

Bandar: Pursuit of Pleasure

Beverly Havlir

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Chapter One

Sandora Three
Helena Sector

There's something to be said about a pair of full, heavy breasts combined with a plump, luscious ass.

Dax Morrison admired the curvaceous redhead as he gripped a fat, squat glass, tossing back the potent, lime-green liquor it contained. He'd traveled here to Sandora Three for a week of furlough. A full seven days of kicking back, hopefully doing nothing more strenuous than having sex. He'd also given his crew a much deserved time off while his ship, *Federation Guardian*, was in for its regular maintenance.

His pulse quickened as he locked eyes on the woman across the noisy bar. Talk about hot. Glossy vibrant red hair fell in tousled curls down the middle of her back, partially covering the skin left bare by the sexy halter-top she wore. As she turned toward him, her unfettered nipples pushed temptingly against the thin, stretchy material of her bodice. His senses stirred. By the gods, he'd love to cup those soft, generous globes and give them a squeeze. Or bend her over one of the crowded tables, push that sorry excuse of a skirt out of the way and pound into her all the way to heaven.

It had been too damn long since he'd had a woman.

His lips curved as he observed her continually tugging at the neckline, trying to pull it up to a more modest height, as if she wasn't used to wearing such a revealing outfit. Interesting. She certainly had the body for it.

The object of his attention suddenly flashed him a sultry smile.

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled in instant awareness. Just due south, a certain part of his anatomy snapped to attention, coming to full, stinging hardness. Dax

stared back for an endless second, letting his gaze drift pointedly to her luscious mouth, already imagining what she would taste like. Was she local? If she was, it would be really nice to spend a few days soaking up her... er... considerable charms.

Raising a hand, he stopped one of the many blue-skinned serv-bots and asked for another drink. When he glanced toward the bar again, the woman was gone. Disappointment slammed into him. He surged to his feet, scanning the crowd huddled around the low-slung, curving smoked glass counter which snaked along the length of the wall. There was no sign of her. *Damn it.* He should have approached her sooner.

"Looking for me?"

Dax pivoted. *She* was standing right behind him, two drinks in hand. He gave her a small smile, relishing the feel of hot anticipation gliding along his veins. "Not anymore."

The husky chuckle she gave ignited a fire deep in his belly. "You looked thirsty. I brought you a drink."

He took the glass she offered. His gaze fell to her chest, drawn by the delicious mounds prominently on display. With some difficulty, he pulled it back up to her pretty face. "I'm Dax. What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Ariana."

His cock twitched at the breathy voice. "It suits you." He shifted a little, crowding her against the wall. He stood close, brushing against her. Excitement snaked along the length of his stiff cock.

She drained her glass, licking her bottom lip afterwards. "Drink up."

"Are you in a hurry?"

Her hand came to rest on his middle, right above his too-tight crotch. "I want to get out of here." Her fingertips danced lightly over his tensed muscles. "Don't you?"

Dax raised an eyebrow, shifting that much closer. He wanted to run his hands down her back and palm that perfect ass. "What do you have in mind?"

She hesitated for a second. "If you don't know, then --" she trailed off, shrugging her delicate shoulders.

He grinned. "Show me." He was enjoying this little cat and mouse game. Truth to tell, he was itching to get her someplace quiet and deserted, but first he wanted a quick taste.

Once again, there was that infinitesimal pause, further stoking his curiosity about her. Dax watched her expression intently. She had temptress down pat but he was also getting mixed signals. Like she wasn't entirely comfortable with the situation. Maybe she just wasn't used to picking up strange men in bars.

"Will a kiss do?"

"If you have to ask..."

Ariana nibbled on her lower lip. "I just thought privacy would be more suited for what I had in mind."

He leaned close. "How about a little something to whet the appetite?"

Her arms slid around his shoulders. Dax expelled a rough breath when he came into full contact with her. Gods, she was soft everywhere. Caging her in his arms, he boldly insinuated his thigh between hers, pushing her skirt even higher. Unable to wait one minute longer, he captured her lips, sending his tongue deep in the warm cavern of her mouth when she gasped in surprise. Delicious. Sweet taste exploded in his senses. The quick surge of heat, intense and powerful, ignited every single cell in his body.

Leaning in, he sucked on her lower lip, squeezing her ass softly. Lust coursed hot and urgent in his veins. Gods, she was so fuckable. Entirely too sexy. He rubbed against her, letting her feel his erection, smiling with satisfaction at the glazed look in her eyes. She was just as hot for him as he was for her. "I want you." He could already imagine spending the rest of the week just losing himself in her. "You're too hot for words." He kissed her again and again before he tore his lips away. "Let's go."

Ariana didn't budge. The flashing lights in the club highlighted the two bright spots of color that covered her creamy cheeks. "Finish your drink first."

"Why waste time?"

Under normal circumstances, the shadow of desperation that flitted across her face would have raised a red flag, but his thoughts fuzzed over when her fingers fluttered over his engorged shaft. "We have all night."

Dax drained the glass in one gulp, wincing slightly at the brassy taste. "All done." He bent down and sucked the skin at the base of her throat, loving the jump of her pulse. Unable to resist, he did what he'd wanted to do since he'd laid eyes on her. He cupped her breast and squeezed. At her gasp, he thumbed the hard little bud that pushed impudently against his palm. Not satisfied, driven by a compulsion he couldn't deny, he slipped his hand inside her bodice and sought her warm flesh. Oh, yeah. He must have pleased somebody up there to be so lucky. He pinched her nipple gently.

"Dax."

"Gods, I could just eat you up." His mouth watered, hungry for a taste of that plump little button. "Let's go."

Dax took her hand and began to weave his way through the crowd, pulling her along. His vision blurred and he blinked in surprise. He wasn't *that* drunk. And shit, he didn't remember the way out being so far away from where he'd sat. Sweat beaded on his face. He impatiently wiped it away, eager to get out of the club. Perspiration trickled down his back. Why was it suddenly so hot in here? His every step seemed heavier than the last. It was an effort to keep moving through the doorway.

"Dax?"

Ariana's voice sounded faint. The lights became distorted. His legs felt like lead and he found it difficult to move. What the hell was wrong with him? He stumbled through the exit, leaning on the outside wall, trying to pull air into his lungs. Excited patrons continued to flow through the entryway, jostling him. He tried to take deep breaths but everything was slowly darkening. What the fuck? He reached for the com-link button on his belt. "Got to get help..."

"Don't worry," Ariana whispered soothingly. "I'll take care of you."

That was the last thing Dax heard before he succumbed to the dark abyss that beckoned.

* * *

"Are you sure you didn't give him too much?"

Dax heard the worry in the feminine voice as he broke through the dregs of deep sleep. He stayed perfectly still, keeping his eyes closed. His head hurt like a bitch and his mouth was as dry as cotton. What the fuck had happened to him?

"I added one drop, that's all. To make sure the potion took effect immediately."

He stilled. Wait a minute. He knew that voice. The last thing he remembered was meeting a woman in a bar, feeling her up, and then... *Goddammit*. He'd been drugged. But why?

"So why isn't he awake yet?"

"I don't know. He should be coming around soon."

Anger rose to choke him. Even through the weakness permeating his bones and the lingering fuzz in his brain, Dax knew he was in some kind of trouble. Though it was an effort because of the headache that was killing him, he cracked open his eyelids. Two women stood over him. One was older with streaks of gray in her hair. The other female was the one he'd met at the club. Ariana. The drug must have been in the drink she'd given him.

She glanced at him, her eyes widening. "You're awake."

"You're damn right I am," Dax growled and moved to stand, only to flop back on the bed. It was then he realized his wrists and legs were restrained. He struggled violently, pulling against the ties. "What the fuck?" Cold rage filled him. "Release. Me. Right. Now."

She swallowed and lifted her chin. "I can't." When he lunged at her, Ariana took a step back. "Please, stop. You're going to hurt yourself."

His jaw clenched in disgust. How the hell did he get himself in this situation? Because he'd been horny, that's why. Damn it all to hell. He'd been working non-stop patrolling the vulnerable sectors since the Xerexians had declared war on the Federation. All he had wanted was a little R and R and this is what he got? "What the hell time is it?"

"Just before noon --"

"My men are searching for me right now," he declared flatly. "The moment I failed to report for duty this morning, they knew something's wrong. Within a few hours, you're gonna find your ass locked up in jail." He was lying, of course. His second-in-command, Peter, wouldn't suspect anything until Dax failed to show up at the pick-up point after the week was over. A whole fucking week. Until then, his men wouldn't think anything was amiss. Shit. But his captors didn't know that.

The women exchanged glances. Ariana cleared her throat nervously. "They won't find you."

Dax snorted. "I wouldn't be too sure of that if I were you. I have a tracking device on my belt. I promise you, you'll regret what you did to me last night." The tracking device was another lie, but he'd rot in hell before he admitted that his crew had no way of finding out his whereabouts.

"It wasn't last night."

"What?"

Ariana hesitated for a moment. "You've been here for two days."

Disbelief mixed with sheer rage made him clench his fists. Two days? He'd been out for *two days*? "What if you had killed me with... with whatever you spiked my drink with?"

"But you're still alive," Ariana pointed out, a flush reddening her cheeks. "The med-dispenser told me a couple of drops ought to do it. But when I saw how big you were, I thought to add just a little bit more..."

Dax flailed on the bed, pulling furiously at the restraints. "Woman, I advise you to let me go. *Now*."

"I can't do that," she insisted, though her tone trembled a bit.

"Once I get free, I will throw you and all who conspire with you in a Federation jail and let you rot. Then I will come back here and blow this place to kingdom come."

The other female placed a hand nervously on her chest. "Goodness, Ari."

Ariana threw her a quelling look. "Leave us, Mama."

"But --"

"Please."

With a nod, the older woman hurried out the door. As soon as they were alone, Ariana spoke again. "I'd like to explain why you're here."

"Save it," Dax snapped. "The only thing you can do now to escape a life in prison is to let me go. Do you know what the penalty is for assaulting a Federation Commander?"

"Assault?" She paled. "I didn't assault you."

"By the time I'm done with you, the whole galaxy will think you're a sick, murderous cannibal who likes to eat human flesh," Dax growled. "Do it now and I might be persuaded to show some mercy."

She gritted her teeth. "Don't you want to know why I did this?"

"I don't care. Untie me," he demanded. The ignominy of being drugged and strapped down like a hapless fool instead of a decorated fleet commander grated on his masculine pride. How could he have let this happen? Because he let a great pair of tits and luscious ass turn his head. So fucking pathetic.

"Not until you hear me out."

"Are you totally without any sense? Release me now and you might get off lightly. If you don't, I swear, you'll end up in the mining colonies of Illyris. I'll take you there myself. No doubt the inmates over there could use a woman like you," he snarled.

She wrapped her arms around her middle. "Will you please stop and just listen to me? We need your help."

He averted his face, impotent rage robbing him of words. Apparently not one to take a hint, Ariana simply stalked to the other side of the bed. When he swung away again, she exhaled in exasperation. "Stop acting like a child and listen to me. Please."

He was acting like a child? If he could get his hands around her throat, he'd happily choke her. One way or another, he was getting out of here. With great effort, Dax ignored her and examined his surroundings instead. The room was small. Apart from the bed, there was nothing else in it. He frowned. *Wait a minute...* "I'm on a ship."

Ariana came into his line of vision once more. "Yes."

He was in deeper shit than he'd first thought. It was entirely possible he wasn't even on Sandora Three anymore. He cursed under his breath. These loony women could have flown him to the ends of this butt-fuck galaxy without anybody being the wiser. He was well and truly caught in whatever diabolical plot they'd hatched for him.

"Will you please let me explain?"

Dax closed his eyes. He was feeling close to normal, though there was still some lingering weakness in his body. The thing to do now would be to regain his strength, figure out where he was and think of an escape plan.

"I will eventually let you go. You have my word." She sounded sincere. He cracked open one eye. Damn it, she even looked it.

"You purposely came on to me at the club, drugged me and tied me down. Forgive me if your word doesn't hold water with me."

She had the grace to appear embarrassed. "I only did what I had to do."

Against his will, he checked her out. Gone was the low cut top and scandalously short skirt. Today, Ariana wore a light colored top and pants. *Too bad*. He would've loved to see that magnificent chest again. Gods, he must be insane to still be attracted to a kidnapper.

"Whatever you may think of me, I promise we'll let you go once you've agreed to help us. Will you hear me out?"

"Talk away, sweetheart," he mocked. "But it doesn't mean I have to listen."

Ariana's shoulders slumped. "It's clear to me you're not ready to cooperate." She bit her lip. "I'm sure you're hungry. I'll get you some food." She walked to the door. "When I come back, I hope you'll be in a better frame of mind and realize that the only way out for you is to help us."

Alone, Dax simmered in anger and frustration, cursing his weakness. Some way, somehow, he'd get out of here. Then he'd tear this place apart and teach Ariana a lesson she'd never forget. He pulled on his restraints. They were made of some kind of sturdy

cloth that they'd tied around his wrists. With grim determination, he scrutinized each knot, trying to figure out how to get loose.

* * *

"Have you told him?"

Ariana jumped, whirled around and spotted the two women who stood in the shadows. "Mama. Don't sneak up on me like that."

Her mother, Demetria, sniffed. "I do *not* sneak. You were so lost in thought you didn't even notice us standing here waiting for you."

Nana Colette, Ariana's grandmother, merely snickered. But then she'd always had a wicked sense of humor. Ariana sighed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you."

Colette peered closely at her. "Did you ask him?"

"He's still angry." Ariana ran a hand through her hair. "I'll give him a chance to calm down while I get him something to eat."

"We're running out of time," Demetria declared, a trace of desperation in her voice.

"Don't you think I know that?" she snapped. Demetria caught her breath. Instantly remorseful, Ariana hugged her. "Forgive me, Mama. The urgency of our situation hasn't escaped my attention for a moment. We have him here. That, by far, is the most crucial step of our plan. I just need to persuade him to help us."

"I never expected him to be so young," Colette observed. "He's very good-looking."

"I suppose so," Ariana replied vaguely. "I hadn't really noticed." *Liar. You couldn't keep your eyes off him in there.* The first time she'd seen him that night at the club, it was as if a bolt of lightning had hit her. He was beautiful in a thoroughly masculine way, with sharp, angular facial features that were softened by full lips. Lips that were too sexy for a man.

And when he'd kissed her...

Heat zoomed along her body at the memory -- the way Dax had sent his tongue shooting in her mouth. No hesitation. No asking for permission. He'd just swooped in

and taken possession. He'd insinuated his leg between hers like it was his territory. Worse, she'd rubbed against him like a woman in heat. Mercy, she'd responded as readily as a starved woman.

"Ariana, didn't it occur to you to just come right out and ask him for help? He's a young buck. How could he have resisted you?" Colette reasoned blithely.

"Mother," Demetria reprimanded sharply. "Please. This is serious."

Colette simply ignored her daughter. "Ari, do you suppose he's married?"

Ariana frowned. "I don't know, Nana. My informant said he was a Federation Commander, a pilot held in high esteem by his peers."

"His people are probably trying to locate him right now." Demetria's smooth brow furrowed. "What's the possibility of them tracking him here?"

"I covered our trail as best as I could." Ariana crossed her fingers behind her back. "I don't think anybody suspected anything amiss."

"We have to get out of here soon, Ari," Demetria reminded her. "I'm scared."

"I know." She soothed her mother's concerns with a kiss on her cheek. "I'll do my best to get him to help us. Now why don't you go with Nana to see what Keeva's up to? In the meantime, I'll fix him something to eat. He must be starving by now."

Demetria hesitated for a moment, wringing her hands in worry before she relented. "All right. Promise to let us know as soon as you get him to agree."

"I promise."

Colette hung back as her mother hurried away. "Use your wiles, Ari," she suggested with a wink. "You're a beautiful young woman. Men always respond with that thing between their legs, you know."

Ariana's lips twitched with reluctant amusement. Even with the danger they were facing, her grandmother was still her usual incorrigible self. "Nana, please."

"What's wrong with that?" Nana's faded blue eyes sparkled with humor.

"You know why," she reminded her gently.

"You know, Ariana, if you're not careful, you're going to end up like your mother. Boring, straitlaced and inflexible. If I didn't give birth to Demetria, I'd wonder

if she was really my child." Clucking her tongue, Nana headed for the stairs and made her way to the lower level.

Ariana shook her head and headed to the galley. Things were difficult enough without having to run interference between her mother and Nana. Her grandmother's acerbic wit and unpredictable comments always raised Demetria's ire. Getting caught between them was intolerable. In light of the danger they were all in, those two needed to learn how to get along better.

With a sigh, she filled a bowl with stew and grabbed a couple of slices of bread. A jug of water and a glass were next before she picked up the tray and headed back upstairs. She hesitated at the top. Beyond the door lay their only hope for survival -- justifiably angry and resentful.

"I can do this," she said out loud. There was no other way. Too many lives depended on her ability to secure Dax's cooperation. Straightening her shoulders, she opened the door and geared herself to go into battle.

Ariana's bravado fell by the wayside as soon as she spotted Dax lying on the bed. Even in restraints, he projected an aura of strength and authority. Strong, corded muscles lined his thick arms, bunching as he continually pulled at his bonds. His shirt gaped open, giving her a peek of his sculpted chest. Giving in to the urge, she examined his lower body. Power and potency were written in those solidly built limbs. Unable to resist, she stole a quick glimpse at the imposing bulge nestled in between those thighs. Goddess, he was intimidating even in a relaxed state.

Of all the Federation Commanders out there, why did fate have to put him in her path? Why couldn't he be fat and balding? She flushed to the roots of her hair when she encountered Dax's mocking visage. *Mercy, he just caught me ogling his cock.*

"You've come to your senses, I hope?"

"I've brought you food. I'm sure you're hungry."

"I'd rather starve." At that exact moment, his stomach growled loudly.

"I swear there are no drugs in your food." When he just glared at her, she continued. "It wouldn't serve any purpose to dose you again. I need you strong and awake in order to help us."

"I'm getting tired of this game, Ariana, if that's even your real name."

"It is."

"So you say. At this point, I would be hard-pressed to believe anything that comes out of that lovely, lying little mouth of yours."

Letting that pass, Ariana placed another pillow beneath his head to prop him a little higher. She spooned some stew and held it against his closed lips. "Please, eat."

He didn't budge.

Seeking to convince him, Ariana took the spoonful of food and ate it herself. "There. Do you believe me now?" No answer. "Please eat. You can't deny that you're hungry."

When she offered him food again, he accepted it. She fed him the stew and the bread. He ate everything, finishing the meal with a long gulp of water.

When he was done, Ariana placed the tray on the floor beside the door. It was time to convince Dax to help her family. "I come from a world called Altezza," she began. "It's a small, sovereign monarchy in the outskirts of the Mersella Quadrant. Do you know where that is?"

He wore an inscrutable expression, neither confirming nor denying he even knew of her home.

Undeterred, she went on. "My home is prosperous and peaceful. Our family has ruled Altezza for hundreds of years. Until the Xerexians came." Ariana paced by the bed, wringing her hands. "They invaded my world, disregarding treaties and agreements with the Federation Alliance. They have taken the king -- my father -- captive."

She glanced at Dax and wished she could figure out what he was thinking. At least he wasn't telling her to shut up. That was encouraging. "With the help of one of my father's most trusted personal guards, I managed to escape along with my

grandmother, my little sister Keeva and my mother -- whom you saw earlier." She sat on the bed next to him. "The Xerexians demanded that I marry one of their senators in exchange for my father's freedom. They want a legitimate claim to Altezza's throne in order to avoid any opposition from the Federation Alliance."

Dax remained silent.

"Teren flew us to Sandora Three. He suspected the Xerexians had planted a tracking device on our ship and decided to ditch it. He bought this cargo ship for us but was accidentally killed when a fight broke out at the auction house. Now we have no one to fly us to safety. No one we trust, anyway."

"And you picked me?" he drawled derisively. "Because I was stupid enough to fall for your trick?"

Ariana ignored that. "I hired an informant to find me a Federation pilot on Sandora Three. He found you." She held his gaze. "We need your help, Dax. My father's life -- the life of Altezzan people -- depend on us getting safely to the Federation Alliance and asking for help."

"Why not just have Sandora Three authorities contact the Federation? Why all the subterfuge?"

"The Xerexians are after us. For our safety, we couldn't just trust anyone. I'm sorry I had to do what I did. I had no choice. I couldn't take the chance you would say no. Or that we would be discovered." Ariana licked her lips nervously. "Will you help us?"

"Release me."

"I can't do that unless you give me your promise to fly us out of here."

"And I'm telling you there is no way in hell I'm agreeing to anything while I'm tied down like some fucking animal."

The cold finality with which he spat out the words convinced Ariana Dax meant what he said. Still, she hesitated. "Will you promise not to try to escape if I let you go?"

His features were carved into hard, uncompromising lines. "The way I see it, *Princess*, that's something you're going to have to decide for yourself."

Goddess, what was she going to do now? Did she really have a choice here? He refused to agree to anything until she let him go. On the other hand, it would be a show of faith if she untied him, one way of letting him know she wasn't lying. Ariana expelled a breath and began to undo the ties around his ankles. That done, she worked on the intricate knots that held his wrists, biting her lip until she finally had him free.

In the next moment, air whooshed from her lungs as Dax grabbed her and toppled her to the bed. He clamped a leg over hers and easily held her arms over her head, trapping her under him. "Big mistake. Never assume you can trust me."

Ariana's pulse tripped. In the space of a heartbeat, she'd become sharply aware of the muscled body plastered to hers from shoulder to hip. "Please," she implored, a tad breathless. "We need your help desperately."

"You should have just asked."

"I couldn't take the chance that you'd say no." Why was her heart beating so fast? Ariana ceased struggling. The slightest movement mashed her breasts against his chest. Her nipples tightened, turning into two stiff points that gleefully made their presence known to him. Heat suffused her senses at the sudden gleam in his eyes. "We couldn't run the risk of coming out in the open and being found by the Xerexians."

"You would have had a damn sight better chance asking."

"You'll be amply compensated. Just fly us to safety."

"Princess, you can't afford me."

"I have a trunk full of crown jewels," she swiftly countered, desperately ignoring how her body seemed to cant naturally toward his.

"Do I look like the type to wear jewelry?"

Ariana refused to even think of failure. This was her only chance to get her family out of danger. "Name your price. I'll pay you anything you want if you help us."

At her words, a wicked expression stole over his face. The air around them thickened. Slow, syrupy warmth unfurled in Ariana's lower belly. Moisture pooled between her upper thighs, hot and thick. Her blood simmered. She was filled with the strangest longing to reach up and kiss him. Dax dipped low, coming in close. Just a little

bit more and their lips would touch... but it never came. Instead, he surged to his feet in one lithe movement.

"I'll think about it."

Stunned, Ariana lay unmoving, feeling an acute sense of loss. It was a moment before she could gather her scattered wits and push off the bed. "Th-think about helping us? Or your price?"

"If your story is true, then you are indeed in danger. I will fly you to Federation territory. If I find out that you're lying to me..." The tone of his voice left no mistake as to what he meant.

Relief rushed through her. She impulsively clutched the front of his shirt. "Oh, goddess. Thank you, thank you. You don't know how much this means to us. In return for your help, we'll give you whatever you want."

A half-smile tilted the corners of his mouth. "Be careful, Princess. You might not like what I'll ask for."

And just like that, her blood sizzled once more. Ariana caught her breath at the heat in his eyes but all he did was step back.

"Now give me the grand tour of this ship. I'd like to check out what I'll be flying."

Chapter Two

Dax followed Ariana down the narrow passageway, trying not to stare at her shapely ass. He needed to keep his mind on the mess he found himself in. Control of Altezza would mean control of the vital Mersella trade route. It would be a veritable gold mine for the Xerexians, one that could fund their penchant for wars. Shit would hit the proverbial fan and the Federation Alliance would have a big-ass headache on their hands.

He grimaced as he followed Ariana deeper into the bowels of the ship. It had obviously seen better days, looking like it was one bolt away from being condemned as junk. Jeez, it probably wasn't even flight-worthy anymore. "Are you sure this thing will fly?"

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "Of course. Teren wouldn't have bought it at the auction if it wasn't."

Dax bit back the retort that hovered on his tongue. Auctions were notorious places to find scrap metals and obsolete buckets held together by precious few screws and prayers. Whether this thing could fly remained to be seen. "Princess, I'm going to check the engine and determine the integrity of the hull. You don't want it to disintegrate as soon as we power up."

"It's Ariana."

"What?"

"Call me Ariana, please."

She made the request sound like a command. "Fine."

At the bottom of the stairs, she veered right, leading him into the galley. Three people swung around and focused on them. A little girl, about eight years old, fixed Dax with an interested stare. The older woman he'd seen in his room earlier, the one

Ariana identified as her mother, came to her feet, a tentative smile on her lips. The third person was another female, with faded copper-colored hair, clutching a cane in her hand.

Ariana made the introductions. "Dax, I'd like you to meet my mother, Queen Demetria. My younger sister, Keeva, and my Nana Colette, Dowager Queen."

Great. All women. Not even one male. *Things are looking better and better*, he thought sarcastically.

"Hello, Commander Dax," Demetria murmured softly.

By her demeanor, Dax would have had her pegged as a queen without even knowing it for a fact. She radiated royalty in waves. He bowed his head. "Your Highness."

"Oh, please. No need to be so formal. Our lives are in your hands. We're very grateful for your help."

He felt uncomfortable at the blind trust and confidence placed in him. "I'll do my best, Your Majesty." Feeling the piercing gaze of the dowager, Dax gave her the same greeting. "Your Highness."

"You're a handsome one," came the blithe reply, ignoring the stifled gasp from Demetria.

Dax grinned, instantly liking this one. "I aim to please."

Colette's lined face eased into a wide smile. "A rascal, too."

"You must forgive my mother." Resignation underscored Demetria's tone. "She tends to be very outspoken."

"Bah!" Colette blurted out. "There's nothing wrong with speaking your mind."

Demetria sent her a reproving glance before addressing Dax once more. "As for payment --"

Ariana stepped in. "Dax and I will talk about that later, Mama." Soft color bloomed over her cheeks at the silence that followed her statement.

"I'd like to check out the ship and get us on our way as soon as possible," Dax said smoothly, breaking the uncomfortable moment.

"Of course. I'm glad there were no ill effects from your... er... ordeal," Demetria muttered, clearly embarrassed.

Dax gave her an easy smile, aware of the little girl's rapt attention. "Everything's fine. I just need Ariana to show me the flight controls and we'll see if this puppy can fly."

"Right this way." Ariana led him through another passageway and up the stairs. At the upper deck, safely out of earshot of the rest of her family, she paused. "Thank you for putting them at ease. They have all been worried sick, scared that you wouldn't agree to help us."

"Though I don't appreciate being kidnapped," Dax quipped dryly, "I can understand that you had to do what you did." He stared over Ariana's shoulder at the ship's controls and whistled under his breath. "I haven't seen one of these since my training days at the Academy."

"Is that good or bad?" she asked cautiously.

Dax examined the flight console. "Depends."

"On what?" Ariana persisted, peering over his shoulder. "Can you fly it?"

"For your family's sake, you better pray that I can." He flipped some switches, carefully checking they were all functioning. "Listen, Princess --" he stifled a grin at the impatience that flickered across her face at the nickname, "-- why don't you check if your man Teren bought this heap with registration papers or even an engineering manual? I have a feeling we're going to need it."

"Fine."

With some regret, Dax looked away from her swinging hips and went back to perusing the controls. This ship was as old as his grandfather, probably older. He glanced out the flight deck to the bustling port. Their little cargo ship was tucked in between larger merchant cruisers, and although it wasn't exactly new, it blended in with the other transports. Sandora Three was a popular trade route and vacation destination. If Ariana's story was true, then the Xerexians could very well be around here someplace, hunting the escaped royals.

What if he radioed the Federation for help? Then again, Sandora Three was neutral territory. Any communication could be intercepted. Besides, Dax wouldn't put it past the Xerexians to bribe local authorities to notify them at the first sign of Altezzan royals. What a fucking mess.

The best thing to do would be to fly them out of Sandora Three, find the nearest Federation outpost and contact Premier Conway through secure channels. Avoid confrontation at all costs. As far as he could determine, the ship didn't even have a weapons system.

He just hoped that the Xerexians didn't find them first.

* * *

"Princess," Ariana mimicked under her breath. "Why won't he stop calling me that?" She rifled through the box that had previously been in Teren's room but had since been stashed in the cargo bay. It was full of little scraps of paper and a file with numbers that appeared to be coordinates. "I don't even know what I'm supposed to find."

At the bottom was an envelope that contained the receipt from the auction, and a booklet riddled with complicated looking diagrams. Inside was what she surmised to be the ship's registry, serial numbers and some other stuff she couldn't figure out. "I hope this is it so Mr. High-and-Mighty over there can finally fly us out of here."

"Ari?"

Startled, she jumped and bumped her head on the overhead bin. "Owww." Rubbing her scalp, Ariana slowly pivoted and found her younger sister right behind her.

"Are you okay? I didn't mean to scare you."

She gave Keeva a rueful smile. "You didn't. I was just being clumsy, that's all." She smoothed thick, dark red curls that were so like her own. "Do you need something?"

"No." Keeva began to fidget, rubbing one foot over the other. The instinct to correct the un-princess-like habit rose to Ariana's lips, herself the recipient of years of

training, but she swallowed the words. Her younger sister had endured enough turmoil in her life lately that one little nervous habit could be overlooked. "I just wondered..."

Ariana went down on her knees. "What is it?"

Keeva bit her lip. "Is Dax really going to help us?"

"Yes." Ariana wrapped her sister in a hug. "He's going to fly us to Federation territory."

Keeva held on to her tightly. "Then we'll rescue Papa?"

Ariana mustered a confident smile. "Definitely." She wiped the lone tear on her sister's cheek. "It won't be long before you'll be back at home playing once more with your friends."

"I'm scared."

"Don't be. We've come this far after escaping the Xerexians. We're not going to fail now."

"Promise Dax will keep us safe?"

"With all my heart."

Keeva clung to her. "I believe you, Ari. You would never lie to me."

Ariana closed her eyes and sent a quick prayer to the gods above asking for help. *Please don't make me out to be a liar.* "Everything will be all right."

"Our lives will go back to normal?"

Ariana's chest constricted. "Yes," she whispered fiercely. "Our life will be as it was before."

"I like Dax. He's strong and brave. I just know he'll take care of us."

The admiration in the girlish tone was evident. Hero worship already? Dax certainly had an effect on the females of her family. She had firsthand knowledge of that. There was such an aura of strength and integrity about him that inspired trust and confidence. As if you could give him your troubles and he'd take them on without a problem at all.

Stop it. Lust shouldn't come into this. So what if he was tall, masculine and oozed sex appeal? Now more than ever, she needed to think with her head, not with

that... that spot between her legs. It was imperative to keep focused on the task at hand. Danger still lay ahead, and they still had a long way to go.

* * *

Dax lay under the engine block of the ship, huffing in irritation. "Great. Just great. I have to figure out this damn engine, too? This is one fucking party." He tried to stem his impatience. The most important thing right now was to make sure this old bucket could actually fly and get them out of here.

Somewhere above, there was a loud clearing of throat.

Dax scooted to the side, just enough so he could glare at the intruder. He narrowed his eyes at Ariana, the woman who'd gotten him into this whole shitty situation in the first place. "What?" he barked impatiently.

Ariana's luscious lips tightened infinitesimally, the only sign that the princess wasn't pleased. Good. Small payback for what she'd done.

"I was wondering if there was anything I could do to help."

"Unless you can tell me you're familiar with a ship built some fifty-odd years ago, then no, there's nothing you can do to help."

"Right. I just thought..." Ariana swung on her heel and started to leave.

Oh, hell. Dax felt a trickle of remorse prick his conscience. She was just trying to help. He was pissed and had taken it out on her. "You want something to do?"

Her stiff countenance softened marginally. "I just figured with the two of us, we could accomplish what needs to be done quicker. So we can leave as soon as possible."

The last thing he wanted was to be working side by side with Her Royal Hotness, but what the hell. She had a point. The longer they stayed on Sandora Three, the more they ran the risk of being found by the Xerexians. They'd already wasted two days, precious time they could have utilized to get the hell out of Dodge, but since they knocked him out... *Don't go there*, he reminded himself. No use getting pissed all over again at the way Ariana had tricked him. He got to his feet and dusted off his pants. "Come to think of it, I do need your help."

Ariana's expression brightened. "What can I do?"

He led the way to the upper deck and the operations console. "Do you know anything about flight controls?"

"I can plan a banquet for a thousand people, arrange a formal dinner for visiting dignitaries and talk about a whole range of subjects, but no, I can't say I know anything about flight controls." Her dry tone nearly made him smile. "But I'm not stupid. Just tell me what I have to do."

Princess had a sense of humor, after all. Dax began to explain the basics to her, pointing out the various buttons and controls. "I'm going to start the engine. I will tell you what to switch on so I can track it down there in engineering. That way, I can make sure everything is functioning. Got it?"

Ariana nodded. "Got it. Switch everything on when you tell me."

"No. Not everything." Dax reined in his impatience. "Just switch on whatever I tell you to."

A hint of an embarrassed flush appeared to cover her smooth cheeks. "Of course. That's easy enough to do."

Dax took the captain's chair and flipped on the buttons, hoping nothing malfunctioned. When the controls lit up, he released a small sigh of relief. "I'm switching on the engine. This is the big test. If this baby doesn't fire up, we're all stuck here like prime targets."

Ariana hovered over him anxiously. "Can you fix it if it doesn't work?"

"Hell, Princess, I'm good but not *that* good," he muttered. "But it'll work. I refuse to believe it won't." He pressed the red button that would ignite the engine and held his breath. After what had to be the longest few seconds of his life, the ship sputtered to life. Dax didn't dare move, still waiting. The controls lit up and beeped repeatedly before settling down to stable levels. Only then did he release the breath he'd been holding.

Her face lit up with excitement. "The engine is working."

"That's only the first step. Now we have to make sure it works all the way to the nearest Federation outpost." Dax peered at the controls, carefully checking the different indicators. "I'll be damned. This ship doesn't even have jump drive."

"It doesn't?" Ariana frowned. "Is a jump drive necessary?"

"It shortens our travel time considerably, so yeah, it helps. For the last twenty years or so, jump technology has been a common feature for cargo and merchant transports."

"How old do you think this ship is?"

"Way old." Dax exhaled. "I think she'll fly, but this trip will take us days, possibly up to a week, to get to the nearest Federation outpost." He fiddled with the keyboard, his fingers moving swiftly over the keys. "The onboard computer is online. All stations are functional according to the indicators." He glanced at her. "Your man Teren was smart enough to purchase extra fuel cells, too."

"So if everything checks out okay, we should be able to get out of here soon."

Dax nodded. "The only downside is, what would normally be a short trip will be a long-ass one because we don't have jump drive." He strode down the stairs to the lower deck and headed to the engine room, aware that Ariana followed close at his heels. The huge engine block hummed efficiently, which gave Dax a little comfort. He took the portable diagnostic unit he'd discovered earlier and plugged it into the slot at the bottom of the engine compartment.

"That's a diagnostic unit. It's hooked up to the onboard computer. If anything isn't working properly, I'll know up there at the controls. Just keep an eye on it, all right?"

"I can do that."

Her Royal Hotness' eagerness to help brought a twitch to Dax's cock. *Down, boy. Now's not the time for that.* "Yeah, well, just make sure you watch it closely." He pointed to the internal-com unit and flipped it on. "You can talk to me through here."

"I'm grateful for your help. I know the decision didn't come easy, considering what I had done to you. I'm glad it was you at the club that night."

Oh, for heaven's sake. "I'm simply helping because if the Xerexians are not stopped, we'll all be in a hell of a lot more trouble," he tossed back gruffly.

It didn't faze Ariana. "Still, you could've just overpowered all of us and escaped. You're a good man, Dax."

She thought he was a good man? He stifled a disgusted snort. He'd rather she thought of him as sexy, irresistible, *hot*. Dax stepped close to her, intentionally invading her personal space. "You might not think so after I demand payment for hauling all your asses to safety."

She blinked. "What do you mean?"

His gaze dropped to her chest. The meaning was unmistakable. "No jump drive. No weapons. That means if the Xerexians ever get wind of us, we're good as dead. For putting my life on the line for you and your family, I figured I deserve a payment that's equal to the risk I'm taking."

Ariana took a jerky step back. "The crown jewels are worth an awful lot of cash currency."

"I'm interested in more than the crown jewels." He boxed her in, the console at her back preventing her from moving away. "I'm interested in the body that wears them."

She swallowed. "My mother?"

Through the lust that zinged through his flesh, Dax managed a chuckle. "Nice try. You know exactly what I mean." He dipped his head toward her.

"W-wait..."

Heat swirled in his stomach, spreading lower to wrap fingers of fire around his suddenly erect shaft. Ariana's lips were damp, quivering ever so slightly. This woman was dangerous. That alone should have driven him to step away and put some distance between them. But like a lamb being led to slaughter, he couldn't stop himself from leaning in until he was just a hair's breadth away. Her light scent teased his nostrils, evoking memories of a summer rain shower back home on Earth.

The darkening of her eyes told him she wasn't immune. Good. At least he wasn't the only one hot and bothered. "Let me show you what I want."

"I don't think --"

Dax never gave her a chance to finish what she'd been about to say. He wanted to proceed nice and slow, intending to coax a response. Her taste, sweet and fresh, exploded in his senses. The softness of her bottom lip roused the predator in him. Forget nice and slow. His good intentions flew out the proverbial window. With a low growl, Dax changed the angle of the kiss, intensifying the contact, his tongue delving deep in the damp cavern of her mouth.

Ariana's soft moan could barely be heard over the hum of the engine, but it was enough to send fire shooting in his veins. Lust suffused his entire body, igniting places Dax never knew existed. He pulled her closer, kissing her like a starving man, greedy for more. Finesse didn't even enter into it. He wanted more of her.

Bewildered by his unprecedented reaction to a mere *kiss*, Dax drew back. He was panting hard. His heart was beating so fast it felt like it was going to jump out of his chest. His memory of their kiss at the club didn't fail him. All along, he'd thought it was the spiked drink that made their encounter unforgettable. Stunned, he stepped back, ignoring the vicious protest from his cock that demanded he stay. No other woman had ever aroused him with such intensity and swiftness. Damn.

"I don't want the crown jewels. Nor do I need cash credits." He ran a thumb over her damp lower lip. "There's only one thing I want as payment for my services." He tipped her chin up. "You."

With that, Dax walked away, ignoring the tremor in his limbs.

Ariana's pulse thudded in her ears. Her knees were shaking so badly she had to lean against the console for support. She licked her lips, dazed. The taste of him still lingered.

Stop it! What's wrong with you? It was just one kiss. Goddess, one kiss and she'd turned limp and boneless in his arms. It had been the exact same feeling when he'd

kissed her that night at the club. Only it was more. More intense. More... everything. She'd never felt that way before. Even the King of Kamala, reputed to be a great lover, had never summoned this kind of response when he'd stolen a kiss from her once.

What was so special about Dax Morrison?

She pulled in a deep breath, running a hand through her hair, trying to calm her still rioting senses. Explosive. The word came to her mind, flashing in big red letters, a warning in itself. One touch of his lips and she'd melted into his arms. She'd trembled and clung to him, lost in the power of his kiss.

And as scandalous as the thought was, instead of being offended at his gall in demanding her body as payment, Ariana was excited. Thrilled. Goddess, her brain had definitely been addled by the stress, worry and fear that had plagued her lately. It was the only explanation she could come up with for actually considering his stipulation.

Should she say yes?

Mercy, she shouldn't even be thinking about that right now. Ariana pushed away from the wall. At the moment, it was important to concentrate on the job Dax had given her and not the way he'd kissed her. With great difficulty, she forced her attention to the controls that lay before her.

The console's lights blinked intermittently. The portable diagnostic was -- she peered closely at it -- diagnosing. She sighed. She was so out of her element here. The best thing to do would be to stop fixating on the gorgeous Federation commander. No more thinking of bone melting kisses, urgent caresses and... Stop right there.

She had to convince him to accept cash currency as payment. *She* was not part of the deal.

* * *

After finishing the test run of the engine and thanking Ariana for her help via the internal com-unit -- to avoid further temptation -- Dax busied himself with checking over every inch of the ship in a bid to stop thinking of the princess. *That's right, buddy. Just keep in mind who she is. She's an Altezzan royal. Her blood is too blue for you.*

Yeah, but she obviously liked my kisses, a small voice inside his head snickered. Damn it, Ariana seemed as shaken as he'd felt. That kiss was a doozy, as his grandmother back on Earth would say.

He'd rocked her senses. Of that he was sure. He'd been around the block too many times not to know when he'd zapped a woman's brain cells. But he wasn't sure if he could afford to mess around with her right now. There was just too much at stake. Her family was in danger. Her father and their kingdom were perilously close to falling into Xerexian hands -- if it hadn't already. The consequences of that happening were too disastrous to even contemplate. The sooner he got them to safety, the sooner the Federation and its allies could send help to Altezza.

As for the temptation Ariana presented, well, he was just going to have to keep his cock in his pants. Tightly zipped and contained where it couldn't do much damage.

With one last test performed, Dax was finally satisfied that everything was in working order. He headed to the galley to find his ragtag all-female crew. The hope and expectation that lit up their faces upon seeing him brought him up short.

The enormity of his task hit him at that moment. He was their only chance at safety, the only thing standing between them and the dreaded Xerexians. It was up to him to get them out of Sandora Three and into Federation hands. He cleared his throat. "The ship, as far as I can tell, will be able to make the journey from here to the nearest Earth Federation outpost." At the chorus of exclamations, he held up a hand. "I'd hate to dampen everybody's excitement. However, there's no telling if we'll have trouble along the way."

"I believe in the power of positive thinking, Commander." Demetria's voice was firm and determined. "I have every confidence that you'll get us there in one piece."

"Me, too," Keeva piped in.

"Yeah, well, it's not really up to me. I only navigate and fly," he countered gruffly, feeling uncomfortable with such blind trust. "The engine could give out any moment and leave us stranded."

"Can we send out communication?" Ariana asked. "Maybe we can radio for help?"

He gave her a brief glance. "Helena Sector is neutral territory. Anybody can navigate this area without prior clearance. Because of that, it is notorious for non-secure lines of communication. It's not safe to radio for help."

Ariana raised her eyebrows. "Yet it's obviously a popular vacation spot?"

The faint sarcasm in her voice didn't escape him. "Sandora Three is a place noted for... uh --" he chose his words carefully, "-- offering a variety of recreational activities." He wasn't about to defend where he chose to take his down time. That was his business. "We can't run the risk of any message being intercepted. Neutral means the Xerexians could very well be patrolling this area. Ariana told me Teren suspected that the Xerexians were somehow able to track your old ship, that's why he ditched it. I suspect they had something to do with Teren's death."

"Oh goddess," Ariana whispered in dismay. "We're in even more danger than we had originally thought, then."

"Exactly," he said flatly. "I don't want to take the risk of sending out a call for help. With the ship's lack of weaponry, I plan on maintaining a low profile until we're in a Federation controlled zone."

"It's best to keep radio silence then," Demetria agreed, remarkably calm. "Is there anything you want us to do, Dax?"

"We're pretty much set. We'll be leaving in a few minutes, as soon as I can get clearance to launch. How are we doing with supplies?"

"I bought supplies before we... uh... contacted you," Ariana finished lamely, glancing briefly at her sister. "We've got everything we need."

"Right," Dax muttered. How was it possible her skin looked more luminous? Jeez. What the hell was wrong with him? He'd never come close to waxing poetic like that before. Suppressing a disgusted shudder at his thoughts, he wondered what the hell it was about Ariana that set off all his buttons? She was damned tempting without even doing anything. By the gods, he was nuts to be feeling horny at a time like this. As

soon as he dumped them with the proper Federation authorities, he was going to get laid to take care of this problem.

“Now it’s time to pray we actually get to our destination in one piece.” If the Xerexians didn’t catch wind of them first and if this flying bucket held up during the entire trip. Dax felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to find the Dowager Queen standing next to him.

“I have no doubt you’ll keep us safe,” she declared quietly before joining the others at the table.

Dax stared at the four women conversing at the table. *Shit*. They were about to embark on a very dangerous trip during which they must maintain radio silence to avoid detection. It was like flying blind in a fucking war zone.

Here goes nothing.

Chapter Three

Ariana sought to avoid Dax. Granted it wasn't easy since the ship wasn't big, but she did her best. It was bad enough that all she could think about was the kiss they had shared in the engine room. It was only one kiss, but she couldn't get it out of her mind. Every time she caught a glimpse of Dax, she remembered the feel of his lips against hers. Obsessed, she found herself looking at him, checking out those wide shoulders, flat stomach and tight behind. He was just so... masculine. She wanted to run her hands over the smooth, golden skin stretched over his sinewy body. Goddess, but he was driving her crazy. Lucky for her, he spent most of his time at the controls, keeping to himself. It saved her from embarrassing herself by drooling over him.

At breakfast, he talked to everybody *but* her. He chatted with her mother and Nana Colette at length, keeping them informed on how far they still had to go. He even joked around with Keeva, for goddess' sake. Her? He ignored her totally. Fine. If that's what he preferred, she could play that game.

Since she wasn't a glutton for punishment, Ariana decided to take her plate and sit by the large porthole on the topmost deck of the ship. Though small in area, it afforded her a measure of privacy. She'd transformed it into a makeshift room, giving up her quarters for Nana. If there was one thing this whole ordeal had taught her, it was that her mother and Nana couldn't share a room. It just wasn't possible for those two to be together for any length of time. For the sake of everybody's sanity, Ariana had given up her quarters for her grandmother.

"Ariana?"

Her grandmother appeared at the top of the steps. Pasting a smile to her face, Ariana inclined her head. "Did you need me, Nana?"

Colette approached her slowly, her cane making a soft clicking sound on the floor. "You didn't need to give up your room for this tiny space."

"Nonsense. I wanted you to have it. That way, you and Mama can both get some rest," she added teasingly.

Nana snorted. "Your mother believes I should be seen but not heard. What does she think of me? A child? I have my own opinions, you know."

Since their escape from Altezza, Demetria and Colette had disagreed on every single thing they could think of. It was driving Ariana crazy. The only solution was to keep them apart. "I don't mind, really. You have your own quarters. Mama has hers. We can all get some sleep, hmm?" She smiled. "Besides, I like it up here."

"You're holding up very well considering the difficult circumstances we're all in. I always knew you were a strong girl." Nana's smile was rueful. "Being an Altezzan princess is already a heavy burden to bear without adding this crazy situation on top of it."

"It's not so bad, Nana. It's my duty to be strong, to overcome adversity."

"When I was your age, I hated the constriction of royal life. I broke all the rules and then some. My father was only too happy to marry me off."

Ariana grinned, remembering all the stories she'd heard. Nana was the family rebel. In spite of all that Colette had done to flout the rules, the blood of Yriman ran deep and sure in her veins. In the end, she'd married the man her father had chosen for her.

"When I was young, I hated having to conform to long-held traditions," Colette recalled softly. "I wanted to travel, to explore different worlds. But I was the only daughter of the king, promised to wed your grandfather when we were still children."

"But weren't you in love with Grandpa?"

A small smile played around her finely shaped lips. "Of course. Who wouldn't fall in love with him? He cut a very dashing figure in his military uniform. I thought he was the sexiest man in the whole of Altezza. And when he kissed me..." she trailed off, a dreamy look on her face.

Ariana chuckled. "Fond memories, Nana?"

"Oh, yes. I knew he was the man suited for me. But back then, there was also this handsome captain from the Royal Navy that had also caught my eye. Of course, nothing had come of it. I was already betrothed to Jared." She appeared lost in her memories. "Duty above all else. A motto that's been engraved in my mind ever since I was old enough to understand what duty was." Colette sighed, reaching out to smooth back Ariana's hair. "I'm afraid your mama is a typical stick-in-the-mud like my father had been. Nothing must get in the way of royal duty." She grinned. "But I've long suspected that we have more in common than your mother would like, Ari."

"Don't tell Mama that. You'll give her a heart attack," Ariana replied teasingly. Deep inside, she knew her grandmother was right. They got along so well because they were so alike.

"Demetria never broke the rules. Never did anything outside of the boundaries. Such a dutiful, *boring* life she's led. I don't want you to become like your mother, Ariana."

"I don't think Mama would approve."

Colette snorted. "Bah. Life is too short. You should enjoy it while you're young. Don't let duty dictate your life." Her faded blue eyes twinkled with a naughty gleam. "Dax is very attractive, don't you agree?"

Hot color flooded Ariana's cheeks. "I suppose so."

"You don't think he is?"

She squirmed uncomfortably. "He's very handsome." And strong. And courageous. She imagined he could sweep a woman in his arms and carry her off into the sunset.

Colette laughed. "That he is. So what's stopping you?"

"Have you forgotten the danger we're in? There are more important things to think about right now."

"The threat of danger only heightens sexual attraction, you know," Nana said with a wink.

Ariana couldn't help but smile at that. "You're incorrigible."

"You think I've missed the way he looks at you?"

Her pulse leapt. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask Nana to elaborate, but she shook her head. "Even if I was attracted to the Commander -- and I'm not saying I am -- nothing can come of it."

"Why not?"

"You know why. I'm duty bound to make an advantageous union, a marriage that will benefit the kingdom and the people. Besides," she lowered her voice, "Altezzan princesses have to remain virgins until their wedding night, remember?"

Her grandmother rolled her eyes. "A tradition we should definitely do away with. Besides, who said you can't have a little fun without losing your precious virginity?" Colette chuckled at Ariana's mortified expression. "Oh, dear girl, there are many ways to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh without breaking that stupid rule."

"Nana, I can't believe you're telling me this," Ariana muttered.

"These are very uncertain times, Ariana. Who knows what will happen tomorrow? The enemy could find us and blow us all to bits. And then you'll never have known the pleasure a man's touch can give you."

Though Ariana privately admitted Nana had a point, a small part of her still remained sensible. "It's wrong. I was raised to follow rules, Nana. To put duty above myself at all times."

"Ah, but where's the fun in that?"

Fun? Was she entitled to fun? All her life, she'd been the obedient daughter, ever conscious of her destiny.

"With all that's happened lately, I've realized that everything can be taken away in a second. Life could be gone," Colette snapped her fingers, "just like that. Do you understand?"

"I-I don't know what you mean."

Colette squeezed her hand. "Live life as much as you can. Enjoy your youth. Life is meant to be experienced. Live it to the fullest. Duty will always be there. But don't let it rule every moment of your life."

"Nana..."

"Will duty bring you happiness? It's certainly something to think about." She placed a kiss on Ariana's cheek. "I love you, my darling. Now I will let you have some peace. Keeva and I usually spend our evenings putting together the great puzzle of Castle Tellani. With hundreds of little pieces, it's going to take awhile."

Ariana watched as her grandmother disappeared down the steps. Had she and Dax been that obvious? But then again, nothing escaped Nana's notice. Nor was she the type to make a big issue of it. Unlike her mother.

Years ago, when Ariana had been younger, she'd harbored a silly infatuation for the son of an Altezzen merchant. She'd found reasons to visit the prosperous seaside town where the young man lived, wanting a glimpse of him. As soon as Demetria had found out, she'd put a stop to it, sternly reprimanding her daughter for her reckless behavior. A royal must marry a royal. Generations before her had upheld the tradition. Ariana was expected to do the same.

Life is meant to be experienced. Live it to the fullest.

A deep longing for the forbidden rose to the surface as Colette's words echoed in Ariana's head. For the first time in her life, she wanted to be selfish, to do something for herself for a change. She bit her lip, torn.

Duty above all else.

But would it really be so bad to experience the pleasure of intimacy? To assuage this attraction she felt for Dax? Ariana already knew, with a certainty, where all this would lead to. From the very first kiss they had shared at the club, it had been a foregone conclusion.

She was going to do it. Give Dax the payment he demanded.

Her situation, however, was not simple. Things weren't cut and dried. Ariana had a stipulation of her own to which Dax must agree. One rule she could not break.

She had to remain a virgin.

* * *

The ship was cruising along at a decent speed. Dax manned the controls, setting the coordinates to the nearest Federation outpost. Everything seemed to be working fine. For now. They had cleared Sandora Three and were now in Helena Sector's vast, unguarded and neutral space. He activated the autopilot control and switched navigation over to the onboard computer. As long as they maintained a low profile and kept radio silence, their nondescript ship wouldn't raise any red flags among the other transports that littered the area.

For the tenth time, Dax wished he was back on his own powerful vessel. The *Guardian* was a battle-class cruiser, equipped with the latest weapons and state-of-the-art jump drive technology. If he hadn't been horny and hadn't been ruled by his dick, he wouldn't be in this situation. Then again, he wouldn't have met Her Royal Hotness either, the stuff of male fantasies everywhere.

Ariana was smart, sexy and damned gutsy. She'd had the nerve to come on to him and essentially abduct him from the club, hadn't she? Like a callow schoolboy, he'd fallen for the sultry, sexy temptress act. Dax was still pissed about being drugged and tied up. That just rankled. He'd undergone years of Academy training, served with distinction under different commanders and was one of the youngest ever to be awarded command of his own war cruiser. And all it took to bring him down was a woman who had no other weapon but her voluptuous body.

Apparently, it had been all the arsenal she'd needed. One glimpse of Ariana and his temperature had spiked. Tamara would mock his chauvinism, but it had never occurred to him that a woman, a *female*, would have the nerve to do what Ariana had done to him. The princess had gumption, he'd give her that. More guts than common sense, too. What if her informant had picked someone less honorable than him?

A small voice inside his head echoed *honorable*? He'd undressed her with his eyes as soon as he'd sighted her at the club. Still did whenever he slapped eyes on her now.

Ariana was hot, with curves that just wouldn't quit. In his mind, he could see her naked and spread on the bed, moaning his name as she writhed in pleasure.

Disgusted, he pushed up from the chair and headed to the galley to get something to eat. It annoyed him that she occupied his thoughts so much. He'd even taken to avoiding eating meals with the royals, just to stay away from temptation.

The plate of food that sat in the middle of the table was obviously meant for him. Dax dug in and polished it off in no time flat. After he cleared the dishes, he strolled down to the lower deck and headed to the cargo bay.

The hum of the engine echoed in the silence. The silence was a little unnerving. He was used to a ship that had no less than a hundred people aboard, with crew members manning every station from security to engineering. It was a cruel twist of fate he'd decided to vacation on Sandora Three. Had he gone to Suraya Minor, he probably would be in bed right now with a woman. Or two. Maybe even three. Instead, he was stuck on this ancient bucket drooling over a princess with a great pair of tits and the most luscious, delectably round ass he'd seen in seven galaxies.

"Dax."

He froze and slowly pivoted. The object of his lustful thoughts stood a short distance away. Even in the dim lighting, her hair shone like a fiery halo around her head, the riotous curls framing her lovely face. Every nerve ending he possessed went on alert. "What are you doing up?"

Ariana shrugged. "I'm not sleepy."

He crossed his arms and leaned back against a metal crate, projecting a calm he was far from feeling. The soft material of her tunic molded her full breasts. *Man, don't even go there.* "What's on your mind, Princess?" He knew it irked her when he called her that, but he figured if she was pissed at him, he wouldn't be so tempted to kiss her or feel her up. At that thought, his cock sprang to life, ready for action.

Ariana cleared her throat. "Now that it's just you and me here, tell me how much danger we're really in."

His lips twitched. "Sweetheart, I'm not in the habit of blowing sunshine up anybody's ass -- pardon my language. I told the truth. We're screwed if the Xerexians find out about our little ship here. We're sitting ducks."

"If that happens, what will we do?"

"We'll send out an SOS from here to kingdom come until somebody comes to bail us out. But until then, it's prudent to maintain radio silence and not attract undue attention."

A shadow of relief crossed her pretty features. "When -- if -- we send out an SOS, help will come, right?"

Dax had the urge to soothe her worries but he couldn't lie. "If there's a friendly ship nearby, then yeah."

Her smooth brow furrowed. "And if there isn't?"

"We'll try to outrun them."

"But with this ship being old and without a jump drive, like you said, how's it possible to outrun the Xerexians?"

Dax just stared at her.

"We're not going to be able to outrun them, are we?"

He sighed. "Listen. I don't want to think about things that haven't happened yet. Don't worry too much about it. We'll deal with it when, or if, we get to that point."

She nodded. "I'm glad you're here. I feel... safer."

A sharp tingle of awareness streaked down his spine. Was it him or did the air in here just get hotter? "Don't put too much faith in me, Princess." He infused his tone with mockery. "I don't have super powers or anything like that."

"We all believe in you. You're fearless and confident."

He grinned. "Men are genetically programmed not to show fear or insecurity. Goes against the macho grain, you know."

A small smile played around her deliciously full, red lips. "You don't like being praised or complimented?"

Not when it came from a sexy little blue blood that constantly made him think of mussed sheets and long sessions of hard-driving sex. Dax tried not to let his gaze drop south to her chest or down to the round, feminine hips that were perfectly shaped to be gripped by his hands as he pounded into her...

"I'm really sorry for kidnapping you. I was desperate. I couldn't think of anything else to do but knock you unconscious and bring you back here."

With a grimace, he held up a hand. "Don't remind me."

Ariana bowed her head, looking at the floor. "I... uh... want you to know that I've thought about your payment and... uh... I would agree to it."

The statement, delivered in a shy, breathy voice, was like damn lightning hitting his cock. His eager, susceptible flesh lengthened to its full size, pressing against his trousers painfully. "What exactly are you trying to say?"

Her face was red but she didn't falter. "I'm saying yes to what you want as payment."

Somewhere in his brain, an alarm bell rang in loud, shrill tones, warning him without words that he was venturing into dangerous territory. He ignored it -- what else? -- driven by the sudden lust heating his blood. Common sense was quickly drowning but Dax made one last stab at holding onto it. "Are you sure about this?"

Ariana's tongue swiped over her lower lip, leaving a damp trail. "Yes."

"Is that right?" Even blushing furiously as she was, and lacking the finery he was positive usually adorned her body, Ariana radiated an innate grace that came from good breeding. Even when she'd been dressed in a scandalously short skirt and low-cut top that night at the club, she hadn't come across as cheap and easy. "I don't think you know what you're getting into, Princess."

Her chin came up. "You're upholding your end of the bargain. Now I have to live up to mine."

Unable to resist, Dax thumbed the soft skin of her cheek. "You might regret it."

"Why would I do that?" she asked breathlessly.

Her gaze dropped to his mouth. Dax actually felt a *tingle* slice through him at that look. Her scent, fresh and natural, wafted to tease his nostrils. "We're complete opposites. I'm not refined. I'm not a gentle man. I'll expect things of you that you've never done before."

She caught her breath. "W-what if I'm willing to do those things?"

Hunger, curiosity and honesty were etched in her eyes. Steeling himself to resist the heat threatening to fry his brain, Dax pushed her against the wall and plastered his body against hers. "You don't even know what I want."

To his surprise, Ariana insinuated her hand between them and cupped him. "I do."

He inhaled sharply. Her soft fingers curled around his length, tracing the rigid shaft up and down. *Damn it.* He kissed her, driving his tongue inside without preamble. He was too hungry, had denied himself too long to indulge in the sweet and slow.

Ariana uttered a small moan and eagerly returned the kiss, boldly engaging him in a game of thrust and parry. Fiery heat engulfed Dax. It was nothing short of being struck by lightning. He went up in flames, burning every bit of sanity he had left. *Ah shit, but what a way to go.*

No one had ever told Ariana a kiss could be like this. It was a complete conflagration of the senses. Her thought process fuzzed over. She'd been kissed before, all tentative, never going beyond implied boundaries because of who she was. None had this intensity, never aroused in her this burning need to have more. It should be illegal, outlawed even, the way Dax could affect her like that.

With a whimper, she edged closer to him. Touching him through his pants wasn't enough. She wanted to touch *him*, the flesh and blood man. Frantic with desperation she couldn't understand, Ariana sought the tab of the zip and worked it loose. When she encountered warm, naked, *very hard* flesh, she let out a blissful sigh.

"Jeez."

She forced open her heavy eyelids and focused on Dax. He looked pained. "What?"

"Princess, you've got your hand in my pants."

"So I do." Ariana palmed the stiff shaft. The contrast of soft skin and iron-hard muscle was fascinating. She insinuated her hand deeper inside, wanting a better grip. "You're so... it feels so good to touch you... to hold you like this."

Dax thrust his pelvis against her hand, kissing her wildly. He grabbed her backside and squeezed, holding her still as they rubbed against each other hungrily. Ariana was in the grip of something strong and powerful that couldn't be stemmed, couldn't be denied.

"We've got to stop." He skimmed his lips down her neck, taking nipping bites before soothing her with his tongue.

Stop? No. She whimpered a denial while working on the lone button that denied her full access to him. Through the fog surrounding her mind, Ariana knew she was acting totally out of character. She'd never behaved like this before. Not with anyone. Nor had she ever been tempted to.

Only with Dax.

When she finally worked the button free, she uttered a faint sound of triumph. The long, rigid length of his cock sprang free, bobbing softly against her hand. Her inner muscles instantly clenched in response. Her sex flooded, drenching with liquid need. Stopping was the furthest thing from her mind. Ariana wanted to feel more, to touch more, and to *have* more of him. She began to push the offending pants down his hips, working to get him free.

Dax groaned. "This really isn't a good idea right now." Contrary to his words, his fingers were busy unbuttoning her blouse, impatiently pushing the edges aside once he was done. "I must be insane. You're a *princess*."

The words were much like cold water thrown on her face, dousing her ardor. Ariana leaned her forehead on his shoulder, breathing heavily. "You had to remind me," she mumbled to herself.

He licked his way from her shoulder to the side of her neck. "What?"

Ariana uttered a defeated sigh, frustration riding her hard. Before she totally lost control and plunged to the point of no return, she had to come clean. "There's something you have to know."

"I'm all ears." He palmed her breast, staring with intent absorption at the distended tip.

"Dax, I need you to listen."

"I am," he muttered, bending to lick the stiff areola. "I can do two things at the same time, you know. Like walk and chew gum."

"What?" she asked, not understanding what he was talking about. He was distracting and Ariana struggled to focus on what she had to say. "B-before we continue, it's very important for you to know that... I'm a virgin and I have to stay that way."

He froze. Disbelief was etched in his features as he stepped away from her. "You're a *what*?"

Feeling bereft, wanting only for him to pull her back in his arms, she repeated the words. "I'm a virgin and I must remain one."

"Shit." Dax raked a hand through his hair, taking several deep breaths. With angry, jerky motions, he pulled up his pants.

"I didn't tell you that to make you stop."

He leveled a thunderous frown at her. "You think after telling me that little tidbit we'd just continue?" he grouched. "Will you cover yourself?"

A hot flush spread over her cheeks. Disappointed, Ariana scrambled to pull the edges of her blouse together. "Don't be mad."

Dax glared at her through narrowed eyes. "I suppose I should thank you for telling me now rather than later, when it would have been too late."

"I didn't -- don't -- want to stop," she reiterated in a shaky voice.

"Sorry, Princess. I don't do virgins."

Ariana winced. "You have something against them?"

"As a rule, I generally stay away from innocents."

"I'm not," she countered softly. "Not totally." Not anymore after what they had done.

"This conversation is moot. Didn't you say you have to stay a virgin?"

She dragged her stare away from his crotch. Why couldn't she stop looking *there*? Goddess up above, she wanted to see this man in all his naked glory. "Altezzan tradition dictates that as a princess, I must remain untouched until my wedding day. Part of the wedding settlement will be the gift of my virginity to my husband."

"Whoop-de-doo for whoever that will be," he muttered irritably. "What a fucking quaint tradition. Frankly, I didn't think virgins still existed."

Ariana flinched. "We can be creative," she offered in a whisper.

His incredulous gaze swung back to her. "What are you suggesting?"

She'd come this far. There was no going back now. "There's nothing wrong with finding ways around... you know."

"Nothing wrong if your intent is to eventually kill me."

Huh? "Kill you? I don't understand."

Dax's stormy dark eyes flashed with heat. "A man can only take so much. It's almost painful for us to be denied completion." A hint of red shadowed his cheekbones.

Comprehension dawned. "Oh, no. I wouldn't do that to you." She wrung her hands nervously, steeling herself to say the words. "There are other ways to achieve completion without sexual intercourse."

"So speaks the expert?" His full mouth had thinned into a tight line. "How many times have you found *creative* ways to get around the stupid virginity rule?"

Ariana flushed to the roots of her hair. When had this conversation taken such a wrong turn? "Never."

"Your past lovers were obviously willing to play by your rules," he bit out tautly as if she hadn't spoken. "Not me. Count me out."

"You're the only one I've asked," she interrupted quietly.

"No need to spare my feelings by lying, Princess."

She blinked back the tears. She was *not* going to cry. "Believe me when I say that before tonight, I've never been tempted to circumvent convention. Not even for a moment did I think to do anything like that with any man other than my future husband. Until now." It wasn't easy to search for the right words to say to make Dax understand. "You make me feel things I've never felt before."

Tension crackled between them. "You don't have to sweet-talk me. That's a man's job."

In spite of the mess she'd made of things, Ariana still hungered for his touch. Her nipples felt tight and achy, and there was a heavy pulsing in her wet sex. She didn't want to stop. Most of all, she wanted *him* to touch her everywhere. The little white lines of strain around Dax's mouth were telling signs he'd been just as caught up in the heat of the moment as she'd been. That bolstered her determination to push away the apprehension she felt.

"I *want* to find ways to be creative. With you and only you, Dax." She laid a palm over his rapidly beating heart. "I want you. I-I think about you all the time, ever since that night at the club. I want to be with you. I want this for *me*. For purely selfish reasons." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "But I can't simply disregard my obligation to my family, to my people. Please," she whispered. "Tell me you understand."

"So you want to have your cake and eat it too?"

Ariana flinched at the harsh words. "All my life, I've lived according to a set of rules that have been in place for hundreds of years. I'm a daughter of the house of Yriman, ruling family of Altezza. I have an obligation to my people. I *have* to believe this will end with my father's life intact, that my home will soon be free from the Xerexians. When that happens, I will still be expected to fulfill my duty and do what's required of me."

"Let me see if I understand this correctly. You want to have a sexual affair with me without having intercourse?" Dax's lips were pressed into a thin line, his eyes cold and flat. "You want me to say yes, be your playmate, find *creative ways* to satisfy you

without actually fucking you --" Ariana winced at the deliberately crude word, "-- and go on my merry way when all this is over. Then you'll go back to Altezza and marry some royal dickhead who'll then have the privilege of being your first lover?"

Put that way, her suggestion seemed crass and callous. Heartless.

"Sorry." His tone made it clear he wasn't. "But I'd have to say no."

Crushed, Ariana blurted out the first thing that came to her mind. "Why?"

His closed expression gave nothing away. "I'm not interested."

She glanced pointedly at the bulge in the front of his trousers. "I may be inexperienced but I'm not stupid."

"For a virgin, you're very bold," he taunted softly. "No thank you, Princess. I don't care to be used that way. It's a good thing we stopped when we did, *Princess*. From now on, just stay the hell away from me. I don't play around with virgins." He left.

Ariana trembled, hurt and humiliated by his rejection. His receding footsteps echoed in the painful silence. With tears in her eyes, she ran all the way back up to the top deck. In the darkness, she huddled under the blanket, the pain of his refusal akin to a knife wound.

Ariana buried her face in the pillow, feeling utterly miserable. For the first time in her life, she resented the obligation, the sense of responsibility that had been instilled in her since she was a child. It was a heavy burden to bear, one she'd been saddled with from the moment she was born.

Squeezing her thighs together, Ariana sought to suppress the need she felt. She'd gathered enough courage to offer herself to Dax and he'd rejected her. He'd said no. That was the end of it. Her flesh, still throbbing with lingering hunger, protested at the thought. Despite the weakness of her body, her royal pride came to the rescue. She was Princess Ariana of Altezza. One rejection was enough. No matter how much she wanted Dax, she wouldn't ask him again.

Chapter Four

Dax sat in sullen silence, staring into the vast expanse of space before him. Functioning on a few hours of sleep didn't lighten his mood. His eyes felt gritty and he ached in more places than he could count. He'd slept slumped in this chair, waking up with a terrible crick in his neck and his back protesting the unnatural position. Damn her anyway. *A virgin*. Who would have thought? *She certainly didn't kiss like any virgin*, he thought sourly. She'd been just as eager and hot as he'd been, practically tearing off his jeans in her haste to undress him. At the memory, his dick shot up, instantly alert. Just thinking of the soft, plump breasts he'd held in the palm of his hand rekindled the lust he'd managed to suppress last night.

He snorted. She'd offered him everything *except* the one thing he really wanted. He wanted to slip between those pale, smooth thighs and feel her tight pussy grip his cock. Offering to get around intercourse using *creative* ways was akin to offering torture. Fucking ridiculous. Not to mention, cruel.

A tiny part of him had protested when he'd said no to Ariana. His body had certainly been willing, as evidenced by the hard-on that wouldn't go away. He remembered the hurt that had flickered in her beautiful eyes. He wished he could've taken back the words he'd said, anything to erase that stricken look from her face. Great. He actually felt guilty for hurting her. And when she'd launched into that impassioned speech about duty and obligation and finally wanting to do something for herself just this once, he'd nearly hauled her back in his arms.

He'd never felt this way before. Dax scowled. What was it about Ariana that made him want to protect her and fuck her at the same time?

"Hello."

Dax looked over his shoulder to find Keeva standing behind him, plucking shyly at the skirt of her dress. Up close, it struck him how much she resembled her older sister. Keeva was a miniature version of Ariana with her thick hair and fine features.

"Can I sit up here with you?"

He shrugged, pushing thoughts of Her Royal Hotness to the back of his mind. "Sure." Keeva took the seat next to him and just stared at him. "You got a question, little Princess?"

She giggled, showing perfect white teeth. "I'm really not so little."

Her smile was infectious. Dax found himself returning it. "Compared to me, you're small."

Keeva rolled her eyes. "You're very tall."

"Uh-huh."

"I think you like Ariana."

Surprised, Dax swung his head toward the little girl. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I noticed you look at her. A lot."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Silly." Keeva laughed. "How can you not know? I've seen you do it. Then when you weren't looking, she did the same."

She did, did she? *Out of the mouths of babes.* It really shouldn't please him. He shouldn't even care.

"My nanny said men and women do that when they like each other."

Now what was he supposed to say to that?

"So do you?" When he raised his eyebrows, Keeva sighed with a touch of impatience. "Like my sister?"

He cleared his throat. "I like a lot of people. I even like you."

"That's good," she agreed with wisdom older than her age. "Do you miss your home?"

"Sure."

"Tell me about Earth."

"It's beautiful. On a clear day, you can lie down on the grass and look at the blue sky while white puffy clouds float by."

Keeva smiled. "It sounds nice."

"Yeah," he agreed, feeling a touch of homesickness. It had been ages since he'd spent any length of time at home. "If you can find a patch of grass, that is," he added dryly. "Back in my grandfather's day, he said there used to be lots of lush, rolling hillside as far as the eyes can see."

"Not anymore?"

"I'm afraid not. But luckily, we still have oceans and rivers to swim in."

"I miss my home, too," Keeva said softly.

The fervent longing in the whisper hit him squarely in the chest. "I know you do, little one."

"Do you think my papa is still alive?"

"Uh --"

"I'm asking you because you'll tell me the truth," she continued. "Every time I ask Mama, Ari or Nana, they always tell me that he is fine and that our lives will soon be back to normal." Her expression became thoughtful. "I'm not stupid. I know the kind of danger we're all facing." Her voice lowered. "I just hope Papa is okay."

Keeva was an intelligent child, forthright and eloquent for her age. Dax chose his words carefully. "At this point, I think they all want to believe your father is still alive. During these difficult times, it's understandable that they would want to protect you and assure you everything will be fine. With your father back in Altezza and you so far away from him, isn't it better to think of him as still alive?"

Keeva seemed to consider his words before she nodded. "I suppose so." To his surprise, she leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I feel much better already. Thank you, Dax." With a big grin and a wave, she ran down the steps, leaving him alone once again.

As he settled in his bed that night, images of Ariana tortured Dax's mind. He shifted on the mattress, restlessness eating away at him. Hunger vibrated just under his

skin, mocking his efforts at trying not to think of her. *Gods*. Why was he denying himself anyway? Ariana had all but offered herself to him on a silver platter. In a fit of righteous anger, he'd refused. But if they both received gratification, was it really as bad as he'd thought?

Sick of his thoughts, Dax jumped up from the bed and pulled on a shirt. Maybe a walk around the ship to check things over would do him some good.

* * *

Ariana rolled over once more, trying to find a position that was halfway comfortable. The makeshift bed wasn't the best, but it would have to do. Up here, she might be sleeping in discomfort, but at least she had some peace and quiet. Thank the goddess their journey so far had been uneventful. Had it really only been three days? It seemed longer.

"Should I even ask why you're sleeping here?"

At that voice, Ariana swiveled around and sat up, her legs tangling with the sheets. She hadn't even heard him approach. Heat flooded her face as she unsuccessfully tried to get free from the blanket. Muttering a very unladylike curse under her breath, she finally gave up and leveled a cool stare at Dax. "Is there a problem?"

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter to me if you want to end up with a sore back."

Goddess, he had no right to look so good in a white shirt and dark trousers. On any other man, it would look plain and ordinary. But on Dax, it was sexy. The thin white material of the shirt molded his torso, outlining the mouthwatering muscles of his chest and his flat stomach. Ariana forced her gaze not to drop down any further. *Don't look there*. With difficulty, she pulled it back up. "Did you want me?" Too late, she realized the suggestiveness of her words. She flushed. "For something, I mean?" she rushed to add.

"I was just doing a security check." Dax expelled a harsh breath. "Why are you up here, Ariana?"

"I gave up my room to Nana," she admitted grudgingly. "She and Mama just can't be in one room together. They drive me crazy with their bickering."

"You should have told me. You could've taken my room."

The captain's quarters were right off operations, where the flight controls were. One door would separate her from Dax. That wasn't enough distance between them.

"Oh, no." Ariana shook her head emphatically. "That's yours. You need your rest. We've already imposed too much on you. I can't take your quarters, too."

"I don't really use it. Only to take showers and get cleaned up." His dark gaze pierced hers. "You can sleep there and we'll just devise a schedule for when I need to use it."

"Thank you, but no."

Dax's sigh held a tinge of impatience. "You'll be more comfortable sleeping on the bed than here. Now come on. I'll help you move your stuff." He stepped closer and pulled her up.

Ariana uttered a protest. Her legs were still hopelessly tangled in the blankets. "Please don't. I can get up on my own." She jerked away from him, hurriedly pushing to her feet, desperately trying to get out from under the sheets. With a gasp, she lost her balance and stumbled right into him.

His arms came around her to stop her fall. They both froze. Ariana was acutely conscious of being plastered against him from the neck down, her breasts mashed against his chest. Her cheeks burned at the intimacy of their position. "Y-you can let go of me now."

"You're trouble with a capital T," he said under his breath.

A jagged quiver worked its way through Ariana's susceptible flesh. "Dax, let me go."

"I've tried to stay away from you, you know."

His admission stung. "You don't seem to be in too much of a hurry to get away from me now."

His smile was slightly rueful. "I never said I was smart."

Goddess, was he trying to drive her insane? He ate her up with his eyes but insulted her with his words. She pushed against him. "You said no, remember?"

"I'm not used to being sexually propositioned by a virgin, only to be told she must remain one."

Ariana glared at him. "Point taken. You've told me that before. And just so we're clear, I've never sexually propositioned *any* man before. It's not something I take lightly."

He gripped her arms tightly, holding her in place. "Never?"

Her nipples tightened. Her whole body fired up. Flames licked at her senses. She had to get away from Dax. Soon. Like now. "I'm done defending myself," she tossed back huskily. Every breath she took was filled with his scent. "Think whatever you want. Now please, let me go."

His breath feathered over her skin, sending scorching need racing through her. "You're a temptation I don't need."

Ariana couldn't look away from his mouth. "W-what?" Was there a point to this conversation?

"I accept your offer."

Ariana pulled in a ragged breath. "It's too la --"

He cut off her words with a toe-curling kiss. All semblance of thought, of resentment, dissolved. The contact was carnal, unapologetically possessive. Caught up in a swell of hot need, Ariana could do nothing else but respond, mimicking his actions, boldly touching her tongue to his.

Dax skimmed his lips down the side of her neck. "You're dangerous, do you know that?"

Oh goddess, what was he doing with his lips? He was alternately sucking and nipping at her skin then soothing her with his tongue. "You mean *you're* dangerous."

His low chuckle reverberated over her sensitive nerves. "Let's be dangerous together." Cupping her nape, Dax angled her head, swooped in for the kill and kissed her hard and deep. He trailed his palms down her sides, molding her waist and tracing

the flare of her hips. On the way back up, he meandered to her front, heading for her breasts. Ariana held her breath, waiting to feel his touch. Dax didn't disappoint. Through the thin shirt she wore, he cupped her flesh, kneading softly, his thumbs brushing over the stiff crests.

She moaned. "You're too good at this."

Nimble fingers pulled the shirt over her head. Cool air wafted over her exposed torso, brushing against her pebbled nipples.

With a fleeting touch, he rotated a palm over one areola. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

A scorching bolt of electricity raced along her spine. "Oh goddess, touch me more. Please."

"Princess, you don't know what you're asking for." His voice was strained.

Ariana attacked his shirt, sighing with pleasure when she encountered warm, male skin. "Everyone's asleep."

"I've got to be crazy to do this." He fumbled with her drawstring pants, huffing impatiently when he couldn't readily unfasten it. "How the hell does this work?" Finally, the ties gave and he pushed the offending thing down her thighs. Ariana did the rest by kicking it away.

"I know I'm going to regret this, but fuck it, we only live once." With a barely leashed hunger, Dax pulled her nipple deep into the warm cavern of his mouth. She gasped. A small part of her mind that was still functioning recognized his words. She knew she should resent what he just said or at least call him on it. But he was doing sinful things with his lips and hands that made everything just bounce off into thin air.

The intense suction of his lips was almost painful, a knife-sharp sensation edged with scalding pleasure. Ariana shuddered, plunging her fingers through the thickness of his hair, offering more of her flesh for his enjoyment. "Dax."

Like a greedy man, he switched to her other breast, giving it the same lustful treatment. She closed her eyes, trembling helplessly, bombarded by feelings she'd never experienced before.

Dax pushed her down amid the tangled sheets, bracing himself on his forearms. He shifted, licking his way down to her belly and beyond. When his breath feathered over her mound, Ariana stilled. Her heart pounded in anticipation.

When he simply buried his face in her soaked pussy, she jerked against him, stiffening for a second before melting at the unconscious act of worship, of profound intimacy. A heady thrill slid down her spine.

He pulled back a little, staring down at her. "Dax?" she prompted softly.

"Give me a second." He was breathing hard, panting, as if he'd just run a mile. "Just let me look at you."

It probably wasn't proper for a young lady to be so thrilled at how he was reacting, but she didn't care. Proper was the furthest thing from her mind. Slick moisture coated her pussy, slowly seeping down her thighs.

"Do something," she groaned. Her breasts felt heavy and sensitive, the slightest movement intensifying the ache. "Touch me. Please."

He clenched his jaw. Parting the soaked folds of her sex with his fingers, Dax held her open as he thrust his tongue within. Ariana smothered a cry, throwing her head back in ecstasy. Oh goddess, it felt so good. Like nothing she'd ever felt before. Greedy and eager, she plunged her fingers into his hair, pulling him close. Every lick of his tongue, every scrape of his teeth drove her out of her mind. She writhed against him, pushing her hips closer, seeking more of the white-hot sensations he was giving her.

Ariana was unprepared for the incredible wave of pleasure that suddenly slammed into her. "Dax," she whispered before she stiffened and bowed, thrusting urgently against his mouth. Stars exploded in her eyes, momentarily blinding her, as her world narrowed down to just the two of them. On and on it went, an orgasm so sharp, so sweet, she almost didn't want it to end. With a great shudder, she fell back on the sheets. Soft, soothing licks gently brought her down from the incredible sexual high. "Goddess. That was... that was..."

Dax reared over her, breathing heavily, his mouth damp from her juices. The skin was drawn tight over his cheekbones and tension held his muscles rigid. He'd never looked more handsome to her as he did that moment. Dax was a living, breathing true personification of what a man is. Hard. Strong. And hungry. Oh mercy, the stark need etched in his rugged face was almost too much to bear.

With shaking fingers, she unfastened his trousers, attacking the zipper urgently. Ariana tried to hurry, concentrating on her task, glad he made it easier by kicking away his pants. She wanted nothing more than to see him unclothed.

She cupped the heavy sacs that hung beneath the engorged shaft. With the other hand, she explored him, learning his shape with trembling fingers from the root to the tip, gingerly touching the small drop that hovered at the slit.

"Jesus, Ariana, are you trying to kill me?"

Goddess, he was so hot. So big. "I want to touch you."

A strained smile parted his lips. "Right now, you're lucky if I last five seconds. You can touch me later."

His words didn't sink in. Ariana was too busy memorizing the beauty of his cock, tracing the life-giving veins that lined the shaft. So soft on the outside yet he was hard as steel underneath the skin. Fascinating. She palmed the rigid length, lightly stroking the broad, reddened head. Experimentally, she touched her tongue right on the slit, squeezing him softly at the same time.

"Shit, Ariana --" Dax groaned, his cock twitching in her hand, swelling bigger right before he came.

Caught by surprise, she didn't move as he erupted, sending his seed spurting all over her hand. Some of it landed on her chin. A drop fell on her bottom lip. Dax thrust against her palm. Ariana fisted her hand around him, instinctively milking him until he quieted.

Dax in the throes of an orgasm was quite an erotic sight.

He tipped her chin up, their gazes colliding. Curious as to what he would taste like, she licked the drop of liquid that quivered on her lip.

"For the love of -- stop it, Ariana."

"W-what?"

Dax gave her a rueful smile and shook his head. "You're driving me nuts, you know that?"

"I like the way you taste."

"I just came all over your hand like an untried schoolboy," he huffed under his breath. "You've got to stop saying things that will get me hot again."

Happiness filled her. She had that effect on him? "What's wrong with that?"

"Princess, you drove me out of control. Next time, we'll take it slow."

"So, next time I can actually take you inside my mouth?"

He cupped her nape. "Do you want me there, Princess?" he asked roughly.

"Oh, yes."

Resignation flitted over his handsome features. "We'll leave it for next time." He stood up and straightened his clothes.

"When?"

He pulled her up and into his arms. "You're unbelievable, you know that? So innocent yet so sexy."

"When, Dax?" she persisted, wanting to sink her teeth gently on his bottom lip. Standing on tiptoe, she leaned in for a kiss.

His eyes darkened as he gave her a brief, hard kiss. "Enough, Princess. If you touch me one more time tonight with those lips, I doubt I'll be able to stop."

Ariana exhaled, trying not to show her disappointment. "But --"

He stepped back, his jaw clenched tight. "Hold that thought, Ariana. Now let's get you moved into the bedroom so you can get a good night's sleep."

Chapter Five

For a virgin, Ariana was an enthusiastic and adventurous participant. And thanks to her, Dax walked around with a constant hard-on, which she was only too happy to take care of.

Dax slapped a hand against the metal panel of the darkened cargo bay, trying to will his pulse to slow down to normal as he pulled Ariana to her feet. He was breathing heavily, the harsh sound echoing in the little alcove. The orgasm he'd just had nearly blew his head off. He could feel his legs trembling, *trembling*, for heaven's sake, and already he was raring to go again. What was it about this woman that just tripped his switch?

Ariana wrapped her arms around his neck. "That was good."

He shook his head in bemusement. She'd developed a particular fondness for the unselfish act of giving him head. Who knew? As she rubbed against him, he promptly lost his train of thought, distracted by her soft, feminine curves. He pulled her close, palming her plump buttocks.

She rained kisses all over his neck. Gritting his teeth at the swell of lust that choked him again, Dax pushed her shirt up and out of the way. For his part, he'd discovered a fondness, an obsession really, with her body. He particularly liked her breasts. Full and heavy, they were tipped with luscious pale pink crests he just couldn't get enough of. At the moment, he was trying to stuff the whole thing in his mouth. If he could, if it were only possible, he'd be in paradise.

Her stifled moan reached his ears. "Oh, yes... that feels good... oh Dax..."

The princess was verbal, too. Ariana wasn't shy about telling him how she felt and what she liked, almost always asking for more. She was amazingly responsive, eager and willing. There weren't too many places on the ship that afforded them some

privacy, but somehow, they always managed to find the opportunity to go at it like a couple of sex-starved creatures.

Impatient, Dax dropped to his knees and pushed her skirt out of the way. The musky scent of her sex teased his nostrils. This was another part of her body he really liked. Ariana had a beautiful pussy. Wet and slick, just eager for his touch. What he wouldn't give for the right to stick his cock in her soaked folds and pound himself all the way to paradise. The need to fuck her gnawed at him but it was out of the question. So he did the next best thing. He latched onto her giving flesh with his lips and within moments, she smothered a cry as she came.

Savage satisfaction roiled through Dax as Ariana slumped against the wall, weak and limp from the pleasure he'd just given her. No other man had ever done this to her. No matter what happened in the future -- even if Ariana ended up marrying the king of some fucking world somewhere -- he would always be the first one who'd made her feel this way. She'd never forget that.

Dax tried to console himself with the same line of reasoning again hours later. As always, the pleasure was quick and searing, leaving him breathless, but this time it was followed by a rising dissatisfaction. He was all for fooling around, eager for Ariana to suck his cock, but he wanted more than merely slaking the need he felt. He wanted true connection. Intimacy. He wanted the most intimate joining of all with Ariana.

The fellatio, pleasurable as it was, just wasn't sufficient. The more he was with her, the more his discontent grew. It was getting harder and harder not to obsess about fucking her. It wasn't enough for him to have her one way. He wanted to have her *every* way known to man.

This shit has got to stop.

Before he could voice the thoughts knocking around in his head, fate intervened. The general alarm he'd rigged to go off if any ship came close pealed, rousing him from the small alcove in the cargo bay which had become their trysting place.

With a curse, he jumped to his feet and hurriedly tucked his shirt back in his pants. "Fuck."

"What's going on?"

"We have company." He tightened his jaw. "Get everyone together and strap in. Move, Ariana!" He didn't wait to see if she followed. The general alarm meant they had been found.

Rushing up the stairs, Dax sent a mental prayer to the gods above for a miracle. At the controls, he deactivated the autopilot and took control of the ship but it didn't move. Only one thing could prevent them from any kind of movement. A holding shield had been placed around them. "Damn it."

A disembodied mechanical voice suddenly droned, "Incoming message. Incoming message. Respond. Respond."

"W-what does that mean?" Ariana appeared behind him, pale and clearly frightened.

"Stay out of sight," he barked. "Strap in and don't move until I say it's clear. Do you hear me?"

"What can I do to help?"

"Keep everyone calm. Now go." Footsteps receded as she hurried back to the main deck. Pulling in a deep breath, Dax pressed the button that activated the monitor. The image flickered for a second. The scaly face of a Xerexian warship commander stared back at him.

"Identify yourself."

Dax schooled his features into a friendly smile. "Scrap-metal hauler. I'm on my way to Trinity sector. My ship is registered with Sandora Three."

"We're on the hunt for some fugitives. Our sensors indicate you have passengers on board."

"I haven't seen any fugitives." He didn't let his grin falter. "Just me, my family and some old metal parts I'm hoping to sell for some cash currency."

The Xerexian wasn't fooled. "We will turn off the shield. Idle your engines and prepare to be boarded."

"Roger that," Dax quipped lightly, pretending to fiddle with the controls. Once the Xerexians released the holding shield, he'd have a split second to power up the engine and get far enough away to prevent another hold on them.

"Come on, baby, don't let me down now," he muttered under his breath. "Just one surge of power is all I need. Just enough to buy us some time."

Dax knew the exact moment the Xerexians shut off the shield. Gritting his teeth, he powered up the engine and punched it. The ship sputtered for a moment before it jumped forward. "Yes. That's it. Get us out of here." He held his breath, watching as the distance between the Xerexians and their little ship grew more and more.

His stomach dropped when the Xerexians quickly moved to follow them. "Shit. It's now or never." It was time to send out a distress signal. He activated the com-link. "This is Commander Dax Morrison of the Earth Federation Army. I need help from any friendlies out there. We're being pursued by a Xerexian warship."

The monitor showed the Xerexian ship gaining on them. Things were going downhill fast. Ariana slipped into the seat next to him. "Tell me what to do."

"I have no time for this now, Ari. I told you to strap in back there."

"I want to help."

He showed her the com-link. "Keep sending out a distress signal until somebody hears us. And for heaven's sake, whatever happens, don't panic. You hear me?"

She swallowed and gave a tight nod and did what he ordered her to. Dax pulled up the schematics of the ship on the monitor. "Where can I pull more juice? Just a little bit more, baby. Give me just a little bit more." He shut down energy in the lower half of the ship and shifted all that to the engine. It gave him some, but not enough. That would have to do. It was all he had.

The Xerexians were right on their tail. If he didn't shake them now, they'd all end up dead. What could buy them more time?

It hit him. At the outer edges of the quadrant was a notorious asteroid belt. If he could lure the Xerexians to follow him into it, he could quickly skirt around and try to

outrun them. It was dangerous but it was also their only chance of getting away. He'd flown through an asteroid belt once; surely he could do it again?

Dax clenched his jaw. There was nothing else to do but try it. "Fuck it. Hold on." He headed straight for the large floating rocks.

Ariana gasped. "Are you thinking of doing what I think you are?"

"I have no choice. We can't outrun them, Princess. Our only chance is to lead them into the asteroid belt and hope they get stuck in it and give us a chance to get away."

She paled. "B-but if we hit an asteroid, it could kill us all."

"Do you trust me?"

"With everything in me," she replied without hesitation.

Dax grinned. "That's all I needed to hear." Gripping the controls with both hands, he headed for the huge boulders that floated in space. He steered the ship deftly in between, wincing as the ship grazed the side of a particularly large asteroid.

"Uh, Dax..."

"Just sit tight, Princess."

"H-have you done this before?" she asked shakily.

"Yeah. Once." He zoomed by another one, checking over his shoulder to see the Xerexians entering the asteroid belt. *Ha*. With that big fucking ship, it'd take a miracle to get out of there unscathed.

"Once?" Ariana squeaked. "That's hardly reassuring."

"Relax. All we need to do is wait until they hit something. They're way bigger than us, so chances are, they won't make it out of here intact."

"But what if *we* get hit?"

"I won't let that happen, Princess. Now do me a favor and hail every goddamn ship in this sector. There's got to be a friendly around here somewhere."

As Ariana frantically tried to hail any ship nearby, Dax concentrated on getting around the dangerous asteroids. *Piece of cake*, he told himself. It was just like those old-

fashioned simulator games during his Academy days. Like navigating an obstacle course.

A loud explosion burst to their right. Debris hurtled at them with frightening speed. "Hold on," he shouted. "They're firing at us."

"Oh, goddess," Ariana whispered.

"Don't worry, Princess. I have no intention of dying today." Dax skirted a floating rock, taking the turn so quick that the tail of the ship glanced off the sharp edge of another. He winced at the clanging sound. The engine was already at maximum output. There was no more power to be pulled from anywhere. Gripping the controls tight, he zoomed between the asteroids, crossing his fingers that the ship held together.

The Xerexian warship, though considerably larger than theirs, skirted the rocks and managed to stay on their tail. They kept firing, the powerful plasma beams glancing off the hard surfaces of the floating stones. Fragments flew at them, hitting the ship with bone-jarring impact. Dax swerved, barely avoiding the rubble, maneuvering the ship around suddenly. Anything that wasn't strapped down crashed and fell. Screams of fright came from the main deck.

"Is everyone all right?" he shouted.

"Yes," came Demetria's faint reply.

Dax gave Ariana a brief glance. "You okay?"

She nodded, looking shaken but otherwise intact. "Yes, I'm fine."

"I've got a plan, but we might get knocked around some more." He flipped on the internal com-line and addressed his passengers. "Brace yourselves. I'm about to do something that will get us out of here. Hold on."

Dax mentally crossed his fingers, hoping his plan would work. He deliberately slowed down, letting the Xerexian ship catch up.

"Are you sure about this?"

He watched the monitor as the enemy ship closed in. "Come on, baby. Just a little bit closer..." He waited until the Xerexians were within firing distance before he braked hard and abruptly pulled right. The hard turn sent them briefly in a crazy tailspin.

Screams echoed in the ship. Dax wrapped his fingers around the wheel tightly, gritting his teeth until they stopped spinning and were stable once more. He seized the opportunity and punched full power to get away from the Xerexians and out of the asteroid belt. With a big ship, the damned enemy wouldn't be able to maneuver as quickly as they did. That should buy them some precious minutes to get away.

His elation died as they cleared the asteroid belt. Dax pulled hard on the brakes as six large battle cruisers sat waiting ominously for them. "Shit."

"Incoming message."

Dread twisted his stomach into knots. Dax flipped on the com-link and allowed the message to come through.

"Commander Dax. This is Captain Marnak from the Bandarian Royal Military. Is everyone all right?"

Relief slammed into him upon seeing a friendly face. Dax let out a burst of laughter. "It's good to see you, Captain Marnak. And yes, we're all fine."

The Bandarian's face creased into a smile. "We were patrolling the neutral area when we received your emergency distress call. The Federation has sent out a general alarm for you, sir, since you've gone missing."

"It's a long story, Captain. In the meantime --" Dax glimpsed the Xerexian ship just clearing the asteroid belt, "-- could you give us some assistance in handling our friend over there?"

"With pleasure, Commander. I invite you to come aboard. I'll take you to your destination." With that, Captain Marnak signed off. Two of the huge warships shifted into position, ready to confront the Xerexians.

Dax reached over and cupped Ariana's cheek. "No need to worry anymore, Princess. We're safe now."

* * *

"I've dispatched several battle cruisers as well as a good number of my infantry to Altezza. I'm confident that before long, your world will be free and your husband will be rescued," Prince Kendrick of Bandar assured her mother.

Demetria smiled. "I am grateful for your help. Had we known that you have a close alliance with the Earth Federation, I would have immediately brought my family here."

The Bandarians were a kind and generous people. Kendrick had a reputation as a fair and just ruler, one who was quite obviously in love with his wife, Tamara. The Queen of Bandar had literally flown into Dax's arms upon their arrival. Though their relationship was clearly platonic, Ariana still felt a quick spurt of resentment at the closeness the two shared.

Goddess, she'd never been jealous of anyone before.

Ariana stared glumly at the beautiful tapestry covering an entire wall, unappreciative of the intricate design and craftsmanship. She missed Dax. He'd volunteered to lead the combined Federation and Bandarian forces sent to Altezza to save her father. He hadn't even said goodbye. How could he do that? Now she sat here worried sick, pretending to take part in polite conversation, answering in monosyllables without knowing what it was she was replying to. The worry over her father, her home and now Dax was taking its toll. Last night, she'd barely slept a wink.

Somewhere between meeting Dax at the club, being chased by the Xerexians, nearly getting killed in the asteroid belt and their eventual rescue, her feelings had changed. Somehow, she'd crossed the line from sexual attraction to emotional attachment. She'd fallen in love with Dax.

Ariana glanced out the window at the clear Bandarian sky. There wasn't a particular moment she could pinpoint as the turning point of her feelings. It just happened. She fell in love with the man who took on the responsibility of flying them to safety when he could've just walked away, the man who had soothed Keeva's anxieties and fears, the man who'd even put up with Mama and Nana's constant bickering.

Dax had indulged her sexual curiosity with a combined passion and gentleness that took her breath away. The intensity with which she wanted him scared her. It was a physical need, a longing that deepened every minute he was apart from her. Her heart

ached with loneliness. She missed him. The very thought of not having Dax around was unthinkable.

Come back to me, Dax.

The sound of her mother's gentle laughter drew Ariana back to the present. All at once, the heavy burden of duty and obligation she'd managed to push to the back of her mind came rushing back. Her life was already mapped out for her, a path from which she couldn't stray. Now, more than ever, she would be required to make an alliance that would make Altezza stronger, less vulnerable to enemy attacks. The stark reality of her future lay before her. *Duty above all.*

Her love for Dax was doomed.

Ariana buried her face in her hands. Her chest constricted with pain. No matter what happened, she was sure of one thing. Her life would never be the same again.

Chapter Six

Driving the enemy out of Altezza happened quicker than they had all expected. The Xerexians had surrendered and left hastily without a single shot being fired, avoiding a war which could have killed many. King Roman was found alive, though a little worse for the wear, his kingdom largely unscathed. The Xerexians had not had time to wreak havoc yet.

With the invaders out and Altezza once again in peace, Kendrick had personally flown Ariana and her family back to their home. Her anxiety eased with the turmoil over and her father safe. Their homecoming had been filled with tears of joy.

In honor of the victory, Demetria opened the palace to the people and hastily arranged a banquet to celebrate. With everyone helping out, the palace was soon festooned with gaily-colored flowers and decorations. Tables were laden with food and drinks. Festive music filled the air and the palace was lit up by hundreds of twinkling lights.

Ariana watched as Demetria glided around the room, greeting her guests and mingling with the people, but always ending up at her husband's side. Gone were the lines of strain and worry from her face. She looked relaxed and happy. Even Nana joined in the celebration, clapping along to the music. Keeva was playing with other children, darting among the tables, slipping under the long, trailing covers.

As for herself, Ariana couldn't say the same. All would be right in her world as soon as she had a moment alone with Dax. Where was he? She'd circled the room twice and still had seen no sign of him. Last night, she'd searched for him but failed to find him. Was he avoiding her? Why hadn't he come to see her? Restless, she stalked around the room, spotting Tamara alone by the huge double doors.

Ariana quickened her steps, heading for Kendrick's queen before she lost her nerve. "I beg your pardon, Your Majesty," she said as she came to a stop next to the other woman.

Tamara smiled. "Please. No need to be so formal among friends. Every time someone calls me Your Majesty, I have the urge to look behind me. I still can't believe it's me they're addressing."

Put at ease by Tamara's friendly words, Ariana relaxed a little. "I was wondering if you've seen Dax."

"Dax?"

Ariana flushed at the speculative gleam in Tamara's gaze. "I wanted to thank him for his help in getting my family through serious danger and for helping rescue my father."

"Of course." Tamara nodded. "I saw him right before the festivities began. I believe your mother put him in the same wing as Kendrick and I. Dax is due to fly back home in the morning." She paused. "I believe he has the last room on the right."

Clearly, she'd found a friend in the Queen of Bandar. "Thank you very much for understanding," she finished softly.

Tamara squeezed her hand. "I'm a woman, too. Now go and make your escape before anybody notices you're gone."

With a grateful smile, Ariana made a quick exit. The hallway was mostly deserted, everyone was enjoying the banquet. She headed for the side stairs and ran up the steps. The sounds of the party grew more distant as she ventured into the silence of the guest wing and to the very end of the marble corridor. Before she lost her nerve, she knocked. The door opened abruptly. Dax appeared shirtless, wearing only a pair of dark trousers. His hair was tousled, his skin gleaming smooth and golden in the pale light inside the bedroom.

"Ariana."

She couldn't tell whether he was happy to see her or not. Swallowing the lump that suddenly lodged in her throat, she met his gaze. "Hello, Dax."

"What are you doing here?"

Her stomach dipped. He was hardly being welcoming. "Can I come in?"

There was a barely perceptible pause before he stepped back. Ariana crossed the threshold, straightening her shoulders when she heard the soft snick of the door closing before she confronted him. "Why have you been avoiding me?" Hurt blossomed inside her when he didn't answer. "You were going to leave in the morning without saying goodbye?"

His lips tightened. "Your father is safe. We've driven the Xerexians out of Altezza. My business is done here."

Ariana couldn't prevent the tremor that rolled through her. "So that's it?"

"We had some fun times together but now it's over, Princess. We've got to accept that."

"You don't want me anymore?" she asked, forcing the words past her throat. It was physically painful to hear it.

Dax's dark eyes flashed with heat. "I would suggest that you don't go there, Ariana. Leave well enough alone."

"I deserve an answer."

"You want the truth?" he challenged softly. Something in his tone gave her pause, but she nodded. Dax eliminated the distance between them and hauled her into his arms. "I don't want to play anymore. Every time I touch you, come anywhere near you, I have this overwhelming need to shove my cock inside you, to hell with preserving your virginity. Now do you understand why?"

She caught her breath. Little fingers of flame licked at every inch of her skin, igniting a hunger deep in her belly.

He pushed her from him. "No more games. Just go."

"Look at me. Tell me that it's over between us." Her voice shook. "Tell me you don't feel anything for me and I'll leave."

Dax didn't respond, stiff and unmoving. She waited for him to force her to go, but he didn't. Deep inside, Ariana knew he couldn't. Before she lost her nerve, she

reached for the fastening of her dress. With one flick of her fingers, the silky material slithered to the floor.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded hoarsely.

She calmly disposed of her undergarments.

He clenched his fists. "I'm warning you, Ariana. Put your dress back on and leave."

The anger that edged his voice didn't faze her. She walked toward him. With every step, she grew more confident that she was doing the right thing. How could it be wrong? "I want you." When mere inches separated them, she halted. "Only you."

His gaze flashed with heat but he shook his head. "We both know we can't do this."

Driven by an overwhelming need to be close to him, she took that one last step. Ariana laid a hand over his heart, comforted by the solid beat under her palm. "It feels right."

Dax groaned. "Princess, once we cross this line, there's no going back."

Ariana planted a kiss on his chin, inhaling his uniquely male scent, savoring the tangy taste of his skin. Buoyed by the fact that he wasn't pushing her away, she skimmed her lips under his ear. "Yes."

His handsome face was drawn in tight lines, his breathing rough and uneven. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

"Last chance, Princess," he warned in a guttural tone. "Once we start, I'm not holding back."

Determined to crush the last of his resistance, Ariana kissed him. Dax uttered a growl and took over. She rejoiced. This was what she wanted, what she'd been after. Later she'd ponder a future without Dax. But this time was just for the two of them.

"Damn you." He pushed her against the wall, caging her in with his body. "Why won't you ever do anything I tell you?" Without missing a beat, he latched onto a nipple, driving the breath from her lungs. The raspy texture of his tongue combined

with the heat of his mouth nearly drove her insane. She strained against him, plunging her hands into his hair, holding him close, never wanting to let him go.

Ariana cried out in surprise as he suddenly picked her up and tumbled her on the bed, landing on top of her, bracing his weight on his elbows. The kiss was carnal, full of unabashed need, demanding and giving more.

Driven by an urgency that mirrored hers, Dax stood up and hastily undressed. Ariana stared at him hungrily. She would never tire of looking at the ropy stretch of muscles, the taut golden skin, and the proud, erect flesh that rose from a nest of curls. "You're beautiful."

His eyes darkened. "You are, Princess. Not me." Putting one knee on the bed, he pulled her legs apart and settled in between. He stared at her sex with unblinking intensity.

Ariana squirmed on the bed, restless and needy.

He buried his face between her thighs. With amazing agility, using his tongue, lips and fingers, he pleased her, lapping at her swollen clit and licking at the wet folds of her pussy.

"Ohhh..."

She pushed her hips closer to his mouth, demanding more, protesting when he shifted to his knees. He cupped her mound, pressing his palm down on her clit. She shuddered. One blunt finger slipped inside her slit, instantly engulfed in her wetness. His thumb rotated over the sensitive nub, driving her insane, while he pushed another digit inside her, slowly stretching her. It was delicious, this preview of what it would be like to have him inside her.

Dax settled between her parted legs, his cock brushing against her sodden sex. Hunger was etched in his features.

"Come inside me," she implored softly. There was nothing else she wanted more.

He loomed over her, pushing her sweat-dampened hair away from her cheek tenderly. She held her breath as the head of his shaft penetrated her. He felt so big, so

thick. Curving a hand around her nape, he swooped in to kiss her at the same moment he surged inside her to the hilt.

Ariana shuddered, unable to believe he was finally inside her. She gazed at him in wonder. The pain was so minimal she hardly noticed it, completely overshadowed by the pleasure of his possession.

"Oh, Dax. It feels... it feels..."

Their breaths mingled. "I know."

She raised a shaky hand to cup his cheek. "I'm glad it was you."

"My princess." He closed his eyes and began to move, slowly at first, gradually building in tempo. To be connected with Dax in the most intimate way transcended the physical. It felt incredible. Love for him filled her, rising to her throat, begging to be said.

He stroked deeper, harder. "Yes." Wrapping her legs around his hips, Ariana clung to him, lost in the white-hot pleasure he gave her. Again and again, he rammed into her, rubbing a special spot somewhere high inside her that magnified the sensations. A powerful tingling started in her lower belly, gathering steam, her muscles clenching, coalescing into one explosion that wrought a cry from deep in her soul.

Dax never let up during her orgasm. He kept on thrusting, cupping her buttocks to raise her higher, reaching the deepest part of her pussy. "One more time, Ariana," he urged hotly. "Come with me this time."

The husky rasp of his voice acted like a catalyst. Her body was so sensitive to his needs, to his demands, like an instrument fine-tuned to receive and give pleasure solely to him. She crested once more, his name a litany on her lips.

He thrust once, twice, before he groaned. Ariana felt him swell inside her before he came, warm seed filling her clenching sex.

Dax nuzzled her neck, panting heavily. "Ariana?"

"Hmm?" she replied dreamily, boneless and spent.

A soft chuckle rumbled through his chest. "Are you okay?"

"Never better."

"I wasn't too rough?" Faint concern tinged his voice. "I was hardly gentle and it was your first time."

"It was perfect. *You* were perfect." Everything was just the way it should be. Ariana sighed, satiation seeping into her bones. Her eyelids began to droop. She'd close her eyes. Just for a moment...

* * *

She was beautiful, even in sleep. Long lashes cast half-moon shadows on her creamy cheeks. Dax let her hair trail over his fingers, the curls soft and silky as they lay in tousled disarray over the pillow. Sleep eluded him. He'd felt restless and uneasy. The thought of leaving Ariana and never seeing her again pained him.

What was it with her? From the start, he'd been drawn to her, unable to resist, no matter how hard he tried. Ariana was unlike all those women who'd drifted through his life. Women who'd asked for no commitments and expected none in return, understanding that the life of a Federation Commander didn't leave much room for relationships.

Dax smiled, smoothing a hand down Ariana's silky leg. Even while he'd been enraged at being kidnapped and tied down, essentially forced to help her family, he'd always known Ariana was special. He admired her bravery and strong will. She'd managed to get under his skin, igniting his temper at times, and left him feeling frustrated and confused. Most of all, Her Royal Hotness had curves that made him drool.

He kissed the sensitive spot between her neck and shoulder. Ariana shifted in her sleep, murmuring something unintelligible. With a grin, he fastened his lips right there, loving the way she bucked softly in reaction.

"Wake up, Ari."

"Mmm."

There were a few hours left before his departure. "I'm leaving soon. Let's not waste the time sleeping."

At the mention of his imminent departure, Ariana tensed. Sadness shadowed her eyes. Dax braced himself, hoping she wouldn't start to cry. If she did, then he was in deep shit. He couldn't handle her tears.

"I wish things were different. Another time and place --" she trailed off, unable to continue.

Thick silence settled between them. Dax's mind raced. What if he didn't leave? What if -- *no*. Don't even think about it. Ariana was an Altezzan princess. It was her duty to marry a man who would someday rule beside her, one from impeccable lineage, of royal blood like her. Which ruled him out. Dax Morrison was a commoner, an orphan at that. The closest thing he considered family was Tamara. He had no inkling about royal etiquette. He cussed too much and had no patience for boring, polite conversation.

He and Ariana together? It was a fucking dream.

Suddenly annoyed at the prospect of Ariana marrying some royal dickhead, Dax did the next best thing. He enclosed her in his arms, fitting her back to his front. "No more talking," he declared huskily.

He took her left arm and wrapped it around his neck, shifting her this way and that, putting her leg over his so that his erect shaft was cradled in her pussy. His other hand curved around her torso, giving him easy access to her plump breasts. Need thrummed through his senses. He wanted her again. Now. He tugged her face toward him and kissed her, intent on driving every thought from her mind.

Ariana's soft gasp broke the silence as he entered her with one powerful stroke. Dax thrust hard and deep inside her. So tight. He wanted to just stay where he was and soak in the unbelievable pleasure. Would he feel this way with another woman? Somehow he doubted it. There was only one woman who could make him feel like this, who could drive him to the point of insanity. He knew because he'd slept with plenty. The difference was startling and unmistakable.

Her scent wafted to his nostrils, obliterating every thought, searing his senses like a goddamn drug. He loved when she made that little breathless catch in the back of

her throat, a clear signal that she was as lost in the pleasure as he was. Her fingers dug into his skin as she blindly sought his lips. Crazy with need, Dax immersed his mind, body and heart in loving Ariana, in giving her pleasure. In this, he knew he couldn't fail her.

He slid one hand to cup a breast, sending the other diving between her legs, seeking the sensitive bundle of nerves. Her whimpers, the little mewling gasps that came from her, spurred him on. He stroked in and out feverishly, wanting to get as deep as he could, until he couldn't tell where she ended and where he began. Faster. Harder. Ariana cried out his name in that shaky, breathless way before she shuddered violently and came. He gritted his teeth as she contracted around his shaft, pummeling her with short, rapid strokes. In a bid to prolong the knife-sharp sensations coursing through him, he tried to hold out as long as he could. He couldn't. With a guttural groan, he gave in to the powerful orgasm that overtook him.

The whole ride had been quick and intense, leaving him boneless and stunned. Ariana slumped against him, panting heavily, all soft curves and silky skin. She murmured something under her breath and snuggled closer.

Dax felt poleaxed. He'd just had her. How was it possible to want her again so soon? His blood was already heating. His cock, still inside her, lengthened once more. She moved her hips, riding his shaft, and just like that, the whole thing started all over again.

He had it bad. For a princess, no less. What's a man like him got to offer somebody like her? Nothing but himself.

He was in deep shit this time. All the way to his heart.

* * *

Ariana blinked awake, a smile on her lips. She stretched an arm out and froze when all she encountered were cold sheets. Jackknifing to a sitting position, she glanced around the room. "Dax?"

Dead silence. She was alone.

A sinking feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. Ariana jumped from the bed and frantically searched for her clothes. Oh goddess, he couldn't possibly have left without waking her? The very thought of not seeing Dax again left a bitter taste in her mouth as she haphazardly dressed. She pushed a hand through her sleep-tangled hair as she ran out the door. *Please, please, don't let me be too late. Please still be here. Don't leave me, Dax.*

She ran down the long hallway, ignoring the palace staff who rushed to get out of her way. Gripping the thick banister of the winding staircase, she dashed down the steps, zipping through the people milling around. She would have sprinted past the grand receiving room if not for a glimpse of a familiar figure standing at the far end by the door.

Ariana rushed back and stood under the arched entryway. Her pulse raced. Dax was shaking her father's hand. *He is about to leave.* Desperate, Ariana ran toward him, heedless of those present. Heads swiveled as she slid to a stop, breathing heavily, clutching the back of a chair. "I love you, Dax."

At her declaration, the buzz of conversation immediately died. Dax looked up in surprise. Her father did the same. Ariana lifted her chin. Her future was at stake here. "Don't leave me."

Her words rang loud and clear in the cavernous room. Shocked whispers began to circulate, steadily gaining in volume. "Ari," Demetria's reproving tone rose above the murmurs. "What are you doing?"

Ariana couldn't help but stare at Dax. In his official Federation uniform, he stood tall and proud beside her father as they came toward her. The two men drew to a halt a scant distance away from her. She steeled herself against the disapproving frown her father wore. Explanations would have to wait. Right now, it was imperative to stop Dax from leaving.

Dax's expression was frustratingly inscrutable. "Ariana --"

She started to speak but her father's raised hand stopped her. Without looking around, King Roman simply said, "Leave us."

The people shuffled out quickly. In no time at all, the room was cleared and the double doors shut, leaving her, Dax and her parents inside. Ariana swallowed. She'd never done anything to displease her parents. The dutiful daughter, that's what she was brought up to be. But in this instance, she had no choice. Her heart was on the line. Whatever consequences her action would bring, she'd accept them.

"I'm sorry, Papa." She met her father's gaze bravely. "I couldn't let Dax leave." A lone tear escaped. Ariana wiped it away, suddenly conscious of how disheveled she must look. One thing she was sure didn't escape her parents' notice, judging by the expression on their faces.

"I must say," King Roman's tone was hard and unyielding, "I am disappointed at your behavior, Ariana."

She bowed her head, her cheeks flaming. Why bother to deny it? It was obvious she had just rolled out of Dax's bed.

"However, I must admit that recent events in our lives have taught me one very important lesson." Her father's stern countenance softened. "You love him, Ari?"

Hope fluttered in Ariana's chest. "I do."

"You're certain this is what you want?"

"More than anything."

Her mother, who so far had been silent, burst into tears.

Roman nodded. "It seems your request is no longer necessary, Dax."

Ariana's gaze swung from her father to Dax. "What do you mean, Papa?"

Dax took her hand in his. "Would you excuse us, Your Majesty? I'd like to talk to Ariana alone."

"Very well." Roman led his wife to the door. "Rumors have undoubtedly started to spread fast. I'd like to make an announcement soon, if I may."

"Papa," Ariana cut in. "Please go."

Unbelievably, she heard her father stifle an amused chuckle before he pulled Demetria outside, leaving her alone with Dax.

He smiled. "You just had to burst in here and ruin my plans."

Her breath locked in her lungs. "Don't keep me in suspense, please."

Dax pulled her close. "I wanted to do everything the proper, traditional Altezzan way. I told your father I wanted to marry you, but your little announcement made that rather unnecessary."

Tears of happiness welled up in her eyes. "Ask *me*. Hurry."

He kissed her. "I love you. You launched a sneak attack and managed to breach my heart. But I'm a mere commoner, Ariana, and a Federation Commander at that. I don't have a lot to offer you but I told your father I would do everything in my power to make you happy. Will you marry me?"

"Yes." Ariana wrapped her arms around his neck. "*You* make me happy. I don't need anything else."

His chuckle was warm against her cheek. "I'm going to guess that our wedding will happen soon. Your father's not a fool."

"Good," she whispered, gently biting his lower lip. "I love you, too. I need to be your wife as soon as possible. Now that I've slept with you, I don't think I can sleep without you ever. You've ruined me."

His laughter rumbled through his chest and vibrated against hers. "I'm betting we'll have to wait until after we're married to be together again. That will kill me."

She grinned. "Do you know there are several secret chambers and passageways in this palace? And I know every single one of them."

Heat darkened his eyes. Dax cupped her buttocks and pulled her up to him, capturing her lips in a deep kiss. The desire simmering just below the surface burst into the open. They were lost in each other, unaware of anything else, until her father cleared his throat rather loudly.

"Ariana." Her mother glided into the room, smoothly separating them. "Come, darling, we have a lot of planning to do for your wedding." She sent Dax a charming smile. "Let me be the first to welcome you to the family." She planted a kiss on his cheek before stepping back. "Ari?" Demetria prompted.

Ariana gave her soon-to-be-husband another lingering kiss. "I'll see you tonight," she whispered in Dax's ears, giving him a quick lick with her tongue. "I can't wait."

Halting by the door, she looked at Dax once more. Her heart swelled with love. She couldn't wait until tonight when everybody had gone to bed. Then she and Dax could be together again.

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 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 in 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.