

Paladin's Pride



Angelina Evans

Changeling Press

Changeling Press LLC

www.changelingpress.com

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First published in 2009, 2009

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ISBN: 978-1-60521-213-5

Formats Available:

HTML, Adobe PDF,

MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:

Changeling Press LLC

PO Box 1046

Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046

www.ChangelingPress.com

Editor: Maryam Salim

Cover Artist: Sahara Kelly

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Paladin's Pride (Collection)
by Angelina Evans

Paladin's Pride

Angelina Evans

VanDai: Legendary warriors. Legendary lovers. They hold their women at all cost ... protecting them even if the price is their life.

Kai saves Genae's life and finds her life is the one that means everything to him. He will fight League killers, League generals, even the death dealing machine of the League to save her, but he can't save her from death, for that he must depend on a healer of extraordinary talent.

Llaryn, a Mriln healer, is bound by Mriln law—use of her life-force to heal non-Mriln and sex outside her species is forbidden. But she can't let an innocent die and she can't say no when the leader of the VanDai chooses her for his own. Paladin will give his life for hers and she won't live without him.

For Kai and Genae, Paladin and Llaryn, love really does conquer all.

Paladin's Pride 1: Out of Sight

Angelina Evans

Some causes are worth dying for.

Genae is willing to risk everything to expose the lies behind a corrupt government's plan for mass extinction—but she's only one woman. One woman with an army of League soldiers hot on her tail. When she crash lands on the desolate planet YelAsta she knows she's failed her mission.

Genae finds help where she least expects it—in the arms of an incredibly large—and naked—warrior who pulls her from the flaming wreckage of her shuttle. He's also invisible.

Save a life—and claim it as your own.

The VanDai warriors have perfected the art of stealth. As deadly as he is silent, Kai is all too familiar with the hazards of this strange and dangerous planet. Kai is willing to brave laser fire, the dangers of the wild planet itself, and assassins to keep Genae alive. His price, though, is high. He will accept nothing less than her heart. For the love of a woman like Genae, he'll risk everything. No one—not even the League—will take Genae from him. He'll keep what he's won, no matter the cost.

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Chapter One

Unexpected Rescue

Laser fire blasted the tail drive of her small interplanetary transport. Metal shrieked as it tore. Her heart pounding in her throat, Genae's fingers flew over the control panel in front of her.

"Critical damage to hull integrity. Life support systems at 80% and falling."

The metallic voice echoed through the control deck as the lights wavered and died. The tiny vessel shook, fighting her every effort to keep it on course.

"Critical damage to hull integrity. Life support systems at 79% and falling." Genae gritted her teeth and concentrated on the readings in front of her. There was only one planet in the immediate vicinity that supported life. She had to reach it.

"Critical dam—"

"Shut up!" She stabbed the shut-off icon on the internal communications grid and immediately turned her attention back to keeping her vessel from disintegrating around her.

Laser fire flashed past her starboard side making her flinch. The hairs on her arms rose, the blast so close to the ship it created static electricity. Another hit would destroy her vessel. She didn't have the luxury of trying to outmaneuver the destroyer class battle ship behind her. She had to get to ground.

She wasn't going to let them kill her. Not yet. Not that easily. With new resolve she concentrated even harder on the controls. Her fingers blurred as she input coordinates for the habitable planet. She needed a perfect trajectory or she'd burn up as she entered the planet's atmosphere.

A light flashed a millisecond before a laser charred the aft port thruster. The ship started spinning. Genae didn't think, she reacted. She fired the starboard thruster to full power, fueling the spin.

The battle ship behind her veered to starboard. She cut the aft thruster and powered the forward braking thrusters. Her heart pounding the air from her lungs, she reversed the entry sequence and locked in the coordinates. Grabbing the mouth-vent, she pulled the tubing from its housing shaft and clamped her mouth around the end. She took a deep breath testing oxygen flow as she wrenched the cover from the emergency panel on the left armrest of the command seat. Her heart raced, one beat indistinguishable from another as she hit the foam release.

Almost clear, gelatinous material rolled out of the vents to flood the deck. Genae closed her eyes and fought to breathe. She'd done everything she could. If the battle ship blasted her from existence, if she burned up in the atmosphere, if the ship disintegrated on impact, there was nothing she could do. Even if she survived there was probably no way off the planet.

None of it mattered. She could die in peace knowing she'd done her best to make up for the horror she'd helped create.

The foam swallowed her and all rational thought fled. It pinned her to her seat, sealed her mouth around the vent, filled her nose, glued her eyes shut and enveloped her head. It was like being entombed.

Genae tried to scream but no sound emerged.

She fought to claw her way free but couldn't.

A rushing roar filled her ears. Heat slammed into her, wave after singeing wave. Her heart felt like it would explode. Her lungs fought for air. Silent screams filled her mind.

Everything went black.

* * * *

A hand closed around her throat.

Genae regained consciousness fighting. She swung one fist as she ripped the vent from her mouth with the other.

The hand released her throat.

Blinking to clear her vision, she fought free of the fast-disintegrating foam. She wouldn't give up without a fight—would fight with every breath left in her body. She'd survived the crash. She'd find a way to deliver the information.

A hand closed around her left calf. Adrenaline surged through her veins. Almost blind from the gel sticking to eyelids and lashes, she started punching.

Genae almost smiled as she heard a grunt. She didn't know what she'd hit but she hoped it hurt.

"I'm helping you." The low, gruff words didn't register except as a target to strike at. She swung, her fist connecting with flesh and bone, jarring her shoulder. She bit back a curse and swung again.

Genae cried out as her fist hit something that felt like stone. Tears filled her eyes and streamed down her face.

Fingers closed around her hand, the grip unbreakable.

"Release me," she demanded, fighting to free herself.

"No. You hit me once. You won't do it again." There wasn't just anger in the gravelly male voice. There was rage.

Genae couldn't help herself, she flinched. Her fist felt tiny trapped in the big paw holding it. He had to be huge. "If you're going to kill me, get it over with," she goaded. "I'm not going to tell you anything."

"If I'd wanted you dead you'd never have woken up."

She opened her mouth to argue but never got the chance. The giant threw her over his shoulder. Her hands slapped into his broad back, barely keeping her head from cracking against him. He was all muscle and a lot of it ... And he was naked.

Blinking hard she reached up and wiped streaming eyes. That couldn't be right. He wouldn't be naked, but dammit that had felt like skin.

Her legs dangled well above the debris-strewn ground. Her flight suit was singed in spots, her left thigh red. The gel saved her life but hadn't been able to completely insulate her from the heat her weakened shields let through on entering the atmosphere.

"Look. If you put me down I can..." Her voice trailed off as what she saw sank in.

"I'll carry you. I'm not chasing you when you try and run." Genae barely heard what he said. All that mattered was what

she'd just noticed. Or more to the point what she couldn't see. "My left thigh is burned."

A grunt was his only answer.

"You're carrying me over your shoulder. My head is bouncing against your back and my legs are dangling against your chest, right?"

"So?" His tone was impatient.

Well, tough shit. She wasn't happy about it either. "Either I've lost my wits in the crash or you're invisible." She'd obviously scrambled her brain. The stress of trying to escape with the information and being trapped in the safety-gel had been too much for her.

"I'm invisible."

She closed her eyes and nodded. *Sure, whatever.* Her brain would say that to trick her. She sighed and relaxed. There was no sense fighting her own mind. If it wanted to conjure up muscle-bound invisible men that was much better than being trapped and helpless.

"Are you all right? Where do you hurt?" The big, invisible man stopped, lifted her off his shoulder and stood her on the ground in front of him. His hands easily circled her waist.

Damn, he was big.

"I'd say I'm doing very well for someone who's crazy." She smiled up at where a face should be and patted a forearm roped with high tensile-strength muscle.

"You aren't insane," he growled.

Genae patted his arm again. "Of course I am. How else do you explain being rescued by huge, invisible, naked men on a deserted planet?"

"Not men. Man. One man."

She glowered up at him. "Don't talk to me like I'm brainless."

"Why shouldn't I? You're the one who said you'd lost your mind."

"I hope that's not humor I hear in your voice." She made her own voice as menacing as she could.

"Or what?"

"Or poof, smartass! I'll destroy you, you figment of my imagination. I'll..."

Light streaked from the sky, blinding her. The impact split the earth flinging her into the air. A clap of sound like a thousand thunder booms layered over one another deafened her as she hit the ground with bone jarring force. Another laser blast hit throwing her yards from where she'd landed. Dazed, she felt heat building under her left hip, thigh and arm where they touched the ground. A burning odor filled her nostrils. Huge hands gripped the neckline of her flight suit ripping it apart. Genae couldn't understand what he was saying as he stripped the material from her arms and down her legs, but she had no doubt it wasn't pretty.

"Who the hell's after you?" he demanded.

"President Galaran's soldiers." Saying the name snapped her back to reality. She started pushing at the hands stripping her as she silently cursed herself. "What are you doing? Leave me alone."

Trying to stop him was like trying to move a mountain by blowing on it. Totally useless. In seconds she was naked, her clothes flying through the air and landing on the ground.

She took a step toward them, intent on picking them up when big hands clamped around her waist.

His skin against hers was hot and intimate. Any thought that he was a figment of her imagination had disappeared with the first laser blast. And now she was naked.

"I want my clothes." She tried to step forward as she pushed his hands away.

"Watch." His rough, low voice was harsh, his grip unbreakable. She watched and even though there was nothing to see, heard the sound of sizzling. Her clothes started to bubble and smoke. Flames leapt into the air and seconds later a pile of white ash lay where her clothes had been.

Her mouth open, all she could do was stare. "What happened?"

"The chemicals in the dirt are highly reactive with almost every synthetic product manufactured."

Incredulous, she shook her head. She'd never heard of anything like it.

"I ... th—"

"Quiet!" He swung her into his arms and started running.

"Wh—"

He squeezed her hard, cutting her off.

He dropped her to the ground as he stopped in front of a tree. A split in the trunk started to widen. She heard him grunt as the bark started to pop and groan as it splintered. She couldn't see him, but she didn't have to. She'd seen huge muscles before and his would bulge under the strain of ripping apart a tree trunk.

"Get in." The words were gritted.

She squeezed through the narrow opening in the bark. He'd saved her twice. She wasn't going to argue ... yet. Bark scraped her breast, hip, thigh and buttocks leaving a sharp sting behind. She winced but didn't make a sound. She reached out, testing the boundaries of the hollow trunk as he squeezed in behind her. What hadn't been spacious to start with suddenly became very close quarters. His front, every oversized square inch was pressed tight to her backside.

"What do you—"

"Look." A huge hand clamped over her mouth and she found herself turned until she was looking through a tiny crack in the bark. The air above the debris of her ship had a hazy, heat wave look to it. As she watched seven people materialized on the blast site.

Her breath caught and she shrank back against the big man behind her. Five men and two women dressed in League military uniforms fanned out and began searching the area. Her heart started beating fast and hard. If they were caught neither of them would get the immediate death they begged for.

"Shhh." His breath teased her ear as his arms wrapped around her waist. "They can't find us here. This planet, everything about it, hates modern technology. Their instruments won't work and chances are—"

A scream sounded from somewhere out of sight. All seven crewmembers raced back to the blast site. One of them tore at the sleeve of his flight suit swearing.

"Chances are they'll get hurt looking for you." His voice sounded very satisfied. Unaware she did it, Genae clutched the arms wrapped around her. She'd never wanted anything as much as she wanted the soldiers to transport back to their ship. There had to be a way off this planet and the man behind her would know where it was. There was still a chance. She raised one hand to her heart. It was still beating and as long as it was there was hope.

Outside, the soldiers milled for a moment before one of the women shouted a command. They formed up in a loose triangle. Seconds later the air around them seemed to thicken and they disappeared.

Relief made Genae weak. She slumped back against the giant holding her. His heartbeat was a strong reassuring rhythm under her head. She turned her head until her cheek was pressed against his chest and savored his warmth. They were alive.

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Chapter Two

Pleasure in the Strangest Places

She was alive, but she still had a goal to accomplish. Time was fast running out if she wanted to keep millions of lives from being lost. The man holding her had saved her from serious burns. He'd saved her life when he'd hidden her from the League soldiers. He had to help her get off the planet. But if he didn't want to help beyond that, fine. She could find her own way where she needed to go.

"I thought you said the planet was reactive with synthetic material. Why didn't all the soldiers have trouble?"

"They must not have come into physical contact with the vegetation or dirt."

"What about their boots?" If he'd stripped her for no reason she was going to kill him.

"Their boots, just like yours, are made of a resin. Not completely a natural product, but not completely synthetic either. Their hand-held lasers wouldn't have any effect against the vegetation either."

Not sure she believed him, but not willing to stay and argue, she turned and studied the section of the trunk they'd slipped through. Determined to do what she'd set out to do, she straightened away from him and tried to lean forward, ready to squeeze back through the bark.

"My ship's computer said this was an uninhabited planet. What are you doing here? And how did you know the tree was

hollow?" It was an ingenious hiding place. She was surprised the soldiers' instruments hadn't picked them up instantly. What he'd said must be true. Modern technology wouldn't work on this planet.

"All Tortauna trees are hollow. As the outer ring grows the inner ring is absorbed." His voice was a low rumble of sound.

She filed the information away in her head. It could be useful later. If the soldiers figured out she hadn't died in the crash they'd turn the planet upside down looking for her. He hadn't answered her question about what he was doing on the planet, but at the moment it really didn't matter.

She reached for the crack in the bark. It was time to get moving.

"You're not going anywhere yet."

"Of course I am. I have to get off this planet. I have inf—" She stopped herself. She didn't know anything about the man behind her. If he supported the League's current President and found out what she was trying to do he'd turn her over without a qualm or kill her himself.

"I don't care what you have or don't have. Those are professional soldiers. They won't stop until they're sure their mission was accomplished. You're not leaving this tree until I'm sure it's safe."

She looked over her shoulder and glared up at where his voice came from. "Who appointed you leader?" she demanded. Who did he think he was dictating to her? She was grateful for his help but wouldn't let him order her around. The soldiers were gone and she had her own mission to accomplish.

"I did." His arms tightened around her and pulled her against his chest. "Relax, *vaiya*. You're not going anywhere until I say so."

"My name is *Genae*," she said from between her teeth. His arms were like titanium around her. He was right. Until he was ready to release her she wouldn't be going anywhere.

"I'm Kai." His arms around her loosened their hold. One big hand flattened low over her abdomen. The other slid up her torso to envelop her right breast. He grunted with satisfaction as he kneaded her soft flesh.

She froze. A strange man she couldn't even see was playing with her breast, his other hand massaging lower and lower on her abdomen and she wasn't screaming in terror?

She bit her lip, fighting not to writhe against him as fire raced through her veins. His skin was hot, his cock growing, a hard huge ridge against her lower back.

"What are you doing?" She tried to make the question scathing. Instead her voice was breathless and husky.

"Having fun." His head brushed against hers a second before his lips started nuzzling her neck.

Heart racing for a whole new reason, she tried to push his hands away. Her attempts, though, were half-hearted, her body a traitor to her mind. And her mind wasn't all that sure she wanted him to quit as sparks of pure pleasure flashed through her. *What was happening? How was he making her feel this way?* It had to be the overflow of adrenaline left from a narrow escape.

His hand found its way between her thighs. His fingers delved between her delicate folds. He found the swollen knot

of nerves at the apex of her sex and played it like a master musician.

Genae grabbed the forearm attached to the hand at her breast and held on. *Lord, who was this woman reacting to him like this?* He rubbed and flicked her clit with alternating pressure and speed.

One second she was racing toward climax, her hips rocking to the rhythm of his finger. The next moment she was grinding herself back against his cock as he rubbed her with slow, deft strokes.

He tested the weight of her breast, plucked her nipple.

His mouth grazed her neck and sucked. He nipped—small stinging bites—then stroked the sting away, his tongue warm, moist and slightly rough.

She shuddered as his fingers stroked farther between her legs. He pressed against her entrance, tested the resistance of the small ring of muscle guarding her depths.

Genae moaned, on the brink of orgasm. She'd never been so ready so fast. She wanted his finger on her clit again.

"You're wet and hot," he whispered, his tongue swirling around her ear.

No shit. She shivered, unaware until that moment that her ear was an erotic organ.

"Your species is so receptive, and you're no exception, are you?" His low voice was almost taunting.

A chill passed through her. Before her thoughts could clear, though, his finger entered her vagina in a fast, almost savage thrust.

Her mouth opened but no sound emerged. She was surrounded by him, filled by him. He withdrew his finger, spread her own liquid heat to her clit and flicked. Only it wasn't his finger. It felt more like a ... claw?

She tried to clear her mind, needed to know who—what—he was. She'd thought him a man, albeit an invisible one. She needed—

His claw, hard and sharp, tormented her clit. It was pleasure, the threat of pain spine tingling. His fingers stroked down and circled her entrance.

"How tight are you?" he whispered.

She couldn't answer, could only move her head back and forth against his shoulder, a quivering mass of tormented nerves. Two fingers plunged deep at the same time he pinched her nipple and bit her neck. The triple assault was too much. She screamed as her whole being clenched.

An orgasm thundered through her, more powerful than anything she'd ever felt. Her body shook. Her vagina clenched around the fingers lodged there. Her nipple, caught by his fingers, ached to the point of pain.

He sucked the skin of her neck trapped between his teeth. His teeth released her at the same time he released her nipple. But her torment had just begun.

Instead of decreasing, her orgasm swelled. Wave after wave slammed into her as his fingers slid in and out of her. His other hand moved between her legs. One second a finger strummed her clit, the next a claw flicked, toying with her, adding the spice of a threat to the already heady experience.

Genae gasped for breath. She moaned and cried out. There was a fire between her legs, deep in her belly. Tremors shook her as he forced her higher. She was going to die and she didn't care.

Hard fingers squeezed her clit, forged deep.

Every muscle tightened and her world exploded. She arched like a bow pulled too tight. Her heart stopped and she went limp in his arms.

* * * *

One moment Kai was invisible, the next he wasn't. His lean, sharp features were drawn tight with need. The unconscious woman lying limp in his arms was a surprise. He'd fought to free her from the wreckage of her ship only to find her already struggling to free herself. She'd been ready to take him on when she hadn't been able to see him. He wasn't used to humans being so fierce. He'd wanted her, and decided at that moment he would have her.

He turned her to face him. Holding her easily with one arm he brushed the short mop of black curls off her forehead. She was tiny, something he'd never liked, but with her he did. He wanted to hold and protect her. He also wanted to ram his straining cock into her until they both exploded.

He traced her small straight nose, her soft, full lips, and brushed the dark fan of her lashes where they lay against her cheeks. Unconscious, she looked very young and very sweet.

A hint of a smile touched his lips at that thought. She might have moments when she was sweet, but he hadn't seen them yet.

His gaze trailed down to her breasts and his eyes narrowed. Her right nipple was puffier and redder than the left due to his manipulations. The scrape on her left breast, though, was from something else. Probably from when he'd pushed her into the trunk before the League soldiers arrived planet-side.

He cursed, the low guttural language of his people adding emphasis to the words. He looked lower, the curses flowing freely when he saw the scrapes on her left hip and thigh. The soldiers would pay for every mark on her body. He would see to it personally.

Leaning forward, he ran his tongue over the abraded flesh of her left breast. A low purr rumbled in his throat when her nipple hardened and lengthened as he licked her.

He lifted her until he could reach her hip and the purr became a growl. He licked the abused skin before moving to her thigh. He started to lick her but the scent of her arousal, sea-sweet and musky, had the growl in his throat threatening to become a roar.

He resisted the urge to turn his attention to the soft, hidden folds of flesh between her legs. He was VanDai, and he lived by the code of his people. He had saved her life and therefore she belonged to him. She'd accepted his invasion of her body by his fingers, giving tacit permission for him to fuck her. She hadn't opened herself to his mouth. She would, but he wouldn't take advantage while she couldn't say no.

He licked her thigh.

Straightening to his full height, his broad shoulders wedged into the small space provided inside the tree's hollow

interior, he lifted Genae and propped her against the smooth inner bark. He lifted her left leg and wedged his hips between her thighs. He'd pushed her to the point of losing consciousness on purpose. The first time he entered her wouldn't be comfortable. The males of his species were built big in every way. And the nubby flesh of his penis, though it would soon drive her wild, would provide too much stimulation for her the first time he penetrated her.

His huge muscles tensed as he held her, his hands supporting her buttocks and hips, her back braced against the tree. His penis quivered and jerked. Anticipation tightened his muscles even more. The human women he'd been with before had been good, so tight it had almost been painful entering them. And with this woman there was the added element of ownership. She belonged to him.

He thrust his hips forward until the head of his penis touched the soft, moist folds of her sex. His breath hissed out from between clenched teeth. It felt like a torch was being held to his cock it was so sensitive to her heat. He had to have her now.

He lifted her higher and pulled her hips forward. The head of his cock skimmed through her dew and lodged at the opening of her vagina.

Taking a deep breath he fought for control when every instinct urged him to ram his cock into her cunt and claim her. He had to use more care than that. Even unconscious, he could still hurt her.

Slowly, pressing her down against his shaft, he began to penetrate her. The pressure had sweat popping out on his

forehead and upper lip. She'd been tight around his fingers but he hadn't realized how tight.

Breathing hard, his fingers biting into her hips and buttocks, he forced her down. The bulbous head of his cock pushed through her guardian muscles and he started cursing. She was tighter than any woman he'd ever been in. So tight it bordered on pain. Good pain. Pleasure pain. A wet velvet vise squeezing him.

He pushed forward an inch. Throwing his head back he fought the need raging through him. He never wanted another male to know the ecstasy of her tight sheath. She was his by right of life. His hips surged forward before he could stop himself, sinking his cock another two inches in her depths. His litany of curses narrowed to his people's version of "fuck, fuck, fuck."

He became aware of the low whimpers coming from Genae when her head began to rock back and forth. Her hands fluttered in the air before settling on his forearms. Her breasts heaved as she took one gulp of breath after another.

He had to be inside her before she roused. He wanted her filled with his length and girth. She might or might not recognize the bonds he was forging through sex. It would work to his benefit if she didn't.

Slowly, inexorably, grunting and sweating, he pulled her down, impaling her on his rampant cock. She burned him, her fiery essence bathing him. Her silken walls resisted his invasion but he wouldn't let her stop him. Not until every inch she could take was inside her.

Through half-closed lids he watched her lashes flutter. She blinked, a questioning, almost bewildered expression flitted across her face. Fear flickered in the depths of her blue eyes as they opened.

* * * *

She glanced down, saw his cock where it disappeared between her thighs, felt the burning slide of his flesh into hers, and jerked, trying to get away. The motion sank her fully onto his shaft.

Her eyes flew up to meet his. Her mouth opened. Her fingers dug into his arms. Her vagina clamped down on his cock. Her hips jerked, trying to relieve the burning, pinching pressure.

"Remember, I tried to go slow." His voice was a guttural rumble. His eyes glittered pure golden fire. There was no more time to talk. He pulled back, plunged forward. His cock was abrasive against her tender inner tissue.

She grabbed his shoulders, raked her nails down his chest. Teeth gritted, she tried to twist away from him. The motion increased the pressure inside. His cock unerringly found every pressure point and she screamed.

"It hurts," she panted, holding his upper arms. She tried not to move as her whole body shook and shuddered with each powerful surge of his hips.

"Is the hurt good or bad?" he demanded.

Hurt good? She opened her mouth ready to flay him with words. He plunged deep but rotated his hips before pulling back. The motion worked her clit with fierce pressure.

Lightning shot from the small knot of nerves to every pleasure point in her body. She shook as he repeated the motion. Pressure built, great waves threatening to drown her. His cock rode in and out of her. Tormenting. Torturing. Good?

His penis grew.

Her chest heaved as she fought for air. Her whole being centered around his penis as it surged in and out of her, moist sucking sounds accompanying the hard rhythm he set.

She fought the pressure, the growing, expanding sensation.

He thrust against her without pulling out.

She moaned and shook her head.

His cock vibrated inside her, his pelvic bone riding her clit.

He stared at her, wanted to see her face as she orgasmed. Her cunt clenched around his cock, not releasing but getting tighter and tighter.

"Come for me," he growled. His hips pistoned against her. If she didn't come soon he wouldn't be able to watch her. He'd be riding the wave of his own release.

"No." She glared up at him. Fear made her eyes almost black. If she let go, if the power making her muscles tight found release she wouldn't survive. No one could survive the storm raging through her. "Stop," she begged, almost sobbing.

"Never." His eyes were narrowed, his voice guttural. "You will come for me." It was a threat and a promise. He pulled back and hammered into her.

His was the power of lightning striking, his cock fire as the rough texture of head and shaft flashed in and out of her.

There was no rhythm to his thrusts. Fast, faster, slow, fast. He stroked shallow, deep, shallow. He plunged *deep*.

She screamed. Her body arched and her muscles corded. Her nipples flushed darker, distended. Her eyes started to close.

"No! You won't faint," he ordered. "You'll experience every moment while I watch."

Something in his voice held her. Low, mewling sounds broke from her throat as her orgasm ravaged her. And it went on, peak after peak, as his cock pounded into her, a relentless machine.

"Yes." His voice was a hoarse whisper as he felt the pressure of release starting in his balls. Her expression, eyes half-closed, lips parted, teeth clenched, could have been pleasure or pain. A flush stained her breasts, chest, neck and face. Her nipples were longer, more pointed.

He wanted it to never end. The fierce clenching of her muscles around him, the pressure. Head thrown back, the veins in his neck standing out, he roared his release.

Genae felt the hot jets of fluid pumping into her, bathing her in his essence. It was too much sensation. Her mind couldn't fathom that such extremes of pleasure existed and a person survived.

He kept thrusting into her, his come still spurting. Unable to respond any more, her conscious fled. Her body went limp, tremors shaking it.

His head thrown back, eyes closed, Kai savored being one with her. His cock twitched inside her as tremors tightened

her around him. He'd been well milked. There was nothing more in him to give.

He leaned against her, loathe to pull free. He didn't want to be separated from her. Not yet. If he'd ever thought about forming a life bond it wouldn't have been with a human woman. His right to her after saving her life was too ephemeral. He wanted something universally recognized. He wanted no one doubting that she belonged to him. And he didn't want time limits or conditions. He wanted her always.

He breathed deep, satisfaction curling through him at their combined scents. She was potent, her scent the most sexual he'd ever encountered in a human or any other female. But there was something else. Eyes narrowed, he frowned. His breathing stilled as he focused on listening. The only sounds that reached him were the sounds he'd become familiar with during his month on the planet.

There was something else bothering him. Something else was making the hair on his arms and the back of his neck stand up.

He peered through the crack in the bark, searching the darkening landscape for something out of place.

He inhaled and the truth hit him. He smelled sex. His smell combined with hers. But he smelled another being, too. Human. Male. And close.

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Chapter Three

Surviving to Run

Had the male heard them? Their lovemaking hadn't been quiet. If he had heard them he would have attacked.

Genae shifted in his arms and groaned.

Kai lifted her off him, furious he had to leave her welcoming sheath before he was ready.

She started to cry out. Kai clamped his hand over her mouth. He lowered his head until his mouth brushed her ear. "Someone is out there. Be silent." His voice was a mere suggestion of sound. He pulled back to look at her. If she didn't understand he would knock her out to keep them safe.

Her eyes were so wide they dominated her face, but she nodded.

His mouth set in a grim straight line, he nodded once before releasing her.

Her legs wouldn't hold her. She slumped to the base of the trunk. Her thighs where they connected to her hips felt stretched. Her muscles felt as though she'd run around a spaceport about a million times.

Kai spared her a frown before turning his attention back to the crack in the bark.

Genae knew she should be worried and she was. Just not to the extent the situation called for. If there was someone outside, their intentions weren't good. A death sentence had been issued against her and every crewmember aboard the

destroyer was more than ready to carry it out if she was found.

That's what she needed to concentrate on. If she wasn't careful she would be killed. Everything she'd done, everything she'd given up would be for nothing. But all she could think about was Kai. She couldn't stop looking at him or wanting him.

A shiver skipped down her spine. She bit her lip to keep from moaning aloud. The man—no, not man. Well, it didn't matter what he was. He knew how to have sex.

He was beautiful. His hair was thick and full, a dark golden brown. It grew down his neck to a point. It reminded her of pictures she'd seen of Terran lions. She wanted to touch it. *Was it as soft as it looked?*

She wouldn't touch him, even though she wanted to. One of them had to be vigilant and since the only thing holding her attention was Kai, she elected him for the job.

He really was a giant. Head and shoulders taller than she was. She wasn't sure how he'd squeezed his broad shoulders into the cramped space. He was lean and powerfully muscled, and yet he looked sleek.

Dark gold hair grew across his chest and arched down his abdomen to his sex. Her breath caught as she looked at him. Awe, fear and fascination warred inside her. He was huge. Even limp he was long and thick. But that wasn't the surprise.

She realized she was reaching for him when she saw her hand readying to close around him. She snatched her arm back and clasped her hands together.

He was knobby. She didn't know how else to describe it. No wonder she felt abraded. She was. And she wanted him to do it again. There was only one reason she could think of to explain the texture of his cock. Nature had made him that way to increase sexual stimulation.

She shivered, a smile of pure sensual enjoyment lighting her face as she stretched. Yes, she would very much like him to do it again. She'd never been in a situation like this before. Did she ask? If she didn't—

Laser fire hit the tree with a thunderous boom.

Genae hit the opposite side of the inner trunk. Before she could move it happened again. Her heart pounding in her chest, she lay unmoving. Strike after strike hit the tree. Kai flattened himself against the inner trunk, half-standing over her, his body contorted to stay clear of the crack in the trunk's bark.

As suddenly as it started the laser fire stopped.

Genae couldn't hear anything over the sound of her own heartbeat. Her ears rang with the sound of the detonations.

"...ineffective. Search each tree. We all heard something. Find out what it was. If the woman escapes we all pay."

Kai crouched down and folded himself around Genae. She had no idea what he was doing but she wasn't going to protest. His life was as much at risk as hers and he had to know it. He folded her almost into a fetal position, wrapped his arms around her and disappeared.

She blinked. Her heart stuttered. She could still feel him but he was invisible. If the soldiers searched the tree and

looked through the crack they would only see her, wouldn't they?

Biting her lip she buried her face against his warm, hard chest. She didn't want to die. She'd thought she'd resigned herself to dying when she'd started the whole chain of events that was unfolding. But Kai had changed that. He'd made her feel more alive than she ever had before. She wanted to learn if there were higher levels of pleasure she could ascend too.

She didn't want to die.

She closed her eyes against the sudden tears burning in them. What was she thinking? She had risked everything to get the information hidden in her heart. Just because Kai had suddenly appeared in her life she couldn't let it change anything. She had to get the information to the TaYair if she could. If they got through this search without being discovered she would ask Kai to help her get off the planet. After that she would have to go on alone. He was too much of a liability. He made her want to forget everything but him and what he did to her body.

She burrowed as close to his body as she could get, savoring the delicious aches he had created in her.

Kai held Genae tight, using his body's reflective camouflage to hide them both this time. He checked and rechecked ensuring nothing of her would be visible around him. It wasn't comfortable—he felt like he'd been shoved into a tight box—but it would keep her safe and that was what mattered.

He listened, picking up the footfalls of someone as they paced close to the tree. The Tortauna trees would stand

against anything the soldiers could fire at them, he knew. And they would never find him with their instruments or eyes. If they fired blindly into the trunk of the tree, though, he and Genae would die.

Silently he cursed himself. He'd kept them hidden because he was sure the soldiers would return once they were equipped with organic rather than synthetic suits to withstand YelAsta's unique environment of reactionary chemicals and poisonous plants. And while the vegetation was impervious to hand-held laser fire, he and Genae weren't.

When he was sure they were safe for a time, he'd let the sexual fire he always felt when coming out of a dangerous situation flare and burn them both. He'd counted too much on his superior abilities of sight, sound and sensory perception. He hadn't counted on how fully Genae would engage his attention. He'd never lost all sense of his surroundings before. She was a dangerous woman.

The steps circled the tree, stopped outside the crack. Light flashed into the trunk illuminating the hollow space.

Genae flinched.

Kai tightened his arms around her and froze. His breathing and even his heart rate slowed. Move on, he silently urged. He could feel Genae's heartbeat hammering her chest until she was almost vibrating against him. He wanted to reach through the crack, grab the soldier's throat and crush it for frightening her like this. He wanted to stroke her and soothe her with words of reassurance and he couldn't do that either.

Rage burned through him as he listened to the soldier walk away. He wanted to slip from his hiding place and dispose of

each and every soldier who had threatened her life. But he wouldn't leave her alone and unprotected. He wouldn't risk his bond mate's life.

Listening to every night sound, he waited, ignoring cramped muscles and claustrophobic quarters. The night creatures alerted him to the location of their enemies. Sudden silences and screeches told him how many soldiers searched and where they searched.

He willed Genae to go to sleep, not wanting her to endure each torturous moment but she remained awake. Her body shivered, no doubt shock setting in from all the extremes of the day. Their first sexual experience hadn't helped but he didn't regret it. He'd started something he fully intended to continue.

The animal sounds around the blast site stilled. His senses tingled with an awareness of danger closing in. He listened hard, caught scattered words as the leader of the group talked to the soldiers with her.

"...weapons are ineffective. We'll ... destroyer ... trees won't be ... laser blast. No one ... survive the hell fire we'll rain down on them."

Fresh rage rolled through Kai, building on the feelings already roiling through him. Military forces were the same everywhere. Rather than expend more time they would decimate areas of the planet to ensure their success.

He waited, felt the sudden absence of their presence.

Ignoring screaming muscles he began unfolding himself from around Genae. Cursing, fighting for freedom from his

cramped position, he bent and contorted until he was standing.

He reached down with one hand, caught Genae's right arm and pulled her up against him. She gasped but it was the only sound she made. He was sure her body was as uncomfortable as his, pain shooting through muscles held in one position for far too long.

His shoulders scraping the inside of the trunk, he turned until he could look outside through the crack in the bark. He could feel Genae pressed against his back, her skin cooler than it should have been in the warm night air.

Muscles straining he shoved against the bark until the opening was wide enough for him to squeeze through. Teeth clenched he fought to hold the bark apart so Genae could slip free. He released the bark and it snapped back together with a loud popping sound.

Grabbing her hand he yanked her after him as he started running.

Behind him, Genae stumbled and swore.

He released her hand, spun, caught her around the waist and flipped her over his shoulder. He finished a three hundred and sixty degree turn and kept running.

Blinding light flashed from the sky as laser fire hit the ground. The earth under his feet shook then rolled as the pulse of energy moved out from the point of impact. Genae slipped from his shoulder as he lost his balance and fell to his knees.

A second pulse threw him to the ground before he could get up. The ground next to him cracked.

"Genae!" He shouted her name, looked around and saw her on the other side of the crack. She was on her hands and knees trying to stand up.

Another laser bolt blasted the earth.

The ground rolled throwing them both down. The crack widened into a chasm, rock and earth splitting with sharp pops and cracks and a low, ominous rumble.

* * * *

Genae watched as Kai lunged to his feet. His expression savage, he started running. Her heart stopped then started racing. She fought to her feet, barely kept her balance as another wave of energy rocked the world.

She ran, stumbled, crawled, got up and ran again. He was going to jump the chasm. She wanted to scream at him not to but saved her breath. She wouldn't let him fall. And if he did he wouldn't go alone.

* * * *

Kai saw Genae fighting gravity and unstable ground to reach the edge of the growing crevice. Fear slammed into his gut. If she was close to the edge when a pulse ripped the earth again she could go over. *What did she think she was doing?*

Fueled by fury, he raced to the edge of the crevice and leaped into the air. Another wave rippled the earth and ripped the gaping tear wider.

His heart slammed into his chest. Dread settled like a weight in his gut. He didn't have enough momentum. He wasn't going to make it.

He reached out as the ground rushed toward him. If he could catch the lip he might—

Something slammed into his side. The earth spun in a dizzying arc. He hit the side of the chasm with stunning force. Legs dangling, fighting for breath, he clawed for purchase as he started to slide over the edge.

Genae dropped the limb she'd used to knock Kai closer to the chasm's edge and threw herself on the ground. Stretching full length she caught his hands as the next wave rolled under them.

Kai's eyes met hers, pure gold and burning with anger.

"Let go," he ordered his voice breathless but harsh.

She clutched his wrists as tight as she could, dug her toes into the dirt and held on. She wanted to pull him up but couldn't. Her muscles shook. Adrenaline couldn't hold out against too many hours without sleep, constant fear, his size and a sexual encounter the likes of which she'd never known before. Tears clouded her eyes and she didn't care. She wanted to cry. More than that, she wanted to just all out wail. She didn't want to lose Kai. She didn't want to lose her own life.

Letting her head drop to the ground she fought back the laughter welling up from deep inside. She wouldn't give into it and she wouldn't give in to the weakness stalking through her. She'd hold Kai forever if she had to, or until they both went over the edge.

His weight dragged her forward as the ground shook.

Kai couldn't believe what he was seeing and experiencing. She wasn't letting go. He could feel the quiver of overexerted, overextended muscles, knew her arms must feel like they were on fire. But she didn't once loosen her grip.

Light flashed, blindingly bright. The thunderclap of exploding earth and vegetation was almost simultaneous. He felt the ground tremble and knew he had only one chance. If what he was thinking worked they would live to run. If it didn't work it wouldn't matter if they fell. The laser strikes were getting systematically closer. If they couldn't run the soldiers had won.

Breathing hard, watching as the swell started rolling toward them, he tensed his muscles, ready to move. He'd have only a split second.

The leading edge lifted Genae's feet.

They both slipped.

Surprise flickered through his mind. He hadn't realized how much of his weight she was supporting. He watched her body undulate as the earth moved under her. Bracing his elbows, he caught the leading edge as it lifted, dug in hard and lunged forward.

As the ground split wide open with a roar of tumbling boulders and dirt he threw his leg over the lip and rolled. When he stopped Genae was twisted at an odd angle, her hands still locked around his wrists.

He didn't know whether to pick her up and hold her tight or shake her. Instead he picked her up and ran.

Another blast hit. He stumbled but didn't go down. His eyes never wavered from the point in front of him he was running toward. The tectonic plate under them was unstable, already fractured in places. If he could make it through the one fissure running through the mountain of stone before them they would be on stable ground. The blasts wouldn't be able to touch them.

He didn't let thoughts of tumbled boulders slow him. If the path he was following was blocked he would find another. He would never give up, would never let the League soldiers win.

* * * *

Genae wanted to help but knew she couldn't. She held as still as she could, kept her body from swaying as much as possible. It was a nightmare of light flashes followed by moments of blindness—deafening blast after blast. The earth rolling in tortured waves.

She wanted to be furious but only felt numb. So many people had already died. Now a planet was being destroyed. How much more death and destruction would occur before it ended?

Kai ran straight toward the wall of stone. With an unerring sense of direction he picked his way through strewn rocks and boulders and over fissures and rivulets of water that shone like living silver in the moon's light.

The ship orbiting overhead was ominously silent.

Genae wanted to breathe a sigh of relief but couldn't.

Kai didn't slow down. If anything he ran faster. Did he sense something she didn't? The shadow of the mountain

swallowed them. There was no hint of light. It was as if the world around them ceased to exist. After constant rumbles and booms all Genae could hear was the sound of Kai's ragged breathing. There wasn't even the sound of his running footsteps.

"Keep your head tucked in close to my back. This will be tight."

Genae didn't have time to ask what he meant. Rock scraped her back. She felt as much as heard him grunt as he wedged them through a tight, jagged corridor of stone.

"I can walk." It was as much an offer as a statement of fact.

Kai didn't respond. If something happened and slabs of rock sheered off the steep walls above them he wanted them together. He wasn't going to tell Genae that so he kept quiet. If they could reach the side tunnel he'd discovered the week before they would be safe.

He ran his hand along the wall, even his exceptional night vision limited by the absence of light. He almost missed the tiny opening. Only the jagged unevenness of shattered rock in a unique L shape alerted him that they were there.

Carefully he slid Genae from his shoulder. He held her close as she regained her equilibrium.

"Let's not ever do that again," she grumbled, but wrapped her arms round him and held tight. How did she thank someone for risking their life to save hers?

"Run from your enemies?" he asked, frowning.

"Carry me upside down," she clarified.

He just kept frowning. "We have to keep moving." His heart raced at the feel of her breasts pressed against him.

"You think they'll do something else?" She felt sick to her stomach at the thought.

"I would if it was me." His tone was grim, his meaning chilling in its ruthlessness.

"What would you do?" She barely recognized the hoarse whisper as her own voice. She felt chilled to her soul.

"I'd destroy the planet if that's what I thought it would take."

"To kill one person you would destroy a planet?" She couldn't believe it. Didn't want to. She pulled back and looked up at him but there was nothing to see. Even if there had been light he would have been invisible.

"If the person in question was that much of a danger to me or my people? I wouldn't hesitate."

Genae's legs felt boneless. The bottom dropped out of her stomach. "If that's true you saved us for nothing."

* * * *

A tall, powerfully muscled man strode onto the command deck of the destroyer orbiting YelAsta. His hair was a thick, wild black mane around his sensual face.

"You're ready?" a squat, coarse featured man barked. He turned to glare at the taller man.

The taller man's smile was slow. "Of course."

"Your suggestion?"

"I'll find her. If she's alive there is no way she can hide from me."

"You're overconfident."

"No." The taller man's handsome features hardened into fierce lines. "I know what I'm capable of."

The shorter man nodded after only a moment's hesitation. "Go."

With a sweeping bow made mockingly low the taller man strode off the command deck.

"You should have destroyed the planet."

With casual strength the captain backhanded his second-in-command and sent him sprawling to the floor.

* * * *

On the planet's surface Kai helped Genae into the tunnel. When she had a good start he squeezed himself in behind her. For the first time he wished for clothes. There were some parts of his anatomy he didn't want scraped.

Once they were safely in the underground cavern he would seal the tunnel behind them. If the League soldiers detonated a fusion charge on the planet surface there was a slight chance they would survive. Anything else he could deal with.

He crawled after Genae, reaching out to touch her when the tunnel widened enough to allow it. His thoughts turned to what he would do with and to her when they reached the safety of the underground cavern.

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Chapter Four

Pleasure Revisited

The tunnel in places was so tight Genae felt stone scraping her from above, below and from either side. When it started to widen she felt as if a weight had been lifted off her chest.

Light shimmered and wavered along the ceiling. It was a mesmerizing blue with flashes of every other color imaginable. She wanted to stop and stare at it but Kai touched her left calf urging her on.

She kept looking up, fascinated by the light. It seemed to be alive. But what made it?

The ground dropped from under her. She fell three feet and hit the cavern floor with a loud thump and a muffled cry.

"Are you hurt?" Big hands ran over her arms and legs before moving to her torso.

"No more than I already was." Genae lay unmoving. There was no sense looking at Kai so she watched the lights instead. She'd never been so tired in her life. She felt like she'd been run through a League academy training class for a week with no sleep. Her arms and legs trembled, her muscles ached. All she wanted to do was stay right where she was and sleep for a week.

Big hands clamped around her upper arms. She glared upward, ready to fight if she had to. There was no way she was going to move again. Not anytime soon.

Instead of urging her on, Kai settled to the ground beside her and shifted her around until they were spooned together, his front to her back.

Genae breathed a sigh of relief as she wriggled against him to get more comfortable. It wasn't ideal but she wasn't going to complain. Hard arms closed around her. She could have sworn she felt the brush of lips against her temple.

"You don't think we should keep moving?" Even as the words left her mouth she wanted to bite her tongue.

"If we wake up we'll know they didn't set a fusion charge. If we don't wake up it won't matter."

Genae was horrified. A moment later she had to smile. It was actually a very prosaic way to look at the situation. And it was true. If they didn't wake up it wouldn't matter. Nothing would.

* * * *

Some time later, Kai woke, his cock so hard it ached. He'd slept soundly and woke instantly. It had been a long time since he'd slept so well. Knowing he would either wake up or he wouldn't made it easy. He hadn't had to stay vigilant, more awake than asleep.

He glanced down at Genae. She was facing him, her arms around his waist, her face pressed against his chest. He hadn't even noticed when she'd turned. He'd never slept so deeply in his life.

He lowered his head until he could press his lips against her forehead. Her breasts were flattened against his chest, her nipples barely nubs against him. They were lax with

sleep. Her legs were caught between his, the vee of her thighs pressed tight against his straining cock.

He needed her. He'd woken hard and ready for sex before. This was different. He wanted to mate. He wanted to sink into her moist heat and ride her hard until they both exploded. He wanted to feel his seed spurt into her, filling her, possibly taking root to grow inside her. He wanted to see her stomach round with his child, her breasts and nipples swollen and ready to feed their child.

His eyes narrowed and he almost groaned at the thought of her breasts engorged with milk. He wanted to feast on her. And he didn't want to wait. He wanted to do it now.

Careful not to wake her, he rolled her onto her back. Her arms fell to her sides and her head rolled to one side. Her eyelids didn't even flicker. He spread her legs making room before settling himself between her thighs.

He knew she was exhausted. Not once had she protested or complained the day before. She'd been amazing.

Leaning down, keeping his weight propped off her, he brushed her lips with his. A soft sigh feathered across his mouth like gentle wings.

He groaned as he lifted his head. His expression regretful, he studied her face, looked down at her breasts and shook his head. He wanted to plunder the depths of her mouth, to feast on her breasts. But he couldn't wait.

Propped on one forearm, he grasped his cock with his other hand. Pre-come bubbled up from the head of his cock. He leaned forward and rubbed his cock along her labial folds.

He cursed at the feel of her, soft and moist against the sensitive end of his cock. She wasn't ready for him and he was almost past caring. He wanted to thrust his cock into her. One fast lunge that would bury him in her.

Fighting the urge, swearing to himself, he studied her breasts. They were pale and tipped with pink nipples. He glanced down to where he still held his cock pressed against her and licked his lips. He wanted to taste her. She'd been receptive to his fingers on her clit. She'd gone wild when he'd flicked it with an unsheathed claw. *How much more sensitive would she be to his tongue and teeth? Would she lose control if he suckled her there?*

His hips thrust forward. His cock slid between her folds seeking entrance to her secret passage.

Teeth clenched, head thrown back, he struggled with the most primitive drive of all. The drive to mate. He knew himself well. He wouldn't be able to hold back long. Already the animal in him, never far below the surface, was straining for release.

Would she be able to handle his full passion?

He released his cock and, crouched over her, stared down at her. He wanted to ignore everything he believed and taste her now. It would be the fastest way to bring her to full arousal. Exploring her secret folds and crevices, toying with her sensitive clit, thrusting his tongue into her sweet passage. But he'd been taught and believed that such acts were the most intimate two people could share. He would have those intimacies with her but with her consent.

A low rumble issued from his throat as he forced his gaze away from the tangle of black curls around the petals of her exposed sex. He wouldn't do what he wanted but there were other ways to arouse her and he would use every one if he had to.

His gaze moved to her breasts. *Mmm. Yes. He would start there.*

His eyes narrowed and his lips curved up in a smile that would have had Genae squirming where she lay if she'd been awake to see it.

He lowered himself enough so that his chest rubbed against the tips of her breasts as he moved. He studied her mouth, her full lips slightly parted in sleep.

* * * *

Genae smiled and wriggled just a little, still caught deep in sleep. Her mind conjured images of a big, powerfully muscled, golden-eyed man. She wanted to run her fingers through his hair and find out for herself if the long, full-bodied strands were soft or coarse.

Sharp teeth tugged at her bottom lip. The hint of danger made her shiver, but she didn't move away. Instead she lifted into his touch. A tongue, warm and moist, slightly raspy, licked her lip. It didn't feel quite scratchy but there was definite roughness to it.

The image of her dream lover grew. She shivered as he looked up and met her wide-eyed stare. His expression was predatory. He reminded her of a wild animal intent on its

prey. He looked at her mouth and her lips tingled. Without conscious thought she licked her lips.

A low growl vibrated his chest against her breasts. Her breasts felt full, her nipples tight. She had a heavy, aching feeling low in her abdomen, could feel the gathering heat between her legs.

"Take me," she whispered, not aware she'd spoken aloud. She pulled up her knees, locked his lean hips between her thighs and lifted her pelvis searching for the hard length of his cock. He'd taken her once, surged into her with powerful strokes until she'd flown apart. She wanted that again. The heat, the smell, the power. Even the sound of it. She wanted it all again.

"Soon." His voice was almost threatening it was so low and harsh. "Lie still."

She froze.

That rough, wet tongue stroked down her throat from below her left ear to the vee at the base of her neck.

Her nipples tightened, her breasts grew heavier, the ache between her legs intensified. She bit her lip to hold back a moan. Until that moment she'd never thought of her neck as an erogenous zone.

"Do that again," she ordered, arching her neck.

"You liked that."

It wasn't a question but she answered anyway. "Yes."

He stroked up from the vee of her neck to her right ear, caught her earlobe in his teeth and nipped.

"Ahh." She shuddered at the unexpected feel of his teeth. She tried to press her legs together wanting to ease the

pressure building there. His hips were in the way. He lowered himself onto her. His pelvis pressed her into the ground. His turgid penis was trapped against her abdomen.

She reached up and tangled her fingers in his hair. "It's so soft," she whispered, surprised. She ran her fingers through the thick strands, her fingertips massaging his head.

A low purr rumbled from him.

She arched into him, her nipples pressing against his hairy chest. She rocked from side to side enjoying the pinched, dragging sensation as her tight nipples rubbed against him.

He pulled her arms to her sides and held her down. She could feel his chest heaving against hers, could feel his hot breath against her neck.

"Take me." It was an order and a plea. She wanted to feel his sex buried inside her, long and hard, made to pleasure her. She wanted to feel his flesh drag against hers as he pulled out, rasping hers as he pushed back inside.

He didn't answer as his head lowered to her breast.

She closed her eyes. Her body tensed for the feel of his mouth closing over her breast, sucking her nipple. He licked around her right nipple, careful not to touch the hard nub.

Her eyes flew open. She tried to fight the powerful hands holding her arms down but couldn't budge them.

"You're teasing me," she accused, glaring up at him. Her nipples throbbed, her sex burned. She needed to feel him pounding into her, against her.

He didn't respond. Turning to her left breast he repeated the rasping caress, again careful not to touch her nipple.

"Suck my nipples." Even as she shouted the order she couldn't believe she was doing it. She tried to buck against him, determined to get away. He was torturing her with his tongue.

Using his body to trap hers, he started licking her breasts. Fast flicks. Long lazy strokes. He polished each full mound until they were pink from his rough attention. Her nipples, distended and red, crowned her breasts.

Breathing fast, she endured the torment of his tongue on her breasts. He would pass close to her nipple and she would tense. He was going to take her into his mouth this time. She knew it.

But he didn't.

Her body trembled as he stroked down the center of her chest. He licked up her sides and she quivered. She didn't know when she'd woken to find her dream reality. But this was more real than she could stand.

He licked around her belly button, delved into it.

A wave of heat rolled over her, through her. Her pelvis jerked against his, searching for relief, hurting she needed him so much. Low broken moans kept escaping.

His mouth closed over her left nipple. He sucked her pebbled flesh deep into his mouth, pressed it hard against the roof of his mouth, released and pressed again.

She cried out, her nipple so tight, the external pressure of his sucking was a pain that was pure pleasure.

He turned to her right breast, nipped and suckled the tip, repeating the sequence again and again.

Genae's hands clenched into fists at her sides. She opened her eyes, not sure when she'd closed them. Kai was gone. She could feel his mouth at her breast, could feel his rough tongue rasping over her nipple as he sucked it, but she couldn't see him. She could see her nipple pulled long, crushed flat. She moaned and gasped. It was the most erotic thing she'd ever seen and it was happening to her.

Before she could say anything he caught her legs behind the knees, lifted and spread them, opening her wide.

"Ye—"

He thrust so deep so fast the air rushed from her lungs. No one had ever made her feel so helpless, penetrated her so deep. She felt invaded, stretched, too full. She arched against him, intending to throw him off. It only forced him deeper.

"It's going to be a hard ride. I can't be gentle."

Between one blink and the next he appeared. His eyes gleamed gold as he stared down at her. His face was set in grim lines. His nostrils flared with each breath he took and his teeth were bared.

His penis, huge and throbbing inside her, only fed the fire of lust he'd sparked in her. "The harder, the faster, the better," she murmured, a smile of pure temptation lifting her lips. She'd loved what he'd done to her before and she wanted to find out if they could go farther this time.

Kai's eyelids lowered so only slits of gold showed. Color darkened his face. She felt his penis grow and lengthen inside her. For a moment he held perfectly still. The animal in him ripped free of all civilized bonds. He surged over her, against

her, in her. From chest to thighs he rubbed against her as he pounded into her.

Fast.

Hard.

Her breasts shook more than bounced to the speed of his thrusts.

He forced her toward the peak, reached between them and rubbed her clitoris with one extended claw and sent her soaring.

She screamed.

He didn't let her come down.

Teeth bared, his face twisted in a ferocious mask, he refused to find his own release in her. He wanted to ride her forever. Her sheath was so tight, got tighter with each climax she experienced. She quivered under him, in response to his powerful, lightning thrusts and her own thunderous orgasms.

He started to come.

"Not yet," he growled. But he couldn't stop what was happening. He arched into her, bucked against her. He thrust deeper, pulled out and pounded back into her. Great ropes of hot, thick come jetted from him and filled her.

Spent, he collapsed on top of her.

Genae stared at the dancing lights on the ceiling. She wanted to reach up and stroke his broad back but she didn't have the strength. He'd done it again, sent her spiraling completely out of control.

He rolled them until he was on his back, his penis still a heavy presence inside her.

"Try to sleep."

"First, tell me how you become invisible."

"You need a bedtime story?"

She pinched his side. "Just tell me."

"I'm from a planet of predators. In order to survive we had to blend completely with our surroundings. Not only do we become invisible, we reflect the temperature of our surroundings."

"You're not going to tell me how you do it, are you?" She still didn't know what he was doing on the planet, either.

"No. Now sleep."

She'd get answers to her questions eventually. He didn't know how determined she could be. Burrowing her head against his chest she didn't bother to answer. Sleep was definitely not going to be a problem.

Waking without him was.

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Chapter Five

Dangers, Wonders and Sex

Genae woke slowly, a smile curving her lips as she stretched. Her muscles, inside and out, ached in delicious ways. Proper by the standards of her class or not, she wanted to make love with him again.

"You didn't wake me, Kai. I'm disappointed."

He didn't answer.

Squinting, blinking her eyes to focus, she looked around. What good it did, though, she didn't know. If he was invisible she wasn't going to see him.

"Kai!" Her voice echoed but he still didn't respond.

She sat up and for the first time really looked around the huge cavern she'd tumbled into. The lights reflected on the stalactite studded ceiling came from a large pool of water in the center of the cavern. There was a constant, repetitive plopping sound as water dripped off the stalactites into the pool.

The pool was a mesmerizing blue. Getting to her feet she walked to the edge. It was rimmed by a small ridge of white. It was almost chalky. She poked the section in front of her with her toes. It stuck.

Grimacing, she lifted her foot. Once she rinsed it off she'd go looking for Kai. And when she found him she'd explain to him that he was to tell her before he was leaving, not just disappear.

She lifted her foot over the pool. The water came alive. What looked like tiny fish, bright red and green, darted back and forth through the water. Waving her arms to keep her balance she lowered her foot toward the pool.

Hard hands clamped around her waist. Her heart stopped for one brief moment before it started to race. He lifted, turned and set her down in one continuous motion.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, clutching at his arms.

"Saving your life." His voice was harsh. His hands tightened around her waist before he released her.

"Saving my life? From what? Finger length fish?" She didn't even try to keep the bite out of her voice. He'd scared her and she didn't like it. She'd been running on adrenaline for weeks and had enjoyed the few moments when her heart was beating at a normal rate. She'd felt like she was actually getting enough oxygen. And he'd ruined it.

A rock floated up from the ground, arced through the air and hit the water. There was a sizzling sound. Green and red fish no longer than her thumb darted toward the splash from all directions. The rock quickly sank out of sight.

"All right. You can throw rocks into water." Was she supposed to be impressed? "Could you show yourself? It's a bit disconcerting talking to empty air."

The air in front of her seemed to thicken and he appeared, his expression dark. Without a word he stalked away, picked up what looked like a protein ration, spun and threw it into the pool. She had a hard time pulling her eyes from him to

follow the arc of the bar. He was truly a beautiful man. Tall, powerful, his penis mouth-wateringly erect.

The bar hit the water with a hissing sizzle. It started to dissolve but before it could disappear a cloud of green and red converged on it. White sparks flashed as the tiny creatures rubbed against each other as they tore the bar apart and consumed it.

She sank to the ground, holding her stomach. If she'd put her foot in that pool of acid, pain and her own lack of balance would have toppled her in head first. And those carnivorous creatures would have eaten her alive.

"Come with me."

She didn't care for his tone but didn't complain about it as she stood up. Her legs felt shaky as she followed him deeper into the cavern.

The blue iridescence of the acid pool faded as they walked around an outcropping of stone and the cavern took a sharp right turn. A soft roaring sound grew as they walked.

Genae stayed close to Kai. The cavern wasn't black but the light emanating from a substance veining the walls was weak at best. She followed him around a sharp left bend, gasped and stopped when the cavern opened up before her like a huge natural cathedral.

The only light was still the lines of luminescent material crisscrossing walls, ceiling and floor. Here it was brighter, the light reflecting off the surface of what looked like a small lake that filled the center of the huge cave. A waterfall rushed from the far wall churning the water below it into white foam. A constant plume of water droplets sprayed into the air. Small

waves rolled across the surface and lapped with a soft, ceaseless whisper against the shore.

But was it water?

"Is it safe to swim?"

"Yes, but you'll enjoy something else first." She looked up, her expression questioning.

Kai took her hand and led her up the side of a fifteen foot cone-shaped rise. The surface crackled underfoot. When they stepped on a part where the crust had bubbled up it made a soft crinkly sound. In the strange, almost ephemeral light the whole dome had a yellowish cast to it.

At the top white mud bubbled.

Kai started to step into it but she dragged back on his arm.

He looked at her over his shoulder. His eyebrows lifted questioningly.

"That beautiful pool out there is deadly but this bubbly white muck isn't?" Her nose wrinkled as she eyed the boiling pot with distaste.

He tugged her with him, easily overcoming her resistance. "Trust me."

Frowning, still reluctant, she stepped into the mud with him. "Is everything here the opposite of what it appears? Trees that look solid are hollow. Beautiful blue pools are acid. Pretty little fish are carnivorous. Boiling white mud is okay to step into."

"It's not boiling. The chemicals in it make it bubble."

As the mud closed over her foot her eyes widened and her mouth formed a perfect O. The mud was warm. The bubbles tickled, almost massaged her foot.

"Lay down, Genae. You need this as much as I do."

Fighting her fear of the unknown, hoping there were no little critters hiding in the bubbly white mess, she did as he said. When she was sitting down he pulled her close and cradled her head on his shoulder.

The sensation was relaxing and stimulating all at once. Her muscles loosened under the constant massaging action the popping bubbles made. At the same time her skin was innervated by the constant stimulation. Her nipples hardened. The bubbles against her sex stimulated her labia and clitoris. Desire rose quickly to a low level hum in her blood.

"You could make a fortune if you opened this as a spa." She wriggled and gasped as a bubble burst against a particularly sensitive spot between her legs.

"The liability would be prohibitive. Someone would decide that blue pool out there was too pretty to resist. When they died their family would want everything."

Genae lifted her head to scowl at him. He'd ruined the whole picture she'd been building in her head.

He didn't see it. His eyes were closed as he enjoyed himself. She settled her head back against his shoulder and missed his eyes opening, amusement gleaming in the golden depths.

Eyes closed, she concentrated on keeping her mind blank and enjoying the effects of the little mud pot. She wasn't sure how long it took but slowly the stimulation increased. She moaned, her body undulating as her skin caught fire. Her nipples pinched into tight points. Her thighs clamped together as the constant press, pop, tickle against her labia and clitoris

became too much. Almost immediately she spread her legs again opening herself to the delicious torment.

* * * *

Kai lifted himself enough to watch her through slitted eyes. Her face, so openly expressive it was a window to her every thought and emotion, went from slight frown to sensual smile in time with her shifting legs. When her hips started to undulate he couldn't wait any longer.

Sitting up he lifted her in his arms before surging to his feet.

"What—"

He stopped, lowered his mouth to hers and invaded the warm cavern with his tongue. He stroked in and out, dueled with and conquered her tongue, stroking it with his before lifting his head and licking his lips. He strode down the cone, across the cavern and into the lake.

"Rinse off," he ordered as he released her into the water. He needed her again. With a small, wicked smile she did as he said but not as he meant. She slipped beneath the surface and swam away from him. When she was sure she was well out of his reach she surfaced just enough to catch her breath and look back. He stood where she'd left him but even as she watched he disappeared.

"Ooohhh. That's not fair," she muttered. In a game of hide and seek he had her beat. Not that she wanted to get away. She didn't.

Treading water she looked around then started swimming toward the waterfall. Two strokes were all she managed. He

caught her around the waist, lifted her from the water and turned her to face him.

"Wrap your legs around my waist." She drew her knees up and locked her ankles in the small of his back. The position left her open and vulnerable to him and she loved it.

"What are you going to do now?" she taunted rocking her hips against his straining cock. Not being able to see him added to the erotic moment.

"What do you want me to do?" His tone was innocent but the hand sliding over her buttocks and between her legs to stroke her soft folds was anything but innocent.

"Mmm." She undulated against his stroking fingers. "You're putting those fingers to good use." Her eyes started to close and her head fell back. She could happily spend the rest of her life right where she was.

He started walking toward the shore. When he reached it he lowered her to the powdery surface. He settled himself beside her. His huge hands grasped her thighs and spread them apart. His heat enveloped her.

"I can put them to better use."

His words were her only warning. Two fingers thrust into her. His thumb rubbed her clit. Already stimulated to the point of climax, her body arched in response to his hard thrust and tormenting thumb. She cried out as her muscles tightened and released in a fast, hard climax.

He flipped her onto her stomach, raised her hips and tucked her knees under her. "Cross your arms and rest your head on them," he ordered in a seductive whisper.

He groaned as he caressed the exposed flesh of her sex. He played with the folds, rimmed the opening of her sheath and teased her clit.

"Do you know how beautiful you are?"

"That would mean more if you were looking at my face." She grimaced and closed her eyes as the words came out of her mouth. Why had she said that?

Kai laughed a low rumble of sound. "Your face is beautiful, too, but I'm a man and I do have my priorities. And you," he cupped his hand over her, "are beautiful."

He stroked her as he pulled his hand away. He caught his straining cock in his hand and rubbed the head along her wet folds.

"Arch your back," he instructed, his teeth gritted as he lodged his penis against the entrance to her vagina.

Shivering, she did as he asked. "How many times can you have sex in an hour?"

"I'd rather make it last an hour than race through it and try for numbers." He pushed against her testing her resistance. Forcing his cock through it, making it dilate to accept him was an act of dominance he more than enjoyed.

"You feel so big." Her voice was breathless.

"Rock back against me." He wanted her to help with his penetration. He wanted her actively involved.

Biting her lip to keep from screaming at the burning pressure, she pushed back against him. "Why don't you just push your cock into me?" she demanded, impatient to feel the rush of power as he slammed into her.

He leaned over her increasing the pressure against her opening. Sweat beaded his forehead and upper lip. It took every ounce of willpower he had not to ram into her and just keep pumping.

"Are you torturing me for a reason?" She thrust her hips back at him wanting him inside her, not pressing against her.

Kai eased back keeping the pressure against her steady and constant. He wouldn't let her take the control away from him.

"We're going to make it last an hour."

"No." She wanted the fast climb and sharp drop she'd experienced before. She wanted the wild sense of free falling as he pushed her beyond control even as her body, mind and soul resisted the loss of control. She'd never known the power of orgasm before. Now she craved it.

"Yes." He sank slowly, slowly through the ring of muscle as it opened to him. He smiled as she gasped. Her body had opened for him just as he'd known it would.

He pulsed his hips forward, short sharp movements that forced his cock deeper into her sheath and back out by microns.

"Take me," she demanded. She wriggled her hips from side to side, trying to rock back on the huge pole of his cock.

"Patience will bring you more pleasure than you can imagine," he whispered. He grasped her hips, controlling her and steadying himself.

"I want the pleasure I've already known." She tried to push up from the ground. If she couldn't have him the way she wanted then he couldn't have her at all.

A large hand closed over the back of her neck holding her down. "This time we do it my way. Next time you can have whatever you want."

Her eyes narrowed as she tried to consider what he'd said. The huge head of his cock lodged at the entrance of her channel, though, was about to drive her insane.

"Anything I want?"

"Anything."

She relaxed back into the position he'd directed her to take. "This time is yours," she conceded grumpily.

He didn't respond, just started the thrust-withdrawal in her sheath again.

Genae panted for breath as his cock slid back and forth inside her in unbelievably tiny increments, making her burn. She couldn't help but rock back against him.

She lost all track of time as he rubbed deeper in, pulled slightly back. She could hear him breathing, could feel the puffs of hot breath on her back. Sweat dripped from him down onto her but he didn't increase the maddening in-and-back slide.

"Please," she begged. "Fuck me."

"I am," he grunted.

"Faster. Harder. As deep as you can go."

"Trust me."

She buried her head against her arms and bit her lip. Her nipples felt like someone was pinching them, they were so hard and tight. She was so wet his movements in her, tiny as they were, made a wet sucking sound.

When he was fully embedded in her he stopped. Hanging over her, his muscles corded with the strain of restraining himself, he fought for breath and control. He wanted her to fly so high with him no other male of any species could pose a threat. He wanted her addicted to sex with him. Until emotional bonds could be forged he wanted her chained to him through sex.

He slowly pulled back until only the head of his cock was in her.

Her hips bucked up against him.

"Now." Her demand sounded ragged.

He slid back into her just as slowly.

Her inner flesh was swollen from the constant friction of his penetration. His cock felt huge. The sensation of him pushing into her made her sheath clench. Uncontrollable tremors shook her.

He pulled out, pushed back in, the motion slightly faster.

"Yes. Faster." She rocked back as he thrust forward, rocked forward as he pulled back. She needed him fast and hard. Now.

He didn't say anything but kept his invasion-retreat at a moderate pace. The pressure building in him was like nothing he'd ever felt before.

Genae hung at the edge of the precipice. Her body quaked with pre-orgasmic tremors. Each breath was a gasp for air. She shuddered with each slide of his flesh in hers. Her whole body throbbed with the need for release.

"Please," she begged, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Please just fuck me."

Kai's control broke. He surged into her, his hips a wild piston ramming him deeper and deeper, faster with each thrust.

Genae screamed as he slammed into her, her orgasm cresting and breaking over a peak she'd never thought to climb. Each hard thrust impacted through her whole body, sent her spiraling farther and farther out of control until she was pure sensation. A living ember created for him, shaped by him.

* * * *

Kai wanted it to last forever. The milking, almost sucking sensation as her sheath, already tight, clenched around him. He fought the building pressure of his own release. He wanted to push her higher, to steal every thought not centered on him and this.

As he thrust forward his body took control.

"No," he yelled the protest as he came, a volcanic eruption he couldn't control.

She froze as he jerked and bucked against her, into her. His hot seed burned against abraded flesh. White heat enveloped her. Caught in the heart of lightning's strike she touched the heavens and shattered.

Kai emptied himself into her. The ferocity of his release was stunning. He'd thought he was binding her to him, but the opposite was true as well. He collapsed on top of her, too spent to move. If he hadn't felt her breathing he would have feared he killed her, she was so still.

They both dozed. When Kai woke he lifted Genae into his arms and carried her into the gently lapping water.

"Did it last an hour?" she asked, her voice dazed.

"A millennium at least." He lowered her into the water.

She winced as her sex came into contact with the gentle waves. Her arms wrapped around his neck, she tried to lift herself out of the warm waves.

"You need to soak for a few minutes." He sank into the water, taking her with him. He wanted her soothed, not sore.

"It hurts," she growled, trying to push away from him. He was the one who had caused the problem in the first place.

One arm wrapped around her waist, he reached between her legs with the other. He rubbed the petals of her sex, soothing and washing her. She writhed and fought to get free, pushed against his chest and kicked at him.

"Blast you, that hurts." She glared up at him. She felt raw. His touch stung. She started hitting his chest. He didn't release her, seemed impervious to her blows. She wanted to see him, wanted to know if she had any effect on him at all.

"Let me go," she demanded.

He didn't respond, just kept stroking the flesh between her legs until the stinging eased and she settled against him.

"Better?"

"Yes," she responded reluctantly, wanting to yell no.

Warm lips pressed against her forehead. "We need to sleep. We'll have to travel fast when we leave the cavern. Since the soldiers haven't destroyed this part of the planet they must have sent hunters to track us. The sooner we get to my ship the better it will be for us."

"You don't think they left?" She knew they hadn't but she wanted to hear that they had. She wanted to be safe.

"I know they haven't."

She sobered as reality crashed into the dream she'd been living. She let her head drop against his broad shoulder and just hung on as he strode out of the water. "Next time, lie to me."

With infinite care he laid her on the powdery earth. He brushed her hair back from her face, kissed her eyes, nose and finally her lips. It was a gentle sharing, his lips soothing rather than arousing. When he lifted his head her eyes were bright with tears. "There will be truth between us, always." His tone was hard, demanded her agreement.

She nodded but inside she knew it was a lie. She had secrets she would never share. And once they left the planet she would do everything in her power to complete the mission she'd set for herself. And if that meant using him that's what she would do.

Her mind understood what she had to do but her heart didn't. She buried her face against his chest and let the tears fall as she savored the security of his arms around her. She hadn't felt safe and protected in a long, *long* time.

Kai held her, felt her body shake as she cried. He didn't question her, just held her until the storm was over and she slept in his arms. When they reached his ship would be soon enough to find out what she was hiding and why League soldiers were chasing her.

He was sure she was thinking of running from him but she wouldn't get very far. He had claimed her and he would never

let her go. When she realized that it would be easier for both of them. Whatever she faced he would face with her. He fell asleep, certain in his ability to keep her safe.

* * * *

The transport pod, barely big enough for one man, settled on the surface of YelAsta. The man inside shoved the capsule door open and squeezed out of the tiny enclosure. He looked around, shedding his clothes as the pod started to smoke and burn. As he strode away from the transport he disappeared.

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Chapter Six

Exploring Him

Genae woke slowly, stretched languidly. She felt wonderfully achy, deliciously tender. She arched her back and smiled as the big hand over her right breast tightened. She looked down and saw the imprint of individual fingers on her breast as it was squeezed, the hand doing it invisible.

Her womb clenched, and moisture started to flow. Her nipples tightened and their color darkened from pink to rose.

They needed to leave for his ship. She knew that better than anyone. What she was doing was more important than any two people's lives. It had the potential to affect every planet in the universe for generations.

Her heart thumped hard in her chest at the thought. There were generations of different species who would never be born if the current League President had his way.

What about Kai? Was his race one of those slated for annihilation?

She swallowed hard as bile burned the back of her throat. She could count how long she'd known him in hours but she couldn't imagine a universe where he and other spectacular beings like him didn't exist.

She didn't even know what his species was, their name or their characteristics. Were they all like Kai?

She shivered. A whole planet of men like Kai. She could sell flights to the planet and make more credits than she and

all her descendents could spend. There wasn't a woman alive who wouldn't want sex with Kai if they knew what it was like.

A wave of heat washed over her body. Already aware of everywhere her body touched Kai's, she was suddenly hyperaware. It felt like his heat burned into her.

Lying against him she felt tiny, her shoulders and back pressed against his chest. His arm lying over her side was heavy with muscle. His hand flexed around her breast again. She felt the prick of claws, like a cat when it kneaded a cushion.

Her breath caught and her heart started to race. Her lips thinned as new resolve settled like a weight in her stomach. She wouldn't let the President do it. She *would* stop him.

She closed her eyes and dragged in a deep breath. She'd given up any hope of succeeding when laser fire had downed her ship.

Until Kai showed up.

She rubbed herself back against him, smiled when his penis rose to her lure. He kneaded her breast with his claws.

He didn't know the meaning of the words give up. He'd jumped the growing chasm when she'd been on the other side. He'd carried her when it would have been hard enough to run and save himself. He was sure the League soldiers would follow them and he was still determined to help her, determined to get off the planet. Determined to win.

Slowly, carefully, hoping he didn't wake up, she turned in his arms. His arms tightened around her. The one her head rested on came up around her, too. He dragged her to his chest, held her tight. She stilled, waited until he relaxed and

tried again. She didn't want him to wake up before she started.

It took three attempts before she was facing him. Each time his arms tightened around her tingles coursed through her. She knew he was asleep but it felt like he wanted her close. It felt like he cared.

His chest was like granite against her breasts, the hair covering it coarse against her skin. His stomach felt ridged the muscles were so tight and prominent. He was made for her softer curves to mold to.

She was sure she looked smug. And why shouldn't she? She rubbed her toes against his legs. They stretched out farther than she could touch. Everything about the man was hard. At the moment even his cock.

A dreamy smile lit her face as she undulated her hips against his straining penis. She'd enjoyed sex before but she'd never experienced anything like him. He took pleasure to a whole new realm. If they made it off the planet alive, if she survived delivering the information and wasn't sentenced to death for her part in what had happened, the only mate she would want was Kai. He'd ruined her for anyone else.

Her smile grew and she shook her head. There were a whole lot of ifs between where she was and the end of the whole League President issue. What was amazing was that she could even consider being alive and allowed to remain that way at the end of it. If there was a way, she would find it.

She pressed closer to Kai, savored the hard ridge of his cock against her abdomen. When they got off the planet she

would have to get away from him. She couldn't allow him to finish the journey with her. The end was too uncertain. He'd already risked his life time and again for her. She wouldn't let him keep doing it. She wouldn't tell him why it was happening. If his sympathies lay with the President, she wouldn't make him choose between them.

A low grumble rumbled from deep in his chest. He rolled to his back, half rolling her with him. Against her hip, his morning hard-on was a blatant invitation.

Her mouth watered as she stared at where he lay, wishing with everything in her that she could see him, asleep yet aroused and ready. She'd never wanted oral sex before. Either to perform it or have it performed on her. It had always seemed too ... personal. Too ... intimate.

But now, she wanted everything she could have with him.

Her heart in her throat, her blood racing through her veins, she moved down his body. They needed to leave, to get to his ship before whoever was looking for them found them. But he'd said the next time was hers and this could well be their last time together. Wise or not, she was going to take it.

She bumped into his cock with her chin. Her eyes closed as she rubbed the soft underside of her chin against the velvety head of his penis. It had a knobby quality to it that was different and exciting. She wanted to explore every nuance and texture with her tongue.

* * * *

Kai woke to the feel of something soft rubbing against his straining cock. He opened his eyes to see Genae caressing him with her chin, her eyes closed, a half smile lifting her lips.

The need to grab her and devour her whole was instantaneous. Only his own indomitable will kept him from acting on overwhelming instinct. What would she do next?

Barely breathing, he waited and watched. She seemed lost in what she was doing. She held her breasts together, his cock caught between them as she moved slowly up and down. The head of his cock disappeared between her breasts only to re-emerge below her chin. Her head was thrown back, her lips slightly parted.

Take me, he silently urged. *Open your mouth and take me inside.*

His hips moved of their own volition, his cock riding along her jaw. The most intimate act two beings could share, something he'd never experienced with anyone else. He'd never thought she would be the one to initiate it. Would she take him inside?

* * * *

Genae jumped when his cock thrust against her. *Was he awake? Why wasn't he visible? She wanted to see him.*

He didn't move again.

Slowly, hesitantly, she knelt over him. She ran one hand over his penis. It was so tight it was almost upright against his abdomen. She grasped him in one hand and lifted the great stalk out from his body. It somehow urged her to stroke and squeeze and pull and she didn't resist.

Heat grew between her legs. She was wet and ready. She wanted to settle herself over him, to ride him. Before she did that, though, she wanted to taste him.

* * * *

Kai felt like he was going to explode. Her hand squeezed and pumped his cock to perfection. Where had she learned to manipulate a cock so expertly?

Rage boiled through him. He pushed the thought away and concentrated on her small hand moving up and down his cock. *Suck me!* he silently shouted. *Take me in your mouth, now!*

Her tongue slipped out of her mouth and stroked over her lips, leaving them wet and shiny. He bit back a violent curse, couldn't stop the evidence of his response from bubbling up from the root of his cock. It shone white and wet, seemingly suspended in midair. Would it disgust her?

She leaned forward, her breasts swaying with the move. Her mouth opened.

His breath stopped. Yes, he urged. *Take me.*

Her tongue poked out, small and pink.

His heart slammed into his chest shaking him. *Come on, Genae. Take me.* She lowered her head a fraction of an inch.

"Take me." His voice was hoarse, his cock straining against her hold. He wanted to feel her tongue on him.

"All you had to do was ask," she whispered. She could see the evidence of his arousal floating above her hand. But she could feel him, his pulse throbbing in the rampant flesh she

held. She would never have guessed how much exciting him would make her burn.

She lowered her head the last centimeter. She wanted to taste life, to taste him. Her tongue swirled over the head of his cock. She curled it around the throbbing end, lapped at the pulsing vein running the length of the underside.

"Yes. Fucking, yes." His hips arched off the ground. His pulse thundered in his ears.

"You like that." She licked his shaft between each word, wanted to drive him as wild as she was driving herself. His hips leapt up with each touch of her tongue. He wanted her to take him into the dark cavern of her mouth. He wanted to feel her suck him, to hear the wet slurping sound as she did it. But he wouldn't force her. It had to be her choice.

"Show me how much you want me," he entreated.

Lifting her head from the carnal feast of his flesh, she gasped in a breath. He wasn't begging, but it wasn't an order either. It was a statement of need. Tenderness welled inside her, leaving her weak, making her feel strong. He was the most physically able man she'd ever met, yet he needed her.

She looked at her hand suspended in mid-air. Fresh evidence of his need, milky-white, bubbled up. He tasted salty and if it was possible to taste a musky scent, he tasted of that, too.

"I want you," she murmured, wishing all over again that she could see him. She wanted to see his expression. Would his eyes be heavy-lidded? Was his face flushed?

She cupped his balls in one hand, testing their weight as she ran her other hand up and down his engorged length. He

was so big, so alive in her hand. And in every way a woman could want a man, she wanted him.

"Tell me what you like." She opened her mouth wide and lowered it toward the visible evidence of his need. Her womb clenched. Her own desire left her wet and aching.

His teeth gritted, Kai kept his hips down as her mouth lowered over him.

Her tongue stroked the end of his cock.

He closed his eyes, swore from between clenched teeth and shook where he lay. He wouldn't thrust his cock into her mouth, but he wanted to. And when she was done exploring him it would be his turn to explore her.

Her breath skimmed the length of his cock.

He looked up, gasped as her lips surrounded his left ball, her tongue playing with it.

He swore. His hands clenched into fists.

She moved to the other side. Her tongue vibrating against him as she hummed low in her throat.

"Fuck!" His muscles locked tight. He wanted to grab her hair, pull her mouth over him and shove his cock deep. She was killing him.

Her mouth closed over him, barely contained the head and first two inches of his shaft.

His hips bucked against her. Come erupted from him. In moments it was over. His expression grim, Kai surged to his feet, lifted Genae in his arms and strode into the water. He submerged them both, erasing the evidence of his loss of control.

Genae struggled in his arms. She broke the surface of the water choking and swiping at him.

"What the hell was that all about?" she demanded. Whatever she'd done wrong it wasn't worth drowning her for it.

"I didn't control myself." His tone was pure self-disgust.

"So this," she waved her hand at the water, "was all because you were frustrated because you couldn't stop yourself from coming?" She stared up at where she thought he was. She wasn't sure whether to be incredulous or absolutely furious.

Hard arms wrapped around her from behind. "I'm sorry."

How had he moved without even a ripple? She shook her head and pushed the thought away. She laid her hands over his arms where they circled her waist and dug her nails in.

He jerked away. "Why did you do that?"

She sloshed through the water angry enough she wanted to hit him or kick him or bite him.

"What did you think I was trying to do?" she demanded, for the first time missing her clothes in a big way. It was hard to be taken seriously when your chest was heaving with each breath you took. "Do you think I started that whole thing thinking—if I take his penis in my mouth will he show me just how much control he has? I wonder if he can resist me?"

She shook her head and turned back to glare at him. "I wanted you to lose control. I wanted you to respond to me and what I was doing. I wanted to feel like I was irresistible, even for a minute." She swallowed hard, furious that tears

were so near the surface. He'd managed to completely ruin everything. "Don't we have to get moving?"

He caught her up from behind, held her against his chest. "Lose control. Respond. Irresistible." He repeated the important parts of her ranting.

She tried to pry his arms loose but it was like fighting the destroyer with her transport, impossible. She kicked back at his legs but he seemed impervious to her blows. "Fighting while you're invisible is the coward's way out," she taunted wanting him as angry and frustrated as she was.

Suddenly, his arms were visible around her. "You accomplished your goals."

She jerked her head away from the voice in her right ear. "What are you talking about?"

His warm lips sipped at her neck. "I responded." He nipped the base of her throat, swirled his tongue over the sting. "I lost control." He let her feet settle on the ground. His hands stroked up until he held both her breasts. He squeezed and kneaded the full globes. He caught her nipples between thumb and forefingers and squeezed, rolled and tugged.

Genae straightened against him. She wrapped her hands around his wrists but couldn't force herself to push him away. Need arrowed from her nipples to between her legs and set fire to desire that had never been satisfied.

"You're irresistible." One breast was freed. He caught her chin in his hand and turned her head until his mouth could close over hers.

He didn't give her a chance to do anything but respond. His tongue pushed between her lips, found hers and initiated

a fast thrust, parry, retreat. He repeated the sequence, mating with her mouth, stealing her breath and making her heart race.

When he lifted his head all she could do was gape up at him.

His expression was intent, yet there was a tenderness there she'd never seen before. A warm weight settled in her chest. She felt like the center of the universe when he looked at her like that.

He turned her in his arms, leaned down to rest his forehead against hers. "I'm sorry."

Her heart swelled. Tears rose in her eyes. She blinked to keep them back, tried to smile as she looked into his golden eyes. "If I had forever I just might want to spend it with you," she whispered. He was strong and fierce yet tender and gentle. He was perfect.

"I don't know about forever but I'll take the rest of your life."

She smiled but couldn't keep the tears from falling. "You'll have to settle for today."

"You don't believe we can have forever, do you?" He sounded more intrigued than upset.

She closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Open your eyes and look at me."

She did as he said, refused to be a coward and hide from him or herself.

"We made it this far against incredible odds, didn't we?"

She nodded and swallowed hard.

"Why can't you believe we would survive anything the League soldiers could send at us? Can't you trust me?"

Feeling his arms around her, so strong and supportive, looking into his eyes, being enveloped in his confidence, she knew he believed everything he said. "How can you be so certain?" She wanted to believe. She wanted to be able to plan a future with him even if they turned out to be only daydreams.

"I have abilities and resources your League soldiers have no knowledge of. Secrets known only to my own people. Trust me."

She dragged in a deep, shuddering breath. "I do trust you." And she did. If there was a way off YelAsta, a way to get away from the destroyer and reach the people she needed to talk to, Kai was the one who would find it.

A smile, slow and sweet, lit his face. "I can see the doubts in your eyes, but I see your belief in me, too. It's not misplaced."

She threw her arms around his neck and held tight. Emotions swirled inside her, huge and multihued. Hope. Tinges of fear.

"It's my turn." He set her a little away from him, let his gaze travel over her from her feet, up her long legs to the dark triangle of hair that hid her sex. He studied her tiny waist, her full breasts, her red lips. She was feminine perfection and he was going to sample every inch of her.

"Your turn to what?" She shifted, half nervous yet fully aroused. Just his look made her nipples pucker and wet heat gather between her legs.

"To make you respond." His hands circled her waist. He pulled her close, lowered his mouth to hers and licked her full lips.

"To make you lose control." He took one red nipple between his teeth and tugged.

She gasped and arched up to him.

He rewarded her by laving the swollen tip with his tongue.

She shook with an instant, overwhelming need. Her body was already so attuned to his she craved him.

"I want you to find me irresistible."

She opened her mouth, but never got to say she already did. His mouth closed over hers. His tongue dove into and retreated from the dark cavern of her mouth. He lifted her against him, carried her to the shore and laid her down. He settled on top of her, rubbed himself against her as he continued to stroke in and out of her mouth.

He raised his head, still rubbing against her. Her nipples against his chest. His cock against her abdomen. His expression was fierce, almost frightening.

"I claim you as my own." His voice was deep and resonant. "You don't understand yet what that means, but you will."

She opened her mouth, but all that emerged was a broken moan as he latched on to her right nipple and sucked her deep.

Her eyes closed and she arched up, pulled by the incredible pressure of his mouth. Later would be soon enough to find out what he meant.

He crushed the tight nub against the roof of his mouth with his agile tongue, rolled and sucked it deeper all at once.

She cried out. Her hips jerked. *Much later*. The words spiraled through her mind, but she had no idea what they meant.

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Chapter Seven

The Race is On

Kai lifted his head and studied the tip of her breast. It was swollen, redder and puffier than its twin. He licked his lips and flexed his fingers, his claws distending just enough to make indentations in her skin.

She flinched. Her breath broke. Her eyes, already half-lidded, closed.

He loved the sound. Loved the flush of desire that mantled her cheeks, chest and breasts. A low rumble, almost a growl, vibrated his chest. His muscles tensed and bulged. The beast broke free of its bonds.

He caught her left nipple in his teeth, nipped and tugged, worrying the small nub until Genae's fingers tangled in his hair and pulled.

"Enough," she cried.

He looked up, something savage staring at her from the golden eyes.

"Kai?" Fear and excitement mixed like wine in her blood. It was intoxicating. He growled. His claws bit into her hips, a warning to be still.

Her chest heaved, drawing his eyes.

He licked his lips, lunged and enveloped her right breast with his mouth. He sucked hard, crushed the already tender flesh of her nipple to the roof of his mouth, rasped and rolled it with his tongue.

Her scent, hot and feminine, was a musk that stole the last vestiges of civility from him. He lifted his head from her breast, reluctant to give up his prize but wanting to taste her more. He lifted his head, breathed deep, drawing the perfume of her desire into his lungs. The hint of fear was a spice that touched off explosions in his already heated blood.

Genae didn't move, tried not to breathe. Kai crouched over her, a wild animal claiming his prey. His eyes shone gold, his nostrils flared. She had wanted him since he'd taken her when they'd hidden in the tree. She wanted him more, now. She was wet with her need.

"Kai." She said his name quietly. She wanted to catch his attention, not incite a riot. He ignored her. His gaze moved from her breasts down her abdomen to the juncture at the top of her thighs. He pulled her legs up, bending her knees then pushed them apart, then farther apart.

Genae lay before him, completely exposed, completely open. She wriggled a little, a moan choked in her throat. Every moment with him created a memory she would treasure.

Kai saw her move. His primitive instincts saw an attempted escape. He caught her thighs in his powerful hands. Eyes narrowed, he flexed his claws and bared his teeth.

Genae stilled, fine tremors shaking her.

Finally, satisfied he'd quelled her bid for freedom, Kai looked back at the treasure he'd exposed. Raking his claws lightly over her inner thighs, he extended his right index claw completely. Carefully, his expression intent, he flicked the shiny folds.

Her breath caught and he smiled.

He ran the blunt curve of his claw between her folds to the top of her sex. The tiny nub of flesh peeked out at him. He circled it with the point of his claw before lightly, gently, raking the nub itself.

Genae's muscles clenched. As if she were being tortured her whole body jerked and trembled. She had no control. She didn't want it to stop.

It had to stop.

She was flying.

She wouldn't survive.

Kai attacked, driven wild by the scent of the sexual dew spilling from her. He was on her, licking and laving, his tongue pushing into her as he searched out her essence. His tongue rough, he lapped at the soft petals of her sex. His tongue swirled around her slit. He growled and licked faster as her body arched off the ground, choked cries breaking from her.

Even if the thought had entered his mind he couldn't have stopped himself. He had to have her, had to taste her, had to make her his. He closed his mouth over her vulva and sucked. She tasted like nectar. Sweet and wet. He pushed his tongue into her cunt and groaned when she cried out. He'd never had such intimacy with a woman. He would never be happy to have anything less again.

He licked the swollen folds of her sex. She shivered and undulated in time to his strokes. *She was perfect. Would she react as strongly to his tongue on her clit as she did to his finger?*

Savoring her taste, her secret scent, he teased her with his stiffened tongue. He stroked upward until he reached the apex of her sex. He touched her clit with just the tip of his tongue.

Genae quivered, her body shaking. She liked it. And so did he.

A secret smile lifted his lips as he pulled back just enough to see the perfect pearl of her clit. It was swollen, peeking from the folds that usually hid it. He lowered his head, closed his lips around the small knot of flesh and sucked.

Genae screamed. Her body shook. Her eyes rolled back but she didn't lose consciousness. She couldn't breathe. Only one thought echoed in her head. She was going to die at his mouth and love it.

Growling, almost snarling, his cock thumping against his abdomen, Kai could no longer ignore his own powerful need. He had to be inside her now. He groaned at the thought of shoving his engorged manhood through her small entrance, her tight sheath gloving him, squeezing him until he was mad.

He pulled back and flipped her onto her stomach. He lifted her to her hands and knees, biting her neck in warning when her shaking limbs started to buckle. All he knew was she was trying to get away and he would never allow that. Never.

He lifted her, spreading her legs. She wouldn't block his entrance. She was his. Kneeling behind her, he positioned his cock against the opening of her vagina.

He dropped over her. His frame dwarfed hers. Using his whole body he surged forward, speared into her. His thighs

and pelvis slapped against her, sent her body rocking forward with the powerful thrust.

He groaned as her channel squeezed him from head to root. He was lodged in her tight sheath, the head of his cock reaching to her womb.

His woman.

"Mine," he growled, the sound almost a roar against her exposed neck. He plunged in and out of her. Wild. Uncontrollable.

Her breath gone, she couldn't respond. She braced her arms against the power of his body slamming into hers.

He was so big, plundered so deep, pulled almost out. The rough texture of his cock rasped her inner walls, the stimulation constant. She gasped in a breath only to have it forced from her lungs as he surged into her, deep into her belly.

His teeth closed on the cord of muscle joining her shoulder and neck. His hips pistoned against her, rocked her.

Heat flushed her rocking body. Her breasts swung, almost vibrated to the furious motion of his flesh moving in her. Her vagina clenched, trying to hold him inside. He surged upright, kneeling behind her. His fingers bit into her hips, holding her as his cock slid in and out of her, a blur of motion.

He sank deep, his hips bucking against her as he ejaculated, his seed filling her. Head thrown back, teeth bared, he roared. The primitive sound echoed through the cavern.

Finally spent, he dropped over her again, swaying back and forth, rubbing himself against her as the motion tugged his spent penis where it was still lodged in her swollen tissue.

Genae didn't know what was holding her up. Her elbows were locked and she wasn't sure they would ever bend again. Her body trembled, her final climax still quaking through her.

"If I don't lie down I'm going to fall down," she whispered hoarsely as she started to crawl forward.

One of Kai's arms circled her waist holding her where she was. His teeth closed over her neck once more, a clear warning not to move.

"Kai. I'm going to lie down." She made her tone sharp. If she didn't lie down she was going to end up on her face.

"No." The low rumble was barely recognizable as a word. The arm around her waist tightened. His rough tongue licked the nape of her neck.

She shivered. Her nipples hardened as she tightened around his flaccid cock lying heavy inside her. Her arms gave out. She collapsed onto the sand, winced as his cock was tugged free of her swollen channel.

Kai threw himself down beside her. He pulled her legs up around his hips and lodged his pelvis tight against her sex. He wrapped his arms around her and tucked her head under his chin.

Something nagged at the back of his mind. He felt the need to move, to drag her with him to his ship, but the primitive side of his brain was still in control. The thought wouldn't surface.

As Genae's breath teased his chest he started to calm, though his senses remained hyper-alert. He'd found his mate and would defend her against anyone and anything.

He shifted until her upper leg was caught between his. Then, with his arms locked around her he finally succumbed to much needed sleep.

* * * *

The tracker studied the decimated landscape. Charred earth obscured any scent he might have picked up. Invisible to any watching eyes he lifted his head and studied the terrain. A wall of stone rose toward the sky to the east. In every other direction as far as the eye could see there was nothing but blackened craters. The earth had splintered under the ferocious attack of the destroyer circling above.

He turned his gaze back toward the mountain of stone. If the woman and whoever had helped her were alive that was where they would be. All his senses attuned, he loped toward the mountain. Soon he would have his prey.

His smile would have made anyone who saw it cringe.

* * * *

Kai woke instantly, remembered everything. He eased his hold on the small, slender woman in his arms. Careful not to wake her, he rolled her onto her back.

There were dark circles under her eyes. Her cheeks looked hollow. The left side of her neck at the base was bruised where he'd bitten her. He studied her breasts, her nipples soft

but still puffy. There were pinprick marks on both her hips where his claws had pierced her flesh.

His touch gentle, he pushed her legs apart until he could see her sex. She was swollen and red. His lips thinned and his jaw clenched. He wanted to taste her again, to fuck her hard, harder than he already had.

Closing his eyes he shook his head. If he didn't keep a clear head neither of them would survive the trip to his ship. YelAsta was not a planet that would allow the unwary or unfocused to survive.

And there would be someone on their trail. They were lucky they hadn't already been discovered. He opened his eyes and focused on her swollen sex. They were going to have to move fast and as swollen and tender as she looked and no doubt was she wouldn't find moving, let alone moving fast and silent, easy.

Every instinct in his being screamed at him to pick her up and run. But it was his fault she was in the condition she was. The cool water would soothe her.

"Genae." He smoothed her hair back from her face, kept his tone quiet.

Her lashes fluttered against her cheeks before rising. "Do you sell tickets to your planet?"

He frowned, her husky words making no sense. "Tickets?"

"If the other males of your world have sex like you do you could make your whole planet rich selling tickets."

Kai frowned, not amused by her words. "We are not performers or sex-workers for sale. We are a race of warriors."

Genae grinned unrepentantly. She stretched, wincing as different body parts protested the move. Before she could blink she found herself swept up in Kai's arms. As he strode into the water and set her on her feet she blinked.

"I think we've done this before."

He insinuated a hand between her thighs and started stroking her sex. She winced at the sting but didn't try to get away. She held on to his biceps, looked up and met his intent golden stare. "I think we've done this before, too."

He didn't respond, just kept stroking her under the water until she relaxed and her muscles loosened.

"We have to leave. We'll be traveling fast and the terrain is rough in spots, dangerous in many. You have to do what I say the moment I tell you."

She nodded and shrugged. "Okay."

"No." He framed her face with his hands and stared into her eyes. "This is nothing to be flippant about. Your life and mine depend on how well you follow my orders."

Genae wrapped her hands around his wrists and smiled up at him. It felt like her heart was swelling in her chest there was so much emotion growing inside her.

"Kai, I'll do exactly what you say the moment you say it, I swear. I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for you. I wouldn't have experienced the best sex of my life if it wasn't for you."

"When I crashed on this planet I was ready to give up. You changed that. You gave me hope that I could escape and accomplish what I need to. I'm not going to quit trusting you now."

A muscle jumped in Kai's jaw. He knew she meant what she said. Only time would prove how much she trusted him and how much he could trust her. "Are you ready?"

She nodded. He leaned down, pressed his lips to hers in a hard kiss. When he straightened his gaze was still sharp but desire was a fire in the depths of his eyes.

"When we reach my ship I want an explanation. I'll fight these soldiers for you but I want to know why. In order to keep you safe I have to know the reason you're in danger."

Genae took a deep breath. He had a right to know everything. Slowly, she nodded. "When we reach your ship I'll tell you the whole story."

He nodded, caught her hand and tugged her out of the water behind him. They had a long distance to travel and there was nothing he could do to make it easier for her. He led the way around the pool and through a maze of stalagmites. The exit was a long, narrow tunnel. He had to stoop in spots and in others squeeze through sideways but none of it was as small and closed in as the entrance had been.

Genae started blinking before they ever reached the outside. Sunlight filtered into the tunnel, blindingly bright after the near dark of the cavern.

Kai stopped at the entrance and pulled her close before pushing her against the stone wall behind his back. His eyes narrowed against the brilliant morning sun, he studied the terrain before them. Loose stone tumbled from the entrance of the tunnel to a narrow valley. On the other side virgin

timber stretched as far as the eye could see. Trees with ghostly gray-white bark and leaves of silver-green.

He stepped out of the cavern far enough to study the small valley with its ribbon of shining water. Turning he looked up the sheer cliff above them before studying the walls to either side.

Stepping back into the tunnel he took Genae's hand and led her out. "Watch your step," he cautioned. "The rock is loose and slides easily."

Genae didn't waste breath answering, just nodded and held tight to his hand. She really wanted clothes but knew she wasn't getting any. He moved silently and steadily down the loose rubble. Her foot came down hard on a pointed rock. She bit her lip to keep from crying out and kept following. She wasn't as surefooted or as quiet as he was, but she wasn't going to slow him down. It seemed forever before they reached the bottom. At the base he turned and looked at Genae, pride shining in his eyes.

"Not a bad start, *avaiya*."

"*Avaiya*?"

"My woman. My mate." He brushed his lips over her forehead, never once releasing her hand. She felt a warm glow envelop her as her hand caught in his. She followed him into the forest. She wasn't going to let him go when they got back to civilization. He wasn't the only one who could stake a claim.

* * * *

Paladin's Pride (Collection)
by Angelina Evans

From atop the cliff the hunter watched with a savage mix of satisfaction and disappointment as the two disappeared into the trees. He would win, but he'd hoped for more of a challenge. He leapt from boulder to boulder down the cliff, not making a sound. An invisible predator on the trail of easy prey.

* * * *

Eyes narrowed, Kai looked over his shoulder as he led Genae into the forest. He couldn't see the man who pursued them, but he didn't have to. He sensed him. It was one of his own kind.

Hopefully the other VanDai was a worthy opponent. It would add pleasure to the satisfaction he would feel when he brought the swift, final justice of their people to the traitor who had sold himself to the League.

He would win, but the stakes were more interesting.

A feral smile spread across his face as he laid a trail their pursuer wouldn't be able to miss.

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Paladin's Pride 2: His By Rite

Angelina Evans

A woman worth fighting for...

Kai, a VanDai warrior, has found the woman he would claim as his mate. To keep her he will fight a League hunter sent to kill her, face down a League General determined to destroy her, and overcome his own prejudice when he finds out who she is.

Secrets shared, secrets kept.

Genae is willing to share everything with Kai. The information she stole. Who she is, what she's doing. There is one thing, though, she can't share, one secret she must keep if she is going to save Kai's life.

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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 looped 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.

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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.

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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?

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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.

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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 Mriln 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.*

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Paladin's Pride 3: Her Forever Knight

Angelina Evans

Her life for his...

Genae is willing to share every secret with Kai except one. Her life is 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, only the unexpected intervention of a mysterious healer can make things right.

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Prologue

Paladin—Hidden Dangers

Paladin lay on his great bed. He was naked, his cock thrusting like a lance into the air.

"You're dangerous tonight," Moulina purred, her eyes narrowed on his long, thick shaft. She licked her lips and he felt it in his gut. He wanted that rough, feline tongue licking him, working him as she sucked him.

She crawled onto the bed, her thick coppery mane tumbling in curling waves around her face and down to her shoulders. Knees spread, she sat back on her heels and cupped her breasts, her claws fully extended and kneading the slopes of her full mounds.

She licked her lips again and a pearly drop of liquid welled up in the slit at the head of his penis.

"Taste it," he ordered, his deep rumbling voice harsh. He needed release, not games. Moulina thought she could entice him to her, coerce him into formally mating with her. She couldn't. He'd been blunt with her. He hadn't found the woman he would bind his life to. It wasn't Moulina and she knew it. If she persisted he would sever their relationship. He didn't want a jealous mistress. He wanted an enthusiastic bed partner.

Moulina leaned forward, reached out and lightly scraped her claws down his rigid length. Paladin inhaled sharply but never took his eyes off her. She said there was something

dangerous about him but she was the one who was dangerous tonight.

Desire and adrenaline mixed in his blood. "I want my cock in your mouth."

Her claws flexed against his shaft. He watched her, his eyes cold despite the fire racing through his veins.

She lowered her head and her tongue, pink and long, flicked out of her mouth in a fast swipe, stealing his essence from the head of his cock. The rough lick made him swear and his hips leap off the bed.

She moaned and licked him again. "I don't want to want you," she hissed, almost spitting. "But I do. I crave you. Your taste. Your huge cock splitting me nearly in half. If you wanted *me*, I could laugh in your face and leave. But you don't and you never will."

Paladin lifted himself on one elbow and fisted his other hand in the hair at the nape of her neck. "This *will* be our last night together. Do you want sex with me or do you want to leave?"

Her eyes shot green sparks. Her claws tested the steel of his arousal.

He tightened his grip on her hair and his eyes narrowed. "Don't." The one word was a warning and a promise. He'd never learned what mercy was. If she maimed him she would learn how unforgiving he really was.

At the same time, the threat fueled his need. She wouldn't tell him no and, even if she did, he wouldn't let her go. His cock throbbed. He would push his thick length into her but first he wanted her mouth. He wanted to see her lips

stretched around him. He wanted to watch her cheeks hollow and listen to the sound of her sucking him.

He applied pressure to the back of her head, forcing her mouth closer to his cock as she glared at him.

"Open your mouth."

She did as she was told. Her tongue stroked over her bottom lip, touched him before her lips did. Paladin's breath caught. His eyes half-closed and his hips jerked off the bed again.

A buzzer sounded, shrill and intrusive. Paladin cursed viciously. "What?" he roared.

"Incoming communication from Kai."

Paladin's hands clenched into fists. "Forward it," he snarled. Kai wouldn't contact him unless it was important. This better be monumental.

Moulina's mouth closed over the head of his penis and she sucked hard. It felt like she was trying to pull the head off his cock. He arched into her. The veins in his neck stood out as he thrust into her mouth. His teeth bared in a grimace. Her mouth was pain and pure pleasure.

"Paladin?"

"You're interrupting," Paladin snapped through clenched teeth. "Take more of it," he ordered Moulina, his chest heaving, his heart beating heavy and fast.

"I've got a woman aboard the *Therik*." Kai named his own spaceship.

Paladin swore as Moulina took another inch of him into her mouth. Her tongue, agile and rough, swirled around him, poked and licked the crevice at the head of his cock, found

and tormented the sensitive underside of his shaft just below the head. She was trying to distract him and coming close to doing it.

"I've got a woman in my bed."

"Do you trust your woman?" Kai asked, his tone cold.

"She wouldn't have my cock in her mouth if I didn't."

There was a pause before Kai continued. "I've got Genae Galaran, President Galaran's daughter. She's got her father's plans to annihilate non-human species throughout the galaxy. We need a Mriln healer on Sai-sen-Sai to retrieve the information."

"A healer?"

"The information was implanted in her heart."

Moulina's teeth sank into Paladin's cock.

Shouting a curse, he shoved her away. He rolled off the bed, one hand holding his nearly maimed penis. "How far out are you?" he demanded, his cold stare pinning Moulina where she knelt on the bed. She would pay for what she'd almost done.

"Two days."

Paladin's mind played through scenarios with lightning speed. Ryvn was near Thalanace. There was a Mriln healing facility there. It would be the closest.

If what he'd heard from the Mriln and what he'd put together himself added up to what he thought, the tides had just turned against President Galaran; at his daughter's hand.

"I'll have a Mriln healer here the day after you arrive. Sooner if possible."

"I've got three League destroyers on my tail," Kai warned.

Paladin's smile was savage. "Let them come." He would show the League the true might of his own fleet. He'd wanted to do that for a long time but the time had never been right, until now.

"Two days," Kai said and disconnected.

Paladin strode across the room and activated his connection to the communications center. "Get Ryvn. Tell him to get to Thalanace. I want a Mriln healer here in a day. Less if he can do it. I don't care if he has to kidnap one. Get them here." He closed the connection, sure his orders would be carried out, and looked back at his bed.

Moulina was on her hands and knees, her mane a wild tangle of curls around her face. Her breasts hung free, swaying slightly with each breath she took. Her lips were swollen and red.

Paladin's cock jerked to full attention. He smiled, the expression cruel. Finally, he would fight the League head on. If he died, it wouldn't matter as long as Galaran, the bastard, was brought down. The only thing that could be better would be Galaran himself being aboard one of the destroyers following Kai.

Need slammed into him, hot and wild. He stalked toward the bed, his eyes narrowed and glinting. "You bit me," he rumbled.

Moulina threw her hair back and shrugged. "It's not every day you hear that the President's daughter is with someone you know."

"League bastard," Paladin growled. He didn't like the way she said *the President*, as if he were *her* president.

She shrugged again. "Did I injure you too badly to get the job done?"

Paladin grabbed her hips, turned her ass to face him and rammed his cock into her.

"Palladiiiin." She screamed his name, her back arching, her claws shredding the covers on his bed.

He grunted as he pounded into her, watched as his penis moved in and out of her. She was tight and wet, hot and wild. Her body shook each time his pelvis hit her ass. She moaned and cried out, arched and flung her head.

He felt the building pressure in his balls. He wouldn't come before she did. He wouldn't let her have that control. Reaching between her thighs he pinched her clit. She screamed. Her vaginal muscles clamped and spasmed around him. Moulina dropped her head to her forearms, her ass still raised, her cunt impaled by him.

He rode into her, as fast and hard as he could. The sensation boiled up inside him and he came, his cum shooting into her in spurts.

He bowed over her, propped up by his arms that caged her. "Finally. The League bastard falls." He savored the words as he enjoyed the feel of her inner muscles tightening around him as the aftershocks of her orgasm worked through her.

Moulina shook her head against the bed. The only one who would fall was Paladin.

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Chapter One

Two Days Later

Genae woke slowly. A smile lit her face as she stretched. She was tender from another night of Kai's loving. He was amazing. She didn't know how many times she'd climaxed. Sometimes he didn't let her come down, he just forced her higher and higher until she wasn't sure she was even bound in her own body any longer, just a being of energy and light connected to reality through him.

She wanted more time with him. The past two days aboard his ship, the *Therik*, had been the only calm she'd known in over a year and it felt wonderful. Thoughts about the information she carried intruded. There was still so much to do. Making sure the information was retrieved and got to someone who could do something with it.

She shook her head and tried to hold on to the contentment of the moment. She didn't want to give up this time she had with Kai.

She yawned and rubbed her eyes before opening them. She looked toward Kai and her jaw dropped. He was asleep. The man never, well hardly ever, slept. She itched to reach out and touch his hair and trace the hard contours of his face. It still amazed her every time she looked at him how golden he was. His thick golden mane, his gold toned skin and his old gold eyes.

She wrinkled her nose and kept her hands where they were. He needed his sleep and she wasn't going to disturb him. How he had managed to keep a close watch on League activities, see to his own vessel and spend a considerable amount of time with her, she would never know. His stamina was tremendous but even he had limitations. Not that he would ever admit to them.

A rueful smile lit her face and warmth filled her. He really was perfect. Reality, though, wouldn't be held at bay. Three destroyers were headed for Sai-sen-Sai. One of them was Rabala's.

Her stomach knotted and she pressed her hand over it. Rabala would want revenge. Kai had tricked him above YelAsta and sent him chasing a ghost. That would make the whole thing very personal to the general.

She looked out the view port and tried to take a breath around the fear choking her. There were so many planets with so many people. The information in her heart meant the difference between life and death for them. The price of saving people she would never know was so high. It could mean Kai's life. How would she live with that?

She looked back at Kai and her eyes traced over his face once more. A feeling she couldn't describe swelled in her chest. His planet and people were in jeopardy. The League destroyers weren't chasing only her this time. Kai had made her much more dangerous. Suddenly there was a chance she would succeed. They wouldn't be satisfied killing her. They would destroy the planet. They wouldn't even hesitate.

Taking a deep breath, she rolled to the side of the bed and sat up. How did she live with the destruction of a planet and its people?

A humorless smile lifted her lips. She wouldn't have to live with it. She'd be dead right along with every other person on the planet. That was comforting.

A hard arm circled her waist and pulled her back across the bed. Kai rolled her onto her back, pushed her legs apart and settled himself between them.

"Where were you going?"

She reached up and tunneled her fingers through his hair. He made a low approving sound and she smiled. He loved her touch and she loved touching him. He was truly the most beautiful male she'd ever seen and for now, unbelievable as it seemed, he was hers.

"I thought I would bathe and dress for the occasion. Naked might have been all right for YelAsta but not for Sai-two." She used the VanDai abbreviation for their planet.

Kai growled. The sound vibrated his chest and teased her nipples where he pressed against her. "You'll wear clothes everywhere except our chambers. *There* I want you naked. I like having you accessible."

He reached between them, grasped his cock and found her wet entrance with its thick head.

"Accessible?" Her breath caught as he pressed against her. His penis was huge and throbbing.

He forged into her with heavy, insistent pressure and she bit her lip as he filled her. Her body arched into his. The

sensation was incredible. It crashed through her as he surged deeper.

She twisted, trying to compensate for the heavy intrusion. He stretched her almost to the point of discomfort. His pulse throbbed inside her, stimulating even when he was still. She never wanted him to leave her.

"Accessible." He groaned as he pulled back and thrust forward, the first stroke slow.

A single harsh word exploded from him. She didn't understand what he said but his tone made it a curse. She clutched his shoulders, her body moving against his, seeking the pleasure he'd taught her to expect.

"Can we talk about it later?" She moved her hips as much as she could under the press of his. The miniscule movement inflamed already sizzling nerves. Every time was better.

Kai glared down at her. "You're so small. Delicate. I should be gentle with you."

Genae smiled, slow and sensual. She didn't want gentle. She wanted Kai. "I love your power. Just take me."

Kai's lips drew back in a feral snarl. He pulled out of her, flipped her onto her stomach and pulled her hips up. He positioned his cock and plunged into her. His hips ground into hers. He pulled out and hammered into her again.

She shook and moaned. Her inner muscles tightened around him but couldn't hold him as he pulled out and lunged back in. She was on fire and he forced the flames higher.

Kai couldn't go deep enough. He wanted to sink himself in her. He wanted them to be one being. He growled as she melted around him, milked him. She was everything he

wanted, everything he needed. The sound of his flesh slapping hers, her wet heat sucking his cock in as he thrust forward, slurping to keep him in when he pulled out; her hot, feminine scent, drove him on.

She would never get away from him. She would understand that in time. Whatever force had sent her toward YelAsta had sent her to him and he would never let her go.

He groaned as she clenched around him.

She cried out as an orgasm rocketed through her.

He couldn't hold back and didn't want to. He wanted his seed filling her. He wanted her bound to him in every way a woman could be bound to a man. For them, there was no going back, only forward.

He shouted as his own release caught him. His cum fountained into her, hot and thick. He rocked into her once, twice more before settling over her, covering her body with his. Her inner muscles tightened around him in unpredictable spasms as aftershocks rippled through her. It was a sensation he was becoming addicted to.

"Do you think anyone would notice if we didn't transport down to the planet?" Her voice was soft, almost dreamy.

Kai nuzzled his face into the crook of her neck and kissed her. "Paladin would send up a search party if you weren't on the first transport to the surface. No one is going to take any chances with you and the information you carry."

Genae's heart skipped a beat. *No one is going to take any chances with you and the information you carry.* His words reverberated in her head. No one would take any chances with her until they had her where they could get the

information. She didn't really have any doubt how Kai would take the news of how dangerous the retrieval process was. The chances of her surviving were slim. He'd been protective from the moment he'd seen her. He wasn't going to be happy when he found out the rest.

She murmured a protest as he rocked back and his cock pulled out of her. She had to make sure he didn't find out. Getting the information was more important than her life. She'd believed that to start with, but now it meant even more. Because of Kai. He was worth saving. Others like him were worth saving. She couldn't live with herself if she didn't do everything in her power to stop her father.

She closed her eyes as pain stabbed through her. Her father. He wasn't that. Not anymore. The man her father had been would never have thought about killing whole planets of people.

Kai ran his hand over her raised bottom, up her back and under her arms to cup her breasts. He teased her nipples, tugging at them and squeezing her full mounds. "A quick bath, we'll get dressed, and it will be time to go."

His erotic stimulation of her breasts stole the somber thoughts from her mind. "I think that's what I was doing when you started this whole thing," she grumbled as she arched into his hands. She loved the way he was always touching her. It would be interesting to see how that changed when they were both fully clothed and in the company of others. She would miss the way he caught her hand or her arm or lifted and carried her.

She groaned and shook her head.

"What?" he demanded, lifting her up and turning her so he could see her face.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "The whole time we were racing across the surface of YelAsta, the one thing I knew I wasn't going to miss was being thrown over your shoulder."

He frowned down at her. "And?"

"It just crossed my mind that I'm going to miss it and I couldn't believe I was actually thinking that."

A wicked glint lit his golden eyes. He rose to his feet, caught her arm and expertly flipped her over his shoulder. She laughed as he strode into the dressing area off the main room of his private chambers. He lifted her off his shoulder and put her into the huge pool of clean-gel and followed her in. His hands started moving over her in firm, even strokes. He slowed to cup and play with her breasts and to trace the fascinating cleft of her buttocks and explore the secrets of her sex.

"I'll carry you anywhere you want to go."

She pushed at his shoulders as he smoothed down her legs and massaged her feet. She loved everything he did to her, but it was her turn.

"What are you going to miss when we're not alone and naked all the time?" she asked.

He leaned back, his eyes closing as she rubbed his chest, paying close attention to his nipples and under his arms.

"Nothing."

"Nothing." She poked him in the side. "What do you mean? You're not going to miss anything? There has to be something."

He shook his head. "If I want to carry you, I will. When I want you naked, I'll get you that way."

She stroked down his stomach and around his erection to cup his balls. She smiled as his breath caught. He was responsive to her every touch. There was no playing with Kai, no teasing. His reactions were straightforward and honest like everything else about him.

"I won't miss being chased across the planet by laser fire." She squeezed his balls in a slow rhythm.

He grunted as her hand moved up to close around the thick evidence of his arousal.

"I won't miss having a League hunter chasing us." She closed both hands around him and squeezed. She licked her lips as a small drop of white liquid appeared at the end of his penis, disappearing almost immediately in the clean-gel.

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Chapter Two

One More Time

Kai watched her through slitted eyes as she devoured him with her eyes. A low rumble vibrated in his chest as her tongue played over her lips.

"Will you take me?" He hadn't meant to ask but wasn't sorry when he did. They didn't have time but he wanted her. Her mouth on him was the most erotic thing he'd ever experienced and he wanted it again before he had to share her.

That was the one thing he would miss. Yes, they had barely escaped with their lives when the destroyer had ripped apart the surface of YelAsta to kill her, but she had been exclusively his. Once they were on Sai-sen-Sai that would no longer be true and he didn't like it.

She looked at him, her eyes heavy-lidded, her lips parted. "Stand up." Her voice was husky, a sensual lure. Dark color started at her breasts and rose up her chest and neck and into her face. Her lips looked fuller, her nipples reddened, and her breasts swelled. Just looking at her made him ache.

He rose to his feet and watched with pure male satisfaction as she settled on her knees before him. His gut knotted as she reached for him, her small hands closing around him and testing his length with strong, pulling strokes.

"Take me in your mouth."

She looked up at him through her lashes, her eyes incredibly blue, her short cap of black curls the perfect frame for her sweet face. "Will you let me have all of you?"

His breath caught at the question. The thought of her taking him in her mouth, of sucking and stroking him until he came was almost more than he could stand. He jerked in her tight hold. Pre-cum dampened the broad head of his cock.

"Take all of me." It was an order and a plea.

Genae lowered her head and swirled her tongue over the end of his cock. She made a low sound of approval at his taste and her eyes closed.

Kai threw back his head. His fingers sank into her hair and he held her close as she tortured him with the sweet torment of her mouth and hands. She sucked and licked, stroked and squeezed. She released his penis to suck on his male sac, one side and then the other. When his desire welled up from the depths of his cock, she took it, savored it and demanded more.

He couldn't breathe. His hips moved against her, driving his cock into her seeking mouth. Her hands squeezed and pulled. She took him deep, deeper.

He clutched her head as he fucked her mouth. He couldn't stop himself. Low sounds of pleasure, the sounds of sucking, the slight pop as he pulled out of her mouth, all built the inferno raging through him.

"Take me." Eyes narrowed, he growled the order as he rubbed his cock against her lips, seeking entrance once more.

Genae smiled at him, blue fire flashing through her lashes. Her tongue, small and pink, peeked out of her lips and touched the end of him.

He groaned and pressed insistently against her lips. She shared the most intimate act a man and woman could have with him and he wanted it all. No holding back, no stopping short of fulfillment. She would take him all, everything he had to give in this most intimate way.

"Open for me." His voice was dark and rough, his expression fierce.

She took him into her mouth and sucked. She worked up and down his length, taking him as deep as she could as she worked his shaft with her hands. Using her tongue and lips, she drew on him until he couldn't hold back. His cock swelled in her mouth. She sucked harder, squeezed, pulled him to her.

His release rushed through him, from him as he roared. He gripped her head tight as he jerked into her, spilling the essence of life in her avid mouth. His body shook as she continued to suckle him. He wanted to stay in her mouth. He wanted to taste her feminine honey and make her explode as she had made him. There would be time. He would share her with his people as he had to. The information she carried was important to too many species throughout the universe; it had to be retrieved. He would do what he had to do but she was his. She belonged with him. Once the information was retrieved, he would let nothing come between them again.

Wincing, he pulled his cock from her mouth and hands. She made a sound of protest that tightened his gut. He

wanted to let her suck him until he was ready to come again and this time he wanted to be inside her. One day soon, when she was once more solely his, they would do this again and it wouldn't end until he had taken her every way a male could take his mate. He would reward her well for the pleasure she gave him.

Frustration made his expression harsh as he lifted her to her feet. He kissed her hard, his tongue stealing into her mouth and mating with hers in a wild foray. He tasted himself in her and a growl rumbled in his chest.

A tone sounded followed by his second-in-command's voice. "Paladin is expecting us on Sai-sen-Sai," Teer announced.

A muscle ticked in Kai's jaw. He was a member of the pride, Paladin his acknowledged leader, but he resented the summons. He wanted to take Genae and find a place of their own, a place where no one and nothing could touch them.

Honor won out over need. "Tell Paladin we'll be transporting to the surface within the hour." He had a duty to his people, to the other people of the universe, and he wouldn't walk away from it. He wouldn't have Genae exclusively to himself but she was still his. When duty was done, she would be in his arms, in his bed, a part of him and no other.

* * * *

Moulina watched Paladin stride into the communications center. Kai and his traitor had to be close to the planet. A full

VanDai guard, six warriors all heavily armed, had been sent to Portation City to escort them back to Boujara.

She watched as Paladin strode back out of the com-center, and pretended to be busy with her chores. VanDai were considered an impressive sight and he stood out even among his warriors. *Damn him.*

He glanced at her as he passed.

Her chin rose and she glared after him as he strode away. He thought it was over. He thought he could throw her aside and search for his perfect mate.

A sneer lifted her lip. He was about to learn how wrong he was. He wasn't invincible and things would not go his way. She would see to that.

"Moulina?"

Startled, she jumped and dropped her anti-grav-vac. Celn, one of Paladin's warriors, stood in front of her.

"What do you want?" she snapped, reaching out to snatch her vac from the air in front of her.

"You were glaring at Paladin."

"How is that your business?" What was he going to do? Tell Paladin she'd been watching him? He was as stupid as all the others.

Celn's expression grew cold. "Don't cause him trouble."

She widened her eyes, the picture of innocence. "Cause him trouble? Me? What could a discarded lover, a *mere woman*, do to the great Paladin?"

Celn shook his head. "Just stay out of his way," he ordered as he hurried after Paladin.

Paladin's Pride (Collection)
by Angelina Evans

She watched him disappear outside. She wouldn't get in
Paladin's way. She was going to stop him completely.

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Chapter Three

Safely Home

Half an hour later, Genae sat beside Kai in a transport captained by Teer. Part of the planet's defense system didn't allow for molecular transport to the surface so the slower transports were used. She didn't mind. This allowed her more time with Kai before the universe intruded.

It was strange to be dressed. On YelAsta, she hadn't been able to wear clothes at all and most of the past couple days aboard the *Therik* had been spent in Kai's chambers, naked and in bed with him.

Heat flooded her cheeks as she thought about all the ways they had been together. She really wanted to go back and try all of them again. It didn't matter where they were if she could be with Kai and, at least for a few moments, forget what she had to do.

She fingered the soft, flowing material of the dress Kai had provided for her. It was the same blue as her eyes. A simple sheath that covered her from her neck to mid-calf. It clung lovingly to her curves and felt like a constant caress on her skin. But it had been Kai's reaction that made her feel beautiful. He'd taken one look and reached for her, his hands skimming over her breasts and settling on the gentle swell of her hips.

"Every male on Sai-two will want you." Pride and anger had mixed in his voice and expression.

She pressed against him, needing to be as close to him as she could get. Everything she'd fought for was coming to a close. The Mriln healer would be arriving soon. The League destroyers would be in range of the planet at almost the same time. One way or another, it would soon be over.

Her heart skipped a beat and she pressed her face into Kai's shoulder. There wasn't a force in the universe that could stand against a League destroyer, let alone three of them. It would come down to how fast the healer was and if the information could be sent to others before the League destroyed the planet.

Kai wrapped his arm around her and drew her closer. She snuggled against him, soothed by the strong, steady beat of his heart and the strength of his arms. When he held her, she could believe they had a chance. He seemed invincible to her. Nothing had stopped him and she wanted to believe nothing could.

* * * *

All too soon she felt the slight thump as the transport docked. Her heart beat wildly in her throat, trapping her breath in her chest. She'd made it. It was impossible and yet she'd done it.

Kai stood and she stood with him. He took her hand in his and she clung to him. She'd made it because of him. Where she would have given up, he never had.

She followed a step behind him as they walked off the transport. He'd never given up. And because he hadn't, they were on Sai-sen-Sai. So why was she giving up now? Yes,

there was little chance of surviving the information retrieval but there was a chance. Yes, there was little chance of the planet surviving an attack by three League destroyers, but there was a chance. Kai wouldn't give up until he lost. If his people were anything like him they wouldn't give up either, so why was she?

She raised her chin, angry with herself. She wasn't a quitter. If she had been, she would never have stolen the information from her father. She would never have tried to outrun a destroyer and she wouldn't have run across the face of YelAsta with Kai. She wasn't going to give up now and if there was a way to win, they would find it.

* * * *

Moulina carried her vac back to its storage cupboard. She shoved it into its space and took out the solar-powered duster. At the same time she pocketed two thumbnail-sized disks. She hadn't cleaned the arched entryway of the Palladium in two days. No one would even notice she was there.

She fingered the tiny disks in her pocket as she strolled toward the entryway. Paladin should have sent her to another city the moment he kicked her out of his bed. It wouldn't have changed what was going to happen but it would have proved him more intelligent than she'd ever given him credit for.

* * * *

They emerged from the shadow of the transport and were immediately surrounded by a full VanDai guard. There was nothing honorary about the contingent and no one in the docking bay thought there was. Each member of the guard was armed with a hand blaster and VanDai tazer stars.

As they moved across the large, vessel filled complex to a waiting floater, people moved out of their way. Having been raised as the League President's daughter, Genae had been used to a certain status in all her travels but nothing like this. Some of the people who hurried out of their way showed fear, shaking and cowering. Others were more formal, bowing as they moved to the side. What amazed Genae, though, was the respect. Fearful or not, every being inclined their head or placed their hand on their chest or, in the case of a Gelian trader, waved a tentacle.

Two members of the guard stepped into the waiting floater first. Teer stepped in next and Kai lifted her hand to Teer's when the other male reached out. A princess wouldn't have been treated with more care, she was sure. It made her feel warm and protected.

Kai stepped in and the remaining four guardsmen stepped in behind him. All six members of the guard stood around them as they seated themselves. The driver wasted no time. He sent the floater spinning in a tight circle and raced out of the docking bay, wending his way through other floaters and transports, clearly expecting everyone to move out of *his* way.

Genae watched the planet whip by below. The city that surrounded the docking bay wasn't very large, sprawling out

in unorganized clusters of buildings and stock piles. Beyond the city was sand. The earth was red-gold, scorched by the sun and lifeless. It smelled hot, dry and dusty and made her nose tickle. It wasn't what she had expected and she wasn't sure why. She'd never asked Kai about his home planet and hadn't really speculated about it. There hadn't been time.

"This is the Sein desert," Kai explained, leaning close so he didn't have to raise his voice above the wind rushing over the floater's half canopy. "It stretches several hundred kilometers south, north and west."

"What about to the east?"

"It drops away into the Senshi delta."

"The Senshi delta?" She shivered at the exotic sound. As the president's daughter, she'd been exposed to all different species and worlds, yet nothing had ever affected her like this. She felt shivery inside. Everything seemed new and wonderful. She wanted time to explore and learn everything about Kai, his world and his people.

Kai nodded. "It's a huge torrent where all the rivers of this hemisphere come together. It's a wild place. Dangerous and beautiful too."

"I would love to see it." She didn't realize how wistful she sounded.

Kai looked at her and smiled, his expression filled with pride. "I'll take you there when we have more time."

She smiled back at him even as doubts intruded. She wanted to believe that there would be time, that there would be something left in two days, but it was hard. She'd been raised to believe in the ultimate power and invincibility of the

League. Changing that mindset would take longer than she had.

Kai slipped his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to his side. She stiffened for a moment before relaxing against him. There was no reason to worry about what anyone else would think or even if they cared. Beside him, having him hold her, was right where she wanted to be. She wasn't going to apologize to anyone about that.

Closing her eyes, she let her head settle on his shoulder. The sound of the wind was peaceful, the hot air draining what little energy she had. If she had money with her, she'd pay the floater's driver to keep going forever, away from the worries and fears that had plagued her for most of a year.

Kai shifted until his body curved around Genae's. He held her cradled against his chest. She felt warm and *right* against him. He'd been responsible for the welfare of the VanDai for years. This was the first time he'd been responsible for one person specifically. One woman. His woman.

He rubbed his chin against the top of her head, enjoying the springy curls catching on the fine hair that covered his chin. It was amazing that someone so small could be so resilient. Not once had she complained about what was happening to her. She worked with him, did what was needed and kept going. Yet her life had been one of privilege until recently. The League President's daughter.

He tensed.

Consciously he forced himself to relax. She wasn't the president's daughter any longer. She was his woman and he wasn't going to wait to claim her. The Mrlin healer who was to

extract the information planted in Genae's heart would arrive on Sai-sen-Sai soon. The three League destroyers that had been sighted making their way toward the planet would arrive soon after. He wanted Genae bound to him before anything else happened. His people would take care of her because she had risked so much to get the president's plan to them. As his official mate, though, she would have more rights and more privileges and he wanted that for her if something happened to him. The VanDai vessels had a better chance of standing up against the League destroyers than anyone suspected but the outcome of the coming confrontation was by no means sure.

He rubbed his chin against her hair again and his arm tightened around her. They would be joined within the hour. Paladin would stand with him. There would be no waiting. She was his and he was claiming her.

The low, red-gold buildings of the pride headquarters came into view over a low rise. The compound was deceptively open and had been misjudged in the past as an easy target by rival prides and off-worlders alike. Genae would be safer in Boujara than anywhere else in the universe. Until the information was retrieved, she was a global treasure.

A smile lit his eyes. She probably wouldn't like all the security she would be surrounded by but no one was going to take any chances with her safety. He would see to that personally.

His expression darkened and he looked down at Genae, her face raised slightly to his, her hair a wild mop of black curls, her lashes thick black fans against her cheeks. She

might not mind the security at all. No doubt she had been used to having her own guards before she'd run from the president.

He looked back up at Boujara, his expression grim. He could never provide her with the wealth and position of the president. He was a member of Paladin's pride. A VanDai warrior. His life had been and always would be the protection of his planet and people. It was a simple life and more difficult than she was used to but she would come to accept it as she came to love him.

A low moan made him aware of his unsheathed claws digging into her side. Her brows were drawn together in a frown as she shifted against him. He retracted his claws and watched the main gate of the compound open. He wouldn't accept anything less than everything from her. Her body, her heart, her very soul if that were possible.

The floater sped through the gate as it was still opening. It passed through without scraping and zipped to the main building. The driver pulled to a smooth stop and set the vehicle on the ground without jostling any of his passengers.

* * * *

Moulina watched the floater settle. She could barely make out the woman cradled in Kai's arms through the thick wall of VanDai warriors guarding her.

Her lips thinned and her nostrils flared in distaste as she watched the group start to exit the floater. She wanted Paladin here. Chances were good no one would be killed but

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by Angelina Evans

with luck, there would be injuries. If Paladin were one of them, it would be very sweet indeed.

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Chapter Four

A Warning Given

Two guards stepped out of the floater and turned back to help Genae but stepped back when they saw Kai would accept no assistance with his woman.

Kai's heart melted as he looked down at her. The circles under her eyes had gotten bigger and darker each day he'd known her. Her exhaustion had finally caught up with her. Even though she was on an unfamiliar planet among unfamiliar people, she was sound asleep. And he wasn't going to wake her. Anything anyone wanted to know, they would have to talk to him about. When Genae woke, she could answer questions but he wasn't going to let them bother her now.

His jaw set, he caught Genae up in his arms, rose to his feet and stepped out of the floater.

* * * *

Moulina watched as Kai lifted the woman into his arms. She wanted to spit. If she weren't the president's daughter, if she didn't have the information they wanted, Kai would have as much use for her as Paladin had for herself. If the woman was already in love with Kai, Moulina was doing her a favor by killing her. And it would be the first step in Paladin's capture, torture and death. She had a League general's promise on that.

Smiling, she took one disk from her pocket, rotated the inner circle of the tiny device and pushed it into a chink of the stone archway. Slowly, she finished dusting that side and moved to the other. She took the second disk, activated it and pushed it into a crack in the stone.

She looked over her shoulder and shook her head as she walked away. All those big VanDai warriors were armed and ready to fight any outside threat. Not one of them thought to look inside their own city. Not even the great Paladin himself.

* * * *

A tall, thin VanDai male rushed up to them. "Paladin is waiting in the main conference hall. He wants to see you and the woman immediately."

Kai ignored him and strode away from the Palladium toward his own quarters in one of the outer buildings.

"Kai! Paladin is waiting."

He ignored Jerill's panicked words and kept walking.

Thunder boomed. Rock chips and small boulders flew through the air. Kai threw himself to the ground, rolled and covered Genae with his body. He scanned the courtyard even as he reached for his weapons. The entrance to the main building was gone. The archway was filled with debris. Dust clogged the air.

"Who tried to kill us this time?" Genae asked, her tone tired, almost defeated.

Kai's eyes never stopped moving as he kept her pinned under him. He wasn't fooled by her tone. Her breasts crushed to his chest, he could feel her heart racing. He'd thought she

was safe here. This was his home. His sanctuary and someone had defiled it. "I don't know, but I *will* find out," he vowed. Whoever had done this would pay.

Guards raced to surround them. Weapons drawn, they faced out, ready for anything that came against them. Thunder boomed again. Rocks exploded and showered the courtyard.

"Find out who set those charges and where they were detonated from. Bring me the body of the person who did it." The furious roar preceded the huge VanDai warrior who burst through the remaining rubble blocking the destroyed entrance. Black, pitiless eyes searched the courtyard and settled on Kai as he strode toward the small group, a tazer star in one hand and a blaster in the other.

"Get them off the ground," the huge male thundered as he reached them. His eyes never settled. He constantly searched the courtyard, the buildings on one side and the wall on the other.

Hands grabbed Kai's arms and pulled him from the ground. He allowed them to lift him but he never released Genae. He kept one arm locked around her. In his other hand he held his own tazer star. He wanted someone to kill. Someone had tried to hurt Genae again and he wanted them dead.

"Are you hurt?" The huge VanDai's voice was muted thunder as he stepped in front of Kai and Genae, his body completely blocking Genae and doing a good job of blocking Kai. He moved forward and the guards moved with him as a solid wall.

Inside the flesh and blood blockade, Kai kept himself and Genae moving forward. He searched the courtyard but there was nothing and no one to see. Whoever had set off the charges was well hidden if they were even still in the vicinity.

"No. Where to?" Who would betray the pride? He would have bet his life, *had* bet his life and Genae's that there wasn't one warrior who would dishonor the bonds of the group.

"My quarters."

Kai nodded. Paladin didn't worry much about his own security but those who followed him did. His quarters were the most secure in Boujara. If Genae was going to be safe anywhere, it would be there.

Kai kept Genae locked to him with one arm. He made sure she was between himself and Paladin. No one was going to touch her and live. Some VanDai males never found the woman they would formally mate with. He had and he wasn't going to lose her.

Fury raged through him. His own home wasn't secure. He'd brought her to Sai-sen-Sai to keep her safe and she could have died within moments of stepping foot in *his* city. Never releasing his grip on his tazer star, he half carried her up the steps as he followed Paladin.

Paladin stepped over and powered through the debris. Two VanDai warriors rushed forward to help. Kai searched the darker anterior, trusting the men at his back to watch the courtyard. They were all vulnerable and he didn't like it. There could be more charges. Someone could be hidden with a blaster or even farther out with a laser.

With a low rumble, the debris shifted. A huge chunk of rock fell from the ceiling, hit the floor and cracked, the sound earsplitting. Kai felt Genae flinch and his arm tightened around her. His jaw clenched and silently he swore. She should have been safe here. This was his home.

Paladin reached over the rubble and plucked Genae from his grasp. Kai leapt over the massive pile of stone and immediately took her back. He would trust Paladin with his life and often had. He trusted no one with Genae.

"Find the explosives and bring me a body," Paladin ordered as he led the way to the right and down a long hall.

VanDai warriors split from the gathering crowd and converged on the rubble. The crash and thunder of boulders being thrown and hitting the ground, the slithering rush of rubble falling filled the air with noise as dust plumed up in a fine, choking mist.

Genae started coughing and Kai swung her up in his arms as Paladin picked up the pace. Moments later they turned down another hall and halfway down it they stopped. Paladin touched his fingertips to a sensor lock before pressing his palm to it. The door slid open and Paladin, followed by Kai, stepped inside. The door slid shut behind them and Kai set Genae on her feet. His hands tightened into fists as he released her. He didn't want to let her go. He wanted to keep her safe in his arms but he couldn't do that and search for the traitor who had tried to kill her.

His expression turned grim as he looked at her. Her black curls were frosted with a thick coat of dust. Her face was

smudged and her dress showed the effects of being flung to the ground. There was a rip over the right side of her ribs.

His eyes narrowed on the raw red mark that showed through the tear.

"Settle her then join me."

He looked at Paladin and nodded. "I want two guards at the door. I'll reset the sensor lock to admit only you, myself and them."

Paladin lifted one brow. "I thought you would demand at least four guards."

"The warriors I want will fight like six."

"Marik and Challen."

Kai nodded.

"Done." Paladin turned and strode through the door as it opened.

Kai looked at Genae and his heart beat harder in his chest. He could have lost her and he hadn't even seen it coming. "I brought you here where I could keep you safe and almost got you killed."

Genae's heart turned over at his words. "You mean I almost got you killed. Again." She reached up and touched his face, brushed her fingers over his high cheekbones, traced the contour of his lips. She couldn't imagine his fierce presence being gone. He was so solid and alive, he burned with a vitality she could only admire and marvel at. It seemed impossible that she could lose him and yet it could happen so easily.

She took a deep, shuddering breath. The League President's influence reached even here. Deep inside it hurt to

think that, because of her, Kai's belief in his own people was shaken. The ramifications of what she'd done kept growing. The ripples that had started when she dropped the pebble had turned into a tidal wave.

"I'll have food brought to you. There's a cleansing pool and a bed. Use both."

Genae frowned up at him. "Are you trying to say something about my hygiene?" She tried to sound indignant but the effect was ruined as the left shoulder of her gown slid down and dust wafted into the air.

Kai smoothed his hand over her bare shoulder and pushed the material off her other shoulder. His eyes darkened and his eyelids lowered. One claw extended and he ran the razor sharp tip over her dress down the center of her body. There was a slight hiss as the material split.

Pushing the material aside, he studied her breasts. Satisfaction made his golden eyes glow as her nipples hardened, jutting toward him in silent offering.

"I'll help you get cleaned up when I come back."

She shivered at the dark sensuality of his voice. "I'll take you up on that," she whispered, her throat tight with her own need. Her heart pounded in her chest as shivers coursed down her spine and tightened her breasts.

Kai grasped her breasts and pulled her to him. He swooped down, caught her mouth with his. He forced her lips apart and entered her with his tongue. He *took* her, his breath replacing hers as his tongue dueled with hers and his hands kneaded her breasts.

He wedged his leg between hers and lifted her off her feet. She cried into his mouth as she rocked on his hard thigh, grinding herself against him.

Abruptly, Kai lifted her away from him. His eyes blazed down at her. His grip on her arms was almost punishing. "If you need anything, pull this lever." He walked to a sculpture of a great stalking cat and grasped the long tail.

"What will that do? Set off all sorts of alarms?" She glared at him. She wanted him to finish what he'd started, not leave her alone.

"Yes." He strode toward her, leaned down and kissed her, his hand grasping the nape of her neck. "Stay in this room," he ordered.

Genae opened her mouth but never got to respond as he strode away. Her breasts bare and aching, her vagina empty and weeping, she watched the door close behind him.

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Chapter Five

More Than Threats

Genae watched the door for long minutes after he was gone. Why couldn't they just be together? Why couldn't her father be the man he was supposed to be? Eyes closed, she clenched her fists and fought back a scream. *Why?*

Her thoughts spun back to Kai. Her chest tight, she cupped her breasts. Her breath caught as her nipples pressed against her palms. She wanted him. She wanted his hands on her. His thumbs rubbing her nipples, his claws scraping over them, light and teasing with a hint of danger that made her insides quiver.

Still holding her breasts, she opened her eyes and looked around the room for the first time. It was stark. The floor bare, nothing on the walls except the one sculpture and it definitely had a purpose.

She wrinkled her nose, turned and whistled. Kai had called the bath a cleansing pool. It would be better named a lake. It was huge. The bed, placed in a recessed alcove, was built along the same gargantuan lines. There was no way she could sleep in it on her own. She'd never find her way back out.

She breathed a sigh of relief as some of the sexual tension started to recede. Kai had a powerful effect on her. He made it hard to think or reason or even breathe.

Hands cupped to her breasts, she walked around the room. No doubt he'd left her in a shredded gown for two reasons.

She wasn't likely to leave without clothes and when he returned she would certainly be accessible.

She felt heat climb her cheeks and smiled. She didn't mind being accessible for him. But she didn't like being at a disadvantage and being naked when someone was trying to kill her felt distinctly like a disadvantage.

It took two circuits around the room before she discovered its false wall. Set at an odd angle it gave the illusion of being flush with the apparently adjoining wall but was actually free standing.

She walked around the end and her jaw dropped. One side was a garment storage area. Clothes were hung, draped and shelved. It was the other side, though, that was truly impressive.

Weapons lined the wall. Blasters. Tazer stars. Laser whips. Laser rifles. Frelik charges and other devices she couldn't name. She started to reach out and stopped. What kind of man kept an arsenal in his bedroom?

She hurried across the room and reached for a shirt.

"This room is like the VanDai. Full of hidden depths."

Genae stopped short and spun around at the sound of the voice behind her. Her hands flew to cover her breasts as she saw the woman watching her. "Who are you?" She looked past the woman but there was nothing to see except the wall.

"Moulina. I'm in charge of the domestic side of the household. And until two days ago I was Paladin's mistress."

Genae tried to smile. Moulina was the most feline being she'd ever seen. Beautiful and overtly sensual. Men would have a hard time walking past the woman without salivating.

Her figure was purely feminine. Large breasts, tiny waist, full hips. Her lips were full, her eyes half-slumberous and her hair a tumble of waving curls.

She was also the kind of woman no other woman would ever be comfortable around. There was something about her that *seethed*.

"Did someone send you to see if I needed something?" Even as Genae asked the question, the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. Kai had said he was resetting the door lock for himself, Paladin and the two guards. How had this woman gotten in?

Moulina smiled, the expression sly. "Poor little rich girl," she purred. "Used to having others see to your every need. Your time with Kai must have been hard for you. Having to fend for yourself. No one to fetch and carry for you."

Genae shrugged. Her heart thundered in her chest and it was hard to breathe. The safest place on the planet and she was going to get killed in it.

"You set the charges?"

Moulina's smile grew. "There was a chance you would be caught in the blast but it wasn't likely. Having Paladin put you here? The explosion made that a certainty."

Genae edged toward the wall of weapons, her hands still covering her breasts.

"Don't." Moulina's tone was sharp, her lips curled in a sneer. She lifted one hand and waved a tazer star at Genae. "I'm going to kill you. It's up to you if I hurt you first."

Genae froze. Her heart leapt into her throat, choking her. Where was Kai? "Why would you betray your people? The

information I carry will keep entire species alive. It will keep *your* species alive. Being Paladin's mistress couldn't be worth that much."

Moulina's eyes narrowed and she hissed. "His mistress? I wanted to be his *mate*. On Sai-sen-Sai he is a king. As his mate, I would have been a queen." She stepped forward, her eyes glinting as she lifted her other hand and showed Genae a silver, palm-sized device. "You've never been poor, or hungry, or unwanted, have you, Miss Privileged? You've never worried about where you would go or what would become of you if the man you were with threw you away."

Genae backed up as Moulina moved forward. The other woman was VanDai. She was taller and bigger. A fight would be unfairly balanced in the other woman's favor but she wasn't going to let herself be killed without fighting back. If she got the chance.

"I can ensure you wealth and a place of your own. A place where no one could ever throw you out."

Moulina laughed, the sound cold and grating, making Genae wince. "And how would you do that? You'll be dead, this world destroyed and all the species of the universe your father considers inferior will be gone."

"It doesn't have to be that way. Even if I die during the information retrieval, I can give you what you want. My holdings, my wealth. You can have it all."

"You think that's all I want? Wealth?"

Genae backed around the end of the room and edged back toward the opening.

Moulina's brows rose. "You won't get away."

Genae shrugged. "I have to try." She had to do more than try. Somehow she had to get out of the room. She hadn't come this far to lose everything.

"You think you can buy your life? You think you know what I want?"

Genae threw up her hands. Who cared if her breasts were bare? If she was dead, it didn't matter. "You said you wanted to be a queen."

"I said I wanted to be Paladin's queen."

"And he didn't want you." Genae almost groaned as the words left her mouth.

A low, threatening hiss issued from between Moulina's bared teeth. "He'll live to regret what he's done."

Genae bit her lip and managed to keep her mouth shut. Telling the woman she could see why Paladin wouldn't want to be permanently tied to a heartless, honorless bitch wasn't going to help.

"What did my father promise you? And why would you think he'll allow you to live when every other member of your species is terminated?" She needed the advantage of even a moment more to get into the other room first.

She edged toward the opening into the hidden room. Her heart beat so hard it shook her.

"You want a head start?"

Genae's heart stuttered. What was the woman, a mind reader? She swallowed but there was no saliva in her mouth. "What do you get for killing me?"

"I get to see Paladin tortured and killed." The VanDai woman smiled and licked her lips. "I get to choose the

manner of his torture and death." She undulated where she stood.

Genae shuddered. The woman's words made the gesture obscene.

"Your father might hate and fear what he calls non-human species but he *loves* sex with us. He'll have his own little alien brothel. He'll hate himself more every time he visits it but he won't be able to stay away. And those of us who are good enough will have more power than he ever realizes. With your death I get everything I want. And I want Paladin's hide." Moulina closed her eyes and Genae ran.

"You can't escape."

Genae blocked Moulina's words as she sprinted toward the door. The tazer star flew past her. The small weapon superheated as it spun through the air. It burned into the stone of the wall with a hissing sound.

At the last possible moment Genae turned and leapt toward the sculpture Kai had shown her. Something hit her left shoulder. Pain seared through her. Her heart stuttered and swelled. She could feel it expanding.

Her fingers brushed the great cat's tail as she fell. Her vision faded. She hit the ground hard, unsure if the blaring she heard was from alarms or the pain exploding in her own head.

* * * *

"How many VanDai will be here in ti—" Kai broke off as the alarm from Paladin's room pealed through the Palladium. He

started running, fury at himself spurring him on. He'd left her alone. Someone had tried to kill her and he'd left her alone.

Swearing, he raced toward Paladin's door where Challen was deactivating the secure-lock. As the door opened, he rushed through it.

His heart stopped when he saw Genae. She lay unmoving on the floor, her face white. He caught a flash of color from the corner of his eye as he dropped to the floor and reacted. He whipped a tazer star from his belt and threw it, his aim deadly. He heard a feminine scream but didn't care as he dropped to his knees beside Genae. He pressed his head to her chest. A sick feeling grew in his stomach. There was no heartbeat, no rise and fall with each breath.

He'd left her alone.

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Chapter Six

Lessons Learned

Paladin, seconds behind Kai, saw Moulina fall as Kai dropped beside the president's daughter. He understood immediately what had happened. He strode across the room and lifted Moulina from the floor. The wound in her side was gaping but there was no blood. The tazer star had cauterized as it sliced through her.

"Why?" His tone was stark, his expression cold.

Moulina smiled even as she gasped for breath. Her body shuddered with pain as the damage inflicted by the tazer star spread through her, the burn expanding. "To hurt you."

Paladin's face turned to stone. He hadn't made her his mate and she had gotten even. "Take her." He handed her to one of his warriors. "Make her end swift."

Moulina's eyes were cold. "No mercy?"

He stared at her for one long moment before turning away. "A swift death *is* mercy."

"Get a healer!" Kai's voice thundered through the room.

Paladin crouched beside him as a healer, already summoned, ran toward them. Kai lifted the material of Genae's top and covered her breasts with it. A small silver disk lay on the floor under one wisp of material. He lifted it and turned it over. "What is it?"

The healer, a huge VanDai male, plucked the disk from his hand. "It's a cardiac stabilizer." He looked at the setting and grimaced. "It must have felt like someone crushed her heart."

Kai's hands clenched into fists. "Heal her." It was a demand and an order. He wanted Genae healed. He wanted her in his arms, her heart beating strong and steady and the male in front of him had to do it. If he had to hold a blaster to the healer's head, he would. He wanted her healed now.

The healer frowned at Kai.

Paladin leaned forward and caught the healer's gaze with his own. "Do what you can, Eln."

The healer nodded but a muscle worked in his jaw as he gave Kai a narrow-eyed look. He set the disk he'd taken from Kai down and took an instrument from his belt. He pressed it to Genae's chest and waited. Seconds later his lips thinned and he shook his head.

He looked at Kai as he picked up the small disk. "The setting on this could have made her heart explode. Now it's the only thing that will keep her alive." He pushed the material off her left breast and pressed the disk to Genae's chest to the left of her sternum, over her heart. He adjusted the device's micro-controls then pressed in on either side of the small sphere.

Genae's body jerked.

Kai lunged at the healer and Paladin grabbed him. He wanted to tear the other VanDai apart for hurting her. What did he think he was doing?

The healer finished adjusting the cardiac stabilizer as Kai broke free of Paladin's hold. He grabbed Genae and sat on the

floor with her held tight in his arms while the guards filed from the room.

"Who tried to get me this time?"

Startled by the sound of her voice, Kai shifted Genae away from him enough to look down at her. She was alive. Pain splintered through him and he clutched her to his chest. He owed the healer more than he could ever repay. Genae was alive.

As the healer left, he stopped in the door and looked at them. "The stabilizer could keep her alive indefinitely, but what she really needs is a healer who specializes in human hearts. I don't know exactly how much damage was done but it was considerable. As long as the stabilizer is in place, though, she'll be fine."

"What can't she do?" Kai demanded, his arms tightening around Genae. He needed more than to hold her but he wouldn't touch her if it wasn't safe.

The faintest of smiles lit the other male's eyes. "Just be careful not to jar her too hard."

Genae felt heat rush into her cheeks and there was nothing she could do about it but hide. She turned her face into Kai's shoulder and stayed there. And as her naked breasts came into contact with his hard chest, her mortification grew.

Several minutes later, Kai stroked her back. "How long are you going to hide there?"

Genae refused to budge. "I thought we weren't going to do the naked thing except in private."

A low rumble vibrated Kai's chest and she wriggled, enjoying the sensation against her breasts. "Don't growl at me. You're the one who destroyed the top of my dress."

Without answering, Kai lifted her and set her on her feet. Her knees almost buckled. Only Kai's quick reflexes kept her from falling. Somehow he kept her upright as he surged to his feet. Without pausing he caught her up in his arms and strode to the bed.

Genae smiled up at him. "Something else we keep doing," she murmured but she wasn't complaining. She liked being in Kai's arms.

Kai laid her on the bed and quickly stripped off her ruined gown. He searched her for any injuries, rolled her over and then back. His gaze raked her as his hands searched her body.

He made her feel like a lab specimen. She glared up at him. "You could have just asked me if I hurt anywhere."

Kai grunted. His expression darkened as he looked at the strange disk attached to her chest. "This should never have happened." He blamed himself because there was no one else to blame. Anywhere else in the universe he would never have left her alone.

Because he had thought Sai-two was safe, he hadn't been prepared for the explosion. Because he'd believed Paladin's quarters were safe, he hadn't looked for an attack. Because he had trusted the people of Boujara, he hadn't looked for an enemy among his own people.

He stripped out of his clothes, climbed onto the bed and lay down. He pulled Genae over him and positioned her legs

between his, his hard cock caught between them. He guided her head down to his chest. "Sleep."

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. At least he hadn't ordered her to eat, bathe and then sleep. She was more tired than she could ever remember being. She smiled at the thought. She'd thought she was exhausted when they had reached the *Therik* after their marathon across YelAsta. She hadn't known what tired was. She had just enough energy to close her eyes. Maybe.

Slowly, she lowered her eyelids. Yep. Just enough energy for that. Kai pulled her closer and she didn't even make a murmur. She didn't have enough energy for that.

* * * *

Kai woke instantly. He didn't know what had disturbed him but something wasn't right. Eyes half-lidded, he looked around the room, but nothing in the room was different from when he'd taken Genae to bed. He opened his senses and still, there was nothing.

Reflexively his hand tightened on Genae's breast. He'd gone to sleep with her heart beating against his and woken holding her breast. A smile lit his eyes but quickly dimmed. His own heart skipped a beat as he realized what was missing. He couldn't feel her heartbeat. There was no rise and fall of her breast with each breath.

His heart gave a body shaking thump. He broke out in a sweat and his hand tightened on her soft flesh. It felt like he was being ripped in two. She was dead.

His claws sprang free and a roar built in his throat. No! The healer had told them the cardiac stabilizer would keep her alive indefinitely. She couldn't be gone.

Genae grumbled a protest and shifted in his arms.

Kai's world narrowed to her. Need slammed into him. There was no thought, no rational process. The beast rose inside him and took over. He rolled Genae onto her back and forced her legs apart. Growling, his focus centered solely on the folds of her sex, he grasped his cock and pressed the head against her small opening. The sight of her tight entrance flowering to accept his broad girth freed the beast inside. She was his and he was taking her. She was alive and he would feel her response.

Genae moaned and blinked. She grimaced as he penetrated her, his penis huge in her unprepared sheath. She writhed against him, rolled her hips trying to relieve the pressure. She bit her lip and groaned.

"Kai?"

He grunted in response, his expression harsh as he forged deeper.

She spread her legs wide trying to accommodate him.

"Kai? What..."

He surged forward the last few inches. She arched up, the pressure immense, so intense it stole her breath and made her heart race. His length burned inside her.

Kai felt every tremor around his cock, every quiver of her stomach against his abdomen. It wasn't enough. He needed to feel her lose control. He would settle for nothing less than the life affirming clenching of total release.

Somewhere deep inside he realized she wasn't aroused. Not completely. He had to arouse her if he was going to make her come. He had to feel the great soul-shattering release of her orgasm. He had to know she was with him, a part of him.

He reached between them and flicked and rubbed her clit. There was no finesse. No rhythm. Just focused attention as he watched her clit blossom, its color darkening as it rose to his touch. His claws, partially extended, flexed out fully. With narrowed eyes he raked the small nub with great care.

He groaned as her sheath spasmed around him and her dew started to flow.

It still wasn't enough.

He pulled out of her. Thrust back in hard and fast. There was a wet, slurping sound as her sheath sucked at him. And still he played with her clit. Rubbing. Flicking.

Genae bit down on her lip and tasted blood. She arched against him. Her legs wrapped around him. Her hands clutched at the bed. She couldn't stop the burning slide as he pounded into her. She didn't want to stop it. She felt him everywhere, in the huge, throbbing length of him as he buried himself in her over and over; in the tight pinched nipples that needed to feel the nip of his teeth, the deep pressure of his sucking; in her clit throbbing and pulsing at the apex of her sex, tortured by his constant attention.

He pushed her higher and higher yet somehow kept her from climaxing. She writhed against him, rose into each thrust, impaling herself as much as being impaled. She wanted to come, damn him. She needed release.

He slammed into her and ground himself against her. He grasped her clit and pinched, not once but over and over again, milking the small protrusion.

Genae screamed. Her body tried to arch but she couldn't move, pinned beneath his great weight.

He kept grinding against her, into her, never losing contact with her clit. She writhed and gasped, cried and swore. Her inner muscles tightened, tightened more, clenched and she screamed again.

Kai shouted, his cum spewing from him in great spurts of hot, sticky fluid. He collapsed on top of her. He stayed imbedded in her as she quivered and the deep clenching continued.

Shocked, her mind was only slowly able to focus. She stroked his back and consciously forced herself to breathe. What happened? He'd had her many times before but this time she felt *taken*. Branded. Claimed? There weren't words to describe what she felt. It was as if he had possessed her. She closed her eyes as her body shook under the lash of an aftershock. Possessed. Yes. That was what he'd done, possessed her.

She fought to take a deep breath against his weight crushing her into the bed. Her legs had fallen to either side of him and she couldn't move them if she wanted to. The only reason she could force her arms to move was to comfort him. And why he would need comforting she didn't know, but she could feel that he did.

It was that and the fact that she couldn't quit touching him. Her nipples poked into his furry chest. His back was

smooth, the heavy muscles rippling under her stroking hands. His breath was slowly returning to normal as his heart beat against her in a deep, steady rhythm.

"Are you all right?" His voice, a low rumble, made his chest vibrate against her. His breath was hot against her neck and he didn't lift his head to look at her.

"I'm ... good." She was more than good but again she didn't have the words to describe the deep satisfaction and wonder she was feeling. She was his. If she'd had any lingering doubts, they were gone. She belonged to Kai.

She thrust her fingers into his golden mane and massaged his scalp. "What happened?" Her voice was soft and caressing.

He pushed up on his forearms, the position thrusting his pelvis more tightly against hers as he looked down at her. His gaze burned into her, the stark emotion painful to look at. His soul was bared to her, and it hurt deep inside to know he cared for her like he did. Without words she knew and it was the most precious and most terrifying gift she'd ever been given. She wanted to keep him safe, to guard his heart, to never let him be hurt but she wasn't going to have that chance. She was going to be the one who destroyed him.

The sudden ache in her chest threatened to steal her breath again.

"I woke up and I thought I'd lost you."

His words tore at her heart. He'd thought he'd lost her. What would he do when he did lose her?

"You didn't lose me," she whispered. She wanted to reassure him. She wanted to be able to tell him everything

would be fine, but she couldn't. She wouldn't lie to him and she couldn't lie to herself even though she wanted to.

"Roll over." Her voice was quiet.

He didn't move, just continued to stare down at her.

"Roll over." She frowned at him as she pushed at his broad chest. Her fingers flexed into his hard muscles as she relished the feel of him, so warm and solid, larger than life really. He was the kind of male who became a legend.

He returned her frown with interest but levered himself off her, his cock pulling free of her tight sheath with an audible pop. Genae winced, his cock dragging against her swollen inner tissues almost painful and yet at the same time innervating.

He settled on his side and she had to push again to get him to lie down on his back. When he returned from fighting the League destroyers ... She shuddered as the word—if—tried to intrude. He *would* return, and when he did, she wouldn't be here. Everything she had to give, she had to give now. For them, there would be no tomorrow.

She traced his face with shaking hands, memorizing every curve and hollow. She wanted everything about him, how he looked, smelled, tasted, felt and sounded, so completely burned into her subconscious that even when anesthetized for the retrieval, he would fill her senses.

A smile tugged at her lips. He was still the most beautiful male she'd ever seen and that was saying a lot considering all the VanDai males she'd seen. They were a magnificent race and Kai was the most impressive of them all. He made her want to stop what she was doing.

"Why did you steal your father's plan?"

She jumped, startled by his question. Had she spoken aloud? Was he reading her mind? It was more likely they were thinking the same things because of what was coming. And hadn't she asked herself the same question a thousand times?

"When I found out, I thought about ignoring it, pretending I'd never heard of it, trying to make myself believe it couldn't be true. That would have been the easiest. Just go on with my life and never look outside my own narrow existence."

"Why didn't you?"

That was the harder question. Her heavy lashes lowered, hiding her eyes from him but hiding wasn't something she did well and she wasn't going to hide any part of herself from him.

Chin lifted, she met his intent stare straight on. "I couldn't have lived with myself if I did nothing."

"And?"

She closed her eyes and took a deep, steadying breath. "And I had to do something for my brother." She opened her eyes, met his steady stare and smiled.

"Your brother?"

"Yes. The beautiful little boy my *father* didn't let live." Her hands fisted and she glared at Kai. How could a man kill his own child? How could he hate enough to destroy his own flesh and blood?

Kai grasped her head and pulled her face down to his. His lips were hard, forcing hers apart so his tongue could plunge deep. She was breathless when he released her, thinking of

nothing but him. She started to rise off the bed but he clasped her to him.

"Come with me." She tried to push away from him again.

Kai's eyes narrowed in warning. "I want you right here in my arms."

She glowered down at him. "I want you in the bathing pool with me so I can do wicked things to your body."

His brows lifted. "Wicked?"

She felt the heat rush into her face but didn't let embarrassment stop her as she smiled. "Wonderfully wicked."

Kai sat up, lifted her off the bed and quickly stood beside her. She couldn't look away from his half erect penis. It made her mouth water and the wet heat between her legs run. She'd never dreamed she would enjoy a man's cock in her mouth, his taste as he spilled himself in her. With Kai, the thought made her burn. She wanted everything with him. Everything in every way.

Taking his hand, she led him to the huge pool and took the steps into it first. His free hand cupped her ass and squeezed as she touched the bottom of the pool and the clean gel rippled just below her breasts.

She wriggled against him and started to lean back before she caught herself. This was for his pleasure, not her own, though she would enjoy every moment. Touching him was a pure sensual delight.

With one last wriggle of her bottom, she turned to face him. He towered over her. His shoulders were so wide they made her feel small. She ran her hands over the hard planes

of his chest and closed her eyes. His skin was rougher than hers, the hair on his chest more furry than coarse.

And his smell...

She took a deep breath, trying to inhale the warm musk of maleness that was uniquely his. It was a wonder that everywhere he went, he didn't end up with women throwing themselves on him. Given half a chance, she would.

"What are you doing?"

She looked up from smelling him and had to smile at the quizzical expression on his face. "Memorizing you. How you feel. How you smell. How you look."

"Everything about you is fixed in my mind." His eyes caressed her face, skimmed down her neck and chest and lingered on her breasts. He murmured a low sound of satisfaction as her nipples hardened, their color deepening as blood rushed into them.

Her hands rose to her breasts and she cupped them, lifting them to offer to him. She licked her lips as she looked at his mouth. He lowered his head and sipped one breast into his mouth, the pressure light, his tongue flicking the swollen tip.

Her head fell back and she clasped his head with her hands. She felt every gentle tug, every stroke of his tongue from her nipple to her heels. Her sheath clenched and her fingers massaged his scalp.

He moved to her other breast and sucked all around her nipple, drawing on her flesh but never taking the pebbled nub.

Desperate, making a low keening sound she'd never heard herself make before, she reached down and grasped his cock.

If he was going to torment her she was going to return the torment.

She wrapped one hand around him and pumped. She used the hard, fast pace she knew he liked. Her other hand weighed and played with his balls. The clean gel left no trace of pre-cum but in her mind she could picture the welling of silky white fluid in the slit of his broad head.

"Kai—"

He latched onto her breast, stalling her words and thoughts and making her cry out. Her body jerked. Her hands tightened on his cock. He sucked hard. His hips thrust at her, his cock twitched in her fisted hand.

Genae grasped him tighter, her lips drawn back and her head moving from side to side. His mouth attached to her breast, sucking, pulling, crushing, was more than she could stand. She grimaced as the pulling sensation arrowed down to her womb. She melted inside as every muscle in her body knotted.

Her mouth opened, her cry silent as a fierce orgasm ravaged her body, driven by his mouth on her breast.

Kai finally released her. He didn't want to, but his cock throbbed with the need for attention. He knew his appetite was driven by fear but he didn't care. He was VanDai and he would face even this straight on.

Genae lay half bowed over his arm. His mouth curved up in a satisfied smile as he looked at her. Her left breast was red from his fierce attention, her nipple swollen and almost bruised looking.

His cock jerked between them. He wanted her hands on him again. He wanted more than that. He wanted her mouth.

Lifting her in his arms, he strode to the edge of the pool. It was slightly shallower there. The perfect height for him to sit on the rim as she loved him with her mouth.

He lowered her legs and held her until he was sure her feet were solidly placed on the bottom of the pool and she could keep herself upright. He took a step away from her, turned and levered himself up to sit on the side of the pool.

He studied her face as he grasped his cock. Her eyes were dark and dreamy. Her expression soft, but it was her mouth that caught and held his attention. Full and softly pink, he knew it would become puffy and red after she sucked him, her lips rubbing against his cock as her mouth swallowed him.

She licked her lips and a shudder raced through him. His balls tightened. He looked down and saw pearly liquid crowning the great head of his penis.

He opened his mouth to tell her that drop of life was for her but he never got the chance. She swooped down, her tongue swirled his essence from his cock, and she swallowed him deep. Deeper than she'd ever taken him before.

Kai braced himself on his arms, elbows locked, and watched her. Her head bobbed as she tried to swallow him. Her lips rode up and down his length, stretched by his girth.

His breath broke as she retreated, sucking and licking the head of his cock as if it were candy. He fought the great spurts of cum threatening to explode from him but fed her with small wellings he couldn't withhold.

The sight of her lapping up his offering, licking and suckling, the sound of her happy murmurs and noisy slurping drove him to the brink.

"Take me deeper," he ordered and grasped her head to ensure she did it. The beast inside rose and he thrust into her mouth, fucking her with fierce, short jabs.

"Suck me," he directed, his voice guttural, and groaned when she did it.

"Suck harder."

His face contorted as she tried to suck his soul from his cock. He grabbed her hand, forced it around his cock and held it in place as he rode into her mouth. His fingers laced with hers, both squeezing as her mouth took him and he thrust.

"Yes!" He yelled his release as the inferno raced through him. He pulsed into her mouth, came harder as he watched her take him. Even when he was spent, she sucked, working his softening flesh with mouth and lips and hands.

Kai let his head drop to his chest. If someday he forgot everything else, he knew he would remember this moment. Sated, content, even happy. His woman giving him everything and the world around them quiet in spite of what was to come.

He kneaded her scalp and slowly drew her head back, pulling his cock from her avid mouth. She murmured a protest and he wanted to howl his own. In her mouth or her cunt was where he wanted his cock to be.

His heart rate settled as he lifted Genae out of the pool to sit beside him. She immediately leaned into him, her eyes drifting shut. He laid her back on the floor, his hands

smoothing over her breasts and stomach when she mumbled a protest without opening her eyes.

Slowly, his legs more unsteady than they had ever been before, Kai rose to his feet. He admired Genae stretched naked at his feet, lust kicking hard and fast. He savored the burn of it even as he cursed his undisciplined body. They had only hours. If either of them was to survive what was to come, they needed sleep, not more sex.

Reaching down, he scooped her up in his arms and strode to the bed. He settled her before climbing onto the bed and settling himself beside her. When he had her wrapped in his arms, held tight to his chest and one of his legs pinning both of hers, he breathed a contented sigh.

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Chapter Seven

The Gathering

A strident tone filled the room. Kai felt Genae jump but his arms tight around her and his leg pinning her to the bed kept her from moving.

"Kai. The *Zolsum* has arrived. Ryvn is transporting the Mriln healer to the surface. They'll be here within the hour." Paladin's voice was like a physical presence in the room.

"How far out are the League ships?"

He watched Genae's eyes close and her face crumple. She wrapped her arms around him and held tight. She cared, and that was good. She was afraid, and that wasn't.

"The destroyers will be in orbit by the time the retrieval begins."

Kai crushed Genae against him. The Mriln healer would be working on her heart. A heart that had already been weakened. His and the other two VanDai ships would have to keep the destroyers away from the planet. Even one strike could make the difference between life and death for Genae if it disrupted the process at a critical moment.

His eyes narrowed as he stared at the ceiling as if he could see through it and into space where the League ships were. With the information Genae carried, the balance of power in the universe was about to change.

Deep satisfaction welled inside him and pride in the woman he held. His woman. Because of her, everything the VanDai

had done to keep the president from wresting power from the planets of the League and destroying lives would mean something.

"We'll meet you in the communications room." Kai loosened his grip on Genae as he spoke. They would have to be ready. Three destroyers against three VanDai vessels. It would be interesting.

He rolled off the bed, stood up and reached for Genae. He lifted her in his arms, kissed her once; a hard, thorough claiming of lips, tongue and teeth. When he lifted his head, his expression was arrogantly satisfied. He let her legs slide down his body, being sure she stayed in contact with him the whole time, her belly prodded by his erection.

Genae stepped back and he let her go. He was amazed at the rush of color into her cheeks. That she could be embarrassed by anything, especially something as simple as his hard cock poking her belly, amazed him.

"What should I wear?"

Kai's eyes darkened with instant arousal. A simple question and it made him throb. He'd have to learn to control that when they were in public. A muscle jumped in his jaw as he looked down at her breasts with their swollen nipples. He reached out and cupped the full globes. He rolled the distended tips with his thumbs. "You should wear me." He squeezed her tender flesh, making her breath catch and her nipples stand out even more.

Genae's head fell back and her eyes closed. Her breathing was fast and shallow and when she spoke, she sounded

breathless. "I don't think that would work. The healer might find it hard to work if you're attached to my breasts."

Kai released her breasts, ran his hands down her sides and around her flanks so he could cup and squeeze her ass as he drew her tight against him once more. Her skin was smooth and soft, her body small and tight. He would have to keep a tight rein on her when this was over or someone would steal her away.

He pushed the disturbing thought away. No one would take Genae anywhere without him.

"The Mrlin are inventive. The healer could find a way."

Genae kissed his chest before pushing against him so he would let her go. "You still haven't answered my question of what to wear. I don't have any clothes here and I don't want to run around naked *or* wearing you."

Kai's hands clenched but he let her get away. He strode into Paladin's secret room and came back with clothes for both of them. Genae didn't ask how women's clothes had come to be in Paladin's room and Kai didn't volunteer the information.

As covertly as she could, Genae watched Kai dress while she got herself into the loose, flowing gown he'd found for her. She loved the way his muscles bunched and rippled when he moved. She bit her lip to keep from smiling when he had to tuck his erection into his pants. When he grimaced, she couldn't help but laugh.

Kai's expression was dangerous when he looked at her. "You think it's funny?"

Genae, still smiling, nodded. He might look dangerous but she knew better. He would never hurt her and he would do anything in his power to make sure nothing else hurt her.

That thought wiped the smile from her face. She couldn't let him find out how dangerous the retrieval was. Especially not now. His attention had to stay focused completely on the League destroyers.

"What is it?"

Hard hands clamped down on her shoulders. Startled, she blinked up at him. "What?"

"You looked sad, almost as if you were in pain. I'll call the healer to look at that cardiac stabilizer."

She caught his arm as he started to turn away. He looked over his shoulder at her.

"I'm fine, Kai. I was thinking about the destroyers. It wasn't my heart."

Kai turned, wrapped his arms around her and held her tight to his chest. She felt the instant hardening of his cock but neither one of them acknowledged it. This was a time for reassurances, not sex.

"Have faith in your mate. If I didn't think we had a chance, you would be light years away from here. If I couldn't protect you from the League, you wouldn't be here."

Genae smiled and rubbed her face against his chest. One thing Kai didn't lack was confidence. Then again, why would he? From what she'd seen, there hadn't been anything that could stand in his way. Maybe the same would be true now.

"Ready?"

Stepping back, she straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin and nodded. It was time. Everything that had happened had brought her to this moment. If...

No. She wasn't going to think if. When the information was retrieved, her father's plan would be stopped. So many people had already died. There would be no others.

Kai walked to the door and disabled the security lock. As it slid open, she walked toward him out of the room. The two VanDai guards stepped in front of her, barring her from leaving and anyone from getting close to her.

"To the communications room."

Both men nodded at Kai's curt words. They turned and marched off.

Kai's hand settled at the base of Genae's spine and urged her forward. Warmth seeped into her from his hand and she realized how cold she'd become. This was it. Impossible as it seemed, this was it.

* * * *

They walked through the huge corridors and people stepped out of their way. Genae didn't blame them. The two VanDai guards leading the way looked as if they wanted an excuse to fight.

She looked up at Kai and shivered. His expression was just as harsh as the other two VanDai yet his hand at the small of her back was gentle. He always made her feel safe.

The two VanDai stopped outside the communications room. Kai urged Genae through the surprisingly narrow door and into a room that had her gasping for breath even as she

rubbed her arms against the chill air. The room was filled, almost literally, from floor to ceiling with equipment. Aisles too narrow for more than one VanDai to walk down at a time wended through the machine canyons.

And it was cold. Chill bumps rose on her arms and her nipples hardened to painful points. Not the most comfortable of things to happen in a room full of observant VanDai males. She grimaced but managed to keep from crossing her arms over her chest and drawing even more attention to herself.

Paladin came toward them out of the maze. His shoulders were canted at an awkward angle, too wide to walk through the narrow space without turning slightly.

"How long until the healer arrives?" Kai asked.

Paladin grunted as he wedged his shoulders between two pieces of equipment to face them. "Twenty minutes."

"We won't have time to get to the docking port and up to the ships before the destroyers reach Sai-two space."

"We'll use molecular transportation."

Kai nodded, apparently not surprised while Genae was shocked. Kai had explained to her that the inability for anyone to molecularly transport to the surface was the backbone of Sai-sen-Sai security. Yet now, when League destroyers were entering their space, they were going to disable their greatest security measure.

Even as she thought it, she wanted to kick herself. If the League won and the planet was destroyed, there wouldn't be a need to keep anyone from transporting down.

Minutes dragged by as she squeezed herself against the door to keep from getting smashed by the huge VanDai males moving around the room.

She had no idea how much time passed when the door behind her opened and she almost fell through. Hard hands caught her and set her on her feet. She looked over her shoulder and up and her breath caught in her throat. The VanDai male standing over her was the most sensual looking being she'd ever seen. His mane was black, his eyes topaz and his skin bronze. His lips were thin with an almost cruel cast that only added to his dangerous sexual air.

"You're mine." Kai spun her and wrapped his arms around her, her back to his chest.

Genae's lips twitched but she managed to keep from smiling. He had to know there was no reason to be jealous but his possessiveness sent warm thrills chasing through her.

"Was I drooling?" she asked, her voice a whisper.

His fingers flexed against her stomach. "Almost."

"You can't blame me," she murmured. "He's beautiful."

Sharp teeth nipped her neck as his claws teased her stomach.

"You're sexier," she assured him. She wanted to rub herself against him but there was no way to do it without everyone seeing.

"If you two are finished with your foreplay, I need to speak to Paladin."

Genae gasped at the beautiful stranger's cold tone and harsh words.

"Frustrating trip?" Kai asked.

Genae looked from Kai to the stranger and back. There was an undertone to Kai's voice she didn't understand but apparently the other male did. He grimaced and nodded.

"Let me introduce you to Llaryn, the Mriln healer I brought back with me." He stepped to one side and motioned to the woman behind him.

"I didn't mean to be a frustration to you, Ryvn."

Genae was speechless. The woman had the melodic voice of all her species. She was tall, over six feet by at least two inches, yet she was the most fragile looking woman Genae had ever seen. The most fragile and the most beautiful.

Her eyes were huge, the pupils a darker shade of lavender than the iris, another Mriln trait. Her elaborately plaited hair fell to her waist in a flowing fall of black silk. She was pale, her features made up of gentle curves and angles that made Genae think of angels.

Ryvn merely growled a wordless response to the Mriln healer's words.

"Frustrating indeed," Kai said as Ryvn forced his way past them.

Genae elbowed him in the side and winced. There was no give to the man. Every inch of him was solid muscle.

"Paladin." Ryvn's tone sounded angry and overly loud in the confined space. "Your Mriln healer is here."

Paladin's roar came from the other side of the room. "Get what you need and stand by to molecularly transport back to your ship. The destroyers are closing in."

Without a word, Ryvn spun and stormed from the room.

"Kai. Be ready to transport in the next ten minutes."

"I'm ready now."

Paladin looked thunderous as he strode from the dark recesses of the room. "Get your woman and the healer to the procedure lab and get back here. I'll have Eln meet you there." He looked through the open door and froze.

Genae leaned back against Kai, her startled gaze moving back and forth between Paladin and the Mriln healer.

Paladin walked forward until he stood in front of the Mriln woman. He was well within her personal space and Genae was sure the woman could feel the heat rolling off Paladin's huge body. He towered over her, his whole body screaming possession, his eyes devouring her.

Llaryn's expression was a mix of panic and fear. Her lashes lowered and her head bowed. It was like seeing a flower close in on itself and Genae couldn't blame her. Just by his size, Paladin was overwhelming.

"I'll take them to the procedure suite." Kai stepped forward, his body pressing into Genae's and forcing her forward too.

"I'll go with you." Paladin gestured to his left. When the Mriln healer turned, he moved to her side and his hand settled low on her back. "This way." His voice was a low, rumbling caress.

Genae shivered and Kai pinched her. She looked up and smiled at him. There really was no one else in the universe she wanted but Kai.

It took only minutes for them to reach the room where the extraction would take place. Genae bit her lip to keep from smiling as Llaryn tried to step away from Paladin. The woman

looked everywhere but at the big VanDai. She kept moving away from him and he just kept following her.

"Would you have done that to me?" Genae asked on a whisper.

"I did do that," Kai reminded her, his mouth brushing her ear.

Genae smiled and shook her head. He was right. During their time on YelAsta, onboard his ship, even since arriving on Sai-two, he was constantly touching her, close enough so she would feel his heat and be enveloped in his scent. Even now his arm was around her, his chin resting on top of her head.

"The poor woman doesn't stand a chance."

"No," Kai agreed, "she doesn't."

She wanted to hit him for his arrogance and at the same time she wanted to hug him.

Ryvyn strode into the room, a small case in one hand. "Here are your supplies," he told Llaryn as he set the case on a tabletop. His brows rose as he saw Paladin stalking the Mriln healer but he didn't say anything about it. "The techs say the molecular shield is ready to come down on your order, Paladin."

Llaryn moved away from Paladin. He visibly tensed but this time he didn't follow her. "There will be guards posted outside the room. At any hint of trouble, let them know and they will contact me."

Llaryn didn't respond and after a moment, Paladin turned and strode out of the room. Ryvyn followed close behind.

Kai, his hands gentle, turned Genae to face him. His face, as usual, gave nothing away but the look in his eyes made

her throat tighten. There was love there, and fear. Not for himself, she knew, but for her. If he could take her place, she knew he would.

His hand settled over her left breast as his gaze locked with hers.

Tears filled Genae's eyes and for once she didn't care. "I love you."

Kai leaned down and his mouth took hers. It was slow and hot. His lips pressed to hers, his tongue entering her mouth, retreating, his teeth nipping her bottom lip before he suckled it and finally released her.

He stepped back and pinned the Mrlin healer with his burning golden gaze. "Remember, healer, it isn't only her life and heart you hold in your hands." Without another word or a backward glance, he strode away.

Genae bit her lip to keep from calling him back. Her choices had been made before she ever met him. She had a promise to keep, to herself and more importantly, to a child who'd never had the chance to live.

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Chapter Eight

Fighting for Life

With the exodus of all the VanDai, it was as if the air had been let out of the room. Genae slumped where she stood. Until that moment, she hadn't realized how much energy Kai generated just by being in the room.

"Are all VanDai like those three? Like the others on board the *Zolsum*?"

Genae nodded as she looked at Llaryn. "All the ones I've met."

The beautiful Mriln woman seemed to think about it for a moment before shaking her head, the motion seeming somehow elegant and graceful. "It's fortunate I'll be leaving soon after the retrieval." She walked forward, her gait flowing, more gliding than stepping. She took Genae's hands in her long, slender ones and met her eyes directly.

"You were told the odds of a successful retrieval?"

"Aevyn said getting the information back had proven very successful."

"And your survival?"

Genae's eyes didn't waver but a tremor shook her hands caught in Llaryn's grasp. She took a deep, shuddering breath and nodded. She didn't want to die but if that was the price to be paid, she would pay it. "He told me my chances of surviving the retrieval were less than one tenth of a percent."

"Yet you agreed? Does Kai know?"

Genae jumped. She turned to glare at Eln. "Do you always listen in on conversations that are none of your business?"

"I'm Llaryn's second in this procedure." He glowered down at Genae. "Now answer my question. You agreed to this?"

She nodded.

"You were fully aware of the consequences?"

She nodded again.

"Does Kai know?"

"No. And you're not going to tell him."

"Do you understand what a VanDai's mate means to him?"

Genae closed her eyes against the pain tearing at her. She couldn't think about Kai and what he would feel. She would have oblivion but he ... he would be the one left behind.

She opened her eyes and faced Eln. "I know what he means to me, how I would feel if he were the one to die. I wouldn't want to live. That's why he can't know." She stepped forward and took the healer's hands in hers. "He has to be focused on living."

Eln looked at Llaryn. "Did she tell you about the damage done to her heart?"

Llaryn frowned and stepped forward. "No."

"A VanDai woman used a cardiac stabilizer to try and stop her heart. The only thing keeping her alive is the same instrument that almost killed her. For all I know there may be no information left for you to retrieve."

"When did this happen?"

Eln explained when it happened and exactly what happened. "Her heart needs to be repaired. Whatever this *information* is, I'm sure it can be gotten another way."

Genae shook her head. "The only places this information exists are in my heart and in the president's head."

"The president?"

"Yes." Genae turned her back on him and faced Llaryn.

"Can you do it?"

"I can retrieve and even reconstruct the viral DNA strands, yes. I don't know if I can save you."

"If it comes down to a choice between my life and the information, get the information."

Llaryn nodded.

Genae studied her, looking for any hint of hesitation. Once she was out, she wouldn't know what was happening and she needed to know she could trust the Mriln healer.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Then tell me what to do."

El'n watched as the two women worked together. One small and delicate, the other tall and fragile. How the fate of so many had come to rest in their hands, he would never know. He wouldn't disturb the precarious balance of fate. Kai would find out when he returned if the procedure had been successful or not. And if he didn't return, it wouldn't matter anyway. They'd all be dead.

With those fatalistic thoughts, he stepped forward and began to help with the preparations.

* * * *

"Ready?"

Kai nodded to the tech manning the molecular transport controls. As the room disappeared and the *Therik* materialized around him, his thoughts centered solely on Genae's safety. The League could not be allowed to make even one strike against the planet. The retrieval process could not be interrupted. He should have called a halt to it until the League vessels had been dealt with.

His jaw tightened as he strode out of the room with a curt nod to the tech manning the controls. He and Paladin had talked strategy briefly. When Ryvn had been briefed on their plans, he had agreed; attack with the intent to kill. No engaging the enemy. No trying to outmaneuver or disable. Each one of them would go for the kill.

He strode onto the command deck and a quick glance showed him everyone at their post. He seated himself in the command chair and swung the command arm around in front of him. His fingers moved with speed and surety over the interactive screen. Paladin's intelligence had the three destroyers entering Sai-two space from the Roithen quadrant.

"Set a course for Dysyn." He named the last planet of the Roithen quadrant. They wouldn't wait for the League ships above Sai-two. The three League vessels would never get within viewing distance of the planet.

He settled back in his seat and watched the huge view screen that dominated the front section of the command deck. Planets, suns, moons, stars, the universe lay all around him. He'd always loved the freedom of space, yet now all he wanted was to be on Sai-two.

He sat forward and reviewed the plan for the coming battle in his mind. He could do nothing for Genae on Sai-two but he could keep the League away from her in space.

* * * *

"Are you ready?"

Genae looked back at Eln and nodded when what she really wanted to do was tell him an emphatic no. Consciously she relaxed her hands and tried to take a deep breath. It felt like a huge weight was sitting on her chest and she wanted it to go away.

"The mind is as responsible for health as the body." Llaryn pressed something to her forehead and another to each of her temples. "These are neural stimulators. You won't remember when you wake up but while you're unconscious only your most joyful memories will fill your mind."

Genae's lips pressed together and her brows furrowed. Joyful memories? She couldn't think of one. She'd been happy occasionally as a child but mostly she'd been content. She'd always been alone, the daughter of the most powerful man in the universe.

The closest she'd come to knowing joy was her time with Kai. A smile lifted her lips as the neural stimulators began to work.

Llaryn looked at Eln, her lavender eyes solemn. "Tell me if her body starts to falter. I won't be able to monitor anything but her heart."

Eln nodded, his expression grim. Llaryn checked all of her equipment—tiny instruments that attached to her fingertips

that had fibers allowing her to work on a submolecular level. Her scanning microscope goggles and the router that would keep Genae's blood flowing as she worked on her heart.

It took only seconds to sterilize her hands, the equipment and Genae's bared chest. The damage to Genae's heart hadn't been as extensive as Eln had feared but it added another complication to an already impossible surgery.

Llaryn gently reprimanded herself. There was no surgery that was impossible, only the ones that hadn't been done successfully yet. She would be successful today.

Eln kept one eye on the monitor tracking Kai's woman's vitals. He also kept a close watch on Llaryn. The initial part of the surgery was nothing special. She cracked the chest, set the router and readied the heart. At that point, the Mriln woman placed submolecular tips on each of her fingers and he learned why the Mriln were considered wizards of medicine.

Llaryn's attention was focused solely on the woman in front of her. Never once did a thought enter her mind except what she was doing. Time was meaningless. Her fingers flew, removing DNA strands, reknitting the ends together. She found the electrical pathways disrupted by the cardiac stabilizer and meticulously repaired each cell.

Her fingers cramped and she glanced at the timer she'd set. Her heart jumped. She'd been working for two hours. That only left four hours and she'd done the barest fraction of Genae's heart.

"Eln?" She met the older man's narrowed gaze.

"She's weakening but it's not critical yet."

Llaryn nodded once and went back to work. Her fingers flew, almost faster than she could see them. She closed her mind to the time and focused on her task. Her body seemed to fall away. Energy coursed through her, leaving her free of any limitations.

Eln watched, stunned by what he saw. If Mriln healers were wizards, this woman was more. If Genae stood a chance, it was because Llaryn was her healer.

* * * *

Kai watched the space close between the *Therik* and the League destroyers. He could see Paladin's ship, the *Kadre*, and Ryvn's ship, the *Zolsum*, to his right.

Laser fire sliced through space in a brilliant flash. Paladin's ship shuddered but held.

"Get us within weapons' range. Return fire at will." Kai's voice was harsh as he studied each move made by every ship on the command screen in front of him. His mind calculated as fast as his computer and he adjusted speed and direction even as the commands blipped onto the screen.

The *Therik* shuddered as laser fire raked their shields. Kai recalculated the distance. They had to be closer. The beam had to be tight or the disruption would be too extensive and they couldn't risk that. An ever expanding hole in space would make the problems they now faced insignificant.

"The lead destroyer is firing up her Woyer."

Kai looked at his weapons specialist. The Woyer was a world destroyer. "How long before she can fire?"

"Ten minutes. No more."

Grimly, Kai turned back to his screen. He needed half that time to be close enough to discharge his own weapons. Blinding streaks of power ripped through space. More shots hit than missed on both sides. The *Therik's* warning system began to shriek. Their shields wouldn't survive many more direct hits. He could read the destroyers' signatures as well as the other two VanDai ships and knew the other VanDai were all in similar shape.

"Faster, you bastards." His voice was a low growl as he watched the distance between them close. He grabbed the arms of his chair as the ship bucked under the lash of laser fire. A little closer and all would be won or lost and one way or another, Sai-sen-Sai and every life on it would be safe. He, Paladin and Ryvn would see to that.

* * * *

Llaryn blinked hard to clear her blurring eyes. The muscles of her neck and shoulders burned. Her fingers ached and threatened to spasm. She ignored every discomfort and limitation as she battled time and the too-fast deterioration of the heart she worked on.

"She's critical."

The VanDai's words drove her harder. She wouldn't lose this woman. What she had gone through to make it this far was a matter of speculation but if even a tenth of it were true, she deserved more than to die handing over the information she'd risked everything to make known.

"I won't lose her."

Elm wasn't sure she even realized she'd spoken aloud. Her ability to focus amazed him. Three and a half hours into the surgery and she hadn't even paused. That Genae still lived amazed him even more. Her body had come close to shutting down more than once only to have a surge in her vital signs. The woman's will to live was beyond anything he'd ever seen. If she survived, it would be almost as much her own doing as Llaryn's.

* * * *

Kai cursed as he watched Paladin and Ryvn being pounded. His own ship bucked and shuddered with each strike. They fired back but they didn't have the laser power of the League ships.

Pure white light flashed under the belly of the lead destroyer. They were firing up their world destroyer. The charge would take out all three VanDai ships.

The muscles in his jaw worked as Kai calculated their distance. They had to be closer or their own weapons would be ineffective. It would be only minutes until the destroyer could fire its weapon.

"Kai. Ryvn." Paladin's voice crackled through the room, interrupted by laser strikes. "We'll use their charge against them. The dimension wave should follow the power trail back to their ship."

Kai's lips thinned and his jaw tightened. It was a daring move and their only chance. It would take split second timing and they would all have to act as one. His ship shuddered and faltered.

"Divert all power to the forward shields." His expression grim, he watched the light under the lead destroyer start to blaze. He pulled his control panel around and ran the initial sequence for his weapon.

"Wait for the strike," Paladin ordered.

Kai's hands closed over the arms of his chair and gripped tight as another strike threatened to spin them. Part of each blast was getting through his shields. The damage was extensive but it would hold. He wouldn't allow anything else. Genae's life was at stake.

Light flashed.

"Now!" Paladin's voice sounded like thunder.

Kai jabbed the control panel and activated his weapon. The view screen radiated white. Everything froze.

Black lashed back along the line of pure, pulsating power the League vessel had released. A lightless void wrapped around the lead destroyer, caught the other two in its rolling wave and collapsed in on itself. Where the destroyers had been, only empty space remained.

For one moment there was silence then Paladin's voice filled the void.

"Let's go home." Paladin's voice was quiet, almost subdued.

Kai understood his leader's feelings. They had destroyed three of the most powerful vessels the universe had ever seen. Their own weapon, its power tested in combat for the first time, had proven itself.

"Get us home." His expression grim, Kai leaned back in his chair. Damage reports scrolled across the screen of his

control panel. The damage was extensive but the *Therik* would hold until they got back to Sai-two. Until he got back to Genae.

He started to lift his hand to open communications with the planet but stopped. He would find out from the healers in person how the procedure had gone. Good or bad, he didn't want to hear the news on board his ship with his crew listening and nowhere to go to vent whatever emotions he would be feeling.

With grim determination he focused on his ship. His fingers flew over the control panel as he directed what repairs could be done while they were in space.

* * * *

Llaryn's eyes teared as she fought to keep the woman on the table alive. She didn't know anymore if the tears were from exhaustion or emotion and she didn't care. She'd never fought so hard for anything. As she'd worked, the battle had become personal. She would not lose this woman. Yet the faster she moved, the harder she fought, the closer the woman came to dying. She paused to wipe the sweat from her forehead and silently cursed the loss of seconds.

El'n watched, awed as Llaryn reconstructed Genae's heart. She was no longer just removing viral DNA, repairing the genetic code and moving on, she was building tissue, rebuilding DNA one building block at a time but faster than he could see.

He glanced at the monitor and his shoulders slumped. The pit of his stomach burned. "We're losing her."

The flickering motions of Llaryn's fingers never faltered.
"Increase the load of the recirculator."

Eln opened his mouth to protest but quickly closed it again. Increasing the amount of blood flowing through the recirculator would decrease the blood flow through the heart. The lack of oxygen to the tissue would increase the rate of the heart's deterioration. The Mriln healer had to know that.

"Do it." Her order was quiet but laced with steel.

Eln did as she said. It wouldn't change the outcome. The result of the procedure was already set. Genae was dying. Not even the Mriln wizard operating on her could save her.

Llaryn's fingers slowed and finally stopped. She lifted her hands from Genae's chest, removed the fingertips and took off her goggles. When she looked up at Eln, her lavender eyes were clear, her expression serene.

"Leave me with her for a moment."

He nodded, turned and walked away.

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Chapter Nine

Heartbreak and Homecomings

"Disable the molecular transport inhibitor," Kai ordered for the second time. When he got his hands on the tech manning the MTI, he was going to rip his throat out.

"You don't have the authorization to..."

"I do." Paladin's voice whipped through the communications system like a lash. "Disable the inhibitor."

"Yes, sir."

Kai gritted his teeth. His hands clenched hard enough on the arms of his command chair to bend metal. With a vicious curse, he launched himself out of the command chair. In four strides he was across the room. Minutes later he was in the molecular transport room. The MTI tech rushed in behind him.

Kai closed himself in the transport cubicle. "Is the inhibitor down?"

The young VanDai nodded.

"Then transport me," Kai snapped. His claws flashed out, fully extended. The back of his neck prickled. Unease clawed through his belly. Something was very wrong.

Before he could make the order a second time, the *Therik* disappeared and the molecular transport center in the Palladium materialized around him. He ripped open the front closure of the cubicle and started running. He wasn't surprised when Paladin caught up with him but didn't pause

to acknowledge him. Something was wrong. Very, very wrong.

As he rounded the corner to the procedure suite, he saw Eln stepping out of the room. He looked gray, his shoulders slumped.

Killing rage exploded inside Kai. His claws extended and his fingers flexed as he raced toward the healer. He slid to a stop in front of the other VanDai.

"Genae?"

Eln looked at Kai, his eyes dull, and shook his head.

Kai roared and charged the door.

* * * *

Llaryn waited until the door closed behind Eln. She looked at Genae's motionless face, the color seeping from her cheeks as life drained away. She wouldn't let the woman die. Not when there was another choice.

Meticulously she removed the router and closed Genae's chest. By every vow and tenet of her people, she was forbidden to use the true art of the Mriln on an outsider. She had always agreed with the laws her people had created for their own safety. But she couldn't let the woman die. Even if it cost her own life, Genae would live.

Placing her hands over Genae's chest, her left hand over Genae's heart, Llaryn focused her life's energy into her hands. The door opened and the VanDai, Kai, stormed through, his expression murderous. The big VanDai leader ran in behind him, followed closely by Eln.

Llaryn closed her eyes and sank into herself. If she could have pulled back in time to live, that option had now been taken from her. She had revealed the nature of the Mriln to outsiders. Her life was forfeit.

* * * *

Kai stared. He didn't know what he was seeing. The Mriln woman glowed, her lavender eyes lit from within before they closed. Her hands, pressed to Genae's chest, pulsed with golden light.

Eln rushed forward to the monitor. "It's not possible," he muttered. "She's alive."

Kai felt as if a fist slammed into his gut. He looked at Genae, watched as color seeped back into her face. When she blinked, the strength drained from his legs and he went to his knees beside the table, her small hand caught in his.

"I take it the good guys won."

Her voice was soft, sounded almost rusty but was the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard. He raised his head, his eyes moving restlessly over her face. The drama going on around them couldn't penetrate the moment.

"You doubted it?" His brows rose and he tried to look arrogant.

She smiled and shook her head. "I never doubted you."

Kai pulled her away from Llaryn and into his arms. He wanted to crush her against him but cradled her gently instead. Until he knew she was healthy, she was the most precious and delicate creature in the universe.

"I love you."

Kai lifted his head enough to look down at her. His mouth settled over hers, a slow melding of lips and tongues. When he lifted his head, they were both breathless.

Her arms wrapped around his neck and he held her close. The feel of her breasts rising and falling against his chest with each breath was a miracle he would never take for granted.

As Kai dropped beside Genae, Eln grabbed the monitor and swung it toward Llaryn. Her vital signs were deteriorating rapidly.

"She's killing herself to save Genae."

Paladin vaulted the end of the table and grabbed Llaryn around the waist. She collapsed over his arm, her body limp.

"Bring her in here."

Paladin followed Eln into the next suite. When the healer motioned for him to lay Llaryn on the table, he had to fight himself to release her.

As the VanDai healer swung the monitor into place over Llaryn, Paladin knelt by her side. He captured her hand in his and studied her face with dark, brooding eyes.

Eln injected her with something. She winced but Paladin couldn't be sorry, it told him she was alive.

"She'll live," he said.

It wasn't a question but Eln answered it anyway. "She'll live. Whatever she did drained her to the point of collapse. Her vital signs aren't strong but they are stable. With enough rest and quiet, she should be fine."

"Leave us," Paladin ordered, never looking away from Llaryn's colorless face.

As the door closed behind the other VanDai, Paladin rose to his feet and leaned over Llaryn. His eyes glittered with a cold, consuming fury as he stared at her. He reached out and grasped her face.

"Llaryn. Look at me." His tone was one of pure command. It reached her even in the depths where she had sunk inside herself. She tried to resist, tried to pull away but he wouldn't let her.

"Llaryn. Open your eyes and look at me."

She had to fight to get her lashes to lift. They felt impossibly heavy, dragging her eyes closed. And when she saw Paladin's face, harsh with rage, his eyes on fire with it, she tried to close them again. She didn't want to face him. She couldn't face herself and what she'd done.

Paladin's hands tightened around her face. "Open your eyes."

She couldn't disobey his order.

"You tried to escape me." His voice vibrated with the force of emotion raging through him. "You will never escape me. The moment I saw you, you were mine. I claimed you and when you're stronger, I'll mate you. You *are* mine."

Llaryn's lashes fell and she escaped him the only way she could, in the depths of her own mind.

Paladin released her, strode out of the room and returned with a chair. His brooding gaze never left her as he watched her sleep. He had questions he wanted answers to and when she woke, he would get them. What had she done to save Genae? Why would she have killed herself to do it?

Paladin's Pride (Collection)
by Angelina Evans

And he had expectations he wouldn't compromise on. The first of them being that she never put her life in danger again.

He settled back in his chair to wait. Waiting was something he was good at. When she opened her eyes, the first thing she would see was him. Until he was sure of her, she would never be out of his sight.

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Epilogue

One Week Later

Forever

Genae's breath rushed out as Kai thrust into her. Her inner muscles clenched around him and they both groaned. In the week since the retrieval, he hadn't been out of her for more than an hour at a time. She was deliciously sore with aches inside and out from his vigorous loving.

"I'm not sure I can take much more." All he had to do was enter her and she came; she was so sensitive to his touch. His constant presence kept her quivering and ready for him and anything he wanted to do.

"You can take anything I have to give." Kai pulled out of her one slow increment at a time, his nubby texture rasping her silken walls. When only his broad head stretched her, he paused. "Everything," he murmured, his eyes blazing, and thrust forward in a fast, hard slide.

Genae shuddered, her orgasm shaking her. She moaned as he pounded into her, sending her higher. Minutes later she could barely breathe as he came, great jets of hot cum filling her.

He rolled them over so she lay on top, her legs straddling him, his cock still lodged inside her. She snuggled her head against his chest and listened to the sound of his heartbeat as it slowed. It wouldn't be long before he needed her again.

How long it would take for him to get over the fear of losing her, neither of them knew. At times she was overwhelmed by his intensity yet she would never change one single thing about him.

Neither of them, though, had to worry about the League coming after them. The fallout from the information she had carried was still being felt. Galaran had been removed from the office of the president. The actions of his generals were under scrutiny and prosecution wouldn't be far behind. All because Kai had helped her.

"Do you know anything about knights?" she asked.

A low rumble vibrated his chest against her. "They happen at the end of every day."

She turned her head and nipped his chest. Inside her his cock stirred, his thickening length making her shiver. "Not that kind of night. On old Earth in ancient times, there were warriors called knights. They wore plate armor and chain mail shirts. You remind me of them."

"I remind you of men who went around encased in metal?" He sounded indignant.

She lifted her head and looked down at him. His expression was as disgruntled as his tone. She scooted up his body to kiss him and as she did, his cock was pulled from her wet heat.

He growled, rolled her over and pushed her legs wide. He spread her labia with one hand and grasped his cock with the other. He wasn't fully hard but managed to wedge the head of his cock inside her anyway.

"Don't move," he growled.

She rolled her eyes. "I wouldn't think of it."

He settled his weight over her, keeping himself propped up on his elbows, so he didn't crush her. "Tell me why I remind you of these metal men."

For a long moment she just stared at him, her attention focused between her legs where she quivered and wept around him. She needed a deeper penetration, not the tease of his head just inside her.

"Tell me."

She blinked and focused on him. "You would do anything to protect me and keep me safe," she said simply, her words a husky whisper. "Just like a knight with his lady."

Kai's eyes gleamed gold in the dim light. Still propped on his elbows he managed to grasp her breasts, his claws barely extended as he squeezed the tender mounds. At the same time, he pushed against her, his burgeoning flesh stretching her and delving deeper as he hardened, lengthened and *grew*.

"So I'm your knight?"

There was a wicked gleam in his eyes that made her laugh even though her breath broke as he thrust into her. She threw her arms around him and hugged him tight. "Forever," she purred and gave herself up to his loving once more.

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Paladin's Pride 4: Seducing Llaryn

Angelina Evans

Mriln law:

A Mriln healer can't use their own life-force to heal non-Mriln.

Sex outside the species is forbidden.

What he wants he gets...

The moment he sees the Mriln healer Llaryn, Paladin, leader of the VanDai, wants her. He'll keep her from death, seduce her with the power of sex, and hold her when her world falls apart.

The bitter and the sweet...

Llaryn can't let the innocent die and she can't say no to Paladin when her body and heart have already said yes. She knows Mriln law and is willing to pay the price for her choices. What she doesn't know is that the price won't be only hers to pay.

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Prologue

"If you two are finished with your foreplay, I need to speak to Paladin."

Llaryn winced at the snap in Ryvn's voice. The VanDai warrior had become more and more surly the closer they'd come to his home world, Sai-sen-Sai. Around him she could just see a small, delicate, human woman with a short cap of black curly hair standing in the arms of another VanDai warrior. He was tall with the same well developed, muscular physique as Ryvn; but where Ryvn was dark, overtly sensual and reactive, this warrior was golden, almost regal and watchful. "Frustrating trip?" he asked.

"Let me introduce you to Llaryn, the Mriln healer I brought back with me." Ryvn stepped to one side and motioned toward Llaryn.

Being the center of attention wasn't new to Llaryn but it usually involved her healing ability, not her physical being. She didn't like the personal attention. No Mriln did.

"I didn't mean to be a frustration to you, Ryvn." The VanDai warrior's overtly sexual reaction to her had more than surprised her. He had been obviously aroused the first time he saw her. Flattering, but also impossible. Mriln didn't have sexual relations outside their own species. It was a matter of survival. True passion led to physical dependence. She certainly wouldn't bond herself to the volatile VanDai male even if it weren't forbidden by her people.

Ryvn made a wordless, growling noise.

"Frustrating indeed." Llaryn didn't know how to interpret the tone of the golden warrior's voice. She had the sense of appreciation and teasing and something more.

She was learning very quickly that VanDai were creatures of undercurrents. There always seemed to be more to what they were saying than their words. Trying to decipher what they meant was exhausting. The sooner she did what she had come to do and returned to her people the better.

The human woman hit the huge warrior holding her with her elbow and winced.

Eyes wide, Llaryn stared at them. The warrior didn't seem upset by the blow at all. From what she had studied and observed she would have thought a VanDai warrior would immediately retaliate against any assault. The human woman, she was sure, was Genae Galaran, the President's daughter and the reason she was on Sai-sen-Sai. She had to retrieve information encoded in the DNA of the human woman's heart and try to keep her alive. It wasn't going to be easy, if it was even possible.

Determination tightened her lips. If there was a way to do the retrieval and keep the woman alive, she would do it. Nothing was impossible.

"Paladin. Your Mriln healer is here." Ryvn's tone was angry and overly loud.

Inside, Llaryn cringed. Outwardly she very carefully kept her expression serene and her body relaxed. The attention of the warrior and woman in front of her was more than she wanted. Did Ryvn have to announce her presence? Couldn't he find Paladin and tell him quietly that she had arrived?

A roar sounded from somewhere inside the great, machine choked room in front of them. Llaryn started.

"Get what you need and stand by to molecularly transport back to your ship. The destroyers are closing in."

Her heart jumped wildly against her ribs at the booming, rumbling voice. She'd never heard a voice with such power and resonance. What would the male who owned that voice be like? Paladin was the VanDai leader. He would be calmer, more controlled and diplomatic than Ryvn, wouldn't he? Surely that voice didn't belong to him.

Ryvn stormed past her without looking back.

"Kai. Be ready to transport in the next ten minutes," the unidentified voice ordered. She trembled at the sound of his voice.

"I'm ready now," Kai, the golden-maned warrior, responded.

A huge VanDai male, his shoulders cocked at an angle to get through the narrow aisle left by equipment, strode from the dark recesses of the room. "Get your woman and the healer to the procedure lab and get back here. I'll have Eln meet you there." The huge warrior looked through the open door and stopped.

Fear chased panic through Llaryn's blood. She looked down, unable to maintain eye contact with the fierce black gaze of the warrior in front of her. He was huge. He towered over her. His shoulders blocked out the world. The air around him vibrated with his presence.

"I'll take them to the procedure suite," Kai offered.

Llaryn wanted to leap to the golden warrior's side as he stepped forward, forcing the woman in his arms forward with him. He was safe. His leader wasn't.

"I'll go with you." Paladin gestured to his left.

She could *feel* his eyes on her as she turned away. Her skin prickled as he moved to her side. Heat radiated from him and wrapped around her. His hand settled low on her back and she shuddered. What was he doing?

"This way."

She shivered at the low, rumbling caress of his voice. He was seducing her and she didn't know how to stop him. He wasn't doing anything she could protest about, yet she felt surrounded by him. She walked faster but he easily kept pace.

It only took a few minutes to walk down the gold-veined, red sandstone corridor but it seemed like much longer. She studied the carved stone walls, the floor, anything to keep her attention off the VanDai warrior. She stepped to one side, he moved with her. Until he was ready to walk away from her there wasn't much she could do to stop him from walking where he wanted.

A door stood open and Paladin escorted Llaryn through it. He let his hand drop to his side but his gaze never left her.

Llaryn moved away from him on the pretext of studying a monitor she'd used many times. He followed her but she ignored him. If her heart beat any faster, she was going to faint. Her stomach kept jumping every time he got close. She knew she was a woman but she'd never been so aware of her femininity before. Her breasts felt heavy, her nipples tight.

Between her legs she ached and was becoming wet. He wasn't even touching her and she was having a sexual experience. He wasn't safe, not for her.

Ryvyn entered the room, her medical case in his hand. "Here are your supplies." He set the case on a long, metal table, looked at Paladin keeping pace with her as she wandered around the well equipped examination room, and his brows rose. He didn't say anything but he didn't have to. His raised brows said all too much. "The techs say the molecular shield is ready to come down on your order, Paladin."

Llaryn moved away from Paladin again and felt him go completely still but at least he didn't follow her again. Her pulse kicked into light speed anyway and there was nothing she could do about it. She needed him to leave so she could concentrate on why she was here.

"There will be guards posted outside the room. At any hint of trouble let them know and they will contact me."

She was sure he was talking to her but Llaryn ignored him and after a moment he strode out of the room. She took a slow, deep breath and let it out, more than a little relieved. With Paladin gone all the tension in the room vanished. For a moment she watched Kai and Genae. His big hands framed the human woman's small face and she knew for him there was no one else in the world. Her heart turned over and she looked away, uncomfortable with the sad longing that filled her.

Genae's voice murmured something too softly for her to hear, followed by a long moment of silence.

"Remember, healer—" her attention snapped back to the golden warrior, "—it isn't only her life and heart you hold in your hands."

Llaryn watched him turn and stride away, her heart thumping hard in her chest. Did he mean he would kill her if Genae didn't live, or he wouldn't live? Either meaning wasn't good. Did the VanDai go out of their way to make everyone around them uncomfortable or was it just her?

Genae slumped where she stood.

Llaryn knew exactly how she felt. It was a relief to have the big warriors gone.

* * * *

"Leave me with her for a moment."

Eln, the VanDai healer and Llaryn's second in the DNA retrieval, nodded at Llaryn's quiet order. Tears made the Mriln woman's eyes glow like lavender stars. She'd fought a battle beyond anything he'd ever seen. If anyone could have performed the procedure and healed Genae Galaran successfully it was Llaryn. He'd never seen talent like hers before.

He walked into the monitor room as Kai, followed by Paladin, rushed in from the opposite side. "Kai—" Kai ran past him, his attention focused solely on the door that hid Genae. Paladin was right behind Kai and Eln hurried after them.

The Mriln healer stood over Genae, her whole being glowing with silver-striated golden light, her hands pressed to Genae's chest. Her eyes shone and her determined

expression faded as she looked at them. Her shoulders slumped and her eyes closed.

Eln grabbed the monitor, looked at it and yelled, "She's killing herself to save Genae."

Paladin moved faster than Eln had ever seen a VanDai move. He vaulted the table, grabbed Llaryn and ripped her away from Genae. The tall, fragile woman collapsed in his arms.

"Bring her in here," Eln ordered.

Paladin followed him and, with obvious reluctance, laid Llaryn on the table. Eln had never thought to see the proud and fearsome leader of the VanDai brought to his knees but the huge warrior dropped to the floor beside the exam table. Only one thing would bring Paladin down: he'd found his mate and he might lose her.

Eln readied an injection to help slow Llaryn's heart and lower her metabolism. He had to buy her time to heal. He turned and found Paladin had taken her hand, his dark gaze moving restlessly over her face.

* * * *

After Eln had done what he could and left, Paladin remained at Llaryn's side. He'd been in killing rages before but nothing had ever prepared him for this—standing beside his mate and not knowing if she would live or die.

He reached out and grasped her face. "Llaryn. Look at me." He wouldn't let her ignore him. He wouldn't let her fade away. She *would* do as he said. "Llaryn. Open your eyes and look at me."

Her lashes fluttered.

He tightened his hands on her face. "Open your eyes."

Her lashes fluttered again and finally lifted. She looked dazed, her eyes not quite focused.

Barely resisting the urge to crush something, Paladin let his rage show only in the force of his voice. "You tried to escape me." He wanted to pick her up and crush her to him. He wanted to take her and make her understand what he felt. He wanted her to feel the same thing. "You will never escape me. The moment I saw you, you were mine. I claimed you and when you're stronger I'll mate with you. You *are* mine."

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Chapter One

Something sharp pressed but didn't pierce the skin at the base of Llaryn's throat, jolting her from sleep. It was Paladin. It had to be. Since she'd healed Genae no one but Paladin had been allowed close to her except Eln, the VanDai healer. Even then, Paladin was always close.

No one else would be in the room alone with her. Not if they wanted to live.

The sensation moved down her body, between her breasts, down her abdomen and pelvis where it tangled and combed through the tight curls covering her mound. She could barely hear a slight hissing sound over the pounding of her heart.

What was he doing? If she looked he would know she was awake and she wasn't ready to face him. Not yet. He had claimed her the moment he saw her and she didn't know how to fight him. He was huge, powerful and almost violently male. He was *VanDai*.

The material over her thighs pulled tighter, the hissing sound moving lower even though the sharpness and pressure didn't touch her skin.

Fear choked her, stopping her breath in her throat. There was nothing to give away Paladin's presence. No sound, no scent, nothing. If it weren't for the ... *whatever* touching her, she wouldn't even know he was in the room. But it was him. She knew it. The question was, if she kept her eyes closed, would he leave? He'd taken care of her every need in the

days she'd been on the VanDai world of Sai-sen-Sai but he hadn't taken advantage and he wouldn't now, would he?

Calloused fingers brushed her chest, pushing the material of her gown away.

Her breath came fast and shallow. The sound of it and the thunder of her heart drowned out any other noise. What was he doing? Why was he doing it now? She'd already broken a sacred law of her people by using her own life force to heal Genae. Sex with a non-Mriln, especially for a Mriln healer, was forbidden. Healing Genae *might* be forgiven. Sex with Paladin wouldn't.

"You're mine, Llaryn, and I won't allow you to hide from me even behind your own closed eyes. Look at me." His voice rumbled over and through her, demanded obedience.

Fear chilled her from the inside and, even not wanting to, she opened her eyes.

"Watch." With the thumb and first finger of each hand he pinched her nipples and pulled upward, drawing the clinging gold material away from her breasts and laying it to either side of her body on the bed.

Her back arched off the bed following the tug of his fingers. Eyes huge, she gasped in a deep breath at the feel of her nipples being stretched and released. She felt the pull deep in her abdomen, her vagina squeezing in response. She felt vulnerable and exposed lying unclothed on the bed with his hot black eyes staring at her breasts. She was afraid but there was a thrill underlying it that she didn't understand. She wanted to run away but something inside her craved that pull

on her breasts again. How did he do that, make her fear and want him at the same time?

He touched the tip of her right nipple with a fingertip, slid the calloused end over her distended flesh and circled the pink, swollen and puckered flesh that ringed her nipple. "I've never seen such prominent areolas." He lifted his finger from her breast and rested it on her other nipple, pressing down and rolling it before tracing the areola that circled it. "Do all Mriln females have areolas that crown their breast and cradle their nipple?" His narrowed black eyes burned into her wide lavender ones.

Her breath hitched, making her body quiver as she stared up at him. Electric shocks zinged through her body. Her mind was blank. She couldn't think of any answer to his question. What was she supposed to say? "Yes?"

His lips thinned and his eyes narrowed even more. Using both hands he grasped the areolas of her breasts and pinched them, not hard but enough to make them stand out, her nipples tall and red at the center of the puffy blushing flesh he gripped. "Are you asking me or telling me?"

She could barely get enough breath to answer his question. "Mine are ... more developed than ... most." He held her breasts clamped in his fingers and wanted her to think? To talk?

"How sensitive are they?" He squeezed tighter and watched her reaction.

Her back arched off the bed. Her eyelids fluttered down. Each breath was fast and uneven, her lips slightly parted. Her body was on fire, her vagina clamping tight and releasing,

moisture leaking from her. She needed something but she couldn't name it. It wasn't anything she had needed before but she was desperate for it now. What was he doing to her?

"Very sensitive." His voice was a mere murmur of sound, dark and rich with a rough unevenness that used sound to stroke.

He released her breasts.

Her body relaxed and she rested back on the bed. A heavy yet hollow feeling filled her. She lifted her heavy lashes just enough to see him. Her stomach quivered and the hollow feeling inside grew. "What are you going to do?" Her voice sounded breathless. He wouldn't stop until they had sex, she was sure of that. The question was would she survive it?

Paladin didn't answer as he pulled off his simple white shirt. The muscles in his abdomen and chest rippled. The shirt looked bright in the dimly lit room. Paladin, his skin tone darker, seemed to blend into the shadows. His thick mane of hair settled back in place, full and dark around his face. The color wasn't visible in the low light but her memory filled in the gap. His hair was an amazing mix of colors, dark, almost black but shot through with gold and bronze that made it alive and ever-changing when light played over it.

His pants were held in place with a drawstring. He pulled it loose, folded the material back from his straining cock and let the pants fall to the floor. Hands on his hips, he looked at Llaryn.

She couldn't pull her eyes away from him. He was huge. Everything about him was huge. His shoulders stretched forever. His neck was thick, his arms and legs heavy with

muscle. His penis ... She swallowed hard and unconsciously shook her head. If she was going to get away she had to do it now.

Her only thought escape, she shifted away from him, sliding across the bed.

Paladin pounced.

Llaryn didn't see him move, just a blur, one moment beside the bed, the next moment crouched over her. The skin over his cheekbones was drawn tight. His black eyes burned. His lips were thin, his teeth bared. He wasn't growling but he *vibrated* with menace.

Llaryn didn't move, didn't breathe, didn't even blink. She stared up at him and waited, tension a living entity growing inside her, scraping her nerves and leaving her raw and even more vulnerable.

"Do you want to leave?"

How was she supposed to answer him? With the truth? She drew on every ounce of courage she had and did exactly that. "Yes, I want to leave. You scare me. Everything about you scares me. Your size, your intensity, your virility, *everything*. You won't let me move away from you across the bed. What are the chances you will let me leave the room?"

"Why do I frighten you? You're the one person in the universe I would give my life to keep safe." He spoke in a growl, menace emanating from him. "Knowing that, you still want to leave?"

She opened her mouth but couldn't force any words out. Slowly, never taking her eyes off him, she nodded.

"Will you still feel that way after we're mated?"

Her eyes rounded and she took a deep, gulping breath. "Mated?" Mriln didn't have sex outside their own species. What he wanted wasn't possible.

He sat back on his heels, caught her shoulders in his huge hands and lifted her into a sitting position. Her nipples pressed into his hot, hair covered chest. Her hair swayed against her back as she looked up at him. Her racing heartbeat shook her. Being so close to him she was enveloped in his heat. His scent surrounded her; each breath drew it into her. It was wild, untamed and sexual like him. He wanted her to smell him, to feel him.

He was seducing her and there was nothing she could do to stop it. And it was working. She didn't know if she wanted him to stop. He was the most virile male she'd ever met and he wanted her. *That* was amazing. Terrifying, but amazing.

He cupped the back of her head in one hand and held her in place with his other hand at her back. "After we've mated, if you still want to leave, we'll talk."

She opened her mouth but never got the chance to utter a sound. Paladin swooped down. His mouth opened over hers. His tongue pushed between her lips and filled the moist depths of her mouth.

Llaryn started, her body jerking at the invasion. His tongue felt big, hot and wet, its texture coarse against her inner cheeks and tongue. She tried to turn away. Her teeth closed on his tongue and her tongue pushed at his.

Paladin easily held her in place. He growled low in his throat, the sound vibrating against her nipples and into her

mouth. He pushed his tongue deeper into her mouth, tasting more of her.

He rubbed his tongue over hers, swept the tender inside of her lips and retreated. He sucked her lower lip into his mouth and nipped it. He ran his tongue over the sting. It rasped her flesh, leaving a burning sensation behind.

He'd taken and possessed her in the most elemental way. Her hands hovered just in front of his shoulders, to embrace him or push him away she didn't know.

She opened her eyes and found herself staring into the black depths of his. It was like falling into black fire, enveloped by flames but not burned. She should push him away—he wasn't Mr Irn—but all she wanted to do was pull him closer and taste him again.

"Do you taste that good everywhere?"

Embarrassment washed through her. She could feel the blood flooding her cheeks. Had he read her mind? "You can't ask me things like that. You have to stop." She had to make him understand before it was too late.

He licked his lips in a slow, mesmerizing motion. "I'll find out for myself how you taste. Everywhere."

He laid her back against the bed, took her arms and stretched them over her head. On his hands and knees he crouched over her, staring at her breasts, and they responded.

Llaryn closed her eyes. It was too much, watching him watch her. Feeling her breasts plump, looking down and seeing her areolas swell, the skin crinkling as it grew tight,

her nipples ripe, red and standing at attention. And all he'd done was look at her.

Her left breast was enveloped in wet heat. She jerked. Her eyes flew open. His head was at her breast, his mouth over it. He sucked her left nipple hard. His teeth bit into her areola, not hurting but threatening to.

Gasping, she undulated against him. The urge to buck was there but his teeth, their sharp threat on her soft breast, controlled her, allowing only so much motion and no more.

She was wet, wetter than she had ever been before. She should want to stop him but she didn't. She wanted him, inside her, filling her, *claiming her*.

He released her breast. She sagged back against the bed. Yes. She needed a moment, a break from the constant sensation.

He took her right breast. Sucked her nipple, crushed it against the roof of his mouth. At the same time he clamped his lip-covered teeth tight on her areola.

A grimace twisted her face. Her heart felt like it would explode. Her hips came off the bed as her head ground back against it. "I'm going to die. A living being can't *feel* this much and survive."

His head pulled back and he released her. "I wouldn't want to kill you," he purred.

"No, don't stop." She looked at Paladin from under her lashes and shook her head. "I won't live through what you're doing to me. You need someone else. A VanDai woman. Mriln aren't meant to experience sensations like these but I want

to. I want to feel *you*." She wanted it more than she'd ever wanted anything.

"The only female I need is you." In one lithe motion he sprang off the bed. His expression savage, he caught her ankles, pulled her to the edge of the bed and released her legs to dangle off the side and walked away.

Stunned, Llaryn watched him disappear around the end of the false wall. He'd brought her to the point of almost screaming. He'd manipulated her body, arranged it, *used it*, and now he walked away? She wanted to scream now, at him. How dare he...

He came back around the end of the wall with something wedge-shaped in his hands. His eyes never left her as he approached.

Belatedly she realized she hadn't moved. She was still sprawled with her legs off the bed, naked, in a pool of gold material, right where he'd left her. She hadn't even tried to get away and she could have. If she'd wanted to.

She pushed the last thought away. Later she would deal with the consequences of what was happening. Right now, as terrifyingly exciting as it was, Paladin and what was happening in this room were her whole world.

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Chapter Two

Hooking one arm under her knees, Paladin lifted her hips off the bed and slid the wedge under them. He grasped her ankles, settled her feet on the edge of the bed and pushed her knees apart, exposing her sex to him.

Eyes huge, she watched him. No one had ever treated her this way before. She felt *owned*. His to do what he wanted with. "I should be protesting or fighting you, shouldn't I? I don't know you. Why do I love how I feel, how you *make* me feel?"

His eyes glinting with lust, Paladin pressed her labia back with the fingers of one hand, opening her even more. His nostrils flared and his chest expanded. His lashes lowered and his lips thinned. "You love it because you were made to be mine."

Llaryn's body pulsed to the beat of her racing heart. There was a heavy yet empty feeling deep in her belly. She knew she was wet and the knowledge was embarrassing and exciting at the same time. A Mriln male would never spread her open and study her as Paladin was doing. The sex act would have been over long ago. It would have been pleasant but not powerful. It wouldn't have been Paladin.

He made her burn and ache where she had only ever felt a pleasant glow before. She wanted him more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life. And he scared her. His cock was long and thick. The head was almost purple, angry looking, and he was going to push it into her. Deep inside.

She quivered at the thought.

He looked up, his gaze fiercely intense. "I'll taste you there later."

Shocked, she froze. "You'll taste me *there* later?" He couldn't mean her sex. A moment later a shudder tracked down her body. She'd heard of such sexual practices but had never participated in them. The thought of his mouth on her sex ... She shuddered again. She couldn't even imagine what it would feel like.

Her eyes went back to his cock and her imagination soared. If he could taste her, could she taste him?

His cock stood out from his body like a pole, its head a long dome. The shaft had an uneven, nubby texture. As she watched, he grasped it in one hand, still holding her open with the other. He pulled his penis down, its head shiny with moisture, and rubbed it against the entrance of her vagina.

She couldn't catch her breath even though she was breathing fast. He was there, between her legs, snug against *her*. Hot and hard. Longer and thicker than anything she'd taken into her body before.

Panic raced through her in a suffocating wave. She rolled up slightly and braced herself on her elbows. She couldn't tear her eyes away from his cock pressed against her. "It won't fit inside me. There's no way you'll fit it inside me without hurting me." Her voice wavered on the last word. She didn't want to be hurt. She wanted to experience him but she didn't want to be hurt.

Teeth bared, the muscles in his jaw knotted, Paladin flexed forward. The feel of him tight against her became a heavy

pressure, her entrance stinging as it was forced to stretch. Llaryn shook her head in a wild no and started to inch back.

"Don't move." Paladin snapped the order.

Her eyes flew to his.

"I'm a predator," he growled. "My instinct is to ram my cock into your cunt fast and hard. I need to claim you. If you try to get away, we're both lost."

Fear sent fine tremors racing through her. But it wasn't only fear. There was excitement there, too. She wanted to roll over and hide, as much from herself as from him, but she couldn't. Whatever the outcome, they were going to have sex.

Paladin pressed forward, sweat beading his forehead. The head of his cock forced her vaginal opening to stretch and open around him.

Llaryn's head fell back. Her breasts heaved as she breathed through the stinging, burning pressure. He was never going to be able to force his cock into her.

The domed head of his cock pierced her.

Paladin groaned.

Llaryn tensed even more. Her lips pressed together. The pressure, the burn, the sting, it didn't ease. It *grew*. His cock was in her, stretching her, forcing her open. She was tight around him. She fought to breathe through the feeling of incredible fullness. She understood what impaled meant. *She was impaled on him.*

Paladin didn't quit pushing, invading deeper, opening her wider. He grunted, his face twisted, sweat dripping from him.

Llaryn held still, lifted her hips, shifted to one side, shifted to the other. Nothing eased his burning invasion. And he was invading. He was *taking* her, molding her around his great cock. He was hot and throbbing inside her. Stretched around him as she was, she felt every hard nub along the shaft of his penis as he entered her, felt them rubbing her vaginal walls, the velvet skin covering them doing nothing to ease the friction of his penetration.

He grasped her hips, leaned over her, strained against her. His lips curled back from his teeth, his sweat dripped on her. His penis moved forward, deeper into her in short, jerky movements. The muscles in his buttocks and upper thighs bunched tight, straining forward as he fought to hold back.

Llaryn, her eyes barely slitted, could see the war raging inside him mirrored on his face. The need to conquer and claim in the low, savage sounds he made and his bared teeth. The need to protect reflected in the black depths of his eyes.

There was nothing she could do to help him. Nothing she could do to help herself. She felt stuffed by him and he was still pushing into her. It seemed like he'd been pushing into her forever. Her inner muscles clenched as much as they could, stretched as they were, but it did nothing to slow or stop his advance.

Finally, miraculously, he stopped.

Llaryn gasped in air through her open mouth. She knew his cock only filled her vagina but her whole body felt *impaled*. Her nipples throbbed in time to his pulsing cock. Her areolas felt tight and pulsed too. The walls of her channel squeezed him in a frantic milking motion. His cock, buried

deep inside her, jerked at odd intervals. It felt like it lifted her off the bed with its sudden, violent movements.

Paladin's fingers bit into her hips. His eyes closed and his nostrils flared as he fought for control.

Overwhelmed, Llaryn didn't know what to do. He hadn't ejaculated so she knew he wasn't done. Her body teetered on the brink between pleasure and true pain. If she could stop her heart and her lungs and the clenching of her vagina, she would. She didn't want to tip the balance. He had to remain in control.

His thick, spiky lashes lifted. His eyes blazed. He released her hips and with the thumb of one hand he pressed and rotated her swollen clit. With the thumb and forefinger of the other hand he pinched her left nipple.

Every molecule in her body exploded. She felt lighter than air. The center of her being contracted in on itself, her awareness expanded outward.

Paladin pulled back and thrust forward in a slow, powerful slide. Friction sparked another, greater wave of energy. Llaryn arched off the bed, her weight supported by her heels and shoulders, her body suspended on his impaling length.

He pulled back and thrust forward, harder and faster. He released her breast, took his thumb off her clit and grabbed her hips. He lifted her higher, holding her in place. He rode into her with long, forceful thrusts that would have driven her body across the bed if he hadn't held her in place.

Llaryn's fingertips, toes, the tips of her ears and her nipples tingled. The wave of energy spiraled tight at her core.

Paladin slammed into her.

The energy snapped free. Eyes heavy-lidded, she watched Paladin drive for release, saw his bulging biceps and her hands, glowing with golden light, gripping them. Her body splintered. Waves of energy raced through her, brimmed inside her, threatened to escape and take the essence of her with them.

Paladin thrust hard, deep, and came. His hips bucked against her. His fingers bit into her hips. Inside, his come filled her in spurts of hot release.

His release somehow centered her, focused her back into herself. She was a part of him. *Aware of him*. She felt him swell, pulsing and releasing inside her. And she could feel herself surrounding him, squeezing him, *pulling* his release from him.

For several long moments he loomed over her not moving. His chest heaved. He held her hips off the bed, his pelvis tight against her sex, his cock, not as hard but still incredibly large, filling her.

"Are you hurt?"

His gruff question made her blink. It took a moment for her mind to process what it was he wanted to know. Finally, she shook her head. "No, I'm not hurt." And she wasn't. Stunned. Shocked. Still reeling. She was all of those things but she wasn't hurt. She was going to be sore but that was something else, too.

Paladin started to straighten, his cock pulling from her clinging vagina as he did.

Llaryn sat straight up, grabbed the stalk of his cock between her legs and stared up at him with huge lavender

eyes. "Don't move," she gasped. She didn't know if she was pleading or ordering and didn't care. She was too swollen and tender and he was too big, the nubby texture of his cock too rough. "You can't move. Not yet."

The muscles in Paladin's jaw jumped and his eyes narrowed. "I can't stay inside you and not start again."

Horried and fascinated at the same time, Llaryn stared at him. "What are VanDai males made of? You could do that again? Already?"

"Yes. I could do it again. Now." His eyes smoldered and she could feel his cock hardening inside her.

Slowly, watching him closely for any sign of impending attack, she lay back on the bed. "Take it out fast." Fast had to be better than the torture of his slow withdrawal. She bit her bottom lip and waited.

Paladin studied her for a long moment. Without warning, all at the same moment, he stepped back and lowered her hips back to the wedge. His cock pulled free with a wet, slurping sound.

Sensation arced from her vagina through her body. Every muscle tensed. It was several long moments before she relaxed back against the bed. Her eyes closed as the tension eased. Sleep was just what she needed. A long, uninterrupted rest with no thoughts about what sex with Paladin meant and how she was going to leave when a Mriln ship came to pick her up.

Angry with herself, she forced those thoughts away. Thinking about sex, Paladin, and the Mriln wasn't going to

help her recover from the most amazing experience of her life. She needed rest.

Powerfully muscled arms slid under her, lifting her from the bed.

Her eyes flew open and she grabbed at Paladin's chest. "What are you doing?" she demanded. "If you think you're going to have sex with me again you can..." Her voice trailed off. She didn't know what she would do but she would do something. She had to. She couldn't take him again. He was too big and she was too sore.

"You need a hot soak and we both need to clean up. We'll sleep better."

She didn't know if she trusted him, but what was she going to do? Fight him? As long as they were just going to soak in a tub of clean-gel, that would be okay. It was just a bath, nothing intimate.

Paladin walked into the pond sized tub and lowered himself down onto a seat built into the pool's wall. He settled her on his lap, her legs draped over his, one breast pressed against the hard wall of his chest. His penis hardened and lengthened against her hip.

Llaryn jumped. Her heart hammered hard in her chest. She pushed against his chest, turned and tried to stand up. "I may want you but I can't take you again now."

He growled something in his own language as his arms circled her waist. He pulled her back against him and down.

She grabbed his arms and dug her fingernails in deep. "You're not going to take me against my will. I won't let you."

I don't know how I'll stop you but I will. The choice is mine." She almost sobbed the last.

Paladin didn't try to stop her struggles. He easily held her in place with one hand and began stroking her with the other. A strange, low, purring hum issued from his throat and vibrated through his chest against her back. It had a hypnotic quality that made her pause and listen. The sound was soothing, calming, and somehow caring. She'd never heard anything like it.

Without her realizing it, Paladin turned her back around on his lap. His cock pressed into her hip but he didn't give her fear a chance to grow as he used his hands to wash her. He stroked down her back, her arms, between her fingers. All the time he continued the entrancing purr she felt as much as heard.

She laid back, her head cradled in the crook of his arm, and let him care for her. It felt more than good. His callous-roughened hands stroked over her chest and breasts. He paid special attention to her nipples and the puffy areolas that seemed to fascinate him. He stroked her abdomen, her pelvis and down her legs to below the knee.

Nothing in her life had prepared her for anyone lavishing so much attention on her. No Mrlin male would spend time after sex just touching the female he'd been with. Yet Paladin was doing exactly that. She felt special. Special to him. He was a powerful male, leader of the VanDai, and he seemed to be fascinated with her. How did she fight something she wanted to keep experiencing?

He eased her legs apart and stroked up from her knee to her inner thighs.

Her lashes lifted and she looked up to find him watching her. "Don't hurt me," she half-pleaded, half-ordered. She didn't know what else to do except trust him.

His hand covered her sex, one finger easing between her folds and rubbing along the valley between them. "I would never hurt you intentionally. My instincts are strong but they're under control. I still want you and it's my nature to stake my claim frequently and forcefully but I won't do it again right now. Not with my cock."

Her eyes widened and her hands lifted to press against his chest. "What do you mean, not with your cock?"

He didn't answer her, he showed her. He explored every inch of her body. Her labia, the crease in her buttocks, behind her knees, her feet and even her toes. How long he spent just touching her she didn't know. There was nowhere on her body he allowed her to keep from him. And as he touched and explored, never hurting, always demanding her acceptance, her body and her mind accepted his right to touch her.

He brought her torso up so she was once again sitting on his lap rather than lying across it. He lifted her to her feet so she was standing in front of him and, with his hands on her hips, turned her so she faced away from him but was caged by his outstretched legs. "Kneel down and tip your head back."

A tight ball formed in her stomach as she did what he ordered. He was controlling her but she was letting him. It

was so easy. Everything he'd done or had her do led to pleasure. Yes, there had been discomfort bordering on pain but the ultimate outcome had been pleasure.

Kneeling in front of him submerged her to her chin in clean-gel. The warm, viscous liquid enfolded her, soothed and held her. With a sigh she let her head fall back. She'd never spent a more carnal, sensual day in her life. Going back to her life among the Mriln was going to be hard after Paladin had shown her everything physical she'd been missing.

His fingers settled on her scalp and he started massaging.

"Oh." Llaryn moaned the word. Her breasts tightened, her nipples stabbing out in hard points from the crowns of her areolas. Her vagina contracted in time to his massaging fingers. Even her head was an erogenous zone with him.

How long he attended to her scalp she didn't know but any length of time would never be enough as far as she was concerned. When he stopped and ran his fingers through the long length of her hair she bit her lip to keep from protesting.

He gathered her hair in one hand and laid it over her shoulder. His hands slipped under her arms and he lifted her to her feet. He ran his hands over her shoulders and down her arms, returned to her shoulders and slid his large, rough-skinned hands down her back, over her buttocks with special attention to the crease between them, leaving them dry as the clean-gel ran before his hands.

He turned her and, starting at her neck, ran his hands over her chest, her breasts, his hands slowing to rub them, his gaze fastened on the small mounds. He slid his hands under her breasts, lifted and cupped them. His lips parted and his

eyes narrowed. "How hard could I suck them without hurting you?"

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Chapter Three

She *felt* his question. It tightened her nipples even more, had moisture raining down from the heart of her. "I don't know. No one's ever tested it." She felt bold to the point of brazen saying that, as if she were inviting him to find out. And wasn't she? She wanted to feel his mouth on her breast as he sucked her so hard it felt like he was trying to draw her soul out of her body through her nipples.

She closed her eyes, shocked at her own imagery. She didn't recognize the woman inside her. She was Mriln. A healer. Her life was about mending others, not focusing on herself and her body. Paladin was changing her, making her something she had never been before. The changes couldn't be good.

His hands slicked down her abdomen and pelvis with only a short, almost curt foray between her legs. He stood, scooped her up in his arms and stepped out of the pool. With quick, deft movements he dried her legs and had her lift her feet and dried them too.

She watched, stunned by his attention to the smallest detail of her body.

He straightened and glared at her, his lips a thin, straight line. "Go to bed," he ordered tersely.

Llaryn didn't hesitate. She hurried away, almost running to the bed. He looked like he wanted to tear something apart and she didn't want it to be her.

She pulled the one thin cover to her chin, looked back at the pool where Paladin stood and gasped. His penis stood out from his body and he was running one hand up and down its length in an incredibly fast almost jerking motion. His other hand gripped his thigh at the junction where it met his hip. His claws were extended. Blood oozed from where they bit into his flesh.

She looked up and found him watching her as she watched him. Her body tightened impossibly toward climax. His hand on his cock moved faster. His claws bit deeper.

She licked her lips. Her hips moved in short jerks in time to his masturbating hand.

Paladin's eyes closed and his head fell back. The thick column of his neck arched. His hips bucked forward, his hand still moving as white cream spurted from the domed head of his cock.

Llaryn gasped as her own tension released in an orgasmic wave. She stared at Paladin in disbelief as her vagina clenched, her body quaking. It couldn't be happening but it was. She had climaxed from watching him masturbate, from seeing him ejaculate and wishing he was inside her.

Dazed, she just shook her head and lay there trembling. It hadn't been the forceful orgasm she'd had from his penetration but it was definitely an orgasm, rolling through her body, leaving her weak and sated yet still wanting. Would she ever *not* want him? She was very afraid the answer was no. He'd brought her more pleasure just watching him than sex had brought her with any of her Mriln partners. She would never forget anything that had happened.

Feeling close to tears and weary from deep inside, she closed her eyes. There was nothing she was going to do about anything tonight, or today. She didn't even know what time it was. The room's lighting hadn't changed and there were no windows to show the outside.

Suddenly, she felt very lost and alone. Her whole life she'd been focused. First on her education, then on increasing her knowledge of healing when her aptitude for that was determined. As a healer she had gone from one patient to another. She'd helped those she could. The few that were beyond her skills she had helped pass on with all the dignity and respect such a moment deserved. Now, she felt like she was floundering.

Since she'd healed Genae her whole existence had centered around Paladin. He'd bathed her, seen to her personal needs, fed and clothed her. In just a few hours he'd shown her pleasure beyond what she'd known could exist. How did she go back? Her life had been full, yes, but colorless. Paladin might not hold any affection for her but it *felt* like he did and she wanted that. Until now she hadn't even known it was missing from her life.

The bed dipped under Paladin's weight. He lifted the light blanket and slid in beside her. His heat washed over her.

She fought the pull of gravity, her body tense to keep her from rolling into him. He wouldn't want her mashed up against him while he slept. It would be hot, quite possibly sweaty and probably uncomfortable. She should find somewhere else to sleep. It would be more comfortable for both of them.

Paladin wrapped an arm around her waist and half-dragged, half-tumbled her into himself. He easily turned her on her side so her buttocks were snug against his groin, his half-hard cock snug against the crease. He trapped her legs under his and wrapped an arm around her so her left breast was trapped under it. His abdomen and chest were pressed to her back and her head was pillowed on his other arm. She was completely surrounded.

Eyes wide, Llaryn stared into the shadows of the room. Apparently she would be sleeping with Paladin after all. Not only with him but wrapped up by him.

"Go to sleep." The words were more rumbled than spoken.

Could she sleep like this? Quickly, Llaryn inventoried how she felt. She shifted her legs back, adjusting the weight of his leg more forward so she wasn't crushed. She grasped the arm circling her and tugged it downward as she arched back, freeing her breast so his arm was pressed under it instead of over it. Closing her eyes she snuggled her head back against his chest and shifted it on his arm until she was comfortable.

A sigh escaped her and without conscious thought she went boneless. Yes, she could sleep surrounded by Paladin's heat and strength. The problem from now on would be sleeping without it. She pushed the thought away, smiled at how good she was getting at that and fell asleep.

* * * *

Paladin's eyes gleamed in the dim light as he stared down at Llaryn. Her head lay on his arm. Her lashes were black fans against her pale cheeks. Silently he forced his muscles to

relax. When she'd started rearranging him he'd thought she would try to move away, even leave his bed. Fortunately for both of them that hadn't been the case.

He looked at her breast plumped up by the press of his arm against it. He couldn't look at her pink nipples standing out from the areolas that crowned her breasts without wanting to suck and bite them.

His cock hardened and his lips drew back in a feral grimace. It might take a couple days for her to adjust to the size of his cock. Once she did he would wear her every night. She would sheath his cock and when he wanted her all he would have to do was start thrusting. When she wanted him, and she would, she could ride his cock at will.

She murmured something in the lilting tones of her people and his need soared. He closed his eyes, fighting the allure of her sweet scent. It took several minutes to bring himself under control. He was fighting every instinct he had. He hadn't exaggerated when he'd told her it was his nature to stake his claim frequently and forcefully. He'd tempered the truth so he wouldn't scare her more than she already was. He wanted to drag her into a small, tight lair, shove his cock deep in her cunt and fuck her fast and hard. He would stop to sleep, maybe to eat, and start again. He didn't want to stop until she knew physically and mentally that she belonged to him. Her claim on him had been made the moment he saw her. She didn't understand that yet, but she would.

Her hand lay palm up on the bed. Her fingers, loosely curved, were long and slender, her bones incredibly delicate.

A ferocious need to protect rose inside him, expanding in his chest and driving the urge to roar. He wanted no one else close to her. He wanted her protected and sheltered every moment. When he couldn't be with her she would have guards, VanDai he trusted to give their lives for hers.

He couldn't think about her wanting to leave Sai-two to return to her own people. He would deal with that when it came up, and it *would* come up. She didn't see herself as mated to him. That was part of what drove his need to dominate and possess her. He needed to know she wouldn't walk away if she could. Not that she would ever be allowed that opportunity. No one would take her away from him.

He pulled her tighter against himself and closed his eyes. Her scent combined with his own filled his nostrils. He had deliberately marked her and he would do it again, many times. No VanDai male would mistake his scent on her for that of any other VanDai warrior. Males of other species might not recognize his particular scent but they would have no doubt that a potent male had claimed her. And he would make very certain that his scent stayed on her.

Knowing he wouldn't sleep, he forced his muscles to loosen. He would rest while she slept. If he needed to, he would have Eln, his healer, provide something for her discomfort, but he would be taking her again before they left his room. He didn't have a choice. His control was thread thin. Without another mating, feeling her body accepting him, he wouldn't be able to rein in his instincts and she wasn't ready for an unfettered fuck with him. She might never be and he accepted that. All he had to do was protect her from himself.

Paladin's Pride (Collection)
by Angelina Evans

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Chapter Four

Llaryn sighed, snuggled back against the solid wall of heat behind her and froze. Her eyes popped open and she stared into the shadows.

Paladin. His penis, long and hard and thick, pressed between the cheeks of her buttocks and between her thighs. Memories rushed to the forefront of her mind. The feel of Paladin shredding her sleep-gown. His callous-roughened hands abrasive on her skin. His penis, thick and long, pushing into her. Making her climax. Bathing her. Taking himself to climax. His semen spurting out as she watched and climaxed again. Heat washed over her.

A shudder raced through her at the remembered release. Her people were right. It wasn't safe to have sex with members of other races. Paladin could, and she was sure *would*, take over her life given the chance. He wanted her. He'd had her. He had no reason to believe he couldn't keep her and have her again any time he wanted her.

It was time to get away from him and find a way home. The longer she spent with him the easier it would be to stay. Before going to sleep the hard thing had been contemplating leaving him. Fortunately sleep had brought reason. She had to leave while she could.

Very carefully, listening for any change in his breathing, she lifted his arm free of her waist. Scooting forward, she rolled onto her back. She looked up at the hard planes and

angles of his face. His thick, spiky black lashes lay unmoving against his cheeks.

Slowly, trying not to disturb him any more than she had to, she wriggled her way out from under the muscular, hair-roughened leg that trapped hers. Her heart hammered hard and loud in her chest. She kept looking up to be sure he was still sleeping.

Finally, she was free.

She almost collapsed back on the bed. It felt like she'd worked for hours rather than the minutes it had taken to free herself. Her nerves weren't meant for these kinds of intrigues. Life and death, wounds, healing, she thrived on those things. This, trying to free herself, trying not to be caught, trying to figure out a way to escape, it was terrifying. And if Paladin caught her...

Her throat closed and a chill wound through her. Thinking about that would keep her in bed and at his side more surely than physical bonds would.

Inch by inch she eased across the expanse of bed until she reached the side. She pushed up into a sitting position and slid her legs off the bed. A quick glance over her shoulder assured her Paladin hadn't moved and wasn't watching her. If he just kept sleeping, she'd be gone before he knew it.

Cloaked in only her own hair, she slid off the side of the bed and ran on tiptoes across the room. She skirted around the edge of the false wall and stopped, dropping to her heels when she saw the wall of weapons facing her. He had every instrument designed to kill that she'd ever seen or heard about and some she'd never dreamed existed.

The chill inside her grew. She and Paladin were more than incompatible. He was a predator, she his prey. And she wouldn't stay to be devoured by him.

Sad, and angry at herself for feeling that way, she turned away from the weapons. It was time to return to her own environment. Calm. Controlled. Carefully thought out decisions. Slow to action. Those things were prized by the Mriln. That was what she knew. The way of life she was comfortable with. Being with Paladin was like being caught on an energy bolt and whipped through space at light speed. It was exciting but not safe and not something a sane person would want to experience more than once, if that.

Shaking her head she looked away from the lasers and tazer-stars and more and found what she was looking for. Clothes.

A smile, more satisfied than happy, lifted her lips. Without clothes she wouldn't have the nerve to walk out of the room and if she was going to find a way home she had to leave Paladin's room.

Grabbing up the first tunic that came to hand she pulled it over her head. It fell to just above her knees, slid off her shoulders and swam around her but it was something to wear. She was just grateful she'd found it. Now she could do what she needed to do—go home.

* * * *

From under his lashes Paladin watched Llaryn disappear behind the room's false wall. Her legs and rounded buttocks

gleamed white in the dim light. Her black hair swung around her hips. His body, already aroused, jerked to full attention.

His lids rose and he stared with predatory intensity at the spot where she'd disappeared. She'd never been behind the wall so she didn't know about the weapons. That didn't mean she wouldn't use one when she found them, but he didn't think she would. She was a healer by nature and training. Her instincts were to care for and nurture others. Hurting someone, killing them, would be abhorrent to her. That was one reason she needed him.

Seconds ticked into a minute and he started to tense. What was she doing back there? He didn't think she would use any of the weapons but she could take one for leverage. Some of the weapons didn't work as expected. She could hurt herself.

She walked back around the wall shrouded in material. One of his tunics dwarfed her. The collar had slipped off her shoulder and halfway down her arm on one side, baring the outer curve of her breast. It was sleeveless and as she turned, tugging at the fallen neckline, her other breast was bared through the armhole.

His mouth watered and his eyes all but closed again. Blood rushed to his penis, engorging it even more. Her, dressed in his clothes, he liked. He liked it even more that she was alternately exposed and covered, her feminine secrets *almost* exposed. It roused every predatory instinct in him. He wanted to grab her, throw her on the bed and explore every place on her body the shirt hid. He would use his hands and mouth, his tongue and teeth. She'd scream before he was done with her.

Her gaze slid over him and the shirt trembled visibly as she shivered. Carefully placing one foot in front of the other, not quite tiptoeing, she skirted the end of the bed, and ran.

Paladin leapt off the bed. His arm circled her waist as she reached the door. Llyarn screamed. She tried to twist away. She fought to pry the solid bar of muscle and bone loose, her nails digging into his forearm.

Paladin used his weight to crush her against the door. Teeth grinding, he fought back the need to drag her away with him. Her body against his felt slender and fragile. His penis pressed tight against her upper buttocks and lower back. He was going to take her and this time he couldn't be gentle. She'd *run* from him. He'd been as gentle and careful with her as he could and she'd *run*.

Sobs shook her. She turned her head, her cheek pressed to the door. Tears glistened on her pale skin. "Let me go, Paladin. You don't know what you're doing, what the price of sex will be. Let me go. Please, let me go."

The predator in him surfaced even stronger at the sound of her sobs and the feel of her body shaking. She begged for release and the beast in him, clawing him from inside, fed on her vulnerability. His penis surged impossibly bigger and thicker.

He spun her to face him and forced his leg between hers. Using his knee pressed to the door between her legs, he lifted her off her feet. With one swipe of his claws he shredded the tunic.

She was wet.

That fact penetrated the sexual haze fogging his mind only enough to make him understand that, while she was scared, she was also aroused. He was beyond rational thought, his actions driven by the instinct to fuck his mate.

Grabbing her by the back of her thighs he lifted and spread her legs. His cock found the notch of her entrance and his hips surged forward. He grunted at the feel of her tight flesh pressing, stretching, opening. His cock forged into her, her flesh tight around him, her muscles squeezing.

He surged up and in, fast and hard. She was so tight, so good, only his.

He filled her completely, couldn't go any deeper. He pulled back, almost out, held her in place and watched her flushed face. Her mouth opened and she gasped for air. Her eyes were half-closed and glazed.

He couldn't go deep enough, couldn't move fast enough. She had to come. He had to come. Inside her. The only place he wanted to be. His seed in her belly. His woman. His mate. His.

He hammered into her. Animal sounds broke from him.

She grasped his biceps, her nails digging into him. Her breasts heaved in time with each gasping breath. Her nipples jutted out in hard points from her puffed areolas.

Paladin pressed his body to hers. His hips slammed against her as he drove his penis in and out of her. He *felt* her, hard nipples stabbing against the hard wall of his chest, the bite of her nails, the fisting of her cunt on his pounding cock.

Her head rolled back. Her eyes closed. Her body locked, every muscle tensed.

Paladin stroked into her even faster, wild, out of control. Fighting for his own release even as he watched hers. Her face twisted in a grimace of ecstasy bordering on pain.

A nimbus of light sparked around her, the glow growing as he rode her. Heat blossomed in her cunt, burning him as he fucked her. She screamed. Her back bowed. Her nails bit deep in his shoulders. Her cunt clamped down around his cock. Golden light striated with sparks of white exploded around her, pulsing in time to the tightening of her inner muscles on him.

Paladin roared. Semen fountained from him into her. She pulled at his very essence, milked him of his seed, burned him with her light.

Suddenly, she slumped against him, boneless.

For a long moment Paladin held her in place, his hips moving in a slow rhythm against her.

"Are you all right?" His voice was a hoarse growl, his words barely understandable.

Her head moved against him in a barely perceptible nod.

"Don't try and run again."

She nodded again.

Paladin wrapped one arm around her waist, the other around her hips, turned and strode back to the bed. He sat down, laid back and rolled them over without taking his cock out of her. He wouldn't be out of her again until they left his room. His claim was going to be made clear in a very physical, irrefutable way. He wouldn't let her deny it and he wouldn't let her deny him.

* * * *

Llaryn couldn't have gotten away if she wanted to. Paladin's cock, somehow heavier, was still lodged inside her. One of her legs was trapped between his, the other over his. His arms held her secure against him.

It was hot and uncomfortable. Her chest was flattened against the hard wall of his and sweat beaded between her breasts. His cock was thick and hard inside her. Her leg, caught between his, would go numb before long.

If she could have moved, she wouldn't. A weight crushed down on her chest as she admitted that to herself. She was where she wanted to be. Could she have left if she'd told Paladin no and meant it?

No, that wasn't a fair thought to her or Paladin. She had wanted him. She still wanted him. Against everything she believed. Against all the teachings of her people, she wanted him.

Eyes closed, she pressed her lips together and fought back tears. What price would she have to pay for what she had allowed to happen? Her heart squeezed and her stomach rolled. She'd never been truly afraid before. Not like this.

Flooded with worries and fears that had no answer, her mind shut down and she slept.

* * * *

A tone sounded through the room. Paladin woke instantly. Llaryn fought through layers of sleep.

"Paladin, a Mriln vessel has arrived. They're here to collect the Mriln healer."

Paladin's teeth ground together, his eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. His hips and chest thrust forward, moving him against and into Llaryn.

Involuntarily Llaryn's body tensed and she tightened around him. The Mrlin had come? Now?

Paladin rolled Llaryn onto her back and himself on top of her. His eyes fierce, he stared into hers as he pulled his hips back and powered forward. Llaryn's body jolted at the impact and she half-grunted, half-groaned.

"Have they brought a transport down?" He pulled back, slammed forward.

"Yes."

Llaryn felt the impact of him in and against her, in every fiber of her being. Moisture flooded her channel, easing his penetration though the first two thrusts had left her very sensitive. She couldn't lie still as he drove into her. She twisted, moaned and moved her hips. Her vagina slid up and down his cock as he moved in and out of her. It felt like a thousand tiny fires sparking and burning all along her sheath.

"We will meet them within the hour."

A tone sounded, announcing the connection was closed.

"I'll inform them you won't be returning with them."

Paladin's voice was rough as he stared into her eyes.

"You can't keep me if I don't want to stay." She groaned as he slammed into her.

He fucked her hard, fast and deep.

Her body jumped against his, riding his cock. Her cunt squeezed him, voracious for more of what only he had ever given her.

"You want to stay." His black eyes looked into her soul.
"You want me."

He reached between them and rubbed her clit.

Llaryn arched into him. Her head pressed back hard against the mattress. Her body glowed, surrounded by golden light. Her molecules sang as they spun out of control, expanding and snapping together, her life's energy barely contained.

Blinded by her radiance, his cock milked by her vagina, Paladin came. He emptied jet after jet of come into her grasping sheath. "If I haven't made you pregnant already, I will." His child would grow in her, binding them together even more. In every way that was possible he would make her his.

Paladin rose and pulled out of her in one fast, jarring motion. He swooped her up in his arms, carried her to the pool and submerged them both.

Llaryn didn't protest. Her mind raced around what he'd said. Pregnant? He would inform them she wouldn't be returning? Anticipation and dread warred inside her. He wanted a child with her. If he publicly said he wanted her and claimed her, he meant it. Didn't he? Yet if he told the Mriln he wanted and had claimed her, she could be banished.

Her people, her life, her beliefs—or Paladin. Did she have a choice? She didn't even know if she wanted one.

Paladin walked out of the pool, hand drying himself as he went.

For the first time Llaryn found herself left with the choice of going with him or staying where she was. Her heart raced

with panic. Why hadn't he picked her up and taken her with him?

She sank to her knees on the step in front of her and bowed her head. Her chin touched the surface of the clean-gel, its silky texture against her skin giving her something to focus on.

What was happening to her? She was strong, competent and intelligent. Her healing abilities were greater than any other had ever achieved. There had always been a clear path before her, a path that might have been guided by her mentors but had always been chosen by her. This would be no different. Regardless of what Paladin thought or her people decided, her life was her own and it was her choice that would decide its course.

Raising her head she found Paladin standing at the side of the pool. He was dressed in black leather breeches and a flowing sand-red tunic. His thighs bulged against the tight material encasing them. His potency as a male, though contained, was visibly apparent. His shoulders stretched forever and his bronze-gold-black hair stood out around his head in a glorious mane. He looked exactly like what he was, a magnificent male animal in his prime.

Rising to her feet, Llaryn slowly and meticulously hand-dried herself. She stepped out of the pool, bent and finished drying before standing to face him. She glanced toward the door where the tunic she'd worn lay in tatters. Flipping her hair over her shoulders, she lifted her chin and looked him in the eye. "Stay or leave, Paladin, the choice is mine."

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A low growl rumbled in Paladin's throat and his eyes narrowed. "The choice is made." He reached out, pinched one nipple and stared into her eyes as he manipulated it.

Llaryn's knees went weak and her channel flooded. His scent marked her as surely as a sign would have. She had to admit, on the physical level he was right. Her body had chosen him. Her mind, however, was more rational. Her heart, though...

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Chapter Five

"A gown is being sent for you."

Llaryn opened her mouth, closed it again and shook her head, not sure what she'd been about to say. She crossed her arms over her breasts, uncomfortable being naked when he was dressed. "Thank you for ordering something for me to wear. I didn't want to meet my Mriln escort dressed in one of your tunics."

Paladin pulled her arms away from her breasts and covered the small mounds with his hands. "A tunic wouldn't be appropriate for today." He rolled both nipples against his palms.

"A tunic would be appropriate another day?" She couldn't think with his hot hands on her.

"Not for my mate. Your body is for me to see. You'll be properly attired when out of our room."

"You're not a fan of the Tortella designs?" She was shocked at herself, teasing the huge VanDai warrior. Tortella garments were designed to bare the body, not cover it.

A low rumble issued from deep in Paladin's chest. He released her right breast and his claws flashed out. Reaching down he carefully raked the curls covering her mound, making her shudder. "If I want you accessible, I'll take care of it."

He would do exactly that, Llaryn knew.

A tone sounded at the door.

Faster than she could believe, Paladin whipped the light blanket off the bed and around her. He strode toward the door and she found herself shrouded in material where she stood.

He pressed his hand to the sensor lock and the door slid open. A VanDai woman, her hair a more subdued version of Paladin's full mane, stood on the other side. She held out a length of bronze and gold-shot black material. Paladin took it and she inclined her head. She turned and walked away, her hips swaying enticingly.

Llaryn watched the other female strut away with a mixture of awe and anger. The VanDai woman had no right to flaunt herself in front of Paladin that way. Yet Llaryn understood exactly why she did it. Paladin was completely male and amazingly virile. Any woman looking at him could have no doubt he would bring her ecstasy in bed.

Why was she angry? Paladin said he had claimed her but she had laid no claim on him.

Paladin stalked back toward her, silent, his gaze piercingly intent. He stopped in front of her and held the gown out to her draped over his arms. "Do you accept this gown?"

Llaryn's skin rippled and the back of her neck tingled. There was a formality to his tone that belied the simplicity of his words. What was he really asking her? "The gown is for me, isn't it?"

Paladin nodded. "To wear to meet my people and yours. Do you accept it?"

She frowned. "We're going to meet my people, not yours."

"Do you take the gown and come with me?"

Llaryn's heart jumped into her throat. Did she have a choice? She couldn't go before the Mriln naked. Hands shaking, she reached out and took the gown from Paladin.

"Ohh." Her eyes widened and her mouth formed a perfect circle. The material was light and flowing, like holding liquid air in her hands. It looked alive. The gold and bronze seemed to spark and glow in the bed of black.

Paladin took the gown back and held it over her head. "Lift your arms."

She did as she was told, wanting to feel the material against her skin. He guided the dress over her arms and head, letting it fall into place from there on its own. Llaryn shivered and slowly lowered her arms. It was like being swathed in a dream. The material caressed and clung, shaping itself to her in flowing lines. "Do you have a mirror?"

Paladin led her into the secret room. He touched a control and a section of wall slid back, revealing a floor to ceiling mirror. Llaryn's hands flew to her mouth. The woman looking back at her wasn't her. It couldn't be. She didn't have such wide, starry eyes. Her lips weren't that red and full. Her body—

She shook her head. It couldn't be true and yet it was. This was who she was with Paladin. The image was shockingly carnal. She was completely covered yet bared. Her nipples, her puffy areolas, her small breasts, were all starkly outlined. It was as if she were clothed in water. Clinging, revealing, bronze and gold-sparked black water. Her waist, the gentle flare of her hips, the juncture of her thighs. It was more

erotic than being naked. She was clothed yet *everything was revealed*. She'd never felt more sexy or more exposed.

"You expect me to meet my people dressed in this?" Her lashes lifted and she looked at him through the mirror. "You want me exposed like this to other VanDai males?" She couldn't keep the bewilderment out of her voice. "A tunic that bares my legs is too revealing and this isn't?"

Paladin stepped behind her and pressed his body into hers. His penis was hard, evidence of how aroused he was. He reached around her and half-cupped, half-covered her breasts. "This gown announces to every VanDai, male or female, that you belong to me."

"It's a claiming gown?" Llaryn's stomach hollowed out, leaving her breathless. "This gown announces that you claimed me?"

"And that you accepted." Satisfaction flared bright in Paladin's night-dark eyes.

Had she accepted? Llaryn studied the uncertain woman who stood looking back at her. Fear dominated Mriln life. Fear of revealing secrets that would bring unwanted interest from stronger, more militant species. Fear of feeling too much, of losing control. Every fear was valid, based on a history of slavery and servitude to other races over millennia. They had always found a way to freedom, always been subjugated again until fears were planted so deep it was laced through their genes.

Did she have the courage to accept what Paladin offered? The VanDai were renowned for mating for life. If she accepted Paladin, there would be no going back to the Mriln. Her life

would be among the VanDai. Paladin and his warrior species would be her family.

His right hand slid from her breast to her abdomen and lower. His middle finger found the notch at the apex of her sex. The material slid against her in a distracting, arousing glide under his hand.

"This body, the woman inside it, *you*, belong to me." His breath was warm and moist against her ear. His eyes met hers in the mirror.

She was lost in the depths of his obsidian eyes. "Yes. Yes, I do," she whispered and at that moment she meant it. She did belong to Paladin. Her body had known it first. From the moment he had touched her she'd been ready for him.

Something deep inside her trusted him. Belonging to him was the greatest seduction of all. He focused on *her*. She felt like the center of his world. She was from a species where being singled out, to be special or to draw attention to yourself was bad. With Paladin it was all right to be wanted. She liked his attention and she wanted to know more about what could be between them. He'd shown her so much. What more did she have to learn?

"I'm yours." It felt like weights dropped off her as she said the words. She was going to do what she wanted to do, spend her life with Paladin.

He turned her from the mirror into his arms. He pressed her tight to his body and held her. Abruptly he released her, stepped back and caught her hand in his. Keeping her at his side, he strode toward the door. "The Mriln are waiting."

She felt as though she were racing, trying to keep up with him. He led the way out the door and two warriors fell into place behind them. For the first time she got the chance to look around even though they were moving fast. She'd had impressions of heat and red when she first arrived on Sai-two but she'd been so focused on Genae and the job she had to do she hadn't really paid attention. The Paladium, the courtyard and the guard wall were stark yet beautiful. Sun baked, dry, red-gold. How could life have survived in such desolation? Yet this was the home of the VanDai.

Under her feet the sandstone floor was warm. It was more uneven in some places than in others, worn down from countless feet treading over it through the centuries. VanDai, male and female, moved through the corridors. They were a beautiful species. Strong, fit, self-assured. To a person, she was sure, they wouldn't run from the problems they faced but meet them head on.

Unlike her.

Her heart skipped a beat. She felt breathless, her legs suddenly weak. She wanted to stop but she wasn't willing to bring Paladin's attention to herself. She was just having second thoughts because she was going to face fellow Mriln.

The maze of corridors wound on and on. It felt like he was leading her in circles. By the time he stopped in front of a door, she knew there was no way she could ever find her way back on her own. This door looked like all the others. Tiny wood pieces fitted together in an intricate pattern that teased the eye.

Paladin reached for the secure-lock and a weight settled on her chest. It was time to face the consequences of her actions. She took a deep breath and raised her chin. Whatever happened, her time with Paladin was worth the price.

The door slid open and Paladin walked in tall, strong and confident. He was the leader of the VanDai and it showed. Llaryn felt a thrill of pride. A smile lifted her lips. She couldn't take her eyes off him and didn't want to. She wanted to remember everything about him. His thick bronze- and gold-shot black hair. His black eyes, sometimes piercing, sometimes on fire, always intense. He was power personified and he was hers.

"Prime healer Llaryn."

Shocked, Llaryn's gaze snapped forward to the tall, frail, elderly Mriln female seated at the room's one, long table. She was flanked by two Mriln males almost as old as she was. All three were garbed in the pale gray reserved for Mriln elders.

The world shifted under Llaryn's feet. She felt dizzy, almost disoriented as she faced her mentor. "Elder Rhonon." She inclined her head in a sign of deepest respect. "Elder Lykor. Elder Shinzae." She inclined her head to the other Elders but her attention stayed centered on Rhonon. The Elder rarely left her adopted home world of Thalance where she had settled some years before. "Why have you come to Sai-two? I would have returned to Thalance if you'd asked."

Rhonon straightened to her full height. Her eyes, a pale, piercing purple, stared into Llaryn's. Her expression was closed. "You are not welcome among the Mriln."

Llaryn blinked and shook her head. Surely she hadn't heard correctly. "I'm not welcome among the Mriln? I don't understand. Because of my time with Paladin?"

"Your time with Paladin?" Elder Rhonon flicked a glance at Paladin before centering her attention back on Llaryn. "What you've done with Paladin goes against everything you've been taught, everything we believe as a people, but it's insignificant."

Llaryn took a half step back. Her time with Paladin was insignificant? "Then what?" Bewildered, she shook her head. She'd retrieved the information from Genae's heart, she'd healed her, gone into a stasis-sleep and when she woke, Paladin ... Her thoughts trailed off and her eyes grew huge. She stumbled where she stood.

Paladin's hand, big and hot, settled at the small of her back and propelled her forward. He pulled out a chair for her and seated himself beside her.

"I healed Genae." She whispered the words, a sick feeling settling in the base of her stomach. "I couldn't let her die. She gave up her father, the only life she knew, risked her life. She was willing to give her life for species she'd never come into contact with. She deserved to live."

"So you healed a dead woman and now a universe wants miracles." The ice cracked, revealing Elder Rhonon's anguish. Her eyes dimmed and she shrank in on herself, aging as Llaryn watched.

"What's happened?" Llaryn leaned forward, her hands flat on the table.

"Tell us." Paladin's words echoed Llaryn's but his tone was one of pure command.

Elder Rhonon turned her attention to him. "All Mriln have been recalled to Mouvriln."

"Have there been casualties?"

Llaryn's heart stuttered at Paladin's question. Casualties? Because of what she'd done? It couldn't be. She'd healed someone. She hadn't hurt anyone.

Rhonon nodded. Her hand visibly shaking, she rubbed her eyes. "Several."

Ice froze in Llaryn's veins. Her stomach quivered. She felt sick, bile rising in her throat. "Mriln have died because of me?"

"Bring the Mriln here," Paladin ordered.

The Elder shook her head. "We're not a prolific species but our numbers are still more than Sai-sen-Sai could support. What I would ask is that you send one of your vessels that battled the League destroyers back to Mouvriln with us."

Paladin gave one sharp nod. "Ryvyn and the *Zolsum* will go with you. I'll send a task force of advisors and a contingent of warriors as well."

"We appreciate any help you can spare."

"What about Llaryn?" Paladin demanded.

Llaryn wanted to protest. Her heart and body wanted to remain with him but she was ruled by her intellect. She would return to Mouvriln with her mentor and her people. She belonged with them, facing what lay before them. She couldn't stay with Paladin knowing what she had caused.

A tremor raced through her at the thought. Her own death had been the price of healing Genae with her own life-force and she'd been ready to pay it, but Paladin had stopped her. She'd known the price of sexual relations with Paladin but had somehow managed to make it less than what it was in her own mind. Everything was catching up with her and there was no stopping it. "I'll go to Mouvriln with my people."

Elder Rhonon rose to her feet with the help of the Elders on either side of her. Paladin rose as well. When Llaryn would have stood his hand on her shoulder kept her seated.

Rhonon looked at Paladin, ignoring Llaryn as if she didn't exist. "The healer, despite our teaching, has made her choice. She is no longer Mriln. It is your choice if she is to join the VanDai."

Pain sliced through Llaryn at the Elder's emotionless dismissal. "I'm Mriln. I belong on Mouvriln. I'll face your judgment and the judgment of the full council for what I've done." She tried to stand up but Paladin wouldn't let her rise.

Elder Rhonon straightened to her full height. She looked at Llaryn, her gaze piercingly cold. "Your outburst is both emotional and public, healer," she reprimanded. "A relationship with Paladin could have been overlooked. Bringing your species to the brink of enslavement when annihilation had just been averted, that *cannot and will not* be overlooked or forgiven."

The words hit Llaryn like a physical blow. She rocked back in her chair. "Enslavement? What do you mean?" The world tilted on its axis. There was no solid place to stand.

Rhonon's smile was chilling. "You miraculously cured a dead woman and now every being in the universe wants to *own* their own Mriln healer." She turned and walked away supported by the other Elders.

They reached the door and all Llaryn could do was sit and watch. It wasn't real. It couldn't be real. At the door Rhonon stopped. She turned back, her eyes suspiciously bright. "The fault is not solely yours, child." Her voice wavered and broke on the last word.

Llaryn's throat closed. Tears welled in her eyes.

"When the VanDai healer asked for Mriln help to save you, we didn't answer. He took his questions elsewhere. We've all made mistakes but you no longer belong among the Mriln. Find peace with Paladin if you can."

She turned away and the three disappeared through the door.

Llaryn stared after the Elder. Rhonon had taught and mentored her from childhood. She'd been so worried about Paladin, about a sexual relationship with him. It had been wrong even though it didn't feel like it. Healing Genae had been absolutely right.

This time when she went to stand Paladin let her. She stepped away from him but he caught her arm and pulled her back.

"Let me go." She raked her fingernails down his forearm. "I'm *Mriln*. I belong with my people."

Paladin spun her around to face him. "You belong with me."

Pain ripped through her. "No." It was a cry from her heart. "I'm Mriln, not VanDai. I'm a healer. I can help them." She couldn't breathe. Tears stung her eyes. "Why don't you understand? I have to go with Rhonon. Whatever the fate of my people, it's my fate as well." She tried to pull away.

Paladin wouldn't release her.

"Please," she pleaded. "Let me go."

"No." His expression was implacable, his hold on her unbreakable.

She closed her eyes and bowed her head. "You have to let me go." She didn't know what was real. Everything was spinning out of control. Upside down. Inside out. "I'm a healer. I don't cause death. How could healing Genae be wrong? How could what I feel for you be wrong?"

His strong arms wrapped around her, pulling her tight against him. She buried her face against his neck, her head under his chin. He was warm and real and solid in a fluid reality that was drowning her.

"You weren't wrong to heal Genae." His tone was fierce. "What she did was heroic. Healing her was the only thing you could do." He lifted her chin, forcing her eyes to meet his. His own eyes were hard and bright, his expression grim.

"What you feel for me, what we experience together, isn't wrong. Secrets are wrong. Hiding the ability to heal is wrong. Not healing to the full extent of your ability, that's wrong. How many lives have been lost because of Mriln law?"

Anger warring with sorrow, Llaryn frowned up at him and clenched her jaw to hold back tears. "Our laws aren't wrong. I broke them and look what happened. Our laws keep us safe."

He grasped her arms and shook her once, hard. "Your laws didn't keep you safe. They kept you in hiding, never able to completely reveal yourself to anyone."

"Mriln have died because of what I did. They've been called back to Mouvriln. More will die. *Because of me.*" Her voice broke and the tears started falling. She couldn't hold them back, couldn't escape the crushing weight of betrayal. She'd thought she would pay the price, no one else.

Paladin growled low in his throat and scooped her up in his arms. He strode out of the room and down the corridor the way they'd come. He barked orders at the warriors who followed them.

Llaryn didn't care. The tears just kept falling. A silent rain of sorrow she couldn't stop. No sobs shook her but it felt as if the tears came from deep inside, scalding her inside, freezing her outside.

Her people were dying *because of her*. Lives had been lost *because of her*. She was a healer. She cheated death, she didn't cause it.

"I'm not a killer." Hoarse and strangled, the words burst from her.

Paladin entered his quarters, his pace fast, his arms tight around her. He sat down on the bed with her seated on his lap. Her legs draped over his thighs. His hold was fierce, his heart beating strong and steady against her. "You're not a killer and you're not responsible for anyone dying. There won't be another Mriln death if I can help it."

She raised her face from his neck. She looked at him through eyes blurred by tears. "How can you stop it?"

His expression hardened, his eyes narrowed and death stared out at her from them. "As of this moment the Mriln are under VanDai protection. Any attack against the Mriln will be an attack against the VanDai and will be treated as a declaration of war."

She wiped at her face and shook her head. "No one will believe you would do that."

"They will." His tone sent a shiver down her back. "A declaration is being sent out now. The Mriln *are* under my protection."

For a long moment she could only stare at him. "You mean it, don't you?"

"I never say anything I don't mean. Not about this and not about you."

She knew what he was saying was important but she couldn't grasp exactly why. Her mind felt sluggish. Too many shocks had hit her all at once. She let her head fall forward to rest on his chest and closed her eyes. "Thank you."

If the Mriln had a hope of surviving it would be thanks to Paladin.

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Chapter Six

The tension left Llaryn's body, leaving her limp and sleeping in Paladin's arms. He stared unseeing at the wall in front of him. He wanted to kill Elder Rhonon for hurting her. The older Mriln had to realize that at some point their secret would come out. He would bet his life the President had known and used that knowledge to his advantage.

His expression grim, he stood up and settled Llaryn on the bed. She looked translucent she was so pale. Her face was wet, her only color the pale pink of her lips. She wore his claiming gown. His scent marked her. She belonged to him. He wouldn't have had her banished from her people to keep her but it did prevent her from trying to get away from him. She had nowhere to go.

What he wanted to do was watch her. If she woke, he wanted to be beside her but there was too much to do. Ryvn would take the *Zolsum* to Mouvriln and anyone who tried to attack them would have to go through him.

While the Mriln as a whole were a target in general, Llaryn would be a specific target. Anyone who wanted to bring someone back from the dead or who wanted to feel invincible would be after her. Sai-sen-Sai had to be ready. There weren't many in the universe insane enough to take on the might of the VanDai directly, especially not after the display of their power against the President's destroyers. The threat would be much more covert and all the more dangerous because of it. He wanted Llaryn safe. No one would touch her.

He left her sleeping on the bed, unaware of the measures he was putting in place to keep her safe. Hours later he returned, grim and furious. Prides among the VanDai were demanding Llaryn for her healing ability. They wanted miracles and they wanted them from his mate.

He stared at her. She hadn't moved. She looked fragile and vulnerable. She'd almost died saving Genae and he would never let that happen again. She belonged to him and he protected his own.

He settled himself on the bed beside her and she rolled up against him. Satisfaction flared bright and hot in his eyes. She would admit she belonged to him again. Until she did, though, it was enough to know that subconsciously she already recognized him as her mate.

* * * *

The only sound was her own breathing. She could smell Paladin's scent, warm, male and wild. He surrounded her in heat.

Slowly she opened her eyes and tilted her head back until she could see his face. His features were too angular to be beautiful. He was big, blunt and overtly powerful. He was the epitome of the VanDai warrior and he was hers.

Pleasure at the thought burned bright inside her and she'd never felt more guilty about anything in her life. What right did she have to feel pleasure?

Not caring if she woke him, she rolled away from Paladin and off the bed. She paced across the room, scraped her

fingers through her hair and searched inside herself for even ground.

"Don't try to run." Paladin's voice was gravelly. His tone made the words a command.

Llaryn turned to face the bed, looked at him and turned away again. "Where would I run to? The Mriln won't accept me. It sounds like every other species in the universe would enslave me or kill me. Where would I go?"

She stopped pacing and covered her face with her hands. There was nowhere to go except right where she was. *Right where I wanted to be*, a voice inside her head whispered.

Guilt rushed in, flooding her. She wrapped her arms around her waist and started pacing again. Her insides felt quivery and unsettled. She'd been banished from the Mriln. She no longer had a home or a people. The Mriln were being hunted because they could heal and, regardless of species, no being wanted to die. That was her fault. Mriln had already died *because of her*.

She was almost to the door, started to turn around and caught a blur of motion out of the corner of her eye. Paladin's arms wrapped around her and lifted her off her feet.

Heart pounding, she stared up at him. "I wasn't trying to leave. You're in here. There are two guards outside the door and I have nowhere to go."

"You would have left with the Mriln if you could have." His voice was rough, his hold on her not loosening.

Llaryn closed her eyes, wrapped her arms around him and buried her face against his neck. "I *would* have gone with

them. I broke Mriln law not once, but twice. I deserve to pay for what I've done, for the harm I've caused."

Taking a deep breath and steeling her nerve, she lifted her face until she was looking at him. "I would have gone but, even believing it was wrong, I wanted to stay."

Something hot and dangerous flared in Paladin's eyes. His arms tightened around her and he carried her back to the bed, releasing her to stand beside it. "How do you like your gown?"

"My gown?" She frowned, looked down at herself and back up at Paladin. "It's lovely." Why would he ask about her clothing now?

"You'll be wearing some version of it the rest of your life."

Her gaze sharpened on him. "You said it was a claiming gown. Does it have significance other than that and covering me?"

A slow, sensual smile lifted his lips. His lashes lowered and his face flushed. "It tells all VanDai you belong to me."

"Yes, you told me that." She frowned.

"It tells them in more than its colors. It also keeps your body aroused and ready for me." His nostrils flared and he drew in a deep breath. "I can smell your heat."

Embarrassed, Llaryn felt heat rush into her face. She couldn't deny what he said. She was wet, her breasts heavy, her nipples aching, and her areolas tight. She'd been caught up with everything else, unaware of her body's constant state of low lying arousal until Paladin made her aware of it.

"How does it work?"

"Metal threads woven through the garment."

She looked down and fingered the soft material. "It doesn't scratch or itch."

"It's not meant to hurt, only to arouse." He ran his hands down her chest, over her breasts, down her abdomen and around to cup her ass. He breathed deep again. "It's done its job." His satisfaction was clear.

"You think I'll wear something like this every day for the rest of my life?" She lifted her chin and shook her head.

"I know you will or you'll go naked." His hands kneaded her bottom, making it hard to think. And that's what she wanted. She didn't want to think, didn't want to feel anything but her arousal for him. She would have to deal with what had happened, but later. Not now.

She lowered her chin and looked at him from under her lashes. "You're going to control my clothes?" She'd never teased anyone before and with Paladin there was a dangerous edge to it that made her tingle.

"Yes." He ran his hands down her thighs and started bunching up the skirt of the gown, pulling it up from the floor until her legs were bare.

"What do I get to control?" Thoughts of death, her mentor, Mriln racing back to Mouvriln flooded her head and her voice broke on the last word. Tears filled her eyes and her lower lip trembled. She clutched Paladin's biceps and fought back the tide of pain. "Please make me forget," she whispered.

He released the gown. It slithered down her legs, making her skin come alive. The tug of material as the weight dropped pulled it against her nipples and she moaned. Sparks ignited from her breasts to her cunt.

He stripped his clothes off with fast, economical motions. Llaryn started to take off her gown.

"No." His one word command stopped her. "I want you in it when I take you."

She shivered, unsure why the thought of being clothed while he was naked felt so erotic. He walked to her, his eyes raking her and making her shiver. She looked down and her mouth watered. "You're so big. Long and thick. How can you fit inside me without hurting me?"

He seated himself on the bed, grabbed her hips and pulled her between his knees. "You were made for me."

She looked at him and it felt like the air was sucked from the room. He filled her world. He'd taken her over. Without him she would have died after saving Genae. Finding out what was happening with the Mriln would have destroyed her. Death would have been welcome.

Paladin. He'd given her more than she ever imagined possible. She didn't understand what she felt for him but she knew it was powerful.

"Let me take you in my mouth. Teach me how to please you." She wanted to give him some measure of what he'd given her. If that could only be pleasure, so be it.

His expression turned molten but he shook his head. "I want you too much to control myself. I couldn't be careful and you're too fragile for what I would do."

Dejected, she sank against him. "I never thought I was VanDai mate material." She didn't belong anywhere. Not with the Mriln and not with Paladin.

He jerked her away from his chest and glared down at her. "You *are* a VanDai mate. My mate. Nothing will change that. No one will ever take you away from me. We will learn what we can do without hurting you that will pleasure us both. It will just take time."

He took her face in his hands, keeping her attention focused completely on him. "I'll teach you to take my cock but right now I need to take you and keep taking you. I need to *make* you mine."

Feeling shy, embarrassed and thrilled all at the same time, she smiled at him. "I want to taste you, to feel you and give you the same pleasure you've given me."

He growled and his eyes glowed. "Later," he promised and lowered his head to hers. His mouth settled over hers, pressing hard. His tongue stabbed against her lips, demanding entrance.

She opened her mouth. His tongue darted inside, filling her. His tongue rubbed against hers, stroking her inner lips and twining around her tongue. She opened her mouth wider, wanting more. He pulled back, stood her on her feet and lifted the skirt of her gown to her waist. "Sit on my lap and wrap your legs around my waist."

Feeling exposed and vulnerable, the material of the gown keeping her breasts tight, she did as he said. His skin was coarse and hot against the inside of her legs and thighs. She lifted her legs and locked them around his hips, looked down and felt heat rush through her, making her wetter and readying her even more for him. She was stretched wide,

open for him. His cock was huge and enticing, staring up at her, the slit gleaming with pre-come.

A shiver raced down her back. Mriln were taught control from birth. Control of their emotions. Control of their movements. Awareness of themselves at all times. With Paladin she was very aware of herself and him but not because she was trying to hide. She liked sex with him. She liked feeling vulnerable and exposed and knowing she was safe.

Paladin dipped two fingers into her folds. She watched what he was doing and felt it at the same time. His cock was so close, his fingers where she wanted them. Her eyes half-closed and her bones went liquid.

He pressed his fingers into her. Stretching her. Rotating his fingers as he pushed them deeper. Her belly quivered and her hips rocked forward. She bit her lip and nearly groaned. The material of her gown felt more abrasive against her nipples.

He pulled his fingers from her clinging heat and traced up the valley between her folds until he reached her clit. He circled the nub with his wet fingers, pressed and flicked it.

She couldn't watch. It was too raw. Her head fell back and she closed her eyes. Her hips rocked forward when his touch was too light; backward when it was too much. And suddenly it wasn't enough at all.

Something inside her shifted and focused entirely on him. She knew what was happening though she'd never felt it. It had started when they made love before but she'd never let go, never released her control enough to let a true bond

between herself and Paladin happen. This time she didn't have a choice.

She raised her head, opened her eyes and looked at him. Her eyes glowed. She could feel the energy dancing through her, the pulse and flow of it along her skin and under it.

Paladin's hand cupped her mound. He was tense, watchful. "What is it?"

"There's a good reason Mriln don't mate outside their own species."

Paladin frowned. His middle finger rubbed her clit, keeping her blood running hot and fast.

"When a Mriln becomes excited physically, such as an orgasm, our molecules speed and our bodies become more energy. You've seen it to some extent. If we go beyond that we become more energy than matter. We *imprint* on our partner. Our energy bonds with theirs."

Paladin cupped her ass, pulling her forward as he continued to strum her clit.

She fought to keep her attention on him when all she wanted to do was focus on what he was doing between her legs. "If I imprint on you, my life becomes dependent on yours. It was your energy that kept me alive after I healed Genae. Your touching and stroking me. I *absorbed* your energy so I know we're compatible."

His eyes narrowed. "What does imprinting do? How does it make your life dependent on mine?" The head of his cock, hot and pulsing, lodged against the entrance of her vagina.

Her breath caught. Her back arched, pushing her breasts against the maddening material rubbing them. Her eyes

threatened to close but she wouldn't let them. He had to know what was about to happen. "If I imprint on you, I will require frequent physical contact to rejuvenate. My life-force will be fueled by contact with yours."

"Your species is symbiotic?"

"When bonded, yes."

"How long can you survive without physical contact?" He pushed himself against her.

She bit her lower lip at the burn of him stretching her, forcing himself into her. "A few days. Maybe a week before my molecular bonds begin to degenerate."

"You're willing to bond with me?"

"If we make love now, I'll have no choice."

"Is it what you want?"

Meeting his eyes, she rocked forward, forcing herself down on his cock a little more. "Yes."

He lifted his hand from her sex, grabbed her ass with both hands and pulled her onto his cock. She writhed against him, undulating as he impaled her. The head of his cock speared into her, opening her from entrance to womb for his shaft. Every nub rubbed against her, increasing the friction.

She could feel the flow of energy. How could a being more energy than matter like herself be compatible with a being as completely physical as Paladin? Or was that why they were so drawn to each other?

Supporting her with his hands under her ass, he stood up. His cock surged even deeper into her. She locked her feet behind him and her thighs tightened on his hips. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to ride you fast and hard and for as long as it takes. You're my mate in the eyes of the VanDai. I want you bonded to me in the eyes of the Mriln. I'll make sure there is frequent physical contact. And if it's possible I'll bind you to me more completely than has ever been done."

She started to say something but the words never made it past her throat. He lifted her off him, laid her on the bed and flipped her onto her stomach. She didn't have a chance to think let alone speak as he lifted her hips and pulled her back, his cock spearing into her.

He held her hips as his own pistoned against her. He pushed her forward and pulled her back in time with his thrusts. Her nails dug into the bed. Her breasts jerked and swayed, rubbing against the material of the gown as he fucked her. Energy built inside her, snapping and crackling, alive and looking for release.

He pounded into her, against her. Long strokes took him deep. His girth stretched her. His nubs abraded her. She was on fire. Moaning. Her vagina clenching. Tension shattered. She felt like she was flying. Energy flowed between them. She'd felt it before. Not imprinting but sharing.

"Not enough." He moved faster, pounded harder, filled her deeper and fuller. "I won't let you hold back. I won't settle for less than everything."

One arm circled her waist. His other hand settled beside hers on the bed. His body blanketed hers. She could feel the ripple of muscles across his abdomen where it pressed against her. His hips recoiled and rebounded against her ass. Inside she was on fire, his cock a hot brand inside her.

Her stomach knotted. Tension tightened every muscle. She hadn't recovered from her first orgasm, he just pushed her higher, determined to have her, and her essence bonded to his.

The wave broke again, energy arcing between them. She cried out, shaking, clenching tight around him. She was drained and rejuvenated in turns, her energy flowing out, into him, and returning in a growing wave.

"You're sparking. It's time to ignite." He lifted her with him as he rose, keeping her impaled on his cock. He strode to the wall, humping her as he went.

He allowed a small amount of room between her back and his chest. She felt his claws skim her back, felt the rush of air as he shredded the material, baring her back.

"Brace your hands on the wall." He reached around her, grasped one breast and cupped her mound with the other.

She brought her hands up just in time. Braced on her forearms, her face buried against them, she gasped and moaned as Paladin took her from behind. He squeezed her breast, working the nipple, pinching it and the areola. The fingers of his other hand rubbed her clit, the folds of her sex, the delicate tissue of her sex stretched tight around his pounding cock.

She couldn't breathe. He touched her everywhere. The fire was building, engulfing her. She felt like she was flying outside herself. And then she did. Her physical being dropped away. The world spun around her. Colors swirled. She could *feel* Paladin. She didn't just feel him; she was one with him. His cock was about to explode. His life-force was pure energy

perfectly contained in his corporal form. She had no form, no substance without him. He'd take her apart and in that moment, with perfect clarity, she realized she trusted him to put her together again.

Her vagina clamped and squeezed him.

* * * *

His cock exploded. He was surrounded in light, bathed in it, filled by it. He felt her moving in him, through him. He felt her essence as he shot his come into her, great jets sucked out of him by her milking cunt.

He kept thrusting. He held her tight by breast and mound as he rode her. He was wild, uncontrolled, the power of the act more than he'd ever experienced before. He leaned forward, crushing her into the wall, his hips moving spasmodically in short jerks. He had nothing left to give her but he couldn't quit fucking her. He wanted to stay connected to her, could still feel the energy that bonded them.

"Paladin."

"Hmm?" he rumbled against her. Answering would take too much effort.

"If I don't lie down I'm going to fall down. The only thing keeping me up is your cock."

He forced himself to straighten and lifted her in his arms. He carried her back to the bed and laid her on it. He spread her legs apart, settled over her and pushed his semi-hard cock into her swollen channel.

She groaned and her muscles rippled around him. "I can't take any more."

He rubbed her hip. "Not until tomorrow."

Her head moved back and forth against his neck but she didn't say anything more. Within moments she was limp, her breathing even and her heart rate slowing.

He stared into the shadows. There was a lot to be done still. The Mriln would be protected. They were a treasure beyond what the universe knew. It would take time for Llaryn to heal from the blows she'd been dealt. She'd lost her people and was just learning to accept him. He'd kept her mind off the Mriln for a while but she would wake with the weight of guilt crushing her.

He rolled them to their sides. He kept her snug against him as he arranged their legs so he could stay inside her while they slept. She might not have been ready but she was bonded to him now and more completely than he'd known was possible. She was truly his. It was his right and responsibility to ensure her safety. Whatever came he would protect her.

A humming murmur tickled his neck as Llaryn shifted and snuggled closer. Her breasts were soft against the hard plane of his chest. Her skin was smooth and silky against him.

He'd wanted her the moment he saw her. He'd seduced her while she couldn't resist. He'd made her his. The queen of Paladin's Pride.

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Paladin's Pride 5: Binding Llaryn

Angelina Evans

A healer's heart:

Not even for Paladin can Llaryn walk away from someone in need. The price of healing is high but the payoff is great and with Paladin as her mate she can do anything.

A protector's plan:

Paladin won't let anyone harm Llaryn, not even herself. He'll use whatever means he has to keep her safe ... from sex to relocation and seclusion.

Nowhere is safe:

An attempt to abduct Llaryn goes awry and Paladin's life is forfeit. Only Llaryn can save him; only he can save her and in saving each other the legend of their love is born.

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Chapter One

Heart pounding, palms sweaty, Llaryn looked first right then left before activating the door to the medical and procedure lab and going inside. The door slid shut behind her and she breathed a sigh of relief. Paladin hadn't actually forbidden her from going to the med-lab or from healing but she knew that was his intention. He saw healing as dangerous to her and he didn't want her doing it.

She lifted her chin and walked farther into the clinic, her unbound hair swaying around her to her hips. Healing Genae Galaran, the ex-President's daughter, had happened under such stressful circumstances and it hadn't been planned. She'd expected to die and she'd held nothing back when she connected to the other woman.

What would it be like to heal someone deliberately? To open herself to that connection knowing, to some extent, what would happen? For a brief moment it had been as if a connection between her and Genae had opened up. She'd been a part of a universe of cells and molecules. She had connected with life at its most basic level. Would that happen again? Could it?

"Llaryn? What are you doing here?"

Startled, she jumped. One hand pressed to her heart, the other to her stomach, she looked at Eln standing in a door she hadn't been through before. "I met your assistant, Olara, yesterday. She told me about your grandson. Is his condition

as poor as she said?" She didn't ask why he hadn't come to her; she knew. Paladin.

Eln's expression darkened, his features becoming pinched. Age seemed to weigh him down where he stood. "Does Paladin know you're here?"

Her chin lifted another notch. "No." She wouldn't lie about it but she wasn't going to leave either. "If I can, Eln, I want to help. I'm a healer. It's what I've trained for and worked at my entire life. A new world opened up for me the day I healed Genae. I want, no, I *need* to know more about it."

Eln seemed to shrivel in on himself. His face looked pinched, every line pronounced. A heavy breath lifted his shoulders and he nodded. "Olara wasn't wrong. The babe is dying. He won't live to see the end of his first week without your help. I can't ask you to help him just because he's my grandson."

Llaryn smiled. "You didn't ask me. I offered."

Eln nodded and led the way into the warren of privacy cubicles.

A frisson of fear raced through her. If Paladin found out where she was and what she was doing she didn't know what his reaction would be. She pushed the thought away as she followed Eln. When she'd been in the med-lab before the only room she'd seen was a procedure lab.

Olara, Eln's half-VanDai assistant, came out of a room. Her hair looked as strange as it had the day before when she had approached Llaryn. Swaths of straight, fine, human hair grew among tufts of coarser, more full, VanDai hair giving her head an almost lumpy appearance. Even more unfortunately, the

finer hair was a soft, pale brown, the fuller hair a dark, vibrant brown. The mismatch of genetics continued in a face that was a mix of strong feline and softer, more rounded human. Human and VanDai, the two genetic halves had not mixed well in her.

Llaryn nodded but said nothing. She felt bad for the other woman. It couldn't have been easy growing up "different" in a society of physically almost perfect people.

She was glad Olara had come to her. She'd never healed a baby, never even touched one but she hoped she could heal this one. What would it be like to hold an infant in her arms? A shiver coursed through her at the thought. Until she'd met Paladin she'd never thought about babies. Now she knew she wanted his child, *his children*. She would have to study the genetics and find out if Mriln and VanDai would blend better than human and VanDai. She would talk with one of the Mriln elders and find out if there was something that could be done to help Olara.

A pang arrowed through her chest. She couldn't talk with an elder. To her people she didn't exist and if she could heal Eln's grandson she would be repeating the offense they had banned her for.

She swallowed hard as Eln walked into a cubicle. There was so much involved in this moment. Her chest felt tight, full of too many emotions crowding each other inside her.

Taking a deep breath she blew it out slow and silent. This was it. Why and how everything had come down to this moment she didn't know but it had. Her future, what direction

it would take from here, was tied to what was about to happen, tied to an infant she had yet to meet.

One step took her across the threshold and into the cubicle. She couldn't see the infant. Eln stood in front of the environment-controlled enclosure the baby was in. She walked in and stopped at Eln's side. Her heart leapt into her throat.

"He's so tiny." Her voice was little more than a gasp. Her fingers curled into her hands as she fought the urge to reach out and touch the tiny VanDai baby. His eyes were round and bright, too old for someone whose life had just begun. He stared up at her through the clear wall of the only home he'd ever known. His face was too thin; his nose flatter than it would be once he'd grown. Brown hair stuck straight up all over his head, somehow making him look startled.

His tiny arms and legs lay unmoving. Only his eyes showed how bright and active his mind was. His ribs were visible through his translucent skin and his stomach was concave.

Her heart breaking Llaryn stepped closer, drawn by the too serious eyes. "What's wrong with him?" Her voice barely made it past the tears filling her throat. If there had been a choice to help the baby or not, that choice was gone.

"There was a hole in his heart that was easily repaired. What I can't fix is the genetic code that makes it impossible for him to absorb and utilize nutrition. He's starving to death." Eln's voice was stark.

Her heart dropped as her eyes flew to Eln's face. "Eln, I can't help him." She felt sick to her stomach. She closed her eyes, fighting back tears and fear. What she'd done with

Genae was knit together molecules to repair her damaged heart. This was something else entirely. The baby needed genes he hadn't been born with. She couldn't create what didn't exist. What she'd done for Genae had started rumors of miracles but it wasn't true and apparently Olara had bought into them. She couldn't perform miracles. All she'd done was use her energy to manipulate Genae's microcellular makeup.

His dark eyes glistening and ringed with lines of fatigue, Eln took her hands in his. "You're Paladin's mate and my duty is to see to your health and safety. If you hadn't come, I would never have asked but you did come and I am asking. Will you at least try to help my grandchild?"

A weight crushed down on Llaryn's chest. She couldn't do the impossible but she couldn't walk away without trying either. What she'd thought earlier was true. Her choice to help or not was gone.

Lips pressed tight together, she nodded.

"Thank you." His voice hoarse, Eln released her hands and stepped back.

The baby's round, bright eyes followed her as she opened the side of his environmental cube. He looked serious to the point of solemn. His eyes, at once old and ageless, took in everything around him as if he knew his time was short and this was his chance to absorb everything he could about the world he'd been born into.

She reached in and placed her hands over the baby's torso. He was tiny, her hands easily covering his small form. Heat radiated off him, making her smile. Paladin was just like

that, heat coming off him in waves, making it hard to sleep by him at times.

The baby's tiny mouth formed a perfect "O." His little hand twitched but was too weak to lift from the bed.

Closing her eyes against the heartbreaking sight, Llaryn focused on her hands and the tiny body under them. She could feel his heartbeat. The rise and fall of the little chest as he breathed.

Slowly, opening herself to him, she felt his energy begin to flow into her, mingling with hers. She became aware of his consciousness. He took in sounds, smells, and images though he didn't yet understand the combination as being a person or thing. He was tired but happy. He felt the warmth of those around him, understood he was loved without understanding what love was.

Her energy seeped into him, feeding him, and the floodgates opened. She could feel his heart, could see it as if it were points of light, molecules spinning in a circle that was life. Eln's repair was holding, healing, taking what energy the baby had.

She sank deeper, merged herself more completely and his being opened before her, a universe of protons, electrons, neutrons, and structures even more minute than that. There was an ebb and flow, a dance of motion that was off. She didn't understand what she was seeing but knew it was wrong. Without thought, instinct driving her, she let her energy flow into and through the baby. She became part of him, moved and rebuilt the building blocks of his life. It

wasn't that he didn't have the genes he needed; his body just couldn't use the ones he had.

His little heart stuttered. His body shuddered as the essence of his being changed and reformed.

Oh, no you don't. Her mind whispered the thought. *You're going to live to grow old. You'll lead your Pride in whatever you choose to do. Your life begins now.* She flooded the tiny body with energy.

His heart thumped strong and hard. Breath filled his lungs.

Joy burst inside her, flowed from her to him. Inside she laughed and cried. This was what she'd been born to do. What she could do with her hands was a shadow of what she could do with her mind, heart, and soul. *She could heal.*

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Chapter Two

Fury exploding in him, Paladin stormed into the med-lab. "Where is she?" he demanded of the woman in front of him. Distantly he knew she was Eln's assistant but he didn't care. He wanted to know where Llaryn was and when he found her he'd drag her out of the lab and back to their room. He would make it very clear to her and then to Eln that the med-lab was off limits.

"She ... she's with Eln." The woman's eyes were huge in her suddenly pale face.

Paladin's teeth snapped together. "Where are they?" The question was softly voiced and all the more frightening because of it.

Eln's assistant didn't mistake how dangerous he was at that moment. "This way." She hurried through the door that led into the block of private rooms and indicated a door halfway down on the left.

The muscles in his jaw bunched tight. He walked to the door and stopped. His hands fisted and the muscles in his neck corded, the veins standing out. She had come to heal someone. He knew that and he needed to be in control before he entered the room. He wouldn't hurt her but his control when it came to her was precarious. Eln, however, was very much in danger.

He stabbed the door sensor with one finger and it slid open. His eyes raked over Eln and settled on Llaryn. His lips thinned and his eyes narrowed to mere slits. Her hands,

covering the tiny infant in the environment-controlled cube, glowed with pulsing golden light.

Rage boiled in his veins. The muscles in his arms and shoulders bunched and he took one leaping step forward.

Eln spun and jumped in front of him, blocking him from his mate. "Let her finish, Paladin. We don't know what will happen to her or the baby if she's pulled away."

Feral black eyes snapped to Eln. Paladin's hands flexed and his claws flashed out. He wanted to kill the male in front of him, someone he had always considered a friend. "You didn't stop her." His voice rumbled low and deadly in the small confines of the room. "*My mate* and you allowed her life to be endangered."

Eln straightened, his graying mane bristling as his own VanDai temper flared. "She's your mate, Paladin, but she's a healer. What she's doing is what she does. Stop that and you stop her from being who she is."

Paladin's fingers curved, his claws lethal blades at the end of each one. His muscles coiled, ready to spring. "You—"

Light flared through the room, blindingly bright.

Paladin's attention snapped from Eln to Llaryn. She wasn't surrounded by light. She *was* the light. Sparks flashed around her, shooting through the brilliant glow. As if a switch were thrown the light stopped. Llaryn's knees buckled and she started to fall.

Paladin leaped forward, grabbed Llaryn's shoulders, and wrenched her away from the cube. She looked up at him and his world shifted. Her smile was brilliant, her lavender eyes alight with joy.

"Paladin." She threw her arms around him. Her body pressed tight to his, vibrating with energy.

She started to step back but Paladin wrapped his arms around her. Irrational though it was, he felt that if he weren't holding her she would disappear. She felt ephemeral as light, impossible to hold, but he *would* hold her. He wouldn't let anything take her away from him.

She arched back, her pelvis pressed tight to his, her upper body swaying to music only she heard. Her eyes were dreamy, her smile soft. "I healed him, Paladin. I thought it was impossible but it wasn't. He wasn't missing genes. The ones he had just needed to be turned on." She laughed and arched back even more.

Like quicksilver, rage transmuted to lust in Paladin. His cock hardened and lengthened. His nostrils flared, he grasped Llaryn's hips and pulled her even tighter against him.

"He'll live?" A fine tremor shook Eln's hand as he reached toward the cube.

Llaryn's smile grew. She tried to turn but settled for looking over her shoulder when Paladin wouldn't release her. "Not only alive but thriving."

"Another miracle." Paladin's voice was toneless, his eyes cold even as his body burned for Llaryn. She had done the impossible when she healed Genae Galaran, and because of that she and the rest of her species were hunted. There were beings throughout the universe that would never stop until they possessed her or any Mriln healer. When news of this latest "miracle" spread, the abduction attempts he'd thwarted in the past weeks would look like nothing.

Ellyn looked at Llaryn, his features somehow softened, his expression peaceful. "Thank you."

Llaryn nodded and wrapped her arms around Paladin again, hugging him tight. Saying nothing Paladin lifted Llaryn into his arms and strode out of the cubicle.

Llaryn laid her head on his shoulder and snuggled closer. "I can walk, I'm not tired. Actually, I feel enervated. Alive. Wonderful." She shivered in his arms and nuzzled her face into his neck. She pressed her lips against his pounding pulse before stroking him with her tongue and taking his taste into her mouth. "Hmmm." She smiled and licked him again. "You taste warm and completely male."

Paladin's whole body tightened. Lust burned hot through his veins. He needed to be over her, inside her, pounding into her. "I'm going to tie you to my bed and never let you up. Never let you walk into danger again. I'm going to push my cock so deep into your cunt neither of us will know if I'll ever come out again. I'll fuck you so hard and so long you won't be able to walk."

Llaryn twisted in his arms until her breasts pressed to his chest. Her nipples, hard and long, poked him. She swayed side to side, rubbing the sensitive nubs against him. Her eyes were heavy-lidded and her lips parted. "Yes," she murmured. "Fuck me just like that." She nipped at his lower lip, licked the sting and leaned back. "I want your cock inside me, Paladin. In my mouth, in my cunt. I want to taste it, lick it, suck it. Will you let me do that? Then I want it inside me. Filling me so tight it burns, but in a good way." A flush

mantled her cheeks but she didn't look away from him as she raked the back of his neck with her fingernails.

He shuddered and his cock strained against the confines of his pants. His blood boiled in his veins. "I won't be gentle." He stared into her lust drugged eyes, wanting her to understand what he was saying.

Her smile was slow and pure siren. She licked her lips before sinking her teeth into her lower lip, a hum vibrating in her throat. "I don't want gentle. I want you, Paladin. Everything you've never given me, I want."

His eyes narrowed. She had always been quiet, almost shy. "What happened? You've never been so bold and demanding. What changed?"

Her lashes lowered to fan against her cheeks. Her smile turned almost shy. "I've never felt so alive. I touched *life*, Paladin. Life in its most pure and basic form. I want to create life with you."

His chest expanded on a huge breath as he walked into their room. The door closed behind them and he secured it. Almost rough, his black eyes gleaming, he set her on her feet. "Strip," he ordered and started undressing himself.

She walked a few steps away, her hair swaying around her like a black curtain, the ends flirting at her hips. Tall and slender, fragile and beautiful, she turned to face him. "What do you want to see?"

Paladin ripped his tunic off over his head. His expression was dark and angry. "Don't tease me, Llaryn. Not now. I want you too much."

"That's how I want you to want me." Her hands slid over the silver-shot burgundy of her gown. Her eyes closed and her head fell back as she circled her palms over her breasts, rolling her nipples. "I want your mouth here, Paladin," she half-groaned, half-whispered. "I want you to suck and bite and—" She looked at him from under her lashes. Her tongue traced across her lower lip and then she bit it.

Paladin tore his pants down and off and lunged for her.

She struggled to raise the hem of her gown. His hands closed over hers. He pulled the gown over her head but didn't take it all the way off, trapping her arms behind her.

She was wand slim, her breasts small and firm, her nipples red and long, rising from the crowns of her areolas. Her waist was impossibly small, her hips narrow, her legs long. Moisture glistened on the inner curves of her thighs.

His expression cruel, he forced her to her knees. "I've always taken what I wanted the way I wanted except with you. I've been careful. I've restrained myself so I wouldn't hurt you. I won't hurt you now but I will have you any way I want, as hard and fast as I want."

Eyes huge in her flushed face, she slowly smiled. "Yes."

He tunneled his fingers into her hair and pushed the head of his cock against her lips. "Open."

Her tongue peeked out, licked him, and then he was inside.

A growl rumbled from his chest and his lips drew back, baring his teeth. His cock looked indecently huge as it forced her mouth wide. He rode in and out in short, fast jabs. He

kept his thrusts shallow but couldn't have stopped if he wanted to. Her mouth was everything he'd ever dreamed of.

"Suck," he ordered hoarsely. "Suck hard."

Her mouth drew on him. His thrusts deepened and his head fell back. He groaned and kneaded her head, his world narrowed to the hot, moist cavern of her mouth and the head of his penis in it.

"Use your teeth. Lightly." He watched her through his lashes. She was a carnal delight, her lips red and stretched around him, his cock moving in and out of her mouth.

Her eyes never left his face, seemed to drink him in. The barest edge of her teeth raked his length, caught behind the flared, dome shaped head and tugged.

Paladin groaned and jerked. He came in her mouth, watched her swallow, her mouth tightening around him, sucking him, taking every drop as it shot from him.

Eyes closed, chest heaving, he stood without moving.

She pulled back and licked him. Her tongue, smooth and agile and curious, moved around the head of his cock, exploring its single eye, and trailed down the still hard length.

He grunted and bucked against her as her lips nibbled at his balls.

"Paladin." Her voice was hoarse and she cleared her throat. "I want to hold you in my hands." Shrugging her shoulders and wriggling, she tried to free herself of the gown binding her arms.

"No." His tone harsh, Paladin plucked her off the floor. Holding her tight against his chest, he took her to the bed and laid her down.

She wriggled, trying to free her arms of the material holding her.

He splayed one hand over her pelvis and abdomen, easily holding her in place. His hand looked huge and dark against her pale skin. He more than liked the contrast. "It's my nature to dominate and control. I'm possessive and protective, aggressive and at times cruel. I fight my base nature for you every day and then I find you in the med-lab healing someone."

He lifted her knees and pushed them back and down on the bed, exposing her sex to his hungry, penetrating stare. He breathed in her scent, trailed his fingers over her folds and dipped into her crevices. The claw at the end of his index finger flicked out and he traced her slit with delicate precision, stimulating without hurting, but the threat was there.

"You need me right now don't you, Llaryn?" He forced two fingers into her wet passage, his eyes glittering.

She arched, her breasts rising, her areolas and nipples darkening. Her shoulders moved but she was helpless to free her arms. "Yes, I need you." Her voice sounded strained.

He liked that, even loved it. She was completely at his mercy. "Who is it that gives you life, Llaryn? When life drains you? When healing leaves you near death, who gives you life?" He pulled out of her, added a third finger and thrust into her again. "I do."

Uncertainty mixed with raw passion on her face. Her body undulated, responding to the force of his motions into her.

"You can't help but respond, can you?" He drew his fingers out of her and painted her nipples and areolas with her own

nectar. He leaned down and blew a breath over her wet, glistening flesh. "You're mine aren't you, Llaryn?"

He licked her left areola, his rough, feline tongue scraping every millimeter of her tender, sensitive flesh—over and over again until her breath came in gasps and her breasts heaved. "Do you like that? Do you feel energy arcing between us? Am I rejuvenating you?" He wanted to torture her like he'd been tortured watching her lie unmoving and unresponsive after healing Genae. He hadn't been sure she would live. To find her healing again, to know he could lose her, that she had done it without him there to support her if her energy failed...

Rage-driven passion flamed through him and he turned to her right breast. "You know how much I love your prominent areolas. Your long nipples." He licked around her right areola and moved to her left. He flicked and laved her nipples until her body convulsed and she cried out as her body orgasmed from nothing more than her nipples being stimulated. Even then he didn't quit. He sucked her into his mouth, pulling hard on one tight berry, moving and taking the other.

Shivers coursed through her body in constant waves. She couldn't think, couldn't speak, could only feel. His tongue on her breasts, rasping them over and over, kept her body in a constant agony of release. Rough-edged pleasure, torture and paradise rolled into one. Helpless, her hands clenched the material that bound them. She pressed her legs hard into the bed, her hips rocking, trying to assuage the aching emptiness.

His mouth opened over her clit. His tongue flicked rapid, burning lashes on her flesh, the sensation seared her. A

scream lodged tight in her throat without breath to express it. Her hips arched off the bed and her response flowed from her. Her cunt clenched, empty and needing.

Paladin lapped at her swollen folds and ringed her entrance, tasting her, savoring her as he slipped his tongue inside.

Every muscle in her body locked tight. A quaking shudder shook her. Paladin rolled her onto her side, pushed her upper leg forward and straddled her lower leg. He slid into her, the head of his cock forging a burning path into her swollen channel.

Shock waves shook her. Her undulations worked her on his thick stalk. He felt huge inside her. Deep. Thick. *Hot*.

His balls slapped against her. He grunted and ground himself into her, twisting and rubbing against her and inside her, claiming places he never had before. Her mouth opened, gasping for air. Her arms still trapped in her gown, she was at his mercy.

He positioned her upper leg higher and pushed forward another fraction of an inch.

A low, keening sound broke from her. It felt like he was lodged inside her from her cunt to her throat. She was so full. His pulse beat inside her, rocking her body.

He pulled back fast, thrust in hard.

Consciousness fled and the world went dark, her body ravaged by another cataclysmic wave.

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Chapter Three

What woke him, Paladin didn't know but something wasn't right. He didn't make a sound, not even a change in his breathing to let anyone know he was awake.

He pushed his senses out, listening, *feeling* for what was wrong. Slight, barely there, a whisper of movement alerted him. He opened his eyes and looked around the dim room. There was nothing to see.

The whisper of sound broke the silence again. It was beside the bed below where he could see. He rose slowly, climbed over Llaryn, and looked over the side of the bed.

Paper thin, no bigger than his thumb, something rose from the floor. Paladin grabbed for it. It rose out of his reach and started to pulse.

He threw himself over Llaryn, covering her body with his own. Llaryn shrieked and tried to push him off. He held her down, keeping her trapped under his body.

There was a popping sound. Something light and almost powdery rained down, stinging all along his back, buttocks, and legs.

"Paladin." Frantic, Llaryn pushed at him.

Not moving or answering, he waited. The burning subsided almost instantly. Whatever it was didn't immediately maim or kill.

"Paladin. What is it?"

He levered himself off her, his expression closed, his eyes blazing. "Don't move." His tone was short, ordering her to do

as he said. This was another attempt on Llaryn. He had no doubt it was about her and not him. Whatever the tiny device was it hadn't hurt him beyond the initial burn. He had expected the burning to deepen or pain to flare. It hadn't done any of those things. The pain, though it had been sharp, had quickly faded. He was sure it had somehow marked him but it had been meant for her.

Cold rage sliced through him. He leaped from the bed, listened, and looked for any sign of another device. There wasn't one that he could find. Furious, he activated the communications system. "Get Eln, and whatever tracker is in residence to my quarters."

Llaryn sat up. "What—"

He dove across the distance, knocking her back to the bed. "Don't move." His gaze swept the room constantly. He didn't see anything but he wasn't taking any chances. It, whatever *it* was, had seemed to respond to his movement.

Llaryn shoved at him. "What—"

He levered himself up, grabbed one end of the blanket, and rolled her into it.

"Paladin," she called as she tried to fight free of the blanket.

He didn't give her a chance. Scooping her up in his arms, he rushed across the room and around the end of the false wall. He used his elbow to activate a sensor and part of the wall lined with his weapons slid backward and to the side. He knelt and laid Llaryn on the floor, stood and ran back out. He palmed the sensor and the wall slid back into place.

Llaryn watched the wall move, her heart sinking. Paladin didn't know what waited in the other room. There could be another device that would be more lethal. The first one could be more lethal than they knew. If it was a poison it could take hours for the symptoms to appear.

She closed her eyes and sank back to the floor. Even if she could get out what would she do? Increase the danger to Paladin, probably. He'd be worried about her and that might cause him the moment of hesitation that could mean the difference between life and death. If he didn't come back, they both died.

Pressure built in her chest at the thought of something happening to Paladin. She was so completely dependent on him. She *knew* that but until now she hadn't *realized* what it meant, not completely.

Opening her eyes, she rose to her feet and began a restless exploration of the room. For long moments she didn't take anything in. Her mind was too busy with the reality she faced. Her life was tied to Paladin. Completely, irrevocably bound to his.

She blew out a long breath and braced her hands against a strange tilting chair. She'd always followed the direction of her teachers and later her superiors and mentors but there had always been an element of choice. If she'd wanted to go somewhere other than where they sent her, she could have. That wasn't true anymore. Where Paladin was, that was where she had to be. She had always needed other people for her survival. Now she needed Paladin.

Her arms crossed over her chest, she paced the length of the small, empty space. She wouldn't choose a male other than Paladin to be with. He was a powerful male and an equally powerful lover. Just being near him made her burn inside. Before him, she hadn't realized need had such heat.

Her smile rueful, she looked down at her breasts and shook her head. She didn't even have to be near him. Thinking about him was enough to make her breasts firm, her nipples harden, and her areolas swell.

She shivered and cupped her breasts in her hands. No. She wouldn't choose anyone but Paladin to be with. He took charge. He dominated her and she hadn't known that was something she needed until him. Was she all right with her life being so completely tied to his?

Breathing out a huge sigh, she smiled and nodded. She was okay with it. What they still had to fight out was how he was going to live with her healing. And he would have to accept that she was going to do what she had been born to do.

At the same time she felt more content inside herself and increasingly concerned about Paladin. What was happening out there? Was he safe? If there had been no other devices, why hadn't he come back?

She paced the length of the room, turned and paced back. She turned again and tripped. Looking down, she saw the blanket Paladin had bundled her into. It was crumpled on the floor where she'd left it when she got up. Leaning down, she picked it up and wrapped it around herself before sinking to

the floor. When Paladin returned they would talk. Until then, she would keep her faith in Paladin's invincibility.

* * * *

Paladin made sure the wall was in place before gliding back toward the end of the false wall. He sped his molecules, becoming invisible. It was a VanDai hunting and survival skill that had evolved over millennia of living on a planet of harsh extremes and fierce predators. It was one tool in his fighting arsenal that was always with him.

Taking two tazer stars and a small hand-held laser off the wall, he closed his hands around them. His molecules moved fast enough to keep the weapons blurred in his hands. It would take someone looking close and knowing what they were looking for to see anything.

His teeth clenched together and the muscles along his jaw tightened. His weapons weren't much but they would be enough. As furious as he was he didn't care if anyone or anything saw the stars or laser floating around in mid air. He welcomed a fight, even needed it. There had already been attempts to abduct Llaryn in the short time she'd been on his planet. He expected Sai-sen-Sai to be safe. He expected his city and his home to be safe and neither Boujara nor the Paladium had been.

Moving slow, staying low, he stalked around the end of the false wall into the main room and stopped. His eyes swept the sparsely furnished space. He listened for any sound. Even a breath inhaled or exhaled too loudly would give away a predator and he didn't discount that his current enemy could

be VanDai. It had been a whisper of sound that had given away the device earlier or Llaryn would have been "burned" as well as him.

He searched with all his senses including his battle sense. Training, experience, and genetics had given him the ability to *know* when he was being observed, not alone or about to be attacked, but observed. He trusted that instinct more than seeing or hearing.

All of his senses told him there was no one and nothing in the room.

The door opened and slid closed without anyone entering the room. Or so it appeared. Invisible himself, Paladin knew one of his trackers had entered the room. What he didn't know was which one. He stayed where he was and waited. He wanted their uninfluenced impressions. He hadn't missed anything but the tracker might see the scene differently, have a different perspective.

By the bed a female VanDai tracker, naked and wild, shimmered into sight.

Paladin studied her form with appreciation but not passion. She was compact, her muscles well defined but not overly developed. She was voluptuous with plum nipples, large breasts, and generously curving hips. Her mane was a wild tangle of golds and reds. Her eyes were narrowed, her nostrils flared as she searched the room with all of her senses.

"What do you see?" Paladin slowed his molecules and stepped forward.

Cool green-brown eyes heated with feminine interest as Keersha looked at him. "Nothing. I don't see anything, smell anything or sense anything. What happened?"

Paladin nodded at the bed. "Something small, paper thin, and airborne exploded over the bed. What fell on me burned for a minute and then stopped. There was nothing left."

Keersha climbed onto the bed, her nostrils flaring even more as she moved her hands over the bed. She looked at Paladin out of the corner of her eye. "Do you pull out of your mate long enough to let her rest?"

Paladin thought of Llaryn lying under him, staring up at him, her lavender eyes wide with a combination of surprise, bemusement, and fear as he pushed his big cock into her narrow cunt. It was the same look every time. Even now, just thinking about it, his cock hardened and blood rushed to engorge the veins standing out along its length, the nubs hardening as it became engorged.

He looked at Keersha, unconcerned by his erection. "Not unless I have to."

She looked at his cock and let out a long, slow, humming breath. "Lucky her."

Paladin ignored the blatant appraisal, walked to the room's one decoration, the statue of a cat, and activated the communication system. "Get Eln to my quarters," he ordered before anyone could identify themselves from the other end.

No one answered but a low tone announced the connection was closed.

Paladin glided away from Keersha around the end of the false wall and activated the door of the room where Llaryn waited.

"Paladin?" She rushed toward him, the blanket over her shoulders. Her small breasts barely moved. The shadowed cleft between her legs called to him.

She ran to him, her arms going around his neck, her face buried against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, crushing her to him. His erection ground against her belly as he took her mouth, his tongue sweeping inside, tasting, claiming, and conquering.

Lifting his head, he stepped back. He wanted to pick her up and slide her onto his shaft but there wasn't time. He needed to know what he'd been tagged with and how to counteract it. And he wanted Llaryn somewhere more defensible than the Paladium.

Llaryn stared up at him, her lavender eyes bright. "What happened?"

Paladin took her arm and pulled her out of the room with him. "Nothing." And he was furious about that. Whoever sent the device had left no obvious clues. Keersha would continue looking. Sensors that could trace someone's breath would be brought in but if he was right, the only evidence had been absorbed into his body.

He stepped in front of a display of brilliantly colored gowns he'd chosen for Llaryn. He took down a soft gray colored sheath. "Hold your arms up."

She raised her arms and watched him, her expression bemused.

He slid the sheath over her head and smoothed the material over her breasts, hips, and thighs. He took a pair of ultra soft, durable foot coverings and slid them onto her feet, his hand circling her ankle, one then the other.

Llaryn watched as he grabbed trousers and a shirt for himself. His muscles bunched and released as he dressed with fast, economical movements. He folded his half erect penis into his pants and her mouth watered. How could she think about taking him into her mouth and learning to suck him deeper than she had before? They were in danger. She would never have thought such a thing before. He had changed her. Or had he?

He led her into the main room, his hand circling her wrist keeping her close by his side.

Her heart stopped when she saw the naked VanDai woman kneeling on *their* bed. The female was sensually beautiful, her breasts big, her nipples thick. Her hips were rounded, her body compact and perfectly proportioned. No wonder Paladin's cock was hard. What male could see a female like that and not want her?

The door slid open and Eln rushed in. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

Paladin repeated his explanation of what had happened, his explanation terse.

Llaryn barely listened as thoughts tumbled over themselves in her mind. Was she different? Had Paladin changed her? She'd never been unsure of herself before. Never self-conscious. She hadn't really been aware of herself as a feminine being though. Her identity had been defined by

her healing ability. She had been a healer. She was still a healer but now she was a woman too.

Stunned by the realization, all she could do was stand and stare. Paladin hadn't changed her. He'd changed her perception of herself. She was feminine. She enjoyed Paladin's dominance and her submission in their sexual relationship. But she was a healer and she wouldn't let him take that away from her.

"...do you?"

Startled, she focused on the world around her and found Paladin and Eln staring at her. "What? I'm sorry. I was thinking." She felt heat rise in her cheeks and knew she was flushed. Paladin's expression gave nothing away but she was sure he had to be questioning what thoughts could be more important than their immediate safety.

"You didn't get burned, did you?"

She took a deep breath, trying to center herself. "I wasn't burned, no. Whatever it was that exploded over us didn't touch me."

Eln nodded. "We'll take skin and fluid samples in the clinic."

Paladin, Llaryn's wrist still manacled in his hand, started to follow Eln out of the room.

"Paladin." The female VanDai's call stopped them. "I'll let you know if we find anything. Right now, though, it looks like anything that's left is in you."

Paladin's expression hardened and his eyes turned cold. He gave one curt nod in response, turned, and followed Eln out of the room with Llaryn beside him.

Paladin's hand manacled Llaryn's wrist as he followed Eln down the hall.

Llaryn couldn't take her eyes off the difference between them. His hand was big and blunt, the fingers more than wrapping around her wrist. And his wrist was strong, thick, and solid. *He* was solid and he made her feel cared for and connected.

He kept her close by his side and she didn't resist him. If anything she worked to keep closer. She felt safe when she was with him.

Safe? She fought back a grimace. Nothing exciting had ever happened in her life before she met Paladin. Since meeting him she had almost died, been cast out by her people, and had several abduction attempts made on her. Yet she felt safer with him than she ever had in her life. Was it because she was attracted to him?

She thought about that and realized that it could be part of the truth. She found everything about him attractive. His size, his coloring, his dominance. She couldn't imagine ever wanting anyone else. He had become her world in such a short time it was hard to comprehend.

She rushed, staying close to him as they entered more populated halls. She felt safe because she knew he would give his life for her. She shuddered at the thought. She didn't want his life to be in jeopardy. She wanted him to be safe and she wanted to be safe with him.

Eln entered the med-lab with Paladin right behind him.

Llaryn almost sighed. Most of her life had been spent in labs very much like this one. It was like coming home. When

this latest crisis was over and Paladin returned to his duties she would return to hers too.

Eln's assistant hurried toward them. Her pale eyes moved over them anxiously but she didn't say anything, just waited for Eln to direct her.

"Check Llaryn," Paladin ordered. "If there's something there I want to know." His expression was hard, his tone uncompromising.

Llaryn didn't protest. She was sure Paladin had kept anything from touching her but it wouldn't hurt to be examined.

"Tissue and fluid samples. Enough to test for any kind of chemical tracker," Eln ordered, already leading Paladin away.

Llaryn looked over her shoulder to see Paladin disappearing into a privacy cubicle as she stepped into the one Olara had already disappeared into. Completely unexpected, a wave of fear and anxiety iced through her. He'd been injured because of her. Burned. She wanted to see for herself what Eln did. She wanted to know what had marked him even if there was no physical evidence. She had never wanted to hurt anyone before, never even imagined thinking about it but she wanted the people behind this attack to pay.

Olara palmed the sensor and the door closed. Llaryn took a deep, calming breath. It didn't do anyone any good for her to become so angry. There was nothing she could do except give a sample for testing and that was what she would do.

"Were you burned?"

Llaryn's attention snapped forward and she shook her head. "No. Paladin was the only one touched. He just wants me checked to be sure."

Olara turned away and gathered supplies out of a dispenser.

Belatedly Llaryn thought about the baby. It seemed like forever since she'd come to the med-lab and worked with the infant, not just hours. "How is Eln's grandson?" The urge to see and touch the beautiful baby, to hold him and see for herself how he was doing, almost overwhelmed her. Healing him had been the most extraordinary experience of her life.

Thoughts of Paladin flooded her mind and heat rose in her face. Healing the baby had been the most extraordinary experience of her *healing* life.

Olara turned back to her, supplies in hand and a soft smile on her face. She scanned Llaryn as she talked. "Akari is well. Nira will be able to take him home in a day or so, Eln says. It was amazing what you did. I wish I could do that, heal with my touch, give back life."

Llaryn felt uncomfortable with the praise. "What you do here is more important than what I did. You're here every day, helping your people, making a difference. I move from place to place and help one person here and another there. You know the people you work with and you care about them." Her smile was unknowingly wistful. "I can't imagine anything more important than helping the people you care about."

Olara stepped behind her, a probe in hand. "That's an interesting view."

Something sharp stabbed Llaryn in the right hip, burning her as it pierced. She gasped and jerked forward. Before she could turn the pain was gone. Frowning she looked at Olara. "What did you do?"

Olara's eyes went wide. "Do? I took tissue and fluid samples for Eln to analyze. Does it still hurt?"

Llaryn shook her head. "I'm fine."

Olara grimaced. "Good. I wouldn't want Paladin to think I'd done something to hurt you."

Llaryn had to grin. "I wouldn't want him to think that either."

The door opened as she turned to leave and Paladin strode in. He took one look at her face and his eyes narrowed. He looked at Olara and back at Llaryn. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She looked at Olara and smiled. "Just worried about what happened and what it means."

Paladin circled her wrist with his hand and looked at Eln, who had followed him into the room. "I'll contact you tomorrow to find out what you've learned."

Llaryn's heart fluttered before settling into a faster beat at the feel of his hand on her. Her body was so attuned to his that all it took was such a small touch to make her ready for him. Her breasts were fuller, her nipples hard, and she was wet. Just because he was close. Just because he'd touched her.

"You won't be in the Paladium." Eln made it a statement instead of a question. "I'll work on this until I have answers for you."

Paladin nodded. Without another word he led Llaryn out of the room.

Llaryn's heart jumped to an even faster beat. They weren't going to be in the Paladium? "Where are we going?" She had to hurry to keep up but that wasn't why her heart was slamming into her chest. She already felt so lost. The only place she knew on Sai-sen-Sai was the Paladium.

Paladin didn't answer as he paced down the hall.

Llaryn didn't ask again, knowing he wouldn't answer her, at least not yet and not in a hall where anyone might overhear them.

They entered their room and the female VanDai, Keersha, was still there. Thankfully, though, this time she was dressed. She stood next to the bed with a cart of equipment beside her and some sort of sensor in her hand.

"Have you found anything?"

Keersha looked up, her expression disgusted. "Nothing. Whatever that thing was, it was undetectable once it detonated. I'll keep looking but so far, nothing."

Llaryn shivered. She felt more disappointed than she would have thought possible. Whoever sent the device needed to be found before someone got hurt. She didn't want Paladin marked in any way. As angry as she felt it probably wasn't anything compared to what he was feeling. She was new to anger, he was practiced at it. "How could something enter a room, explode, and leave no evidence?"

Keersha looked at her with a scowl. "That's the question, isn't it?"

Wincing, Llaryn stepped back. "I wasn't questioning your expertise; I just said what I was thinking."

With a shrug Keersha waved a dismissing hand. "I hate not being able to solve a puzzle."

Llaryn understood. She hated not being able to figure out a medical puzzle, but she wasn't going to say anything.

Keersha's eyes moved over Paladin with obvious appreciation. "You'll be leaving."

Anger flashed in Llaryn's gut, hot and fast. She didn't like the other woman looking at Paladin like she wanted him. He belonged to her as much as she belonged to him.

"Let Meeleer know if you find anything. He'll be in charge here at the Paladium until I return." He released Llaryn and walked to the cat statue. He touched under the jaw and a voice responded almost immediately.

"Meeleer is on his way to the Paladium, Paladin."

"I'll contact him when we're settled." Satisfaction coursed through him. Ryvn was away, Kai would watch his back, and Meeleer would run things while he was gone. It was as much as he could do for now. He touched under the jaw again, disconnecting.

He crossed back to Llaryn and shackled her wrist once more. Her body, already aware of him, jolted to even deeper awareness. She was hot enough to start a fire, her cunt wet enough to ease his entry if he were to take her right that moment. She liked the feeling but it could be embarrassing in the wrong situation.

He nodded once to Keersha and led the way around the end of the false wall. He opened the hidden room, led her inside, and closed the door behind them.

"We're going somewhere from here?"

Paladin pressed his hand to what appeared to be nothing more than the wall across from the door they had entered. In front of them a door opened. He led her through it and the door closed behind them. "A VanDai always has more than one way out of any lair."

She blinked at the term and finally nodded. To a VanDai any living space was probably considered a lair.

"We're going to my family's holding. It's more defensible. The only ones there will be the two of us and the warrior guard assigned to it."

"Thank you."

He looked at her over his shoulder without pausing as he strode down the long, dimly lit tunnel. "For what?"

"For explaining. I wasn't sure you were going to."

His attention turned forward once more. "I couldn't answer your question where we were."

They walked and kept walking, going deeper with each step. When the tunnel finally leveled out Llaryn was sure they were well under the Paladium and beyond its walls, somewhere under Boujara. How long they walked she didn't know. In the dim, artificial light that glowed from near the floor of the tunnel there was no way to gauge the passage of time except by the burning of her muscles as Paladin kept up a fast pace.

Finally the tunnel started to pitch upward and make sharp, blind turns. Suddenly, it ended. She found herself facing a blank wall. The only way to go was back the way they had come.

Tired, thirsty, hungry, she looked at Paladin and her throat closed around tears. "Where do we go from here?"

"Up."

"Up?"

Paladin released her wrist and crouched, his muscles bunching tight. In one explosive move he jumped straight up, flying into the air. His hands caught an unseen ledge far overhead. He lifted himself, swung a leg over the ledge and disappeared from sight.

A moment later he was back, looking down at her. "Step back," he ordered.

She hurriedly did as he said.

He disappeared from her sight and reappeared with a bundle in his arms. He threw it over the side and it fanned out as it fell. Llaryn jumped back, coughing as the webbed material raised sand and dust from the floor of the tunnel.

"Stretch out the sling and sit in the middle. As I lift you keep your feet braced against the wall and walk up it."

For a moment Llaryn stared up at him, hesitating.

He kneeled down and stared at her. "I won't drop you."

The distance between them and the dim light kept her from seeing his eyes but his intensity reached her. She felt breathless, not with fear but with an anxiety that had no foundation. She knew he wouldn't drop her. He was

enormously strong and he would keep her safe; she didn't doubt that. So what was it?

Slowly she nodded. Stepping forward she leaned down and straightened out the sling as best she could. A rope was attached to the webbed contraption and disappeared up the wall to where Paladin stood.

She sat down in the middle of the sling and looked up.

Hand over hand Paladin drew the rope up. The sling rose around her, pulled together by the rope that laced through the corners of the webbing. Muscles bulged in his arms and his shoulders strained the material of his shirt as he lifted her weight off the floor with nothing more than his own physical strength.

Holding tight to the webbing of the sling, Llaryn braced her legs against the wall of the tunnel and "walked" up it as he lifted her ever higher. She looked up and found him watching her as he pulled her up in a steady motion. Her awe of him grew. Before meeting Paladin she had never imagined such physical power embodied in a living being.

The top of the sling drew even with the edge of the ledge. Paladin grasped the material bundled together by the rope in his hand and lifted her and the sling onto the ledge. He quickly released her from the confining webbing and lifted her to her feet. His arms circled her, crushing her to him. He swooped down and took her mouth with his own in a biting, tongue thrusting kiss.

She gasped, her mouth opening to let him take her.

One hand grasped her breast, the other her ass, grinding her against his rigid cock. Moaning, she clutched his biceps

until her nails bit into his flesh. She rubbed against him as he ground her close. The material of her gown, shot through with metallic threads, stimulated her nipples and sparked fire against her skin.

He grasped the skirt of her gown with both hands and yanked it up to bunch around her waist. He loosened his trousers just enough to let his cock spring free, poking her in the belly.

Opening her eyes, not even aware she had closed them, she looked up as he lifted her, her back against the wall, and thrust his cock into her. She grunted at the impact, held captive by his searing gaze.

Again and again he slammed into her, riding her hard but not fast. Each thrust made her gasp with the impact as he grunted. "Come for me, Llaryn," he ordered, his voice harsh. "Come. Don't lose yourself this time, stay with *me*."

Llaryn stared at him, her mouth open, her belly filled with his cock. She gasped in a breath, her mouth open, her body jerking with each impact of his against her. "Paladin—"

"No." He cut her off, glaring at her. "Don't tell me you can't. *Stay with me*." He reached between her legs and rubbed her clit with his thumb. It wasn't a soft caress but a firm taking and controlling of the tiny bundle of nerves.

"Ahhhhhh!" she cried out and her head rolled back. Her legs tightened around him and she arched forward into his hand and onto his cock.

"Look at me."

Her lips trembled. Her cunt squeezed tight as he rubbed her, his cock pounding into her, stretching her. He was so

hot. She was so tight around him. He was a fire inside her, his thumb making her burn.

"Look at me."

Somehow, not sure how she did it, she lifted her head and looked at him.

"Don't leave me." His lips were drawn back, his teeth bared. His thumb never left her clit. His cock never stopped forging into her.

She tried to breathe, tried to answer but all she could do was stare back and hold on. She clawed at him, bit her bottom lip, and focused completely on him.

Every fiber of her being fought for release. She could feel the energy inside building. Her skin felt too tight, her body vibrating with the need for release, sexual, mental, and corporal.

"No." Paladin pinched her clit, shoved himself deep into her and held her pinned to the wall, crushed by his weight, impaled on his pulsing penis. "Come, Llaryn. Come now without losing yourself. This isn't for you. *This is for me.* I could have lost you. That device could have been deadly. *They could have killed you.*"

Her being imploded. Energy arced inward, contained, not released, a volcano claiming its vessel.

Paladin smiled, his expression savage. His cock pulsed inside her, growing thicker, longer. "Yes." He shoved into her harder. His chin went up but he never looked away from her as he ejaculated in her, his come filling her in hot, viscous spurts.

For a long moment he held them where they were. Each felt quakes shake the other, the aftermath a long time in subsiding.

Finally he stepped back and lifted her off himself.

Her legs trembled and she held onto him until she could stand on her own. She wasn't sure what she felt. Physically she was satisfied but she didn't feel complete. "Why did what just happened happen? Going to energy is the most intimate, wonderful thing I've ever felt with anyone. Why didn't you want it to happen?"

He let her skirt fall back into place. "When you lose substance and your body turns to light, that's a place I can't follow. This time I wanted you there with me, completely matter, connected to me and not out of my reach."

Not sure she completely understood, she nodded. He needed, she provided. It felt good to be the one giving for a change instead of the one needing and taking.

He took her wrist in his hand and led the way up another sharp incline.

She grimaced, uncomfortable with his seed wet and sticky between her legs and on her thighs but she wasn't going to complain. He wanted them somewhere he considered safe and she wasn't going to hold him back.

The tunnel seemed to end again and she looked up but there was nothing but ceiling above them. No shadows or anything else that could hide another ledge.

Paladin released her hand, walked forward, pressed back against the wall and slid around an outcrop of rock. She walked forward and peered around the out jut to see Paladin

wedging his way through an impossibly narrow opening. Cringing at the thought of getting stuck, for the first time in her life wondering if she could be claustrophobic, she followed him.

Rock pressed against her back, against her front, from knee to shoulder. It was too tight to take a deep breath. She couldn't imagine how Paladin did it; he was so much bigger than her. She wanted to go back the way she'd come or push him out of the way so she could hurry to the other end. There had to be an outlet at the end, didn't there?

She opened her mouth, not sure what she wanted to say and barely bit back a sound she was very afraid would be a scream.

Closing her eyes, she kept sliding forward pressed between rocks. Paladin's hand closed over her shoulder. She stopped but didn't open her eyes. Seeing the rock in front of her, feeling it crushing her, was more than she could face with her eyes open.

"Stay here until I'm sure it's safe."

It was an order, not a request, and she knew it. But how did she stay where she was when the life was being crushed from her one shallow, impeded breath at a time?

"Stay here."

Closing her eyes even more tightly, bunching her hands into fists, she nodded. She was a strong person. She could stay where she was until Paladin said it was okay to leave. She wouldn't endanger him or herself by leaving before he knew it was safe.

She counted to a thousand in Mrilnese, in the League common tongue, and had started on Tilneese when Paladin's hand closed over her shoulder again.

His hand slid down her arm and circled her wrist. She shivered and focused all her attention on his hand on her wrist. It felt hot and vital, alive, grounding her. For the first time since entering the sliver of space between rock walls she felt she would make it out alive.

He tugged her forward.

Rock gave way to air. It washed over her, so hot it felt impossible to breathe but she *could* breathe.

Opening her eyes, she stared into the sky filled by a huge, scorching, red-gold sun. Tears filled her eyes and slid down her face, immediately dried by the wind and heat.

"We have to get you out of the sun before you burn." He grasped her around the waist and lifted her.

Startled, she looked around for the first time. A transport waited in front of them. Paladin lifted her in, before vaulting over the side himself. He sat behind the controls and powered on the small vehicle. He quickly scanned the instrument panel, made adjustments, and sent their ride racing forward.

The front plasti-shield curved up in front of and over them, protecting them from wind created by momentum. It was also tinted, providing protection from the sun.

Llaryn had never seen such a desolate, beautiful landscape. The sand looked red-gold as if the sun had dyed it to match its color. What would Paladin's family's holding be like? He said there would be guards there but for the most part it would be only the two of them. Not that they had

spent much time around anyone else but she'd known there were others just outside the room that had, for most of her time on Sai-sen-Sai, become her world.

Sitting back, she enjoyed the soft wind blowing her hair. She looked at Paladin and marveled again at his power. He was tall and, to her, beautiful. As long as she was with him she would be all right until life settled into a routine again.

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Chapter Four

Llaryn blinked, shifted and tried to straighten. She felt cramped, her back protesting her odd angle. She lifted her head and realized it was resting on Paladin's lap. Sitting up, she scrubbed a hand over her face. "I hadn't realized I was falling asleep."

Paladin glanced at her. "You were tired." His attention turned back to the desert in front of them though he reached out and rested his right hand high on her left thigh.

She looked down at his hand on her thigh, at his other hand navigating the transport. They were strong and skilled, beautiful. Large, well-shaped and powerful and with her always careful. He didn't know how to be gentle, she was sure of that, but he knew his own strength and with her he tempered his every move to never hurt her. Even in the throes of orgasm he didn't hurt her.

Leaning back against the seat, her head resting against his broad shoulder, she watched the moon rise. A giant silver dish, it filled half the sky. Somehow it cast light but stole color. It painted the sand every shade of gray from near black to a color so pale it was almost white. It painted Paladin as stark and angular, carved from the desert that had shaped his people.

Her heart turned over. She wanted Paladin physically but it was more than that. His presence was so powerful, so dominating, he would never be someone who raised insipid emotions. He roused fear and hate or love and devotion.

There *were* times when she feared him but somehow that only added spice to her love.

Love?

She looked away from him, her mind shutting down as she stared at the endless sea of sand. It rippled like an ocean frozen in time. The sand sculpted by now silent winds.

Desert and man, they were both stark, both beautiful, and both either loved or hated.

Her heart raced. Her palms grew sweaty. She was wet and ready for him, only him. She did love him and the stark beauty of his planet called to her as no other landscape ever had.

He topped a rise. On the other side the land fell away. Llaryn's stomach dropped as the transport tipped over the edge and raced nose-first down the side of the giant dune.

Her eyes latched onto the walled dwelling visible in the distance. His family's holding, one abode, long and low, surrounded by a thick white wall, rose out of the desert. There was no way to approach it unseen. It was a haven in a desolately beautiful landscape.

Desperate, she focused on it as her hair flew out behind her and her breath and heart lodged in her throat as the world became a vertical fall.

It took a moment that felt like eternity for the transport to hit the bottom and straighten out to horizontal with a lurch that almost unseated Llaryn. Paladin's hand tightened on her thigh, keeping her seated next to him.

They chased moon shadows across the desert as the moon rose in front of them. Sand shifted under them, rippling in

waves behind them. The holding grew fast in front of them. The wall grew taller and more imposing the closer they got. Paladin slowed the transport as he approached the gate.

Someone shouted in VanDeese from the gate as Paladin slowed to a stop.

He shouted back in the same guttural tongue.

Another spate of VanDeese sounded from the gate.

Listening to them Llaryn realized she was coming to understand something of the VanDai. They didn't use a more sophisticated system of identification because talking to each other, exchanging information that only they could know, that was specific to the two people and not prearranged, made it almost impossible for anyone to impersonate or penetrate the holding by any means other than force.

The gate opened and Paladin sent the transport forward in a smooth, fast motion.

Behind them the gate swung shut.

He didn't stop the transport until he was butted up against a building under the shadow of a huge awning. He leaped out, turned and lifted Llaryn out. She didn't have a chance to think, speak or react as he led the way inside.

She was stunned. If she'd stopped to think about it, and she hadn't, she would have expected the holding to be as unadorned as his room in the Paladium. It was completely different here. An intricately braided rug in every color of the sunburned land from red to gold to black and white stretched from the entrance to the end of the long hallway. The ceiling was low and tiled with intricately carved pieces of wood.

Paladin led the way into a living area with another rug, braided as the first but in shades of blue that looked like water lit by the sun in places and shaded by mountain peaks in others. Those peaks seemed to be reflected in the amazingly intricate braid work. Furniture was grouped in an area two steps down from the rest of the room. It was big and plush and made for lounging. She reached out to touch a figurine of a VanDai warrior. It was abstract but unmistakable, sharp angles and flowing curves giving the impression of movement.

He didn't give her time to take in more than that as he strode into another room filled with control panels and monitoring equipment.

He reached out and activated the communication system. Immediately a voice filled the room speaking in VanDeese. Paladin answered and the only word she recognized was Kai's name.

The conversation was short and Paladin disconnected quickly.

"Paladin, what's happening? What's going on?" Her voice sounded more hesitant than she wanted but she faced him squarely. "Are we safe?"

"We're looking for the traitor." His expression was closed, his tone emotionless, but his eyes promised death.

"Traitor?"

"The attack at the Paladium had to come from inside. There was no way for anyone to get close enough to get a device into the building. Not unless they belonged there. Kai and the warrior guard here are the only ones who know we've

arrived. I will let the information out slowly. When the attack comes, I'll know who is behind it."

"We're bait? Isn't there another way?"

"No." He led the way out of the communication room down a short hall and into another room.

"No? Or you don't want to try another way?"

"No."

Frustrated, she turned away and almost ran into a contraption made of tubes and slings. Frowning, she stepped back. "What is that?"

Paladin's arms wrapped around her from behind. "*That* is a toy developed for cats."

Llaryn didn't have to ask what he was doing. She knew. The thought of his mouth on her, licking, biting, sucking, his cock filling her, was too much. Her body responded with a rush of heat, her breasts firming, her areolas swelling and her nipples growing tight.

"Paladin—"

He lifted her into his arms and his mouth crushed hers.

She opened her lips to his tongue, sucked and bit it and was rewarded by a low growl deep in his chest that rumbled against her breasts.

"Wrap your legs around my waist." He spoke the words into her mouth, the fingers of one hand tangled in her hair. His other hand supported her buttocks.

Feeling wanton and exposed, Llaryn buried her face in his neck and did as he told her. She could feel his cock, long and hard, pushing against her wet folds through the material of his pants and her gown. Before coming to Sai-sen-Sai, the

VanDai home world, she would never have made such a display of herself in a potentially public place. She wouldn't even have done it in private. Mriln didn't have emotional or sexual displays in public and rarely if ever in private. A VanDai mate apparently had them all the time. And that's what she was. A VanDai mate.

Paladin walked further into the room, each step thrusting his cock against her. She moaned, the sound catching in her throat as she moved against him. His body was all hard muscle and sinew. Having her body pressed against his, her softer parts rubbing against his hard ones, was exquisite torture.

"How do you make me want you more every time?" Her arms wrapped around his neck. She closed her eyes and leaned back, thrusting her pelvis tighter against his turgid cock. He took her apart and made her new every time he took her. She was his to do what he wanted with and she couldn't imagine ever wanting it any different.

He didn't say anything. Walking into their room he pulled her away from him, his movement abrupt and rough, and set her on her feet. "Get undressed." He turned and wrenched his shirt off over his head.

Llaryn pulled her gown up and off over her head. He hadn't allowed her to wear anything under her gowns since she'd woken in his room at the Paladium. He wanted her naked and available to him so whenever he wanted to raise her hem or reach into her bodice to take or touch her, he could, and he frequently did both. She shivered as she thought about him lifting her in the hall outside their room, bunching her skirt

around her waist and freeing himself. Surging into her. He didn't know how to wait and if he did he would refuse to do it anyway.

He turned to her, his expression fierce, his eyes narrowed and predatory. He reached for her, his claws only half sheathed, and a tremor raced through her, a thrill half fear and one hundred percent excitement. She knew he had to curb his instincts. He wanted her the way a VanDai male wanted his mate. Hard, fast, rough, sometimes even painful. They were not a gentle species and while he was careful to never hurt her, he was a rough lover.

He jerked her to him. His mouth crashed down on hers. His tongue forced its way between her lips as his fingers kneaded her buttocks, his claws a sharp threat that never pierced the pale globes.

He lifted his head, his eyes glittering black in the late afternoon sunlight that filled the room with a golden glow. "I want you naked all the time. I want to be able to reach out and grab your breasts." He suited action to words, his grip on her breasts just short of crushing.

Gasping, Llaryn arched forward, trying to ease the pressure of his grip on her soft flesh. At the same time she reveled in his harsh treatment, something in her responding, *needing* him to need her just like that.

"I want to pinch your areolas and watch their color deepen and your nipples grow even longer and harder." He caught her areolas between the thumb and first finger of each hand and pinched.

Llaryn moaned, her pelvis moving back and forth, an involuntary plea for more. She held his wrists and fought to breathe as he stole the air from her lungs with his words and his actions.

"Your nipples get so long and hard, the skin so tight it has a shine to it, my mouth waters and I want to bite them. Bite and suck and bite again."

Still pinching her areolas he lowered his head and bit down on her left nipple.

She shuddered. Moisture flooded her vagina. Her lungs quit working. "Paladin."

He released her breasts, grasped her hips, and pulled her forward. He opened his mouth over her throbbing nipple and sucked her into his mouth with crushing pressure, pulling her nipple taut, his teeth sharp on her areola, his tongue rasping her flesh with its rough surface.

Llaryn's body jerked as if it were electrified. Heat boiled through her veins. She was on fire inside. She wrapped one leg around Paladin's thigh and rubbed her wet center against the thick column of muscle.

Paladin growled low in his throat, caught the backs of her thighs in his great hands and lifted her. He stared into her eyes as he brought her down on his straining cock, filling her hard and fast, stretching her tight around him.

She wrapped her legs tight around his hips, her inner muscles clenching on him as she fought to adjust to his length and girth splitting her. He filled her so full. She felt connected to him, more than just physically, when he was inside her. She wanted him more every time because he

wanted her. "I never imagined anyone wanting me so much and now I can't imagine living without that feeling."

"You'll never live without me. I won't allow it." He looked angry as he lifted her up the length of his shaft. He surged up in a powerful move as he lowered her back down, jarring her.

She held his shoulders as he moved her up and down, his hips rocking in a pounding rhythm. Her molecules sped, energy spiked inside her, waves driven by him.

Arms and legs wrapped tight around him, she tried to hold back. She wanted it to go on, the build up of pressure and pleasure. His cock slamming into her. His fingers biting into her buttocks as he manipulated her body to increase the pleasure for both of them.

But she couldn't hold back. Paladin wouldn't let her. He moved faster, canted her hips side to side as he rammed her, changing pressure points and exposing new nerves to his nubby length.

Her head fell back as her body convulsed. Light radiated from her as her cellular energy went nova.

Breathing hard she finally returned to herself and found Paladin still inside her, huge and throbbing. His expression had a cruel edge and his black eyes were flat and focused.

Alarmed, her eyes rounded and she shook her head. "What's wrong?" She felt panicky, her heart fluttering wildly in her chest. She'd never seen that exact expression before but it scared her. Paladin would never hurt her but her limits were much more narrow than his. "What are you thinking?"

Still buried inside her, each step rocking him into her and making waves of sensation crash through her, he took her to

the clean-gel pool. He lifted her off his hard cock as he walked in. Submerging them both, he used his hand to wash her sex. He pushed two fingers into her, pulled them out and washed her sex again.

Picking her back up, he carried her out of the pool and across the room to a latticework of tubes and straps. He sat her down on a webbed seat and lifted her feet up and to either side and placed them in webbed stirrups.

Eyes wide, unsure what he was doing or what to expect, she clutched at his shoulders and tried to stay upright. "What is this? What are you planning?" She couldn't keep her uncertainty out of her voice. She'd never seen anything like the contraption before.

Paladin lifted her hands off his shoulders and slowly, inexorably, pushed her back. "My people are genetically of a cat species. One thing to know about cats is they love to play. The other thing to know is that they are as serious about their play as they are about their hunting. This"—he pointed at the conglomerate of slings and tubes—"was made for a cat to play."

"You do remember that I'm not a cat, right? What you consider fun, I might not." She pulled herself up as much as she could by bending her elbows and arching forward. "Mriln aren't adventurous. I've already done more with you than I would have in my whole lifetime if I hadn't met you."

A predatory smile lifted Paladin's lips. It wasn't reassuring and wasn't meant to be, she was sure.

"Lean back, Llaryn."

A shiver shook her as she stared up at him.

"I won't let you out of this until we've explored it. If you don't like it we won't use it again but we'll try it this once." His expression was closed, his tone unyielding.

Llaryn's teeth set, her lips thinned, and she glared up at him. "What if I don't want to try it?"

He released one of her hands, reached between her legs and shoved two fingers into her cunt hard and fast. She gasped and arched backward but didn't go far. She was arched over a tube, her breasts jutting into the air. Her legs were spread wide, exposing her, and Paladin had two fingers wedged tight inside her.

"I think you'll like it," he purred, leaning down and rasping her clit with his tongue as he twisted his fingers inside her, as he pulled them out and shoved them in without any rhythm but keeping it hard and fast.

There were many times she had felt exposed but this was the first time she had felt *displayed* as well. Her stomach felt jittery, her cunt full, and Paladin was watching his fingers enter and open her.

She let her head roll back and admitted to herself anything Paladin wanted to do to her she would let him. Everything she was, she gave to him. He had opened her eyes to who she was. She loved sex. As a Mrlin she needed sex but it went beyond that for her. She *loved* sex. What was more, she loved to be dominated. A touch of fear, yet knowing she was safe, made her forget everything but the moment and the VanDai male who controlled her.

His fingers left her.

"No." She whispered the protest.

He pinched her swollen slit. She jerked but found she couldn't move her legs. They were tangled in the straps that held them. She couldn't completely close her legs and she couldn't free herself by lifting them out of the straps.

He pinched her clit again and she forgot about where her legs were. Her body convulsed on a short, sharp orgasm. She was wet, her channel clamping down, needing his cock or even his fingers in her again.

"Paladin." She looked at him through her lashes, unable to open her eyes. Her body felt heavy yet weightless at the same time. "Take me."

He kept her clit caught between his fingers, rolling and pinching it. She jerked and twisted to the manipulation of his fingers. Her orgasm continued, one wave rolling into the next, never higher, never less. "Paladin, please," she begged, her eyes pleading with him. Her breasts felt full, her nipples tight. She breathed in gasps, her chest heaving. It was torture but exquisitely so.

"I'll take you," he promised, his smile dark. "But you'll take me first."

His fingers left her clit and he walked around her suspended body to where her head dangled over the tube.

She watched him closely, her eyes growing larger with each step he took. His penis was huge, his testicles heavy. As he stepped close her mouth formed an "O." Her head and mouth were positioned perfectly to take his cock.

He pressed his cock against her parted lips and pushed forward. She opened her mouth, opened it wider. The head of his cock entered her, filled her, pushed deeper.

"Suck him hard." Paladin's voice was a growl. One hand circled her throat, a living necklace as he rocked his cock back and forth in her mouth.

She closed her eyes and sucked. Her tongue explored the domed head, the nubby surface of the shaft that entered her mouth and retreated. She gasped for air, gagged when he pushed deeper. She wanted to take more of him to be able to swallow him whole but he was too big and she was built too small.

His fingers closed on her nipples, and pulled. He squeezed her breasts.

Llaryn tried to gasp. She arched up, shrank away. Reaching up, she grasped his hips and held on.

His claws kneaded her pelvis as he moved faster. He raked lightly up her abdomen, over her breasts and chest. He reached down and did it again. And again. And again.

She shuddered with each stroke of his claws up her body. Gasping, her mouth wet with saliva, she released his hips and grasped his cock with both hands.

He growled something low and guttural in VanDeese. His fingers, caging her breasts, extended up and away before flexing down. His claws bit into her flesh without breaking skin. His hips arched forward and he went wild.

Llaryn's hands tightened on his shaft, holding fast as he thrust in a furious rhythm. Her own hand hit her mouth. His hands grabbed, pulled, pinched her breasts. Her hips rocked in helpless counterpart to his. Her cunt clenched, wet and wanting the cock that filled her mouth to fill it.

He said something explosive in VanDeese and came.

She swallowed, gulping. His taste was his alone, salty and earthy. Alive.

Long minutes later he pulled out of her mouth. She stared up at him, waiting to see what he would do next. Her cunt felt empty. Her thighs were wet with her own juice. She'd had him once but she wanted him again. She *needed* him. The ache between her legs had grown with each rake of his nails over her skin, each thrust of his cock into her mouth and each punishing squeeze and pinch to her breasts and nipples. Would he take her again? Could he? He'd come in her mouth, his orgasm as explosive and long as he'd ever had with her.

His hands braced on the tube on either side of her head and he stared down at her. "You surprise me."

"I surprise you? How?" She couldn't imagine how she could surprise him. She followed his lead. She learned what he taught her. If anything the surprise was that he wanted someone as inexperienced in anything sexually adventurous as she'd been before meeting him.

He cupped her chin in one hand. "You've given yourself to me." Leaning down, he pressed his lips to hers. It was the softest kiss he'd ever given her. A press of his lips to hers. His tongue explored her lips, sipped and tasted and made her feel treasured.

Lifting his head he studied her. "I told you I would take you and I will. More completely than I ever have."

He walked back around her and, using the straps on the sling she was suspended in, he lifted her up. Another sling came down as hers went up and he positioned her so her torso and head were supported.

His eyes closed as he stepped between her legs and breathed deep. His face flushed and his nostrils flared. His lips grew fuller even as they drew back to expose his teeth.

Opening his eyes, he studied her sex. He reached out and, using his thumbs, pulled her labial folds apart, exposing her even more.

Her cunt clenched and she grew wetter.

"You glisten." He dipped one finger into her, raised it to his lips and licked her essence as he watched her watching him. "You taste like everything my mate should. You taste like life."

A shiver coursed through her. She was mesmerized by him, by his words, by his effect on her. She couldn't contain her response to him if she wanted to, and she didn't want to.

He lowered his head and buried his face in her sex. He licked, sucked and bit. His tongue pushed into her. He lashed her clit. He drank her essence and forced her to give him more.

Llaryn whimpered, moaned, screamed. His tongue was rough, felt almost as if it scraped over her labia and clit. A velvet covered roughness that made every muscle in her body tighten. He pushed his tongue into her and she twisted and squirmed, fighting to get away from him. It was too much. *He was too much.*

"Paladin, no," she pleaded. "Take it out."

His tongue probed deeper.

She exploded. Arched. Shuddered.

His lips closed around her clit and he licked.

She screamed and bucked, clawed at the straps holding her sling, but couldn't get away.

Growling, Paladin drew back. He did something to the straps and her sling plummeted several inches, spinning her over as it did until she was suspended on her stomach, her ass higher than her head, her torso lengthwise on the tube that her back had arched over before.

Paladin didn't give her a chance to adjust. He pulled her back, her breasts dragging against the slightly rough surface of the tube. His erection, fully hard again, butted up against her swollen entrance and plunged inside. The motion pushed her forward on the tube, raking her nipples, areolas, and breasts against it.

Gasping, filled to bursting by Paladin, her breasts tortured by the tube, she bit her bottom lip. She couldn't catch her breath. He pounded into her. This was *more* than she'd ever experienced. She wasn't VanDai. She wasn't made to endure pleasure this extreme.

"It hurts ... Good ... So good..." she sobbed, tried to brace her torso up from the tube.

Paladin wouldn't let her. His hips slammed into hers, his cock riding her hard. Her body flew into orgasm, shaking and shuddering. She felt on fire. Sensation *raked* her breasts. The fires spread from her cock-ridden vagina through her whole body. She could *feel* Paladin in her, over her. His feral need to take and claim and mark her as his. He wanted to burn his essence into hers, to brand her with his very being and he wanted to be branded by her in return. He needed this. He

needed this elemental mating. He needed her out of control. His. His. His.

His cock swelled even more. She felt the building pressure, the explosion of release leaving him, filling her. For one moment she felt his molecules spin as fast and out of control as her own. Their souls touched. Their beings meshed and for one glowing moment they were truly one.

Paladin didn't move. He wasn't even sure he was breathing. He had never experienced anything like what had just happened. He had felt the power of sex, of taking Llaryn and feeling her climax over and over again in his arms. He had experienced her near metamorphosis, the charge, the lightening of her being as she became more energy than matter. For one moment out of time, though, he had become that very same thing, a being more energy than matter.

Pulling free of her clinging heat, he lifted her out of the sling that supported her. He carried her to the bathing pool and submerged them both. He didn't pause but carried her back out of the pool almost immediately. He set her on her feet by the bed, wiped her off with quick, impersonal motions and did the same for himself.

Llaryn didn't seem to notice anything was wrong. She climbed onto the bed and pulled a cover over herself, hiding the red marks the tube had left on her breasts.

Paladin's jaw tightened at the sight of the red marks on her pale skin. He had put those marks there. They stirred the predator in him. He liked that he had his mark on her, in her.

He breathed in and satisfaction curled through him. His scent marked her as well. Her body responded to his of its

own volition. Frequent sex had conditioned her body to recognize and ready itself for him. He had seen her, wanted her, chosen her as the female who would be his mate and he had bound her to him by every measure both VanDai and Mriln. He had *marked* her. Now, though, she had marked him.

He settled on the bed beside her. She rolled up against his side and settled her head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around her and held her as he listened to her breathing become even as she fell asleep.

He stared across the room and watched the shadows move and fade as the sun set. He was an apex predator. He controlled his surroundings. He ruled his people. He pronounced judgment and carried out sentencing. Weakness was something he exploited. When he saw something he wanted he took it.

Today it felt as if Llaryn had taken him.

He shifted and looked down at her face for a long moment. She was completely feminine. Her face was all soft angles and curves. Her lips were full, her eyes exotic. Her body was slender to the point of fragility. She was his and he had taken her. It was his place *to take her*.

His muscles bunched, and his lips drew back, exposing his canines, and his claws flashed out. How had she done it? Something had happened and he had taken on characteristics of hers. *He had lost control*.

Closing his eyes, he concentrated on relaxing his muscles. He took slow, steady breaths and centered himself. Control wasn't something he practiced; it was who he was. Losing

control made him a danger to himself and others. What had she done to him? How had she taken control?

He unwrapped his arm from around her, rolled away and got off the bed. He would never hurt her but he didn't trust himself next to her at that moment. He wanted answers and she wouldn't have them. To his knowledge no VanDai had ever had a relationship with a Mriln before. What had happened could be as big a surprise to her as to him.

He turned back toward the bed and the woman sleeping there. She had known what sex with him would do to her. Could she have known what it would do to him? Would she keep that knowledge from him until it was too late? Was he as dependent on her now as she was on him?

His jaw tightened. His eyes narrowed and his chin lowered as he stalked her. He wanted answers and if she had them she would give them to him.

Gliding forward he approached the bed, completely silent. He reached for her and the world exploded. Sandstone fragments filled the air, deadly missiles biting into flesh, wood, and bedding.

Llaryn screamed, rolled over, and fought free of her cover.

A chunk of the ceiling broke free and fell on the bed, cracked and fell to the floor. Paladin grabbed her and the cover. He dropped to the floor and covered her body with his.

Dust swirled through the air in a choking cloud. Coughing, Paladin surged to his feet, grabbed Llaryn's arm, and dragged her up with him.

Another explosion rocked the room. Sandstone blocks disintegrated, throwing off deadly darts. Paladin flinched and grunted but kept moving.

Llaryn cried out, tried to drop and cover herself but Paladin wouldn't let her go.

Paladin dragged her out of the room. Llaryn's heart pounded loud and hard. The air was choked with dust. She couldn't quit coughing. Her eyes watered, half-blinding her. They could have been killed. Why was someone doing this? She wanted to cry and almost laughed when she realized she already was.

They walked half-crouched through the main living space, more slowly than Llaryn wanted. She wanted to run, to get far away as fast as possible. She tried to get ahead of Paladin, to pick up the pace but he dragged her back.

They reached a short corridor she had seen but not been in. The door at the end, she assumed, had to lead outside.

Paladin stopped, his grip on her wrist pulling her up short. He shoved hard on a tile in the wall and a whole section of stone moved back. Pale light barely penetrated past the opening. Inside, there was a small room barely big enough for them to squeeze in. She turned, relief bringing a smile. "We can hide here until help arrives."

Paladin pulled the door shut.

Her mouth dropped open. She rushed forward, pounding on the wall. Paladin was on the other side. Alone. If he was hurt she wouldn't be able to help him.

"Paladin. Paladin! Let me out." She pounded and screamed until her voice broke and her fists were sore. Finally she gave

up and slumped to the floor. "Come back, Paladin," she whispered, her voice hoarse. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head against the wall. "Just come back." If he died, she died and more importantly, she would want to die.

She opened her eyes and stared into the near blackness of the tiny room. Of course he wouldn't be able to hide here with her. He was a warrior. "Come back, Paladin," she whispered. "Just come back." All she could do now was wait and hope.

* * * *

Paladin watched the door shut to make sure it showed no sign of being a door in the wall. He heard her for a mere moment before the column wedged back into place and then there was only silence.

He flickered into invisibility. His suspicions were correct. He trusted Eln completely but not his assistant. She was the only one who would know where he and Llaryn were outside of the small group of individuals that Paladin trusted. She was the one behind the attempts on Llaryn and the latest attempts on both of them.

He turned and ghosted away from the short corridor, back through the living space and to the room where they had lain sleeping. He looked into the bedroom but there was nothing to see except the destruction that had already happened. Chunks of sandstone lay on the bed where Llaryn had slept. Dust covered the bed, the floor, everything.

Rage burned through him.

Voices, too loud, not cautious, gave away the approach of men.

He froze and waited. This was the time. He would take them out. Kai wouldn't be far away. Opening the safe room had set off a call for him and the warriors with him to come. But Paladin wanted to take these ones out himself before help arrived. They had threatened his life, the life of his mate. More, they wanted to take her from him. For all of those reasons they would die.

The voices advanced quickly.

He didn't think much of their hunting abilities. They didn't try to hide their approach. Didn't try to look for enemies. They advanced fast, sure of themselves. They didn't know if their plan had worked or not but they *assumed* it had.

"...explosion was bigger than you said."

"I know. I already explained, sir. It wasn't the explosives. It was the sandstone. It was softer than I realized. The explosion was more fierce, the fallout greater because it wasn't the density I expected."

"If she dies, you die."

Paladin didn't like the sound of that man, though he completely understood him. He was the leader. The first man hadn't performed his duties well. The leader needed Llaryn alive for whatever reason he wanted her.

"How long will the gas affect him? If the VanDai isn't dead or incapacitated I want to know how long he'll be immobilized. When the President returns, he will want to deal with the dog himself."

In the process of moving closer to his enemies, Paladin stilled. Gas? Their *bomb* hadn't worked as expected in more ways than one. And the President? What did they mean by

that? The President had been executed on the orders of the interplanetary council. There was no way for him to *come back*. Unless—

Fury rose hotter and more fierce within him. It all made sense. They thought Llaryn could bring the President back. They wanted to use her to return the despot to power.

They were at the entrance to the sleeping chamber when the leader asked, "Do you have their signal?"

Paladin eased forward, careful to move soundlessly. He didn't want to alert them to his presence. Not before he was ready to kill them.

"Hers. I haven't found him yet."

"Find it. Fast. I don't want any surprises."

Curses lodged in Paladin's throat. They had her signal? Olara must have tagged Llaryn when she was supposed to be getting samples for testing to be sure Llaryn hadn't been marked. With her helping, Eln would never find out what had been used to mark them so these men could follow, hunt and acquire them.

His fury rose higher, hotter as he glided after them. They didn't enter the bedroom at all but moved out into the living space and toward the short hall and the wall behind which he'd hidden Llaryn.

"How long would he have been able to move after the gas hit them?"

"Two, three minutes maybe."

"Maybe?" There was cold warning in the leader's voice.

"What do you mean maybe?"

"It's never been tested on a VanDai specimen. With their constitution it may be that he had a few more minutes."

"How many more?"

"Five, maybe ten at most."

"Long enough to hide himself and the Mriln."

Staying close to them Paladin followed as they skirted the living space and the five-member team entered the short hall where he had Llaryn. As he passed the VanDai statue Llaryn had admired, he picked it up and quickly dismantled it. He folded the dozen tazer stars in his palm.

He watched with predatory eyes as three men fanned out at the end of the hall, the leader and the one with the tracking device entering it.

He glided soundlessly past the three with their lasers ready and ceaselessly sweeping the area, alert for any danger. He almost touched one as he passed.

The man shivered and looked around but held his ground. There was nothing to see and he didn't follow his instinct that something or someone had brushed past him.

Paladin entered the mouth of the hall.

"She's alone. The wall is about one meter thick."

"Can you bring down the wall without bringing the ceiling down on her head? I don't want her injured."

"I think so."

"Don't think, know. She's no good to us or the President dead. Can you do it? Yes or no?"

There was a split second pause. "Yes." He unclipped a charge from his belt and pressed it against the wall. It

adhered with a click and he began setting the parameters for the blast.

Paladin threw a tazer star. It embedded in the charge setter's neck, slicing through his carotid artery and bisecting his trachea. Blood spurted and he went down in a boneless heap.

The leader spun and fired his laser in the direction the star had come from. The blast hit Paladin in the shoulder, half-spinning him. Tazer stars fell from his numb hand. He dropped and rolled forward, throwing the star he still held as he came to his feet in a low crouch. A second man went down with a star embedded in his eye and Paladin leaped away from where he had stood while throwing it.

Laser fire scored the spot where he had stood.

"Get the charges set!"

"Where is he?"

The leader ran forward and yanked the sensor out of the dead man's hand. "Set the charges." He swung the sensor around, sweeping the room.

Paladin jumped at him at the same time the leader found him. Laser fire hit a second behind him. He grabbed the leader's neck with his good arm and, using his own weight and momentum, broke his neck. He jerked the laser free of the falling man's hand and kept moving. Spinning as he ran, he fired the laser and another man went down.

Laser fire hit him, scoring his left hip and down into his thigh. Paladin hit the floor hard, the laser flying from his hand.

An explosion rocked the world. Sandstone projectiles laced the room.

"Llary—" Paladin's shout choked off without being finished.

Laser fire raked through the smoke and dust choked room. The last man fell, sliced by clear fire.

Kai appeared by Paladin's side, his expression grim. He dropped to one knee and another warrior crouched beside him. The second VanDai assessed Paladin with quick efficiency, looked at Kai and shook his head.

Paladin watched Kai through eyes that were quickly growing dim. He reached up, grabbed Kai's biceps and held tight. His breathing was labored, half his chest, one arm, a hip, and thigh blackened. A shard of stone was wedged in his throat, another in his chest. "Get Llaryn." His voice emerged as barely a whisper, hoarse and weak.

Kai ripped free of Paladin's hold, surged to his feet and ran into the hall. He dove through the hole in the wall and cursed as he landed on the other side. Llaryn lay in a heap on the floor. Her black hair, white with dust, blanketed her body. Her hips were twisted in the opposite direction of her upper body. She was motionless, her face hidden, her hands streaked with blood where they lay on either side of her head.

Leaning down he easily lifted her from the floor. He walked over the rubble and carried her to Paladin's side. He laid her beside Paladin and stepped back so the VanDai medic could check out Llaryn.

"Is she dead?" Paladin reached for her with his good hand, his fingers brushing her hair away from her face. His eyes closed and his head fell back against the floor. His breath

hitched and stopped before starting again, more labored, a gurgle punctuating each inhalation and exhalation. His hand moved blindly toward Llaryn, dragging in the dust until he touched her hand. His fingers inched up until they circled her wrist, binding them together.

His eyes opened and he looked at Kai, his black eyes flaming. "Find Olara ... and the Pres-id-ent's ... body. Kill her. Bur ... burn him." His head lolled to the side, his eyes staring blindly at Llaryn.

Kai pressed his hand over Paladin's chest. His heartbeat was sluggish. It missed beats, raced for two beats, stopped and started again. His eyes were cold, murderous as he looked at the warriors around him. "Contact Mee in Boujara. Have him take care of Olara. Find out where the President's body is and do what Paladin said. Burn it."

Crouching down, Kai grasped Paladin's hand and started to pull him up. "Come on, my friend. I'm taking you home."

Paladin's hand pulled free of Llaryn's wrist. She stirred and blinked, squinting at Paladin. Her mouth opened but no sound emerged.

Kai lifted Paladin.

"No!" Llaryn screamed. She rolled onto her side, threw her arm around Paladin's waist and held on. "Don't touch him."

Kai stopped, his eyes cold as he stared at her. "Paladin is dying, Llaryn, and I'm taking my leader, *my friend*, home."

Llaryn returned glare for glare. "He's dying, Kai, not dead, and I'm a healer."

Kai, his hand still grasping Paladin's, stopped. "Can you save him?"

She took a deep breath and pushed up to her knees. "I'm going to try. I have to, for him and for me. Without him I'm dead anyway." Ignoring him she concentrated all of her attention on Paladin. "When my hands start to glow, pull the stone shards out of his chest and neck. Do it *just* as my hands start to glow. If you're too soon, he'll bleed to death. If you're too late, I won't be able to heal his wounds with the stone still there. We only have one chance. I won't have the energy to try more than once."

She didn't look up or wait for a reply. Pressing her hands to Paladin's chest she closed her eyes and focused inward deeper than she ever had. This was Paladin. Invincible, impossibly strong Paladin, and he was dying.

Slowly, concentrating every spark of energy in her being outward, she touched Paladin, centered on him and entered. His presence, always so intense, masterful, dominating, was a fading spark.

Don't fight me, Paladin, she whispered, her mind and soul speaking to his. *Help me or we both die*.

His body jerked, the spark fading.

No. She felt the pain, the sudden spurt of blood from his neck, and stopped the bleeding, molecules like stars glowing, knitting together, tissue binding under her direction.

His body jerked again. Blood spurted from his chest, his heart stopped, the stone scraping muscle.

She forced energy from her body, through her hands, into his. She wouldn't let him go. If one of them was going to die, it would be her. Paladin would continue. Whatever she had to do, his life would go on.

The damage was more severe than she had realized. She concentrated her efforts on his chest and heart, his throat, and artery but there was more. So much more. His chest, one arm, hip and thigh. Who had done this to him? Why had they done it?

Her energy faded but she kept going. She wouldn't stop until he was healed. He was the leader of the VanDai. He was Paladin.

Inside she smiled even as her energy began to fade. Paladin. He was everything she'd ever wanted and she hadn't known it. She could have gone through her life and never met him and she would have missed the best thing that could ever have happened to her. She had lost her people, her place in the universe, but she had gained another place, another people and, most importantly, she had gained Paladin.

His heart beat a strong, steady rhythm. Air moved easily in and out of his lungs. Blood flowed through vessels healed whole and strong. His chest, arm, hip, and thigh would bear the scars of the damage done to them but the muscles, tendons, and ligaments were strong and whole once more.

Opening her eyes, she looked into the black fire of his and smiled. "You'll live, my love," she whispered and slumped to the floor beside him.

* * * *

Paladin rolled toward Llaryn, reached out and caught her arm, dragging her close. He touched her face and found her skin cold to the touch. He pressed his hand to her chest and felt—nothing.

Weak, his muscles shaking, he sat up. Kai reached for him and he pushed him away, glaring at him. "You let her do this, Kai. What would you do if it was Genae?" He looked at Llaryn, a soft smile lifting her pale lips in her even paler face.

"Did she lie?"

"What?" He frowned at Kai.

"Did she lie? She said without you she was dead anyway. Was that true?"

Paladin's lashes lowered, his attention only for Llaryn. "No. She didn't lie."

"You brought her back from near death before. Do it again."

"After she healed Genae her heart still beat, her skin was still warm. She's cold. Her heart is barely moving. She's the healer, Kai, not me."

"Then learn."

Memories flooded his mind and he held her tighter to his chest. The first time he'd seen her he'd wanted her. Tall, fragile, with purple eyes that seemed to glow. She'd moved away from him and he'd moved closer. He'd wanted her for himself.

Before he could take her she had slipped away from him. No one had been able to tell him how to help her and if they had been able they hadn't been willing. He'd touched her, stroked her, and taken care of her every need because he knew the power of touch in bonding with a woman. He hadn't realized the full power of touch to the Mriln, though. He'd saved her life and bound her to him.

She'd healed him. Could he heal her?

The last time they'd made love, he'd been the one to lose control. Energy had flowed through and from him. He'd felt the same surge, the same acceleration of his molecules as he did when he went invisible and yet it had been different. He'd felt connected to her. He'd known what she was feeling, what she was experiencing. For a moment out of time they had been one.

Could he do that again? Forge a connection? Would doing that help her? She had exhausted herself beyond her ability to sustain her own life. Only by using the energy he could provide her would she live, and if he could stop it, she wasn't going to die.

He crushed her to his chest and forced his molecules to speed. He went from reflective to invisible in the time it took to blink. Nothing happened. Furious, his arms tightened even more, trying to absorb Llaryn into his very being.

Her skin was growing colder. He was losing her and he refused to do that. He pressed his lips to hers. No response. Her lips were cold and lifeless under his.

Heat coursed through him. Her lips were full and soft though cold. He knew their shape and texture. He wanted to feel them alive and warm, responding to him, opening for him.

He rubbed his lips softly against hers. Back and forth, brushing, stroking. He licked her lips, testing them, willing her to respond.

Warmth wafted through him like the first breeze of spring. He stilled, lifted his head and waited. That hadn't come from him, it had come from her. Longing filled him, coming

from her. The need of his lips, of his hands, of his body pressed to hers.

The feeling faded. "No." He denied her withdrawal with a vicious curse. "Come back, Llaryn. You won't leave me. I won't let you."

He pressed his mouth to hers, harder, more insistent. His tongue swept between her lips to taste her. *You won't get away from me so easily. I know how to draw you back. I know what you need and I'm the one who will provide it for you. Come back and face me.* He spoke to her mind to mind.

A quiver made her lips tremble. Her tongue fluttered under his. Her heart stuttered in her chest and began to pound where she was pressed against him.

Yes. She was there. She was alive.

He plundered her mouth with his tongue, sucked her bottom lip into his mouth and nipped the tender flesh. His energy flowed into her, warming her skin. Her body moved, seeking a closer connection with his. He wasn't healing her the way she healed but he was healing her. She wouldn't get away from him. Not now.

She moaned and tried to turn her head. He wouldn't let her turn away from him but he lifted his head to gaze down at her. She was more beautiful than the first time he'd seen her and she was his. "You're staying with me, Llaryn. Don't try to get away."

"I'm so tired, Paladin. Just let me sleep."

You belong to me. He spoke the words in her mind.

"Yes, I do," she acknowledged. "But I'm so tired. I have to sleep."

"Sleep," he murmured. "I won't let you go. Not now, not ever." He flickered into visibility and rose to his feet with her in his arms. He looked at Kai and nodded, the gesture an acknowledgement of a debt owed.

Kai inclined his head in return before turning away and taking charge of cleaning up.

Paladin took Llaryn out to a waiting transport and settled her on the seat, his actions gentle. Before her he'd never been gentle, but he was learning. For her he would do almost anything.

He climbed into the transport beside her and set the controls on the panel in front of him. They moved forward in a smooth, gliding motion. It was time to go back and make a life together. Whatever came they would survive, loving and healing each other. He looked at Llaryn and smiled. He had seduced her but they had bound each other and he wouldn't change it even if he could.

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Epilogue

Red-gold and sun-baked, all Llaryn saw from where she lay in a hammock in the shade of an awning jutting from the roof of Paladin's abode was sand. It filled the courtyard from where she lay to the guard wall that surrounded the entire holding. In the year she'd been on Sai-sen-Sai she hadn't lost her awe of the great expanse of desert even though she'd gotten used to it. What she hadn't gotten used to was the temperature. Even now, less than an hour until the sun set, an oily wave of heat still rose visibly from the ground, giving everything a wavery, almost watery appearance.

Whiz-thunk. Whiz-thunk.

She listened, frowning, to the sounds of tazer stars whipping through the air and impacting a target but didn't turn her head to look. Paladin and Kai could practice all day and not get tired while she and Genae barely had the energy to breathe let alone move. It wasn't fair.

A half-cry, half-whimper sounded from the hammock beside her.

She did turn her head for that and smiled. "Is he getting hungry?" She pressed her hands to her own swollen belly full of Paladin's offspring. A foot thumped against her hand followed by two jabs from what she was pretty sure was an elbow.

Bright blue eyes met hers and Genae nodded. "I'll have to have Kai take us inside."

Llaryn's lips twitched but she managed to keep a straight face. In the past year Genae had become her first true friend. They had decided between them that if Paladin and Kai insisted on them being outside when they practiced everything from throwing tazer stars to hand-to-hand combat, then they would also be responsible for carrying them out of and back into Paladin's abode.

Neither male had complained.

Llaryn was pretty sure that both Paladin and Kai liked the arrangement, dominant males that they were.

So much had changed in the past year that she still had trouble believing it at times. The President's body had been found and disposed of. Olara had disappeared and she hadn't asked what had happened to the other woman. The half VanDai female had almost cost Paladin his life and that was something Llaryn would never have been able to forgive her for.

The attempts to abduct her and the hunting of the Mriln had stopped when it became known that her unique abilities were directly connected to her mating with Paladin. With that knowledge had come another benefit. She had gone from being banned by the Mriln to not only being accepted but almost held in awe. She'd been told recently, by one of the elders, that young Mriln girls actually dreamed about being her and having Paladin, or at least a VanDai male, as their mate.

A smile lifted her lips as she watched Genae cradle the babe in her arms. From outcast to celebrity in a year. She could never have imagined that.

Kai moved into her field of vision and easily scooped Genae and the baby up in his arms. "He sounds like he needs attention." He nuzzled Genae's neck. "He's not the only one."

Llaryn watched him stride away, his family in his arms. A VanDai male's devotion to his mate and family made her feel warm inside every time she saw it.

"You should be out of the heat, too."

She looked up at Paladin, her love shining from her lavender eyes. "I never thought I should be out in the heat to begin with." She reached up and caressed his face as he lifted her into his arms.

Paladin shrugged as he walked toward the abode. "Eln said it wouldn't hurt you and I wanted you where I could see you."

Her brows rose. "And what you want, you get."

He stopped just inside the door, lowered his head and took her mouth in a short, fierce kiss. When he lifted his head his expression was both arrogant and satisfied. "Of course."

Laughing, she tucked her head into the curve of his neck. She wouldn't trade Paladin for all the planets in the universe but those Mriln girls who wanted to be her had no idea what they were wishing for. Maybe, with luck, some of them would find out.

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Angelina Evans

Writing is a joy and a passion for Angelina Evans. At times it isn't as easy as she would like it to be but it is always rewarding. She has a very active imagination and loves exploring the worlds and realities that appear in her daydreams and getting to know the people that inhabit these far-away places. Angelina hopes the stories she tells are enjoyable reads for you. She love to hear from her readers and you can contact her at angelinaevans1@yahoo.com and visit her website at www.geocities.com/angelinaevans1.
