

Bandar: License to Pleasure
Beverly Havlir

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Chapter One

Smack!

Lara Conway's cheek stung from the force of the slap. Her ears rang. Tears came to her eyes but she refused to be cowed. "You will die for that," she spat in fury.

The Xerexian, a short, stocky creature with razor sharp teeth, dark skin and wide nose, parted his thick lips in a mocking grin. "Such false courage, *human*," he spat out contemptuously. He slapped her again, just as hard, on the other side of her face.

Oh God. There was the faint taste of blood in her mouth. Bloody hell. She tried, really tried, to curb her tongue, but ever since the damned Xerexians kidnapped her, her life had become a living nightmare.

"Such stupidity," the Ugly Creature, as she'd dubbed the Xerexian who'd abducted her, sneered. Gritting her teeth, Lara bowed her head, hoping if she didn't look at him, she wouldn't be tempted to fight back, even with just words. "You *humans* never know when to shut your mouths."

She bit her lip. *Don't give the bastard any more ammunition to hit you.*

"Nothing to say?" he asked in a hateful, mocking voice. "After three days, you've finally learned to shut up, *arita*?"

Lara flinched at the word. *Whore.*

Ugly Creature laughed. "Why are you so brave, I wonder? Are you expecting a rescue from that bastard, Prince Kendrick?" He snorted. "The fact that you were so poorly guarded shows how little regard he has for you. It was so easy for us to take you."

She kept her face lowered, bitter regret filling her. Why had she refused her father's offer of extra security? With the escalating hostilities between Earth Federation and the Xerexians, tensions were at an all time high. Her father, Joseph Conway, was

the Federation Premier, and as his daughter, Lara was an invaluable bargaining tool. She'd been a fool to think her own meager private security was sufficient to protect her.

"I hate to disillusion you," Ugly Creature continued, "but they won't find you. Not here in Utuja." He laughed, an ugly grating sound. "We will bring the Federation to its knees before we return you."

Was she supposed to sit here and take all his crap? *Hell, no.* "I'd rather die than let you use me as a pawn in this war."

"Oh? And how are you going to do that?" he asked mockingly. "I don't intend to kill you. I will keep you alive, just enough, to use to win this war."

Lara scoffed at that. "You overestimate my importance." God, she hoped it was true. Surely her father would never compromise the safety of millions of people for her? She fully expected her sister Tamara, ex-Special Services agent extraordinaire, soon to be queen of Bandar, and just a general, all-round bad-ass, to come get her. With or without the assistance of her fiancé, Kendrick. *Come on, Tam. Don't let me down now.*

Ugly Creature's lips twisted in an imitation of a smile. "Believe what you like. Your security was pathetic. It was easy enough to get to you while you flitted about the entire galaxy, parading around showing your silly little vid-entertainment."

Now that really pissed her off. Who the hell did he think he was calling her profession silly? So what if she was an actress? She was a successful one, thank you very much, and a damn good one. Her body of work was nothing to be sneezed at. "I guess that's something you warmongering Xerexians will never understand," she snapped in disdain.

"Humans are weak, occupying their time with such trivial matters," he mocked. "Or seeking peace where there is none to be had. It's all a waste of time. Just like it's a waste of time to hope that you'll be rescued."

"Don't be so sure," she countered with far more confidence than she really felt. "My people will come to get me. I'm sure of it."

"Puppies, all of them! We watched them follow you around, waiting on you, fetching you whatever you wanted," he sneered. "Things have changed, *arita*. Here you are nothing but a lowly prisoner."

That remark stung more than the physical blows she'd dealt with. Lara lifted her chin, refusing to be cowed. "When they come for me, they will destroy this place and kill every one of you!"

"Enough!" The Xerexian grabbed her hair and yanked her backward brutally.

She cried out in pain.

"Ah, not so brave now, are you?" Grabbing the front of her blouse, he tore it from her. The sound of the delicate material ripping echoed in the small, dank room where she was kept. He tossed the tattered silk somewhere over his shoulder.

When he produced a curved, jagged-edged knife, Lara froze in fear. The Xerexian's gaze gleamed with predatory purpose as he knelt in front of her and slowly tore her skirt in half. With her hands tied above her head and her ankles strapped to the legs of the chair, Lara was helpless to stop him. Her heart thudded in terror. But she was *not* going to cry. She'd be damned if she showed this Xerexian any more signs that she was terrified, even if she was now clad only in a lacy bra and matching panties. She glared at him.

He merely threw back his head and laughed. "You amuse me, human. Your defiance will lead you nowhere."

"Like I said, you will die for this," she repeated coldly.

"Perhaps I'll teach you a different lesson," he mused, getting on his knees so he was level with her. "The human body is a very fragile thing. Don't you agree?"

Lara's heart almost stopped at the casual way he said it.

"There are myriad of ways to cause pain. For example, I could hurt you right here." He ran the sharp tip of the knife around the lace-covered nipple.

She sucked in a breath.

"Nothing to say?" With one flick of his wrist, he cut her bra open. It hung limply around her. "Detestable human flesh," he derided contemptuously, his eyes zeroing in

on her exposed breasts. His long, reptilian tongue snaked out and licked his thick lips. "Maybe a lesson in subordination is in order." He grabbed her breast, his grip painful and brutal. "Just to curb that poisonous tongue of yours."

Sheer terror robbed her of speech. The fear that she'd tried so hard to suppress roared to the surface. Here was the moment any woman dreaded to experience. She was about to be raped.

A soldier entered the room. "Commander, we need you in the control room." His gaze flicked to Lara, touching briefly on her exposed body. "We received a communiqué."

"You're lucky, *arita*," Ugly Creature sneered. "You've been given a reprieve. Only a temporary one, I assure you. I will come back to finish our little game."

As soon as the door closed, Lara began to cry. In her arrogance, it had never once occurred to her that she would be targeted. She'd been so sure that the Xerexians wouldn't dare touch her, she was too high profile. *Stupid and naïve, that's what I am*. In the end, her coterie of assistants and one personal bodyguard had been helpless to protect her.

The Xerexians were a contemptuous lot, cruel and vicious. They'd manhandled her since abducting her about a week ago, stuffing a foul-smelling rag in her mouth and roughing her up every chance they got. Her body was black and blue in most places, and new cuts blended in with the old. She was filthy and hungry, subsisting on the small pieces of bread they fed her while subjecting her to disdainful comments.

Her arms hurt from being tied above her head. There wasn't a part of her body that wasn't in pain. Without the benefit of a shower, she was beginning to reek, too. Lara grimaced. Her nails were broken, and her hair lay in lank strands down her back. This was certainly a far cry from the glamorous existence she usually led.

At least the light that hung above her gave her a somewhat dim view of the small cell. She wasn't afraid of the dark. It was the creepy crawly little things that slithered around that terrified her. When she was alone, she continually checked around, on the lookout for anything near. Just thinking of nasty little critters crawling over her was

enough to make her throw up, making it impossible to sleep. It was the one thing Ugly Creature must never know about. He would not hesitate to use it against her.

Lara bit her lip, choking on a sob. *Please, please come for me. Don't leave me here. Tamara, Father, send somebody to rescue me before it's too late.*

* * *

The rays of the late afternoon sun made their way through thick tree branches above, casting a bright glow over the verdant forest. The heat was stifling. Sweat trickled down Vartan's back, soaking his shirt. Lying on his stomach, hidden among the dense foliage surrounding him, he quietly watched the crudely erected shack. It was situated in the middle of the jungle, secluded and miles from anywhere. It was the perfect location to hide an important hostage. He smiled. They obviously hadn't figured on him.

There were two guards patrolling outside, walking the perimeter. Two more were stationed by the door. Vartan shifted, wiping the sweat dripping on his face. He peered into his high-powered optic-analyzer. The lens flickered. He cursed, slamming it against his palm. Damn magnetic interference made it impossible for most of his equipment to work. He looked through the lens again. The lens sputtered for a second before it stabilized. The infrared scanner yielded one person in the crudely erected shack, sitting down on a chair with arms pulled high above the head. *Target sighted.* Lara Conway.

The two perimeter guards made their way to a transport waiting on an open field some distance away. Two other soldiers met them halfway, talking and laughing. They were in no hurry to assume their post. Vartan narrowed his eyes. By the looks of it, he'd have a five-minute window, nothing more. It would have to do. He wasn't worried about the two posted outside the door of the shack. Those he could easily dispense with. What he didn't want was the whole Xerexian army on his tail when he got Lara out of here. The only way to go would be a quick and clean escape, with a minimum of fuss.

It was now or never.

Vartan approached the shack from the side. He palmed his knives and threw them with deadly precision. The two Xerexians by the door fell to the ground, their lifeless eyes wide open in shock. He dragged both bodies off to the side, hiding them in the thick brush. Taking cover in the doorway, he waited for the perimeter guards to get closer. When they came within reach, he attacked. He jumped the first one, knocking him out with a blow to the head. Before the remaining guard could even draw his weapon, Vartan knocked his legs from under him with a kick to the knees. With a yelp, the guard went down. A well-placed blow to the jaw rendered him unconscious. He trussed them up, and pulled them behind a tree. Four down and not one shot fired. The only thing to do now would be to retrieve his target and get the hell out of here. He opened the door of the shack.

Inside, Vartan got his first look at Lara. Her light-colored hair fell to a tangled mess past her shoulders. Dirt smudged her face. There was the beginning of a bruise on a cheek, as well as a small cut on her lip. Lara looked nothing like Tamara. Her features were softer, more delicate. She was practically naked, splayed wide open in a wanton pose. There was an instant, heated punch in his guts.

By the gods.

Her breasts, topped by luscious pink tips, were full and generous. The delicate fabric covering her crotch left nothing to his imagination, outlining her plump lips, giving him a revealing eyeful. A totally inappropriate reaction sprang from the wicked picture she made. His cock stiffened. He groaned silently. *Now is not the right time.* However, rotten timing or not, he was only a man.

"Who are you?" Lara croaked.

Vartan felt like an idiot caught with his mouth hanging open. "I'm Vartan. I'm with the Royal Military of Bandar. Kendrick sent me to take you home." There was no hiding her beauty under the dirt and blood crusting her face. And her body... she was perfectly built, voluptuous and curvy in all the right places.

"Well?" Lara demanded gruffly, her face flushed pink as he continued to stare. "Please untie me so I can get some of my dignity back."

Vartan released her wrists, silently berating himself for reacting like an untrained schoolboy. He felt a surge of anger at the red welts that marred her soft skin. Lara slumped forward, moaning softly in pain. He knelt in front of her and untied the coarse rope from her legs. Unable to help himself, his glance strayed once more to that spot between her thighs. She just looked so enticing wide open like that.

"If you're done getting a thrill, please move aside so I can stand up."

Feisty. Vartan flashed an irrepressible grin and straightened. Lara stood up, her legs wobbly. Her breasts jiggled softly as she swayed on her feet. With regret, he tore his eyes away from all that delicious exposed flesh. "We have to go now."

Her face was pale but she nodded. "Right. I need something to wear."

"No time."

She flushed and threw him a disbelieving look. "I can't walk out of here like this."

Why not? It would certainly be fine with him. Vartan wisely kept that to himself and pointed to the remains of her clothing. "That'll have to do for now."

Lara's lips tightened with displeasure. Vartan got another glimpse of her magnificent breasts when she picked up the ripped material from the floor and fashioned it to wrap around her. Too bad she wanted to cover up. She was very easy on the eyes. He tossed a pair of shoes at her feet. "Tamara sent those for you. Military issue footwear."

She frowned, looking at the boots blankly.

"She said you wouldn't have anything appropriate to wear for trekking through the jungle. Judging by the look on your face, she was right." Vartan caught the sidelong glance Lara sent the spindly-heeled shoes that sat in one corner of the shack. "You can't wear those. It'll only slow us down. Now hurry up."

Lara slipped her foot into one boot. "They're too big for me."

"They're adjustable," he explained somewhat impatiently, bending down to press the little button on the heel that automatically adjusted the shoe to her size. Her legs were long and shapely. He wanted to run his hand up her thigh to see if her skin

was as smooth as it looked. *Don't even think about it.* He frowned, irritated by his reaction to her. "Come on. We have to leave *now*."

"All right, I'm coming," she muttered, quickly adjusting the other boot.

"Let's go." Vartan led her out of the shack, pulling her swiftly into the cover of the dense jungle. It would be a mistake to take one of the few established trails that wound through the thick vegetation. Instead, he ventured far away from it, hoping to throw off the Xerexians. The further they got away from there, the better he would feel. He tightened his hold on her hand. By the gods, her skin felt like the most delicate silk woven from costly Maravian fabric. That answered his earlier question. No doubt the rest of her would be just as supple.

Shit. It was getting damn hard to concentrate on where he was going when all he could think about was Lara as he'd seen her earlier. The sight of her body had been mouthwatering, better than what he'd seen in a long while. His cock twitched in his trousers. He cursed under his breath. He mustn't get distracted out here. It could very well get them both killed. He picked up the pace.

"What's the matter?" she whispered anxiously. "Are we being followed?"

"What?" Evidently, she'd heard him, which only irritated him further. "No," he barked. "Just be quiet and follow me."

Lara pulled her hand away from his. "You don't need to cut my head off. I'm fully aware of the danger we're in."

Forced to stop, Vartan turned to face her and wished he hadn't. In the heat of the jungle, her hair had turned damp and her skin glistened with perspiration. She looked like some kind of goddess clad only in two scraps of nothing which did little to conceal her curves. "Listen to me. We need to get away from here as fast as we can. I don't have time to answer your questions or worry about hurting your feelings."

"Where the hell did Tamara find you? Charm school?" she retorted, her face pink with irritation.

Don't look at her breasts. Don't look at those sweet, puckered nipples trying to poke a hole through that cloth. "Kendrick picked the best man for the job. Me." Vartan fought to keep his eyes trained on her face, resisting the urge to give her a good once-over. Twice.

She lifted her chin. "Fine. Carry on."

How the hell did she manage to make that sound like a fucking command? "Follow me and keep up. I don't want to have to carry your ass on my back."

He could almost feel the waves of anger directed at him and heard her muttering something about overbearing men. Good. Maybe if she was mad at him, he wouldn't be drooling over her. Vartan shifted his attention to their surroundings, listening for any unnatural sound that would indicate trouble, or worse, that they were being followed.

"Vartan?" Lara asked. "Can we stop for a minute?"

"We don't have time to stop."

"I know, but I'm cramping. My leg hurts."

Vartan abruptly stopped. She cannoned right into him. When he turned, she was inches away. He sighed. "Look. I know you've just been through a tough ordeal but you know as well as I do that stopping now will eat up whatever lead time we may have over the Xerexians. Right now, I need you to buck up and remember your training. We need to get away from here."

"Training?" she parroted, obviously confused. "What training?"

"Your Special Services training."

"You thought I was an agent?"

The faint horror in her tone gave him pause. "You're not Special Services?"

"I'm an actress."

Vartan just stared at her. "A what?"

She frowned. "An actress. You know, vid-entertainment? Vid-shows? What, you've never heard of those?"

He knew very little about vid-entertainment. "Of course I've heard of those. It's just not very big in Bandar. It's a silly --"

Lara's eyebrow rose. "Silly?"

"What else would you call something as unimportant as that when there are things of far more significance?"

Her expression turned turbulent. "Don't belittle what I do for a living. I'll have you know my vid-shows are very popular, not to mention profitable. I'm very successful at what I do."

"That would help if you can use currency credits to get us out of here alive," Vartan drawled derisively. He knew that comment stung, but he was too pissed to think about her feelings now. An actress? He snorted. *I smell a rat, and his name's Kendrick.* He was positive it had been a deliberate move on Kendrick's part not to correct his initial impression of Lara. Even if he didn't know her very well, it wasn't too hard to imagine the pampered life she'd led. She was probably as spoiled as a royal brat.

"Great. Just what I need. Now I'm stuck with an *actress* who has no idea what it takes to survive this place and get out of here," he said out loud. Why was he so pissed? What did it matter if Lara was an actress? So what if Kendrick and Tamara hadn't bothered to tell him the truth? He was a Bandarian warrior, trained to survive in any situation. If he were honest with himself, he'd admit that he was angry because he hadn't been able to keep his eyes off her. Even worse, his mind had been filled with lustful thoughts since the moment he'd seen her.

Lara instantly stiffened. "Don't worry. When you deliver me safe and sound to my home, I'll make sure you're compensated for your effort."

He glowered at her. Compensated? She was offering to pay him? Currency credits were something he didn't need. "Lady, I don't need you to compensate me. All I want is to get the hell out of here and dump you in the nearest Earth Federation outpost."

A flash of hurt flickered in her eyes but it was gone right away. She squared her shoulders and glared right back. "I don't know what I did to make you dislike me. Believe me, I'm looking forward to getting away from this hellhole as much as you."

She had a point but he couldn't explain it himself, either. Now he wished he hadn't had this discussion with Lara. Her top had turned transparent, damp from sweat, barely covering her chest. He was treated to another eyeful of her generous flesh. His body reacted instantly. Heat pooled in his groin. Vartan pulled in a deep breath, trying to regain some control. What was it about her? He'd had a woman right before he left Bandar. No, he'd had *two* women. Sela and Rahda had been determined to show him a good time before he'd left for his mission. It wasn't as if he'd been deprived. He just couldn't figure out why he reacted so intensely to Lara.

Vartan focused his attention on their surroundings. Keep your mind on the mission, he reminded himself. By now, the Xerexians would have discovered she was gone and a search party would have been sent out. He pushed at the dense foliage. This mission had just taken a turn for the worse. Whereas before he'd been counting on Lara's skill to make this a quick getaway, now everything had changed. He had a *civilian* on his hands. The gods help him, a beautiful and half naked civilian who turned him on with one look.

Despite his misgivings, Vartan glanced over his shoulder. Just in time to see Lara pluck a dark red berry from a vine and put it to her lips. *Fool!* He slapped her hand, sending the berry flying away.

"Hey! What are you --"

"Poisonous. Don't you know better than to just pick anything off trees or plants?" he gritted.

She had the grace to flush. "I normally wouldn't. It's just that I'm so hungry."

He felt like shit right away. Opening his pack, he took out a piece of bread and gave it to her. "I needed to get us as far away from there as possible. But you can eat this for now." lame apology, but it would have to do. By the look on her face, she didn't care for it either, ignoring him as she bit down hungrily.

Vartan handed her a small flask of water. "Here."

Lara took it without saying anything. Biting back a sigh, he gestured for her to follow him. "Let's keep moving." He slung his pack over his shoulder. It would be better if he didn't look at her. *Don't look back. Just don't look at her.*

Chapter Two

Lara glared at Vartan's back, calling him all sorts of nasty names. Why did Tamara have to send him anyway? Where did she find him, Assholes R Us? Since the moment he'd rescued her from that god-awful shack, he'd been gruff and generally unpleasant.

She ran a hand through her tangled hair. God, she must look a fright. What she wouldn't give for a massage right about now, followed by a skin reviving facial and mud bath. She closed her eyes and imagined soaking in a tub of fragrant bath oils that were now a precious commodity on Earth. When she got back home, she'd indulge in a total body pampering. A thin tree branch slapped against her face, bringing her rudely back to the present. "Ouch."

There were no adoring fans, no one around eager to please her. Here, she was just plain Lara Conway, hostage, and now escapee. She gazed at the man who'd saved her. In the late afternoon sunshine, Vartan's muscles rippled and his skin gleamed like silk as he moved with supple grace. Muscular, sinewy, tightly packed body, with not an ounce of fat anywhere. Like all Bandarians, he possessed dark tanned skin and silver-gray eyes. He was tall, too, well over six and a half feet. He cocked his head from side to side, as if he was listening for something.

Lara glanced at his profile. His face was all sharp, rugged angles, combined with a strong jaw. In spite of herself, Lara felt her senses stir. He was physically attractive, exuding an animal magnetism that was hard to ignore. Too bad his attitude didn't match his looks.

Vartan kept conversation to a minimum. How far they went and for how long, she had no idea. She was beyond exhaustion, moving like an automaton, struggling to keep up with him. It was getting more and more difficult to put one foot in front of the

other, but she was damned if she was going to complain to Mr. High and Mighty. He wasn't even breathing hard, for God's sake. What was he anyway? An android? She wouldn't be surprised.

Just when Lara thought she was about to collapse from sheer fatigue, he finally stopped. "We're staying here for the night."

She dropped to the ground in an ungraceful heap, breathing heavily. There wasn't a part of her body that didn't hurt. "Here where?" she managed to wheeze out.

Vartan walked a few steps ahead, pushing aside long palm fronds, tree branches and twigs to reveal an opening. "Right here."

It was a cave, with an entrance so small they had to crawl on their knees to get through it. Lara gritted her teeth and mustered up enough strength to make it inside. The interior was spacious and high enough to allow her to stand. Vartan, however, had to bend his head. With his height, the top of his scalp reached the ceiling of the cave.

He walked toward the back, checking out their temporary shelter. "We should be safe here for tonight. No doubt the Xerexians have already sent out patrols to find us. I'd hoped to be further away than this but..." He shrugged. "I'm going back out to cover our tracks."

Lara leaned against the cave wall, utter weariness beating at her. The grumbling in her stomach hadn't stopped, and she was beginning to feel lightheaded.

Grabbing his pack, Vartan rummaged through it and pulled out some food items. He handed her a couple of plastic wrapped bars of some kind and a small flask of water. "Here. You can eat this for now. We have to conserve our food supply."

Lara took them eagerly, ingrained manners forcing her to murmur her thanks.

"I'll be right back. Stay here and don't go outside." He left, moving quietly for a man his size.

If she had the energy, Lara would have rolled her eyes. He didn't need to tell her to stay here. One more step and she would have collapsed. This cave was perfectly fine for her. It was pure bliss to just rest her aching feet. Her gaze swept over the soft, damp soil she sat on. Hopefully there weren't any snakes or any other creatures around. With

the meager lighting getting through the small opening, it was hard to see. But what if there were? Lara ignored the pain in her legs as she gingerly knelt and scrutinized the area around her, careful to look out for any unsavory living thing. When she was satisfied that there weren't any slinking around, Lara sat back down and munched on the food bar Vartan had given her. It wasn't bad at all. Even the water tasted so good, she finished it all in one gulp.

With some food in her belly, she began to relax. Although they weren't out of danger yet, she was free. The only thing now would be to get out of this jungle alive. Vartan seemed entirely capable of getting them out of there safely, she admitted grudgingly. She was just glad that he'd gotten her away from the Xerexians. There was no telling what Ugly Creature would have eventually done to her. If he'd raped her...

The shock of her ordeal finally set in. Again and again, Lara relived the harrowing events in her mind. Nothing had prepared her for the trauma of being abducted, tied up and physically abused by the Xerexians. She'd led a pampered existence in a world far removed from reality. It was a life that insulated her from the dangers around her. She'd taken her safety for granted, surrounding herself with friends and assistants that catered to her every need and paid scant attention to her security.

Lara clenched her fists, trying to stem her tears. Her life of luxury suddenly appeared shallow and inconsequential. Was that why Vartan had looked at her with contempt in his eyes? Did he think she wasn't worth the effort of saving if she hadn't been the Earth Federation Premier's daughter or Tamara's sister, who was soon to be the queen of Bandar?

What had she really done with her life? Looking back, Lara couldn't think of anything meaningful she'd ever undertaken. She possessed all the material goods one could ask for, amassing an amount of currency credits that she couldn't even spend in her lifetime. She'd been reduced to being a captive, denied of all her rights and humiliated. It was as if blinders had been ripped off her eyes and she could finally see what really mattered in life.

Lara wiped away her tears. After this, things were never going to be the same. *She* wasn't going to be the same. During her days in captivity, she'd had time to take a good, hard look at herself and she hadn't liked what she'd seen. Surely there was more to life than flitting from planet to planet, attending glittering parties and not caring about what tomorrow might bring. She wished she was more like Tamara, who knew what she wanted at a very young age and went after it. From the very beginning, her sister had always wanted to be a Special Services Agent. No amount of discouragement from their father had swayed her. As for herself...

Lara sighed. She'd chosen a glamorous career. But lately even that had begun to lose its appeal. She'd felt restless and bored, strangely dissatisfied with everything around her.

There was no use looking back and regretting the kind of life she'd led. The only thing to do now would be to make some changes and do something worthwhile. As soon as she got off this god-forsaken planet.

Her tears finally subsided to hiccups. Lara pulled in a deep breath, drained, physically and emotionally. The exhaustion she'd managed to hold at bay came back with a vengeance. Shifting to lie on the floor, Lara couldn't fight the lassitude that stole over her. Her eyes drifted shut. Soon, she was fast asleep.

* * *

Lara opened her eyes when Vartan shook her awake. She blinked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Get up. We have to go."

"Good morning to you too," she muttered. She stretched, wincing at the pain that lanced through her. God, every muscle in her body ached. She felt grubby and dirty. Her eyes felt gritty and she smothered a yawn. What she wouldn't do for some bracing, kick-you-in-the-ass-awake coffee from Lower Colombia. Oh, and a nice, warm muffin too. *Yum*. Lara frowned. A large, shiny blanket covered her. It hadn't been there last night. She glanced at Vartan. "Thanks for the blanket."

Vartan shrugged. "I would've given these to you sooner, but you were asleep when I came back. Here." A shirt and trousers landed by her feet. "Put that on. It'll protect you from more cuts and bites."

"I didn't know you cared."

"I don't," he replied in a flat tone. He picked up the blanket and pressed a button that shrank it. "It makes my job easier if I don't have to worry about you getting hurt or contracting fever from an insect bite."

Lara's lips twisted wryly. "Of course." She stood and held up the shirt he tossed her. It hung all the way down to her knees. Oh well. It was better than nothing. She slipped it on, knotting the ends at her waist and rolling up the sleeves. The trousers were another matter. He was much bigger than she was and even if she folded the pant legs, they kept on slipping down to her hips.

Vartan uttered an impatient sigh. Without saying a word, he undid the knot at her waist and tore off the hem of the shirt.

"What are you..."

He ignored her question, just inserted the cloth through the loops at the waist and cinched it tight with a knot, making a belt. Lara was painfully aware of how close he was. Mere inches separated them. He was so close that if she leaned forward just a little bit, she could bury her face in his neck and inhale his scent. Vartan grasped the shirt once more and knotted the ends efficiently. Their gazes clashed. His eyes were certainly unusual. Lighter rings surrounded the dark irises, almost like a cat's. It was only seconds but it felt like long minutes to her as they stared at each other. When he finally stepped back, she released the breath she'd unconsciously been holding.

She looked away in discomfort. "Thanks."

"We have about three or four days of travel, depending on how fast we go," he informed her in an impassive voice. "I doubled back yesterday and covered our tracks. I haven't seen any signs that we're being followed but we can take it for granted that they're looking for us."

Lara frowned. "I'm surprised they haven't sent out a whole battalion scouring the jungle for us. Why do you think that is?"

His glance flickered slightly, as if he was surprised by her question. "I don't know," he replied in a gruff voice. "This leads me to think there's something more going on here." He gathered his pack, digging a small hole in the ground several feet back and burying the food wrappers. "Did you notice anything while you were held captive?"

She shrugged. "Only the same two sets of alternating guards watching me. I never saw anybody else. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

Vartan grunted. "Right now, I can't say. No matter, we have to remain vigilant and alert."

Lara resisted the urge to salute him. He sounded like he was barking orders at an underling. She bit back a sigh. *Just try to ignore his boorish manners and make an effort to get along with him.* He was, after all, the key to getting out of here alive. She followed him out of the cave, crawling through the entrance. The intense humidity hit her instantly. It was like a damn furnace, hot and stifling. Lara could feel sweat trickling down her back, adding to the already overwhelming longing for a bath. Even a quick splash of water on her overheated skin would be fantastic. Anything to wash away the dirt and the grime that seemed stuck to her skin.

Once again, she was treated to the sight of Vartan's muscular back as he carefully made his way through the dense foliage. And again she found herself admiring his physique. Her eyes traveled down the graceful slope of his spine, down to his tight ass and the obvious strength of his thighs. He was certainly mouthwatering, sculpted to perfection, a beautiful male animal. Too bad he was grouchy and rude.

In spite of that, she continued to admire the sleek, economic movements of his body, safe in the knowledge that he couldn't see her. Apart from that brief moment in the shack when he looked at her with clear interest, he hadn't spared her so much as a second glance. That stung. It was vain, she knew, but she was so used to men giving her appreciative glances. So what if he didn't look at her? She knew she looked awful. Her

hair was a mess, and she was in dire need of a bath. Besides, did she want him to give her *that* kind of attention? Not with his appalling manners she didn't. The galaxy was full of men just as hot and sexy as he was, and with better attitudes.

With that thought, Lara stole one last glance at his tight rear, feeling a surge of physical attraction deep in her belly. She ruthlessly quashed it. *Don't think about him that way.*

Miles later, Lara concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. Her legs ached and her feet hurt. Vartan was relentless. She glared at his back. Didn't he ever get tired? They'd been walking for hours, and not once did he slow down, maintaining a brutal pace. The words to ask her silent, sullen guide for a moment's rest hovered on her lips but she held them back. She'd rather swallow her own tongue than complain. No way was she going to cave in first. If he wasn't tired, neither was she.

Soon, she regretted her stubbornness. She couldn't take another step. It was harder than she thought. Sweat dripped down her face. Lara stumbled as she wiped her eyes, running right into him when he stopped.

Vartan frowned and turned to look at her. "Why didn't you ask me to stop so you can rest for a while?"

"And have your opinion of me sink lower than it already is?" Lara snapped, unable to help herself. She was so tired she wanted to cry. "No thanks."

"I'm not a monster. I would have stopped."

"I'm fine." But her voice shook and her shoulders slumped. Lara took several deep breaths and leaned against a tree.

"We can rest here for a while."

Thank God. Lara sank to the soft soil and closed her eyes. At this point, she could have just blissfully sat there forever, the Xerexians be damned. She'd never been so tired in her entire life. And here she thought she was in good shape. All those sessions in the gym with her personal trainer-bot were a picnic compared to this.

"I don't have a low opinion of you."

Her eyes flew open and encountered his enigmatic silver gaze. Lara chose her words carefully. "Contrary to what you think, I'm not stupid. You don't think much of me because I'm an actress and I'm nothing like my sister." When he flinched, she felt mildly victorious. *Good. I hope that makes him feel as rotten as hell.*

"You're different from what I was led to believe," he admitted grudgingly.

Her eyebrow rose in challenge. "So that makes me unworthy to be saved, I suppose?"

A dull flush rose to cover his cheeks. "You're the sister of the future queen of Bandar, and the daughter of Earth's premier."

It didn't escape her notice that he'd skillfully dodged her question. "No matter. I don't have to justify my life to you. It's a moot point. After we get out of here, you and I won't ever have to endure each other's company." Lara leaned her head back. She didn't care what he thought of her. He was rude and judgmental. His opinion didn't matter. "Just tell me where the pick-up point is."

"Pick-up point?" he echoed.

She opened one eye. "Yeah. Where are we going to get picked up?"

"I hate to break it to you but we're not getting picked up. I'm all you have."

The way he said it sent little fingers of heat running up her skin. Lara ignored it. "Where are we going and why will it take three or four days to get there?"

His lips quirked at her tone. "Utuja is surrounded by an electro-magnetic field that jams electronic devices and wreaks havoc with onboard computers. I had to land my ship in a small area where there is the least interference. That's the reason why the Xerexians put you in a shack right in the middle of the jungle where it's difficult to get to you, to make it harder for a rescue." He paused, staring directly at her. "Look. I know we got off on the wrong foot. Truce?"

His attitude really should turn her off, dousing any sort of physical attraction. Strangely enough, the attraction persisted. She liked his deep voice. Her gaze kept straying to his face, his broad shoulders, and the lean waist. She'd love to get a glimpse of his abs. No doubt they would be rock-hard and sculpted to perfection. It would

probably be safer to stay annoyed with him than accept his offer of a truce but she didn't want to be ungracious. "Frankly, I'm too tired to keep fighting with you. All I want is to get out of here. So yes, truce."

"Hungry?"

"God, yes."

"Tamara said you'd appreciate this." He dropped down next to her and fished out a clear plastic bag from his pack.

An old-fashioned chocolate fudge brownie! Lara chuckled. "I don't believe it." She eagerly tore off the wrapper and bit into the sweet treat. "Hmmm. Delicious."

"What is it?" Vartan asked with skepticism in his voice.

She grinned. "It's a chocolate treat from Earth." Her sister's thoughtfulness was touching. "I have a bad tendency to eat this during stressful times," she confessed softly. "Comfort food. It's horribly fattening. Tamara knows me too well."

Vartan grunted. "You're nothing like your sister."

Lara lifted her chin. "Are you going to make asinine comments about how different I am from Tamara again? I guess the truce is over?"

He had the grace to look embarrassed. "No."

She didn't let him dampen her enjoyment of the brownie. "When we were kids, Tamara always liked playing cops and robbers. I liked playing with dolls, okay? We're two very different people but my sister and I get along very well. In fact, I was on my way to Bandar for her wedding when I was kidnapped."

"Your security is sorely lacking."

"It was adequate," she insisted. "I've never liked bodyguards or armed security shadowing my every move." Besides, that night she had been distracted and wasn't thinking clearly, having just been dealt a major shock. She realized now that it wasn't even anger that filled her at the sight of her boyfriend humping the blue-skinned woman on the bathroom floor while a huge party went on outside. It was disgust. She and Er'vid hadn't slept with each other for months. He'd always had a convenient

excuse. Now she knew why. He was too busy sleeping with everybody else. It didn't matter anymore. Good riddance to him.

Truth to tell, Lara had begun to get tired of her life. The glamour of parties and traveling to different worlds use to energize her but lately had begun to get on her nerves. She wouldn't call being kidnapped by the Xerexians an adventure, but this was as much excitement as she'd had happen in her life since... since she couldn't even remember. Here she was, stuck in the Utujan jungle with a sexy as hell Bandarian warrior who couldn't stand her. God, how ironic was that? She uttered a short laugh. For the first time in her life, she was attracted to a man who didn't like her at all. Talk about a humbling experience.

"Is something funny?" Vartan asked.

Her gaze collided with his. She wished she didn't find him so appealing. "It's nothing. Listen, do you think I can find a river or stream somewhere? I'd like to clean up, if it's possible. I'm filthy."

Vartan slung his pack over his shoulder and cocked his head. "Listen."

She frowned. "I don't hear anything."

He stood up and gestured for her to follow. A short distance away, the sound of rushing water reached her ears.

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed, running past him. A few yards ahead was a clearing. A magnificent waterfall rushed down to a pool of water, frothy bubbles forming on the surface. "Thank you, thank you," she gushed over her shoulder. She dove in, the cool temperature a stark contrast to the heat of the jungle. When she surfaced, she pushed her hair back and saw Vartan by the bank holding out a bar of soap and a small bottle of shampoo.

She waded in the water and took them from him. "Tam's idea again?" At his nod, she laughed. "I love her. She thought of everything." The sweet, clean scent of the soap was heavenly, perfect for washing away days' worth of dirt and grime and sweat. Vartan still stood by the bank, continually scanning the surroundings. "Umm, I have to wash my clothes. Could you turn around, please?"

Chapter Three

Vartan fought to keep his face expressionless, hiding his disappointment at her request. The moment she'd gone in the water, her clothes had been all but transparent, her breasts outlined against the thin, wet material of his shirt. His mouth had gone instantly dry.

As he stared at her, Lara covered her breasts with one arm. What a shame. "No. It's safer to keep you in my sights."

She blinked. "B-but -- but I need to take my clothes off."

"I'm not stopping you," he drawled, already anticipating seeing her naked. "But I'm not letting you out of my sight." To mollify her, he shifted his gaze but didn't turn around as she'd requested. He hid a grin at her exasperated sigh, his eyes going back to her as soon as she turned her back to him.

Her light-colored hair hung in thick curls down her back as she washed herself. With her large, deep blue eyes, Lara was lovely without trying. Even dirty, tired, and clearly in need of a bath, she'd looked beautiful. She had a soft, sexy look about her that was entirely natural. He'd been having a hell of a time trying to keep from thinking about her magnificent breasts and long, luscious legs as he led her through the jungle. Though he had to admit, he was still smarting from being given the wrong impression about her when he'd set out for this mission. Vartan snorted. Kendrick knew all about Lara and probably figured it was a lark to fool him. He was sure of it.

Once again, his eyes were drawn back to her. Lara was presently wriggling her luscious backside as she bent slightly. Riveted, Vartan couldn't look away. Her back was lightly tanned, toned and smooth. Just the top of her hips showed above the water. With her every movement, he caught tantalizing glimpses of the beginning curve of her rear end, flaring gently from a trim waist. Lara straightened, her little bit of underwear

in her hand. He swallowed. Knowing she was naked had his cock springing up in ardent attention.

Her movements were graceful as she washed the small scrap of material with soap before rinsing it under the waterfall. Still keeping her back to him, she shifted and put her underwear on top of a boulder, which sat on the bank of the clearing. She did the same with the shirt and pants he lent her, laying them all under the sun to dry.

Vartan stared, unable to move or even blink as she poured shampoo from the bottle. He could see the sides of her breasts, heavy and soft, as she raised her arms and washed her hair. It was like watching an erotic vid-show, only better. Every move of her body was graceful, not contrived, and he could have sat there all day happily watching her wash her body over and over again. He reached down to adjust his cock surreptitiously. The last thing he wanted her to see was his erection.

The frothy waterfall chased away the lather in the thick tresses. She took the soap and began to rub it on her skin, starting at her neck before slipping down to her shoulders. His stiff shaft jerked and pushed against the front of his trousers. *Come on, just turn a little bit for me*, he thought. As if she'd heard the words he spoke in his mind, she shifted sideways. He got an eyeful as her hand drew the soap around her breast, briefly cupping the mound, sliding over the tight tip before dipping under the flesh.

Vartan groaned. Was his mouth hanging open? He was sure he was drooling. He'd never been treated to a sexier show than that of Lara bathing under the waterfall. Her palms glided over wet, slick skin, rubbing away the dirt and the heat of the jungle. His pulse quickened as she ventured between her legs, a quick dipping gesture that made him want to roar out in frustration. *Do it again. Turn around and show it to me.*

The enticing, albeit brief, glimpses of her curves only whetted his appetite for more. Vartan felt like a young boy gawking at a seductress, his blood molten, intense need raging through his veins. A small part of his brain that still functioned reminded him this was Lara, the woman he thought shallow and superficial. His body didn't seem to care, reacting like an untried schoolboy treated to the sight of his first nude female. Damn if she didn't have a luscious body. Lara was sexy as hell.

From the start, he'd been determined not to notice her beauty, her sexiness. All he wanted to do was to complete his mission and dump her on her father's lap. Now, what had been skirting the edges of his mind was front and center. He was salivating just watching her bathe.

"Uh, do you have anything I can cover up with while my clothes dry?"

At the sound of her voice, he snapped out of his lust-induced trance. He stared at the slender line of her back.

"Vartan? Do you have anything I can wear?"

For another moment, he let his admiring gaze linger on the curve of her waist before he reached for his pack. "Just another shirt you can borrow."

Lara glanced over her shoulder. "Thanks." She inched backward until she was an arm's length away from him and held out her hand. "Could you turn around, please?"

He handed her the shirt and averted his face. His lips twitched at the loud sigh she expelled, and then he heard some splashing as she got out of the water and hastily donned his shirt.

"Thank you."

He looked back at her and almost swallowed his tongue. The shirt was stuck to her damp body, faithfully outlining her chest and the enticing shadow between her legs. The sight was infinitely more tempting than had she been naked, for it gave him alluring glimpses of her body. He cleared his throat, trying not to let his gaze stray downwards. "Feel better?"

"Oh yes." She pulled the heavy mass of her hair over one shoulder and wrung out the excess water. "It shouldn't take too long for my clothes to dry, do you think?"

"No." He decided now would be a good time to get away from her for a little while. There was only so much temptation he could take. "I'm going to take a look around." He pulled out a small blaster. "Here. Take this."

Lara sat down under a tree, folding her long legs under the length of the shirt. She took the weapon.

"Do you know how to use that?"

"How hard can it be? Just point and shoot, right?"

Vartan tried not to grimace at that. "It's slightly more complicated than that. The red light signals a full charge." He watched as she examined the gun. "Flick this button to off. That's the safety. It won't fire otherwise."

"Okay. But where are you going?"

At the faint alarm in her voice, he gave her a small smile. "I'm going to find a place where we can settle down for the night. I don't like traveling in the dark. Night vision equipment is useless because of the electro-magnetic interference." He stood up. "Try not to shoot me when I get back."

"How long are you going to be gone?" she asked anxiously.

"Not too long. I'm going to canvass the area. I'll be back soon, I promise." He looked her in the eye. "Shoot anybody who comes into your sight, do you hear me?"

"Anybody?"

"Anybody who's not me," he instructed in a low, serious voice. "We're in hostile territory. You shoot first and ask questions later." He knew she didn't like it. Vartan briefly hesitated about leaving her, but he needed to reconnoiter and find a safe place to bed down for the night. After a moment, she nodded. "Good girl. I'll be back soon." Hefting his pack over his shoulder, he left her.

Good girl? Lara rolled her eyes and clutched the blaster tighter. Is that how he saw her? As a girl? She snorted. Did he think she was stupid? She didn't miss the heat in his eyes earlier when he thought she wasn't looking. He'd definitely been interested in her as a woman. His glance lingered a little too long on her breasts. She'd deliberately given him a glimpse when she was bathing.

Maybe it soothed her vanity to see him admiring her after the horrible way he'd treated her in the beginning. So what if butterflies fluttered in her stomach when she caught that look in his eyes? It was just a normal feminine reaction to male admiration. Lara decided to ignore the fact that she couldn't stop looking at him either. When Vartan was near, she felt weird, all tingly inside. It was hard not to stare at his mouth when he was speaking. It was hard not to stare, period.

She leaned back against the tree trunk, trying to force her thoughts in another direction. It was futile. This attraction she felt for Vartan was unsettling and confusing. Ordinarily, she wouldn't even be attracted to somebody who was overbearing and arrogant like him. Maybe it was the enforced closeness. After all, he was the only one who could get her out of here, and the situation forced them to be together all day. Yes, that was it.

Forcing her thoughts from one infuriating Bandarian, Lara eyed the items of clothing she'd laid out to dry under the sun and decided to retrieve them. She stepped over the large boulders lining the bank carefully, glad when she found the clothes were dry enough to be worn. She wiped off her sweat as she slipped on the top. It hadn't been that long at all since she took a bath, but already she felt hot. Even the splash of the water against her skin felt refreshing. She drifted closer, relishing the coolness of the spray, raising her face. It was then she glimpsed something behind the rushing water. It looked like an opening.

Gripping the gun tightly in her hand, her clothes in the other, she carefully made her way up the boulders. There was an alcove behind the curtain of the waterfall, secured by the large rocks lining the path. The opening veered toward the right, deepening into a crevice hidden by a natural rock wall. It was deep enough that she and Vartan could sit well back from the opening and wouldn't easily be detected. It would be a great place to settle down for the night. Lara glanced at the water wistfully. Maybe she could take another bath before they trekked through the jungle again. Carefully stepping on the slippery boulders, she made her way down to the bank and sat down on the tree stump, waiting for Vartan to return.

It wasn't long before he came back. Lara tried to ignore the fact that he still managed to look sexy, even drenched in sweat. "Everything okay?" she asked, trying to keep her gaze from sliding down to his chest.

He sat down next to her, holding out an exotic looking fruit. "These are safe to eat."

Taking a round, red fuzzy fruit, Lara examined it suspiciously. "Are you sure?" At his nod, she carefully bit into it. An explosion of delicious tangy flavor burst on her palate. "This is good."

"I was here some time ago," he revealed. At her curious glance, he shrugged. "Classified mission. I learned what was edible and not."

"So you covered our tracks again?"

His lips twisted. "Yeah." A slight frown marred his brow. "Something doesn't make sense here."

Lara raised her eyebrows. "What?"

"Didn't find any," he corrected. "No tracks of anybody following us. No sign of troop movement."

That surprised her. "No?" He shook his head. "Not even some?" she persisted. "That's odd."

"My thoughts exactly." He bit into a fruit. "It's certainly unusual. I would have expected them to sound the alarm and send a whole battalion into the jungle to flush us out. You said you saw the same two pairs of soldiers watch you?"

"Yes. I'm sure of it."

"That's certainly significant. I'm beginning to suspect that the Xerexian emperor is not behind your abduction."

"If he wasn't, then who was?"

His lips tightened in a grim line. "I'd like to find out myself."

Lara munched on another piece of fruit. "Does it really matter now? I'm no longer a hostage. The only thing we need to worry about is getting out of here alive."

Vartan stared at her for a moment before his lips twitched, just a bit. "I suppose you're right. It's my military training that demands I find the answer."

With a shrug, she finished off the fruit. "How long have you been in the military?"

"Since I was old enough to be sent to military school. Kendrick and I roomed together."

Her eyebrow rose. "You've been close friends ever since?"

His smile was slightly rueful. "We're as close as brothers. His mother and my mother are cousins."

"You're a member of the royal family?" Lara blurted out in surprise.

"I've never really thought of myself as one. My father was commander general of the Bandarian army, the highest officer of the land. From the moment I was born, I was expected to follow in his footsteps."

"You didn't want to be anything else?" she asked curiously. There was a twinge of compassion in her heart. Vartan had been groomed from the cradle to fill a role his father no doubt chose for him.

"What else is there?"

"You didn't resent being expected to just follow suit? To be like your father?" Lara persisted. "It's difficult to be different. To *want* to be different."

"Like you?"

"What do you mean?" she hedged.

"You're nothing like Tamara." His expression was thoughtful, assessing. "She and your father share a special bond. They're both in public service, their chosen careers closely intertwined."

Who knew he could be so perceptive? Maybe he wasn't just all brawn and no brains. "Tamara was the perfect daughter. She had the same interests as my father. She liked guns as much as he did. Ever since we were children, she'd always tagged along with him on his political missions." She smiled ruefully. "Me? I was perfectly happy to stay at home, playing dress-up with my toy-bots."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, I suppose. I always felt left out, though. Like my father didn't really understand me. Do you know how hard it is to force yourself to be something you're really not?"

"We're all meant to do different things, Lara," he said in a level voice. "I'm sure your father never resented your choice of career or how you choose to live your life."

“No. They just believed I couldn’t be bothered with anything of major consequence in life, that I was only intent on partying and living it up.” When Vartan just stared at her, Lara felt a flush heating up her cheeks. What possessed her to talk too much? She cleared her throat. “Well, that’s enough of that.” She gave him a bright smile. “While you were gone, I found something that might interest you.”

Eager to leave their uncomfortable conversation, she led him around the curtain of water, carefully stepping over the large, smooth boulders that led up to the opening. “I thought this would be the perfect place to camp for tonight. It’s big enough,” she offered in a rush. Vartan didn’t say anything. “And we can’t be seen from the outside,” she finished lamely.

Finally, he turned away from her and examined their surroundings. Activating a light stick from his pack, he walked the length of the enclosure, inspecting it all the way to where it ended. “It’s as good as any I would have picked.”

For some reason, she felt happy that she’d done something he approved of. Turning away to cover her foolish reaction, she sat down on the soft dirt.

Vartan dropped his pack next to her. “If you don’t mind, I’ll take a dip in the water.”

He’d already pulled his shirt off. How Lara kept her jaw from dropping to the floor, she didn’t know. She was treated to the sight of his massive chest. Was he going to strip down in front of her? She tried not to gape, really she did, but it was hard not to. His tanned skin gleamed like silk under the glow of the light stick. Turning away, she told herself not to ogle him. Of course it didn’t help that he was brazen enough to strip down right in front of her, thinking nothing of putting his body on display. Shameless, that’s what he was. Utterly shameless.

Nevertheless, her eyes surreptitiously followed him as he walked out to the waterfall, clad only in boxer-like underpants. Before she could even think about it, Lara moved toward the entrance, as close as she could without being seen and peered out from behind the curtain of water to look at him. Vartan was swimming, his powerful arms cleanly slicing through the water. His strong legs kicked effortlessly, as he

navigated around the small clearing. Admiring the sleek lines of his muscles, Lara felt hot and flushed. When he stood up and began to wash himself, she couldn't look away. Vartan drew the small bar of soap around his shoulders, down his arms and around his waist.

Oh God. She knew it was wrong to spy on him, to act like some peeping woman, but she couldn't help it. There was a lithe grace to his movements, masculine yet enticing, and she was drooling. She'd never seen a man so perfectly proportioned, so strong, like he was lovingly sculpted by a master. From the corded strength of his neck, to his shoulders, and that chest -- *oh wow.*

The obvious power in his thighs brought to mind wicked thoughts. What would it be like to make love with him? Her gaze dropped down to the shorts he wore. The wet material clung to him, outlining a very healthy bulge. She swallowed. A sharp, tingling awareness rolled through her. Her nipples stiffened. A thick fist of need formed in her lower belly, and she could feel the moisture gathering between her thighs. He aroused her, there was no denying it. Her eyes caressed every single, exposed inch of his body. He was so beautiful, so mesmerizing...

Vartan looked up, right in her direction. With a gasp, Lara jumped back. Her heart thudded. He couldn't have seen her, could he? Embarrassed, she scooted back into the enclosure and tried to calm her racing pulse. It would have been humiliating if he'd caught her watching him bathe.

It wasn't long before he came back. From the corner of her eye, she followed his progress. Tiny droplets of water clung to him, rolling in slow rivulets down his skin. Lara pulled in a deep breath. What was the matter with her? She'd had lovers before. It wasn't as if she were some simpering, blushing virgin. How could he affect her so strongly? He was just a man, like any other, even though he was built like a mountain with the strength and courage of ten men.

Lara stared at his back, her eyes glued to the firm outline of his buttocks as he bent at the waist and rifled through his pack. Was he doing it on purpose? Putting himself on display, just tempting her to look? She snorted silently. It wasn't like she

couldn't look away. She could. She just chose not to. In her position, her eyes were level with the tightest, firmest ass she'd ever seen on a man. And that's exactly where her gaze was when he faced her. And suddenly, Lara found her eyes locked on that impressive bulge between his legs.

Oh my.

Up close and personal, he was even more imposing. An intense, overwhelming yearning to see him naked almost choked her. She gulped it down and forced her eyes upward, finally meeting an inscrutable silvery gaze.

Lara felt her cheeks heat up, but she refused to look away as his eyebrows rose. She cleared her throat. "I think I'll go to sleep now. Get some rest for another exhausting day tomorrow."

Their eyes held for an infinitesimal moment. When his gaze dropped to her mouth, she didn't even dare breathe. Quite involuntarily, her tongue came out and wet her dry lips. His eyes flashed with heat so quickly that she thought she must have imagined it.

Lara released a quiet sigh of relief when he handed her the shiny blanket. "Thank you." She winced at the huskiness in her voice. *Get a grip.* Activating the button that expanded it, she spread the blanket on the ground and lay down, wishing her racing pulse would settle back to normal. Closing her eyes tightly, she willed herself to go to sleep. *Don't think about the hot, molten look he gave you. It means nothing. Nothing at all.*

Chapter Four

Vartan woke up, instantly alert. A sharp, prickling awareness stabbed at his senses. His gaze swept the dim surroundings, swiftly checking if they were still alone. Something was wrong. He glanced at Lara, his body stiffening.

She was sitting up, frozen, stark terror plain on her face. A snake-like creature with two short legs stood no more than a few feet from her. *Fuck*. How long had she been like that? "Move back. Slowly," he instructed in a low voice.

"I can't." Lara's voice shook, and she visibly trembled. "I'm scared."

He moved gingerly, not wanting to startle the vicious looking creature into attacking her. "I'll take care of it."

"I-I don't think I can sit still any longer." A big, fat tear made its way slowly down her pale cheek. She began to hiccup, and her breath became choppy.

He palmed a small, metallic disk from his belt. A second later, he heard Lara's terrified cry as it whizzed by her and struck the creature cleanly across the head. It fell to the ground, lifeless.

Vartan wasted no time, rushing over to Lara's side. She was trembling, terribly pale, and had begun to inhale rapid, shallow breaths. Gods above, she was going to faint. He forced her to look at him. "Breathe slowly." She was still dazed. Cursing under his breath, he gently gripped her arms. "Lara, listen to me. Breathe slowly. In. Out. Do what I'm doing." He gripped her chin gently. "Come on, Lara. Do this with me." He breathed slowly, silently encouraging her to follow his lead. "You can do it. That's it. Slowly."

It took a few minutes before she calmed down. Vartan gathered her in his arms and rubbed her back gently, up and down. It was a while before her shaking subsided.

Her breathing gradually returned to normal, broken only by an occasional hiccup. "Better?"

Though her head was still bowed, he detected her nod.

"I would've done anything for you not to be frightened that way," he said in a gruff tone.

Lara wiped away her tears. "That's okay. It's not your fault. I just woke up myself, really, and found that -- that thing." She took a deep, shaky breath. "I know it's silly, but I just have this irrational fear of snakes and bugs and other creatures."

He continued to rub her back, liking the way she felt in his arms. "What brought that on?"

Lara gave him an embarrassed smile. "When I was a young girl, Tamara and I used to play in the woods behind our house. I hid behind some bushes, waiting for her to find me. Unfortunately, a snake found me first."

"How long before you were found?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "Hours, I suppose. Tamara felt so guilty she did my homework for me every day for a whole month. Ever since that time, I've been scared of snakes. Anything that slithers or crawls, really," she finished softly.

"I'd say you were very brave tonight."

Lara looked at him in surprise. "Brave? I hardly think so."

"I do. You sat there and got into a staring contest with it. How many people could do that?"

She laughed. "More like I was too terrified to do anything else *but* stare at it."

His gaze dropped to her lips. She really did have the most luscious lips, full and naturally red, sexy and inviting. He lowered his head, driven by an overwhelming need to kiss her. He wanted to taste her, to take those soft lips and devour her.

"Vartan?" Lara whispered.

He drew back abruptly. *Damn it.* He would have to get himself under control. This constant temptation was beginning to get on his nerves... "Tell me about the night you were abducted," he invited curtly.

Confusion flickered briefly in her eyes. "I -- I had just come from a party that night. A celebration," she added. "I... was upset. I left without informing my security."

"Upset about what?"

"Doesn't matter now," she muttered, pulling away.

He felt bereft without her in his arms. "It does matter, more than you think. It's important to analyze the events that led up to your abduction."

"I really don't want to talk about it anymore."

"The Xerexians could have somebody on the inside. If that's the case, you still won't be safe when you get back."

She looked away. "I caught my boyfriend having sex with another woman," she blurted out sharply. "That's the reason why I ran out of the building that night. I was upset. All I wanted was to get out of there."

A host of different reactions flitted through Vartan. Shock, first of all, at the thought of any man wanting to cheat on her. Then anger. If he'd been there, he would've beaten the fool to a pulp for hurting her feelings. He grunted. "When we get back, I'll kick his ass for you."

Lara gave him an I-can't-believe-you-just-said-that look. "You would do that for me?" She laughed and threw her arms around him. "Thank you. For killing that... thing -- whatever it was. Thank you for calming me down. And most of all, thank you for offering to beat up Ed'ric." Her soft chuckle was like a caress on his starved senses. "Though I suspect he's not worth it."

Vartan inwardly groaned when she ended up on his lap. He gripped her waist and tried to hold her steady. If she wriggled any more against him, she'd feel his stiff cock. "You're welcome."

Her eyes dropped to his lips. A thousand fires ignited under his skin, eating away at his already tenuous control. The air crackled with electricity. Vartan was sharply aware of her soft, subtle scent, and the curves that were pressed against him.

Their breaths mingled, hot and heavy. A flush spread over her cheeks, and she blinked her beautiful blue eyes. "Nobody's ever offered to beat up an ex-boyfriend

before," she whispered, dangerously close to his lips. "Well, only Tamara of course. She never could stand the men I went out with."

This close, the color of her eyes appeared more vivid. He cleared his throat. "It's of little trouble. Just to teach him a lesson, you understand."

"I don't even want to see him again. I want nothing more to do with him. He's not worth it."

At the mixture of admiration and lust in her gaze, Vartan decided at that moment he'd look for the bastard anyway. Just to make him pay for hurting Lara. That bastard must have been blind for cheating on her anyway. Even with her hair in tousled disarray around her shoulders, her face clear of any artificial enhancers, Lara was naturally beautiful. His gaze dropped to her lips. What would it be like to kiss her? Would her lips feel as soft as they looked? Under the thin material of the shirt, her nipples were two hard points that rubbed against his chest. His mouth watered, hungry for a taste.

"Stop it," she whispered. That brought him back up to her face. "Don't look at me that way."

"Like what?"

"Like you're imagining me without clothes on."

"I'm not," he denied. "I'm imagining what you would taste like."

The air thickened. The heat between them sizzled, rising to the surface, intensifying quickly. It cocooned them in sudden intimacy.

There was an answering excitement in her eyes. "You don't even like me."

"That's not true at all." His hands spread down her back, cupping her ass. He'd always maintained a careful leash on his emotions, but this time, he felt control slipping away. He wanted Lara, and he was tired of hiding it. "I've thought of little else but fucking you since the first time I saw you."

If he'd shocked her with his blunt words, she didn't show it. Lara licked her lips. "I -- It's probably just the enforced togetherness, you know?" She sounded a little *too* breathless and unconvinced by her own words. She wasn't moving away either,

squirming restlessly on his lap. Lust kicked him savagely in the gut, intensifying the feelings already swamping him. "You and I are alone here in the middle of nowhere. It's a natural reaction."

Vartan snorted. "I was once marooned on Quadrant Five in Harnia, alone for one week with an intelligence officer from Suraya Minor. It never once occurred to me to fuck her just because we were together." Hunger raced along his veins. Every nerve ending in his body clenched. He lifted her until she straddled him, his cock cradled intimately between her thighs. Rubbing against her mound, he made sure she felt every inch of his shaft. "You, on the other hand, don't even need to do anything and I want to fuck you. I've been aching to lay you down and sink my cock into you over and over, until I'm fully satisfied." His eyes locked with hers. "You got another theory?"

Lara was stunned. Vartan's frank words stoked the fire within her to a full-blown explosion. In all her life, she'd never once been faced with this blunt, no-holds-barred declaration. There was none of the usual coy flirtation she was used to. No sidelong glances, no witty repartee, or the sly references to a budding attraction. Vartan just came right out and said what he felt. For the life of her, she was tongue-tied, unable to think beyond how her pussy was clenching hungrily at his words.

His scent teased her nostrils, adding to the layer of fog swirling in her brain. Her breath came fast and heavy. When he cupped her breast through the thin material of the shirt, she almost jumped. His palm curved around the mound, nestling the weight before squeezing lightly. Vartan thumbed the nipple, bringing it to stinging, pulsing life. "Tell me you want the same thing I do," he demanded huskily.

Heat spread over her and an intense firestorm gathered between her thighs. She trembled, engulfed in the sheer sexual spell he was weaving around her. Yes, she wanted him, but at what cost? For God's sake, he didn't even like her. Not in the least. He thought she was a shallow, superficial version of her sister. Gripping his wrist, she regretfully pushed his hand away. "It would be a mistake."

His jaw tightened. "Mistake?"

She nearly buckled and surrendered under the taunting challenge in his voice. Lara pulled in a deep breath. "You and I have nothing in common. This -- thing between us, it's just physical. It'll pass."

"Are you telling me you don't want me?" He thrust against her, casually brushing against her clit.

Lara moaned. "No," she whispered, desperately wishing he would believe her and let her stew in her own lie.

Vartan tightened his arms around her. His eyes were so dark, so hot. He swooped in, pushing her down on the blanket before capturing her lips with a ferocity that left her breathless. He thrust his tongue inside, sweeping all of her protests aside, tasting her, learning the secret recesses of her mouth. Again and again he kissed her, deep, drugging kisses that left her reeling and breathless. "You don't want me? Is that why you're shaking?"

Lara whimpered and shook her head in mute denial. Plenty of men had kissed her in the past, and she'd enjoyed most of them, but none, not one, came even close to what Vartan made her feel.

"I knew you'd taste this way. Too good," he muttered. He nuzzled her neck, his hand swiftly disposing of the shirt she wore. Before Lara could do more than gasp, his lips descended on the tops of her breasts. Her nipples tightened in anticipation, blood rushing to the tips, a sharp tingling making them throb and pulse with hunger.

"V-Vartan." She pulled in a shuddering breath. "Let me go."

Instead, he slid lower down her front and drew level with her chest. "You're free to go. I'm not holding you anymore."

With a start, she realized she was indeed free. *Push him away while you can.* Vartan watched her closely, his nostrils flaring. Lara bit her lip in defeat. She couldn't do it. She couldn't push him off her. He exhaled -- looking relieved -- before he blew on a nipple. Lara jerked against him, trembling with need. Her mind fogged over, waiting, wanting him to pull the stiff crest between his lips and suck. She squirmed, thinking she wouldn't last another second when he finally curled his tongue around the nubbin.

She whimpered.

His hand slid up her thigh, his palm hot and dry. "Your pussy's wet, isn't it?"

Lara's mind whirled. His tongue pulled and prodded, he nipped and tugged at her nipple. He was driving her insane. "W-What?" she asked, her mind in a daze.

His fingers strummed a mind-numbing beat up her leg, treading dangerously close to the wet juncture that would prove once and for all that she was a liar. It seemed her brain had short-circuited, concentrating solely on the sensations his marauding mouth and lips generated.

When he skimmed up her inner thigh, Lara didn't protest. She was lost in a fevered haze, waiting for the touch of his fingers in her overheated pussy. When it came, the breath rushed from her lungs. He slipped inside the edge of her panties, tracing the puffy lips before delving in the wet folds.

Vartan made a guttural sound of satisfaction. "By the gods, you're so wet."

She panted. His wonderful, talented fingers were driving her crazy, swiping at her swollen clit before plunging inside her pussy. "Ohhh," she cried out. Her body was starved, primed by hours of fantasizing about him, watching him bathe, just *wanting*. Lara felt herself edging toward the precipice, ready to fall headlong into a screaming orgasm. Oh God, oh God, oh God... almost... there...

Then he stopped. With a moan of protest, Lara opened her eyes.

Vartan's eyes were a stormy gray. "I want you. You want me." He palmed her mound, nudging her clit. "Does this feel like a mistake? Answer me."

Lara trembled. "No." It felt so *right*.

"You and me. Together. Only while we're here in Utuja."

She'd never felt this kind of wanting, this hunger. "A-and after?"

"We go our separate ways," he rasped. "I'm not looking for a commitment."

"Neither am I," she whispered, driven to keep just a little bit of pride.

"Then we understand each other?" At her nod, he kissed her. Quick as lightning, Vartan disposed of her flimsy underwear. She lay shaking, waiting for the next touch that would assuage the terrible hunger coalescing between her legs.

"Are you scared?"

She shook her head mutely, eyes locked on his lips.

"You should be," he growled. "I've never felt this way before. My cock has never been this hard, Lara. I just want to fuck you, make you beg for mercy, then fuck you some more."

His graphic words brought erotic images to mind, and she felt the last of her resistance drain away. Who was she kidding? She'd been walking around in a state of permanent arousal, and trying to fend off the teeth-gritting need was a hopeless battle.

With a rough groan, Vartan captured her mouth, slipping his tongue inside. A burst of deliciously male taste exploded on her senses, dark and spicy. Forbidden. She was greedy for more and eagerly dueled with him.

He pressed tiny little kisses down her neck, licking a trail toward the top of her chest. When he merely skimmed the curve of her breast, she uttered a protest.

"Patience," he growled against her skin.

"Patience?" she echoed, disbelieving. She rubbed her thigh against his massive erection. "You don't feel patient to me."

"You're not helping here," he muttered.

"Vartan." Lara tried to put her nipple in the path of his lips. "Suck it, damn you," she demanded in a hoarse whisper. The stiff crest stood out, the soft, fleshy nub protruding proudly. She cried out as he encased the tip in the warm wetness of his mouth. "Yessss. Just like that."

He wasn't being gentle, far from it. Vartan sucked her deeply, tightly, worrying her nipple with the rasp of his teeth, before soothing her with his tongue. Gentleness wasn't what Lara needed right now. She needed it hard. She needed it rough. After two days of constant awareness of this man, days during which she stayed perpetually aroused, she wanted every single, mind-destroying sensation he could give her.

Plunging her fingers in his thick hair, she pulled him closer. Vartan obliged, sucking as much of her flesh into his mouth as he could.

"Bite me." Lara cupped her breasts and rubbed them against his lips. "I need it."

He gave in, biting down just hard enough to cause a little bit of pain, yet it was pleasure she felt. She cried out, and gasped a whimper for more. Ignoring her plea, he trailed biting little kisses down to her navel, slipping his tongue in and out of the little button. Lara arched, her breathing choppy, and she felt feverish. "Come to me now."

"I've thought of doing this since the first moment I saw you. I've no intention of rushing."

She pulled in a shaky breath as he skimmed her hipbone with his lips, drifting close to her mound. She'd never before felt this overwhelming hunger, this greedy little need that pushed her to ask for more and more. Her clit pulsed, swelling in anticipation. As his warm breath feathered over the top of her sex, she groaned, splaying her legs wide open.

"Hold your pussy open," he ordered.

Trembling, Lara did as he commanded, spreading her pussy open with her fingers. She shivered at the fierce look in his eyes. She could feel tiny drops of moisture coating her inner thighs but she didn't care. She felt wanton. She felt uninhibited. God, she wanted his mouth *there*.

Vartan touched her clit with the lightest of caresses. "So swollen and so red." He blew on it, a soft gush of warm air. She whimpered, feeling more cream gather in the soaked folds. When he licked the aching nub, she shuddered.

He clamped his hands on her upper thighs, holding her still, keeping her exposed to him. Lara was beginning to despair that he was ever going to do anything more when Vartan latched on to her clit and sucked.

She screamed. Her cry echoed off the walls, instantly drowned out by the sound of rushing water. His tongue, his wonderful tongue, explored the slick folds, seeking out secret hollows and curves. Lara shot straight to heaven as he feasted on her. When finally, finally he pushed his tongue inside her slit, she thought she would faint. "Oh yesssss."

"Gods above, you're delicious." He hummed against her clit, before delving again and again inside her pussy. She was delirious, riding high on the sensations. Lara

bit her lip and clamped her hands on his shoulders, digging into his skin. He was ravenous for her, and she loved every second of it.

Vartan sucked on her clit, raking it with his teeth, until she was crying out incoherently. A hard shudder tore through her. She was going to come. "V-Vartan," she cried out. She grabbed onto his hair and held on for dear life as the biggest orgasm of her life slammed into her. Her body bowed, every nerve ending exploding to life. She shook, trembling and whimpering his name. The swell of pleasure was so intense it bordered on pain. On and on it went, fueled by Vartan's unrelenting attack on her pussy. Just when she thought the tidal wave was ebbing, he slipped his tongue high up inside her sheath and sucked her essence, driving her up and over once more. "Yes. Yes. Yes." She rode the crest again, driven by his wicked, skillful tongue. Her body shuddered with aftershocks, and she felt boneless, drained and utterly pleased.

He reared up over her body, his eyes glittering with intense heat. "Ask me to fuck you, Lara. I want to hear you say it."

Lara moaned. Even though she'd just had the most unbelievable orgasm in her life, her body once again hummed with need. Already, the now familiar hunger pangs reverberated through her pussy. "Fuck me, Vartan. I need you to fuck me."

Chapter Five

Coming from Lara's lips, said in a breathy whisper, the words struck a chord within Vartan. He positioned the head of his cock, broad and dripping with pre-cum, at the entrance to her vagina. With one hard thrust, he buried himself balls-deep in her slick channel.

Lara's beautiful eyes fluttered. "Oh," she exclaimed, breathless and shaky. "So big."

Had he not been desperately fighting for control, Vartan would have smiled at that. As it was, he was having a hell of a time trying to regain a semblance of hold over the raging lust that was eating him up. "You okay?" he asked through gritted teeth.

She was squirming, shifting slightly. "F-Fine. Just -- just trying to... You're in so deep," she ended on a shudder.

He grimaced, tightening his grip on her. "Don't move for a minute," he muttered. Being clasped in the softest, tightest pussy he'd ever had was driving him crazy. All he wanted to do was to thrust in hard, driving lunges to satisfy the hunger in his soul. Once he started, he knew he wouldn't be able to stop.

Tightening his jaw, he cursed his cock, which seemed to have a mind of its own. It was so sensitive, so susceptible to the grasp of her slick walls, that he felt like he could rut in her forever. "I've got to fuck you now." Slowly, so slowly, he began to move, withdrawing incrementally, gritting his teeth at the sharp pleasure that turned his blood molten.

Lara was bucking against his hold, trying to move, protesting his tight grip on her hips. "Vartan --" Her cry was one of protest, ending on a breathless moan as he slid out all the way then plunged back in.

"I told you not to move, damn you," he growled.

"Why?" she cried. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"I'm trying to make it last," he blurted on a hard breath. "It feels so good, I just have to --"

She cupped his jaw. "I want it hard and fast, Vartan. We can go slow next time."

His cock swelled even more at her plea. "You shouldn't have said that," he groaned.

"Why?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

A tremulous half-smile formed on her lips. "You won't. Give me everything you've got. I want all of it."

That proved to be the death knell to his already strained control. Vartan let go. He slammed into her, again and again, penetrating deeper with every stroke, nudging her womb with every hard thrust. Her moans matched the cadence of their hips, wild and earthy, broadcasting her pleasure better than words. He pulled a succulent nipple deep into the depths of his mouth, feeling her vaginal muscles tighten on his cock in time to his suckling of the sensitive tip.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," she chanted mindlessly.

Being inside Lara was sublime, her tender pussy clasp and unclasp on his cock, lovingly tightening on the shaft, driving him insane. He wasn't going to last. Ramming inside her over and over again, Vartan rubbed a finger over her clit, wanting her with him every step of the way.

Her eyes shot open a second before she came. Her inner muscles clenched tightly around his cock, milking him forcefully. His balls tightened, signaling the imminence of his own orgasm. He groaned, a low guttural sound, just a second before he shot his seed deep into the trembling walls of her pussy.

Lara cried out, jerking against him, her nails digging into his ass. Sweat bathed her skin, her lips deep red where she'd bitten them when lost in the throes of pleasure.

Vartan jammed his cock against her clit, rotating his hips, prolonging every single fiery sensation that was flowing through him. She was sobbing, soft sounds of

exhausted pleasure escaping from her lips. He gathered her in his arms, burying his face in the curve of her neck. It was a while before he recovered enough to move again. Lara was motionless beneath him, soft and relaxed.

He drew the damp hair away from her cheek. Something tugged at his heart as he looked down at her. She looked so beautiful, so *right* in his arms. He didn't want to withdraw from her, to lose that connection. His cock was where it should be. That was another first. Usually after fucking, he couldn't wait to get away from a woman. Pleasure was a fleeting thing; once fulfilled there were no lingering desires. "Lara?"

Her eyes opened, drowsy and sated. "Hmmm?"

He grinned. She looked well and truly fucked. He liked that. "Go to sleep. I'll make sure there aren't any more of those creepy crawly things you hate so much."

Lara smiled, already half-asleep. "'Kay. I trust you."

Long after she'd settled in a deep slumber, Vartan stayed awake, leaning on one elbow, relishing the freedom of just being able to look at her, committing to memory her perfect features.

* * *

The next day, the rain came.

It wasn't just rain. It was a torrential downpour, covering the whole jungle in tropical wetness, and showed no signs of abating. Even though she knew it was mid-morning, she couldn't tell it by looking at the bleak, gray light. Lara wrapped the blanket around her, chewing her nail as she waited for Vartan to return. He'd already gone by the time she woke up. Where was he? She worried, even though she knew he could take care of himself.

Memories of the night before came flooding back and she flushed at the remembered pleasure. She'd never been as uninhibited as she'd been with Vartan. So wild. So hungry. Even now, her skin tingled in remembrance. He'd given her everything she'd needed and more. It was as if he read her mind and knew what she wanted, when she wanted it. He'd stoked the fire within her, taking her on a roller coaster ride of hunger and satisfaction. Her nipples tightened. He'd whispered erotic

words in her ear, sexual words that spurred her on to new heights. God, he'd been unbelievable, alternately rough and gentle. She'd teetered on the edge of insanity as pleasure consumed her.

Right then, the man who occupied her thoughts came back with an armful of fruits.

Her gaze lingered on his lips and her well-used pussy rippled in response. She groaned. Great, he'd turned her into a nymphomaniac. "Hi. How does it look out there?"

Vartan deposited the food on top of his pack. "It doesn't look too good. The rain is coming down hard, and the river is swollen. I think there's a chance of flooding if it doesn't let up."

"It's not safe for us to go out there?"

"No. It looks like we're staying here until the rain stops."

Their gazes collided. Lara licked her lips, warmed by the heat that lit up his eyes. "That wouldn't be so bad, would it?"

He gave her a small smile. "It wouldn't be bad at all."

"How long do we have? A day?"

"Two at the most."

Two days with Vartan. Now why did that sound like the most glorious thing in the world? "What are we going to do for two days?"

The look he gave her left no doubt as to what he'd like to do. Vartan was instantly at her side. "Hungry?"

Her nipples tightened at the predatory expression he wore. "Oh yes. Starving, in fact." She released the blanket, letting it fall to the soft, damp ground, baring her body. "We have two days, Vartan. Let's make the most of it." Wrapping her arms around him, she licked the damp skin on his shoulder.

His palms were hot when they landed on her waist. "Let's not waste any time then." Bending, he raked her lips with his teeth, nipping gently. It was all the more intoxicating because she knew his strength. She held on, gripping his arms tightly.

When his tongue made a soothing pass over her swollen lip, the slightly rough, raspy feel of it made her shiver.

"Kiss me," she demanded in a hoarse whisper.

Vartan gave a short, strained laugh. "Patience is definitely not one of your virtues." His tone might have been teasing, but he gripped her hair and held her steady, angling her face to receive his kiss. At the melding of their mouths, Lara shuddered. It felt so good to be kissed by him. Her tongue met his and drew him deeper inside the waiting cavern of her mouth. His taste was all male, spicy and rich. This was a man who didn't do anything in half measures. When he kissed her, he really kissed her. She went weak at the knees, and through the haze fogging up her brain, Lara wanted to laugh at the clichéd thought.

In the next instant, all amusement fled as Vartan licked his way down her neck, scraping his teeth over her sensitive skin. He didn't stop until he came level with her breasts. With a growl, he sucked one throbbing nipple deeply. Lara jerked against him, feeling the strong push and pull clear to her clenching pussy.

He left her for a second to arrange the blanket on the soft, damp ground. Even that short separation she protested. She wanted all of him *now*. Vartan drew her down, quickly coming over her. He kissed her again, long, drugging kisses that left her breathless and far from satisfied. He stood up and undressed. Lara salivated as he worked on the buttons of his trousers, his impressive erection straining the material. She got on her knees. "Let me help you."

Vartan had gone still as her hands brushed against his cock. His size made the maneuver difficult, but finally she was able to free his shaft from its confines. Her breath caught as the thick shaft of flesh jutted proudly, hard and sexy, with a broad, ridged head. He was hot to the touch, the heat seeping through her palm as she tried to encircle him with her fingers.

"Suck it," he growled. "Take me in your mouth, Lara. Let me feel your tongue."

With a soft moan, she did as he asked. She stroked him with her tongue, sending light fluttering sweeps over the ridged head. Wanting to learn his flavor, she licked him

all over, up and down, side to side, tasting his essence. Opening wide, she enclosed him in her mouth.

“Oh, yeah,” he groaned. “Take me deeper.”

Gripping the base of his cock, she took him in deep again. Vartan tipped her face up, stopping her movements. His eyes gleamed hotly. “I want to fuck your mouth. Can you handle it?”

A thrill went through her and she managed to nod. His hands curved around her jaw, holding her steady at a perfect angle. Lara relished the feeling of being mastered, of being helpless. At the same time, she felt extremely powerful knowing she brought him such pleasure.

True to his word, he fucked her mouth with quick, short strokes, venturing a little deeper each time, murmuring sexy words, encouraging her to take a little bit more. Lara moaned. She wanted him to come in her mouth, wanted to take his seed and drink it to the last drop. When he pulled away from her, she protested.

“No more,” he warned harshly. “I’m close to coming.”

She licked her lips. “I want you to come in my mouth.”

“Later. Right now I want to fuck your pussy.”

Vartan positioned her on her knees in front of him. Oh yes, she wanted him this way. Impatient. Eager to fuck her. Looking over her shoulder, she watched him wrestle visibly for control as he gripped her hips tightly. Placing the tip of his shaft at the opening of her pussy, he rammed inside, the force of his entry making her gasp out loud.

He gave her no time to recover, plumbing her depths with deep, penetrating strokes that drove the breath from her lungs. Vartan pulled her up, her back to his front, and reached around to fondle her breasts. Lara tossed her head, leaning back, letting him do what he wanted, finding herself a mere instrument of pleasure. She wrapped one arm around the back of his neck, clinging to him, wanting to be closer.

His chest heaved with every breath he took. Their ragged gasps and moans mingled. Lara was delirious with pleasure. He strummed her swollen clit, whispering

in her ear about what he felt, what he'd like to do to her, what he wanted to make her feel. It all sounded so basic, so honest. So real. And just like that, she came. She cried out, his name on her lips. He was the only solid thing she could hang onto as her orgasm roared through her body.

"Gods above," he muttered in a raw tone. "You're so beautiful." Shifting once more, he slipped out of her pussy and laid her gently back down on the blanket. "You were made for me."

She choked. "Yes." Her skin was slick with perspiration, and her hair lay in damp tangles around her face. At that moment, nothing mattered except the savage pleasure of being intimately connected with him. "Come inside me," she invited huskily.

With a groan of surrender, he fell on her like a man pushed to his limits. He pummeled her with deep strokes, blurring the line where her body ended and his began. It was a tumultuous ride, fierce and uncompromising. Control was a thing of the past as Vartan thrust inside her again and again. Lara caught her breath at the unbelievable pleasure as he rode her hard, catapulting her toward another climax. She gasped and came undone. Above her, Vartan let out a rough curse and with one mighty heave, buried his cock deep in her pussy, filling her with his hot seed.

* * *

Vartan pulled Lara close to him, slipping his thigh between hers. The rain still hadn't let up but he wasn't complaining. It was fine with him. There was nothing he'd rather do at the moment than lie here with Lara in his arms.

"I applied to become a Special Services agent, you know."

At her sudden revelation, he looked down at her in surprise. "You did?"

Her lips tilted in a rueful smile. "Can you believe it? Me? A Special Services agent?" She shrugged. "Didn't make it. I wasn't good enough."

He heard the faint disappointment in her voice. "What do you mean you weren't good enough?"

"I wasn't. I failed the weapons and hostage test." She rubbed her cheek against his chest, one fingertip tracing invisible patterns on his skin.

He smiled. That was one of the things he'd noticed about Lara. She was very affectionate, and liked to touch, whether it was just his hand, his fingers, or even his arm.

"I had to prove my proficiency in handling weapons. The instructor took us through a hostage simulation program."

Simulation programs were primitive training tools, but they showed how well a recruit would react in a life and death situation. This kind of training had long been considered obsolete in Bandar, but it was still widely employed in the Earth Federation. "How did you do?"

"I failed it three times," she confessed, her tone miserable. "I kept on shooting the bad guys *and* the hostage. Finally, after the third disaster, the instructor pulled me aside and advised me to find another career."

Vartan pulled her close, swallowing his laughter. "I'm sorry."

She hit him on the arm. "It's not funny. I was so disappointed." Her voice was muffled against his chest. "I kept it a secret, wanting to surprise Dad and Tamara when I eventually passed."

"What did they say?"

"I never told them. To this day, Tamara doesn't know that I was once a recruit of the same agency she used to work for. I wasn't about to tell Dad, either. I didn't want him pulling strings to get me in." She glared at him. "And you can stop laughing at me."

He couldn't help it. He chuckled. "I don't mean to laugh. I just can't imagine you as a Special Services agent." Vartan leaned over her. "You're too beautiful to be one. You'd only be a distraction to your team." He dropped a kiss on her upturned lips. "Anyway, I'm glad you didn't pass. Otherwise, I wouldn't have had to come here and rescue you."

Lara kissed him back. "I just wanted to have something in common with Tamara and my father."

"She wanted to come here herself, you know."

She laughed. "I'll bet Kendrick had a fit about that. I'm surprised Tamara didn't insist on getting her own way. She's pretty hard to dissuade once she's made up her mind."

He grinned. "She's met her match in Kendrick." Vartan buried his face in her neck, committing her scent to his memory.

"Tell me something about yourself."

"What do you want to know?"

Lara smoothed the hair over his brow. "Anything. Whatever you want to tell me that you haven't told anyone else."

Vartan balked at that. By nature, he was a very private person, not given to talking about himself. He was just about to tell her exactly that when he saw the sweetly hopeful expression Lara wore on her face. How could he disappoint her? "I ran away from the military academy when I was fourteen and stowed away on my father's ship."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see him. I was at school most of the time, and when I was home, he wasn't there. Always off on some mission somewhere. When he found me on his ship, he beat me to within an inch of my life."

She gasped. "Oh, Vartan."

"I deserved it. I knew I shouldn't have run away from the academy. Stowing away on his ship could've jeopardized his mission and endangered my life."

"But you were just a boy," she murmured.

"A boy who should have known better," he corrected. "From the moment I could understand, my duty was instilled in me. I was supposed to follow in my father's footsteps, keep up the prestige of the family name. I learned a hard lesson that day, one that I've never forgotten."

"You loved your father."

"Yeah, I did." He paused. "He was a hard taskmaster, a stern disciplinarian. His biggest fault may be that he didn't know how to separate the military commander from the father."

"Did he send you back home?"

His lips tilted. "No. He said that since I was smart enough to get on board, then I was smart enough to earn my keep during the mission. He put me in the hands of the crew chief and put me to work."

"So you got to spend time with him?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I did. During that time, I learned more about him than I ever would have in a whole lifetime."

"Was it worth it then? Running away from the academy and stowing away on your father's ship?" she asked curiously.

"Yes. We grew closer at that time, and I began to understand why he was the way he was."

"He loved you in his own way," she said softly.

"Yeah, he did," he agreed. "By the time he died, I knew I'd made him proud. My service to Bandar was, and continues to be, a source of family pride."

She played with the soft hair on his chest. "You'll be a good father someday."

He laughed. "Right now, I've got my hands full trying to keep the women in the palace happy now that Kendrick is no longer available to them."

At his careless words, Lara became quiet. An uncomfortable silence descended on them. Vartan cursed his tongue. What possessed him to say that? "Lara --"

Her smile looked forced as she put a finger on his lips. "No need to explain. It's not like we have a claim on each other."

We have no claim on each other. How come he didn't like the sound of that? He'd like to put a claim on her, her body, her pussy. He had no right. He managed to nod. "When we leave Utuja, you'll go back to your life and I'll go back to mine."

Her lashes lowered, hiding her gaze from him. "Of course. We both know we'll part ways when we get back home."

Tense silence ensued. Gone was the easy camaraderie, the relaxed mood between them. For the first time in his life, Vartan was at a loss for words. He didn't know how to break the sudden ice that had descended between them.

"Foot massages," she declared.

"What?" he asked, confused.

"Foot massages," she repeated, giving him a bright smile. "I'm a sucker for them. We're talking about things nobody else knows about us, remember?"

Vartan recognized it for the change of subject that it was. It was clear she wanted to avoid any unpleasant moments. He smiled and sat up, taking her foot in his hand. Gods above, even her foot was soft, dainty and small, as perfect and as beautiful as the rest of her. He began to knead her pliant flesh.

Lara released a blissful sigh. "Ohhh. That feels heavenly."

"If I'd known this was all I needed for you to be putty in my hands," he teased, "I would've done this from the start."

"You didn't like me at all when we first met, remember?" she reminded him.

"Is that what you think?" He chuckled, though his eyes were serious. "All I could think about was getting you out of that chair and getting into your panties."

"Hmm," she murmured sensuously. "Really?"

He slid his hand up her calf to her thigh. "You didn't notice? I had a hard-on that wouldn't go away."

She turned toward him, parting her legs, inviting his touch. "Well. We can't have that now, can we?"

"It would be cruel and unusual punishment." Vartan kissed her shoulders and then the base of her throat.

As her arms wrapped around him, enveloping him in her unique womanly scent, he realized that there was nowhere else he'd rather be. The Xerexians be damned. If they were stuck here in Utuja forever, he would be perfectly happy. As long as he had her in his arms.

* * *

The next day, the rains finally stopped. As if by unspoken agreement, they didn't talk much as they gathered their things and covered up any sign of their presence. Vartan mentioned his ship was no more than a day's travel away. Sadness filled her at the thought. She didn't want their time to end.

"Ready?" He held out a hand.

Lara placed her hand in his and was surprised when he threaded his fingers through hers. That little gesture alone lifted her spirits. She looked back one last time at the little enclosure that had given her so many memories with Vartan before following him out from behind the curtain of water.

It was a little cooler in the forest today. The air was clear and crisp, and everything seemed greener, washed clean by the storm. She was silent as she followed Vartan carefully down the boulders. The spray of water felt wonderful, and he allowed her a few minutes to freshen up before urging her to come along.

It didn't escape her notice that he seemed subdued, too. For some reason, he didn't talk much either. She understood, for she was dealing with a variety of emotions herself. Talking was the last thing she felt like doing at the moment, preferring instead to savor her memories.

"We've already lost time because of the rain yesterday," he explained, stopping for a moment. "Let me know if you're tired and we'll stop, but I'd like to get to the ship before nightfall."

Lara viewed that with mixed feelings. Getting to the ship today would mean that their time together was dwindling fast. She forced a smile to her lips. "I will."

They stayed close to the riverbank, following the flow of water as it wound its way through the jungle. She munched on a piece of fruit and drank water as she followed behind him, trying to analyze her feelings. Shouldn't she be happy that she'd be back home with her family soon? Why, then, did she feel disappointment like a heavy weight on her chest? With every step she took, she knew her time with Vartan was running out. Soon it would be over. It should be enough that they had been together, no matter how brief. *Don't ask for more.*

Though their pace was steady, it wasn't as punishing as before. He seemed to pace himself along with her. The hours and the miles went by, and they communicated with small touches and smiles, more effective and louder than words could ever be.

As the day wore on, the temperature rose. A couple of times, they stopped and Lara was able to splash water on her face. Her shirt was plastered to her body and sweat ran down her back. By the middle of the afternoon, exhaustion dogged her steps but she ignored it. Like him, she was determined to reach his ship and leave this place. The going became more difficult as Vartan veered away from the river and headed up a steep incline.

"Remind me to re-program my personal trainer-bot to change my workouts," she huffed. "I'm so not in shape."

He chuckled and grabbed her hand. "Here. Let me help you." Thankful for his assistance, Lara hung on to him as they made their way up. He didn't seem tired, his breathing even and steady. "When we get to the top, we should see my ship down in the little valley at the bottom of the hill." He spoke in low tones. "That was the spot with the least interference."

"We won't have any trouble taking off, will we?" she asked doubtfully, keeping her voice down. At the faintly offended look on his face, she couldn't help but smile. "I was just kidding."

They reached the top. Vartan cocked his head before dropping to the ground and pulling her down with him.

"What --"

"Shh." He looked down at the valley before them, his face grim. "They found it."

Lara followed his gaze. His ship was big, sleek and long. There were four Xerexian soldiers standing by the rear of the space cruiser. "How are we going to get to the ship if they're guarding it? Do you think they've gotten inside and disabled it somehow?" she whispered.

"No. It's secured by a biometric lock. Without my palm print, they won't be able to open the hatch."

"What are we going to do?"

"*You* stay here. I'll handle them."

Lara realized that wasn't an ego driven statement. He was simply stating a truth.

"There are four of them."

Vartan smiled with relish. "Even better. The more the merrier."

"What do you want me to do?"

The look he gave her was stern. "Wait for me here. Don't move."

"Okay."

"I mean it, Lara." He was utterly serious. "I'll take care of them. But I need to know you're safe."

"I promise. I'll be right here. I won't move a muscle."

He handed her the small blaster. "If anybody comes, shoot. Don't hesitate. I don't know how many are lurking around. Stay here where you're hidden. Is that clear?"

She gulped and nodded. "Yes." Actually shoot somebody? Hell yeah, she could do it.

For a second, his eyes softened and he cupped a hand around her jaw. "Don't make me worry about you."

"I promise. Be careful."

His look was wholly male and confident as he bent and pressed a quick kiss on her lips. "No problem there." Then he was gone, stealthily making his way to the other side of his ship.

Lara's heart pounded in fear. She knew Vartan could handle the Xerexians, but that didn't stop her from being scared. There were only four in plain sight, but there could be more around for all she knew. As quietly as she could, she crawled to the edge, peering over the rise. Her stomach plummeted with dread when she saw four more soldiers come into sight and position themselves at the front of the ship. Oh, no. There were a total of eight of them down there. Vartan was vastly outnumbered. Walking right into a trap. *Think, Lara. Do something.* She chewed on her lip. There had to be a way

to warn him, but how? Her gaze swept the area, frantically trying to figure out where he could be.

At that moment, Vartan emerged from the thick brush and surprised the soldiers standing behind the ship. Wide-eyed, Lara watched him take on all four of them. It all happened so fast. She didn't dare blink; she would have missed it if she did. He executed flawless, deadly moves that disabled two instantly. Although terror clogged her throat, Lara silently cheered him on. The third soldier tried to jump him, but Vartan fended him off with a single blow. The remaining soldier managed to pull his weapon and fire off a shot, the sound echoing in the air. She squeezed her eyes shut, desperately hoping Vartan wasn't hit. *Please, please, be alive. Don't get hurt.* Relief filled her when she opened her eyes in time to see Vartan knock the weapon from the soldier's hand and tackle him to the ground.

There was more trouble brewing. The four Xerexians standing at the front of the ship all turned at the sound and ran toward it. Lara gasped in fear. She had to help him. Now.

What can I do? She had to try to divert the soldiers' attention somehow, to pull some of them away. Her pulse quickened. Could she do it? After a momentary flicker of fear, she pulled in a deep breath. Why not? This was an excellent chance to prove to herself and Vartan that she could take care of herself when things turned dicey. She flinched as the four converged on Vartan at once. He took a hit to the side, nearly knocking him over. A second later, the sound of crunching bone reached her ears as Vartan retaliated with a well-placed blow to the jaw. But the others managed to jump him and knock him to the ground.

Gripping the blaster tightly in her hand, her heart pounding with fear, Lara flicked the safety off and aimed the blaster. *I can do this. I can shoot one of them.* Sweat was dripping down her brow. Her hands shook. They were moving around too much, grappling with each other. What if she shot Vartan by accident?

"Damn it," she muttered frantically. There was no more time to waste. She needed to do something *now*. "Shit." Lara stood up, breathed deeply, and aimed the

weapon to the sky and fired the blaster. The report echoed in the sudden silence, and they all turned to look at her.

Vartan cursed, loud and clear. Lara winced. *Oh well, he can kill me later.* The objective now was to lure some of them away and give him a fighting chance. With one last look over her shoulder, she began to run.

Behind her, she heard shouts and exclamations before the heavy thud of footsteps began to follow in her wake. She ran, weaving and dodging the twigs and branches in her way, hoping she had enough of a head start to get into some kind of position so she could shoot them. *I hope I did the right thing.* Otherwise, she'd just sealed their fate.

Spotting a bulky tree surrounded by thick brush, she quickly skidded to a stop and hid behind it. Panting heavily, she sent a quick prayer to God and gripped the blaster tightly.

Lara peered from behind the tree and spotted two soldiers bearing down on her. Pulling in a fortifying breath, she knelt down and got into position, aiming the blaster. *Point. Aim. Shoot.* Her palms were damp with nerves. *Steady hand. One target at a time.* She desperately tried to remember the things they taught her at her brief stay at the Special Services academy. *I can do this. One shot is all I need. Just one at a time.*

Aiming the blaster at one of the steadily progressing Xerexian soldiers, she pulled the trigger. Her eyes widened when one fell to the ground. She ducked behind the tree once more. A hysterical giggle rose to her throat. *Oh my God! I can't believe I did that.*

One down, one to go.

Her heart was trying to pound its way out of her chest, and she was breathing as if she'd just run ten miles. Bolstered by the knowledge that she had managed to fire one shot and get a hit, she got herself ready to do it again and stole a quick look from behind the stump. The soldier was gone. Where had he gone?

Lara screamed in terror as a pair of arms pulled her up from where she sat. Instinctively struggling, she tried to point the blaster and get a shot, but she was held fast. She kicked and flailed, fighting with all her might.

"Stop it," a male voice growled. "It's me."

She froze. "Vartan?"

"What the hell were you thinking? Didn't I tell you to stay right where you were?" he roared in fury.

"There were more of them than we thought," she replied, a little dazed. "Wait, there was another one coming after me..."

"Taken care of." He gripped her arms tightly. "I told you to stay put."

"You were outnumbered. I had to do something."

His nostrils flared. "You put yourself in jeopardy. That was a stupid thing to do. I didn't need your help."

Lara understood his concern, and didn't really mind that he was furious. "I'm sorry." Wrapping her arms around him, she rubbed her face against his chest. "I did good, though, didn't I? I remembered to take off the safety. I aimed and fired. One shot took him down."

Vartan uttered a loud sigh. After a moment, his arms went around her, pulling her close to him. "Yeah. You did good," he admitted grudgingly.

She smiled, pleased. "Thanks."

"I was terrified when you suddenly stood up and fired that shot into the air." Reluctant amusement tempered his words. "I was half afraid you'd shoot me."

Lara socked him in the arm. "I had to get their attention somehow. At least I helped. Even a little bit, right?"

He chuckled. "Definitely."

"I'm assuming you took care of the rest back there?"

Vartan drew back and raised his eyebrow. "There was never a doubt about that."

She gave him a teasing grin. "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings by helping you out. I knew you could take care of all of them, a big strong warrior like you." She jumped as a sharp smack landed on her buttocks. "Ow! I'm just kidding."

He grinned and shook his head. "Let's go. I don't want to take the chance of more of them coming back to find us. Time to get out of here and go home."

Chapter Six

Safely ensconced in the security of Vartan's ship, Lara relaxed. The powerful vibration of the engine beneath her feet was reassuring as she took a shower and for the first time in what seemed like ages, got properly clean. She really was on her way home.

As she wrapped a towel around her and walked into Vartan's quarters, she finally identified the heavy feeling that had been plaguing her since they left Utuja. It was sadness. Her time with Vartan was nearing its end.

The door swished open silently. Vartan walked in. "Everything all right?"

Lara forced a smile to her lips. "Wonderful. I actually feel clean. Scrubbed thoroughly from head to foot."

He looked at her with an assessing gaze. "What's wrong? Are you hurt anywhere that you're not telling me?"

She strove for a cheerful tone. "No. I'm fine, really. I never thanked you for coming to rescue me."

He came close and slid a hand around her nape. "No need."

"Soon, we'll be home. We'll be going our separate ways." Lara held her breath, wishing he would deny it. *Say we'll still be together.* When he didn't, she swallowed the disappointment that rose to her throat.

"Let's not waste any more time talking," he suggested softly before he kissed her.

Lara gave herself up to the kiss. It was more poignant knowing it might well be the last time they would be together. She savored the unique taste she'd always only associate with him, spicy and wholly male. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she burrowed closer. The towel soon fell to the floor.

Vartan undressed. She ate him up with her eyes. He was so beautiful, his sleek, corded muscles rippling with each graceful movement.

"Come." Vartan led her to the bed. He sat across from her, extending his legs outside hers. "Touch yourself for me."

The request sent heat sizzling down her spine. Lara drew in a shaky breath. "Where?"

"Everywhere."

Hungry anticipation was written on his sharp features. The simple honesty of that emotion gave her courage to do it. Her pulse raced in excitement. She cupped her breasts, squeezing lightly. "Like this?"

"Yeah," he rasped, watching her intently. His jaw was tight. His cock rose between his legs, stiff and ready.

Pinching her nipples, Lara moaned. "It feels good. Don't you want to touch me, Vartan?"

"I'd rather watch for now." His voice was strained.

She slid her hand down over her belly, stopping between her legs. "I want you here."

Vartan grasped her upper thighs and forced her legs wider apart. "Show me."

Caught up in the game, Lara willingly dipped inside the warm, moist folds of her pussy. With her other hand, she pulled her labia apart, showing him everything. His eyes flashed with heat. With a fingertip, she encircled her swollen, aching clit. The little bundle of nerves pulsed and stiffened with need. "When you touch me here, I go crazy." She locked eyes with him, her fingers never ceasing their circular motions. "You always seem to know what I need. Whether to give it to me hard or soft, slow or fast." She licked her lips, pleasure swelling inside her as she pushed her fingers inside her pussy. "I can't wait to have you inside me."

He replaced her fingers with his. Lara willingly gave up control, biting her lip. He began to work her flesh. "Soon. First, I want you to come for me."

Lara trembled. His palm curved over her mound as he stroked inside her. She braced her feet on the bed and bent her knees. It wasn't long before she caught his rhythm, and thrust her hips against his hand. He went faster. She was right there with

him, intoxicated by his touch. The climb was swift and stunning. When her orgasm came, it hit abruptly and intensely, a sensation so powerful and so overwhelming that she cried out. She jerked against him, small keening sounds coming from her lips as she rode the wave of pleasure. It felt so good she never wanted it to end. "That was... amazing."

Vartan pulled her over his lap. "I need to be inside you now." In one smooth thrust, he sheathed himself to the hilt.

"Ohhh."

His groan mixed with hers. Without missing a beat, he drove deep inside her again and again, rubbing against that little spot that drew shivers from deep within her. Lara hung on, her arms creeping around his neck, biting her lip at the sheer heat that swamped her senses. Every long, smooth push of his hips sent her careening to the edge. Every inch of her pussy was crammed full and stretched by his shaft. There was urgency, an almost frantic quality to their coupling.

Through the fog of lust clouding her mind, Lara felt incredible sadness at the thought that this would probably be the last time they would be together this way. Her chest tightened. "Vartan," she whispered.

Their eyes met. Lara leaned up and pressed her lips to his in a soft, tender joining. He stilled and returned her kiss, his touch gentle, almost loving. It was probably the most honest, emotional moment she'd ever shared with anybody in her whole life. At that moment, she realized her feelings had transcended mere physical attraction and had grown into something more. Much more. The time she'd spent with Vartan in the Utujan jungle, slowly getting to know him, had somehow transformed lust into something deeper. She was falling in love with him.

The knowledge stunned her. In love? *Yes*. During the short time they had been together, he took care of her, listened to her and was always honest and up front with her. He was strong and brave, confident and capable. He never gave her false promises, flowery words or meaningless flattery. He made her mad. He made her laugh. And he pleased her like no other man ever did. She was in love with him. "Make love to me."

Vartan's breath mingled with hers, sweet and addicting. "Lara," he whispered, thrusting slowly and deliberately inside her. "It feels so good to be inside you."

Lara heard the wonder in his voice and echoed the sentiment silently. Their bodies were intimately connected, one with each other. All sane thought flew from her mind as he continued with deep, deliberate thrusts, the sound of their flesh gently slapping against each other filling the room. Tears pooled at the corners of her eyes, but she didn't care if Vartan saw them. If this was to be their last time together, then let it be with honest emotions. They both deserved that much.

Vartan groaned, gripping her hips tightly. The pace quickened and their movement took on a new urgency. She panted and whimpered, feeling every thrust deep in her soul. Breathing in his scent, Lara relished this closeness, this intimacy with him. When she came, she cried out his name. The pleasure flowed through her, a sweeping tide of teeth-gritting ecstasy. She felt him swell impossibly thicker inside her before he uttered a rough groan and came, too. He fused his lips to hers, and Lara eagerly kissed him back. *Feel what I feel. Remember how it is for the last time.*

Later, as she lay in his arms listening to the deep, regular beat of his heart, Lara tried to keep the sadness at bay but found she couldn't. There was something special about the time she'd shared with Vartan. He understood her, and in turn, she probably knew him better than anybody else. Or at least, as well as he'd let her know him. Heaviness settled in her chest, chasing away the euphoria of the sex they'd just shared.

She had to accept that it just wasn't meant to be. She'd fallen in love with him but nothing could come of it. Their lives wouldn't mesh. They were two different people with very different lives. He'd told her he wasn't looking for commitment. It was clear he didn't feel the same way she did about him. It was over, and the sooner she accepted that, the better off she would be.

Chapter Seven

Joseph Conway engulfed his youngest daughter in a tight hug. "Thank God you're all right."

Lara wrapped her arms around him. "Father. I'm so glad to be here."

He drew back and looked at her intently. "You're not hurt?"

"I'm fine."

"The Xerexians -- they didn't --"

"No." She gave him a reassuring smile. "Bruises fade. I'm glad that's all I got."

Her father's sigh of relief was palpable. "We'll increase your security tenfold. I don't ever want you to go through this again." He held her close. "I would have done anything to spare you that horrible experience. I'm sorry you were hurt."

Tears came to her eyes. God, if only he knew. Her hurt was of a different nature, and ran so much deeper. She, who had flitted through relationships, never taking anything seriously, had just been blindsided by love, falling for an emotionally unavailable Bandarian warrior.

"Here now, you're safe," Joseph murmured, mistaking the reason for her tears. "I won't let anything happen to you now that you're back."

The door burst open and Tamara came barreling through. "Lara!"

Lara eagerly returned her sister's embrace. God, but it was good to be back home with family.

"I can't believe you're here and you're okay," Tamara whispered in fervent tones. "I haven't been able to sleep at night. I mean, I knew Vartan could get you out, but not being able to communicate with the two of you drove me crazy!" She ran her hands down Lara's arms and her back, looking worried. "You're not hurt anywhere, are you?"

She uttered a laugh. "I'm fine. Really. You look great, by the way." In an effort to lighten the mood, she adopted a teasing tone. "Very much like a queen."

Tamara pushed back her hair in a self-conscious gesture. "Oh, stop it. It feels so weird to have somebody fix my hair every day. I mean, I usually just wear a ponytail. And I don't know when I'll ever wear all the dresses I have in my closet right now." She lowered her voice. "I feel way more comfortable in my Special Services uniform."

Lara chuckled. "I imagine you've seen the last of that ghastly black outfit. What woman wouldn't want dozens and dozens of beautiful gowns and dresses?"

"I'm not used to that kind of thing," Tamara grumbled. She waved her hand. "Enough about me. Come on, I'll take you to your room. You should rest. You've been through such an ordeal."

"I think that's for the best," Joseph spoke up, his voice still tinged with worry. He ushered Lara to the grand sweeping staircase.

"I bet a long, hot bath sounds nice, huh?" her sister asked.

Only if it's in a stream with a waterfall and Vartan is with me. But of course, Lara couldn't say that. With resignation, she followed her father and her sister, both of them anxious to make her feel comfortable and wipe away the trauma of what she'd just gone through. She caught a glimpse of Vartan, standing by the huge palace doors, conversing in low tones with Kendrick.

He looked up. Their eyes met. The atmosphere became charged and fraught with tension. Lara tried to smile, but failed. Time froze. Noise receded. She couldn't move, couldn't look away. Even though they'd parted just some time ago, she missed him already. How was she supposed to act like nothing happened when the sight of him affected her like this?

She searched his face, trying to read his expression. What was he feeling? *Show me something. Let me know you miss me too.* His eyes were dark and unreadable as he stared right back at her.

Disappointment hit her. Lara forced herself to turn away and mount the next step, staring straight ahead, and hoping that nobody noticed her reaction or the flush

that was coloring her cheeks. The best thing to do would be to reconcile herself to the fact that it was over between her and Vartan. *Over*. What she needed was time to lick her wounds and learn to forget.

On impulse, she turned to her sister. "How long before you get the wedding back on track?"

Tamara looked surprised by her question. "Probably in a couple of weeks. We have to notify the invited guests about the new wedding date, and get everything underway. I mean, we had to cancel everything abruptly and --"

"I'd like to go home for a few days, if you don't mind," Lara said in a quiet tone.

She couldn't tell who was more surprised, her father or Tamara. Her sister recovered first. "But the wedding --"

"I will be here for the wedding. I promise." She took Tamara's hands in hers. "I just need to go back, check on some things and make sure they know I'm fine."

"Lara --" Joseph began.

"Father, please. I -- I need some time to myself."

"We can't change your mind, can we?" His tone was resigned. "Very well. I'm assigning Special Services for your security."

Lara was so relieved that tears came to her eyes. "Thank you. I really appreciate it." Mustering up a smile, she hugged her father. "You can give me a dozen Special Services agents. I won't complain."

"I'll make the arrangements. You'll want to leave as soon as possible, am I right?" At her nod, he left.

Tamara looked at her closely. "Are you sure you're all right, Lara? Did something happen on Utuja that you're not telling me?"

Yeah. I fell in love with Vartan. Lara gave her sister a watery smile. "I just think I need to go home to recover, that's all. I promise I'll only be gone a few days. I'll be back for your wedding."

"I'm worried about you."

"No need to be," she assured Tamara. "I'll be fine." Maybe if she said it often enough, she'd start to believe it. She sighed. It was time to go home and accept the fact that he could never love her back.

* * *

Tamara pulled back the covers and shrugged off her robe. She climbed on the bed and eyed her soon-to-be husband. "Did you see what I saw today?"

Kendrick settled next to her and drew Tamara into his arms. He nuzzled her neck. "What are you talking about?" He licked her throat and sucked on the soft skin.

"That look between Lara and Vartan." Tamara drew back in exasperation. "Will you listen to me?"

With a long-suffering sigh, Kendrick ceased what he was doing and looked at Tamara. "All right. I'm listening."

"I think something's going on between them."

Kendrick mulled on that for a moment. "That's why Vartan turned down Rahda's invitation," he muttered. At Tamara's frown, he went on to explain. "She wanted to give him a proper welcome home, but he declined, saying something about seeing to some repairs on his ship."

"Rahda needs something constructive to keep her busy," Tamara grumbled. "She has too much time on her hands."

He captured her lips in a deep kiss. "Since I'm no longer available..." he trailed off.

She scowled. "What are you trying to say? You'd like to spend time with her again?"

With a laugh, he hugged her tight. "It's the farthest thought from my mind, I assure you. I only want you, Tamara."

Mollified, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "So you think Lara and Vartan..."

Kendrick slid his stiff cock suggestively against her thigh. "It doesn't surprise me. Vartan's never had a problem with women."

Tamara frowned, her protective instincts surfacing. "I don't think I like the thought of him messing around with my sister. I'm worried about her. She looked sad, almost heartbroken. And she insisted on going home, which means she'll miss most of the pre-wedding festivities. That's not like Lara. She'd never pass up the chance to party."

"Lara has her own life, Tamara," he reminded her in a mild voice. "Whatever happened between her and Vartan is just that, between them. Frankly, I'm surprised. The last thing I would've expected to happen is for them to even like each other."

She raised an eyebrow. "You mean you didn't intend for this to happen when you sent him to rescue her?"

"No." Then he gave her a sheepish grin. "I only wanted some fireworks. Vartan is not known for his patience. If anything would drive him crazy, I thought your sister would."

"Gee, thanks."

He chuckled. "They're complete opposites. I'm thinking my plan backfired. Opposites attract, huh?"

"By the looks of it, it's true," she grudgingly agreed. "I know I shouldn't interfere, but I don't want Lara to get hurt."

"Leave them be." Kendrick's tone was firm. "They don't need your meddling."

Tamara huffed. "I don't think it's necessarily interfering. Just --"

He pulled her close. "You have too much to attend to without putting your nose in their affairs." At her raised eyebrow, he continued. "Our wedding."

Settling against him, she mumbled against his chest, "I'm just worried about my sister, that's all."

"Don't be." His large hands skimmed her back. "Now attend to me, woman. I need you."

Kendrick was right. Whatever was going on between Lara and Vartan was certainly none of her business. But Tamara had spent most of her life acting as her sister's protector and it was a hard habit to break. There wasn't any reason she should

stop now. Comforted by the thought, she promised herself she'd have a serious talk with Lara as soon as she came back and find out exactly what was going on.

With a soft sigh, Tamara slid over Kendrick. His arms went around her and they kissed. Before long, all semblance of thought was wiped away and she was once again caught up in the pleasure of being in his arms.

* * *

"Ed'ric is on the com-line for you, Lara," Salma, her assistant, announced.

Lara shook herself out of her reverie and tore her gaze away from her small, colorful garden. How long had she been staring at the flowers? Too damn long. "For the last time, tell him I don't want to talk to him. Ever."

Salma's brows drew together in a frown. With a simple click on the com-unit she held in her hand, she cut off the connection. "Done. Are you staying in tonight?" *Again* was the unspoken ending to her question.

Lara reached for the glass of orange juice next to her. "I'm not in the mood to go out."

"You haven't been in the mood for anything lately."

"There's got to be more to my life than just parties, Salma," she countered mildly. "I'm sick of smiling until my face hurts, and making small talk when I don't feel like it. Most of all, I'm sick of acting like I'm enjoying myself when really I'm not."

If her assistant was taken aback by her answer, she didn't show it. "You've been through a harrowing ordeal. It's normal to feel this way. Give it time."

The problem is, it's not going away. The dissatisfaction that had started even before she'd been abducted had grown into a living, breathing thing inside her. The first night she was home, she partied, determined to jumpstart her social life. She didn't even last two hours before she went home. She'd been bored, restless, and uninterested.

She missed Vartan.

Every man that came up to her that night was compared to the formidable Bandarian warrior and found lacking. For several days now, Lara had ensconced herself

at home. Nothing seemed to interest her anymore. "How do you feel about a long vacation, Salma?"

Salma was well used to her lightning moods. "Where are we going?"

Lara gave her friend a little smile. "Not us. Just you. You've been working hard all these years, keeping up with me, making sure I have everything I need. I think it's time you took care of yourself, don't you?"

"Oh, no, I don't need time off."

"Nonsense." On impulse, Lara hugged her. "I insist."

"What's going on, Lara? Is everything all right?" Salma asked, clearly worried.

"I think a change would do me some good. Some quiet time to think things over."

"Change?"

"Don't worry. I'm okay, I promise." Lara squeezed her hands. "A change of pace is all I need."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not sure yet. Tomorrow I'm flying back to Bandar for Tamara's wedding, then who knows?"

"I don't like this, Lara. This isn't like you at all."

She smiled. "Yeah, I know. I'm beginning to think I'm only now getting to know myself." She had a gut feeling that the time for change was now. The last few days she had spent at home proved that. She'd been unhappy, her thoughts filled with the time she spent with Vartan. She was in love with him. The drawback? He didn't feel the same way about her. She needed to accept that and get over him soon. One thing was certain. Her life, as she used to know it, was over.

* * *

Unbeknownst to Lara, Vartan was feeling pretty much the same way. He watched dispassionately as Rahda and Sela kissed and caressed each other, writhing their naked bodies against each other on a brocade settee.

"Vartan?" Sela called in a breathy whisper. "Don't you want to join us?" She cupped Rahda's breast and squeezed the nipple.

He frowned. What the hell was wrong with him? Ever since he'd come back, he hadn't been in the mood to fuck. Even these two lusty women failed to rouse the urge. He tossed back his drink. "You two go ahead and have fun."

Rahda pouted. "You won't join us?"

Vartan shook his head. "Not this time."

She slipped her hand between Sela's legs. "But you love playing with us."

The whole thing just felt wrong. It was the wrong hair color, the wrong body, the wrong voice. Hell, they weren't Lara. "I'm tired."

Sela gave him a seductive smile. "We can help you relax. Rahda and I know just the thing to do."

He glanced with disgust at his cock, which wasn't demonstrating the slightest interest. He slammed the glass on the table and stood up. "Have fun, ladies. I'll see you later." He pulled open the door that led to the garden. It was a clear night and the fragrant smell of ripe flowers filled the air as he stepped outside. The peaceful stillness failed to ease the tension he felt.

Vartan jammed his hands in his pockets, finally admitting that he missed Lara. He missed her sparkling blue eyes, her sharp wit and her courage. He grinned at that one. She might think she was nothing like Tamara, but Lara had more in common with her sister than she thought. When it came down to it, Lara proved she had guts and determination. She wasn't shallow and spoiled like he'd initially thought. She was warm, caring and affectionate. Passionate.

He could have cheerfully kicked himself for not talking to her before she'd left Bandar. He'd known she had decided to leave, but he wanted to keep his distance. It was the best thing to do, wasn't it? Wrong. It was the dumb thing to do. Now he wished he could have kissed her, at least. Held her one more time before she'd gone back home.

What was she doing right now? Was she reunited with that asshole who cheated on her? At that thought, a surge of anger filled him. What the fuck? Why did he care if

she was with another man? He had no right to be jealous. After all, he was the one who told her he only wanted to be with her for the duration of their stay in Utuja. They had a brief, intense affair. It was over. *Don't think about her anymore. Don't miss her. Don't wish she was sleeping next to you in bed.* He glanced at his cock in disgust. One thing he definitely had to do was work on mustering up enthusiasm for sex once again. With somebody other than Lara.

Vartan went back inside and headed to the palace fitness center. Maybe a few, bruising rounds of hard sparring with a trainer-bot would exhaust him enough to help him sleep and forget about Lara for a few blessed hours.

* * *

The Bandarian wedding ceremony was poignant and beautiful. Tears came to Lara's eyes as she watched her sister put her hand in Kendrick's and clasp it tightly. God, Tamara's feelings were transparent as she gazed at her prince. It was obvious Kendrick felt the same, looking at Tamara with so much love.

A pang of envy consumed Lara at what they shared. Unable to help herself, she glanced at Vartan as he stood next to Kendrick. He was in full military regalia, and looked so damn handsome that she got hot just looking at him. He, on the other hand, had given her no more than a brief glance when the ceremony began, and that was it. Twice she'd tried to get his attention, to meet his eyes. Something, *anything*, to tell her that he even knew she was there, but nothing. For all the attention he gave her, she might as well have been invisible. He looked at everybody else *but* her.

Forcing her attention back to Kendrick's and Tamara's binding ritual, Lara swore to ignore Vartan. She concentrated on the ceremonial words that the couple recited, words that were not unlike human vows. At the end of their speech, Kendrick placed a beautiful tiara of stunning, precious stones on Tamara's head. He reached behind her neck and undid the top part of her traditional Bandarian wedding dress.

Lara stifled a grin. This was where it got interesting.

Kendrick took a necklace adorned with a jewel encrusted pendant and fastened it around his queen's neck. The middle stone was a large ruby emblazoned with Bandar's

royal seal. In deference to his new wife's feelings, Kendrick arranged her hair over her breasts. Tamara was left clad in a gorgeous, floor length skirt with a side slit that showed glimpses of a long, shapely leg. There was a happy flush heating up her cheeks as they faced their guests. Tamara now proudly wore the royal necklace that proclaimed her status as Kendrick's wife and as the new queen of Bandar. Joseph Conway beamed with pride, though his face was a delightful shade of red by the time the ceremony ended.

Lara was still smiling when she caught Vartan looking at her. Their eyes clashed, and the smile froze on her face. *Finally, he looks at me.* Lara searched his face, seeking some clue to his thoughts or feelings. God, it was frustrating trying to read his emotions. Why was she even doing this to herself? They'd said their goodbyes already, and there was no use revisiting *that* issue. She and Vartan were over. Finished. Done.

Pulling her gaze away, Lara was relieved when the wedding party made its way to the grand ballroom where the reception was to be held. There were dancers and entertainers, and a multitude of servants who carried huge platters of mouthwatering food. A Bandarian royal wedding reception typically lasted the whole night, with various festivities scheduled for the rest of the week. As the new queen, Tamara was going to do a lot of entertaining. Lara's lips twitched. She wasn't exactly the most social person in the galaxy. Her big sister's aversion to large crowds and parties was going to change fast. Speaking of aversion... she glanced at the male guest seated next to her, and pointedly scooted away.

"Hello." He gave her a wide, ingratiating grin. "You're Lara Conway. You're even more beautiful in person." Apparently, he interpreted her continued silence as encouragement to go on. "I've seen every one of your vid-shows."

God save me from human men on the make. This was just another variation of a line she'd heard a million times. She gave him a sultry smile. "Really. Which one was your favorite?"

He blinked and cleared his throat. "All of them."

Lara traced an imaginary line on his chest. "You know what my favorite is?" She lowered her voice. "The one where I was being chased by a ship full of space pirates, and they made me captive."

A flush crept up his neck. "T-That was my favorite, too."

She narrowed her eyes. "I made that up." At least he had the grace to look embarrassed. "Next time you use that line, make sure you know what you're talking about." With an irritated shake of her head, she took her drink and stood up, leaving him to gape at her back. Wandering outside to the balcony, Lara sought a quiet corner.

"Strategic retreat?"

Lara jumped in surprise. Vartan stood right behind her. "Don't do that. Sneak up on me, I mean." She inwardly winced at sounding so breathless. He stood no more than a couple of feet away from her, and she tried, really tried, not to stare at him but it was impossible. He looked so good. "What do you mean, strategic retreat?"

Vartan stepped closer, crowding her, forcing her to take a step back against the wall. "From that fool who was eating you up with his eyes."

Her pulse jumped. Was that a trace of jealousy in his voice? He sounded almost... angry. Lifting her chin, she looked him straight in the eye. "That's no different than all the looks you've given me, if you remember," she tossed back, a little defiant. His nearness was driving her crazy.

"But unlike him, I intend to do more than eat you up with my eyes," he growled softly before swooping down and taking her lips in a devastating kiss, confident of her response.

At last! A blissful sigh escaped her. It had been so long since she last tasted him this way, and it was unbelievably good. Lara eagerly returned his kiss. Vartan was just as enthusiastic, possessing her mouth with unabashed hunger.

"Hmm," she whispered when their lips parted. "That was good."

He slapped a hand on the wall next to her and rubbed his pelvis against hers. "Only good?"

She licked her lips. "Well, yeah. It's been so long. I think I need more than a kiss to give you a higher than good rating."

In response, Vartan plunged his fingers in her hair, dislodging it from the stylish twist she'd arranged it into. The thick mass tumbled down her back. "I'll make you scream and bring every guest out here to watch you get fucked."

Her nipples tightened at his words. "Promises, promises."

Vartan lifted her leg over his, grunting with impatience when the long skirt of her gown impeded the movement. With a simple pull, he tore the beautiful fabric in two. She murmured a soft protest but didn't stop him. He lifted her against the wall, and the new slit in her dress enabled her to hitch her legs around him. He rubbed against her silk-covered crotch. They groaned simultaneously at the contact. He bent and nudged the bodice of her halter-top dress aside to expose one breast.

"Suck it."

"Greedy," he muttered, popping her nipple in his mouth.

The hot suction of his mouth drove her past the point of caring. Lara ceased to worry that somebody could come out at any moment and witness what they were doing. All she could concentrate on was the fierce pull of his mouth and the intoxicating licks of his tongue. God, it wasn't enough. She wanted more.

Vartan let go of her flesh long enough to skim his lips up her neck and capture her lips. She moaned, clinging to him, oblivious to everything else.

Not even the loud clearing of a throat was enough to break them apart. Vartan gradually broke the kiss and looked over his shoulder. "Go back to your wedding guests and leave us alone."

Lara dared to peek over Vartan's shoulder at Kendrick and Tamara. "Oh, no."

"Lara? What are you doing?" Tamara asked.

Kendrick chuckled. "I think that's obvious, my love."

His new wife sent him a quelling glance. "What happened to your dress? It's torn and... and..." she trailed off, gesturing with her hand to her sister's crooked

bodice. Tamara pulled in a deep breath. "Aren't you coming back in?" she inquired, her tone indicating that was exactly what she wanted Lara to do.

"I --" Lara began.

"No, we're not," Vartan responded firmly, hefting her in his arms securely. "We'll see you two much later." He began to walk down the length of the balcony, heading toward another door further down.

Tamara sputtered her protests and Kendrick just laughed. Compelled to say something, Lara waved at her sister. "I'll talk to you later, Tam. Enjoy the party!" She wrapped her arms around Vartan's neck and clung to him tightly. "By the way, where are we going?"

"Somewhere we won't get interrupted." His long strides ate up the hallway as he walked through another door, up a flight of stairs, and some more incredibly *long* corridors. With a huff of impatience, she kissed his neck, running her tongue over his defined shoulder muscles. "You're so beautiful."

Vartan grimaced. "I'm a man. I can't be beautiful." He made a turn down another hallway. She'd never find her way back from here, but so what? As long as she was with Vartan, she was fine.

"Yes, you can and you are." She rubbed her naked breast against him, loving the friction against her nipple. "Where are we going? And more importantly, are we getting there anytime soon?" She lifted herself up and down, managing to rub against the massive length of his erection. "I'm hungry."

Vartan opened a door, strode across the threshold and kicked the door shut. He dropped her on the bed before quickly shedding his military coat and working on the buttons of his shirt. Next, he attacked his pants. Lara gazed at him hungrily as his thick shaft escaped from the confines of his trousers. "Oh, yes." Getting on her knees, she unclasped the dress at her nape and pushed it down her hips, shimmying until she was free of it.

Vartan tumbled her back down on the bed and ripped off her underwear. Without missing a beat, he kneed her legs apart and thrust deep into her pussy. Lara

gasped. Hot pleasure stabbed at her senses. He rotated his hips, changing the angle and depth of his penetration. But Lara was not in the mood to be patient. She wanted all of him now.

"Vartan. Fuck me harder." She cried out as he gave her what she needed. He was hardly being gentle, but then that's exactly how she wanted it. She wanted it hard, fast and deep. Oh God, she wanted him deep. "Yes. Yes. Make me come."

His husky, strained laughter registered in her pleasure-fogged brain. In one smooth move, he sat up and pulled her on top of him. His hands curved around her ass as he surged against her.

"Oh, yeah," she whispered urgently, writhing against him. "Like that."

Vartan pinched and twisted her nipples. The little bit of pain magnified her pleasure. Lara shuddered. She wanted this ride to last forever. Her body, however, had very different ideas. She'd been starved for his touch, and too long without it. All too soon, she came. A long agonized cry of release escaped her lips as her pussy pulsed around his thick cock.

Aftershocks still rocked her body when Vartan dipped his fingers to where they were still joined, gathering up the moisture that seeped from her pussy. He rubbed against the puckered rim of her ass, gently slipping a slicked finger inside and carefully stretching her. "I want to fuck you here," he purred.

Lara jerked against him, excitement replacing the brief apprehension she felt. He penetrated deeper as he went, until the length of his finger was inside before he began to push it in and out. It didn't take long before she was moaning his name. Vartan groaned and reached over to the side, producing a thick tube from a drawer. He lifted her up, disengaging from her before applying lubricant on his cock. He did it in a matter of fact way, letting her know without words what his intention was.

"On your knees."

The thrill of letting him possess her in such a primal, forbidden place slithered down her back, singeing her senses, chasing her sanity away.

"Lara? Face down, ass up."

Tendrils of heat stoked the fire in her pussy as she got into position. She parted her legs wider, exposing more to his intense gaze. Lara jumped as something cold slapped against her anus, followed immediately by the hot touch of his hands. It wasn't long before she was pushing back against his magical fingers, wanting more.

"Open yourself for me."

Her pussy clenched at his words. She needed him this way, needed to be possessed in the most basic way a man can possess a woman. She was his. She knew it and accepted it now. Holding his gaze, she reached behind her and spread herself for him. "Come to me."

Vartan growled. The mattress dipped under his weight as he knelt behind her. His entry was slow, a gradual penetration and stretching that had her nerves on a tightrope. He eased his thick cock inside. Inch by inch, he pushed through. Lara whimpered at the incredible sensation of fullness as he popped inside the taut ring. She shuddered helplessly, caught in the grip of overwhelming need, spliced with pain. "Ohhh."

He slipped out. With a whimper, she tried to hold him in, wanting the pain and the pleasure alike. One magnified the other, exploding in a fist of hunger in her belly. His progress was measured, slipping back in gently, stretching her, the next stroke a little bit easier but with no less sensation. Again and again he penetrated the tiny entrance until he was finally seated to the hilt.

Stuffed full of his cock, Lara braced herself on the bed, gripping handfuls of the soft sheet. Vartan's fingers dug into her hips, holding her steady. Then he began to move. In. Out. It was dark. Forbidden. She whimpered in protest when he held her still while he moved with tortuous slowness.

"Vartan," she protested, wanting him to release her. "Let me --"

"You can't move. Not yet."

She whimpered. He was so big, and she felt stretched unbearably wide. Vartan leaned forward, sliding his palm past the curve of her hip, up her waist, to capture her

breast. His other hand slipped around to her front, seeking her clit. Then he began to fuck.

Oh, God, how he did. Her eyes nearly crossed with every stroke. Lara felt small, cocooned by his big, warm body, imprisoned within his arms. Her world had narrowed down to his cock in her ass, forcing through the delicate tissues, plowing her from behind, pleasure hard on the heels of pain.

"Yes, yes, yes," she chanted, tossing back her head to look at him. He looked wild, uncontrolled, penetrating her deeper and faster. Her ears buzzed, and the tingling sensation that signaled imminent orgasm swirled higher, stronger inside her.

"I'm coming!" she cried out, exploding with pleasure. Her ass clamped down tightly on his cock.

Vartan cursed, before slamming into her again and again. Lara shuddered, chanting his name. Within seconds, he came, spewing his seed deep inside her, his big body shaking with the pleasure.

Panting, Lara tumbled down on the bed, groaning softly when he followed her. "Wow." That had been better than she expected. Better than any holo-simulation sessions she'd had before.

He gently slipped out and settled down next to her. "Holo-simulation?"

She'd spoken that out loud? Lara flushed. "I was curious. I wanted to feel what it was like to have sex *there*."

Vartan raised an eyebrow, a smile playing around his lips. "And?"

She grinned. "Reality's much better."

He rubbed her cheek. "Stay here with me."

"I suppose nobody would care if I don't sleep in my bed tonight," she agreed with a smile. "What with all the wedding guests staying here and --"

"I meant here, on Bandar."

His gaze was dark and unfathomable. Lara stilled. "Why?"

"I don't want you to leave."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "What's going to happen if I stay here?" Cautious hope began to blossom in her heart.

Vartan shrugged, looking faintly uncomfortable. "I'm not sure. Don't you want to stay?"

She bit her lip. "What happened to your no commitment policy?"

He drew her hair away from her cheek. "I'm not very good at this. If you're expecting words and promises, I don't --"

"Do you love me?"

Vartan took a moment before he spoke. "If love means wanting you close to me all the time, then I guess I do." He looked very serious. "I missed you when you were gone."

"What if it's just a physical thing? One that's temporary?"

He looked into her eyes. "I've never felt this way before. I know it's more than just wanting you, it's needing you. I can't sleep at night and when I do, I dream of you. I couldn't think of anything else but you." He pulled her close. "I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay with me."

Her heart blossomed with happiness. This big strong warrior cared enough to want her to stay in Bandar. "I want to stay. I think we have something very special. It's worth pursuing, don't you think?" she asked softly, wanting him to see how much she'd come to love him. "I want to be with you."

Vartan enfolded her in his arms. "Thank the gods."

"I love you," she confessed, baring her heart.

He held her tightly. "I have something for you." He stood up and strode to the desk that sat in the corner of the large room. When he came back, Lara sat up. Vartan brushed her hair away, baring her breasts. Without any words, he fastened a magnificent necklace around her neck. The beautiful sapphire was emblazoned with a coat of arms. "This has been in my family for generations. My father gave it to my mother. Now I'm giving it to you."

Her heart swelled at the revealing gesture. She didn't need words. Vartan had just given her the symbol of his love. She drew him down to her and gave him a kiss full of love.

"I promise to cherish you forever," he said solemnly. "To protect you, and to keep you safe." He smiled. "I want to have children. Little girls who look just like you."

"Or boys who look just like you."

Vartan pulled in a deep breath. "I love you." He kissed her again and again.

"I think we'll be very happy together, don't you think?" she murmured against his lips. "You can teach me how to use a blaster properly and I can tell you when you're being overbearing and arrogant and keep you in line."

He grinned. "Seems like that's a full time occupation. Would you like a lifetime assignment?"

Lara wrapped her arms around his neck. "Gladly."

The End

Beverly Havlir

In a perfect world, I write while surrounded by hunky, barely clothed men ready to serve my every need. Laundry would be folded out of the dryer and dinner is served with a snap of my fingers. And best of all, I can eat chocolate to my heart's content without an ounce of fat showing anywhere on my body.

Reality is much different. I write mostly at night, or whenever I can squeeze in the time barring any distraction from my kids. My husband is always a willing "test subject" for some rather erotic experiments and is a valuable source of male perspective. And I have to admit, two kids and seventeen years later, he still gets me hot with just a smile.