

Paladin's Pride 2: His By Rite

Angelina Evans

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Chapter One

The Calm Before the Storm

"We'll rest here for the night."

Genae's legs understood Kai's words before her mind did. They collapsed under her and she sat down hard. She closed her eyes and waited for the burning sensation in her legs to subside. Hopefully nothing her bare butt came in contact with would cause a reaction. Who had ever heard of a planet that reacted violently with anything synthetic? Running around naked was a real pain in the ass. She smiled at the thought but it quickly turned into a grimace as pain knifed through her side with each breath.

"Are you all right?" Hard hands lifted her from the ground.

She looked up into golden eyes and scowled. "I'll be fine as long as you set me down before you let go." If he didn't she'd end up on her face.

Kai frowned down at her. "Something's wrong with your legs?"

"Nothing a week's rest wouldn't cure." What wouldn't she give for a week's rest with no worrying about League starships searching for her or League hunters trying to kill her? Having people want to kill her definitely wasn't a change for the better.

Kai continued to frown.

Of course he wouldn't understand. He hadn't breathed hard once the whole day. "Our little walk through the forest?"

He continued to frown.

"Our marathon march? Your long legs versus my short ones? I'm exhausted, Kai. My legs are shaking. I'm just lucky I didn't collapse before now."

Kai's expression turned fierce as he crouched down and set her gently on the ground. "You're to tell me if you're having trouble. There was no need for you to suffer." He swept the fingers of one hand through her hair and tilted her face up to his.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She returned his frown. She wasn't the one having trouble understanding. "You want me to tell you when I'm getting tired. Got it." Not likely. There was no way she was going to have him risk his life because she was tired. He'd saved her life more than once and, if she could help it, he wasn't going to have to do it again.

Kai released her arms and grasped one trembling calf. She winced as he started kneading and massaging the tense, overstrained muscle. "That's not helping."

"It will in a moment."

She'd known the VanDai male only three days and she already knew that low rumble meant business. He wasn't going to stop. She lay back as he moved his attentions to her thigh. She grimaced as his thumbs dug into tight muscles. Maybe he wouldn't kill her with kindness before he decided he'd helped her enough.

Moments later she sighed as her muscles started to loosen. Warmth flowed from his hands to center low in her belly. His hands were magic. Maybe it was *him* that was magic. Whichever it was, she didn't want him to stop.

He moved to her other calf and treated it to the same deep massage. By the time he finished with her second thigh she was limp. She could barely keep her eyes open.

She should thank him. No. In the morning. She'd remember to say thank you then. His lips pressed to hers with hard pressure that was almost instantly gone. She murmured a protest that faded as she rolled onto her side and drifted to sleep.

Kai looked down at the small bundle of human femininity curled in a ball and a possessiveness he'd never thought to feel welled up inside him. She was his. He admired her courage and her stamina but he would protect her, even from herself if necessary. He'd set a grueling pace and she'd followed without complaint but he wouldn't allow her to hurt herself trying to keep up with him.

Anger simmered low in his belly. She should have told him she was ready to collapse. He lifted her arm and circled her wrist with his hand. Her bones were tiny and fragile. She reminded him of the night blooming Fasinia flower from his home planet. It

was incredibly delicate yet amazingly strong. It would survive freezing temperatures for days but a single touch made it wither. She was like that. One wrong touch...

He settled her arm back at her side and brushed her nipple with the tip of one finger. The pink bud hardened, its twin matching its response. Desire hardened his cock even as a fresh wave of anger spread through him. She was all but unconscious, unaware of his touch, and he didn't like it.

In one lithe motion he rose from his knees. A savage smile lifted his lips. Her hunter would catch up with them the next day. It had been too long since he'd challenged himself in hand-to-hand combat. On YelAsta any other kind of fight wasn't possible. The next day would be interesting.

As battle lust filled him so did lust for the woman at his feet. His penis surged to full erection. His breathing deepened and his heart rate sped. He hadn't stopped wanting her from the moment he'd found her in the wreckage of her crashed spaceship. Battle lust only fed his hunger for her. It would be worse after the fight. His control would be more tenuous.

Even the thought had the beast inside him threatening his control. He wanted to sink his cock in the woman he'd already claimed. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists. Half-sheathed claws bit into his hands. He concentrated on the pain. It was enough to dampen the feral quality of his need but didn't lessen his arousal.

He opened his eyes and looked down at her. She was small. Impossibly vulnerable. His gut clenched. He wasn't an animal even if the beast in him was strong.

They had to have food. They'd been lucky the night before to have shared the rations he'd stored in the cavern. When they woke they'd have to eat what YelAsta provided.

The next day would be as challenging as the past two days, maybe more. She needed to sleep and so did he. In the morning, though, he would take her. She wouldn't be safe if he didn't find release before the coming fight.

He looked around, listened and opened his other senses to the world around them. All he sensed or heard was the skittering of small animals. She was as safe as he

could make her and she wouldn't be alone long.

* * *

Genae moaned and shifted. Her hips arched to the lash of a rough textured tongue. She fought not to leave the bliss of sleep as the fire in her belly grew.

His mouth closed over her clit and he sucked. She gasped for breath as an orgasm rocketed through her. Her body arched off the ground. Before her body could settle back to the ground he was on her, pushing into her.

She gasped, bit her lip and tried to twist away from the intense pressure. He'd been inside her before but it didn't feel like he would fit this time, and she wanted him to. She wanted his cock inside her, filling her, pushing her to pleasure she had never imagined.

"It's impossible," his voice was harsh, his expression fierce, "but you're tighter than you were yesterday."

Genae's head rocked back and forth as she fought not to retreat from his heavy invasion. Trust a man to think it was the woman's fault. "You're bigger." She winced as the broad head of his cock forged into her. It burned, but in a good way.

"Oh!" Her breath caught. Her body tightened around him, squeezing him. He felt huge, his cock pulsing inside her.

"Yes." His voice was guttural, almost growling. He grasped her hips and held her still as he pushed deeper. He rubbed against her, his whole body pressed to hers. His cock dragged against her inner tissues. Her nipples rolled against his chest as she squirmed, trying to ease the pressure of his invasion.

He surged forward an inch. Two inches. She tried to move. Away or closer she wasn't sure but he held her still. Her own desire held her helpless. He was so big, the knobby texture of his penis finding every nerve in her vagina. It was so good yet almost too much. She wanted him inside her forever. His heavy weight anchoring her to him, his cock dragging responses from her she hadn't known were possible.

Was he bigger? Was she smaller? Why was it harder for him to penetrate her today? Would it be even more difficult the next time?

All thought disappeared as his cock filled her. His balls slapped against her. She arched up to him. He was heavy and thick, pulsing and hot.

She gasped in a deep breath, ran one hand low over her abdomen and licked her lips. She could feel him inside her. He was a part of her. He was the one she wanted. Taking care of her even though she wasn't of his species. Risking his life for her even though she wasn't *useful* to him.

He pulled back and slid into her again. She moaned. Her inner muscles clenched and released. It felt like her flesh was molding to his. Each penetration shaped her to fit him and only him. Two days with him and she couldn't imagine ever being with anyone else.

He thrust forward without pulling back. The motion pushed his pelvis against her clit. She cried out, breath rushing from her lungs.

Kai watched her. Her expression was the most sensual he'd ever seen. Her eyes were closed, her face flushed, her lips parted. She looked pained, her face contorted. Little whimpers and moans broke from her. Her breasts were fuller, her nipples erect red points arrowing from the swollen pillows of her breasts.

He braced his hands on either side of her and pulled his hips back, his cock dragging out of her. He winced at the cold after the fire of her cunt.

He thrust into her.

He surged in and out.

She clamped around him, tried to meet his thrusts, but he overwhelmed her. He lifted his head and roared. The sound echoed through the forest, a primal sound of conquest.

She bit her lips and *felt*. Felt everything. The pounding thrust of his cock. The inner clenching of her channel as she fought to hold him. The heat and power.

And the sounds. His flesh slapping against hers. The wet, sucking sound as he moved in and out of her, fast and hard, making her body shake with each thrust. His harsh breathing and low rumbles. Her own moans and gasps. He drove into her. A low,

keening sound broke from her as her body rocked under the lash of power.

Kai felt the convulsive squeezing of her release. Her inner muscles worked his entire length. Gripping him. Fighting to keep him inside her. Tightening to keep him from penetrating deeper.

His. No one would ever question who she belonged to. He would take her so long and hard his scent and seed would become a part of her forever.

His motions became fiercer. Harder. He wanted to mark her channel as his own. He wanted it to know and long for the penetration of his hard length. He wanted that knowledge to be visceral.

His seed exploded from him.

He roared his pleasure that she had forced his release, claiming him as he claimed her. He contorted his body so he could stay in her still clenching sheath. He took her breast in his mouth and suckled. A low purring sound rumbled from him as she contracted in time to the rate and rhythm of his sucking. They needed to be moving but he couldn't leave her. Not yet.

* * *

How long they lay like that Genae didn't know. It could have been moments or a lifetime. Thoughts started to develop but disappeared before becoming fully formed.

His hard length pulsed inside her. His mouth feasted at her breasts. Finally, Kai lifted his head. "We have to go."

He flexed into her and she groaned. "You think I'm going to be able to walk after what we've just done? My legs are boneless. The rest of me isn't much better." If she could, she would never move again. It would be wonderful to stay right where she was, with Kai inside her, and pretend she hadn't stolen the League president's plans and wasn't running for her life.

Pretending that would get them both killed. Cold washed through her at the thought. She blinked up at Kai. His expression was intense as he pulled out of her with a moist sucking sound. He rose to his feet and held out his hand to help her up.

She stared at him for a moment. It wasn't fair. He looked energized and ready to

run and she felt limp and tired. He reached down, grasped her arms and lifted her to her feet. He ran his fingers through her hair and brushed his hands down her backside before leaning down and grabbing two pale yellow oblong gourds from the ground. He broke one in two and handed it to her before breaking the other open for himself.

"Drink its juice first, then eat the fruit. It's bitter but nutritious."

She looked at the pale pink flesh inside the gourd. It looked all right but smelled pungent. Mentally crossing her fingers that her faith in him was well placed, she lifted the larger half of the gourd to her mouth and drank.

Coughing and sputtering, she glared up at him. "That's not bitter. It's toxic." Was he trying to torture her too?

His gaze narrowed. "No it isn't. Now finish it. These are what we have to eat."

She wanted to toss the hideous thing on the ground and stomp on it. The flavor coated her mouth. She'd probably taste it for weeks. She sighed as she watched him dig out the pink flesh and eat it. He was right, damn it. It was all they had.

Her face wrinkled with distaste, she followed his example. Stringy, bitter, ugly. She gagged as she swallowed. Her stomach turned, its contents rising in her throat. She took another bite, swallowing hard and fast to keep it down, then gave up, tossing the fruit to the ground and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Kai looked from her to the gourd and back again. She waited for him to say something but he didn't. He finished both halves of his gourd and threw the rinds on the ground. Grabbing her hand, he pulled her along behind him.

Apparently it was time to go. She grimaced but didn't complain as her thighs, sticky with his come, rubbed together. Her hand stuck to his. It was *not* going to be a fun day.

She heard the bubbling, gurgling sound first. When she saw the small, clear stream tumbling over rocks and hedged in by silvery moss-covered banks tears welled in her eyes. As Kai knelt beside it she couldn't take her eyes off him. He was the most beautiful person she'd ever met. He was huge. Lean and muscular. His eyes were gorgeous. His hair luxurious. He smelled like every woman's dream and his cock was a

sensual delight to look at, let alone experience.

It was what was inside him, though, that made her heart hurt. How many times since she was old enough to walk had she been told the best qualities in a person were loyalty, honor and integrity? The man who had taught her those virtues had believed them but hadn't lived them. From what she'd seen so far, Kai lived them.

Kai pulled her down beside him. Before she could protest he had her sitting, her legs spread as he scooped up water and washed her. She gasped and tried to roll away as the cold liquid doused her sex. Kai held her down and she glared at him. They would have to work on gentlemanly behavior. It wouldn't hurt to add that to his other good qualities.

He grasped her thigh with one hand and washed her with the other. His fingers caressed then scrubbed and one finger kept pressing into her. They'd have to work on his fascination with poking parts of himself into her too.

She smiled. Of course, she liked having him poke parts of himself into her. She moaned and arched into him. She was swollen and tender and his finger felt as big as a penis. How they would make love any time soon she didn't know but if it were up to her they would find a way. He was almost too big for her and his knobby texture pushed her to the edge faster than she would have dreamed possible, but it also left her sore.

He scooped up more water and poured it over her. He washed her thighs before moving to her sex once more. She watched his hand between her thighs. His fingers were big and dark. He explored every crevice and fold. As he started to push two fingers into her she looked up, her eyes round, her lips parted.

"If you do that I'll come." She wanted that but every moment they took brought the League hunter closer.

A hard smile lifted his lips as he pushed his fingers into her. Slowly. Never pausing. Filling her. Her head fell back and her breath rushed out as her sheath tightened around him. Her nipples stabbed into the air, erect and at attention with the rush of heat his touch stirred. She moaned and twisted as he fucked her with two

fingers, thumbing her clit with each forward thrust. His cock, mouth and tongue, his fingers, it didn't matter, she loved any way he touched her.

She gasped and moaned. His fingers pushed into her, drove her higher. He rubbed her clit and sent her flying. She couldn't hold back. There was nothing. No one but him.

Kai's expression darkened as he watched her nipples jut higher, her body shuddering as he kept her orgasm rising with only his thumb and two fingers. Teeth gritted, he pulled his fingers from her. "You smell like life." Trapping her with his gaze, he lifted his fingers to his mouth and sucked them, licking himself clean.

She shuddered as she watched him. He was the most sensual being she'd ever met. If she had to be trapped on a dangerous planet with killers tracking her, she wouldn't want it to be with anyone but Kai.

"Now I'm really not going to be able to walk." Her voice was husky and inviting and there was nothing she could do about it. Honestly, there was nothing she wanted to do about it. She wished they could stay and make love again but they couldn't.

She sighed as he rose to his feet, reached down and helped her up. It was hard to think about what she had to do and yet it was more important now than ever. The information she carried would save billions of lives, one of them probably Kai's.

If she survived to reach the Mriln. Even if she did she'd probably still die. It was foolish to think about a future with Kai and yet impossible not to. She pressed her hand over her heart and concentrated on its steady rhythm. As long as her heart was beating there was a chance. Because of Kai there was even hope.

"Are you all right?"

He cupped her chin and tilted her face up to his, his touch gentle. His golden eyes were narrowed, his attention centered solely on her.

"I'm fine." She shivered and smiled. Finally she shook her head. She wasn't fine. There were times when she wondered if anything would ever be fine again. If things had happened differently she would never have met him. Her father would have seen to that.

Her heart skipped a beat. It was impossible to imagine never having met Kai. "I wish we'd met at a different time and place instead of now when a..." Relationship? Would that have ever been possible between them? "It's impossible."

Kai's face remained impassive. "We've got a long trek ahead of us and we're being hunted. This isn't the time for this conversation. We'll talk when we're on my spaceship and safe." His tone was harsh.

Genae felt as if she'd been slapped. Kai felt responsible for her but that didn't mean he felt more. Here she was thinking about a relationship with him and how it could never be and he was thinking about staying alive. How practical was that?

She lowered her eyes and nodded. "You're right. Now isn't the time to talk." Once they started walking she wouldn't have the breath to talk anyway. Not that she'd want to share her recent thoughts with him.

Kai watched her move away and felt her emotional withdrawal. His hands clenched into fists. He wouldn't allow her to distance herself from him. Not physically. Not mentally. Not emotionally. They were a part of each other now and for all time. He reached out, grabbed her arms and pulled her to him. Her eyes, round and startled, flew to his.

"We will talk," he promised. "When we reach my ship, the *Therik*, we will talk and there will be no misunderstandings." He pressed his mouth to hers in a hard, demanding kiss. His tongue surged into her mouth, swept over every surface and retreated.

When he lifted his head they were both breathing hard. "We've got a long walk in front of us. Let's get moving."

She licked her lips, obviously enjoying the taste of him. "I'm ready."

He followed the provocative motion of her tongue and tamped down the urge to take her mouth again. "Tell me when you're tired."

* * *

Hours later the hunter stopped at their campsite. His eyes narrowed and he

smiled. The two he tracked were either unaware or unconcerned that he followed. He could smell the heavy musk of sex. They had taken time they couldn't afford for acts that should have waited.

Glancing skyward, judging the time to be two or three hours into the day, he rose to his feet and loped into the forest. The woman's tracks were easy to follow. The man moved like a ghost.

He glanced skyward again, touched his fingers to the right side of his neck over his jugular vein and kept running.

Chapter Two

Unexpected Ally

There was no sound, no flicker of motion, nothing to give the hunter away, but Kai knew he was close. He loped behind a tree and stopped. As Genae ran around the huge trunk he grabbed her. He clamped his hand over her mouth to keep her from crying out.

"He's here." His voice was barely a hint of sound in her ear. He felt her tense and wanted to reassure her but there wasn't time. He had to make sure she was safe and then he would take care of the threat to her.

He released her, turned and forced his fingers into the tiny split in the tree trunk behind them. The muscles in his arms, shoulders and chest bulged as he pulled apart the trunk of the hollow tree.

Without a word Genae turned sideways and squeezed through the narrow opening. There was a loud cracking sound as the trunk snapped shut behind her. She turned to Kai... and he wasn't there. He'd trapped her in the tree. Alone.

She opened her mouth to scream but closed it again without uttering a sound. She slapped her hands against the smooth, inner bark. He was saving her again.

Her stomach rolled and she leaned forward and pressed her cheek against the inner bark. He had to win. He couldn't die like this. And if he did she'd be stuck in the Tortauna tree and everything she'd done wouldn't matter. The League wouldn't even have to kill her.

Silently she repeated every swear word she knew. He hadn't had to trap her in the damn tree. She might not have been able to help but she knew how to stay out of the way. She slapped the trunk again. She wanted to be with him. She wanted to know what was happening. If he was hurt she wanted to be able to help him. He could die.

Her knees went weak and she sank to the ground. He had to come back. Not just to get her out of the blasted tree but because she couldn't imagine a universe without him in it.

* * *

One moment Kai stood beside the tree that held Genae trapped yet safe. The next moment he was invisible. The hunter was one of his own kind. The other VanDai had betrayed his people. He hunted his own, and he hunted Kai's woman. He was going to die.

Kai walked to the edge of the clearing. No sound or even sense of motion betrayed his presence. He expanded all his senses to their widest range. A fight among VanDai males was never easy, but he would win. He was one of the most adept of his kind. One of Paladin's pride.

He dropped to the ground, sensing air movement before anything physical touched him.. His vision picked up a trace of the other man's energy, like sparks dancing in the air. Rolling, he surged to his feet, claws extended as he drove his right hand at the other male's throat. Blood rage colored his vision.

A low growl rumbled through the clearing. Instead of retreating, Kai's invisible opponent drove forward, his claws raking Kai's shoulder. Kai turned, slashing a blow at the other male's face, and spun away, dropping as he did. Blood sprayed the ground and dripped over the other male's chest. He wasn't invisible any longer.

Kai didn't make a sound as he caught his opponent's arm and flung him into a tree. His nostrils twitched as he caught the other male's scent. Rage erupted inside him. The other wasn't just VanDai.

"Ryak!" He roared the name as he flickered into visibility. Half-crouched, arms spread, he waited and watched. The other male hunted for the League now. Would he have the honor to acknowledge open confrontation? He *would* pay for his betrayal.

Ryak's chest and shoulders were bloody. His mane of black hair was wild around his face.

"You were one of the pride." Kai's voice rang cold through the clear night air.

There would be no mercy for Ryak. Death was more than he deserved.

Ryak's eyes narrowed and his chin rose. "You *are* one of the pride yet you interfere in matters beyond the pride. What does that say for you?" His fingers flickered in a dance of motion that would have been barely discernible to anyone watching.

Kai focused on the other man's fingers. Ryak was using the VanDai secret language. He wanted to kill the other VanDai, not talk, but he would listen.

General Rabala is listening, probably watching.

"The woman you chase is my *avaiya*, my woman. When you chase her it involves me."

"Your *avaiya*?" Ryak's tone was disbelieving. *There's a small chip implanted in my neck on the right side over my jugular. The general tracks me through that.* "You would choose someone outside our people?"

"I would." There had been very little choosing involved but he wasn't going to discuss that with Ryak. What was between him and Genae stayed between them.

"Does Paladin know?" Ryak demanded, his expression sneering. *Paladin knows of the woman and the information she carries. If I can, I am to help her and now, it seems, you.*

A low, warning growl rumbled from deep in Kai's chest. His woman *would* be accepted into the pride. "You turn on your people, *your pride*, and you would question me?"

A cold smile touched Ryak's lips. "I question what I will."

Kai growled again. His eyes flashed gold in the dim light, a clear warning to the younger pride member.

Ryak's fingers flicked one last time. *If you can't remove the chip, kill me.*

Kai lunged at the other VanDai. His claws swept across the other man's neck in what appeared to be a killing blow. Blood spurted from a single gash along the right side of Ryak's neck.

Ryak's claws raked Kai's chest. Kai's lips thinned at the pain. Blood flowed from the fiery stripes. Both men flickered into invisibility as laser fire sliced from the heavens and tore the earth.

* * *

Genae heard the boom and thunderous roll of laser fire. She flinched and curled into a tight ball as the earth rolled under her. Whoever the commander of the destroyer above YelAsta was, the president would be proud of him. The man had the tenacity of a Virian beetle-bug.

There was a cracking, rending sound as the tree trunk split. Kai stood there, his muscles bulging, blood dripping down his chest. She squeezed through the opening as fast as she could. Turning, she reached for him but he grabbed her hand first. He sliced her wrist with one extended claw.

She cried out and tried to jerk away. "What..."

He held her still as her blood drained onto the ground. "Don't speak," Kai commanded, his voice a harsh, barely heard whisper. He tore the leaves off a tree and pressed them to the wound. He wrapped his hand around her wrist, holding the leaves in place, and started running.

A laser strike boomed behind them. The ground swelled and bucked under their feet. The smell of burnt vegetation mixed with the ozone smell of the laser burning through the atmosphere.

Genae raced after Kai. She felt dazed. Kai had sliced open her wrist. YelAsta was being ripped apart. Her world had been turned upside down a year ago and it just kept getting worse. Nothing made sense any more and yet she couldn't stop, and even if she could she wouldn't.

She tripped over an exposed root and tumbled to the ground, her hand ripped from Kai's grasp. From behind her huge, hard hands circled her waist and threw her to her feet. Kai caught her hand in his once more and ran.

Gasping, she searched the forest as she raced after Kai. Who was behind her? Another VanDai? Had there been another one with them the whole time, watching her run naked through the Tortauna forest?

A shudder raced down her back. She looked forward and concentrated on Kai's back. Whoever was behind her didn't matter, running did. As minutes stretched into an

hour Genae's strength faded. Her thighs burned. She gasped for breath and stumbled over every stick, twig and root. Finally Kai stopped, flipped her over his shoulder and kept running.

Genae wanted to protest, but she didn't have the breath. She grasped his lean hips to keep herself as motionless as possible and clamped her teeth tight as her stomach protested and her head started to swim.

How long he ran she didn't know. The moon was disappearing from the sky when he stopped. He lowered her to the ground as carefully as if he hadn't been running all night.

His chest, shoulders and right side were a series of angry red welts and stripes. She reached for him but stopped short of touching him. How had he run all night with her over his shoulder? It hurt just to think about.

Another male appeared beside Kai. She froze. He was the same size as Kai and the resemblance was unquestionable. Where Kai's hair and eyes were dark gold, this male's were black. It looked like someone had tried to rip out his throat.

Her brow wrinkled as her gaze darted from one to the other. Instinctively she moved closer to Kai. The two had fought and then raced away from the laser fire together. Both had helped her. Who was the other VanDai?

"Stay here."

Her startled gaze flew to Kai. Her mouth opened but he disappeared before she could ask anything. She looked back toward the other male but he was gone too. She glanced around and shuddered at the absolute silence. A moment later she took what felt like her first deep breath of the night. Whatever Kai and the other one were doing they obviously believed she couldn't help. But she could try and find food. The gourds Kai had produced earlier had to grow wild. It was just a matter of finding them. Not that she looked forward to eating the noxious things but there wasn't much of a choice.

Slowly she circled around one tree after another. As horrible as the gourds tasted her mouth was dry enough she would welcome even their toxic juice. If she was feeling this parched how thirsty did Kai have to be?

At the thought of food her stomach growled and she laughed out loud. Some things didn't change no matter how dire the situation was.

"You're laughing and you didn't stay where I left you."

She jumped and cursed. "Damn it, Kai. Don't sneak up on me."

He flickered into visibility in front of her, four gourds cradled in his arms. The other male appeared beside him holding four more gourds.

Kai crouched and set the gourds on the ground. He looked up at her, frowning as he easily tore one of the gourds in two. "You laughed."

She frowned right back at him as she accepted the half of the fruit he handed her. "Is that a question? An accusation? What?" Did he have something against laughing?

His frown turned fierce. "Why were you laughing?"

She shook her head. "It was nothing." Why was he so bothered by a simple laugh?

"Answer your mate."

The low, growled order made her jump. Her gaze flew to the other male and she found him glaring at her, his black eyes cold. It was bad enough Kai was questioning her. This male had no right to tell her to do anything.

Fear bloomed in her stomach and her hands clenched on the fruit she held. "I don't know who you are but you should know I don't take orders from anyone." She lifted her chin. So what if he looked like he wanted to kill her. She wasn't going to cower away from him. A year ago, even a month ago, he wouldn't have dared tell her to do anything.

The black-haired male tensed and seemed to grow as she watched him. She blinked and shook her head. It felt like she was coming out of deep water. What was she doing trying to pick a fight with him? He was huge! He'd run as far and fast as Kai. He hadn't carried the same burden, to be sure, but he'd been injured.

She was losing her mind. That was the only explanation. She'd lost one too many gray cells in the past two days. And she was tired of running away. She wanted to stand and fight.

Fight? With a VanDai warrior? He'd go all see-through and she'd never even see him coming. Which didn't make her want to fight him any less, no matter how insane it was.

"Ryak." The single word was a clear warning.

Genae didn't take her eyes off the dark VanDai. Flight wasn't an option even if she would choose it. She would fight but she wouldn't fight fair. She looked at each wound, memorizing where they were. She couldn't win against him but she could hurt him.

"You wouldn't get in one swipe." Kai's low rumble held a thread of amusement.

She spun to glare at him. He'd known exactly what she was thinking. It made her feel vulnerable and she didn't like it. "I could try."

"You would think of fighting a male VanDai? A member of Paladin's pride?"

She frowned at the male Kai had named Ryak. He didn't have to sound so disbelieving. "If you attack me of course I would fight back."

Ryak's nostrils flared and his black eyes blazed. "Attack? A woman?"

Genae didn't know whether to be amused or angry he was so obviously offended. He made attacking a woman sound degrading. Who did he think he was? "You don't think a woman is worth attacking?" Chin lifted, she took a step toward him.

"Attack someone obviously weaker and unable to defend themselves against me?" His eyes raked over her and there was nothing complimentary in the look. "There would be no honor in that."

Genae seethed. Weak? Unable to defend herself? Who did he think he was? Mr. Undefeatable? She didn't think so. From the look of him, Kai had already come close to killing him. She opened her mouth but a large hand closed over it before she could say anything more.

"She challenges me." Ryak sounded outraged. His thick mane of hair seemed to stand out around his head.

"She doesn't know our ways or the danger her actions put her in."

"You'd better explain before you take her around less reasonable members of the

pride."

"*We-on-ble?*" The word came out indecipherable with Kai's hand clamped over her mouth. The male thought himself reasonable? Female VanDai must have more patience than pride.

Kai released her only to catch her shoulders and turn her to him. "Eat," he ordered. "I will explain the rules of the pride to you later. Why did you laugh? What humor do you find in this situation?"

She blinked then scowled. He wasn't going to let it drop until she answered him. "My stomach growled. It just seemed so... ordinary."

Kai looked at her for one long moment before shaking his head. Without a word he started digging the flesh from his own gourd and eating it. Halfway through her part of the gourd the taste caught up with Genae. She gagged but managed to keep everything down.

"You have to eat more than that." Kai frowned at her.

Shaking her head she handed him what remained with a hand that trembled. "If I want to keep down what I've already eaten I'd better not try any more." She sat down, pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. She wanted to be as strong and indestructible as he was, but she wasn't. She was barely able to keep her head up and her stomach kept climbing into her throat.

She laid her head on her upraised knees and closed her eyes. She needed sleep more than anything. Maybe if she caught up on that everything else wouldn't seem so overwhelming.

Kai easily lifted her onto his lap. He pushed her hair away from her face and traced the dark circles under her eyes. "You've eaten almost nothing in two days."

"Don't worry about me." She smiled and caressed his cheek with one small hand. "I'm tough."

Kai grumbled something but she decided not to ask him to repeat it. She snuggled her head against his shoulder and relaxed against him. The feel of his heart beating under her bare breast was delicious but reminded her that she was naked and

not just in front of Kai. She grimaced, took a deep breath and quit fighting sleep. She would worry about the unimportant things tomorrow.

* * *

Kai finished eating one-handed. His other arm curved around Genae, cradling her close. It would be a grueling day but they would reach his ship by the end of it. That is, if the League ship didn't destroy the planet. Why they hadn't done it yet, he didn't know. They wouldn't make the same mistake this time. The question was, how long did they have?

"She really thinks of herself as tough?"

Kai looked up from Genae's delicate face at Ryak's incredulous words. He felt his hackles rise as the other VanDai watched her sleep. There was nothing in Ryak's expression to indicate sexual interest, but that didn't matter. He was seeing Kai's woman sleep and he didn't like it.

"She's stronger than she looks." He looked down and brushed the black curls from her forehead. If she hadn't been strong she wouldn't have survived this far. He had to get her to his ship as soon as possible, not just because of the destroyer hovering over the planet, either. If she didn't get food she could eat soon, she would fade out of existence.

He looked back at Ryak, his expression fiercer than he realized. "Why is the League chasing Genae?"

Ryak's expression gave nothing away. "She stole information they want back."

"Information about what?"

Ryak shook his head. "I wasn't told, but I know it's important to the president himself."

Kai studied the other VanDai for a long moment. There would be time once they were on board the *Therik* to find out everything. If Ryak were lying he would be dealt with. "Find somewhere to sleep. I want to be at my ship by day's end." Kai wanted to keep going but if he didn't sleep even his great strength would give out. He didn't watch to see if Ryak followed his direction. He rose to his feet with Genae cradled

against his chest, and strode away.

He walked until he found what he'd been looking for. A Tortauna tree with a good sized split in its trunk. He settled Genae on the ground. She made a disgruntled sound and frowned in her sleep. He murmured and stroked her forehead. When she calmed he rose and faced the tree. There had been no sign of League soldiers trying to follow them, but if they were followed he wanted Genae safe.

Grasping the bark he started pulling. The muscles in his arms and shoulders bulged. The veins in his neck stood out. Suddenly another set of hands joined his.

Kai tensed. His claws extended and a growl rumbled in the back of his throat. He didn't want the other male knowing his woman's resting place. She was safe only if she was hidden.

It was several moments before he controlled the primitive urge to attack and kill. Genae's safety was the only important thing. He needed sleep and Ryak was silently offering to help him with both. He looked at Ryak and nodded.

Together they widened the gap in the trunk, shredding the tough outer ring of bark. When the opening was large enough for what he had in mind he rumbled a warning at Ryak. He wanted Ryak gone.

Ryak's hackles rose but he didn't challenge Kai's warning. His gaze slid over Genae before he left, his form disappearing silently as he ran.

Kai picked up Genae and carefully laid her in the hollow base of the tree. He curled himself around her, pulled her tight against him and breathed a sigh of contentment. She was safe in his arms. By day's end she would be safe aboard his ship. Not even the League destroyer hunting her would interfere with his mission.

His form seemed to fade and disappear and hers, surrounded by his, disappeared too. Anyone looking would see only the trunk of a Tortauna tree. For tonight they were as safe as he could make them.

Chapter Three

Betrayed

Kai woke hard and hurting, Genae's ass pressed tight against his cock. He wanted to fuck her but he wanted her safe aboard his ship more. Unfortunately he couldn't do the one and accomplish the other.

He couldn't stop himself from touching her, though. Lowering his head he sipped at her neck. He stroked up her ribs to grasp her breasts and bit back a groan. They were full and soft, her nipples growing to hard points as he held her.

"Genae." He kept his tone low. He hadn't been able to take care of her the way he wanted to but he could wake her gently. "*Avaiya*, it's time we were moving."

He opened his mouth and sucked gently on her neck. She moaned and shifted against him. He winced as his penis tightened even more.

"Ryak," she murmured, "where is he?"

Animal instinct flared inside Kai. She was his. Why would she ask for Ryak? Had she been dreaming of the other male? Catching her around the waist he dragged her from the safety of the hollow tree.

"What..."

He didn't give her a chance to speak. His mouth slammed down on hers. He nipped her lower lip. When she gasped his tongue surged inside. Her nipples stabbed into his chest. He couldn't contain his growl. She might think about Ryak, but she responded to him.

"When I'm through you'll think of no one but me." His voice was harsh. He tangled his fingers in her hair and stared at her, his gaze piercing.

Genae opened her mouth to protest but never got the chance. Kai lifted and turned her so her back was to him. He caught the back of her neck and pushed her

down until she was on her hands and knees before him.

"Kai. I wasn't thinking..."

"You are mine." He grasped his cock with one hand and rubbed the throbbing head against her wet sex. His other hand gripped her hip. She wouldn't get away from him, ever.

"Kai..."

"That's right," he rumbled. "Kai. Your mate. The only male with the right to sink his cock into your hot channel." He couldn't fight the beast in himself -- he didn't want to. Her wet heat bathed the head of his cock in liquid fire. He surged forward, her cunt squeezing him as he forged into her. Her back arched and she rocked forward.

Kai grasped her hips and pulled her back as he hammered forward. She gasped at the rough slide of his flesh in her as his cock penetrated to her womb, his balls slapping against her.

"Kai..." She couldn't think of the words she wanted to say. He was over her, in her, dominating her. Every breath she took was filled with his essence. Her body was filled with his. Pressure. Heat. Incredible friction.

His was brute strength. His cock drove into her, fast and hard. She gritted her teeth, dug her fingers into the earth and tried to hang on.

"Come for me," he ordered.

Genae panted for breath. Her body rocked. She bit her lips as the feelings grew. Cords of sensation connected her nipples and cunt. She burned. She was close to the edge. So close. She wanted to fly.

"Avaiya a vo mi tai."

She didn't understand the words. As he reached between her legs she didn't care what they meant. He rubbed her clit, fast little circles as he pulsed into her, barely pulling out.

Her back arched. Her neck arched. Her mouth opened but no sound emerged. Her inner muscles gripped him hard as the world spun out of control. Kai leaned over her. He bit her neck where it met her shoulder as he came. He growled and rumbled.

His buttocks clenched and released as his come filled her hot channel.

For a long moment he hung over her, his sweat dripping on her. Her inner muscles spasmed, milking his still semi-hard cock. Taking a deep breath he rocked back, taking her with him. He knelt with her straddling him, her back resting against his chest, her head on his shoulder.

He still penetrated her. If he could he would never leave her welcoming heat. She was becoming as necessary to him as breathing. He didn't like it but he accepted it.

He reached between her spread legs, stroking the swollen folds of her sex. She shuddered as he plucked at her clit. Her nipples stabbed into the air, hard dark pink points. He would never tire of her responsiveness. She wasn't of his species and yet she had been created for him.

"Why did you ask about Ryak?" He tried to keep the anger from his voice but it threaded his tone like sharp shards of ice on a frozen pond.

Genae shuddered again as he fondled her labial folds, one half-extended claw flicking her clit. How was she supposed to answer him intelligently when he was touching her like that? She couldn't think let alone string together a sentence. "I didn't want him around... if we were doing this." She waved her hand to indicate the two of them.

Low laughter rumbled from Kai's chest as he kissed her neck below her ear.

"What's funny?" She wanted to see his face but didn't have the strength to lift herself off him and turn around. If she was honest, she didn't really want to *be* off him. Having him inside her, his cock filling her so full, it was lovely and comforting and sexy.

"You wanted to make sure Ryak wasn't near when we made love. I was determined we wouldn't couple again until we reached my ship. Then you said his name."

"What difference did that make?" She turned her face into his neck and kissed him.

He groaned and his cock stirred inside her. "It made me jealous. I don't want a doubt in anyone's mind, especially yours, that you belong to me. If it wouldn't be uncomfortable for you I would leave my seed to coat your thighs as we walk. I want my scent on you, buried inside you."

She grimaced. Protective was great. Possessive was wonderful. But Kai took everything beyond the extreme. "Did anyone ever tell you have a tendency to be possessive?"

She felt him shrug. "I'm VanDai."

He lifted her wrist and unbound the leaves he'd secured to it after cutting her. She frowned as he lifted her arm and licked the small wound. "I meant to ask why you cut me. And why in the world would you lick the wound?"

His tongue swirled around her wrist, into her palm and between her fingers.

"Not that I don't want you licking me," she murmured, undulating on his lap as tingles raced up her arm and her nipples hardened again.

"When the League searches the area they will find blood spoor from all three of us. It won't stop them from looking for us but it will create the question of whether we died in the laser blasts."

"And the licking thing?" That point was becoming less important by the moment. She let her head roll against his shoulder until her neck was bared to his wicked tongue.

"My saliva has antimicrobial qualities."

Not romantic, but handy. He could lick her any time he wanted in any way he wanted to. She moved against him, smiled when his cock started to harden and lengthen inside her. "Very handy."

He lifted her off him and stood her on her feet. She blinked and shook her head. So much for that tender after-loving moment.

Behind her, he rose. "There's a stream a short distance from here. We'll stop and clean up there."

"What about Ryak?" She grimaced. That was the last thing she should have

asked.

Kai's golden eyes narrowed. He cupped her chin in one hand, demanding her full attention. "I suggest you quit asking about him."

She frowned up at him but decided not to say anything more. His next response might not be to make love to her.

* * *

Kai didn't leave time to talk anyway as they raced through the ghostly forest, stopping to wash at the stream before racing on. When Genae stumbled or lagged behind, Kai caught her up in his arms, flipped her over his shoulder and carried her. She didn't like it but it did keep them moving.

She wondered about Ryak but kept her questions and thoughts to herself. She didn't want to make Kai angry again. Besides, Ryak could be running at Kai's side and she would never know.

Kai stopped twice. As close as she could tell the first time was about three hours after they started. The second time was at least an hour later. Each time he found the gourds Genae hated. The first time she managed to choke down a small amount. The second time she gagged before she even started. If they didn't reach Kai's ship soon the League wouldn't have to worry about finding her. She'd be dead from starvation.

As Kai threw the remains of their second meal away she slumped forward and rested her head against her raised knees. She'd expected to be chased in space and to die there. Being chased across a planet hadn't figured in any of her plans.

Everything was so different now. She'd started out wanting the universe to know what an evil man the League president was. She still wanted that. He had betrayed her trust and the trust of every being in the universe who had helped get him into office. Now, though, what she wanted more than anything was to save lives. True, the second would accomplish the first but it was no longer what mattered. Saving Kai and others like him, that was important.

She lifted her head and watched as Kai stood up. He stretched to reach the leaves of a Tortauna tree above his head. His muscles lengthened, contracted and bunched as

he grabbed a handful of leaves and pulled them free. The muscles across his chest and shoulders rippled. His biceps bulged as he scrubbed his hands with the leaves.

He was beautiful, probably the most perfect being she had ever seen. Just looking at him made her melt inside. She shifted where she sat, heat growing in her belly. When he took her there was no one and nothing else on her mind. Her only thoughts were of him and what it felt like to be possessed by him.

Taken. That's what he did. He took her. Each time was fierce and primal. He was a powerful male and an equally powerful lover. Why had he saved her life and stayed with her to save it over and over again?

Were his people, *was he*, slated for death in the president's plan? Her gut twisted at the thought. Stealing the information and trying to get it to a people who had the ability to challenge the League had been personal, driven by outrage and disillusionment. Now, though her goals were the same, her reasons were completely different.

Kai reached up, caught another handful of leaves and pulled them down. He crouched down in front of her and handed them to her. She scrubbed her hands as he'd done. It wasn't cleansing gel but it worked.

Kai brushed her cheek, his touch gentle as he traced the dark circles under her eyes. She looked up, her expression questioning. The way he watched her, the incredible gentleness he showed when he touched her were both addictive. No one had ever made her feel special in that way before. It didn't have anything to do with her position or title and everything to do with who *she* was.

"It's only an hour, maybe less until we reach the transport. My ship is in orbit above the planet. Once we're aboard you will eat, bathe and sleep."

She raised her eyebrows. Just because he made her feel special didn't mean he had the right to order her around. "I think I like the idea of sleep, bathe and then eat better."

Kai caught her chin in his big hand. His gaze was fierce. "Don't argue. As soon as we are onboard you *will* eat."

Genae opened her mouth to argue but something in his eyes stopped her. He wasn't being dictatorial for no reason. He was scared.

His next words proved her thought to be true. He caught her wrist in his hand, his fingers circling it with room to spare. "You're so small. Tiny really. I can feel you fading. I've watched it happening each day." He traced the circles under her eyes again.

Tears stung her eyes. What was wrong with her? Yes, she was tired but that was no reason to be crying and emotional. "I'll eat first." She was proud of the grudging sound of her voice. He didn't need to know it was hard for her to tell him no.

Kai nodded. "We have to move."

Genae scrubbed at her eyes and sniffed. He was going to think she was the most tearful woman in the universe. "Sorry, I'm exhausted."

Kai caught her hand in his and pulled her to her feet. "Don't apologize."

She opened her mouth but ended up gasping a protest as he threw her over his shoulder. "This part," she grumbled, "I won't miss."

Kai grunted and started to run. Tree trunks blurred. Kai's one hour seemed to drag into days. Genae would swear they'd been running for a week. Maybe two. And she was being carried half or more of the time. How did Kai do it? He had to be exhausted, too, but no one seeing him would ever know it.

Kai stopped at the base of a huge tree. He set her carefully on her feet and held her waist until he was sure she was steady. "Wait here."

She opened her mouth but didn't get the chance to respond as he disappeared. Shaking her head she sank to the ground and curled into a ball. She couldn't keep her eyes open anyway so she might as well rest.

* * *

Kai moved in a tight but ever widening circle around his transport. He wasn't going to chance his or Genae's life if the League had set guards around the small vessel.

From the air ten feet from him Ryak spoke, his voice a whisper. "I found no trace of the League."

"Neither did I." Kai's voice barely competed with the rustle of leaves in the

gentle night breeze. "Secure the transport while I get Genae." He didn't wait for a reply. He wanted Genae where he could see her.

He reached the tree where he'd left her. She wasn't there.

His heart stopped.

Almost immediately it started pounding. She lay curled at the base of the tree, a pale, unmoving form lost in shadow. Taking a deep breath he stepped forward, knelt and gathered her into his arms. She blinked as she wrapped her arms around him.

"No sign of the League?" She pressed her face against his neck and yawned.

Kai's cock stirred at the feel of her moist, hot breath on his flesh. She was potent, his lady. He would have to watch closely when other males were around. If he ever allowed them near her. "No. No sign," he rumbled.

Genae turned her attention in the direction he was walking. Unbelievable as it was, it was almost over. The League had chased her, destroyed her ship, forced her out of space and chased her across YelAsta's surface, and she was going to leave the planet alive and well. She should be ecstatic. So why wasn't she?

Kai. His name whispered through her mind in answer to her question. A thrill shivered through her and she tightened her arms around his neck. She couldn't have done it without him. Every step of the way he had protected her. He --

Her stomach knotted and her throat closed. She couldn't breathe. Her heart stopped beating.

"Genae?" His tone was questioning.

She didn't respond, couldn't tear her eyes from the transport crouched on the ground in front of them.

"Genae?" His voice roughened and his arms tightened around her. "Genae! Answer me. What's wrong?"

Her heart thumped once painfully against the wall of her chest before racing into an uneven rhythm that stole what little breath she still had.

"Genae!" He cut the end of her name short as he ran toward the transport.

She wanted to protest, to fight her way out of his arms as he raced up the ramp

and into the belly of the vessel. She wanted to scream and cry but she couldn't move, couldn't think. The image of the transport's insignia filled her mind.

It belonged to the League.

"What's wrong?" Ryak appeared beside Kai, his expression fierce.

Kai laid her on the floor and started running his hands over her. "I don't know. Get us to the *Therik*."

Ryak rose and strode away.

Genae rolled away from Kai and curled in on herself. Suddenly it made sense and she hadn't even realized there was a problem. Ryak hadn't turned his back on the League and joined them, he and Kai had been working together all along.

Closing her eyes she hugged the pain of Kai's betrayal close as she fought to breathe. Why had he rescued her from the wreckage of her ship? Why the elaborate charade of blasting the surface of YelAsta? Why hadn't he just transported them both to the destroyer?

Chapter Four

Revelations

Kai sat down, gathered her into his arms and held her as the transport shuddered and lurched as it lifted off YelAsta's surface. On one level Genae's mind shut down, while on another it started working overtime. Who was he really? Why did he have a League transport? How did she get away from him?

She still had to get the information to the Mriln or billions of people would die. Entire species would be lost. "How did the transport survive being on YelAsta? You said the soil didn't react well with man-made material." Had he lied and done something to her clothes? Kept her naked on purpose? She closed her eyes. A deep, burning sensation grew in her gut. She hadn't realized how physical humiliation could be until that moment.

"The landing legs were outfitted with a polymer shell. It's a naturally occurring substance so nothing YelAsta would react with."

She nodded but didn't open her eyes. At least he hadn't lied about that.

Ryak's voice filled the cargo bay. "Kai, the destroyer is tracking us."

For a moment Kai's arms tightened around her. Without a word he settled her on a wide, padded seat. He leaned forward, brushed a kiss against her forehead, stood up and walked away.

Genae curled into a tight ball. She'd been thinking of a future with him and he worked for the League. How could she be so stupid? She cringed, all her muscles tightening. A moment later she went limp. How could she have known?

There was no going back. They would be on his ship soon if the League ship didn't blast them out of the sky. Until they reached their destination, wherever that was, she didn't have any choices. Once they reached a planet, though, there would be

an opportunity to escape and she would.

Something niggled at the back of her mind. Something just said. What had it been? It was important. Why couldn't she remember?

She released a long, shuddering breath. What she needed was a week of sleep. She was exhausted and half-starved and couldn't get her mind to stop spinning. She didn't want to think about the president or Kai or YelAsta. All she wanted was...

Her body gave up and dragged her mind with it into sleep.

* * *

Kai walked into the cargo bay and a slight smile lifted his lips. She'd gotten her way after all. Sleep before food. He knelt beside her and stroked her soft cheek, brushed her full lips with one fingertip. The sooner they were aboard the *Therik* the better. The transport had no defenses and while the chances of the League vessel bothering them were slim there was always a chance.

Leaning down he pressed his lips to hers.

Her lips parted and she sighed.

Kai took in her breath and held it for a long moment. He wanted them so close that they were one at all times. His expression hard, he rose to his feet. When they reached Sai-sen-Sai they would be joined. Until then she would be safe aboard the *Therik*.

* * *

The transport lurched.

Genae hit the floor of the cargo bay. Disoriented, she scrambled back toward the bench seat. She pressed herself against it, holding her right elbow. What had happened? If the destroyer had fired on them they'd be space dust.

She winced as metal screeched against metal. There was a loud thump accompanied by a bone-rattling, body-flinging jolt.

Kai ran into the compartment. Before she could right herself he was beside her. He ran his hands down her arms, up her legs and over her rib cage and breasts.

Eyes narrowed, she looked up at him as he touched her breasts. "You think they

might have been damaged when I fell?" She was instantly hot from his touch. Heat pooled low in her belly and between her legs. But how did she feel about him?

For the first time since she'd met him there was a twinkle in Kai's golden eyes. "Some things you can't be too careful with."

She sighed. Yes, she still wanted him to touch her. He might be part of the League but he had helped her against them. Why, she might never know. As long as he didn't turn her over to them she had a chance. She shook her head and scowled at him but couldn't stop the shiver that walked up her spine at his touch.

Kai rubbed his thumbs over her hard nipples and smiled. It was a slow smile that heated in incremental degrees as he looked from her breasts to the vee of her legs, to her mouth before meeting her eyes.

Ryak strode into the compartment. "Your crew wants to speak with you."

Kai pulled her against him, hiding her naked form.

She tried to push away from Kai but his hold was unbreakable. "I think it's a bit late to be worried about my modesty now. Ryak's already seen everything there is."

"Not quite everything," Ryak replied helpfully, a wicked smile lighting his face.

"Out." Kai's tone was low and deadly. Genae couldn't see his eyes but was sure the teasing glint was gone, replaced by something cold and scary.

She patted Kai's side.

He didn't move.

She slapped him and finally pinched what little skin she could get a hold of. "If you suffocate me you won't have to worry about Ryak or anyone else seeing me naked," she grumbled.

Kai swatted her hand away and sat back, though he kept one hand on her hip, his fingers kneading her almost absently. "Before you leave the transport you will be fully clothed."

She looked down, her eyelashes shielding her eyes at his mention of the transport. Her inside froze and she shivered. "This transport is League issue." She wanted to bite her tongue. Why had she said that? She'd had a plan. Stay along for the

ride and run when she got the chance.

A low rumble vibrated in Kai's chest. "I am not part of the League."

Through the veil of her lashes she looked up at him. His eyes gleamed like sun-shot ice, gold and cold.

"Do you believe I would risk your life and mine running from the League if all I had to do was contact them and be transported to their vessel?"

She shrugged and his hand tightened on her hip, his claws sharp against her skin but not hurting.

He caught her chin in his hand and raised her face to his. "My people, the VanDai, have an... uneasy alliance with the League. I believe their president would enjoy seeing my species destroyed."

Genae closed her eyes and nodded. "I think you're right," she whispered. She opened her mouth to explain everything to him but someone pounded at the transport door.

"Kai! Do you need assistance?"

The door started to open. With lightning speed Kai plucked Genae off the floor and hid her behind him. She tried to peek around him but he kept her pressed tight against him with one hard-muscled arm. Her fingers itched to pinch him again but she restrained herself.

"Teer, I need garments for myself, a human woman and Ryak."

"Ryak? We picked up a transmission from the League destroyer. Listen to it before you welcome Ryak aboard."

"If you have something to say, say it," Ryak snarled as he strode into the cargo bay.

Kai sprang to his feet, somehow taking Genae with him. "Stop."

She blinked and shook her head. How had he done that? Finally she managed to look around him. She bit her lip to keep from whistling at this newest member of the VanDai. She hadn't had the time or the inclination to truly admire Ryak's hard muscled form. She didn't want to miss the opportunity with this male.

Kai was golden, his skin, hair and eyes like old gold. Ryak was dark, black eyes, black hair, his skin tone several shades darker than Kai's. This male that Kai had named as Teer was a mix of the other two men and yet uniquely his own, too. His skin was almost the same dark brown as Ryak's. His eyes flashed a pale brown that was darker than gold as he strode onto the transport, his fierce gaze never leaving Ryak. His hair was dark gold with darker strands running through it.

"Teer." The other male stopped at the warning in Kai's voice but still never once looked away from Ryak.

"I'll listen to the transmission and weigh it against what Ryak has told me and what I discovered on my own. Have someone retrieve clothing for the three of us. I won't have my *avaiya* naked for everyone to see."

"*Avaiya*?" Both sets of eyes snapped to Kai then down to where Genae peeked from behind him.

Genae wanted to cringe behind Kai but refused to hide behind him any more than she already was. He'd explained to her that *avaiya* meant *my woman*. Apparently, if the other two males' reaction was anything to go by, it meant more than that.

With the arm still holding her to him, Kai pulled her even closer. "Clothes," he growled. "Everything else can wait."

"Kai," another male appeared in the door, "that League destroyer is approaching and she's ready to fire."

Kai swore viciously. Reaching out he ripped Teer's shirt from him, spun and stuffed Genae into the shredded material. He grabbed her hand and raced off the transport across the docking bay and into an interdeck lift.

"Command deck," Kai ordered.

The lift door shut. Genae felt a slight sinking sensation in her stomach and a moment later the doors opened.

"What can I expect from the destroyer's commander?" Kai turned cold eyes on Ryak. His life depended on his answer. If there was any hesitation there was no one in the pride who would mourn his passing.

"His name is Rabala. He's a general specially assigned to the destroyer hunting your woman."

Genae gasped. She shouldn't be surprised but she was. President Galaran had put his own personal killer-hound on her trail. Maybe she should be flattered she was at the top of his priority list, but she wasn't.

Kai spared her a glance but quickly focused on Ryak again.

Ryak nodded at Genae. "I see your *avaiya* knows of the general. He's vicious and tenacious. He follows Galaran's orders obsessively and he enjoys taking the most brutal approach."

Kai's eyes narrowed. "Why didn't he destroy YelAsta?" It didn't make sense that a man like the one Ryak described wouldn't annihilate a planet to achieve his goal.

Ryak shook his head. "I don't know. He was willing to destroy sections of the planet. I don't know why he wouldn't destroy the whole thing."

"Could he have been testing your loyalty?" Genae asked. Inside she was trembling. There was only one explanation. Galaran wanted her back alive.

The lift door opened and Kai strode down the corridor, his grip on her hand never loosening. Ryak, Teer and the other VanDai kept pace.

"I have no loyalty to the League," Ryak growled. His eyes blazed as he touched his neck that bore the grooves of Kai's attack. "I was controlled." His voice vibrated with rage.

"Controlled?" Teer's voice was half-disbelieving, half-accusing.

"Controlled."

Kai led the small group through another door. "Discuss it later," he snapped. He released Genae and all but threw himself in the command chair. Teer plucked her off her feet, sat her in a chair and secured a bracing strap around her middle.

Her eyes moved from Teer to Kai to the view-screen that took up the front wall of the command deck. The destroyer was growing at an alarming rate as it raced toward them.

Genae swallowed hard. Kai wasn't going to have a choice but to hand her over to

the League, not if he wanted to keep himself and his crew alive.

Kai swung a control panel around in front of him and touched the screen. The board lit up. He touched one icon, sat back and stared at the view-screen.

Her heart pounding, Genae watched the destroyer close in on them. She'd survived a crash-landing on YelAsta, raced for her life across it with Kai, and now, when she was safely aboard Kai's ship, she was going to die.

She straightened in her chair and raised her chin. Kai would have to turn her over to the League but she would still be alive. And being alive meant there was the possibility of escape.

General Rabala's face snapped into focus on the view-screen. His coarse features looked even worse than usual spread larger than life across the screen. "You have a traitor aboard your vessel, VanDai. Turn her over to us and you may leave."

Genae shuddered at the sound of the harsh voice but Kai didn't even blink.

"I have no traitors aboard the *Therik*, General Rabala, and no one I'm going to be turning over to you." Kai's tone was smooth, his face expressionless.

"You will not be allowed to leave this area with Genae Galaran aboard your vessel."

Genae froze. Her heart stopped beating, her eyes riveted on Kai. She should have told him who she was earlier. He had the right to know who he was helping.

"There is no Galaran aboard my vessel." Kai's voice was velvet over steel, his expression cold.

"I can see her sitting behind you."

"You see my *avaiya*."

"Your mate?" Rabala scoffed, his expression thunderous. "Not even Genae would mate with a VanDai." He spat the name. "More animal than man."

His eyes narrowed, Kai straightened in his seat. "This conversation is over, Rabala." He touched an icon on the control panel. "Teer, take us down, fast."

Genae's stomach rose as the ship seemed to drop out from under her. She clutched the arms of her chair and held on, her gaze never leaving the view-screen

where Rabala was yelling orders, spittle flying, his small eyes darting right and left.

The general disappeared as intership communication was cut. The destroyer once more filled the screen. It raced toward where they had been moving through a shimmering cloud. It took off away from them moving fast.

"Set a course for Sai-sen-Sai," Kai ordered as he rose from his chair. He strode to Genae, released her from the restraining belt, took her arm and pulled her to her feet. "I'll be in my quarters."

Genae didn't have any choice but to follow him. "What happened?" she asked, watching the view-screen until the lift doors closed and blocked it from view. "Why isn't the general following us?"

"I camouflaged the *Therik* and set an electron net encoded with its signature. When the destroyer passed through it the net attached itself to the ship. The general is following a ghost."

"Wow." Genae blew out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Will we have enough time to reach Sai-sen-Sai before they figure it out?"

"Yes."

Something in Kai's tone sent a chill down her spine. She looked up at him as he strode down a short corridor and through a door at the end as it opened. His expression gave nothing away. His hold on her arm was unbreakable but not hurting. He was angry, furious even, and he had every right to be. He'd helped her without once asking a single question and she hadn't offered any explanations, not really.

Kai released her as the door closed behind them. She got the impression of a large room dominated by a huge bed as he spun her to face him.

"What is your name?"

She flinched at the bite in his voice. "Genae Galaran."

"President Galaran?" His tone made the name a curse.

"Veltran Galaran is my father."

Kai didn't move. He wasn't sure he breathed. The woman -- she was Galaran's

daughter? It couldn't be. She was the daughter of the man he despised more than any creature living.

She wrenched free of his hold and walked away from him. Her arms crossed over her stomach, she stared out the large view port at the glittering stars.

He wanted to go after her, grab her and shake her. She was his enemy's daughter. His enemy.

Yet she was his *avaiya*.

* * *

Genae looked out the view port and fought back tears. What did she have to cry about? She was alive. She had escaped the League again and she was going somewhere called Sai-sen-Sai. Getting Kai to let her go wasn't going to be as difficult as she had thought, either. She'd be lucky if he didn't jettison her before they reached a spaceport.

Her arms tightened over her stomach. Why did she feel so sick? She'd known Kai only a matter of days. What he thought shouldn't matter.

She leaned forward and rested her head against the view port. She'd never thought she would have to apologize for who she was. She'd always been proud of her father. Proud to be a Galaran. Now all she wanted to do was crawl through the view port and disappear. There was no way to go back, though, no way to reverse time and be in Kai's arms again. She'd felt safe when he held her. It was an illusion but it had felt real.

"Why is he trying to kill you?"

Kai's voice flayed her. It wasn't even cold. It was completely devoid of emotion. "I stole information he wants back or destroyed. If he has to kill me to accomplish that, he will." She looked out at the stars, the view blurred by the tears she refused to let fall. Her father wanted her dead. All she'd ever wanted was for her father to love her. She'd always believed he did. Now she knew the truth. The only person Veltran Galaran valued was himself.

"What is the information?"

Did she dare tell him? He would use the information against her father. She'd

risked her life for that to happen yet it still tore at her. She couldn't reconcile the man who had held her and wiped away her tears when her mother died with the man who now wanted her dead.

And what about Kai? Once he had the information he wouldn't need her anymore.

He never needed you, her mind jeered.

She rubbed her forehead against the view port. No, he had never needed her. He'd wanted her and he'd taken her. He deserved the information more than anyone. Even though he hadn't known about it, he'd fought to keep her and the information alive. The universe had to know what her father planned. The great Galaran.

Hysterical laughter rose in her throat. Her hands flew to her mouth and pressed hard. If she started laughing she wouldn't be able to stop.

"Tell me what you have."

Kai's tone was cold and hard and close. She could feel his heat against her back. She wanted to feel his arms around her but at the moment he'd probably be shaking her rather than holding her.

Taking several deep breaths she straightened away from the view port. She'd been scared to her very bones when she'd stolen the information from her father but she'd done it. She'd been sure her ship would be destroyed when she'd been chased by the destroyer but she'd flown away regardless. Even with Kai's help on YelAsta she could have given up, but she hadn't. She wasn't a coward and she wasn't going to start being one now.

She took one more deep, shuddering breath and turned to face Kai. He could despise her for who her father was if he wanted to. It didn't change who she was or what she had to do and it didn't make her a bad person. "It's my father's plan."

Kai's steady, unblinking gaze never wavered. "Why would you risk everything to get such information away from your father?"

"He's not my father," she yelled. She closed her eyes and covered her face with her hands. Taking several deep breaths she slowly lowered her hands and faced him

again. "He's not the person I thought he was."

"You didn't know what your father was?"

Kai's tone was disbelieving and she couldn't blame him. It was hard for her to believe she'd been so blind. But she loved -- had loved the man she thought her father was. She couldn't tear out a lifetime of love and pretend it had never existed. She wouldn't want to.

"I knew exactly who my father was -- to me." She closed her eyes again, a bitter-sweet smile lifting her lips as memories played through her mind. Her father welcoming her into his office despite official visitors, catching her and scooping her into his arms. Dancing with her at a formal gala. Holding her when her mother died.

She frowned. That was the second time she'd thought about the day her mother died. It felt like she'd lost both parents.

She couldn't look at Kai. It was too hard to see his closed expression, to be separated from him by something she had no control over. She couldn't change how Kai felt any more than she could change the man her father really was. He wouldn't be interested in why that was significant and she didn't want to talk about it. Not yet.

"What is the information you have?"

Kai sounded impatient and she couldn't blame him. She was making this whole thing more difficult than it needed to be. "His plan. What's already been enacted. What is in the process of happening. What he plans next."

"What do you mean 'his plan'?"

She turned to face him and looked up at him. If he couldn't stand her, so what? She hadn't changed. She still had something she had to do, she was going to do it, and now he was part of it.

"President Galaran's plan to commit genocide. Not once or twice but millions of times. He wants every non-human species in the universe destroyed." She watched his expression closely but he gave nothing away, damn him.

"He wrote this information down?"

Her teeth clenched at his disbelieving tone. "Yes. He wrote it down."

"And he left it where you could find it?"

Her hands clenched into fists and she glared at him. "No. He didn't just leave it lying around where I could find it. It was in his most secure safe in the most secure building in the command city on Blainon."

"How did you get to it?"

She consciously uncurled her fingers. Of course he would have questions. Who wouldn't? It was only making her stomach burn to get upset about it.

"With a lot of help and my father's trust."

"And he would kill you to get it back?"

She smiled, the expression bitter. Would Galaran kill her? "Without hesitation."

"Your father would murder his own child?"

She wrapped her arms around her middle again. "Why not? He's killed his children before." Every time she thought about it she felt cold and she didn't like it.

Kai's eyes narrowed. "Explain that."

"My mother wasn't his first wife. His first wife was Novian. He married her to gain her father's vote to help get himself elected to the president's inter-planetary council. Once he was a firmly established member of the council he had his wife and newborn son killed and cast the blame on the Caln." She shuddered. It was still almost impossible to believe. He'd killed his perfect baby boy. How could he do that? Even if the boy had been half-Novian he had still been Galaran's son.

She swallowed hard against the bile that rose in her throat.

"Where is this information?"

"I have it."

"Give it to me."

She shook her head.

Kai grabbed her arms. "The information you have, if it's real, is what we've been waiting for. With that information we can unify the resistance against Galaran."

"That's what I want. It's why I stole the information and risked my life to get it out. Now, I have to get to the Mriln."

"You don't need to go to the Mriln. Give me the information."

"You think I'm just carrying around a nanochip? Galaran," she couldn't call him father, "doesn't trust anyone. He trusted me in his office but that was it. No one enters or leaves his office or even his presence without being scanned to their bones. There is no way to sneak physical evidence past him."

Kai's grip loosened on her arms. "How did you do it?"

"The Mriln are ingenious. They can code information into a virus and attach it to your very DNA." A shiver chased down her spine. It sounded so easy.

Kai's hands tightened again. "How is this coding done?"

All the blood drained from her head. She felt dizzy and disoriented as time seemed to reverse. Suddenly she was back in her private suite, awake and watching her heart beat in her chest as a Mriln doctor injected a virus into the cells of her heart. Each individual virus held information from her father's files encoded on its DNA.

"Explain."

She told him exactly what had happened. "It was the only way to get the information out."

"Someone else could --"

"No," she shook her head, "they couldn't. My father trusts no one. It took me months to gain access to his files."

"The Mriln inserted the virus. They can take it out?"

She nodded but couldn't keep eye contact with him.

He shook her and not gently. "What aren't you telling me?"

"I've told you everything I know." She tried to pull away but he wouldn't let her go.

"This extraction process. How difficult is it?"

"I don't know." There had never been a successful live extraction, but she wasn't going to tell him that. Not that he would try and stop her. She was his enemy's daughter. If she died he wouldn't care.

A bitter laugh escaped before she could stop it. She'd been thinking and

dreaming of forever while he'd been having sex. What kind of fool did that make her?

"Where were you to meet the Mriln?"

"AVCor."

Kai released her. He grabbed fresh clothes from a dispenser, dressed in a hurry and strode toward the door. "I'll have them meet us at Sai-sen-Sai. We can protect you there until we have the information. You're to stay here in my quarters until then."

Genae watched the door slide shut behind him. "So much for happily ever after."

Her chin rose and she glared at the door. Damn Kai. Double damn him. She was going to die having the information extracted and she hoped it choked him every time he realized she'd given her life to save his.

Chapter Five

Secrets Not Shared

Kai stormed out of the room across the corridor and slammed his hands against the far wall. She was Galaran's *daughter*. His mate was his enemy's daughter.

He stepped away from the wall and strode down the corridor toward the interdeck lift. He didn't care that others walking in the corridor skirted around him.

What did he do with the information he now had? The information she had. It would bring Galaran down. He stopped several feet from the lift and ignored two crewmen who had to edge around him. She carried the information he needed to destroy her father. She had betrayed her father and risked her life.

Why? She couldn't have an emotional investment in any particular alien species. Her father would never have let her close enough to make friends or form bonds with people he planned to destroy.

He had his wife and newborn son killed. Her words echoed in his mind but her face was what resonated with him. Her eyes had been bright with tears but her expression had been fierce.

Slowly, he turned back the way he had come and started walking. Had she risked her life for a child she had never known?

Anger and pride warred within him. Why had she considered her life expendable? She had accomplished what no one else in the universe had been able to do. He reached the door to his quarters and stepped through as it slid open.

Genae, looking out the view port, spun to face him. Her hair, a ruffled mass of black curls, framed her stormy face. Her eyes were narrowed, glaring at him. "What?" she spat. "Did you forget to stomp on one of my feelings?"

Kai ignored her angry question. He walked across the room and grabbed her

arms.

"What --"

He captured her mouth with his. She tried to twist away but he easily subdued her. She was small and fragile in his arms. She could have died before he ever found her.

He wrapped his arms around her, crushing her to his chest. His mouth devoured hers. His tongue invaded, conquered and finally caressed.

She moaned as he licked her inner lips, sighed when his tongue curled around and stroked hers, gasped as he emulated the sex act, his tongue forking in and out of her mouth.

Her body almost vibrated. She wanted to be angry. Her mind still was. But her body was his to command. She craved him, his mouth, the touch of his hand, his cock filling her until she couldn't imagine not having him inside her.

He lifted his head, leaving her breathless. One arm remained wrapped around her. He tangled his other hand in her hair and forced her face up to his.

"You *were* Galaran's daughter."

Her body stiffened. Her chin rose and her red, swollen lips thinned. "Yes, I am."

"No. You *were*," he repeated. "You *are* my mate."

For a long moment she just stared at him. "You would want Galaran's daughter?"

"No."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I want you."

She closed her eyes and took a shuddering breath. "I hate to cry."

Kai kissed her eyelids and nuzzled her nose with his own. "I don't like to see you cry." From now on he would see that there was no reason for her tears. By the laws of his people she belonged to him. It was his right to protect her and see to her happiness and that was what he would do.

Releasing her hair, he pushed Teer's shirt off her shoulders and left her standing

naked in front of him. Her nipples were hard red points. Her breathing was shallow. He had no doubt she was wet, her sex ripe and ready for him.

"Kai?"

Her tentative tone fueled the beast in him. There would be no hesitation between them. They were mated. They belonged together, belonged to one another.

"K --"

He swept her off her feet, carried her to the bed and laid her on it. She started to roll over but he pinned her down, his hands locked around her waist. "Don't move."

A tremor shook her and he growled his pleasure as her nipples peaked even harder. He would never tire of how responsive she was to him. All it took was a look and her cream ran hot and thick and her nipples hardened to entice him.

"Did I tell you before that tasting a woman's essence is considered the most intimate act there is between a male and his mate?" He lifted her feet to rest on the edge of the bed, spread wide so she lay open to him.

"I... I don't remember." She shivered, excitement racing through her veins. She could barely remember her own name. She felt decadent, wild and free. She wanted him to look at her, loved the heavy-lidded desire that darkened his face.

"You're the only woman I've ever tasted." His fingers trailed through the damp curls guarding her sex and she shuddered. He stroked her nether lips, his touch light, almost teasing. He looked up and watched her face as he slowly pushed two fingers into her.

"Yes." Her eyes closed and she undulated on the bed, riding his fingers as he rotated them inside her.

Kai leaned forward and captured one nipple in his teeth. He tugged and nipped as he worked his fingers in and out of her, keeping it slow and making her burn.

Genae grasped his head and tried to pull him closer. Her hips arched as she tried to impale herself more fully on his fingers. She wanted him inside her. She wanted the power of his possession, the fiery slide of his cock in her cunt.

Kai stopped what he was doing, his fingers barely stretching her entrance. "Put

your arms over your head."

Her fingers curled against his skull. The need to touch him warred with her need to please him. Kai wanted her to lie before him, completely open to him. She was his and he wanted to see it.

Slowly, her fingers massaging his scalp, she released his head. She stretched her arms above her head and waited. Lying before him, open and accessible, was delicious.

A low rumble issued from Kai's chest. His eyes glowed gold as they swept over her. "Do you know how beautiful you are?"

Red color rushed up her chest and neck and flamed in her cheeks. He smiled as he pushed his fingers into her, making a rocking motion as he did.

Genae bit her lip. She clasped her hands together and her breasts rose as she arched. It felt as if the very air was caressing her, making her nipples tighten and her stomach clench.

"Your nipples are ripe and red. Your breasts full and pale." He leaned forward again and licked her nipple over and over again, swirling and rolling it.

Moaning, she arched higher, thrusting her breast at him. She wanted a deeper loving. She wanted his mouth over her, pulling at her, making her womb contract each time he sucked her or crushed her nipple against the roof of his mouth.

When he bit her... She shuddered. Moisture pooled between her legs.

Kai played with her secret folds as he turned his attention to her other breast and its pouting crest.

Genae's breath caught. He was driving her wild and she loved it but she was going quietly insane too. His fingers kept moving in and out of her. It was a slow steady friction that kept her at a slow burn. He licked her nipples and her juices flowed but it wasn't enough. It kept her hot and wanting when she wanted to fly.

"Kai, do something or I will," she told him through gritted teeth.

Kai lifted his head and studied her. "What would you do?"

Her eyes lit at the challenge in his voice and his expression. "You don't think there's anything I can do?" Looking at her turned him on. It wasn't something he could

hide. His cock hardened and started to weep each time he looked at her. She could definitely do something to make him take her the way she wanted him to.

Kai's brows rose but he hid his delight in her as she rose to the bait he dangled. Genae closed her eyes and smiled and he knew he was in trouble.

Her movements sensual and slow, she drew her arms down from over her head. Her hands trailed over her collarbones, down her chest to her breasts. She squeezed the plump mounds before rolling the swollen crests against the palms of her hands. She shivered and moaned. The feel of her own hands was more erotic than she would ever have guessed.

Kai licked his lips, his eyes trained on her every movement. He had seen women pleasure themselves before but not for him, not for his personal pleasure and never his own woman.

"Pinch your nipples," he coaxed. His hips jerked as her small fingers caught the plump berries of her nipples and squeezed.

She moaned.

He groaned.

His eyelids lowered and blood rushed into his head. She was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. Her head moved against the bed, her hair a wild tangle of black curls around her love-flushed face.

"Lower," he coached, amazed at the rush of desire flooding him as he watched her. His cock throbbed. His fingers tingled with the need to push hers aside and touch her.

"Like this?" Her voice low and sultry, she trailed her hands down her torso in a slow, sensual caress. She undulated under the stroke of her own hands. Her lower lip was caught between her teeth. She'd meant to seduce him but she was doing a good job on herself as well.

She dipped her index finger into her navel, pulled it out and stroked around before dipping back in.

Kai growled. All pretense of being civilized dropped away as it had once before with her. His teeth bared as he watched her hands glide lower. Her small, white fingers tangled in her nest of dark curls and he clenched his fists to keep from grabbing her. She was about to touch what was his and his alone. He wanted that. He burned with the fire of wanting to see it and yet he was jealous.

"Do it," he ordered, his tone guttural and demanding.

Genae looked up from beneath her lashes and smiled with sensual feminine heat. He looked dangerous and all because of her touching herself.

"Do it?" She stroked the outer lips of her labia and shivered. She bit her lower lip and her eyelids almost closed. Touching herself, having him watch, she would never have guessed how erotic it would be.

Kai fought the urge to claim what was his. She was wet and glistening, ready for him.

"Or do this?" She trailed the fingers of one hand up the center cleft of her sex. She reached the apex where her clitoris peeked from its protective hood. She rubbed it with her middle finger and her breath caught. Her eyes closed and her lips parted as she circled the sensitive nub.

"Or do you want me to do this?" Her fingers dipped into her channel, two small fingers disappearing into her tight sheath.

Kai lunged. He pulled her hand from her sex and caught her fingers in his mouth, sucking and licking the sexual dew from them.

"Mine," he growled from around her fingers, his eyes trained on hers, fierce and feral.

"Yes." She couldn't lie still. Her hips moved in sensual enticement. She needed him filling her now.

Something inside him snapped. He had claimed her the moment he freed her from the wreckage of her ship on YelAsta. He had reinforced that claim again and again in each sexual encounter and each possessive touch.

She acknowledged that she belonged to him. He acknowledged that they

belonged together. Now, he knew it went beyond that. He belonged to her as much -- more -- than she belonged to him. He needed her more than she needed him.

The pain in his chest grew as he studied her. Small, vulnerable to him in every way and yet trusting him to care for her.

Love. He wanted to shake his head at the thought. VanDai males did not love. They mated. They claimed. They bound their chosen one to them. They did not love.

Did he love this small, delicate female?

Her eyes were half-closed in her flushed face, her expression expectant.

He wanted her beside him forever. He wanted any male who looked at her to immediately know she was his. Was that love?

The pain in his chest grew even bigger. Was what he was feeling love? No. He shook his head and watched a frown wrinkle Genae's forehead. Love was too weak a word for what he felt. Love was soft, a tenuous emotion at best. His feelings were fierce and wild, predatory and primitive. If there was a name for what he felt he'd never heard it. It was powerful and intense to the point of being painful.

He reached up and cupped her face. He drew his hands down her neck, over her breasts and delicate rib cage. He stroked over her abdomen and pelvis. His thumbs teased her secret curls as he wrapped his hands around her thighs and spread her legs even further apart.

"By the laws of my people I claim you."

Her lips parted but he didn't give her a chance to say anything. He lowered his head to her sex and began to prove why the VanDai found oral sex the most intimate act between a man and woman.

She moaned as he licked her, searching out every fold and crevice. She groaned as his tongue entered her. She cried out when he flicked her clit, his tongue a lash against her most sensitive flesh. She screamed and arched off the bed when he suckled her.

Her body vibrated with the need to thrash but she held perfectly still, arched

against his sucking mouth. It was too much, but if she pulled away would he let go?

The threat that he wouldn't kept her where she was, lifted to him, offering herself to him. Fire raced through her as he nursed. His tongue dipped lower, stroked the cleft of her sex before sweeping up to curl around her clit once more.

His tongue flicked and licked.

She arched into the wicked pleasure, tried to pull back from the unbearable torment but he wouldn't let her go. He grasped her hips and held her to him, right where she wanted to be.

She moaned. Her fingers dug into the bed. Her head thrashed back and forth. He was killing her but she never wanted him to stop. He licked her nether lips, fondled each fold with his mouth, finding each secret with his tongue.

She shuddered. Her hips undulated to his lapping, sucking rhythm. It was like being touched by the sun and yet safe, burned but not hurt.

She pressed her hands over her breasts to ease the ache in her nipples. It made it worse and at the same time better. She was so close. His tongue delved into her and she cried out. She wanted the deep, clenching release only he could give her.

"Kai, I want you --" Her hips jerked and she gasped as Kai opened his mouth over the apex of her sex and sucked.

Her vision went black. She opened her mouth but no sound came out. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Her body shook. Wild tremors raced through her as his suckling heightened and prolonged her orgasm.

Kai lapped up everything she had to give, feeding off her pleasure and increasing it at the same time. Finally he buried his face against her abdomen and fought for breath. His cock throbbed. He needed to be inside his woman, his mate.

He felt the shocks race through her, the clenching of her stomach muscles. He rose to his feet his gaze moving over her in a slow caress. Her face was flushed, her lashes lying like black crescents against her fair skin. Her bottom lip was swollen from her own bites. Her hands covered her breasts.

He reached out and lifted her hands from the full mounds. He wanted to see all of her. Never again would there be anything hidden between them.

Her nipples were pink and pouty, not red and puffy like they were after he sucked them. Her breasts rose and fell with each fast, shallow breath.

Her sex was red, her clitoris peeking from its protective hood. He groaned and caught his penis in one fist. He rubbed the sensitive head in her dew, teased her folds and rubbed her clit with it.

Teeth bared, the veins in his neck standing out, he positioned the broad head at her narrow entrance and pushed. He watched as his cock pressed against her, demanding entrance. He growled low in his throat as the pressure on the head of his cock increased.

He grunted as she gave before him. He thrust forward in a long, claiming slide as she cried out. Her back bowed off the bed and lifted her breasts like an offering to him.

She gasped for breath as he thrust into her. Fast. Hard. She couldn't keep up. He was like a wave rolling over her. Crashing into her. Taking her with him.

Kai couldn't go deep enough. He strained and grunted, pushing into her, pulling out, pushing in deep, hard, fast, again.

"Take me deeper." He grunted as he clasped her thighs, his hips a piston as he drove into her. His flesh slapped against her in an ever faster rhythm.

"So hot and wet. Tight. I want to sink into you. Your cunt was made for me. Only me. Tell me you belong to me. Tell me."

His words made no sense but she understood his tone. It matched his pounding, dominating rhythm. Pure possession. Her inner muscles contracted as the friction increased beyond tolerable. She was on fire. Alive for him.

"Tell me," he ordered, thrusting harder and faster.

"You." She didn't know what she agreed to. She needed to come. Her body shook with each powerful penetration. Her vagina clenched around him. Each thrust sank him into her to the hilt. He rode her clit with each forward motion. And it wasn't enough.

"Take me," she pleaded. Demanded. She wasn't even sure what she was asking for.

"Take you?"

His question infuriated her. She glared up at him. "Make me come," she demanded.

His expression almost cruel, he lifted her ankles to his shoulders. He thrust into her, rotated his hips and ground against her, his pelvis working her clit with unbelievable pressure as his cock stretched her, filling her deeper than he ever had.

The tension drawing her tight leaped higher. Her skin felt too tight. The brush of air on her skin, across her breasts, teased her nipples unbearably. She sobbed as he pulled back, cried out as he thrust forward and ground against her once more.

"Yes," she cried. "Yes, Kai. Yes."

He pulled out with a wet, sucking sound. As he drove forward she lifted her hips into him.

"Kai!" She screamed his name as her body exploded. She tightened around him. Tighter and tighter. Her whole body shook.

"Genae." His shout echoed hers as his come jetted into her. He pulsed into her as she squeezed him, her inner muscles working his turgid length until he was spent yet still a hard, thick presence inside her.

His chest heaved. His lungs worked hard to draw in enough air as he stood over her, his head bowed.

Thoughts circled through Genae's head and scattered as aftershocks made her nerves sing. New thoughts flooded in.

She belonged with Kai. He'd claimed her yet again. She had to save his life. He was so possessive. So protective. She had to get to the Mriln.

He wouldn't let her if he knew the risk.

The last thought froze her inside even as her body continued to quake. Her mind latched on to the thought and began to make sense of the pieces that had flitted through before it.

Kai felt he had a claim on her. He was extremely possessive and even more protective. If he knew the risk involved in the information retrieval he would never let her do it.

She looked up at him, her eyes caressing his stark features. It would have been better if he had never come back. If he hated her as Galaran's daughter he wouldn't have thought twice about her life. As his mate he would protect her at the cost of his own life. He'd proven that on YelAsta when he'd risked his life to save her from the destroyer's laser blasts.

She closed her eyes against the sudden burn of tears. She hated herself for crying. Tears wouldn't help. They were a weakness she couldn't afford. If Kai saw them he would want to know why she was crying and she couldn't tell him.

Her chest felt tight, her heart aching. There was only one thing she wanted more than she wanted to stay with Kai. What she wanted -- what she needed was for him to survive and that meant getting to the Mriln.

* * *

Reluctantly Kai pulled out of Genae. He looked down at her, her arms over her head, her eyes closed, her knees bent and open for him. She was perfect. Brave. Honorable. That someone like Galaran had sired her was incomprehensible. That he had found her where and how he had, her space ship wrecked on YelAsta, was more than a miracle.

Sliding one arm under her back, the other under her knees, Kai lifted her off the bed to lay her more comfortably in it. But he couldn't let her go.

She blinked and looked up at him. "Kai?"

He shook his head. There were no words to express what he was feeling. Pride. Possession. A fierce, consuming emotion he had no name for, but it was all wrapped around her. He would never let her go.

Closing his eyes he cradled her to his chest and nuzzled his face in her hair. She smelled warm, the scent of sex clinging to her and her own unique, slightly sweet feminine scent.

Her skin was smooth and soft, her hair a sensual pleasure against his face.

His movements gentle, he settled her on the bed. He lay down beside her. They would clean up after they rested. He would take great pleasure in washing every inch of her small body. For now, though, he wanted to hold her, to know she was filled with his essence, that he had marked her as his.

* * *

Genae woke slowly, stretched languidly. A smile tilted her lips before she even opened her eyes. Kai had well and truly claimed her as his own. It would be easier for both of them if he hadn't, but he had.

She reached for him, frowned and opened her eyes when she didn't find him beside her. She grimaced as she sat up. It was better that he wasn't here. What she needed was a bath in hot clean-gel up to her neck. Every muscle in her body, inside and out -- she grimaced at the thought -- was tender.

Throwing the covers aside, she scooted to the edge of the bed and stood up.

* * *

Nearly an hour later Kai found her immersed to her neck in a bath of clear clean-gel. He knelt beside her and trailed his fingers through the thin, liquidy substance. He didn't try to resist the lure of her breasts. He grasped one and fondled it, stroked her pouty pink nipple with his thumb, his expression one of male satisfaction as her nipple hardened and her breath caught.

"I wanted to wake you and bathe you."

Genae smiled. "That would have been nice."

He treated her other breast and nipple to the same caresses. "If I hadn't been called to the communications center I would have washed you myself." He stroked down her torso and delved between her legs. He stroked her soft folds, petting her and playing with her.

Genae took a deep breath and let her head fall back against the rim of the great basin she was immersed in. "Why did they need you at the communications center?" Her voice broke as his fingers delved into her. Did he really expect intelligent

conversation when he was making love to her, his fingers spearing her in a slow, steady rhythm?

"The Mriln sent out an urgent communiqué."

Her eyes opened at his words. Her brow wrinkled and she moaned as his fingers filled her with a forceful thrust.

She bit her lower lip and undulated against his fingers. She needed to think but it was hard when the pressure low in her abdomen was building with each increasingly powerful thrust of his fingers.

"They did?" The last word emerged on a moan.

He nodded. "They wanted information from anyone in the vicinity of YelAsta. They've been monitoring League transmissions and followed you that far. The League has several vessels looking for you since the destroyer that followed you from Blainon seems to have been chasing nothing."

Genae's chest tightened at his news, her mind cleared of the sexual haze even as he kept up the finger fucking he was giving her, his motions more gentle now. "What do we do?"

She had said -- we. She was thinking of them as a unit. Kai rewarded her by stroking her clit with his thumb. Her breath hitched and worry slipped away as she concentrated on what he was doing between her legs.

"Exactly what we're doing." His fingers stroking into her gave his words more than one meaning. "The Mriln are sending a healer to Sai-sen-Sai. You'll be safe there."

Genae gritted her teeth and started riding his fingers. Until she came she wasn't going to be able to think, damn him.

"Not that way." Kai pulled his fingers from her, caught her arms and lifted her from the tub. The gel drained away, leaving her clean and dry. He pushed his pants down as he pressed her back against the wall with his free hand.

Lifting her up, he wedged his hips between her thighs. He braced her with one forearm under her buttocks and positioned his cock at her entrance with his other hand, thrusting forward.

Genae gripped his shoulders. She met each penetration with a roll of her hips, riding him as hard as he drove her. She loved the way he made her come again and again before he found his release but not this time. This time she wanted him as out of control as she was.

Kai pumped into her. She was wild in his arms. Her inner muscles tightened, squeezing him hard. He leaned into her as his hips rocked against her, his cock ramming into her. Neither was prepared as the storm broke. She arched against him as the wave rolled over her.

He cursed as he came, the power of the sexual storm pulling him under with her.

"Wrap your arms around my neck."

She did as he told her. Holding her hips he walked back to the huge oval bath basin and stepped into it. With her still impaled on his cock he sank into the bath gel. She lay against him, her head pillowed on his chest.

"It might be easier to talk first and then have sex."

Kai grunted. "Sex first. Then talk."

She smiled. "Typical male."

"We'll reach Sai-sen-Sai soon. The Mrlin will be ready to do the extraction and once that's done we'll be formally joined."

Genae's heart skipped a beat. Her heart that carried the lives of so many people. She lay quietly against Kai's chest, his cock still filling her. It was going to happen. The president's plan was going to be exposed and he *would* be stopped. All she had to do was make sure Kai didn't find out how dangerous the retrieval was. If he did she'd have another battle on her hands.

Kai nuzzled his face into her neck. "You'll like Sai-sen-Sai."

She sank her fingers into his thick, luxurious hair. "I'm sure I will." *If I get the chance.*

The end... for now.

Paladin's Pride 3: Her Forever Knight

Her life for his...

Genae is willing to share every secret with Kai except one. Her life just might be the price to be paid to save his and the lives of others.

Kai has risked everything to save Genae and he's not about to lose her now. When the choice is taken from him, he will do anything to save Genae, the only woman he believes is worth dying for.

Angelina Evans

Romance. Who can live without it? Certainly not Angelina Evans.

Born, raised and still living close to the Canadian border, she enjoys visiting her neighbors to the north when she's not busy writing. Writing has been a part of Angelina's life since she could first string words together. Seeing her books in print is a dream come true. Her sincerest wish is that readers will enjoy reading her stories as much as she enjoys writing them.

Angelina loves to hear from her readers -- you can contact her at angelinaevans1@yahoo.com.