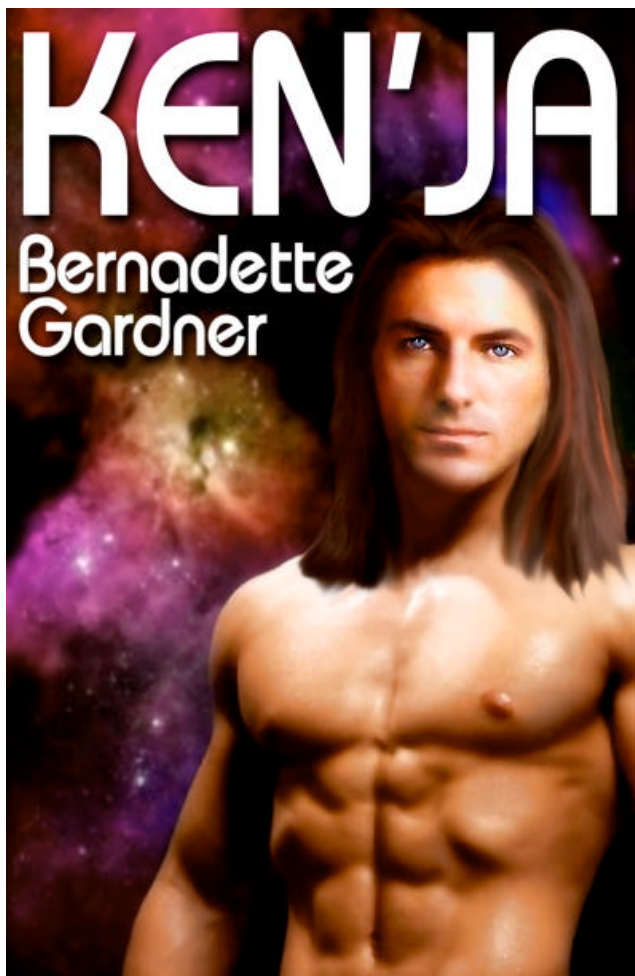


KEN'JA

Bernadette
Gardner



KEN'JA

“What’s wrong?”

She followed him a few steps up the bank and touched his broad back. He shivered at the contact and his flesh rippled. Lightning fast, he had her wrist in a vice-grip. His touch burned, sending an electric stab of awareness through her body. She wanted more.

“It’s not safe,” he said, looking at her from under lowered brows. “We should eat what we have and move on. The farther we travel, the less likely a collection team will find us.”

“What about a rescue ship? If an Allied patrol was following the prison ship—”

“The Ketomir will arrive first. When the danger has passed, we can return to this place.”

He released her wrist, leaving her feeling cold and needy. Her body tensed when he hesitated a moment, his eyes lingering.

Suddenly bold, she took a chance and threw herself against him. He caught her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him, reveling in the warmth of his sun-warmed skin against her breasts.

His arms tightened around her. He groaned, a lost sound, feral and raw. She felt the iron-hard shaft of his sex against her thigh and wondered if Thaliens’ resemblance to humans extended to their sex organs. He certainly felt human...

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KEN'JA

BY

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KEN'JA
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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For Tom, my warrior.

KEN'JA

Zira awoke shivering. Gasping, she drew in a breath of cool air that ignited her tortured lungs. She coughed and spat out the acrid taste of smoke.

She remembered the fire that coursed through the prison ship's ventilation system. The screams of the prisoners had become cheers of liberation when the stasis fields that kept them in their cells finally shorted out.

The euphoria of freedom died quickly, however. With the flames consuming the ship's atmosphere and crawling, meter by meter, toward the fuel cells, the prisoners realized all too soon that they'd won their freedom on the last day of their lives.

With shaking arms, Zira raised herself to a sitting position. She looked at her body to assess the damage. Scorch marks darkened her uniform and blood oozed from a number of scratches, but nothing seemed to be broken. Her throat hurt and her eyes stung, but

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miraculously she'd survived the harrowing flight in the escape capsule largely unharmed.

A fireball blazed low on the flat horizon. She stared at the brilliant orange glow and wondered how many had made it out alive.

A moan interrupted her thoughts and she scrambled to her feet. Around her on the grassy hillside lay the breakaway shell of her escape capsule and what appeared to be the remains of two others.

The body of a human male lay half-encased in one of the capsules, his skin streaked with blood and blackened by burns. Dead. She shivered and wondered if he'd been one of the ones she'd passed in her frantic run for the escape capsules.

The moaning came again from the cracked third pod. The outer safety shell hadn't shattered on impact and the occupant was trapped inside, like a weakened hatchling in a too-thick eggshell.

Zira bent close to the casing. Forcing her voice above a whisper, she said, "Push the emergency release latch, by your left arm." The effort tore at her throat and she coughed again.

The escape capsule wobbled and rolled a few feet. Zira stumbled out of its way. A second later, the brittle remains of the casing burst apart. With a roar of frustration, the occupant forced his way out of the pod and rolled onto the cool grass, panting from his exertion.

Zira froze, one hand tight against her lips to staunch another cough. She recognized the prisoner. He was the Thal Warrior. He'd occupied the cell next to hers, and for a dozen nights since her arrest, she'd listened to him chanting a meditative verse in his native language. The words had soothed her, and his deep, melodic voice had made her think of pleasures she'd long forgotten.

Now they were both free. At least until a rescue ship arrived to recapture the survivors. They'd search for the wreckage of escape capsules first.

Zira eyed the Thal, seeing no obvious signs of injury. He looked

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human on the outside. His bronzed skin and black hair reminded her of earthly warriors she'd read about long ago. His muscular chest rose and fell rhythmically and his violet eyes blinked at the sky. When he reached one massive hand toward her, she ran.

* * *

Tige rolled to his feet in a swift motion as the human female bolted away from him. He'd seen the blood on her hands and arms, seen the fear in her eyes. Of course she'd run from a Thal Warrior. Who wouldn't?

She'd also run from him in the corridors of the prison ship. When the fire shorted out the security locks and the narrow corridors had filled with panicked prisoners, she'd emerged from her tiny cell and collided with him in the confusion. He remembered her face, round and innocent, and her dark eyes, haunted by experiences he could only imagine. Her fear had carried her deeper into the clamoring sea of bodies and he hadn't seen her again.

How they'd both ended up in escape pods when so few still functioned amazed him. That they'd landed within a meter of each other shocked him.

He looked back at the burning wreckage of the prison ship. Judging by the lack of smoke, it hadn't breached the atmosphere yet, but if enough of the hull still remained intact when it did, they could be in danger from falling debris. They had to take cover, both of them.

He ran after her.

* * *

Thal Warriors kill for pleasure. Zira remembered the rumors too well. She'd never seen one of them up close and she didn't want to now. Her appreciation of his voice and his chanting lasted only as long as a thick metal bulkhead separated them. Now, with nothing between them but the cool night air of the nameless planet, her interest

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evaporated.

Her heart raced when she looked over her shoulder and saw him barreling down the hillside after her. With those massive legs, he'd easily overtake her.

She searched for cover but found nothing convenient. A few small rocks dotted the rolling countryside, none large enough to hide behind. The tree line began several kilometers away. She'd never make it.

When she stole another backward glance, her heart skipped a beat. He was gone. Where?

"Uff!"

A solid wall of flesh stopped her in her tracks. Arms corded with thick muscles came around her, and he drew her struggling form against his chest. The staccato of his twin heartbeats vibrated against her back and his voice caressed her.

"How?" she choked out. How could he have ended up in front of her so quickly? Was it true that Thal Warriors could move faster than the eye could follow?

"Neither of us is safe out in the open. Come with me and we'll find a place to hide."

"Ah! You speak—"

"Your language. Yes. I'll let you go if you promise not to run."

She nodded and he let her go. Her feet hit the ground and the impact jarred her. Her head pounded from the exertion and the fear that pumped adrenaline through her exhausted limbs.

"The forest would be safest for now. We should move away from the wreckage." He pointed ahead, and again Zira nodded. "We'll be fortunate if the orbit decays quickly. The debris will land on the other side of the planet."

He began walking toward the trees.

Zira hesitated only a moment before she followed. "Where are we? Is this world inhabited?" she asked when she caught up to him.

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"I doubt it. Ketomir prison ships never orbit populated worlds."

"Do you know a lot about the Ketomir?" Zira suppressed a smile. Her fear gave way to giddy euphoria at being alive and free of her captors. Even if this freedom proved temporary, she wanted to enjoy it.

"I've been aboard more than a year. One learns a lot by listening to the guards."

"What was your crime?" Zira swallowed hard after her question. Her face burned as badly as her throat. She realized she didn't want to know his crimes. Why had she asked?

"I killed a Ketomir prison guard."

Zira bit her lower lip but kept walking. She didn't look at him. Instead she watched his long, dark shadow as it twined with hers on the rough ground ahead of them.

"I didn't mean to pry. It's your business..." Her voice gave out before she finished her sentence and she coughed again. The pain in her throat made her wince.

"You needn't fear me."

"I don't," she answered quickly. The words rasped, making her sound terrified.

"What was *your* crime? It seems only fair to ask."

"I'm a courier for Allied Intelligence. I've no love for the Ketomir Empire either."

This confession produced a grunt from him and she turned her head to catch a glimpse of his sharp profile.

"I'd wager it was an Allied spy that set the fire in order to free the prisoners."

"Someone who didn't know the Ketomir had removed most of the escape capsules," she said.

The Warrior made another wordless affirmation as they reached the edge of the forest. He stopped and glanced back at the horizon. Zira turned also. An orange glow crested the hill where their capsules had

KEN'JA

landed.

“It’s hit the atmosphere,” he said. “We’d better move faster.”

* * *

The female’s rasping breath worried Tige. Her dirt-streaked face contorted in pain each time she coughed. The billowing black smoke that had filled the corridors of the ship had only a minor effect on his upper lungs, but his lower ones had taken over the task of processing the planet’s damp atmosphere. Humans didn’t possess secondary body systems. If her lungs were burned, she would not be able to rest them and allow them to heal.

He thought of carrying her when they reached the forest, but there was barely enough room for him to shoulder between the narrow, closely spaced tree trunks. With her body in his arms, they’d make even slower progress.

They ducked in unison when the first piece of flaming debris crashed into the trees a few meters behind them. He grabbed her hand and pulled her faster through the dark underbrush until the landscape grew rockier. A stand of boulders loomed in front of them and he pushed her toward it. An alcove at the base of the rocks provided just enough space for both of them to wriggle inside. A steep overhang of mossy granite jutted above, providing protection as bolts of fire rained through the forest.

She huddled next to him, her breathing shallow. Tige debated whether he should offer her the protection of his arms as well. Ultimately he settled for allowing her to lean against him. He felt her shivering intensify as pieces of smoldering debris landed a few meters away.

“The pieces are small,” he said. “That means there’s not much left to fall. If we stay here, we’ll be safe.”

“I’m not in a hurry to leave. Believe it or not, this is more comfortable than my cell.” She laughed, but she sounded more

KEN'JA

frightened than amused.

He nodded ruefully and settled deeper into the loamy carpet of leaves and moss beneath the rock. "I agree."

* * *

The insistent cry of birds penetrated Zira's troubled dreams. She awoke to the spicy scent of masculine skin. Her head lay on the Thal Warrior's chest and the fingers of her right hand rested comfortably on the bulge of his pectoral muscle. The hard tip of his dark brown nipple grazed the underside of her wrist with each deep breath he took.

Though the left side of her body felt numb and tingly, she hadn't been this comfortable in months. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt safe.

She raised her eyes to his sleeping face and took inventory. The pink light of dawn lent a coppery hue to his skin. Black hair, streaked with locks of red, hung to his shoulders and his full lips were parted in sleep.

Her curious gaze traveled lower to his abdomen striated with well-defined muscles. Above her fingers, thick ridges of ritual scars created a pattern on the skin of his chest that marked him as highborn.

Killed a Ketomir prison guard, she repeated to herself. He probably had good reason. The Ketomir Empire had declared the Thal an inferior species, just as they believed humans were inferior. From this angle, Zira saw nothing inferior about him. To the reptilian Ketomir, defiance of their divine right to rule the galaxy equaled inferiority.

Gently, she removed her hand from his chest and sat up. The movement set off a bout of coughing that brought him instantly awake. He glared at her, his violet eyes ablaze.

"Sorry." She choked out the apology. "I didn't want to wake you."

He stared at her for a moment and Zira felt heat rise in her face when his gaze tracked down her body.

He seemed to recover from his momentary disorientation and he

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looked away, rolling to his feet with the ease of a well-trained soldier. "We need to find water and something to eat."

Zira stood also and stretched the kinks from her muscles. "Do you think it's safe to go back for the emergency supplies in the capsules?"

"Not if we want to avoid recapture." He hesitated and gave her another long look. She swore she heard a rumbling in his chest, like the purr of a big cat. "Of course, you may do as you wish."

Dismissed already? Zira thought. "I'd rather come with you."

He nodded. "This way, then. I can smell water."

"You *can*?"

"Of course. Can't you?"

She laughed. "Right now, all I can smell is burned poly-fiber." She pointed to the remnants of the knee-length tunic that served as her prison uniform. "Water sounds great. Lead the way—" Another violent cough interrupted her. The Warrior steadied her, and she gratefully met his gaze. "I'm all right. Thank you. Let's find the water."

* * *

They located a shallow river not far from where they'd spent the night. Tige knelt at the river's edge and splashed handfuls of water onto his face and chest to cool the unbearable heat that had plagued him all night long.

The female mimicked his actions, and he kept his eyes averted from her. She made an appreciative hum as she drank the cool, clean water from her cupped hands and the sound caused a shiver to race through his limbs.

Gods! Why did this human seem so enticing? He'd awoken with his *tepir* hard and aching. The heat of her slender body pressed against him set his nerves on fire and made him think dark thoughts of possession. Could it be just the months of deprivation he'd suffered during his captivity? Or could it be something more?

No. He refused to consider the possibility. He'd imagined pushing

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her down into the wet leaves beneath their bodies and taking her in a fevered haze. What man who'd been imprisoned for more than a year wouldn't have such a thought? Fortunately, he'd been able to ignore his desires, been able to pretend to sleep while she stared at him.

Luckily, her discomfort distracted him. If she hadn't started coughing, he'd have torn away the remains of her uniform and—no! It couldn't be. Only the *Ken'Ja* could make him think such thoughts. That was the only explanation.

Thirst and hunger had driven the demon away for a while as they'd walked through the forest. But now, with the sunlight glistening off the crystal drops of water that ran down her neck, with her pink lips wet and shimmering, pursing into a suggestive "O" as she drank from the bowl of her fingers, the desire rose in him again and he cursed under his breath.

How long could he ignore the need? How long could he keep himself from ravaging her if the *Ken'Ja* took over?

"I feel a lot better," she said suddenly. Her voice startled him back from the brink. "Are you all right?"

"I'm hungry." Both of his stomachs rumbled, reminding him that nearly a year had passed since they'd been full at the same time. He scanned the surrounding forest, listening and tasting the air.

Small birds filled the higher branches of the tall, thin trees. Catching them would be difficult, and it would require several of the creatures to feed them both. Splayfooted tracks in the soft earth near the riverbank told him there were larger ground animals nearby, and he'd seen the silver flash of a good-sized fish in the river.

They wouldn't starve, but they wouldn't feast either, at least not until he fashioned some type of hunting weapon and found them a safe place to spend the night.

Another night together. The thought sent a stab of uncanny panic through him. Could he make it through another night with her

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lying in his arms before the *Ken'Ja* turned him into a beast? More than a year had passed since he'd taken any of the herb his people used to control their cursed mating cycle.

"Let's keep moving upstream. The water looks deeper. It will attract larger animals and more fish. We'll find a place to camp and collect some items I can use to make a spear."

She shrugged, then craned her neck to look into the trees. Tige's eyes crept toward the torn neckline of her uniform and the pale, supple skin of her partially exposed breast. She pushed a lock of curly brown hair away from her face and he hungrily followed her movement.

"That sounds like a great plan, but I was thinking we could pick some of those first." She pointed upward to where bunches of small, red-skinned fruits hung from bowed branches.

His fevered senses hadn't noticed them before and he berated himself for missing something so obvious.

"They look like apples," she said.

He gave her a quizzical glance. He wasn't familiar with that word.

"The Terraformer Corps seeded a lot of worlds with plants and animals from Earth in the early days before the Alliance...to prepare for future colonization. Then the Ketomir came."

Tige nodded and glanced at the fruit. "They'll be difficult to reach."

"Hmm." She rose and walked in a tight circle beneath one laden branch. "Lift me."

The fever spiked at the thought of touching her.

She raised one gently arching brow at him. "Come on, I'm lighter than I look."

He crossed to where she stood and placed his hands on her waist. The feel of her soft curves beneath his hands set his hearts pounding.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm preparing to lift you."

"Not like that. Get down on one knee and put your hands together

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like this.” She laced her fingers together in a loose weave. Skeptical, he obeyed and found himself looking up the curve of her thigh as she placed her foot in his hands. “Now, boost me up. I’ll grab that branch and jump down.”

The intoxicating scent of her damp skin teased him unmercifully as she rested her hands on the tense muscles of his shoulders. He wanted to tell her to run as she had last night, to get as far away from him as possible before he hurt her, before he lost his mind to the Thalian curse. The biological urge to mate would consume him and drive him mad until he sated it—or died.

He bit the inside of his cheek and obeyed her command to give her a boost. She flung herself upward and grabbed the lowest hanging branch. Then, with a practiced movement, she sailed back to the ground, the branch clutched in her hand.

He watched with feral appreciation and a Warrior’s pride as she stripped the handful of fruit from the branch and let go. The green limb rebounded upward, scattering an indignant flock of birds.

With a seductive grin, she offered him two of the four fruits she’d picked. “They’re small, but they’re definitely apples. Try one.”

* * *

Two more boosts yielded a dozen tiny apples. Zira ate five and gave her last one to the Warrior, who seemed to enjoy their tart taste more than she did.

The small feast took the edge off her hunger and calmed her fear that they might starve to death before anyone rescued them.

She smiled at the Warrior as he finished the last fruit. “My name is Zira Teynor. I don’t think I mentioned that last night.”

“I am Tig D’vron, son of Viko and Lord of Four Rivers.”

“I’m impressed. I’ve never met a Thalian.”

“I’ve met many humans.”

“I guess that’s how you learned our language.”

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"The Allied soldiers that joined with the Thal against the Ketomir taught me."

Zira sighed and brushed dirt from her legs as she stood. "It's good to know we're on the same side."

"I imagine all the prisoners were Allied sympathizers. Since every Ketomir is a criminal, they need no prisons for their own kind."

Zira paused at the sudden fervor of his words. She felt the same way. Since the Ketomir Empire had taken over this sector of the galaxy, every Allied race had suffered.

"How long do you think we can hide here?" She watched his magnificent violet eyes as he tossed aside an apple core and rose.

"As long as we have to."

Hmm. Not the reassuring answer she'd hoped for, but at least he was honest. They needed to be lucky enough to avoid a Ketomir collection team and lucky enough to warrant an Allied rescue mission. I know I'm not that lucky, she thought. *I just hope he is.*

"Are you all right?" she asked again, noticing the sheen of sweat on his face and chest. She'd seen the tremor in his hand when she'd handed him the last apple.

"Yes." His expression blanked. "Let's go this way. I'll feel better when we have a defensible position and a comfortable place to rest."

"All right. I'll be content as long as we stay near the water." She started walking in the direction he'd indicated. A few seconds later, he followed her.

* * *

They walked for a good portion of the day. Each step Zira took caused her supple form to sway in a way that made Tige's body ache. His erect *tepir* rubbed uncomfortably against the rough fabric of his uniform pants, intensifying his desire. His eyes roamed up and down her body as she picked her way across the thick roots that crisscrossed the forest floor.

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Though small and delicate compared to Thalian females, her human musculature still appealed to him. Her legs, bare beneath her tunic, were long and slender. Her backside was round and high. The *Ken'Ja* demon in his brain urged him at every step to rush forward and grab her, to pull the tattered fabric from her body and satisfy his growing need. The nobleman in him fought valiantly to keep his distance and maintain control over the darkness that threatened to overtake him.

He was Lord of Four Rivers, a confidante of Gyver, the Thalian prince. Trained as a Warrior since his fourteenth summer, Tige could withstand all manner of torture. He could go days without water and weeks without food. He could sew his own battle wounds and kill his enemies without remorse. Surely he possessed the strength of will to keep his *tepir* sheathed. Surely he could triumph over the *Ken'Ja* by force of will alone.

Who was he fooling? If it were possible to fight the *Ken'Ja* and survive, he'd surely have been taught the technique by the D'Vron Warriors who'd come before him. If the *Ken'Ja* could be denied, there would be no need for *tava* to thicken the blood and tame the desire.

"That looks like a cave!"

Once again, Zira's voice distracted Tige from his troubling thoughts. She raced ahead, and when he caught up to her, she hung against a narrow tree and doubled over, coughing. He caught her in his arms, ignoring the electric jolt of awareness that burned his nerve endings.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes!" She gasped and drew in a shuddering breath. "I shouldn't have run. I think the air is thinner here than it was on the ship. I can't seem to catch my breath."

"Sit down." He pulled her to the ground and cradled her in his lap, gently patting her back. "I think the smoke in the ship damaged your lungs. You need to rest."

KEN'JA

She nodded, swallowing hard. "Well, it seems like we...found a place...to call home for a while. What do you think?"

* * *

Zira sat against the wall of the small cave and stretched out her tired legs in front of her. The cool air inside seemed to soothe her throat, and a few hours of rest while Tige collected sticks and rocks had improved her ability to breath without pain.

Now she watched him, his skin gleaming in the late afternoon sunlight as he worked one end of a long, thick stick into a razor-sharp point.

The play of muscles across his broad back held her captivated. She felt her face grow hot when she imagined his powerful body in the throes of passion. Could she handle all that man—his massive body above her, holding her down as he worked her with the same intensity he displayed now?

Her breath caught and she coughed. *Stop this!* She berated herself for such useless daydreams. They were escaped prisoners of war. Their lives were still very much in danger from the Ketomir. Her only concern should be survival, as was his.

She had to admire his resolve, though. He'd already found them shelter and was busily preparing hunting weapons. How fortunate she was that he hadn't let her run away from him last night.

When he glanced in her direction, she fanned her blushing cheeks. "It's warm in here."

He grunted and wiped perspiration from his brow. He looked thirsty.

She got up and joined him in the small clearing in front of the cave. He showed her three finished spears in various sizes.

She nodded approval. "Is this small one for me?"

"You've hunted with a spear?" His incredulous look amused her.

"I've fished with one. This one looks thin enough. Can I take it?"

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He bowed his head.

She lifted the weapon and tested the point with the pad of her thumb, drawing a bead of blood. In the deeper section of the river she might have a chance to catch something substantial. "I'm also going to look for something we can use to carry water."

He nodded. "Stay close to the cave. I'll be looking for the animals that make the three-toed tracks. I believe they're small herbivores. One should provide enough food for both of us."

"Good luck."

Zira smiled. He looked so stern, so troubled. She wanted to smooth the tension from his brow. She might have reached up to touch him, but he moved away, intent on testing the heft of the larger spear.

"To you as well," he said, turning.

* * *

Tige stalked his prey with singular attention. His eyes silently tracked every movement and he held his breath until the final moment when he launched his attack. The heavy spear sailed through the air with a silvery *thsst* and impaled its intended target in the neck.

The small animal squealed once, then fell forward, twitching. Death came swiftly and Tige said a ritual prayer of thanks as he lifted its still-warm body onto his shoulders.

The hunt had cooled the *Ken'Ja* fever somewhat. By channeling his energy into stalking and capturing his prey, he'd purchased some time, but not much. A short period away from Zira made him feel calmer and his *tepir* had even begun to droop, affording him some relief from the constant state of arousal.

He realized if he avoided her completely, he might be able to hold off the worst of the effects. As he headed back to the cave he decided he would spend the night elsewhere, perhaps farther upstream so that the temptation to possess her wouldn't drive him over the edge too soon. He'd hunt all day, every day, if it would keep him from

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succumbing to the beast within.

Then it occurred to him that in his fevered state his instincts would take over. He'd come for her in the night if he knew where to find her.

Distance would have no effect.

She had to be the one to leave, to hide from him. He might go mad searching for her, but better to die in the painful throes of *Ken'Ja* than to ravage her fragile human body and live with the shame.

He had no choice but to chase her away, to frighten her into leaving him.

First, he would present her with his kill and prepare it for them to eat. Then he would...what? Perhaps if he showed her a small taste of the *Ken'Ja* madness she would understand the danger.

What if he simply told her the truth and asked her to leave for her own protection? Would she think less of him, as the Ketomir did? Would she brand him weak, a slave to his race's primitive need to procreate at all costs?

As a proud Warrior, he preferred to have her fear him than pity him. As a nobleman, he owed her his protection, even protection from himself, if necessary.

He would tell her. He would ask her to leave to save herself and he would consider it fair warning. If she refused to go—he would let her experience *Ken'Ja*, even if it killed them both.

He arrived back at the cave with that troubling thought on his mind and his hearts racing.

She hadn't returned yet. He began to worry as he set down the kill next to the bank of rocks he'd assembled as a fire pit. What if she'd exerted herself too much and taxed her injured lungs? What if there were larger predators on this nameless world? Or perhaps other survivors of the crash had found her.

Reluctantly, he moved the carcass inside the cave and covered it with leaves to temporarily hide its scent, then he lumbered toward the

KEN'JA

river, his bloody spear held ready just in case.

The scent of water intensified, reminding him of his thirst. The sound of it rushing against the rocks soothed him, but only momentarily. When he emerged from the trees on the riverbank at the spot where the water ran deep, the sight before him woke the *Ken'Ja* demon. Fire ignited in his gut and his *tepir* sprang back to rigid attention.

Zira stood thigh-deep in the swirling water, her thin spear poised over the shimmering surface. The flush of exertion reddened her cheeks and her dark eyes darted back and forth, tracking her prey among a school of silvery fish that swarmed around her legs.

Naked and glorious, she was a Warrior's woman. A hunter's prey.

* * *

One well-timed thrust completed Zira's task. She lunged forward at just the right moment, and when she drew her spear out of the water, a blue-scaled fish wriggled in its death throes, impaled on the razor point. Its movements grew feeble as she carefully waded to shore. By the time she placed the fish on the bed of leaves she'd made, next to the two others she'd already caught, its glassy eyes had turned dull.

She dropped her spear and reached up to wring water from her hair. That's when she noticed the Warrior watching her. She smiled, unashamed of her nakedness. She'd just caught dinner and the accomplishment made her feel powerful.

Her smile faded, however, when she noticed the dark smudge on his bronzed shoulder. Blood.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, climbing the bank toward him. His labored breathing worried her. His eyes looked dilated, his gaze unfocused. Was he sick? "Tige?"

"Blood from my kill." His voice came out thick. His gaze fell on her breasts and he licked his lips. Her nipples involuntarily hardened.

He wanted her. She didn't need him to tell her. Everything about his

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stance and his expression made his desires perfectly clear.

Zira smiled. What better way to celebrate their freedom from the Ketomir than to take pleasure from one another?

What would happen if she touched him now? Invited him to sample what he so clearly craved?

He growled at her and turned away. His hands curled into fists.

“What’s wrong?”

She followed him a few steps up the bank and touched his broad back. He shivered at the contact and his flesh rippled. Lightning fast, he had her wrist in a vice-grip. His touch burned, sending an electric stab of awareness through her body. She wanted more.

“It’s not safe,” he said, looking at her from under lowered brows. “We should eat what we have and move on. The farther we travel, the less likely a collection team will find us.”

“What about a rescue ship? If an Allied patrol was following the prison ship—”

“The Ketomir will arrive first. When the danger has passed, we can return to this place.”

She nodded. “All right.”

He released her wrist, leaving her feeling cold and needy. Her body tensed when he hesitated a moment, his eyes lingering.

Suddenly bold, she took a chance and threw herself against him. He caught her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him, reveling in the warmth of his sun-warmed skin against her breasts.

“Thank you for helping me,” she whispered against the corded muscles of his neck.

His arms tightened around her. He groaned, a lost sound, feral and raw. She felt the iron-hard shaft of his sex against her thigh and wondered if Thaliens’ resemblance to humans extended to their sex organs. He certainly felt human.

She angled her face toward his and pressed her hips against his

KEN'JA

thigh. One of his hands slid down the wet skin of her back and cupped her bottom, hard, drawing her against him until she felt his massive bulge between her legs. She gasped at the size of it. Her pelvic muscles tightened in anticipation. Would he accept her invitation? Could she take him on, or would their bodies ultimately prove incompatible?

“No!” He pushed her away as roughly as he’d drawn her in. “Go back to camp. I’m going to wash this blood off me, then I’ll prepare the food.”

She settled back to the ground, wide eyed. “What?”

“Go!”

Zira’s cheeks burned at his rejection. Maybe she wasn’t his type. Maybe Thalian females were more beautiful or more demure. Either way, he’d made it clear he had no intention of pursuing the moment.

She didn’t look back as she stalked up the bank and collected her clothes from the low branch on which she’d hung them. For all she knew, she’d insulted him, disgusted him, perhaps even broke a Thalian taboo.

She’d apologize later, after she got over the sting of embarrassment.

* * *

Let her go. Let her go. Let her go...

Tige repeated the command over and over as he listened to Zira’s footsteps recede in the underbrush. If he turned to look at her wet, sinuous form, he’d be lost to the *Ken’Ja*.

The demon painted his world in a red haze of lust. The moment his eyes lit on her naked skin, he’d imagined the feel of her under him. His desire to impale her with his *tepir* and pump his seed into her womb nearly brought him to his knees, but he resisted. He’d forced his brain to think logical, coherent thoughts—until the moment she touched him.

The beast within had her pinned to the ground, writhing as he spread her thighs and thrust his *tepir* deep into her body again and again until sweet release left them both breathless. He didn’t need to

KEN'JA

wonder if humans and Thal were sexually compatible. He'd known Allied soldiers who had bedded Thalian women, but he'd never known a Thal Warrior to take a human mate.

Without the *Ken'Ja* to make her strong and insatiable, she would perish under the onslaught of his need. He would have given anything to ease the growing pain by sinking his *tepir* into her willing body, but she had no idea how much he'd need to take from her.

He stripped off his pants and plunged beneath the icy river water, then swam in circles until his muscles burned. When he broke the surface, the ache returned immediately. His *tepir* stood straight and high, and in desperation, he wrapped his hand around the hot shaft.

Bringing himself to orgasm would do nothing to halt the *Ken'Ja* fever, but for a time it might cool his desire.

As his *tepir* slid through his clenched fist, harder and faster, he allowed the *Ken'Ja* a moment of freedom. He imagined it was her silky inner flesh that held him, the tight ring of muscle within her caressing his length. He heard her panting breath, her moans of pleasure and finally her screams of ecstasy as his seed spilled inside her womb.

Tige shuddered as hot semen clouded the water around him. He drew in deep, calming breaths as his *tepir* temporarily shrank to normal size.

He crawled to shore and lay panting on the warm sand until strength returned to his legs.

Before nightfall, he decided, he would send her away to keep her safe from his ravenous hunger, before the *Ken'Ja* obliterated his desire to spare her.

* * *

Zira's nerve endings blazed. Despite her embarrassment at Tige's rejection, her body still hummed with desire. She needed contact, needed release of all the pent-up fear and frustration that had plagued her during her captivity. She longed to feel his hard muscles under her

KEN'JA

hands. When he'd held her for those brief moments, she felt safe and free. She didn't want that feeling to end.

As she walked back to their cave, she pulled her uniform over her damp skin. She felt hot and constricted in the scorched, dirt-smudged fabric. She wondered if they'd eventually be able to find something from which to make clothing, or if they'd both end up running around naked. Perhaps Tige could resist the lure of her tiny, pale human body, but she'd lose her mind if she had to look at those gorgeous muscles every day and not be able to touch him.

How would she manage not to embarrass herself again?

* * *

Tige returned to camp with Zira's three fish wrapped in leaves. He felt considerably calmer and more in control, and he'd begun to think maybe he could keep the *Ken'Ja* at bay with regular and frequent self-gratification.

When he saw her, bent over the fire pit, arranging dry sticks for tinder, her legs wide and the inviting curve of her backside beckoning him, his resolve fled. His *tepir* rose again and the fever burned anew.

He kept his eyes averted and set about the task of skinning his kill and starting a cook fire. She watched him furtively as he worked, averting her eyes every time he stole a forbidden glance in her direction.

Later, when the fish and the herbivore hung over the fire and dripping fat crackled in the blaze, she approached him. He tried to ignore her, his eyes focused on the flames, his mind repeating the calming chant that had kept him sane for the past year while he'd rotted in the Ketomir prison cell.

Galaria canna vargash thra—the mind is always free.

His mind had taken him to wondrous places during his incarceration, but now the pathways to all those amazing worlds were blocked by the shadow of the *Ken'Ja*. Every road his thoughts traveled

KEN'JA

led him back to the woman sitting beside him and his insatiable, bestial need to possess her.

“Tige, I want to apologize for what happened before.”

Her soft words startled him. His rejection had been meant to frighten her, or better yet, make her angry enough to abandon him, as a Thalian female would have done after such an insult. Instead, she apologized. It would be easy now to tell her of the Thalian curse, but he couldn't form the words. He merely stared at her, the *Ken'Ja* making him mute.

“I didn't mean to...insult you. It never occurred to me that maybe you have a mate, or maybe you've taken vows or something. I had no idea, and if I had, I never would have touched you.”

He grunted. What could he say now that would drive her safely away from him?

“I cannot fault your ignorance of Thalian ways. I can only ask that you keep your distance.” The words came reluctantly to his lips. He should have lashed out, berated her, told her he couldn't stand the sight of her pale human skin and couldn't bear the touch of her soft human hands. “It would be wise if we found separate living areas.”

“Oh...”

The disappointment in her voice tore at him. The *Ken'Ja* woke. *Take her now!* The cursed demon urged him to break her trust, to lunge for her and show her just what he wanted. His *tepir* hardened, forcing him to stand to alleviate the growing pressure.

“Before dark, you should search farther upstream for another cave. You may keep the small spear. Your skill with it will help you survive.”

Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. “What? You mean split up completely? Don't we have a better chance if we stick together?”

“Two targets will be more difficult for the collection teams to find. They'll be scanning for sentient life forms and with no indigenous

KEN'JA

population to help hide us, we'll be easier for them to spot."

"You're throwing me out of camp because I hugged you?"

Tige forced himself to look at her. Her anger excited the *Ken'Ja*, roused his blood to boiling. "I am a Thal Warrior. A lord. You are...no one." He bit out the words, his gaze hard.

She drew back. "Because I touched you? I slept in your arms last night. I know that doesn't mean we're married, but I thought we were in this together, helping each other survive."

"Together is exactly where we shouldn't be." With that, he tore a sizzling leg from the herbivore carcass and held it out to her. "Eat. Then go. The farther we get from each other, the safer we'll both be."

* * *

Zira stared at Tige's offering in disbelief. "I don't want it."

Was this the same man who held her last night and calmed her fears with his soothing alien chant? Was this the same man who looked at her with feral appreciation when she offered him succulent apples for breakfast? How could the simple act of hugging him have turned him against her like this?

She spun away from the fire. "I don't need your help to survive. But it would have been easier for both of us. I don't believe we'll be safer apart."

"A Thal Warrior's only concern is his enemy."

Zira glared at him. *Pompous fool*. Maybe this was his true personality and the caring, attentive man with whom she'd spent the night was only a result of his shock at being free after so long in captivity.

Her appetite fled at the thought of venturing into the forest alone. She turned her back to him and began walking.

"You're not going to eat?" His voice held none of the contempt she'd heard a moment earlier. Was he really concerned about her hunger now?

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She didn't respond. Hurt and confused, she randomly chose a direction and moved forward. What did she need him for anyway? He was, after all, just a prisoner, a killer by his own admission. A lord who thought himself too good for her. She'd survived twenty-eight years without a Thal Warrior to care for her. She could certainly survive the night.

* * *

Tige hung his head in a mixture of relief and shame. He'd never meant to drive her away without her share of the food. Of course, she wouldn't starve. She was resourceful, clever and strong, all coveted traits in a Thal woman. On Thalia, in the old times before the Ketomir ravaged their world, Thal men would have fought for the chance to mate with such a woman.

Had he lived a century ago, he would have voiced his claim to her, and battled a dozen suitors for the right to bed her. In the throes of *Ken'Ja* he would have seeded her womb and proudly watched the next generation of D'vron Warriors grow within her supple body.

Instead, the Ketomir had reduced him to this. Huddled over a fire on some nameless planet, Tige D'Vron, Lord of Four Rivers, was about to become, not a casualty of war, but a sacrifice to the *Ken'Ja* demon, a victim of the Thalian curse.

Unable to eat, he doused the fire and walked away.

* * *

Fortunately for Zira, small caves and rocky alcoves riddled the forest. After walking resolutely toward the setting sun for several hours, she found a granite niche beneath a mossy hillside. She crawled into the leafy depression and drew her knees to her chest.

Never trust a Thal Warrior, she berated herself. *Strike that. Never trust a man.* After all, a man had gotten her into this mess.

She thought of Donok, the Allied soldier who had asked her to ferry

KEN'JA

information to the troops stationed on the dark side of Gendar's moon. He'd told her no one would question her. He promised her she'd be safe. She had believed him and ended up on the wrong end of a Ketomir shock pistol.

This was all Donok's fault.

As her eyes drooped and her belly rumbled, she replayed every moment with Tige. He'd been the first to touch her; when he'd chased her down the hillside and grabbed her, it hadn't been taboo then. When he'd tucked her into the crook of his arm and stilled her shivering as the debris from the prison ship rained through the forest, he'd seemed anything but disgusted by her touch.

What had changed? What could she have done to make herself so repulsive to him that he didn't even want her near him?

It didn't matter. She had no intention of finding him to ask him. She'd get by on her own and survive until the Allied rescue ship came for them.

* * *

The *Ken'Ja* scoured his body in fevered waves and he awoke screaming. Where was his woman? He needed her now! He needed to sate his desires before the pain became unbearable.

He rolled onto his stomach and pulled himself up on his hands and knees. Crouching low like an animal, he scanned the cave for any sign of her.

Her scent came to him from the spot where she'd rested that afternoon. He pawed at the damp earth and brought the essence of her to his nose.

He'd find her.

Tige raced from the cave, incoherent and directionless.

Find her! Take her!

The *Ken'Ja* ruled his thoughts now and his *tepir* ruled his body. By daybreak, he swore to himself with a groan, his body would rule hers or

KEN'JA

one of them would die.

* * *

Zira's startled heart threatened to burst from her chest. The sound that woke her was inhuman, tortured.

She scanned the forest, grateful for the light of the planet's large moon. Nothing moved. The stillness made her uneasy.

Had someone else survived the crash? Had the Ketomir come and captured Tige?

She held her thin spear ready and fought to slow her breathing. The crack of a dry stick scared her and she gasped involuntarily. The musty odor of damp leaves filled her lungs and her breath left her in an explosive cough.

When she finally caught her breath again the forest lay still and utterly silent.

The shadows of the trees stretched around her, and she imagined glowing points of light reflected in the eyes of nocturnal predators. In her shallow niche, she was easy prey.

Forget this! she decided. If Tige didn't want her around, *he* could leave. Why should she be forced to huddle under a cold rock while the "Lord" had a comfortable cave in which to sleep?

She crawled out of the niche and brandished her spear. He can fight me for it or he can leave, she decided as she began retracing what she hoped was the path back to the cave. His only concern might be his enemy, but hers was survival, and she wasn't about to let him compromise that.

* * *

Tige staggered through the forest, led by an instinct his people had suppressed for decades. With his hearts pounding, and his senses on fire, he stalked her like a predator stalked its prey.

Her scent drew him from place to place, stronger, then fainter. The

KEN'JA

blood lust raged in him. The pain grew until he saw only a dark tunnel in front of him. Every step became agony.

The *Ken'Ja* made him want to tear off his clothes—even his own skin restricted him. If he found her at this stage, he'd rend her delicate flesh with the force of his need. He'd break her.

The only part of his brain that remained coherent deliberately slowed his pace and turned his body away from the strongest scent.

She'd begun moving, walking in circles around a small hill. As long as she didn't stop moving, she'd be safe. But each step brought her enticing aroma closer.

The *Ken'Ja* made him call her name. The *Ken'Ja* made him lie in wait for her to stumble into range. The *Ken'Ja* would make him destroy her with his desire.

* * *

Zira stopped between two trees and turned sharply to look behind her. Had Tige called her name? Had he come looking for her? Or was he in trouble?

She waited, fighting to calm her labored breathing. She heard nothing over the sound of her own blood pounding in her ears.

"Tige!" She took the chance that he would be the only one listening for her response.

No answer. Maybe she'd imagined his voice.

Was that a footstep?

Zira turned again and squinted through the trees. A low, throaty growl galvanized her.

She ran.

* * *

He'd frightened her into a panicked run. Good. Now he needed to force himself to let her get ahead of him. The *Ken'Ja* could catch her in no time. The demon in his blood railed at him, pumping in time to the

KEN'JA

double rhythm of his hearts. His *tepir* burned and his engorged testes ached so badly he'd have torn them off with his bare hands except the *Ken'Ja* wouldn't let him.

There was only one cure for this torture. He had to mate by morning or die.

* * *

"Tige! Are you here?" Zira made as much noise as possible when she finally arrived at their campsite. She didn't want to startle a sleeping Warrior, just in case it hadn't been his voice she'd heard in the woods.

Again, no answer. Only cold embers remained of their cook fire, with no sign of the herbivore carcass or the fish she'd caught. *He ate it all himself?*

Zira huffed as she wandered around in front of the cave. Was he out searching for her? Or had he abandoned the campsite in order to put more distance between them?

Either way, she decided the cave was hers now. If he came back he could stay, or go, but there was no way she was going to wander around any more tonight.

* * *

Zira awoke clutching her spear, her heart racing once again. She sat up, stifling a cough against the back of her hand, then scanned the forest around the cave.

The noise that had awakened her might have only been a dream. It sounded like a moan of pain.

She thought of Tige. He hadn't returned. Not that she expected him to, or wished he would.

Zira pushed aside her disappointment and crawled out of the cave. Weak sunlight filtered through the trees, and the air was damp. She didn't need to be Thalian to smell rain. If she wanted to eat, she'd have

KEN'JA

to find something quickly, then work out a way to keep a fire going without smoking herself out of the cave.

She stretched and hefted her spear. *First order of business, the river, then the apple trees.* Without Tige for a lift, she might have to climb one. The prospect didn't thrill her but her hunger conquered her dislike of heights. She'd manage.

The mossy odor of the forest made her cough. She hurried to the river for a cool drink, then decided to explore upstream a bit. Low-hanging bushes not far beyond the riverbank held purple berries that stained her fingers when she picked them. They smelled sweet, and an experimental dab of the juice on her tongue produced no immediate ill effects.

Since the alternative to caution was starvation, Zira ate a small handful. If she made it through the day, she'd come back tonight and pick more.

Apples were her next endeavor. Halfway between her cave and the big rock where she and Tige had spent their first night, she decided to make a trail as she walked, using a sharp stone to scratch marks on tree trunks as she passed.

This time when she heard the low moan, she knew it wasn't a daydream. She froze, her breath solidifying in her lungs. She forced her legs to carry her toward the sound, and a few meters away on the riverbank, she saw him.

Tige lay sprawled on a patch of grass, his body covered in sweat. His skin had an unnatural cast, like tarnished bronze. His violet eyes looked wild.

Poison.

The first thought that came to Zira's mind was that he'd eaten something that had made him sick.

She crossed to where he lay and threw down her spear. When she knelt beside him, he tried to push her away, but she slid her legs under

KEN'JA

his head and brushed strands of dark hair from his face.

“What happened to you? Were you looking for me all night?”

“Leave me.” Despite his weakened condition, his voice sounded strong. His disapproving glance didn’t waver.

“No. You’re sick. I won’t leave you like this. If you want to chase me away, you’re going to have to wait until you’re well enough to get up off the ground.”

“Zira, I’ll hurt you.”

She squinted, and felt the heat of his skin. Delirious from fever, she decided. “You can’t hurt a fly in this condition.”

“*Ken’Ja*...” he rasped.

The look on his face made her think it was a curse. “What’s that?”

“*Ken’Ja*...it will kill me.”

“Is it a disease? What happened to you, Tige?” She pulled his upper body onto her knees and cradled him. If he was going to die and leave her all alone, she wanted to know the reason why.

He grabbed her arm and held it, tugging her hand to his chest where she felt the mismatched beating of his hearts. “*Ken’Ja* is the Thalian curse.” His voice broke as a wave of pain washed over his features. “Mate or die.”

* * *

There. He’d confessed the shame of his people to a human. The pain wracked his body, driving away reason for a moment, and through the blood haze, he reached for her.

“Leave me! Don’t let me hurt you.”

“Mate or die?” Her voice came to him as if from a great distance. The rush of blood pounding in time to his heartbeats filled his ears and drowned out reasonable thought.

Images spun in front of him.

“You’re delirious. You need water.”

She pushed him up to a sitting position. The feel of her hands on

KEN'JA

him ignited the demon in his blood.

He grabbed her arm, clawing at her fair skin. "The *Ken'Ja* will kill me."

"You'll die if you don't mate with someone?"

Tige hung his head. Another wave of desperation washed over him. Her nearness drove the ache to new levels. "Without *tava*, I can't control it."

"What's *tava*?"

"An herb that grows on Thalia. We use it to control the cycle. I've been without it for nearly a year and I can't stop the *Ken'Ja* now. I'm weak. Leave me now and I won't have the strength to follow you."

"I can't let you just lie here and die."

She leaned close, and her scent enveloped him. His muscles clenched, drawing strength from the *Ken'Ja*, and he had no choice but to do as the beast bade him.

In an instant, he had her beneath him on the soft earth. The *Ken'Ja* had tricked him, too, made him think his exhausted body could no longer fight.

"I told you to leave me! Why didn't you obey?" His breath came in ragged gasps as he spread her legs with his.

She stretched beneath him, her hands trapped above her head, held encircled by one of his. Her eyes went wide and she arched, giving a small whimper as his other hand tore at her uniform.

"Tige! Tige! You don't have to hold me down." She panted hard next to his ear and thrust up her hips against his. "It's all right...it's all right."

"No. It's not!" He growled against her throat and opened his mouth to taste her. "A human can't withstand *Ken'Ja*."

Even as he spoke, he yanked her uniform above her waist and dragged the thin undergarment down her hips, exposing her upper thighs and the triangle of dark curls that hid her sex. She bucked

KEN'JA

against him as he ripped away the barrier between them.

“Let me go and I’ll help you.” He imagined he heard desperation in her voice. “Let me go, Tige, please.”

He released her, but only so he could use both hands to tear off her clothing. He rose above her and stripped off his pants, freeing his *tepir*.

Her eyes caressed its length and her mouth formed an “O” that beckoned him. She spread her thighs and pulled his body atop hers.

“It’s all right, Tige,” she sighed again and again as he fought his final battle with the *Ken’Ja*. The demon won, and in her arms, Tige lost himself to the madness.

* * *

Zira gasped as Tige settled his body between her legs. She felt the tension and the heat of his muscles, coiled to spring like a beast. This *Ken’Ja* was turning him inside out. He shuddered in her arms as the wide head of his sex found entrance. She moaned encouragement, and with a growl, he plunged inside her.

The length and width of him surprised her. She arched and let out a small cry of pain before her inner muscles accommodated him. He filled her to the breaking point, and when he began to move, his thrusts wild and uncontrolled, she bit her lower lip and hung on for the ride.

“Good! It’s all right, Tige,” she panted as he pumped into her.

Her body clenched in anticipation of each thrust, and she moved higher and higher with him. They rolled across the grass. When Tige’s body came down on hers, she winced at his weight, then moaned in exquisite pleasure at the completeness she felt. With their bodies melded together, she felt safe and somehow whole.

He held her hips and rode her hard until an orgasm slammed through her. She bucked and locked her legs around his waist to draw him deeper. She felt him in her womb, felt his desperate need and craved it. He drove into her again and again until her body shuddered once more in a release that tore a scream from her throat.

KEN'JA

Still he had more for her. He worked her harder, rolled her over again and again until finally she had to beg him to stop. He couldn't. He growled in her ear, stretched her flat against the soft ground, and took her once more until finally his own release rocked him.

Zira shivered with the force of his orgasm. He came deep inside her, filling her with liquid heat. As he emptied himself into her, she came again, her exhausted body raw and taut from the constant sensations. She could do nothing more than lie panting beneath him and cling to his body as she drifted into a haze of sensation.

* * *

He rose on shaking arms and held himself above her. His hot shaft lay against her thigh, still pumping the last of his seed onto her skin. "I'm sorry, Zira. I never wanted to hurt you."

"Hurt me?" She laughed. "You hurt me when you sent me away."

He caressed her face and pressed tender kisses to her neck and breasts. "The *Ken'Ja* is uncontrollable...but it's almost over."

No...

The demon stirred within him, ready again, but not as strong as before. The terrible ache had once again become pleasure. The sight of her sated body beneath him, his sweat and his seed on her skin, renewed the fever, but this time, Tige maintained some control. He held himself above her, then lifted her hand and limply rested her fingers against his chest.

She smiled. "Do what you need to do, Tige. I'll take whatever you have to give."

"Zira."

"Touch me, Tige. Whatever you need to do to get through it. I can't survive here without you. Take me again if you need to."

He buried his face in her hair and gathered her against his chest. He lifted her from the ground as a light rain began to fall, cooling the fever just enough for him to think of her comfort before his own desires.

KEN'JA

* * *

Zira lay on the bed of leaves, gasping, her body shaking from exertion. All day and half the night she hosted the *Ken'Ja* demon as it relentlessly drove Tige's body in a mating frenzy. For hours, he'd ridden her to heights of passion. Each of his orgasms had come faster, but lasted less time. The opposite was true for her.

Now, her body shivered in a state of hyper-arousal. Impaled to the hilt within her, Tige sucked one nipple and caressed the other. Each movement of his tongue sent electric waves of pleasure and pain through her. She sobbed his name with each thrust and finally closed her eyes and surrendered everything she had to him.

If the *Ken'Ja* killed her, at least she'd die in his arms.

* * *

"Tige! Where are you?"

Zira had lost all concept of time. Golden sunlight bathed the clearing when she crawled out of the cave. It seemed like days had passed. She rose on rubbery legs and glanced down at her naked body. Every inch of her felt raw and tingly. Her stomach rumbled, and she placed her hand over it, caressing her tired muscles.

Could Thalian and humans procreate? she wondered as she took a tentative step. During *Ken'Ja*, Tige had whispered in her ear, growled and panted heated promises to her. He'd urged her to take him deeper, soothed her through orgasms that rocked her until she was barely conscious. He'd promised her all the riches of his world and told her he had seeded her with Warrior stock.

"The legend goes that the greatest of all Thalian armies grew from the womb of a single woman, mated during *Ken'Ja* to the God of War. She bore him twenty strong sons who each fathered twenty sons, and those Warriors ruled the Great Western Plains for fourteen centuries." She remembered his words and his touch, and something inside her

KEN'JA

longed for him.

She wondered if her ravaged body could go another round. Her wanton heart certainly needed more. If he were here.

“Tige!”

He appeared at the edge of the clearing. A scowl momentarily crossed his features. “You should be resting.”

“Do you want me again?” she asked in tentative anticipation. Could her body handle more?

He smiled and crossed the clearing. In his cupped hands he held the purple berries she’d found the day before. Had it been only a day?

“First you need to eat. The *Ken’Ja* is fading. I’ll be able to hunt before I need release again.”

Zira smiled wanly, then leaned against his broad chest and sampled the berries. “Oh. Good.”

She needed time to rest but she didn’t want to be alone. Their desperate union reminded her how lonely she’d been and how much she needed someone.

Gently, he guided her inside the cave and fed her berries until his hands were empty. “Sleep now. I’ll be back with more food.” He handed her the remnants of her uniform and helped her pull the tunic over her head.

“What happens when the *Ken’Ja* is over?” she asked as he smoothed her hair and placed a kiss on her forehead. “Are Thaliens celibate in between cycles?”

He laughed softly. “Hardly. We can control our urges as well as humans can, but we still require and enjoy mating. The *Ken’Ja* served a purpose in our early history when our civil wars decimated the population. *Ken’Ja* virtually guarantees procreation. It occurs every fourteen solar months, which is just enough time for a female to complete a pregnancy and wean her infant.”

Zira’s eyes widened as she lowered herself onto their soft bed of

KEN'JA

leaves. "So Thalian women are always pregnant?"

"Until *tava*, yes. Until the Ketomir came and we turned our attention from our own petty disputes to fighting their invasion. With Warriors away from their mates for long periods, the *Ken'Ja* became a terrible burden. That's how we learned to control it."

"Without *tava*, you'll go through this again and again?"

Tige nodded, and she saw a flicker of shame in his eyes. She reached up to caress his jaw and he kissed her palm. Something within her aching body stirred. When he needed her again, she'd be ready, and very willing.

* * *

Later that night, Tige sated the *Ken'Ja* one final time. The fever broke and his body eased back from the brink of madness when he spilled his seed within Zira's willing body.

Afterward, as her breathing slowed and the beat of her single human heart became regular beneath his hand, he cradled Zira against him and sang the chant that had kept him alive for all those months aboard the prison ship.

Galaria canna vargash thra.

The mind is always free.

* * *

Six Solar Months Later

"Tige! Wake up! Come look!" Zira ducked into the hidden cave high in the foothills of the northern mountains where she and Tige had forged their semi-permanent home.

He lay in the nest of herbivore furs that formed their mattress, clutching a feather pillow beneath his dark head. He opened one eye. "If the sun is not up, neither am I. Come back to bed, woman!"

"No! Come look." She pulled the fur blankets from him and slapped

KEN'JA

his naked thigh. "It's a ship!"

Tige rolled to his feet, grabbing his pants and the leather vest he'd taken to wearing here in the colder altitudes. He took her hand, and together, they hurried outside.

A boxy silhouette hung in the pre-dawn sky, just above the rocky horizon where the first rays of sun met the night. Red landing lights skipped across the dark hull and the heat of its thrusters sent ripples through the cool air.

Tige clutched Zira to him and she felt his heartbeats quicken. "It looks like an Allied lander."

She nodded. "They finally found us." She huddled in his arms, not sure whether to be happy about the rescue.

"What's wrong?" he asked, turning her face to meet his gaze.

She shrugged. "We've been so busy just surviving. I guess I never thought about what would happen afterward."

He smiled and his violet eyes tracked back to the ship. Its landing gear unfolded and the angular hull set down on the plain below them with a thud audible across the distance. "We'll go home."

Zira tensed at the thought. Their homes were on different sides of the galaxy.

* * *

Eight Months Later, Thalia

"What you've done to her is inexcusable," Rual said as he met his brother at the western gate of Four Rivers.

Tige glared at his brother and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. He'd run halfway from the landing field when he got the call. His regiment's battle drills would have to wait. "I make no excuses, brother. I had no idea what would happen."

"No Thalian has ever mated with a human during *Ken'Ja*. You're lucky you didn't damage her permanently."

KEN'JA

Tige followed his brother's long strides toward the main house, where his human wife needed him. "I'm very lucky, Rual. Lucky that Zira chose to stay with me."

The brothers burst through the main doors of the house. Servants greeted them with nervous stares. The Lord of the estate passed them, concerned only with his mate.

"Where is she?"

"Niane is trying to keep her comfortable in the main suite," Rual responded.

Tige ignored his brother's further comments and bounded up the stairs. He rushed into the room he shared with Zira and stopped, momentarily shocked by the sight before him.

She lay on the bed, her sweat-damp hair a mass of ringlets around her face. Her eyes were dark with agony and her limbs shook.

Niane hovered over Zira's pale form, dabbing at her face and chest with a cloth. She cast her brother a cold glare. "I gave her *tava*. It didn't work. She's started the cycle and nothing will stop it now."

"Humans don't suffer *Ken'Ja*. She must be ill." Tige crossed to the bed and sat beside Zira. He took her shivering body in his arms and she gazed at him through half-closed eyes.

"Tige...it's so hot in here. Help me!"

"It's *Ken'Ja*," Niane insisted. "You passed the cycle to her on that godforsaken planet."

"How is that possible? *Ken'Ja* is genetic. It's not contagious."

"Apparently it is. You'd better do something before it kills her."

"Leave us." Tige glared at his sister. "I'll take care of my wife."

Niane nodded and left with a curious backward glance. Tige vowed to deal with her and Rual's objections later. How could they blame him for this? He had no way of knowing Zira would become enslaved to the *Ken'Ja* because of him, or that *tava* would not effect her human metabolism.

KEN'JA

"Tige! I need you." She shuddered in his arms, and he held her close while he pulled off her thin nightdress. As the cool air of the room hit her damp skin, her nipples hardened and her expression grew feral. She clawed at him. "Now! Now!"

"Be patient, love, let me—"

Before he could free his *tepir* from the confines of his uniform pants, she tore open the fastenings and grasped his growing erection in her sweat-slicked hand.

"Now, Tige! I need you inside me."

What man of any race could argue with that directive? Despite his daily dose of *tava*, he felt the stirring within him. The memory of his time at the mercy of *Ken'Ja* hadn't faded. He often conjured those images in his mind when he made love to his wife, and she seemed to relish the ferocity it brought to their coupling.

Without further comment, he pushed her delicate body onto the cushions and plunged his *tepir* inside her. She took him gratefully, panting and screaming his name as the demon took hold of her.

For two days, he sated her every need until she finally slept, exhausted in his arms. With the last ounce of strength he possessed, he laid his hand across her womb, where he hoped he might one day feel the twin heartbeats of the next D'vron Warrior.

"My Zira!" He sighed. "My woman. If I'd known you'd suffer this—"

"Who's suffering?" she replied sleepily. "The secret to *Ken'Ja* is not to deny it, my love. There's no shame in feeling like this." She reached for him and he obeyed the movements of her body by rolling on top of her. "Let's enjoy it while it lasts. *Galaria canna vargash thra.*"

BERNADETTE GARDNER

As a child, Bernadette Gardner (who also writes as Jennifer Colgan) regularly spent all her allowance on books. She quickly progressed from Carolyn Keene's *Nancy Drew Mysteries* to Nora Roberts and Gary Jennings. Her search for the perfect mix of adventure and romance finally took her from the bookstore to her computer where she began writing the kinds of stories she loves to read.

"I'd been experimenting with different genres and decided to try a romance novel. Now I can't imagine writing a story without romance in it," she says.

Jennifer is a native of the NY-NJ Metropolitan area, but her travels have taken her as far from home as Sydney, Australia. Her writing regularly takes her far into the future and deep into distant galaxies.

You can learn visit her websites to learn about her works in progress at www.bernadettegardner.com and www.jennifercolgan.com.

* * *

***Don't miss Conjured In Flames, by Jennifer Colgan,
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