



REVEALED

BRIDES OF THE KINDRED 5

EVANGELINE
ANDERSON

Brides of the Kindred

Book 5: Revealed

Evangeline Anderson

KINDLE EDITION

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Author's Note #2—This is the fifth book in the Brides of the Kindred series. I recommend that you read Claimed, Hunted, Sought, and Found before starting Revealed.

Hugs and Happy Reading to you all!

Evangeline Anderson

Chapter One

Detective Adam Rast stared down at the limp form of the girl in his arms in horror. “Nadiyah?” he

said, patting her cheeks urgently. “Nadiah, come on—wake up. *Please.*”

But she just lay there, barely breathing, her lovely deep blue eyes rolled up to show the whites. She looked like a life-sized doll, her head rolling limply from side to side on his arm.

Rast couldn't figure out what was going on. Nadiah had come down to the Sarasota HKR building at his request to see if she could “feel” anything about the AllFather's last victim, Elise Darden. In the past, she'd been able to tell the whereabouts of a missing person just by touching her clothes, and Rast had hoped she would be able to do it again.

But he'd be lying if he said the still-open case was the only reason he'd asked her to come down from the Kindred Mother Ship to Earth. He'd heard from Commander Sylvan that Nadiah would be leaving soon, going back to her home planet of Tranq Prime, and he just couldn't let her go without seeing her one more time.

It was a stupid impulse and he knew it. They'd started off with a bang during the mistaken luck kiss at Commander Sylvan's wedding, but after that things went downhill fast, thanks to his own stubbornness and stupid pride. To be honest, Nadiah didn't like him at all—a fact she'd gone to great pains to make very clear during some of their earlier meetings.

Rast didn't blame her—he'd been a real jerk. First he'd refused to believe in her gift of “The Sight”, as she called it, and then he'd called her crazy to her face. By the time Nadiah had proved to him beyond the shadow of a doubt that she really was experiencing a genuine psychic phenomenon, it was too late. As his mother liked to say, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.”

But even though he had blown it with the beautiful alien girl with exotically tilted dark blue eyes and long golden hair, Rast couldn't stop thinking about her. Couldn't stop wanting to see her again—just one last time. So he'd called on the viewscreen to ask for her help and to his surprise and gratification, she had graciously agreed.

“Should have known something was wrong,” Rast muttered, patting her cheeks again. “I could tell she didn't feel well.”

It was true—Nadiah had been unnaturally pale as she stepped through the sliding glass doors of the Human/Kindred Relations building. Her skin, always a delicate, translucent porcelain, had been paper white. Her eyes, a deep shade of mysterious blue Rast couldn't name because they didn't seem to match any Earthly color he'd ever seen—had been large and haunted. He'd also noticed dark circles beneath them that hadn't been there during their last meeting.

He'd thought about saying something then—considered asking if she was all right. But he'd assumed she was just having more nightmares. Visions of the AllFather's victims had plagued her in the past, no doubt turning her gift into a curse. Rast had hated like hell to put her through more of the same, but he genuinely needed her help.

Elise Darden hadn't had any family step forward to question her disappearance—in fact, all they'd been able to turn up were a few worried coworkers in the Tampa State Attorney's office. But even though she didn't seem to have any nearest and dearest, Rast still cared. Cared a hell of a lot that an

innocent young woman had been taken and possibly tortured and killed. Something similar had happened to his beloved older sister, Jessie, when he was just a child, and as an adult he'd made it his life's work to find and rescue such victims if he could. Or to see their remains safely home if he couldn't.

Nadiah had greeted him in a low, colorless voice and they sat together on one of the HKR building's numerous gray couches. Rast had noticed that her hands were shaking when she reached for the bag of evidence he held out to her. He hadn't been able to help himself then.

"Hey," he said. "Are you okay? You don't mind me saying so, you don't look so good."

Nadiah had brushed his question off. "I'm fine. Just give me the clothes."

Against his better judgment, Rast had done as she asked. Nadiah had hesitated, then took a deep breath and plunged her hand into the plastic evidence bag as though it contained hot coals instead of discarded clothing.

"Well?" Rast had asked, looking at her anxiously. "What do you see?"

Nadiah had opened her mouth to reply and then everything had happened at once.

One minute she'd been touching the clothes he'd brought from the crime scene—the ones Elise Darden had been wearing on the day of her abduction—and the next minute she had given a cry and clutched at her chest, just below her heart. Then her eyes rolled up and she collapsed like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

It was a good thing he was there to catch her, Rast thought grimly as he shifted his arm to cradle her neck more securely. She would have slid right off the nondescript grey couch they were sitting on and banged her head on the floor if he hadn't grabbed her. But now what was he going to do?

Several of the Kindred warriors in the HKR building had come to his harsh shout and one of them had called Commander Sylvan on the viewscreen. Rast had wanted to call nine-one-one but apparently Sylvan was a doctor—his instructions were to sit tight until he appeared. *But how long is he going to take?* Rast wondered, looking anxiously down at Nadiah's lovely but unconscious face. She didn't seem to be having any kind of seizure or attack but her pulse was weak and thready and her respiration was light and quick—not to mention faint enough to worry the hell out of him.

Rast knew he should probably lay her down on the couch but somehow he couldn't bear to stop holding her. He needed her in his arms—needed to keep her safe any way he could. It was stupid but he had a fear that if he stopped touching her she would disappear, that her lovely porcelain skin would melt away to nothing like a princess in a fairy tale and he would never see her again. So he held her carefully but firmly to him and continued to pat her cheeks and murmur her name.

"Nadiah? Nadiah, please..."

"I'm here. What happened?"

Rast looked up in relief to see Sylvan standing there. The tall, blond Kindred had a small silver satchel slung over one broad shoulder—obviously the alien equivalent of an Earth doctor’s little black bag. He pulled a tiny credit card sized scanner from it and began waving it over Nadiah’s face without waiting for an answer.

“She fainted,” Rast said, still holding Nadiah’s still form close to his chest. “The minute she touched the evidence I asked her to look at.” He shook his head. “It’s my fault—I could tell she wasn’t feeling well. I never should have asked her to put herself through that.”

Sylvan finished the scan and put the tiny instrument back into his satchel. “It’s not your fault, Rast,” he said grimly. “This has nothing to do with your search for the missing girl.”

“What *does* it have to do with, then?” Rast demanded. “Is she sick? Diabetic or something? Is she...” There was a sudden lump in his throat but he forced himself to go on. “She doesn’t have anything...anything terminal, does she?”

Sylvan shook his head. “Not in the way that you mean, no. Though I do fear the long term effects of what is troubling her may eventually kill her.” He sighed. “To form a blood bond in one so young, before the heart’s true desires can manifest is reckless and cruel. But then, no one ever accused my people of being too compassionate.”

“What are you talking about?” Rast felt himself go cold. “She said something about that to me before—something about a bond—but she would never go into detail. What does it mean?”

“Never mind.” Sylvan shook his head again. “Just give her to me. I’ll take her up to the Mother Ship and tend to her.” He held out his arms for the limp form.

Rast started to hand Nadiah over...and stopped. “No.” He heard the stubbornness in his own voice but he didn’t care. “No, I...I can’t.”

Sylvan raised one dark blond eyebrow at him. “What do you mean you *can’t*? Nadiah is my kinswoman—I am charged with her safety, not you. Give her to me so that I can take her for treatment.”

“I’ll go with you.” Rast held her closer, cradling her small head with its luscious spill of long golden hair close to his chest. “But I won’t give her up.”

“Rast—”

“No!” Rast felt something like a growl rise in his throat and swallowed it back down again with difficulty. What was wrong with him? Everything Commander Sylvan said made sense. He was a doctor and related to Nadiah. By all rights *he* should be the one to care for her.

But Rast found himself completely and utterly unable to give her up. She was helpless in her unconscious state—totally vulnerable. And though he knew that Sylvan would never hurt her, he somehow couldn’t bear to see her in another man’s arms, even her married cousin’s. Something inside him urged him to hold her—to guard and protect her and never let her go. It was an instinct too strong

too fight.

“No,” he said again, attempting to keep his voice low and even. “I can’t let her go. We can go wherever you want but I’m going to carry her.”

The big Kindred stared at Rast in evident surprise. He looked like he was going to say something but instead he simply nodded. “Very well. Come with me.”

“Of course.” Rast rose easily, holding Nadiah’s unconscious form in his arms like a baby. “Let’s go.”

* * * * *

The trip up to the Kindred Mother Ship was a nearly silent one. The human detective seemed completely preoccupied with his precious burden and Sylvan was too busy piloting to speak.

Looking up from the controls, he cast a sidelong glance in Rast’s direction. The male was cradling Nadiah in his lap, a look of concern on his usually stoic features. Sylvan wondered if Rast had any idea that the way he was acting was a classic Kindred mating behavior. The possessiveness, the unwillingness to trust her safety to another male, even one he knew to be trustworthy... Sylvan could almost swear he smelled a mating scent drifting from Rast’s direction—something that only Kindred males exuded when they were trying to bond a female to them.

That, of course, was nonsense. Despite his truegreen eyes—(a green so dark it was almost black with a paler ring of green around the iris,) and his size (the detective was every bit as big and muscular as any Kindred warrior)—Rast was human. He’d been born and bred on the tiny blue and white planet called Earth and that was that, Sylvan was sure.

To be honest, he didn’t like the human detective very much. Oh, he admired the dedication to duty that drove Rast to search for lost and hurting females, all right. But the male had started off on the wrong foot with him, as Sophia was wont to say. He’d refused to believe in Nadiah’s gift of the Sight and had even accused her of being connected to some of the disappearances of the AllFather’s intended victims. Lately he seemed less contentious but Sylvan still didn’t like anyone who made slurs against his loved ones.

Of course, to look at Rast, anyone would think Nadiah was *his* loved one—his beloved. He held her as gently and anxiously as a new father holds a precious baby and the look of fear in his eyes when he’s asked if she had a terminal disease had touched Sylvan against his will.

What’s going on between the two of them? he wondered uneasily. *Is Nadiah doing something she shouldn’t?* Sophia accused him of being a “cave man” but the fact was, Sylvan had been charged with maintaining and safeguarding his younger kinswoman’s virtue and he took that charge very seriously. Virginity, while not essential to the Kindred, was highly prized on Tranq Prime. If Nadiah lost hers she would be nothing—less than nothing in the eyes of their people. Not to mention that her parents—his aunt and uncle—would disown her without it. She would be an outcast—the worst kind of pariah.

Sylvan didn't *think* that she'd been indiscreet with the human detective—Nadiyah's eyes remained the same dark blue they had always been—but he couldn't help wondering what had brought about the change in Rast. Why else was he acting like a male about to enter the Claiming Period if he and Nadiyah hadn't formed at least some kind of physical relationship?

He'd better not have touched her, Sylvan thought grimly, frowning at the other male. Rast, however, was completely oblivious to his scrutiny. He was still whispering Nadiyah's name and stroking her pale cheek.

Sylvan shook his head and made a mental note to warn the human detective off once Nadiyah was awake. Being human and not Kindred, he would only complicate the already complicated matter of the blood bond she had back on Tranq Prime. Only a Kindred male was strong enough to challenge such a bond and win—Rast would only get in the way.

But despite his doubts and worries, Sylvan couldn't help hearing the soft, coaxing way Rast spoke his kinswoman's name. "Nadiyah," he murmured, brushing a strand of gold from her forehead and tucking it behind her ear. "Nadiyah, come back to me. Please."

Chapter Two

Nadiah was dreaming—either that or she was having another vision. The Sight, that peculiar gift given by the Goddess to a chosen few of her daughters, had become such an ingrained part of her life that it was becoming difficult to tell the difference between precognition and a simple dream.

“Sometimes dreams and visions are one and the same,” whispered a soft, soothing voice in her ear. *“Watch and learn, daughter. Watch and learn and above all, remember.”*

Obediently, Nadiah turned her head in the direction the voice seemed to indicate. To her surprise, she saw this was a scenario she’d seen before—right before Sylvan and Sophia’s bonding ceremony, in fact. Though at the time she had assumed the male in her dream was Merrick, Sylvan’s friend, she now knew it was none other than the human detective.

Just as before, she saw Detective Rast standing before a throne in the Goddess’s temple. Somehow though she had never been there, she knew this was the original throne—built millennia ago on the original Kindred home world. The human was standing tall, his head thrown back, truegreen eyes blazing as though in response to some challenge. As in her previous vision, he was wearing the ceremonial robes of the First Kindred. But this time the robes were split in back, the soft white material ripped and hanging in ragged shreds to show the broad, tan expanse of his muscular back.

Nadiah had a spasm of horror. *Why am I seeing this? Is he about to be punished for some reason? Whipped or branded? Why—?* Before the question could finish forming in her mind, she saw the tan skin along his shoulder blades ripple, almost as though something inside was trying to force its way out. Rast threw back his head, his face a mask of agony and then—

“Nadiah? Oh, thank God, she’s waking up.”

Nadiah, blinked and caught a fuzzy image of Olivia’s pretty face hanging over her like an anxious moon. “Wha?” she whispered, her mouth too dry to speak properly. “Wha...what’s wrong?”

“You fainted.” It was Sylvan, also leaning over her and studying her with his cool, blue clinician’s eyes. But far back in their icy depths there was worry as great as Olivia’s, Nadiah could tell.

“I did?” She struggled to sit up—someone had brought her to the med station and put her in a healing cot for some reason—but many hands pushed her back down.

“Lie still. You scared me to death.” It was Detective Rast, frowning at her sternly. “You were out like a light and I didn’t know what the hell happened.” He gave Sylvan an unfriendly look. “I still don’t.”

“You don’t need to, Rast.” The normally cool and collected Sylvan looked annoyed. “It doesn’t

concern you.”

“The hell it doesn’t.” Rast glared at the other male. “It happened right in front of me. I’d say I have a right to know exactly what’s going on.”

“And I’d say you’re wrong about that.” Sylvan frowned. “Continuing in that vein, now that Nadiah is awake, I need to have a word with her. *Privately*. So if you could just step outside...?” He raised an eyebrow at Rast, who looked prepared to be stubborn. But before the human detective could open his mouth, Olivia took his arm.

“Come on, Detective. Let’s tell everyone that Nadiah’s going to be all right. They’re all worried t death out there and I need someone to help spread the good news.”

Rast frowned at her, obviously knowing he was being manipulated but not quite sure how to hand it. Finally he put a hand on Nadiah’s knee and looked into her eyes directly. “*Are you all right?*” he asked, his deep voice surprisingly gentle. “Just tell me, sweetheart. I need to hear you say it before I go.”

For some reason, Nadiah’s heart started thudding in her chest and she found it hard to meet those truegreen eyes of his. “I...I’m fine,” she finally managed to say. “Just fine.”

“That’s bullshit, but at least you’re conscious.” He frowned. “I get that I’m not wanted and your cousin here wants me to keep my nose out of your business, but if there’s anything I can do—”

“Thank you, but no.” Nadiah shook her head. “There’s nothing you can do.” *Unless you can break a long standing blood bond, that is...* But she didn’t say it out loud. Rast was human, not Kindred. Of course he couldn’t break the bond that bound her inextricably to her home world, so many thousands of light years away.

“All right, then.” He patted her knee once and then withdrew. “I’ll be outside if you need me. For anything.” With a last frown at Sylvan, he followed Olivia out of the room, leaving Nadiah alone with him.

“Well?” Sylvan rounded on her the minute the door to the small exam room *snicked* closed. “It’s the blood bond, isn’t it? It’s pulling you back toward Tranq Prime.”

Nadiah sighed in defeat—there was no use denying it. “Yes,” she whispered, nodding wearily. “I’ve been feeling it for awhile but lately it’s getting worse. It’s almost like he’s *yanking* on it—trying to pull me back to him across space.”

Sylvan frowned. “That’s possible, I guess. Depending on the strength of the bond.”

Nadiah laughed bitterly. “It’s strong, all right. Mamam and Patro made sure of that when they linked me to Yo-dah.” She sighed. “I guess I should stop calling him by that childhood nickname—it always makes him so mad. I’d better use his formal first name since it seems I have no choice but to join with him. Y’dex.” The name tasted bitter on her tongue. “Y’dex, the one my parents chose for me. And they bound me to him as tightly as they could—that way they could be sure I wouldn’t run off.”

A reluctant grin twitched the corners of Sylvan's mouth. "I guess you proved them wrong on that score."

"Only for a little while." Nadiah's chest felt tight and there was a lump in her throat she couldn't swallow. "But now...now I'll have to go back. The pain is getting worse—it's like someone is twisting a knife right under my heart."

"I could tell you were hurting but I had no idea it was getting so bad." Sylvan sat on the edge of her cot, concern clear on his chiseled features. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because..." Nadiah's eyes burned and she blinked them rapidly, hoping to hold back the tears. "Because I knew you'd send me back. And I just wanted a little more time. I kept hoping I'd start dream sharing with someone—*anyone*. Because anyone would be better than Yo-dah—I mean, Y'dex. But..." The tears came now, she couldn't stop them. "But the only person I ever seem to dream about is Detective Rast."

Sylvan frowned and shook his head. "You can't dream share with a human, Nadiah. And even if you could, it wouldn't do you any good."

"I know." She sniffed and blotted her eyes on the sleeve of her *tharp*. It nuzzled her cheek comfortingly. "I know but it's like he's gotten in my head somehow and he doesn't...doesn't leave room for anyone else."

He sighed. "I'd tell you to *make* room but I'm afraid it wouldn't do any good. I can't let you stay here on the Mother Ship any longer—not when you're in so much pain."

"I know." Despair welled up inside her, threatening to drown her like a salty, bitter wave. "I know Sylvan but it's so *hard* to go back. So—*ahh!*" Her words ended in a gasp as a bright bolt of pain stabbed her. It slid between her ribs like a red hot blade, just below the heart, and ripped downwards. Nadiah doubled over in agony, clutching futilely at her chest and belly. The searing pain took her breath away and for a moment the room around her went gray and pinpoints of light danced in front of her vision.

"Nadiah?" Sylvan pulled her upright, his deep voice filled with fear. "Are you all right?"

She tried to laugh but the sound came out sounding rusty and weak. "Never better, son of my mother's sister. I'm ready for a stroll around the sacred grove, can't you tell?"

Sylvan frowned. "This is no time to joke. We need to get you back to Tranq Prime and *soon*."

"I know." The pain had dissipated but Nadiah's forehead was damp with sweat and her mouth was dry. "I know it, Sylvan. I just hate to let him win—hate the fact that he has so much power over me."

"I hate it too," Sylvan said grimly. "If it were up to me, the whole practice of blood bonding would be abolished. It's archaic and cruel. And—"

"Sylvan?" Sophia's voice from the other side of the door interrupted his thought.

“What is it, *Talana*?” he asked. “You can come in.”

Sophia slipped into the med room and closed the door behind her. “It’s a call on the viewscreen,” she said, and Nadiah saw that her green eyes were troubled.

Sylvan frowned. “A call from who? Whoever it is, tell them I will get back to them.”

Sophia bit her lip. “I don’t think this can wait. It’s a call for Nadiah from her parents and...” She looked at Nadiah directly. “And I think your fiancé.”

Nadiah felt her heart drop like a lead weight. “They’re all calling me at once?”

Sophia nodded. “I’m afraid so. But, Nadiah, you’re not well—you don’t have to take the call.”

“Yes, I do.” Nadiah crossed her arms over her chest and shivered. This was the call she’d been avoiding—the moment she’d been dreading from the first second she stepped foot on the Mother Ship for Sophia and Sylvan’s wedding. Now it could no longer be put off. “It’s not just a call, Sophie,” she said quietly. “It’s a summons. And I must go.”

* * * * *

Rast kept his head low and his eyes trained on the crack between the two medical drapes which shielded the cot where he was hiding. After leaving the room in the first place, he’d convinced Olivia that he needed to use the john and then slipped back to listen at Nadiah’s door the minute she started talking to Lauren and Kat.

Eavesdropping wasn’t exactly the most honorable way to get information but his time as a private detective had taught him that sometimes you got the intel anyway you could. Nadiah had a secret—a secret that was hurting her—and he intended to find out what the hell it was. When he was sure that Nadiah and Commander Sylvan and his wife were far down the corridor, he risked following.

As he slipped down the long curving metal hallway, he thought about what Sylvan and Nadiah had said. He hadn’t gotten the specific details but it was clear she was being hurt by someone—being forced to go back to her home planet where she obviously didn’t want to go by this blood bond, whatever it was.

The question is, who’s hurting her? And how can I get to the son of a bitch to hurt him back? He didn’t question the protective instinct that rose in him or the animal rage at the idea of someone causing Nadiah pain. He only knew that it needed to stop, *now*. And if no one else intended to do anything about it, he sure as hell would.

There was something else she’d said too—soft words that echoed in his heart as he jogged quietly along behind his targets. “...*the only person I ever seem to dream about is Detective Rast,*” Nadiah had told her cousin. But there had been despair in her voice when she said it, as though that was a bad thing. And then Sylvan had said something about how she couldn’t dream share with a human—whatever that was.

Rast couldn't figure out what dreaming had to do with anything. Come to that, he'd had a few interesting dreams about Nadiah as well. Most of them were ordinary enough—he saw her talking to her friends or walking down the halls of the Mother Ship. But there had been one where she was in the shower with hot, soapy water running down her small but firm breasts...

Stop it, he told himself sternly. *No time for that now.*

And indeed, there wasn't. Just ahead, he saw Nadiah, Sylvan and Sophia turn into the viewing room—a place he recognized from seeing it from the viewscreen of the Sarasota HKR building down on Earth. His first impulse was to go in with them and confront whoever was calling her. He'd threaten to pound them flatter than a pancake if they didn't leave her alone. But years of detective work and caution made him pause.

Get the facts first, he thought grimly, settling in the recessed doorway of the viewing room, just out of sight. *Know your enemy.*

Since the three people appearing on the large, rectangular viewscreen were obviously aliens from Nadiah's home world of Tranq Prime, he thanked fate he'd gotten a shot of the translation bacteria only offered on the Kindred Mother Ship. Originally he'd gotten it to help him understand different languages on Earth, now it appeared the bacteria would be much more helpful away from his home planet.

Two of the people were older and dressed in furs—obviously Nadiah's parents. Rast could see the family resemblance in their tall, slender bodies and blonde hair, not to mention the mother's aristocratic features. But there the resemblance ended. The coldness in their blue eyes was nothing like the lively warmth that animated Nadiah's—at least when she wasn't at death's door. And the look of stern disapproval on their haughty faces made it clear that she was in some kind of trouble.

But as compelling as the parents were, Rast found his gaze drawn to the young man who stood between them the most. He was tall and thin but there was a wiry strength to his muscles that couldn't be discounted—obviously he was stronger than he looked. His hair was a blond so fair it was almost white and his eyebrows and eyelashes were even lighter. They seemed to melt into his pale skin giving him the odd, lashless look of a white rabbit.

Like Nadiah's father, he was wearing the traditional male attire of Tranq Prime—a furry skirt looking thing Rast had learned was called a *tharp* and fur boots made from the hide of a *vranna*. The boots and *tharp* were both dark purple and they should have looked ridiculous on his thin, pale form. But the young man wore them with a patrician air of belonging, an unconscious arrogance that somehow put him above common concerns.

Know your enemy, Rast thought again, studying the young man closely. Could this be Nadiah's intended—the one called Yo-dah or Y'dex that she'd spoken briefly about back in Sarasota? Rast had thought the guy's name was unintentionally hilarious but he had no urge to laugh now.

There was a greedy look in Y'dex's pale, bulging blue eyes as he looked at Nadiah's slender form. The look of a rightful owner about to claim his property. And the property, apparently, was Nadiah.

Chapter Three

“Mamam... Patro,” Nadiah greeted her parents. “And Yo-dah—I mean, Y’dex,” she added reluctantly, nodding at the tall, lanky figure of her fiancé. “How are you?”

Y’dex sneered at her, his thin face twisting in an ugly way. “I think the question is how are *you*, my dear one? Are you feeling quite well, lately?”

Nadiah lifted her chin. “Yes, perfectly well, thank you.”

He glared at her. “You’re lying.”

“Of course not.” Nadiah shook her head, determined not to let him know how she really felt. “I’m fine. So if you simply called to ask about my well being, you can be assured of my health and we can end this conversation now.”

Y’dex’s face twisted into an angry sneer. “You know that isn’t why we called.”

“Nadiah, it’s time you came home,” her mother cut in. “We let you go to attend Sylvan’s bonding ceremony but that was ages ago. Now that it’s over, you need to get back to Tranq Prime.”

“You didn’t let me go—I *escaped*.” Nadiah crossed her arms over her chest. “What makes you think I’m in a hurry to come home again?”

Her father frowned. “You *will* come home, young lady. We have your bonding ceremony all planned.”

“For the *second* time,” her mother emphasized, frowning. “And we expect you to be here this time.”

Nadiah’s heart fisted in her chest, but she tried to keep her voice even and light. “Let’s be reasonable about this, Maman, Patro. Times have changed. I don’t want to be bonded to Yo—Y’dex anymore and I’m sure he doesn’t really want to be bonded to me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Y’dex smiled at her nastily. “I very much want our bonding to take place, my lovely Nadiah. I am anxiously awaiting it—almost as anxiously as the bonding night that will follow.”

“Never.” Nadiah couldn’t keep the revulsion out of her voice. “I will *never* give myself to you.”

“Oh, you won’t have to give yourself, my lovely.” Y’dex’s grin turned suddenly malicious and cruel. “I’ll be more than happy to *take* you.”

“Maman, Patro, do you hear this?” Nadiah appealed to her parents. “Do you hear what he’s saying? He’s planning to *rape* me. Don’t you care what’s going to happen to me once your precious bonding ceremony is completed?”

Her father looked uncomfortable but her mother merely frowned. “Our law recognizes no such crime after bonding. As your mate, Y’dex may do what he wishes and you must not complain.”

Sophia, who had been standing beside Sylvan and squeezing his hand convulsively, could apparently no longer be silent. “So you’re saying that once they’re married, he can do whatever he wants to her and nobody cares? What’s *wrong* with you people?”

Nadiah’s mother sniffed. “If it isn’t Sophia Waterhouse from that barbaric little backwater of a planet, Earth. What right have *you* to judge us, *surface dweller*?”

Sophia’s cheeks turned pink with anger. “I have every right! You’re forcing Nadiah into a loveless marriage where she’s going to be abused. *Now* who’s barbaric?”

“*Talana...*” Sylvan stroked her hair soothingly. “Gently, my darling,” he murmured. “Let me try. Stepping forward, he nodded at Nadiah’s parents. “Greetings, Zeelah, Grennly.”

Nadiah’s Maman and Patro nodded back genially enough and for a moment Nadiah felt a stab of hope. Maybe they would listen to Sylvan—he was older, an adult in their eyes instead of a naughty, wayward child who had run away from home—which was how they viewed her.

“Nadiah is happy here on the Mother Ship,” Sylvan began, obviously trying to pick his words carefully. “And she’s safe, under my protection. I do not think she wishes to return to Tranq Prime to be bonded. And since the blood bond was made when she was still a child, before she knew her own mind and heart, I think you should cancel the commitment you made on her behalf and let her go.”

“Let her go?” Nadiah’s mother looked horrified. “And dissolve the connection we’ve planned with the Licklow family for years? Lose the status of joining with such a prestigious clan and adding our bloodline to theirs? Never!”

“Besides, *Kindred*,” Y’dex put in. “You know as well as anyone else you can’t simply cancel a blood bond. It must be challenged and broken.” He raised one nearly-white eyebrow at Nadiah. “*Have* you found a Kindred champion to challenge me, my lovely one?”

Nadiah hung her head. Goddess, how she wished she could answer that question in the affirmative. But there was no one to help—no one to undertake the burden she’d had thrust upon her at such an early age. She was on her own.

Y’dex laughed hatefully. “I’ll take your silence for a ‘no.’ Not that I’m surprised—why would anyone but me bother with the likes of you? You’re lucky, you know. I could have been blood bonded to any female in our grotto but my parents chose *you*.”

“Oh yes, I’m so lucky. My whole life is about to be taken from me—I’ll live in bondage to a male. I hate just because our parents want to keep our bloodlines pure.” Hot tears of rage and despair were

rising in her eyes but Nadiah blinked them back fiercely, not wanting to let him see her cry. “Can’t you...can’t you just let me go?” she asked, trying to make her voice softer. “I don’t want you, Y’dex. And deep down, I don’t think you really want me. Please, go find someone else and let me live my life.”

“And live with an unfulfilled blood bond hanging over me for the rest of my days?” He glared at her. “I think not. Besides, Nadiah, I *do* want you. I intend to show you just how much in the very near future.”

The greedy, leering way he was looking at her made Nadiah’s stomach lurch, and her skin turned cold with fear. “I’ll fight you,” she whispered, clenching her hands into fists at her sides. “Every step of the way, I’ll fight. I swear to the Goddess if you lay so much as a finger or anything else on me I’ll cut it off—I don’t care if we’re bonded or not.”

Her fiancée’s expression went from greedy to enraged—his nearly white skin flushing an angry red. “You think you can fight me? You think you can fight *this*?”

He made a motion with his right hand. Curling it into a fist, he dragged it back toward himself, almost as though he was yanking on a rope. At once Nadiah felt the burning blade slip between her ribs again. It was worse this time, like someone was stirring her guts with a red hot spoon.

She wanted to stand straight and tall, to stare into those hateful, bulging blue eyes defiantly, but she couldn’t—the pain was too great. With a low cry, she doubled over, fully expecting to hit her head on the floor and not caring if she did.

Instead, a pair of strong arms caught her and she was picked up and held against a muscular chest.

Sylvan? she thought hazily but the male holding her smelled wrong—Sylvan’s scent was sharp and this male had a deep, dark musk that was somehow familiar though she had a feeling she had never smelled it quite so strongly before. Also, she could see Sylvan and Sophia standing there arguing angrily with her parents and fiancée on the viewscreen. They seemed to be telling Y’dex to stop his assault on her, to stop yanking on the blood bond. But her fiancée only laughed and twisted his fist some more, causing a fresh wave of agony to roll over her. Her back arched helplessly and she gasped, tears pouring from her eyes.

“Stop it!” The full throated roar was coming from the male who was holding her. It echoed through her skull and rattled her bones as her ear was pressed to his deep chest. “You fucking stop it *right now* you little bastard!”

Nadiah felt herself being carried closer to the viewscreen, close enough to see the shocked looks on her parents’ faces and the angry sneer on Y’dex’s.

“And who is this?” her fiancée demanded, staring at her rescuer. “I thought Nadiah couldn’t find Kindred to be her champion.”

“She found me.” The pain was less now, allowing Nadiah to think. Could it be...was it Detective Rast holding her and shouting at Y’dex? She looked up at him in wonder and saw that his truegreen

eyes were burning with rage. They seemed almost to glow in his face with a strange, protective light.

“One of the First Kindred. Imagine.” Y’dex raised an eyebrow. “I thought your kind had all but died out.”

“You’re the one who’s going to die out, buddy,” Rast snarled. “I’ll come with Nadiah and meet your challenge but I swear to you here and now, if you *ever* inflict that pain on her again *I will end you*. Do I make myself abso-fucking-lutely clear?”

Y’dex’s already pale face went even whiter but there were still spots of angry red on his thin cheekbones. “How dare you speak to me in that manner? I am her intended.”

“No, you’re not. She never intended to marry you—she never wanted you.” Rast glared at him and Nadiah thought she saw murder in his truegreen eyes. “And I don’t really think you want her either—except the way a mean little boy wants a pet so he can beat it and hurt it. Well, Nadiah’s not going to be your pet. Her life is worth more than that—a hell of a lot more.”

Y’dex’s face grew dark red but his voice was calm. “We’ll see about that, won’t we Kindred? I will meet you in my home grotto in one standard week. There I will best you in the three sacred challenges. Do you accept?”

“Rast,” Sylvan murmured urgently, plucking at the human detective’s elbow but Rast shook him off.

“I’ll be there,” he promised grimly. “And in the mean time, keep your psychic paws off Nadiah. No more pain—got it?”

Y’dex grinned nastily. “As to that, she is still my...what did you call her? Oh yes, my little *pet* until you attempt to break out bond. And as such, I can do with her what I want.” He made another twisting, yanking motion with his fist and Nadiah cried out as the burning knife stabbed her again.

“You son of a bitch.” Rast’s voice was thick with rage. “I’ll make you pay for that. I swear to God I will.”

“Come and try. I look forward to it.” And with that, the connection was broken and Nadiah’s fiancée and parents mercifully disappeared from the viewscreen. She gasped in relief—and then fainted.

* * * * *

“Well this is a hell of a mess. Do you realize what you’ve done?” Commander Sylvan was clearly upset but Rast didn’t care.

“Yeah, I know what I did. I stepped up and challenged the bastard who was hurting her which is more than *you* were doing.” Rast cradled Nadiah protectively close to his chest. “What the hell, Sylvan—she’s your baby cousin. Could you do more than just ask nicely?”

“Don’t you think I *wanted* to help her?” Sylvan’s normally impassive face was nearly anguished. “Of course I did, but I couldn’t. Only an unmated, unrelated male can break the blood bond. A *Kindred* male—which you are *not*.”

“You think I give a damn about that?” Rast demanded. “Besides, I don’t have to be Kindred to take on that little bastard. I’ll snap him over my knee like a twig.”

“Just because you have Kindred size and strength doesn’t mean you have Kindred blood.” Sylvan ran a hand through his spiky blond hair impatiently. “There is more than just the challenge of strength to get through, Rast. You’ll also have to endure the challenge of wills and the challenge of blood. Which you will almost certainly lose.”

Rast frowned. “What makes you so sure? You know, you guys talk a good fight and you’re eager enough to get married to Earth women but you clearly have some kind of superiority complex going on.”

“The weakness isn’t in your heart—you clearly have the courage of a *vranna*.” Sylvan sighed. “But your blood—Kindred blood has special compounds in it that give extra strength of will and mind as well as physical strength. They’re also what enable a Kindred to break the blood bond—one of the strongest symbiotic soul bonds in the known universe.”

“Great—so you have superhuman blood and I don’t.” Rast shrugged. “What harm can there be in me at least trying?”

“The harm is that you could *die* trying.” Commander Sylvan looked at him soberly. “And even if you did somehow manage to break the bond, there’s a small but real chance that Nadiah could die as well. She’s been bonded to Y’dex since she was six cycles old. If her soul becomes untethered from his and has no other, stronger soul to anchor to, it’s possible she could lose consciousness and literally drift away.”

Rast felt sick. “You mean even if I succeed I could kill her?”

Sylvan nodded. “Unfortunately, yes. It’s not likely but there is that possibility.”

“I don’t care about that.”

The soft voice came from the girl in his arms. Rast looked down in surprise to see that Nadiah’s lovely deep blue eyes were open. She struggled slightly against him and he helped her stand, keeping an arm around her shoulders just in case.

“Now, what did you say?” he asked, frowning.

“I said, I don’t care if I die.” Her face was filled with calm desperation. “I’d rather die than live with that horrible male the rest of my life.” She looked up at Rast earnestly. “Are you serious? Will you really act as my champion and challenge the blood bond on my behalf?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes. Absolutely.”

Nadiah sighed, looking troubled. “I know I should ask you why or try to change your mind but I’m desperate.”

“I can see that,” Rast said dryly. “He’s literally got you on the end of a leash.”

A spasm of hatred passed over her delicate features. “As you said, I’m his pet. But I don’t want to be—not any more.”

“Of course you don’t, honey!” Sophia came forward and gave Nadiah a quick hug. “But you shouldn’t say you want to die—that isn’t right.”

“How could I live as Y’dex’s mate?” Nadiah demanded. “Being abused every day and...and raped every night?” She looked ill. “That’s no kind of life.”

Rast felt a surge of protectiveness for the slender alien girl at his side. “That’s not going to happen, sweetheart. I won’t *let* it happen.”

Sylvan sighed and shook his head. “I hope you can prevent it, Detective Rast—I really do. Though I don’t see how you can without Kindred blood in your veins.”

“I’ll find a way.” Rast squeezed Nadiah’s shoulders gently. “Believe me, I will.”

She looked up at him, her blue eyes troubled. “There’s something else you should know before you commit yourself to my cause. While I was unconscious just now, I had a vision.”

In the past Rast would have ridiculed her statement but now he knew she was the genuine article—an actual, honest to God psychic—so he listened with respect. “Tell me about it,” he said quietly. “What did you see?”

Nadiah shook her head. “It wasn’t a seeing exactly—not like when I saw you with your sister. It’s something I know—a premonition.”

“Okay then.” Rast stroked a strand of golden hair out of her eyes and looked at her seriously. “What do you know?”

“That if you do this—if you leave Earth and come with me—you may never return to your home planet again.” Nadiah looked at him with troubled eyes. “I don’t know if it’s because you might die or just that you’ll be busy with other matters. But I thought you should know before you committed yourself to my cause.”

Her statement shook him—there was no hiding that. But Rast had no doubt whatsoever. For some reason he belonged with the slender, blonde alien girl. He couldn’t explain it, even to himself, but the idea of leaving her, or of letting her leave without him and go millions of light years away to get married to a man she didn’t love, made him cold inside. “There’s nothing to think about,” he said firmly. “I’m coming with you.”

Nadiah smiled at him gratefully and Rast though he would walk over hot coals barefooted to see

that warm, lovely expression on her face. It occurred to him that he'd never felt this way about a woman before—what was going on? He didn't know and at the moment, he didn't really care. He just knew he wanted to make Nadiah happy so he could see that look on her face forever.

“Thank you, Rast,” she murmured. “But I think you should go down to the surface one more time and say goodbye to anyone you might miss before we go.”

He nodded reluctantly. “Okay, you're right about that. I should probably see my folks one more time.”

“I'll come with you,” Nadiah said but Sylvan shook his head.

“No, you won't. Not when Y'dex could attack you through the blood bond again at any moment. I don't want you down on the surface of a strange world in your condition.”

Rast shook his head. “It's all right—I can go by myself. Just get me a driver and promise not to leave without me. It shouldn't take long.”

“I'll fly you down myself.” Commander Sylvan stepped forward, frowning. “And you'll fly us both back. Some of the smaller Kindred ships aren't much more complicated than an Earth car to drive but if you've never flown before, you're going to need some lessons before you start out for Tranq Prime.”

Rast grinned. “I've always wanted to fly.”

“Now's your chance.” Sylvan clapped him on the shoulder. “Come on. We can talk as we go, but first I want a small sample of your blood. I'll get the lab working while we're gone and see if there's anything I can give you to increase your chances.”

“Sounds good to me—let's go.” He nodded and Sylvan led the way out of the viewing room. As they left, Rast cast one last look over his shoulder and saw Nadiah watching him. Her deep, otherworldly blue eyes were filled with emotion—nervousness, fear, uncertainty, but most of all hope. *She's counting on me*, Rast thought, and the idea made his heart swell in his chest.

He swore to himself then and there, that he wouldn't let her down. That Nadiah's hopes and the trust she had placed in him would be fulfilled in every way, even if it killed him to do it.

Chapter Four

“I still don’t understand why he’s doing this.” Olivia looked perplexed. “I thought he didn’t like you.”

Nadiah looked down at her hands. “I didn’t think he did, either. I guess maybe he was just so angry at the way Y’dex was treating me that he couldn’t stop himself.”

“He *was* really angry,” Sophie, who was sitting on the other side of Nadiah, put in. “You should have seen him—he looked like an avenging angel when he scooped her up and started shouting at that nasty Yo-dah...er, Y’dex.”

“That’s his formal first name,” Nadiah said tiredly to answer the other girls’ confused looks. “Yo-dah is a childhood nickname. But we’re not children anymore.”

“Tomato-tomahto,” said Olivia. “I’m still wondering about Rast.”

“Me too,” Kat said. “So let me get this straight...Rast got so angry at the way Y’...Y’... Y’whatever-his-name-is was treating you, he decided to risk his life and maybe never see his home world and loved ones again just to get even? Sure, that’s *one* explanation.” She lounged back against the cushions scattered on the floor, looking skeptical.

They were all in Sophia’s suite, spending a few more hours together before Nadiah had to go. But the thought of going back to Tranq Prime, even with a champion to challenge the blood bond, was making her more and more nervous.

“What do you mean, Kat?” she asked, frowning.

“Do I really have to spell it out?” Kat raised one auburn eyebrow at her. “I think Detective Rast has the hots for you, hon.”

“The ‘hots’?” Nadiah shook her head, frowning. “You mean you think his internal temperature rises when I’m around?”

Kat looked like she wanted to laugh. “Among other things.”

“He *was* giving you some pretty significant looks,” Sophia said thoughtfully. “Maybe Kat is right.”

“I don’t think so.” Nadiah shook her head. “I mean, I don’t see how he could, um, feel that way about me. You should see the way I’ve treated him. I shouted at him and slapped him. And *then* I had a vision where I brought up his beloved older sister who died. After uncovering a wound like that, I’m

surprised he'll even talk to me, let alone act as my champion."

"Well you must be doing *something* right." Lauren came bustling up with a tray of homemade muffins. "Otherwise he wouldn't be willing to risk life and limb to save you."

"Here's an idea," Olivia said thoughtfully. "Didn't you say he's dedicated his life to saving women?"

Nadiah nodded. "Ever since his sister was killed."

"My mom said he was tireless when he was investigating my disappearance," Lauren put in. "He really takes a lost or hurting female very seriously."

"Maybe that's it then," Liv said. "Maybe he sees all women—you included—as extensions of his sister. He couldn't save *her* but maybe he feels that if he saves enough other women, he'll get over it. She shrugged. "Or something like that."

"Thanks Ms. Pop Psychology for that interesting analysis," Kat said dryly. "But I still think the simplest solution is the right one—Detective Rast has ants in his pants for Nadiah, here."

Nadiah shook her head. "My translation bacteria must be acting up. Did you just say that Detective Rast has insects in his trousers?"

Kat wiggled her eyebrows. "Among other things," she said again.

Sophie laughed and shook her head. "Kat's just being silly, Nadiah. Don't pay any attention."

"All joking aside, do you really think he'll be able to help me?" Nadiah asked her friends. "I mean without any Kindred blood in his veins?"

"In my experience when a man is determined enough, he can do *anything*." Lauren patted her shoulder and offered her a muffin. "And from what you've said, Detective Rast is plenty determined."

"Amen to that." Kat popped a bite-sized muffin into her mouth. "Lauren, these are to *die* for."

Lauren smiled. "Thanks—they're made with *tanka* berries from Rageron. I kind of think they taste like a cross between a hazelnut and a cranberry. Zairn loves them."

"I just bet he does. You've really *mastered* this recipe." Kat grinned at her. "I mean, do you just chop the nuts up or do you have to grind them into *submission* or something?"

Lauren's creamy light brown cheeks turned dark pink in an obvious blush. "Stop being so bad, Kat!"

"Sorry, doll, I just have to get in a few digs wherever I can." Kat popped another muffin. "You have to understand that before *you* came along, my love life with the whole ménage thing was the kinkiest thing going. Now *you* get to wear the kinky crown for awhile."

Liv raised an eyebrow. “The *kinky crown*? Seriously, Kat, that sounds like a bad romance novel.”

“Or a really cheesy Lifetime movie,” Sophie put in.

Olivia laughed. “Yeah, something about beauty pageants gone bad, with all the contestants forced to be sex slaves to really stern but extremely hot masters. Awful.”

“Yeah, but you know you’d watch it if it came on,” Kat pointed out. She looked back at Lauren. “So does this recipe call for any *whipping* cream?”

“Kat!” Lauren threw a still hot muffin at her and Kat ducked. Olivia caught it instead and took a bite.

“Yum! Delicious but it needs dill pickle icing.”

“Ugh, I wish you’d never started with that,” Sophia made a face and looked at Lauren. “Seriously she wants to eat it on *everything* now.”

Nadiah laughed along with them as the topic of conversation turned to Olivia’s pregnancy and her strange food cravings but inside she was still troubled. Why was the human detective willing to risk his life to save her from a lifetime of bondage? Was she really just another part of the quest that had started for him when his beloved sister, Jessie was murdered? Or could there be another, deeper reason? Did he care for her as Kat seemed to think? And more importantly, did she *want* him to care for her?

I’ve always dreamed of bonding with a Kindred warrior, she thought, chewing one of Lauren’s muffins thoughtfully. *Living aboard the Mother Ship, seeing new things and new people all the time as the ship moved on to new trades*. Would she really be willing to give that up to be bonded to a human? Would she want to live on the little blue and white ball called Earth for the rest of her days?

Once again she tried to picture her ideal life, the one with a handsome Blood Kindred husband and two or three little boys that looked just like him running around. But somehow, she could only see Rast—his stern features looking like they’d been carved from granite, his truegreen eyes narrowed as he roared at Y’dex to leave her alone. Just remembering how it had felt to be held against his chest, his warm, masculine musk invading her senses, made her heart start to pound and her palms damp.

Stop being so stupid, she lectured herself, taking another bite of the muffin, which she hardly tasted. *Olivia is almost certainly right—he’s helping me because he sees me and all females, really, as an extension of his sister*.

For whatever reason he was helping her, Nadiah felt extremely grateful. But she couldn’t help wondering if she was just a symbol to Detective Rast...or if she meant something more to him.

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