "I think I can handle one outlaw father, even one as tough as Tearn Rem."

"Good." Feeling as though a great weight had lifted off her because she truly believed him, Adri walked out with him into the main suite and manufactured them breakfast, including a meal for Val, since he'd stayed in the adjoining room of the suite on his last night in New Hattan.

As if on cue, he left his bedroom and joined them, yawning and scratching his bared belly. The man looked good in pants and nothing else, but he wasn't as handsome as her *iriu*. She liked Val, a sentiment that paled considering what they'd been through with The Testing. Yet with it complete, it was as if her time with him had never happened. Her body felt no heat in his presence. Odd.

Not "odd", good. Z grunted. And I won't apologize for trespassing on your thoughts, not when they concern my pretty little brother.

Adri rolled her eyes and smiled, content in a way she had never been before. Though she had a father and brothers, not to mention dozens of uncles and cousins, she had never had a close relationship with any male she could truly call a friend. The few Oтра males her age that she'd encountered were too wary of her father to linger for more than a night or two of sex. And at work on Earth, she'd kept her distance from most men, not comfortable with the way they looked at her. Val made up for all that gladly, like the brother she'd always wanted. And in Zaret, she'd found the love of her life.

Z read her well. The glowing look in his eyes spoke volumes. *I love you, veyu.* He cleared his throat and said aloud, "Speaking of your father, I think it's time he found out you've found your *iriu*. I don't trust your brothers to tell him how truly happy you are. Let's call him first and schedule a visit. I hate to think of the poor man worrying." Zaret gave her a wolfish grin and picked up the vidphone.

* * * * *

Before stopping on Werfal 5, Z had decided to visit his parents at home. They travelled to Werfal 7 aboard one of Talson Shipping's luxury liners. After a full day showing off the ship to his new mate, Zaret had left her in Val's capable hands while he sought relief from a pressing headache that wouldn't leave him alone.

He dozed fitfully and finally fell asleep, only to have a return of his fiery nightmare. He thrashed and resisted the burn until a woman's soft voice and persistent hands stroked him into wakefulness.

"Zaret, Z, wake up, *veyu*."

He wanted to, but something kept impeding his return to her. And then she wrapped her hands around his cock.

He blinked his eyes wide open. As if The Testing had never ended, Z felt a driving need to possess his wife, his love. Thrusting up into her touch, he opened his eyes to see her naked and looming over him. She released his cock only to straddle him, replacing her soft hands with even softer flesh.

Wet and aroused, she slid over his shaft, not letting him penetrate while she teased him and herself, rubbing her clit with his cockhead. He reached up and cradled her breasts in his palms. He kneaded her golden skin until it became rosy with his touch, and pinched her nipples until she cried out and soaked his cock in her juices.

"Baby, if you don't fuck me soon I'm going to explode," he gasped, groaning when she grabbed his hands and slapped them flat to the bed, then slid over his cock, capturing him within her heat until she flattened against his balls.

He lay under her, watching as she rode him, something familiar and yet foreign about this act.

She leaned down and kissed him, rubbing her tits against him while playing with his tongue, mimicking the suction around his hard cock. Stroking and sucking, she allowed his tongue deep in her mouth, taking his control with it. Like a wild man, he jerked and thrust up into her, forcing her to bounce up and slam back down.

Her breath caught and her breasts heaved, her nipples so hard he wanted to bite them. His heart rate increased, his cock filled with suppressed need. Unable to wait any longer, Z yanked a hand free and pinched her clit, stimulating her into an orgasm that gripped him like a vise.

The hold on his flesh jerked him into an eruption of lust so profound that for a moment he saw blackness as he poured into her. Her walls continued to milk him as she cried out his name, and he clenched her hips to move her over him, making her take his every last drop.

"Do you think it will always be like this?" she asked, panting over his chest.

Before he could answer, the ship rocked, throwing them close to the edge of the bed.

"What the hell?"

He grabbed her tightly as they were pitched off the bed, landing on his back to protect her. Cursing, he disengaged from her to rise quickly to his feet and dressed, memories of his nightmare coming to haunt him.

"We're under attack," he said with a certainty he wished he didn't feel.

Adri simply nodded, accepting his words as fact. "What can I do?"

His first thought was to tell her to stay in the cabin and lock the door, but staring at her, knowing what she was capable of, he did the opposite of what an Oтра male normally did in times of crisis. He asked for her help.

"Come with me."

She hurriedly finished dressing and raced with him out the door, past frightened passengers up several decks to the bridge, where Val and the captain argued.

"Those two fighters are missing, and I want to know where the hell they are." Val's eyes glowed with anger that grew as the captain hemmed and hawed. Rage filled the small cabin, like a force that whipped between the two men. Something felt decidedly

off here, and Z knew the time had come to confront the frightening future he continued to see in his dreams. He'd be damned if he'd let her get hurt.

"Val? What's going on?"

"Captain Dickhead here has no idea where the port-flanking defense fighters are." Val advanced on the captain, all but in his face. "Nor can he explain why those same shields are down. We've been attacked by two Cam class vessels, no doubt pirate but small enough to have gone undetected as a threat by our scanners. Problem is, with those shields down and the fighters missing, they can stall us if they hit our lower port engines, and with the way we've been rocking and rolling, I'd say that's their plan."

Z shot the sweating captain a knowing glance. "Interesting they knew just where to find our hidden engine mounts when the exhausts are at least a five-length below us. And to disengage the shields, one has to know the proper codes, codes very few on this ship possess."

The captain swallowed audibly and took a step back from Val and Z. Before he could run, Val used his telekinesis to haul the man onto a nearby stool and held him tight with a band of *psychei*. The weaker Oтра could only sit in Val's angry psychic embrace.

"I know how to handle this." Z glanced to the ship's offensive weapon controls. He'd trained for just such an occurrence, but had never thought they'd have to put those practices into effect.

Val shot the captain a dark look. "Did I mention our offensives are coincidentally malfunctioning?"

"All of them?" Z jerked his gaze back to the captain in surprise. Their saboteur had done a damn fine job of sinking the ship, so to speak. As it stood, they were nearly dead in space, a vessel begging to be boarded and overhauled.

Adri's warm hand gripped his own.

"I can help," she said quietly. *My fire is strong, Zaret. Let me show you.*

Remembrances of her lying so still on the ground shook him.

It's not just me, she reminded him. We need to save everyone on the ship, iriu. Trust me. I can do this.

Are you sure?

Between living and dying? Yes.

He knew she was right. The pirates would take the ship to their nearest station, salvaging all the precious metals and items they could, raping and/or selling what women and men they figured would make them currency. The rest of the passengers would be killed, and only the lucky ones would die quickly.

Okay, then let's do this. Both of us. Use my psychei to aim your fire. The minute you feel any pain, break away. I mean it.

Yes. Fine.

I swear I'll spank that ass for weeks if you don't. I won't lose you now. Not when I've finally found you.

She smiled, her love so sweet and giving he knew he couldn't live without her.

Z took a deep breath and prayed for calm. *Okay. Aim for that vulnerable spot on the ship, right there.* He mentally showed her where to hit the pirate vessels as one passed through the bridge's viewport.

Z watched in awe as Adri stood back and stared into space, transfixing her gleaming eyes. The dark purple of her irises suddenly took over the whites of her eyes, and her pupils turned from black to bloody red, a pinpoint of energy that grew as she drew from him. She closed her eyes and fists, drawing hard on his *psychei*.

Z himself felt a moment of weakness, and then *boom*.

The luxury liner rocked as fragments of metal hit the outer hull. Quickly calling forth whatever temporary shields hadn't been damaged by the pirate's attack, he watched through the viewport as the burning ships quickly died, the flames smothered by dark space.

The world around him grayed. Odd moments of bright colors, a woman's laughter, and the sights and sounds of myriad destinies converged in his mind. But the one that mattered most drew him.

He swayed on his feet and nearly fell when he turned, only to see Adri on the ground. Blood dripped from her nose, eyes and ears. Her entire body was covered in flames that slowly tapered, taking most of her clothing with it. Behind her Val stood with a phaser in hand, his gaze locked on something behind Z.

"Put it down," Val yelled.

Before Z could figure out what had happened, Adri stirred. *Thank God*. Then pain, a fissure of energy burst from his chest and filtered through every cell and vein in his body. Pain burrowed in his heart and traveled along his spine to his brain.

He thought he heard Adri cry out, but then darkness consumed him.

Adri felt something wrong and blinked into sudden bright light. The ship had righted. Next to her, Val fired his phaser. Something hit the deck hard. Then he swore and crouched over someone next to her.

An emptiness in her *psychei* literally hurt, and as she rose unsteadily to her feet, she saw Zaret lying still on the ground, a burned patch of black in the middle of his chest.

"Fuck, Z. Snap out of it." Val sounded frantic as drawers and panels all over the bridge opened and closed. "Dammit. I need a medical kit," he yelled. Then he spied Adri. "Hurry, honey. We need to save Z. Captain Jackass hit him with a Mystifier."

One of Chartrell Shipping's newest measures of protection when flying through unfriendly territories in space. The information hit her like a two-by-four, especially because it came from Zaret.

"I hear him." She stumbled to his side. "Wait, Val. Let me. My fire should burn out the nanoreplicators eating at his insides. Find a kit, though."

While Val scrambled to find help, she pulled the last bit of energy from inside herself and burned through the foreign bodies in Z's flesh. It didn't take long. Still joined, she could sense what didn't belong. And Z, bless him, retained enough of his faculties to help her.

Val returned and injected him with a healing salve. He caught her as she fell over her *iriu*.

She smiled and tried to tell him, "He'll be okay. We both will." But she wasn't sure he understood.

"Shit. I hope you just said what I think you did." Val's shaky smile was the last thing she saw before she fell into Z's dreams. And damn if they didn't land naked into a bed together, perfection in paradise.

Chapter Eight

When Adri woke she had a doozy of a headache.

"There you are."

She felt relieved to hear her *iriu's* deep voice. "Did we get them all?"

"You did," Zaret said quietly.

She glanced over at him, only to see him sitting beside her on the bed. He wore a pair of light-colored trousers and no shirt, showing the faded burn of the Mystifier in the middle of his chest. She wondered if it would ever go away.

He caressed her hair. "You scared the shit out of me. I saw you fall before I even knew you. But loving you and watching you bleeding, not moving..." He paused and kissed her on the mouth, his heart in his eyes. "Don't ever do that to me again, woman."

"I could say the same. Seeing you unconscious wasn't good. If I hadn't been so groggy myself, I probably would have freaked out and scared the crap out of Val."

He paused. "Adri, before I met you I whined about The Testing. I didn't want it now, not when I had so many other pastimes to pursue."

By "pastimes" he obviously meant women. He sounded thoughtful, and not a little amused, so she stemmed the tide of jealousy rearing its ugly head.

"I didn't want children, didn't want one woman when I could pretty much have whoever I wanted."

"Oh?" She couldn't help it. He was starting to piss her off.

"Basically I was a moron." His bright smile felt hotter than any fire, and it warmed her from the inside out.

He put his hand over her heart, and she covered it, wanting him to know she felt what he was saying. "I know we just met," he admitted. "That we don't know nearly

enough about each other, with the exception of how good we are in bed together, and that you don't like the color blue or Taskishi potatoes. You cheat at cards—"

"I do not."

"And you lived a hell of a lot longer than I did with a family who put the word *criminal* in the Werfal database." He paused. "But I can't help loving you."

Tears filled her eyes, despite wanting to appear strong and collected.

"I want to spend the rest of my life showing you how right we are together, and how very, very happy I am you went into Selection at the same time the universe pushed me into The Testing."

"I love you, too, you giant oaf."

His eyes lit, the pupils dotted with red—*her fire*. "I feel your fire, *veyu*. And I feel the burn of your love deep inside. You healed me. Not just from the Mystifier." He rubbed his chest. "But by loving me. I'll be the man I was meant to be with you by my side." His smile faded, and he took a slow look around the room before lowering his voice. "And if you ever tell Val or my other brothers how damn sappy I just sounded, you'll pay. And you'll pay dearly."

The gruff warrior returned, but he couldn't hide the soft lover, her mate and other half, watching her with love in his eyes.

"Then I guess you'll have to concede to my many demands, won't you?"

"Blackmail?" His smile widened. "I can handle that. Like father like daughter, eh?"

The comparison, oddly enough, made her smile. "Wait and see."

"Oh I will, *veyu*. I will. But one more thing."

"Just one more?" She'd noticed the erection he didn't even try to hide.

"We have to have a traditional wedding ceremony. Something to knock my baby brother on his ass, now that he thinks he's the favorite. So do you think you could suck

up to my mom for a little bit? I promise if you're nice to her, I won't kill your father or brothers when one of them annoys me the next time we meet."

"Deal." She ran her hands over his thighs. "Now how about you stop teasing me with that monster in your pants? Your poor *veyu* needs some loving."

He smiled and lowered himself to lie next to her. He hugged her to him, and she felt comforted, aroused, accepted.

Zaret laughed. "You know, my family is just going to love you. But no more than I already do."

Epilogue

Valis Talson 'Or Fal stared at the trembling man wearing a tattered captain's uniform. His face hadn't weathered Val's fists well. Nor had he seemed too happy to have his body hung from a height of thirty feet in the cargo bay of the ship.

Beyond angry, Val let his rage fuel his *psychei* and gave his telekinesis free reign. "Tell me again, *Captain*, who your real friends are in Chartrell Shipping, and where I can find them."

It didn't take more than a few minutes slamming from bulkhead to bulkhead and viewport to floor before the man babbled facts and figures of real interest.

Val made note of everything and resolved to fix their competitor once and for all. He knew just where to start. The woman would pay, and pay dearly.

About the Author

Marie Harte is a professed bibliophile with an addiction to romance. She's fond of things that go bump in the night, especially if they happen to be tall, dark and handsome. Life has given her some interesting insights into the male mind. After majoring in English, she spent several years in the Marine Corps, followed by stints in information technology, logistics and the transportation fields. And yes, herding cats is easier then trying to manage truck drivers.

Now a wife, writer and crazy woman with children, she spends most of her time bugging her kids to do their homework while typing with a mad zeal to make deadlines. She's a multi-published and bestselling author of erotic romance who's obsessed with email, so feel free to drop her a line.

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