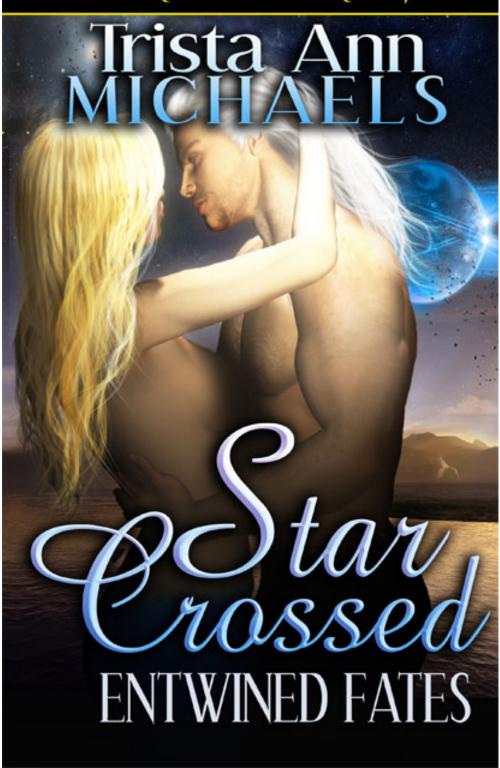
# Ellora's Cave Presents



#### An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Star Crossed

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## STAR CROSSED

**Trista Ann Michaels** 

### **Prologue**

Daego, Legana Sector of the galaxy
Present Day

"I now pronounce you man and wife, Lord and Lady Marcone."

Stefan stood back, admiring the newlyweds. His brother Sidious had married the love of his life, Mikayla. They were perfect for each other, and he was thrilled Sidious had found the same kind of love their parents shared—the kind of love that lasted forever.

He'd given up on finding that kind of love. For one, he didn't have the time to put into the search, and two, women were usually only after his money and status anyway. So he just had fun—no-strings sex and lots of it.

Letting his gaze wander around the onslaught of well-wishing family and friends, he locked eyes with Mikayla's maid of honor, Krista. They hadn't been introduced, but his mother had pointed her out to him earlier. He'd barely made the ceremony, and his mother made sure he knew she was aware of it. So sneaking in through the side entrance to the garden hadn't been all that great of an idea after all.

Mothers. Always on your ass about something.

Throughout the wedding, he couldn't stop sneaking glances at Krista. She was beautiful, with eyes the color of a spring sky—so striking and intense. When he smiled at her a blush covered her cheeks before she looked away. The sunlight beamed down and highlighted the gold streaks in her long honey-blonde hair. The strands teased him with soft curls he could easily see wrapping around his fingers, and he had no doubt they would be soft as silk.

She strolled across the garden to the refreshment table and he swallowed, his eyes mesmerized by the soft swaying of her hips. Her blue dress mirrored her eyes and draped over every last luscious curve of her hourglass figure. Curves his hands craved to touch and explore.

She's your sister-in-law's best friend, you idiot, the voice of reason screamed at him. Mikayla considers her a member of the family. Yet his feet and hardening cock urged him forward. It had been a long time since a woman had affected him this quickly and this strongly. He'd be a vigic if he didn't at least explore the possibility.

Standing behind her right shoulder, he leaned forward slightly and whispered, "I don't believe we've been formally introduced."

She jumped and spun from her perusal of the refreshment table to face him. Her blue eyes narrowed and darkened like impending storm clouds. "I know who you are."

He raised an eyebrow in amusement. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Let's just say your reputation precedes you."

"I have a reputation?" A grin tugged at the corner of his lips.

"Several."

"Such as?"

"Your reputation as a leader and fighter is flawless. We've all heard the stories concerning your organization of the rebels. Your reputation with the ladies, however, leaves much to be desired."

"Wow." He sighed in mock distress. "I don't recall ever hearing any complaints."

He wiggled his eyebrows, but frowned when she turned away from him. Her animosity surprised him, and he wondered what was behind it. He knew he had a reputation as a lady's man, but was that a reason for her to hate him? Reaching out, he brushed her hair from her shoulder. "How about we start over? I'm Stefan—"

"Yes, I know. Count Stefan Marcone, recently appointed Senator for Tilarus in the newly formed Senatorial Government. And of course let's not forget, all-around playboy and womanizer."

"Ouch." He winced.

Setting a sweetball on her plate, she turned to face him. Her gaze met his as she placed her finger in her mouth to suck off a bit of powdered sugar from the confection. The action, seemingly innocent, shocked him. Damn, he wanted to kiss those lips, to slide his tongue into her mouth and taste the sugar she'd just licked off her finger. Without thinking, he took a step toward her.

A scowl crossed her china-doll features as she retreated.

"I think I'm being judged a little unfairly." He moved even closer. "After all, we've never met before. Don't you think you're making a lot of assumptions?"

For some reason he couldn't stop himself from invading her space, from pushing buttons he had no business pushing. There was something about her that drew him in, made him think with his crotch instead of his head. That was a first for him. He loved seducing women and he was good at it, but one thing he never did was lose control of his common sense. He'd never met a woman that made him addle-brained. Until now.

She swallowed, placing her hand against his chest to stop him from getting any closer. The warmth of her palm seeped through his shirt and sent jolts of electrical sensation throughout his limbs.

"I'm not judging you. I'm just stating a fact."

Her voice came out like a croak, and he had to bite back a grin.

"Then shouldn't I be entitled to an opportunity to prove those facts false?"

"At the moment, you're proving them true."

This time he did smile. "Then you won't be surprised when I do this."

Before she could utter a word, he dipped his head and captured her lips. They were soft and warm against his, sending liquid heat straight to his cock. Framing her face with his hands, he ran his tongue along her bottom lip and she stiffened. He tasted powdered sugar and fruit punch, but it wasn't enough. He wanted to feel her silken tongue gliding against his, to feast on the essence of her mouth. He silently encouraged her to open for him.

With a soft moan, she melted against his chest and opened her lips in silent invitation. He slid his tongue inside and stroked hers. He was lost. Audience or not, he couldn't stop kissing her—couldn't stop feeding from the sweetness of her mouth. Sliding a hand into her hair, he pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. With his lips and tongue, he let her know exactly what he wanted to do with her.

He completely forgot about the other guests. He could only feel her lips molded against his, her dainty hands gripping his shoulders. At least until he heard Sidious clearing his throat behind him. Reluctantly, he broke the kiss and growled, "What?"

"What the hell are you doing?" Mikayla hissed.

Stefan glanced over his shoulder and caught his new sister-in-law shooting daggers in his direction. For someone so little, she had a temper to rival his younger brother's, or his own.

"I was just acquainting myself with the newest member of the family."

Mikayla crossed her arms and glared at him while Sidious tried his best to hide a grin. Okay, so maybe the kiss had been a little forward, but for some reason he'd just had to. He couldn't have left without kissing her at least once. Other family members stood around watching, the smiles on their faces evidence of the fact they found the whole thing amusing. A few scowls sent their way quickly dispersed the crowd.

"Stefan," Krista's soft, sultry voice purred behind him.

He turned around to face her and was greeted with a punch bowl being dumped on his head. Lavender punch fell over his shoulders and down the front of his shirt. He gasped as the ice-cold punch hit his skin. In shock, he watched Krista stomp away as laughter rang around him.

"Oh dear," his mother sighed in annoyance, and he cringed at what he knew she would have to say to him later.

"She's my best friend, Stefan, not one of your playthings." Mikayla pointed her finger at his chest. "If you run her off with your antics, I'll have your head."

He stared after Mikayla as she joined Krista by the fountain. His brother chuckled, and Stefan clenched his teeth in aggravation. Turning, he glared at him. "It's not funny, Sidious."

"Considering your platinum blond hair is now purple, it's hilarious."

"Nice of you to stand up for me, little brother."

Sidious snorted. "You're well capable of taking care of yourself. Isn't that what you continually insist, anyway? Besides, I have to agree with Mikayla on this one. What the hell were you thinking? You can't treat Krista like a challenge."

Stefan winced. "You're right. But damn, the woman is gorgeous."

His brother shook his head and patted him on the shoulder. "You'll never change."

He made a face at Sidious' retreating back before casting his gaze back to Krista. She caught him looking at her and scowled. Even when she was ready to kill him, she was adorable. His mischievous side couldn't resist, and he winked at her before heading to the house.

So she wasn't interested. There were plenty out there who would be, lavender hair and all, but as he walked up the steps to the veranda a slight pang of disappointment hit him. At the top, he came to a stop and turned toward the garden to study her. She stood beneath the rose trellis, talking to Mikayla, a smile lighting up her face.

What was it about her? He could still feel her lips against his, could still smell her flowery scent.

"I'll be damned if that's not a first," Taron's amused voice sounded behind him.

Great. Just what I need. The adopted brother's smart-ass humor. "What are you talking about?"

"A beautiful woman not succumbing to your charms."

Stefan rolled his eyes. He would never hear the end of this one. "It's for the best. Mikayla considers her a sister. She would have a fit if I seduced her then dumped her."

Star Crossed

"True." Taron's dark brown eyes raked over Krista in interest. "She is definitely a beautiful woman."

Stefan frowned. "Mikayla is not going to let you do it, either."

"Who said I was going to?" The amusement in Taron's eyes made Stefan grit his teeth.

"I'm going to take a shower."

"Might want to make it a cold one."

Laughter laced Taron's voice, and Stefan clenched his hands in frustration. He was tempted to knock the hell out of him, brother or not.

"Go to Venok, Taron."

Stefan stepped through the double doors into the house. He didn't have time for this. He had a Senate to rebuild. The last thing he needed was a stubborn, opinionated, sassy woman to distract him.

But damn. The woman would be one hell of a distraction.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you okay?"

Krista turned to look at her best friend. Mikayla's green eyes narrowed slightly in concern as she studied her. She hated it when Mikayla watched her like that—as though she could read every thought running through her mind.

"I'm fine," she answered with a hesitant smile.

"Fine, my ass. I still can't believe he did that."

Krista couldn't believe he'd done it either. Especially in front of all these people, but then, it fit what she'd heard about him. Stefan was the last type of man she wanted in her life. Her friend's lips lifted slightly and Krista squirmed uncomfortably. "What?"

"I can't believe you kissed him back."

She closed her eyes and sighed. "Neither can I. I can't figure out what the hell got into me."

Mikayla grinned in amusement. "You want me to tell you what I think?"

"Not really."

"Don't let what Stefan did unsettle you." Mikayla reached out and rubbed her hand down Krista's arm in a soothing motion. "He's harmless, I assure you."

"All I've heard about him is how much a playboy he is."

"You can't always believe what the news media on Earth have to say. They were only going on what people knew of him, and most of what he did was for show."

She frowned. "Show for what?"

"Stefan played the philandering, partying womanizer to take the focus off what he was really doing."

Out of the corner of her eye Krista caught sight of Stefan on the veranda steps, talking with Taron. Both of them were incredibly handsome. Taron was dark and brooding with brown eyes and a bald head. Very hard and unyielding. Stefan was light and playful with long platinum hair and light gray eyes. A breeze blew, whipping Stefan's hair into his face, and he brushed it back with one strong hand.

She still felt the touch of those fingers against her cheek. And damn, the man could kiss. Just thinking about it made her nipples tingle. She crossed her arms over her chest to hide the evidence of her arousal. When Stefan headed into the house, she turned back to Mikayla.

"Let's talk about something else," she mumbled.

"Okay. Are you sure you don't want to stay on here?"

"And feel like a third wheel?" Krista grinned. "No way. Besides, I want to start my life over, and I think the job Sidious set up for me back on Earth will be the perfect opportunity. It'll be the first time in my life I've been on my own, and I'm looking forward to it."

"I'll miss you, though. You'll be so far away."

"We have the communicators. We'll keep in touch, and I promise to come back for visits as often as I can."

Mikayla pointed a finger at her. "I'm going to hold you to that."

"Krista." Taron's deep voice boomed from the veranda, and she spun to face him.

Raising her hand, she shielded her eyes from the late afternoon sun. "Yes?"

"We need to get going."

She nodded and faced her best friend. "Taron's giving me a ride back to Earth so I don't have to take the public transport. He thought it would be quicker."

Mikayla nodded, her eyes filling with unshed tears. "It'll definitely be quicker."

They embraced in a quick hug. "I'll send you a communique to let you know I've made it back safely."

Wiping at the burn that signaled oncoming tears, Krista headed into the massive stone house that resembled a French château to grab her bags. She hated space travel, but at least they would be in Taron's ship. The *Vultair* was huge, and she could stay in a room toward the center. With no windows there would be no evidence that they were moving, which was perfect with her. She could pretend they weren't flying through deep space at twice the speed of light.

With a bag in each hand, she rounded the corner of the second-floor landing and almost ran smack into Stefan. Her gaze took in his open shirt, showing off a smooth tan chest and washboard abs. His feet were bare and his pants clung to his thick thighs and outlined the impressive bulge between his legs. Her fingers clenched the suitcase handle tighter as she realized just how long it had been since she'd been with a man.

Way too long.

"Leaving us already?"

Her gaze locked with his and the heat of a blush moved up her cheeks. She could tell by the mischievous glint in his eyes he knew exactly what she'd been staring at. He watched her in silence while he rubbed at his wet hair with a towel.

She swallowed. "I need to get back to Earth. Taron's giving me a ride."

"Taron's an excellent pilot. You'll be in good hands."

She nodded and licked at her lips. All she could seem to think about was how his mouth had felt on hers.

"I'm sorry about earlier," he said softly.

"No you're not."

A tiny smile lifted the corner of his lips and her breath caught in her throat. How could any one man be so gorgeous? Normally she wasn't attracted to men with long hair, but his gave him a sexy look and his storm cloud gray eyes held her mesmerized, making her wish for things she never even knew she wanted. Like this man having his way with her.

That would be such a stupid thing to do. What if things went badly? She would feel too uncomfortable to come back and see her friend for fear of running into Stefan again. Mikayla was all she had left and much more important than a fling.

"You're right. I'm not." He lowered the towel and stepped closer. She smelled the slight scent of musk and the soap he'd used. With determination, she resisted the urge to inhale deeper. "Come on, Kris. Admit it. You enjoyed it just as much as I did."

She tilted her head and scowled up at him. "You're an arrogant ass, do you know that? And my name is Krista."

"What's wrong with Kris?"

Only her mother had called her Kris. "I don't like it."

"All the more reason to use it. I like it when you're angry. Your eyes get darker and flash fire." He smiled, the gray in his eyes darkening. "It makes for quite a picture."

Krista rolled her eyes at his gall. "Why don't we both do ourselves a favor and steer clear of each other."

"But sweetheart, we're family," Stefan reasoned, the playful glint still evident in his gaze. The man was going to drive her crazy. She would do well to avoid him.

"You don't kiss family in front of over eighty guests."

"Would you prefer I kiss you in private?"

"I would prefer you not kiss me at all."

"Now who's lying?"

She opened her mouth to tell him exactly where he could go, when Taron's voice interrupted them. "There you are. Ready?" His deep brown stare traveled between her and Stefan before a knowing grin spread his lips. "Am I interrupting something?"

"No," Krista snapped.

"Yes," Stefan drawled.

"I see," Taron replied, his shoulders shaking in quiet laughter. "I can come back—"

"No." Krista quickly stepped forward and handed Taron her heaviest bag. "The sooner I get home the better."

More like the sooner she got away from Stefan the better.

## **Chapter One**

Senate Building, capital city of Rhenari, Rineah System, One year later

Senator Stefan Marcone turned his attention from the list of expected senators for the planetary vote scheduled later that week and gazed toward the window that ran along the far wall. The incredible view was one of the reasons he chose this particular space. He could see all the way to the desert wasteland that bordered the capital city of Rhenari.

It had been over a year since the battle that had freed the galaxy from Prime Minister Rigora and his dictatorship. Winning the battle had only been the beginning. Their most difficult challenge—reconstructing the Senatorial Government—came after.

Stefan released a tired breath and rubbed at his dry, overworked eyes. He couldn't remember when he'd last had a day off, and the constant demands of his job had caught up to him. As he stood, he closed the file and set it on his desk. Walking over to the window, he gazed out at the city spread below him.

He loved the view at night. Most every evening he watched the setting sun turn the sands of the wasteland red as it slipped below the horizon. But at the moment all he could see was the never-ending pile of work he needed to finish, the constant demands on his time and his ever-shortening temper.

He knew he'd spread himself too thin, but every time he turned around another problem needed to be solved. Now they had a new problem. Someone was killing the senators.

"Stefan." Taron's deep voice brought him back to the meeting at hand.

"Damn it, what?" Stefan sighed and dragged a hand over his face. "I'm sorry." Taron didn't deserve his temper, no matter how tired and irritable he felt.

"Do yourself and everyone else a favor. Take a vacation and get some rest before I wring your neck. You've been snapping at way too many people lately."

Stefan turned to face the man he considered his best friend. "I have too much to do. And now, with this assassin picking off senators, I need to be here."

"What you need is to learn how to let other people take care of things. I can handle the investigation. If for any reason I need you, I know where to find you." Taron pinned him with a glare. "I mean it, Stefan."

"All right," Stefan said with a sigh, pretending to give in for the time being. "I promised Mikayla I would deliver Krista to Daego for a visit after I meet with Senator Blake, so I'll stay there for a while myself. Happy?"

"Immensely." A small grin tugged at Taron's lips and Stefan braced himself for the ribbing he knew was forthcoming. "Speaking of Krista, have you seen her since the wedding?"

And it starts. "No."

"It's probably a good thing. Surely a year is plenty of time to cool off. Maybe you should make sure there are no punch bowls around for her to dump on you."

Stefan sent him a tight-lipped smile. "Maybe you should kiss my ass."

"Not my type, sorry," Taron remarked with humor as he lifted his coffee cup to take a sip. "I can't believe Krista actually agreed to your escort."

"I'm not sure she knows."

Taron choked on his coffee and Stefan grinned.

"Damn, what I wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall when you pick her up."

Stefan shrugged. "It's been a year, maybe she's forgotten all about the incident." He certainly wished he could. The woman invaded his dreams day and night. He hadn't been able to get her out of his mind.

"Somehow I doubt it. She was pretty pissed." Taron's brown eyes suddenly turned serious. "I want you to take an escort with you."

#### Trista Ann Michaels

A grimace scrunched up his face and he scowled. "Hell no." With a shake of his head, he moved back to the desk. "You know I hate having people tail me like that. I can handle myself."

"Stefan, as your security advisor, I'd feel a lot better if you took an escort."

"Why?" he demanded with a frown. Why was Taron so concerned about his safety all of a sudden? Needles of apprehension snaked down Stefan's spine. Something must be up if Taron was worried.

"Let's just say it's a bad time to be gallivanting around the galaxy alone."

"Unless you can give me a better reason than that, alone is exactly how I'm going."

"What about all the assassinations? How do you know you're not next?"

Stefan narrowed his eyes and watched Taron fidget with the file on his lap. "What are you not telling me?"

Taron sighed and stood, slapping the file against his leg as he paced. "I have reason to believe the assassin is ultimately after you."

"Care to elaborate?"

Taron met his gaze head-on. "Not at the moment."

"So that's what all this vacation talk is really about?"

Taron nodded his bald head in acknowledgment.

"You know damn good and well I don't hide, Taron."

"I'm not suggesting you hide. I'm suggesting you take a much-needed break while I try to find the man responsible."

"And what if you don't find this man? Am I supposed to continue on this break indefinitely?"

Taron snorted. "When have you ever known me to fail?"

One side of Stefan's lip lifted in a grin. "Point taken."

"Good. Now go get Krista, and try not to kiss her this time."

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista Sinclair placed her favorite blue blouse in the suitcase as she prepared for her first vacation since returning to Earth. She looked forward to seeing Mikayla and Sidious again. The last time she had seen them—other than by video communicator—was at their wedding on Daego.

Leaving them behind to come back home had been one of the hardest things she'd ever done, but had also been one of the smartest. Returning to Earth to help with the rebuilding process was the best thing she could have done for herself.

Besides, Earth could use all the help they could get. The war with the Imperial Militia only lasted a few months, but the devastation had been worldwide and unlike anything they'd ever experienced.

Cities like Atlanta and New York no longer existed. The smaller towns now served as the new capitals and the midwest region of the United States, once sparsely populated, soon became overpopulated. Cleanup would take years, but the process provided much-needed employment for millions of people.

Sidious had done her a huge favor and pulled some strings to get her a job. It was a management position for one of the charities responsible for finding and building housing for displaced families. She loved her work and would forever be grateful. For the first time in her life, she'd found something she excelled in.

But it was time she took a break. She'd worked herself ragged trying to put her past hurts behind her. Mikayla had offered to send someone to pick her up, and she'd jumped at the opportunity. One month of relaxation and visiting her friend was just what she needed. And there was no better place to relax than Daego. The planet was a paradise.

A loud knock sounded at the front door and she jumped in surprise then glanced at her watch with a frown. She'd assumed Mikayla had sent Taron to play chauffeur, but was relieved of that notion the second she opened the door. Stefan stood with one hand resting on the doorframe, the other on his hip. Her eyes widened in surprise and her heart pounded in her chest at the sight of his sexy body before her. She'd seen him on the news being hounded by reporters numerous times but nothing compared to his masculine presence.

His thick platinum hair hung just past his collarbone and with it worn loose he looked more like a sexy calendar stud than a galactic leader. His eyes were soft gray now, but she knew from experience they would darken to black when aroused or angry. Her gaze moved over his full lips and she remembered how they had felt against hers, how his erotic kisses had made her weak in the knees. Aggravated with herself for letting her thoughts trail in that direction, she snapped, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Is that any way to talk to your ride?" he asked in amusement.

Sighing, she stepped aside. "No, of course not. I thought Mikayla was sending Taron."

"Actually she was going to, but I volunteered instead."

Krista stared at him in surprise.

A tiny grin touched his lips. "What's that look for?"

"What look?"

"The look that says you can't believe I said such a thing."

"Sorry, it's just with our history..." Her voice trailed off as he walked by.

With an inward groan, she couldn't help but admire how nice he looked. He wore a white denim shirt unbuttoned at the neck. The sleeves were rolled up and showed off tanned, muscular forearms. The lack of hair made his skin look smooth and her fingers itched to skim over that softness, to feel the warm texture of his flesh beneath their tips. The jeans hugged his hips and thighs and she had to bite back the sigh that threatened to slip out.

With the clearing of his throat, her eyes snapped back to his and she tried to control her thundering heart. He raised an eyebrow and his mouth spread in a suggestive grin. He looked devilish and seductive and oh so dangerous. "We do have quite a history, don't we?"

She frowned.

Clearly amused, his eyes roamed over her in a way that made her feel exposed. Shaking off her increasing desire, she moved aside.

"I'll be ready in a second. I just need to pack my laptop so I can get some paperwork done while I'm away."

"I'm in no hurry, take your time."

The rushing of her blood sounded loudly in her ears. Trying her best to block it out, she quickly packed her computer. She glanced over and noticed him studying her bare apartment and felt the need to explain the lack of décor. "This place is only temporary, so I didn't spend a lot of money fixing it up. I wanted to save as much as possible to buy my own place."

He nodded. "That's a good idea. I haven't seen my home in so long I'm not sure I even remember what it looks like."

"Don't you have a place on Rhenari?" Since he worked there, she assumed he lived there as well.

"I have a small apartment next to my office, but I don't consider it home."

"Well," she said as she took one last look around, "I think that's everything."

He picked up her suitcase and held the door open. "After you."

She stepped outside and waited for him to shut the door. Her hand shook as she slid the key into the lock and she scowled at it, hoping to make it stop. Taking a deep breath, she tried to get herself more under control. With determination, she steeled her spine against him and the things he made her feel. She refused to be another one of his many forgotten conquests.

#### Trista Ann Michaels

Turning around, she found herself staring straight into his wide chest. With a gasp, she pressed her back against the door. Her gaze moved up to his, over his wide shoulders and strong neck. She swallowed a lump as desire screamed through her body. His eyes darkened to charcoal as he stared at her, his hand resting on the door by her head.

For the life of her she couldn't utter a word as they continued to watch each other.

"I suppose I should apologize for what happened at the wedding," he whispered.

Her heart fluttered so hard she couldn't breathe. "We should just forget it happened."

"There's just one problem with that." His head dipped even closer and his musky scent surrounded her, seeped into her bones. "I can't."

## **Chapter Two**

Krista jerked her head back, knocking it against the door. His amused gaze locked with hers and he grinned.

"Don't start, Stefan."

"It's already started, Kris. It started at the wedding."

God, the man was unbelievable. "Well, I'm stopping it now. You know damn good and well this is not a good idea."

"We're adults. We can make this work," he reasoned.

She placed her hand against his chest and pushed him away. Taking a deep breath of air, she tried to rid herself of his heady scent. "Maybe you can, but when it comes to sex and relationships I can be very childish. I refuse to let you come between me and Mikayla." When he opened his mouth to argue, she snapped, "End of discussion."

"End of discussion for now."

Grumbling to herself, she kept her eyes on her purse as she put her keys away. "So, how are we getting to the *Vultair*?" At least on the large ship, she could find somewhere to get away from him.

"We're not going in the Vultair."

Krista snapped her head up in surprise. "We're not?"

"No." He pointed to the small ship in the field across the street from her apartment. It didn't look much bigger than a single-engine prop plane from the mid 1900s.

"We're going in that?"

Stefan chuckled. "It's safe, I promise."

She should have been used to this by now. Since Earth's induction into the Galactic Senate, small ships parked in odd places were the norm. They had the same leeway as

helicopters—they could land wherever there was an empty spot big enough. But it wasn't its safety she was worried about. It was her and Stefan's close proximity to each other for the duration of the trip.

Krista warily studied the ship as they made their way to the field. Wings curved forward from the long narrow center section and ended in a point about two feet in front of the cockpit. The solid black color made it appear even more menacing, if that were possible. Three windows surrounded the center section, one big one across the front and one on each side.

Stefan patted the side of the ship and smiled. "You'll be traveling in style to Daego, my dear. Top-of-the-line Litarian Cruiser. It was a gift to Taron when the rebellion ended."

"And he actually let you borrow it?" She knew how possessive Taron was of his toys, as well as how much Mikayla enjoyed teasing him over it.

"Well." Stefan glanced at the ship and grinned. "Forced me to take it is more accurate. A military escort would only draw unwanted attention. Since I refused the hounds, as I call them, Taron thought the cruiser's cloaking capabilities might be useful."

"Sounds like your security advisor is doing his job." She stood back and allowed him to open the side hatch.

"More like my little brother is being an overprotective, overbearing pain in the ass."

Krista laughed until she saw the way he looked at her. His seductive gaze locked with hers and for a moment she swore he could see right into her soul.

Did he do that on purpose? Did he have any idea how her heart raced when he looked at her like that? Resisting a slight shiver, she turned her gaze away and climbed into the ship. With a sigh, she tried her best to make herself comfortable in a seat she considered to be way too close to his.

Oh, lord, this is going to be a long trip.

He climbed in, tossed her overstuffed suitcase behind the seat and settled beside her. The engines roared to life but he kept the ship on the ground while he made a few adjustments to the wings.

Krista noticed him glance in her direction, and she turned her head to stare out the side window.

"You seem a little nervous. You've made this trip before, this time should be a breeze."

Krista faced him. "Both times were in the *Vultair*. At least in that ship I could stay in the kitchen. No windows."

"You could always just close your eyes. Lay your head on my shoulder, perhaps. Once the autopilot kicks in you wouldn't believe all the things we could do in here to help you relax."

"Perhaps not," she countered dryly.

"Come on, beautiful. We should at least try to make this trip a pleasant one. And nothing would be more pleasant than your body molded to mine."

"I don't believe pleasant is a word that can be used to describe this trip. Especially with you making crude comments the whole way."

"You could always just give in to our attraction." She opened her mouth to reply, but he continued, "And don't try to tell me you're not attracted to me. I may not be a Legana mind reader, but I know desire when I see it."

Krista's mouth almost dropped to the floor. "I can't believe how arrogant you are."

"I'm not arrogant. I'm observant," he said with a grin.

"You're impossible," she growled. "Can you just please get me to Daego, without the seduction."

"But where's the fun in that?" he asked, his gray eyes dancing with mischief.

"How much fun do you think a slap upside the head would be?"

Stefan chuckled as he turned back to the controls. He lifted the ship then punched it out of Earth's atmosphere. The force of the unexpected acceleration threw her back against the seat and she gripped the armrests. She could only anxiously stare as they zipped through the clouds, passing birds and even planes so fast the objects were nothing but a blur. Once in space the pressure eased and she was able to move again.

"Was that necessary?" she growled through clenched teeth.

"I'm sorry. I probably should have warned you about that." He gave her a sheepish grin, and she didn't believe for a minute he was sorry. "In order to get through Earth's atmosphere we need a lot of speed. It's either fly low and slowly build or just gun it."

"You could have warned me you were going to gun it."

"True." He grinned mischievously. "But then you wouldn't be staring at me as though you wanted to kill me. Which makes you look absolutely gorgeous, by the way."

She rolled her eyes and looked out the side window. The man was impossible. He'd done that just to piss her off. So much for trying to make the trip pleasant.

His arm brushed hers, and she stiffened. Looking down, she noticed the offending appendage as it rested on the small ledge between their seats, scant inches from her own. The heat emanating from his muscular arm seeped into her pores and settled with alarming swiftness in the pit of her stomach. She shifted and crossed her arms.

Forcing herself to relax, she studied the field of stars spread out before them. They seemed so much brighter up here than they did from Earth—more touchable. She wanted to test that theory and try to grab one.

Glancing to her left, she noticed Stefan entering information into the navigational computer. *Oh God*, she thought. She'd forgotten all about the transport gate. "How long would it take us to get there if we didn't go through the gate?"

"We couldn't do it in this. Even in the *Vultair* it would take years. Not nervous about flying through it, are you?"

"No," she said, then inwardly cringed at the slight squeak to her voice.

Stefan smiled slightly and pointed out the window. "Take a look at that."

Turning, she caught sight of the moon and sucked in a breath from surprise. She'd never seen it this close before. It was beautiful. What looked like small lakes from Earth were in fact huge craters created by long-ago asteroids. The mountains wove shadows across the floor of the valleys, creating stark black and white images. There was no gray. Only white where the sun hit and black where it didn't.

Earth had been toying with the idea of colonizing the moon for the last six months. Krista didn't understand what the point would be. They had the whole galaxy at their disposal, what did they want with the moon? Stefan slowed the ship to allow her a better view. "That is amazing," she sighed.

He chuckled. "See what you missed by staying in the kitchen?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Stefan loaded the last of the coordinates into the flight computer to open the transport gate, a manmade wormhole that allowed ships to pass from one galaxy to another. They had to be opened in specific locations based on where you wanted to exit. Sometimes navigation took a while, depending on how far you were going.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Krista. She fidgeted with her hands, twisting her fingers around each other. Was she nervous? He wondered if it was from being this close to him or traveling through space in a small ship.

She was just as beautiful as he remembered, with her long honey-blonde hair and sky blue eyes. *Lord, I could get lost in those eyes*. Her figure was slim but curvy, and she had an adorable pert nose. Although tall for someone from Earth, she still only came to his shoulder.

She bit her lower lip and he almost groaned, then looked back at the controls with a frown. He needed to keep his mind on flying and not those lips. He had to keep reminding himself what happened the last time he couldn't keep from kissing her.

"How long will it take us to go through the gate?"

Her voice startled him from his thoughts and he looked at her. "Not long. Twenty minutes, give or take."

"The thought of traveling through a wormhole..." She shuddered. "Are they stable?"

"The manmade ones are much more stable than the ones that occur naturally. We only have problems about once a month or so. Actually, we're overdue for one. It's been over two months since the last collapse."

He laughed at her pale face and wide-eyed expression. That comment had been a little mean, but he couldn't help teasing her. Besides, he owed her one.

"That's not funny," she said with narrowed eyes.

"You've done this before."

"I know, but I didn't see it. I never even knew we were going through the thing. Here," she waved her hand, indicating the massive front window, "I have a bird's eye view."

He smiled at her comment. "Would you feel better if you knew how the gate worked?"

With a shake of her head, she scrunched up her nose. "No. I wouldn't understand. When it comes to anything scientific, despite my best efforts, I'll end up tuning you out."

"Just think of it as a shortcut."

"A shortcut." She took a deep breath and let it out with a whoosh, then grumbled, "A shortcut that folds space."

"I thought you didn't know how it worked?"

"I know the basics, but I don't really understand the specifics. I'm not sure that I want to. I may refuse to go through it at all."

He reached out and flipped a couple of switches. His hand brushed the side of her thigh and the contact sent an electrical jolt through his forearm. She shifted in her seat, putting a little more space between them. He couldn't blame her, if she'd felt the same current he had. It would be a smart thing to think about something else.

"You sound like Mikayla." Raising his voice a couple of pitches, he mimicked her.
"I didn't ask for a science lesson, just tell me which button to push to turn the damn thing on."

She laughed and the sound vibrated through the cockpit like bells. It floated around him, over him, even through him, to settle in his cock. *My ever-tightening cock*, he thought with a groan. Despite their last encounter, the woman still had the power to send him into an immediate state of arousal.

And all the hell she did was laugh.

He punched in the last coordinate, hitting the enter key a little harder than necessary. Immediately, the space in front of them was awash with blue light.

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista watched with dread as the blue circle was engulfed in black.

God, I hate dark places.

She took a deep breath as Stefan piloted the ship right through the center. It made her feel so claustrophobic. There was nothing here. No stars, no light, not even sound—it was like they floated through nothing.

She hugged herself as the ship suddenly became several degrees cooler. She wondered if it wasn't all in her head.

Trying to direct her thoughts elsewhere, she studied the dashboard of the ship. Nothing there looked familiar. Everything was foreign, even the symbols. They looked similar to what she'd expect to see on the side of an Egyptian pyramid.

"Is that Litarian?" She pointed at the symbols across the dash.

"Yes." Indicating each symbol, he told her what they were. "These are our speed, location and engine readings." He brought her attention to the ones above them. "This is the cloak and that one is environmental control."

She glanced at the black void that spread before them. The only lights were the ones from the dash casting an eerie glow over everything. It gave her the creeps, and she couldn't stop the shiver that ran through her.

"You okay?" He placed his hand on her knee and gently squeezed it.

For a second, she closed her eyes. His touch sent a wave of sensation up her leg that she wasn't entirely comfortable with—or wanted.

He'll just use you and break your heart, remember that, Krista.

But that didn't stop her from wondering what he'd be like in bed. It had been over two years since she'd been with anyone. For a second she wondered what she was fighting this for. He was gorgeous and he could certainly kiss. She had no doubt sex with him would be incredible, but also not a good idea. He was Mikayla's brother-in-law and Mikayla was her best friend. She considered Mikayla family, the only family she had left. And that made Stefan off-limits.

"Hey," he said as he gave her knee a slight shake. "You still with me over there?"

"Yeah." She let out an anxious breath.

"You'll get used to it after a while." He gave her a reassuring smile and put his hand back on the controls.

She wanted him to put his hand back on her knee. With a frown, she brushed that thought aside. "Get used to what? The feeling that you're falling into nothingness?"

"For me it was the feeling of space closing in on me."

Krista snorted. "That too."

"Let's talk about something. It'll take your mind off of the claustrophobia."

"People are speculating that we originally came from your end of the galaxy, thousands of years ago. There are all sorts of theories floating around."

"When the Prime Minister first found Earth, he was surprised you spoke our mother tongue, English. I did some checking and found in the archives a story about a group of people who left Rhenari to find a much quieter life. They no longer wanted technology. They boarded a ship and no one ever heard from them again."

"Do you think they came to Earth?"

Stefan shrugged. "Anything's possible. It would certainly explain the language similarities."

A brilliant blue flash and suddenly they were among the stars again. Inwardly, she gave a sigh of relief.

"Now that wasn't so bad, was it?"

She raised her eyebrow. "Wanna bet?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Krista!" Mikayla yelled with a smile as she ran out the front door and engulfed her in a hug.

"I've missed you guys." Returning the embrace, Krista gave a sigh of relief that they were finally on Daego.

Krista pulled away and smiled at her friend. She hadn't changed much in the last year. Still as beautiful as ever, with dark brown hair and emerald green eyes. Mikayla chose to keep her hair shoulder-length. The layered cut with curls framing her cheeks suited her face, as well as her sassy personality.

"I'm so glad you're here," Mikayla said. "I can't wait for you to see Hayden. He's grown so much."

"Hello, beautiful." Stefan leaned over and kissed Mikayla on the cheek. "Where's that no-good brother of mine?"

"Where else but in his study." Mikayla waved her hand toward the house.

Krista's eyes followed Stefan in an admiring fashion as he strolled through the front door. Someone could flip a coin on that man's ass.

"It is nice, isn't it?" Mikayla whispered.

"I was admiring the door."

"I could see that. The mahogany door always inspires looks of admiration and lust."

"Would you stop?" Krista tried to sound exasperated but she couldn't hide her grin as she followed Mikayla through the entrance.

Walking into the beautiful home was like stepping back in time. Built of stone, the massive structure stood three stories high, with English Tudor-style windows and turquoise vines covering the front.

Mikayla had spent months looking through magazines and drawing sketches of antiques from memory. The woodworkers had done an excellent job reproducing Earth's furniture.

To keep the Old World charm intact, anything high-tech was well hidden. The kitchen and Sidious' study were the only exceptions.

Mikayla grabbed Krista's bag and started up the large sweeping staircase that led to the second floor. "Let's get your things unpacked and we can talk about what you'd like to do while you're here."

"If I know you, you've already got my schedule booked solid."

Mikayla chuckled. "Well, maybe a couple of things."

\* \* \* \* \*

Stefan knocked once before stepping into his brother's study. He loved this room. A massive fireplace took up one wall beside the desk and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves covered the other wall and included artifacts from various places in the galaxy. Behind the desk a huge set of windows overlooked the grounds and the lake beyond—Stefan's favorite view.

Sidious looked up from the computer and smiled. "You're early. Did you have any problems?"

"Not a one." Stefan shut the door behind him. "Have you spoken with Taron?"

"Earlier this morning." Sidious studied Stefan before adding, "He gave me strict instructions that I'm to sit on you, if necessary, to keep you here."

Stefan rolled his eyes and walked over to the fireplace. He rested his forearm on the mantel and stared down at the fire burning within the grate. The warmth coming from those flames felt good, but all he could think about were all the things he needed to be doing, all the responsibilities he felt as though he was turning his back on. And all because they thought his life was at stake. When in the last twelve years had his life *not* been at stake?

Rebuilding the Senate had been a breeze compared to organizing the rebels and bringing down their previous dictator. He'd received more death threats from sympathizers that wanted a dictator back in control than any he'd gotten as a rebel leader. What was it about these incidents that made things different? What were his brother and Taron not telling him?

"You want to talk about it?" Sidious asked.

"Talk about what?"

"Whatever it is that's bothering you."

Stefan ran his hand through his hair, then turned to his brother with a sigh. He didn't want to get into an argument with Sidious right now about keeping secrets, so he lied. "I'm just aggravated that we can't seem to get a break in this investigation into the assassin."

Sidious gave him a look that said he didn't believe him, but Stefan knew he wouldn't push. "You've been at it long enough. Let Taron handle things for a while. Besides, I think you'll find that once you step away from it, you can go back much clearer. You might even find something you overlooked."

"Did Taron tell you he thinks I'm a target?"

"Yes." Sidious nodded.

"And you agree with him?"

"There have been three senators assassinated. All three were involved in the rebellion, just like you. That's a little too much of a coincidence for me. Taron was right to insist you come here."

"He's overstepping his bounds," Stefan grumbled.

"He's doing his job. A job you insisted he take, if I recall."

"Taron is the only man I trust, other than you."

"Then let the man continue to do what he does best—keep your ass out of trouble."

Stefan scrunched his face at Sidious and began to pace the room. If what they thought was true, he'd placed everyone here in danger. The mere idea that anything could happen to his family scared the hell out of him.

"Out with it, Stefan," Sidious said with exasperation.

"I shouldn't be here. You know it as well as I do."

Sidious' eyes narrowed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"If I am a target, I'm only endangering everyone here. I think it would be best if I went somewhere else."

Sidious threw the pen down on his desk and sighed. "We've always watched each other's backs. That hasn't changed, nor will it. No one knows of this estate so you'll be much safer here than you would be somewhere off by yourself."

Stefan opened his mouth but Sidious held up a hand and stopped him. "I'm not arguing with you about this. I have the house under surveillance. I'll have men following the women whenever they leave here without me. Everything is covered."

"So that's it then? Lord Marcone has put his foot down?" Stefan frowned as he turned back to the fireplace.

"If the situation were reversed you would do the same. And don't try to tell me otherwise."

Sidious was right. He would do exactly the same thing. But damn it! He didn't have to like it. He hated feeling as though his life were no longer his.

"Fine. You win this round."

## **Chapter Three**

The satin sheets felt cool against her hot flesh as Stefan slowly pushed her back to lie on the bed. His hands gently skimmed up the inside of her thigh, sending shocks of hot current to her core. Her juices flowed, dampening the material beneath her. Trembling fingers gripped the sheets at her side as he placed gentle kisses along the sensitive flesh just below her pussy on her thigh. She squirmed, anxious for the feel of his hot mouth against her aching mound. If he didn't touch her soon, she'd die.

A candle flickered on the table, sending soft golden light across his flesh as he rose above her and removed his clothes. His muscles bulged with every movement and she couldn't take her gaze off his beautiful form. He was perfect. Slowly, her gaze worked lower to his massive cock, which stood proud and ready to invade her body. Her pussy clenched at his thick size, his long length. Bringing her gaze back to his, she licked her lips brazenly, making him smile.

"Do you want a little of this, sunshine?" he asked as his hand stroked his length.

"I want all of it," she whispered, amazed at her actions.

"All in due time," he purred, then spread her legs wide with his hands.

His mouth lowered between her legs and she gasped as his hot tongue slowly slid along her wet slit. It felt so good, so wild. She didn't want him to stop. Gently, his fingers spread her lips and blew against her engorged clit. Her hips bucked off the bed, trying to get closer to his touch.

With a moan, he tortured her clit with teasing circles, then moved lower to dip his tongue deep into her channel. Her head moved from side to side as he fucked her with his mouth, bringing her so close to release, then retreating only to begin again. He drove her crazy and ignored her cries for more, continuing to tease her relentlessly as he licked his fill of her juices.

Just when she thought she couldn't take any more, he sucked at her clit. Instantly, her body spasmed out of control as her orgasm raced through her extremities. She smiled in complete contentment as he rose above her and settled between her splayed thighs. Pushing them even

wider, he invaded her sopping pussy with his massive cock. She screamed, lifting her hips to meet every breathtaking thrust.

"Oh, god. It feels so good," she moaned, thrusting her breasts in the air. His palm cupped one and squeezed, then pinched her nipple with his fingers. The slight pain only intensified her pleasure – made her want more.

He pounded into her harder, each thrust going deeper. The tip of his shaft hit her womb and she shuddered as sharp tingles of intense pleasure ripped through her. Every muscle in her body tensed as her release began to work its way along her flesh. With a shrill scream her body erupted into a blinding ball of sensation unlike anything she'd felt before. Her pussy pulsed around his shaft as she ground her hips against him, trying to take his cock even deeper.

Krista awoke with a start and glanced at the curtains blowing in the light breeze, her body still reeling from the massive orgasm she'd experienced. It wasn't the first time she'd dreamed of Stefan, but this dream had certainly been more intense. Her whole body tingled with sensation as her mind replayed the things he'd done. The way his hands had roamed her body with deliberate slowness and the feel of his tongue circling her clit made her whole body tense in need.

He'd not only brought her to orgasm with his mouth, but he'd fucked her to the point she'd screamed in pleasure. She could still feel him thrusting in and out of her.

If the man was half as good in real life as he was in her dream, she was in deep trouble. With a sigh, she brushed her hair back from her forehead. She needed a walk and a good strong drink.

Grabbing her blue satin robe and matching slippers, she headed to the massive garden toward the back of the house. It was a beautiful night. The jasmine was in bloom, filling the air with its musky scent. The rings of Metalon were bright blue and shone down on the small planet, lighting the garden path. Daego's sky was so different from Earth's. Instead of just stars, numerous planets could be seen filling the night sky.

She loved the view and could spend hours looking at it, but then most anything was preferable to the dreams she'd been having about Stefan. His hands and lips all

#### Trista Ann Michaels

over her body, his thick cock thrusting into her over and over. She closed her eyes against the throbbing between her legs and continued around the path. She had to stop thinking about him.

All through dinner they'd bantered back and forth. More than once Sidious stepped in and chided, "Children, please." Twice Krista had caught Mikayla watching them in interest. Krista had no doubt what was going through her friend's mind. She was thinking of ways to get them together. Even Krista could feel the sexual tension between the two of them. She might not want to acknowledge it, but she could certainly feel it.

Rounding the corner toward the center fountain, she stopped dead in her tracks. Standing with his back to her was Stefan. His hands were clasped behind his lower back, his legs spread wide like a captain at sea standing watch over his ship. The wind coming off the lake blew through his hair and sent his sensuous scent in her direction.

Maybe if she left quietly he would never even know she was there. Slowly, she spun around and started to head back toward the house.

"You don't have to leave."

His soft, deep voice shimmered along her flesh, and she turned to find him staring at her. His gray eyes darkened with the same passion that slammed through her body.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you." She tightened the belt around her robe and crossed her arms over her hardening nipples. It's just the cool air that's all, certainly not his presence.

"You didn't. What are you doing out here so late?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

His eyes crinkled slightly when he grinned. Chewing on her lower lip, she watched as he moved closer.

"I couldn't sleep," he said.

"Neither could I."

The soft touch of his fingers against her cheek sent her senses into an immediate tailspin. "It seems you antagonize me even in my dreams," he whispered.

Putting on an indignant expression, she stepped away from his touch. "I don't antagonize you."

"Maybe antagonize is the wrong word. How about arouse me, turn me on?" He brought his body so close to hers she could feel the heat emanating off his skin. The wind blew, parting his blue shirt and exposing his muscled chest and abs. God, the man was a dream. A very dangerous, sensuous, untouchable dream.

"I can't sta...stay here if you're going to keep this up," she stammered.

She continued walking backward until the back of her legs hit a smaller fountain. The contact startled her, causing her to almost lose her balance. In reflex, she grabbed Stefan's arm just as it snaked around her waist to steady her, pulling her against him. Her breasts pressed into his chest and she sucked in a gulp of air in shock.

Her gaze flew to his and it took everything she had not to capture his mouth with hers. The remembered feel of his lips against hers had haunted her for months. Slowly his head lowered, and she was powerless to stop him. Deep down she wanted him to kiss her. This time there would be no audience, no one to interrupt them.

At first his kiss was gentle, questioning, as he nipped at her lips. She realized he was giving her the opportunity to back away if she wanted to, but she didn't. She wanted to feel the silkiness of his tongue against hers, needed to feel it just like she needed the air she breathed.

Parting her lips, she allowed him access to deepen the kiss. He moaned deep in his throat and tightened his arms around her lower back. His palms slid up along her spine and into her hair, making her insides burn with liquid fire. Her arms wrapped around his neck and she moved her body closer. Their thighs pressed together and she could feel the rock-hard length of him poking her stomach. Even through their clothes she could tell he was huge.

"Oh! I'm so terribly sorry."

The soft female voice startled them both and they broke apart quickly. Standing not three feet from them was Stefan's mother, Kaylar. The fiery heat of a blush moved up Krista's cheeks at the knowing grin on Kaylar's face.

"Mother, what the hell are you doing here?" Stefan snapped.

Kaylar frowned at Stefan. "I was invited here by Mikayla, if I recall. I was too wound up from your father's flying here to sleep, so I thought I would take a walk." She smiled faintly at Krista. "I swear, I think Damon deliberately flies like a bat out of hell to aggravate me."

Krista bit back a grin and turned a pointed look toward Stefan. "I know what you mean. Damon isn't the only one who flies as though the demons of hell are on his tail."

"What can I say," Stefan said with a shrug. "I like the rush. I think that's probably the only thing I inherited from my father, other than looks."

"That's not the only thing, Stefan," Kaylar replied dryly, but didn't elaborate. "I'll leave you two alone and head back to the house. Damon should be finished securing the ship. Good night."

"Good night, Mother."

"Wait, Kaylar, I'll head back with you." Krista quickly took off after her, desperate to get away from Stefan before she let him kiss her again and they ended up going at it on the lawn.

"Krista," Stefan hissed.

"Good night, Stefan," she threw over her shoulder.

Stefan watched her go in aggravation. His throbbing cock demanded he take off after her, but his common sense overrode it. He would never force himself on her, but *shetah*, he wanted her. The feel of her in his arms was the closest to perfection he'd ever felt, and he wanted to feel it again. Over and over.

Damn his mother and her untimely interruption.

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista stared at herself in the dressing room mirror. She'd hoped the afternoon of shopping with Mikayla would take her mind off the sexy senator. Unfortunately it hadn't happened yet.

Pursing her lips, she contemplated her reflection. The blue of the outfit really brought out her eyes, but it was so different from what she usually wore. The pants were silk, loose at the waist and tapered at the ankle. The top had long sleeves that flared out above the wrist. It had straps that wrapped around and tied in a knot just below her rib cage, showing off a good portion of her stomach. She had a nice figure and the belly button ring she'd gotten years ago went perfectly with the outfit, but she wasn't used to showing so much skin.

"That's gorgeous," Mikayla said from her position behind her.

"You don't think it's too..."

"Too what?"

"Slutty?"

"Slutty? Absolutely not. You look great." She grinned at her through the mirror. "Stefan will keel over when he sees you in this."

"That's a good thing only if he doesn't get back up."

"What?" Mikayla asked with a chuckle.

"The man is driving me nuts."

"I can tell," Mikayla snickered.

"I know that Stefan is a great guy. He's always there for the people of Tilarus. He's a great senator and has done wonders with the new government."

"But?"

Krista turned and looked at Mikayla with a sigh. "But you and I both know he's only interested in one thing."

Mikayla shrugged. "Give it to him."

Krista's mouth dropped open in shock.

"Krista, how long has it been since you've been with anyone?"

"A while." She stared at Mikayla's raised eyebrow and scowled. "You know I can't have sex and not get emotionally involved. Stefan would rip my heart to shreds. You know it as well as I do."

"I know no such thing."

Krista sighed and went back into the changing room to take off the outfit.

"I've seen the two of you together, Krista. I've seen the way he looks at you when he thinks no one is paying attention. Deep down he wants a family. You've seen how he is with Hayden. He wants a child of his own so bad he can't stand it."

Handing the outfit over the door to Mikayla, she grabbed her own clothes and began to put them back on. "So what do you want me to do, get pregnant?"

"No, of course not. I just want you to give him a chance. Who knows, the two of you may just hit it off."

"And we may not. Have you thought about what would happen if it doesn't work out? He's your family, Mikayla."

"And so are you," Mikayla chided. "Even if it didn't work out you would still be welcome here. But what if it did work out?"

"What about the whole monarchy thing?"

"What about it?"

"He's a count. Can you imagine me as a countess? Come on, Mikayla."

"Yes, I can. Stefan doesn't care about any of that monarchy nonsense. He wants a woman to love him for him, not his title."

Krista opened the door to the changing room and frowned. "If I say I'll think about it, will you let it go?"

Mikayla grinned. "For now."

Krista rolled her eyes at Mikayla's comment. How many times had she heard Stefan say the same thing in the last couple of days? "Now I know where Stefan gets it."

# **Chapter Four**

Krista admired the small town of Daego as she and Mikayla made their way down the cobblestone street. Daego was so much like Earth's Europe. It had an Old World style that seemed so charming and slow paced. Nothing was hurried here. Not for the first time, she wondered how a planet so far from Earth could look so much like it.

There were fountains everywhere, surrounded by flowers of all colors and sizes. Their scents filled the air, mixing with the smell of coffee. She could live here forever amongst the stucco buildings and shops, stone walkways and flower-lined streets. Life was slow here, peaceful.

"Well, well. Speak of the devil." Mikayla tapped Krista on the shoulder and pointed across the street.

Krista turned to see what she was talking about and immediately noticed Stefan walking toward them. Devil was right. Her whole body came alive, and she stamped down a wave of lust and yearning for something that could never be.

He looked incredible with his hair parted on the side and hanging down around his shoulders. The black slacks contoured to his slim waist and hips, but the black turtleneck, the way it stretched across his wide chest, outlining his hard pecs, brought new meaning to the words "sex appeal".

As Stefan stopped in front of them, his gaze roamed over her in a way that made her feel naked despite her clothes. She licked her dry lips and fought the string of goose bumps that shot down her spine.

Geez, Krista, get a grip. What are you going to do, attack the man here in the street?

"What are you doing out and about?" Mikayla asked.

He puckered his lips as though he had just taken a bite of something sour, then shuddered. "I had to get out for a while. My father and Sidious are going to drive me to drink."

Krista couldn't stop the chuckle at the face he made, but her smile faded somewhat when she spotted Mikayla studying the two of them. Unfortunately, her friend had a way of reading between the lines—or in this case between the looks—that made her a little uncomfortable.

"Your timing is perfect," Mikayla said as she moved all her bags to one hand.

"These bags are getting heavy, so why don't you take Krista down to the pastry shop while I load them in the hovercraft? I'll meet you there in a few minutes."

"Mikayla," Krista hissed. Sudden alarm made her voice sound harsh.

"I'll only be a few minutes." She grabbed Krista's bags as well and headed down the sidewalk, leaving the two of them alone.

"She could be a little less obvious." Krista frowned at her retreating back. She couldn't believe Mikayla was doing this. She knew how uncomfortable she was being alone with Stefan.

Stefan laughed. "Subtlety is not in her vocabulary." Turning to look at her, he smiled. "I don't bite, Kris. I promise."

"What a shame," she mumbled as she turned away to walk toward the pastry shop a half block away. When she heard Stefan chuckle the heat of embarrassment scorched her cheeks.

What on Earth made me say that?

Stefan fell into step beside her. "Did you enjoy your shopping?"

"Yes." She turned her head in his direction, desperately wishing he would go antagonize someone else. The man had a formidable presence and an obvious sex appeal that made her uncomfortable. "You know, you really don't have to keep me company. I can wait for Mikayla by myself."

"Trying to get rid of me?"

She came to a stop and faced him with a smirk. "Boy, you're quick."

He took a small step, bringing himself closer. "If you keep this up you're going to make me think you don't like me."

He was so tall she had to tilt her head back to look at him. She crossed her arms. "You mean the punch bowl over your head didn't tip you off?"

Stefan narrowed his eyes and Krista drew in a nervous breath. Whoever thought eyes the color of gunmetal could be so sexy?

"Look, Kris, I'm not going to get into another argument with you. So let's just make the best of this. Okay?"

She raised an eyebrow. "The best would be if you—"

Stefan put his hands on his hips, bringing his face even closer to hers. So close she could smell the hint of coffee on his breath. His lips were full, and she knew they were soft. She swallowed as she remembered the way he kissed. The cologne he wore drifted through the air and she had to stop herself from inhaling deeper.

"I mean it," he growled. "Or would you rather I kiss you right here?"

Her heart nearly jumped from her chest. God, she would love for him to kiss her, but she wasn't about to give him the satisfaction. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh, but I would dare. That and a whole lot more."

"Why do you do that?"

"Why? Because it drives you crazy. Admit it," he purred, a sensual smile spreading his lips and making her heart flutter, "Deep down you want me to kiss you."

"You're unbelievable. What makes you think I even want you near me, much less kissing me?" she demanded.

"Why are you so flushed, Kris?" His eyes traveled down to her breasts then back to her face. "Why is your breathing so erratic?"

"Maybe because I'm angry?"

"Maybe you're aroused."

"Maybe you need to go to hell!" she snapped.

"Such anger." His smooth, deep voice poured over her like honey and she trembled. "All that passion shouldn't be wasted. It should be used for more...pleasant things."

"Pleasant would be my hands wrapped around your neck," she snarled as she walked past him into the pastry shop. His laughter followed close behind and she inwardly chided herself for letting him get to her.

She didn't strive to be mean. She just immediately switched to bitch mode whenever he was around. It was terrible of her, she knew, but she couldn't help it. Was it right for her to lump him in with every other rich guy, every other man that had broken her heart?

Krista sighed as she glanced around the small shop. Moving to the other side of the room, she looked through the display case and pointed out her selection, leaving Stefan at the door. Someone had recognized him and trapped him in a conversation. Thankful for the slight reprieve, she paid for her selection and headed outside.

With a contented smile, she looked around at all the unusual colors. It always seemed as though her eyes played tricks on her here. The trees and grass were more turquoise than green. The flowers had colors so bright and vivid they appeared almost neon. Sidious said it had something to do with the atmosphere.

Looking up, she noticed Stefan exit the shop and silently wished for invisibility. They made eye contact and he headed in her direction.

Damn, so much for being invisible.

Although he appeared relaxed as he strolled over, there was a tenseness about him as he constantly scanned the streets around them. His eyes never seemed to stay in one place too long. It was as though he were watching for something—or someone.

"Looking for anyone in particular?"

Stefan whipped his gaze back to her and took a seat across the table. "What?"

"You keep looking around." Krista smiled and waved her hand in the direction of the center of town.

"Old habits." Stefan picked up his cup of coffee then shrugged.

"Ah. And here I thought you were plotting an escape route."

He grinned. "Why? I have much more fun sitting here antagonizing you." He set his cup back down, leaned back in his chair and spread his arms, palms up. "So, what do you think of Daego?"

"It's like being home." She put her elbows on the wooden table and leaned forward. "Why is that?"

Stefan added more sugar to his coffee and stirred it with a spoon. "A long time ago, probably about one hundred and fifty years or so, a man from Rhenari disappeared. No one knew where he went or why. A few years later he returned with the idea to build an exclusive resort town with unusual architecture, food and drink, in particular, Earth's coffee." He raised his cup and with a smile, continued, "He proposed the idea to several people. They all liked it and agreed to back him financially. This place was that dream."

"So you think he disappeared to Earth?"

"He must have. This place is too much like your Europe to be a coincidence."

"That makes sense, I suppose." She watched him run the tip of his finger along the edge of his cup, wiping away a drop of coffee. An image of him running that same finger along her skin made her breath catch in her chest, and she turned away.

"Have dinner with me tonight. Just the two of us," he said.

Her startled gaze met his. Dinner. With him. Alone.

She shook her head slowly. "I don't think it'd be a good idea."

He leaned forward, his elbows resting on the table. "Haven't you ever done anything that you shouldn't have?"

"Sure. Lots of times," she whispered, her eyes locked with his deep gray ones.

A tiny smile touched his lips and he ran his finger along the back of her hand. Tingling sensations spread along her arm, and she tried desperately to ignore them.

"Then do it again and have dinner with me."

She gazed down at his fingers as he gently brushed her skin. Such long, strong fingers. She wondered what they would feel like against her flesh, between her legs. Swallowing down a huge rise of lust, she once again met his gaze.

"It's against my better judgment, but all right."

He smiled a sexy smile and she almost backed out, realizing instantly what she was in for.

"Good."

"I'm amazed." The sound of Mikayla's amused voice made Krista sit up straight and remove her hand from under Stefan's. She looked up into her friend's grinning eyes. "It's about time the two of you had a civil conversation without biting at each other."

"Biting at each other," Stefan began with a sultry purr that sent shivers down her back, "Now there's an image. But don't worry, Mikayla, the day isn't over yet."

\* \* \* \* \*

Stefan sat behind the desk and read the letter his brother had handed him. The more of it he read the more furious he became. He couldn't believe Taron would have kept this from him.

The letter left no doubt that whoever was behind the assassinations was ultimately after him. The previous murders had just been the assassin playing a game, flaunting it in Stefan's face that he could get close enough to kill him any time he wanted to. And he made it clear that killing him was exactly what he had in mind.

Sidious entered the study, several files in his hand. He studied the one on top with a frown before snapping it closed.

"Why didn't Taron show this to me?" Stefan demanded as he held the letter up.

Sidious placed the files in a hidden drawer in the bookcase. "You've been under a lot of stress lately. He didn't want you to worry about it."

"I hate this." Stefan tossed the letter back onto the desk. "I should be on Veenori helping Taron, not sitting here hiding out."

"You're not hiding out, you're taking a well-earned vacation," Sidious replied sternly, the creases between his eyes made more prominent by the frown he was giving Stefan. "You needed this break, Stefan. You've been running yourself ragged for the last several months. What good are you to Taron when you're so overworked you can't think straight?"

"Point taken." Stefan sat back in the chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

Sidious slammed the drawer shut. "Just remember this one simple rule and you'll be fine."

Stefan frowned. "What rule?"

"Little brother is always right."

Stefan snorted. "Little brother needs to be knocked down a peg or two."

Sidious sat in one of the chairs facing the desk. With a taunting smile, he propped his feet on the surface of the desk and crossed his ankles. "And I suppose you believe you're the one who's going to do that?"

Stefan narrowed his eyes. As black as his mood was at the moment, he would just as soon hit Sidious as talk to him. "Do you really want to rehash that old debate...again?" He raised an eyebrow.

Sidious chuckled as he rubbed his jaw. Stefan was sure Sidious remembered the last time this same argument came up. Stefan had proved that his skill as a fighter was just as good as his brother's.

"Passing on the opportunity to put me in my place? Wow, two years behind a desk has turned you into a wimp."

Stefan slowly rose to his feet, his already foul mood worsening by the second. The scowl he sent his brother would send most men running, but not Sidious.

"Damn it, Stefan, sit down. Where the hell is your sense of humor?"

He slumped back down in the chair and drummed his fingers on the desk. "I'm not in the mood to be joking around."

"Since when?"

He slapped the desk with his palm. "Since you and that pain in my ass, Taron, decided to play Lord Protector and keep things from me you had no business keeping."

Sidious dropped his feet on the floor. He pinned Stefan with a glare as he leaned forward and placed his elbows on the desk. "So we're just supposed to sit back, knowing there's a threat hanging over your head, and let you do whatever the hell you want to?"

The two of them glared at each other in silent combat, neither willing to back down. Sidious was younger by two years, but he had always been the sensible one, the protector. In Stefan's mind, Sidious should have been the older brother. He couldn't count the number of scrapes Sidious had pulled him out of.

It's supposed to be the other way around, damn it.

Although it galled him to give in, he tore his gaze away. "This is pointless. Change the subject."

"All right." Sidious sat back in the chair. He didn't say anything else but watched him with an expectant expression. Stefan got the impression he wanted him to start. So be it, he thought with a sigh. "Does Mikayla know what's going on?"

"Are you kidding? Absolutely not." Sidious shook his head, his lips set in a firm line.

"If you want to keep it that way you might want to tell the men you have following her to be more careful. She saw one of them yesterday when she and Krista were shopping. She's a smart woman. If she keeps seeing them she'll figure something's up."

### Trista Ann Michaels

Sidious sighed. "I'll talk to them." A knock at the door sounded and he turned. "Come in."

Count Damon Marcone marched in and took a seat next to Sidious. Even in his late fifties, his father had a formidable presence. He was an older version of Stefan and Sidious, in looks as well as temperament. "Has Taron found anything out yet?"

"He believes he's found where the bomb came from that destroyed Senator Lengosa's ship. He's on his way to Veenori to investigate. Devlin still owns the largest bar on Veenori, and Taron is convinced he can help. He'll contact us as soon as he knows anything more," Stefan replied.

"Good. I've met Devlin. He's a good man once you get past the gruff exterior." His father nodded.

"Gruff is putting it mildly," Stefan said with amusement.

"Do either of you have any guesses as to who this is?" Damon asked.

"Sidious thinks it's someone we know from the militia, and after reading this letter, I would have to agree with him." Stefan reached over and tossed the letter to the edge of the desk. His father picked up the paper and read it.

Raising his eyes, he looked at Sidious with alarm. "You don't suppose the prime minister escaped the *Destroyer* during the rebellion, do you?"

"If you had asked me that two months ago I would have said no," Sidious replied.

"But now you're not so sure?"

"Now I'm not sure of anything."

## **Chapter Five**

Dinner with Stefan had been much more pleasant than Krista expected. He acted the perfect gentlemen throughout the whole meal, not once making a veiled sexual remark. Even the restaurant was more casual than romantic, with brightly lit tables and a noisy atmosphere.

With a smile, he stood and offered her his hand. "Come on, blue eyes. Let's go for a walk."

She placed her hand in his and let him lead her outside to the lantern-lit streets of Daego. His fingers were warm, surrounding hers possessively, and the tremor that moved up her arm took her by surprise. What was it about him that made her melt into a puddle whenever he touched her?

Once outside she pulled her hand from his. *Think about something else – anything else*.

As they made their way around the corner, Krista jumped at the sound of a woman's squeal. "Stefan!"

Turning to see who yelled, she watched in shock as a beautiful young woman threw herself at Stefan... Wrapping her arms around his neck, she kissed him soundly. At first Krista thought the whole thing was funny, but the longer she stood there the more she didn't like it.

What on Earth do I have to be jealous of? We're not a couple. But for some reason the sight of another woman touching him bothered her. When she noticed Stefan look at her over the woman's shoulder and mouth the words "help me", her notorious mean streak reared its head.

Raising one eyebrow at him, she pretended to not understand what he wanted, then smiled. It was obvious he was uncomfortable with the whole situation, and Krista was in just the type of mood to let him remain that way.

"Stefan, where in the world have you been? You haven't been on Tilarus in months! Daddy is giving this huge party tonight—you have to come by."

"I'm afraid tonight is out of the question. I already have plans. I'm sorry." Stefan tried to extradite himself from the woman's hands but wasn't having much luck. Once again he looked to Krista and silently pleaded with her to do something.

"Oh, that's a shame," she pouted prettily. "I was really looking forward to spending some time alone with you."

"Well," Stefan started.

Finally Krista took pity on him and walked over. Placing her arm possessively around his elbow, she leaned close to him. "Stefan darling, are you going to introduce me?"

Almost sighing in relief, Stefan placed his free hand over her arm. "Sweetheart, this is Ardra Morticio, daughter of Lord Morticio of the Northern Perimeter of Tilarus. Ardra this is Krista Sinclair."

"It's nice to meet you, Ardra." Krista kept her voice cordial but her eyes left no doubt she didn't like the woman encroaching on her territory.

"I didn't realize that you were..." Ardra looked to Stefan for him to clarify who the woman was.

"If we're going to get those errands done before we have to meet my parents for dinner, we should probably get going," Krista said as she looked up at Stefan. She didn't give him an opportunity to answer Ardra. Let the woman wonder, Krista thought smugly.

"Of course." Stefan smiled at her, then turned back to Ardra. "It was good seeing you again, and tell your father hello for me." He and Krista continued down the street.

"Took you long enough," Stefan grumbled, still holding her hand in the crook of his elbow. She liked it there and made no effort to move it.

Krista chuckled. "I was kind of enjoying watching you squirm. Old girlfriend?"

"No. Just a young girl who thinks I would make an excellent son-in-law for her father."

"Why haven't you married?" He was gorgeous, and she was sure he could get most any girl he wanted. Even her, if he were to try.

"I've been so busy I haven't had much of a chance to even think about it, much less find someone," he replied quietly.

"I don't know. Looks like Ardra there would be a pretty good catch. You wouldn't even need to put forth any effort, just a snap of your finger." She snapped her finger and gave him a teasing smile. "Instant wife."

"What about you? I think you would make a pretty good catch." Coming to a stop in the middle of the sidewalk, he turned to face her.

Not wanting him to see how much that idea appealed to her, she teased him back. "I would require too much effort on your part."

"Are you saying you would be a challenge?" He looked as though the very thought was intriguing.

"Of course. But a challenge you would find difficult to win."

Giving her his best seductive smile, he brought her hand up to his lips and kissed the back of her fingers.

"One thing you will learn about me, Kris," he looked at her through his lashes, "I never back down from a challenge."

Trying to get her furiously beating heart a little more under control, she pulled her hand from his grasp. It felt as though his lips had burned her flesh where they'd touched.

She turned and began to walk slowly down the street. Trying to take her mind off the very seductive look in his eyes and the way his gaze followed her every move, she tried to pay closer attention to her surroundings. The thought of Stefan actually being interested enough to try and win her over excited her, but then reality sank in. *He's only teasing. Stefan needs a woman who is just as powerful and aggressive as he is.* He certainly wouldn't want her, at least for anything serious. The rich and powerful ones never did.

He fell into step beside her, his hand resting at the small of her back. For a few moments they remained silent, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Other than challenging," she looked at him out of the corner of her eye, "what are you looking for in a woman?" She was curious if she was correct about what kind of woman he would like.

"Do you think you know someone who would be perfect for me?" Up went that adorable eyebrow, she noticed.

"Maybe," she replied. "But you're evading the question."

Stefan smiled as he looked straight ahead. "You know, I haven't really thought about it."

"You don't know what kind of woman you want to spend the rest of your life with?" That certainly surprised her.

"I keep hoping the woman of my dreams will come running around the corner and barrel into me." He shrugged.

Krista laughed, for she knew that was how Sidious had met Mikayla. "I doubt miracles like that happen twice."

"Maybe the woman of my dreams is right under my nose." Turning back to her, he gave her a charming smile.

"Maybe the woman of your dreams is Ardra."

Stefan made a face and shuddered, making Krista laugh.

"What about you?" Stefan asked, turning the tables. "What are you looking for in a man?"

Krista sighed. "The same thing all women are looking for. The perfect man that doesn't exist."

Stefan laughed. "What is this perfect man like?"

"Well, he's sweet, funny, patient, romantic..."

"There you go." He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and spread his arms. "You've described me to a T. See? The perfect man does exist."

She rolled her eyes. "I don't recall saying anything about him being arrogant, condescending, overbearing..."

"I am not arrogant." He put his hands on his hips, his expression the perfect picture of indignation.

"Of course you're not," she replied dryly. With a smile, she listened to Stefan halfheartedly grumble about how he didn't understand why everyone thought he was arrogant.

\* \* \* \* \*

Standing on the far side of the street, the man who was once Commander Carlone quietly watched Stefan with the pretty young blonde woman. His plan had worked. The fortune he'd paid the informant had been well worth it.

He raised his hand and rubbed at the new skin mask that covered his face. It served two purposes. One was to hide the burn scars he'd received during the rebel attack, the other was to keep his identity hidden. Everyone thought he was dead, and he wanted to keep it that way. At least for a while longer.

He studied Stefan and the woman with interest. Could this be a girlfriend? It didn't matter. If she got in the way, that would be her problem.

Stefan would pay for what he did to him and forever regret getting involved with the rebels.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stefan couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun. Krista was intelligent and funny—most certainly beautiful, but there was something about her that made him feel alive. When he was with her he laughed and looked at things in ways he never had before.

Staring down at her, he noticed her slightly pink cheeks and full lips. She had her arms crossed over her chest, studying the horizon. A cool breeze blew and she shivered slightly. He frowned and wished he'd thought to bring a jacket for her. The temperature had dropped, meaning a storm wasn't far behind.

Walking up behind her, he rubbed his palms up and down her arms. He had a strong desire to wrap his arms around her and pull her close. That thought made him smile. He knew without a doubt that if he did she would deck him. One thing about Kris, she would never be dull. "Do you want to head back to the house?" he asked.

"What?" She turned and brought her gaze from the planet above them to his eyes.
"I'm sorry, I was fascinated with the rings. They're beautiful."

Stefan smiled as an idea came to mind. "Would you like to see them up close?"

"Up close?"

He nodded. "We can take the *Negash* and actually fly through them."

A slow smile spread across her face and his heart leapt in his chest. *Good Lord, I feel like some kid on his first date*!

"That actually sounds like fun."

He returned her smile. "Then let's go. I have the *Negash* secured in the general dock at the other side of town."

Putting his hand at the small of her back, he escorted her down the sidewalk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista sat in the passenger seat of the *Negash* and watched the little moon of Daego disappear beneath them and the planet of Metalon loom larger. The planet was huge, with four rings in all—each one a different color, from red to purple.

Thinking back on the evening, she realized how much fun she'd had. When they weren't bickering with each other they got along very well. They had the same interests, laughed at the same things. Stefan could be adorable when he wanted to be, but he could also be a total arrogant jerk.

Denying her physical attraction was becoming harder and harder. Sometimes she wondered why she even tried. Why shouldn't she have a fling with him? She sighed as she tried to remind herself of the reasons why. Because he was her best friend's brother-in-law and if things didn't work out or it ended badly, coming back here to visit would be out of the question. It would be too uncomfortable. Mikayla meant more to her than a few weeks of sex. No matter how good it would probably be. Now, if she could only convince her body of that and resist him whenever he kissed her.

*Yeah, right,* she thought.

As they flew closer she noticed the rings were actually rocks and dust particles. Zigzagging through the debris to the third ring, Stefan parked the ship on a rock with a beautiful view of the planet below.

"Is Metalon inhabited?" she asked as she watched the sun set behind the curve of the planet.

"No. It's uninhabitable, mostly swampland."

Stefan's breath brushed against her cheek, and she turned to find herself nose to nose with him. His gray eyes mirrored the storm going on within her, and she swallowed nervously. His hungry gaze moved from her eyes to her lips, making her chest tighten.

The evening had gone so well. She couldn't let him do this. She knew the second his lips touched hers she would melt. She always did. There was nowhere for her to run this time. No place for her to get away.

Slowly he lowered his head toward hers, and she drew in a shaking breath. He rubbed his nose against the tip of hers, the contact causing her to almost jump out of her skin. The electricity in that one simple touch sent tingles throughout her entire body.

He didn't kiss her, he just watched her, his face hovering inches above hers. Waiting. Each second that passed made it harder for her to remember the reasons why she shouldn't do this. She had to say something, now. She opened her mouth to draw in a shaky breath and tell him to stop but his lips covered hers in a soft kiss, preventing her from saying anything.

She tried to resist at first, not responding, but he continued to nibble and tease. His patience and lack of urgency were erotic in themselves, and she opened her lips beneath his despite herself.

He ran his tongue along her bottom lip before sliding it against her teeth, slowly exploring as if he had all the time in the world. Running his tongue along her teeth, he barely touched his tongue to hers before retreating.

Krista moaned and leaned closer. She wanted to taste more of him. A hint of chocolate truffle and the hot cinnamon drink *korniga*, still lingered on his breath. His musky scent enveloped her, making her want to drown in it.

Gently he cupped her face in his hands and deepened the kiss further. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she met his hungry mouth with her own craving need.

One kiss led to another and she couldn't seem to stop. With a groan, she admitted she didn't want to. Her body burned with fire, his fingers scorching every place he touched, and he touched everywhere.

"Kris," he sighed against her mouth. Grabbing her at the waist, he pulled her onto his lap, her legs straddling his hips. Her knees rested on either side of him, causing her skirt to ride up her thighs, exposing them. She didn't care. She couldn't believe how badly she wanted him, how much she wanted to feel him inside her.

Stefan groaned and slanted his lips across hers. She delighted at the sound. She loved the fact she had just as strong an effect on him as he had on her. Reaching up, he undid the buttons of her shirt as his lips trailed a path down her neck. She sighed as his thumbs brushed across her hardened nipples through the lace of her bra.

Gently his fingers traced the edging before sliding it aside, freeing her breast. He captured the hard peak in his mouth, his tongue stroking and teasing. Krista buried her hands in his hair and tugged him closer, encouraging him to take more of her. With a gasp, she ground her aching pussy against his hard shaft, the material of his slacks creating a friction that drove her crazy.

She wanted to touch all of him with an urgency that defied understanding. Pulling at the buttons of his shirt, she opened it and slipped her hands inside, running her fingers along the smooth expanse of warm skin and hard muscle. She marveled at his strength and smiled when she felt the muscles twitch beneath her exploring fingers.

Stefan hit a switch on the side of the seat and it reclined slightly. With a soft squeal she lost her balance and fell onto his chest, causing them both to laugh. Framing her face with his hands, he brought her mouth back to his for a deep kiss, silencing her giggles.

He slid his palms up the outside her thighs, pushing her skirt even higher. She shivered at the feel of his fingers against her heated skin.

Stefan whispered against her lips, "Cold?"

"No," she sighed.

He smiled slightly as he sucked her bottom lip into his mouth. "If you are, I can warm you." His hands cupped her bottom and brought her more firmly against his thick cock.

She could hardly breathe. Never in her life had she been so caught up in something like this, so completely out of control. She moaned as his mouth devoured hers and his hands kneaded her behind, moving her in a slow rhythm against him that drove her crazy.

Sliding one hand between them to her stomach, he let his fingers trail along the top edge of her panties. Krista held her breath as he moved lower and traced the edge along the inside of her thigh. She wanted to groan in frustration, for he hadn't touched her yet. He seemed content to just tease.

His teeth nibbled her neck while he slid the crotch of her underwear aside and separated the lips of her wet sex with his finger. Gently he sucked on the spot where he could feel her pulse pounding.

Stefan wanted to rip her panties off and lose himself in her, bury every inch of his throbbing cock inside her, but he also didn't want it over yet. He was enjoying himself way too much.

Bringing his mouth back to hers, his tongue traced her lips at the same time his finger traced her clit. He smiled as she arched against his hand, her head thrown back, her eyes closed. She was so beautiful she took his breath away. "Like that, baby?"

At her deep groan, he had to swallow hard to keep from driving into her with the force of a madman. Sliding one finger into her depths, he sighed against her lips. She was so tight and wet, so ready for him. "Oh God, you're going to feel good."

"Stefan." She closed her eyes and moaned as he leaned forward and captured her nipple in his mouth—his tongue stroking, his teeth softly biting. She moved her hips against his hand and he groaned, taking more of her breast into his mouth.

He slowly slid his finger in and out, stretching her as he went. His thumb circled her nub, prolonging her torture on purpose. He smiled against her lips, enjoying what he was doing to her—what she was doing to him.

A second finger slid into her and she sighed as the first ripples of her climax fluttered through her. God, she wanted him, but she also didn't want him to stop. She was so close she could taste it, could feel her muscles tighten and grip around his fingers. His thumb brushed across her swollen wet nub and her whole body jerked. Rippling sensations shot through her limbs as he did it again, lingering a little longer this time, using a little more pressure on just the right spot. Suddenly her release gripped her and she screamed, her nails digging into his shoulder leaving half-moons on his skin.

"Oh, God," she sighed as her head fell forward onto his chest.

Her hands fumbled with his zipper until he brushed them aside with his own. "I want you, Kris," he hissed against her lips.

His cock sprang free from his pants and she swallowed a gasp at his size. He was perfect and her pussy clenched at the thought of him being buried deep inside her. She didn't have the opportunity to play as she'd wished. Stefan grabbed her hips and lifted her onto his thick shaft. The head of his cock teased her opening before slowly thrusting deeper. Her eyes closed as he stretched and filled her and she braced her hands on his shoulders. With a pleasure-filled groan she pushed down, taking his cock deeper, sheathing him balls-deep.

"Fuck," Stefan growled as he grabbed her hips, holding her still. "God, Kris. You're tight."

"It's been a while." She moaned against his neck, her tongue flicking out to lick his skin.

Slowly they began to move, her sighs becoming lost in his kisses. It felt as though his cock was splitting her in two, but at the same time it felt so good. Lifting her hips until just the head of his shaft remained, she slowly slid back down his length.

Stefan growled and settled his palms against her ribs, lifting her. "Again," he said and she obliged.

Shots of liquid fire passed through Stefan. Damn, she felt good. Hot and tight, like liquid lava encasing his cock. They fit together so perfectly. She was meant for him. He knew it deep in his soul. Leaning forward, he pressed her perfect breasts together and suckled both of them. Anything to keep his mind off losing control. He wanted her to come again. He wanted to feel her pussy clench his cock like it had his fingers. Sliding his palm up the inside of her thigh, he found her swollen clit and brushed his thumb across it. She shuddered in his arms just as the walls of her pussy shuddered along his cock.

"Mmmm," he moaned. "I like that."

He brushed his thumb across her again, applying just a little more pressure, and captured her gasp with his kiss. The muscles on the inside of her thighs began to tremble as he continued with his teasing strokes against her clit.

"Stefan," she groaned against his lips, the movement of her hips becoming more frantic.

"Come for me, baby." He applied stronger pressure to her clit, massaged it in tiny circles, honing in on the one spot he knew would send over the edge. She gasped and threw her head back. Her breasts thrust forward and he licked at one engorged nipple, reveling in the shudder that passed through her. "That's it, baby. Squeeze my cock with your pussy."

She screamed as her release slammed through her and Stefan grit his teeth, trying to hold his at bay. Her walls pulsed around him, milking his climax from him, and he lost it, spilling his seed deep inside her. She collapsed against him and he held her tight.

"Oh, God. What the hell did we just do?" she sighed.

"Something we should have done a year ago."

Suddenly the warning bell on the panel went off and she jumped, her eyes widening in surprise. They both stared at the computer screen on the dash. The shrill beep had stopped but the warning light still flashed. The sound of their harsh breaths echoed through the quiet of the cockpit.

"What the hell?" Stefan scowled.

"What is it?" she asked, trying to fix her clothes and pull herself together. She couldn't believe she'd let it get that far.

Stefan put his hands at her waist and settled her back into her seat. "Put on the harness."

With shaky hands, she snapped the harness together and then frowned at him. "Are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"We've got company," he said as he fastened his pants back and scanned the controls.

"Is that bad?"

Suddenly the ship shook and sparks flew from the side console, making Krista squeal in surprise.

"It's bad."

Krista scowled at him. "Care to explain why?"

"Not at the moment."

The ship lifted from where they'd parked and Stefan began to make his way through the multitude of rocks surrounding the planet. Once again the ship was hit with fire, causing it to shake uncontrollably.

"Stefan, what's going on?"

He kept his eyes straight ahead. "I'll explain later. Right now I've got to get us out of this. Computer, engage cloak."

The computer's voice loomed through the small ship. "Cloak inactive, shields at forty-five percent."

"Damn it." Stefan spun the ship and missed colliding with a rock by what seemed like inches, only to be hit by yet another blast. The ship lurched, and Krista grabbed hold of the dash in front of her. Even with the harness on she felt as though she was being thrown from her chair.

"Can't you fire back at him?" she asked.

"This ship isn't equipped with weapons," he snapped.

She kept her mouth shut as Stefan flew clear of the rings' debris and headed out into open space, the ship attacking them directly on their heels. Her heart raced as they dodged one blast after another. The knuckles of her fingers began to ache from gripping the arm of the seat. She tried her best to remain silent, at least until she noticed Stefan hit a button to open the transport gate. "What are you doing?"

### Trista Ann Michaels

"We can't outrun him, so we're going to have to hide from him."

"We're going through the gate?"

"I can enter the gate and then close it. He'll have no way of knowing where we went."

"But what if he enters with us?" she asked, panic quickly rising in her chest.

"He can't, not unless I program it that way."

She swallowed her nervousness as the gate opened with a flash of blue light and they entered into the dark, dead silence of the wormhole. Turning toward Stefan, she scowled. "Want to explain to me what that was all about?"

He sighed, his brow drawn together in thought.

"Well?" she snapped.

"There's an assassin after me."

Her mouth dropped open and she stared at him in disbelief. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

"No, afraid not."

"You took me up in space knowing there was someone out there trying to kill you?" Her hands fisted against the desire to wring his neck. He should have told her. He should never have taken her up there.

"Damn it, Krista. I didn't know he would be up there waiting for us." He scowled back at her, his eyes a deep black, but his temper didn't scare her.

"So now what?"

"Well, we can't go back to Daego," he sighed.

"What?" Surely she hadn't heard him correctly. "Maybe you can't but I certainly can."

"No."

"What the hell do you mean, no? It's you he's after, not me."

"And what if he catches us again when I try to take you back?" he yelled. "I refuse to endanger Sidious and Mikayla and I really don't think you want to either."

That thought hadn't crossed her mind. She sat back in the chair and stared out at the empty space before them. They still hadn't exited the gate, and she wondered where he was taking them. "Where are we going?"

"The old rebel camp. It should still be intact, although it might be a little messy."

A blue flash of light preceded the exit and she sighed in relief. She hated going through that gate. A thought suddenly occurred to her, and she turned toward him. "All my stuff is still back on Daego."

"We'll swing by the Klindorah Space Station and pick up some things. I don't have anything, either." He turned troubled eyes on her and she felt bad for yelling at him. He'd just saved both of them, after all. "I'm sorry, Kris. Looks like you and I will be on our own for a while."

She swallowed the lump that rose in her throat at the thought of being alone with him. Especially after what just happened.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carlone growled loudly as he watched the small runner enter the transport gate. He had no way of knowing where Stefan went. He'd forgotten how good a pilot Stefan was. Next time, he'd try something else.

As soon as Stefan emerged from the gate, the tracer he had hidden in Stefan's ship would send a signal. How quickly he would get the signal would depend on how far away he was. Sooner or later the senator's whereabouts would be known and he'd get the chance to get even—to finally get his revenge on the meddling count.

## **Chapter Six**

Mikayla stood inside her husband's study door and watched the worry lines deepen around his eyes. Something was going on, something he wasn't telling her, and it was high time he spilled the beans.

"Sidious," she said. His eyes left the computer screen and locked with hers in surprise.

"Hey, baby. I didn't see you standing there."

"Obviously." She took a few steps closer, coming to a stop next to his chair. "Is there something that you want to tell me?"

"Why do you ask?"

Reaching out, he took her hand in his and pulled her onto his lap. Her arms wrapped around his neck, her fingers sliding through his thick platinum hair. She'd always loved his hair. "You looked as though something was bothering you. Not to mention the fact that Taron has been in and out of here more in the last couple of weeks than the last year, and of course there's Damon, who won't let any of us out of his sight."

"Okay," Sidious sighed. With a slight smile, he kissed her forehead. "Sometimes I think you know me too well."

"Well, are you going to tell me?"

Whatever he was about to say was cut off when Taron burst into his office. "I need to talk to you."

"Now?" Sidious asked.

"Now."

Sidious turned to look at Mikayla, and she shook her head. "No. I'm tired of being left in the dark. I'll hear it as well."

Sidious nodded as she stood from his lap. "What is it, Taron?" he asked.

"I was on my way back from Veenori when the alarm went off for the *Negash*. It's gone, and so are Stefan and Krista. The hanger bay personnel said they left in it earlier this evening."

Mikayla shrugged. "Maybe they just went for a short trip."

"If they did, something happened. The alarm was deliberately engaged with Stefan's code. Stefan must have turned it on to send a signal to the tracker on the *Vultair*. According to the tracker, he activated the gate and is docked at the Klindorah Space Station." Taron took a deep breath and continued. "Daego Security said there was a skirmish within the rings earlier. One of the ships was the *Negash*. The other was unknown."

"A skirmish?" Mikayla asked, her heart racing. Why would Stefan be involved in a skirmish, especially if he had Krista with him?

Sidious mumbled a few Tilarian curses and stood. "Can you contact Stefan?"

"I tried." Taron's eyes shot to Mikayla then back to Sidious. "Apparently communications are out on the *Negash*, and without the ship's booster I can't raise Stefan on his communicator. He's too far away. Should I head that way?"

"No. He'll contact us. If the ship is docked at the station we at least know he's made it that far. If what I think happened, Stefan will ditch the *Negash* and get another ship. Coming back here will be out of the question."

"I agree. We also have another problem." Taron handed Sidious a photo.

Sidious raised an eyebrow and took what Taron handed him. After a long silence, he sighed and tossed the photo on the table.

"Devlin was able to retrieve that from a security camera. The former dictator's right-hand man seems to have survived the destruction of the *Destroyer*. My guess is he's our assassin."

Sidious nodded, his brows drawn together in a frown. "He must have attacked Stefan in the rings. But the question is was he trying to kill him or just playing with him?"

"Okay, now you want to tell me what's going on?" Mikayla snapped. With her hands on her hips, she gave her husband what she hoped was her most forceful scowl. "Especially since my best friend is apparently involved?"

Taron grimaced and turned to leave the room. "I think I'll leave the two of you to your chat."

"Chicken," Sidious growled.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What are we doing here?" Krista asked as Stefan docked the *Negash* on the Klindorah Space Station and helped her to exit the ship.

The station was several miles long, with horizontal shoots that wove through the center like a subway. People of all races bustled throughout the busy docking bay, and she stayed as close to Stefan as she could. At one point he turned and took her hand in his, making sure they remained together.

"I want to ditch the *Negash*," he said while they stood waiting for the next shoot to come by. "There's always someone here selling runners, we'll just buy another one. There are also some clothing shops up on the promenade. Might be a little different than what you're used to though."

"I'll adapt."

Stefan grinned and gave her hand a squeeze. "I know you will."

Krista bit her lower lip as they climbed onboard the shoot and took their seats. The force of the start threw her back and she grabbed Stefan's leg in reflex. His hand

covered hers and warmth seeped into her skin, making her whole arm tingle. Looking down at his long thick fingers, she remembered what he'd done earlier and the heat of a blush crept up her cheeks.

Turning to the side, she watched outside the glass walls as the shoot sped by, and closed her eyes against the nausea that threatened. She had to get her mind off her upset stomach and the movement of the shoot before she actually lost her dinner.

"Stefan?" she asked and opened her eyes to look at him.

"Yes?" He turned to look at her, his gray eyes seeming to devour every facet of her face.

She cleared her throat before continuing. "Do you know who this guy is that's after you?"

"No. But I believe he's the same man that killed the other senators."

"How long do you think we'll have to stay hidden?" The shoot came to a stop and she looked to see where they were. "Do we get off here?" she asked. It looked like another docking bay.

"No. We need the third stop. There are two docking bays on each side. The promenade is in the center. And as for hiding, I'm not sure. I'll let Taron know where we're going and he'll meet us there. We'll decide what to do then. But I don't want to go back to Daego yet and risk everyone else. It's bad enough you're in this." He smiled down at her, his eyes dancing with mischief. "Not afraid to be alone with me, are you?"

"Of course not," she lied. Oh boy, did she lie. She was terrified to be alone with him, for she knew exactly what would happen.

They finally reached their stop and stepped off, heading toward the flights of stairs that would take them to the promenade. As they topped the second flight, she stared in awe at her surroundings. It was like a tiny city. Restaurants, shops and bars lined both sides of the station. The ceiling was glass, giving the patrons a perfect view of the stars and two blue moons right outside.

Dim streetlights lit the walkways and the aroma of spicy food filled the air. She inhaled a deep breath and her stomach growled in response.

Stefan grinned. "Are you hungry? We just had dinner."

"A little," she said with a blush. "And dinner was several hours ago."

He chuckled. "True. We can get something." He looked around until he spotted what he was looking for, and pointed to a small place just down the corridor. "They have good food, we'll go there."

With a nod, she followed him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Buy whatever you want.

Krista scrunched up her face as his words echoed in her ears. Dinner had been great—the food here was incredible. The clothes were another matter. With a sigh, she slowly looked through the selection of monk-like dresses and baggy harem pants. She didn't see a thing here that fit Stefan's description of comfortable outdoor clothing.

He'd remained outside to talk with a man about buying his runner and sent her in the shop alone with his currency chip. *Big mistake, rich boy*. She considered a pair of leather pants with a grin. Shaking her head, she replaced them on the rack. She wanted comfortable, not a chafed behind.

After going through what seemed like hundreds of outfits, she finally found something she thought might work. The pants were cut similar to jeans, but were made out of a heavier material. She lifted them and ran her hand across the soft, suede-like material. He did say it would be cool where they were going, so this should work perfectly.

She grabbed three pairs and four shirts, as well as shoes. As she made her way to the counter a satin tunic caught her eye. It was beautiful. On impulse, she decided to try it on and quickly headed to the dressing rooms. Stepping out of the stall, she studied herself in the three-way mirror. The tunic was perfect. The way it felt against her skin and clung to every curve of her body. Even she had to admit she looked good in it. With a naughty grin, she wondered what Stefan would think if he saw it.

The lace hem rested about mid-thigh while the slit went all the way to her waist on both sides. Underwires pulled her breasts together, making it appear she had much more cleavage than she really did. It was definitely an outfit to tempt.

A movement in the mirror caught her attention and she looked up. Her eyes locked with those of a grinning Stefan, walking up behind her.

"What are you doing in here?" she asked, her voice a little more breathless than she would have liked.

"I was looking for you." His eyes traveled down her legs and then moved back up, locking with hers in the reflection.

They had darkened to a deep gray, and she licked her lips nervously. She knew that look. He'd had the same expression, the same passionate hungry gaze, when they were in the ship earlier. His fingers lightly touched her shoulder then slid down her arm. Goose bumps rose along her flesh, making her shiver despite the heat of the shop.

"If you don't buy this, I will," he whispered.

"You shouldn't be in here." She struggled to keep her composure. All she could think about was earlier. How wild and incredible it had been. How much she wanted him. Again.

"Afraid we'll get caught?" His hand parted the side slit and moved to her stomach.

The messaging motion of his fingers as they worked their way lower made her breath catch. He could take her right here without a word of protest. The man hadn't even really touched her yet and already she could feel the wetness forming between her thighs. Her heart pounded and for a second she forgot to breathe as his lips softly kissed the side of her neck. Finally she came to her senses and moved away from him.

### Trista Ann Michaels

"Stop. I have to change." She stormed past him into the dressing stall. She had to get away from him before she was all over him again.

"Need any help?" he asked, his voice full of amusement.

"No," she snapped. *Do I need any help? Of all the arrogant, conceited...* With a sigh, she tossed the tunic onto the bench. She could hear his chuckle as he walked away and she ground her teeth in frustration. The man was going to drive her to violence.

"Hurry up, Kris. I want to get out of here." His words reminded her they were running and the sooner they left the better.

"I'll be right there." Without another thought, she quickly dressed and met Stefan at the counter.

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista awoke to the feel of Stefan's fingers on her cheek, his voice next to her ear. She sighed and leaned closer as he placed a kiss on her temple. Butterflies immediately came alive in her stomach, dancing and jumping like mad.

"Wake up, sweetheart. We're here."

Opening her eyes, she took a look out the window of the ship. She sat up straighter in surprise at the enormous rock wall directly in front of them. Turning her gaze out the side window, she saw nothing but rock there as well.

"We're in a cave?"

The cavern was huge. Or maybe it just looked huge because the ship they'd purchased was the only one in it. He opened the door and reached in, offering a hand to help her out.

"Where are we?" she asked as her eyes traveled around them in wonder.

"We used to call it Shlintori."

"Used to?" Krista stopped studying the cavern and eyed him.

Stefan grinned. "Well. Actually still do. Its official name is Glindogah, but when the rebels used it as a hideout we renamed it Shlintori. That way, no one but us would know what we were talking about."

"I take it we're inside it?" she asked as she began to once again look around.

"Yes. This cavern was here originally, we just improved upon it."

"I'll say."

In the ceiling of the cavern she noticed the huge opening in the rock, enabling her to see a large portion of the night sky beyond it. Apparently that's how the ships got in and out. "How do they keep from seeing in here?"

"You can't see in from the outside. There's a holographic image that simulates the rockface." Stefan shrugged. "Just looks like a regular mountain."

He looked up at the entrance. "You can tell it's on because the stars look blurred."

"That's amazing." She looked at him and smiled. "So what else is here?"

He pointed toward a long hallway beginning at the far end of the hangar. "Down that hall are quarters, each with their own bath, as well as what we called a great room and a training facility. Kept the guys from getting too bored when they were here."

She began to make her way toward the hall while Stefan pulled their bags from the ship. "What's in the great room?"

"It's sort of like a rec room. There are games, replicators for meals, that sort of thing."

She turned to face him, wrapping her arms around her more tightly. The cavern was chilly. She hoped the rest of the place wasn't this bad. If it were she would freeze. The clothes she'd bought wouldn't be near warm enough.

"So we can't actually cook?"

Stefan walked up next to her and grinned. "Don't like the idea of eating replicated food?"

Krista scrunched up her face. "Not particularly."

"Well then, I guess I'll have to scrounge up some real food." He smiled as he tapped her nose with the tip of his finger. "Just for you."

Krista smiled as she watched him go around her and continue down the hall. "You're too kind."

She fell into step behind him, studying the rock walls and solid earthen floors. Lights hung from the ceiling, the connecting wires exposed. She could feel the slight slope to the ground and vaguely wondered how deep they were.

He eyed her over his shoulder. "Kind, huh? Can't say too many people have accused me of that one."

She waved a hand and rolled her eyes. "You were the driving force behind the men and women who freed the galaxy of an abusive and sick tyrant. You can't get any kinder than that."

Stefan came to an abrupt halt and spun to face her with a thoughtful expression.

She frowned. "What?"

An eyebrow arched adorably and she fought the desire to smile. "A compliment? Coming from you?"

"Yeah, well. Don't get too used to it."

One corner of his mouth tipped up in a smile. "Most people would say I had an ulterior motive."

She tilted her head and studied him. "Did you?"

"No."

She shrugged. "Then what do you care what other people think?"

"I don't." His expression sobered as he gazed at her. It made her uncomfortable, and she shifted her stance, trying to find a way around him. "I only care what you think."

She jerked her eyes back to his in surprise. "Why?"

His only response was to smile before turning away again. She frowned at his retreating back. He never failed to completely throw her for a loop. With a sigh, she followed him further into the cave.

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista surveyed the massive great room. It had three fireplaces, one in the center that she was sure someone could easily stand in, and two not quite as large on each end. They appeared to be made of the same stone as the cave, blending into the wall almost perfectly.

The center fireplace divided the room into two sections, a kitchen and eating area on one side and a living room-type area on the other.

Large overstuffed chairs and sofas in shades of burgundy and green filled the living room, while the kitchen offered numerous tables and chairs as well as cabinets filled with dishes and pots. Four replicators took up the opposite wall.

"How many people were usually here at one time?" she asked as she continued to scan the room.

Stefan set the bags down and turned on a replicator. "Two coffees. Black." While he waited, he leaned his back against the counter. "The most, I think, was about one hundred and fifty."

Walking over, she looked into the center fireplace. It was open on both ends, which allowed the heat to spread to both sides of the room. There were logs at the bottom but no burnt-wood scent. It just smelled damp.

"If you're cold I can turn that on."

She looked over at him and smiled slightly. "Please."

Stefan chuckled and grabbed their cups of steaming coffee. "Here, this will help." He handed her a cup before opening a panel to the side of the chimney.

She eyed the drink warily before taking a sip. *Hmmm...not too bad*. She really couldn't tell a difference. Wrapping both hands around the warm cup, she took another sip.

Suddenly there was a loud pop, and she startled as the logs came to life in bright orange and yellow flames. With a sigh, she moved closer to the heat.

Looking around, she noticed the other fireplaces had come to life as well.

Stefan smiled. "They're all interconnected and attached to gas lines running down through the ground. I can also turn on the ones in each individual guest room with this panel as well."

She raised an eyebrow. "The bedrooms have fireplaces too?"

He nodded as he closed the panel.

"How long did it take you to do that?"

"Not long." He came to stand next to her, putting his back to the heat.

Bringing her cup to her lips, she took another sip as she eyed him over the rim. "What was this place used for?"

"This was where we made the *Vultair*. We built her in pieces and then assembled her in orbit, cloaked. She's too big for the cavern." Stefan swallowed a sip of coffee. "After that, we used it as a place to gather in relative safety. A few fugitives, running from the prime minister, hid out here, as well."

"Now we're hiding here."

"So it would seem."

Krista watched him study the flames, a faraway look in his eyes. She wondered what he was thinking.

"If it wasn't for me...would you still hide out here?"

Stefan brought his gaze to hers and for a second she wondered if he was even going to answer her. He shook his head and whispered, "No."

She spun away from him and walked toward one of the many tables in the eating area. Pulling out a chair, she sat down, setting the cup on the table in front of her. The idea of him getting hurt didn't sit well with her, but she refused to analyze it—refused to even think about it. Acknowledging any feelings she had for him was too dangerous.

"Krista."

She looked up to see Stefan take the seat next to her. He reached out and placed his hand over hers. His fingers were so warm, his eyes so full of concern and compassion. Taking a deep breath, she pulled her hand out from under his and shook her head. "I feel terrible…"

"This whole mess is my fault, Kris. Not yours. I should have listened to Taron when he tried to warn me about this." Putting his finger under her chin, he turned her toward him. His dark gray eyes held hers as he rubbed his thumb along her cheek. "I promise I won't let anything happen to you."

How is it he can always do this to me? Why is it when he touches me all I want to do is drown in him?

She closed her eyes against the desire to make love to him again. They hadn't talked about it, but they probably should. Unfortunately, at the moment she was so tired she couldn't think straight, much less talk about what happened. She wasn't even sure what she would say anyway.

"It's going to be okay," he whispered and placed a soft kiss against her brow.

Krista wasn't as confident.

## **Chapter Seven**

Stefan came down the hall late the next morning to the smell of bacon and coffee. With a slight smile, he followed his nose to the great room. He stopped at the entrance and searched for Krista. He found her standing by the counter, softly humming along with the music playing in the background. She must have found Taron's old disk player.

For a second, he leaned against the rock wall and watched her hips softly sway back and forth. The images her movements created in his mind made his cock thicken. The woman could drive him to distraction without even trying.

Keeping his steps whisper soft, he came farther into the room. She had her back to him, her hair hanging in soft curls. His fingers itched to run through its honey-blonde softness like they had on the ship.

With an inward groan, he grimaced. Just thinking about that night made him hard all over again. He shifted his gaze from her hair to her perfectly rounded behind. He remembered the feel of those tight mounds in his hands and his blood quickened.

Good going, idiot. Make it worse.

Coming up behind her, he placed his hands on her shoulders. The material of her sweater was soft beneath his fingers. Her singing stopped and she stiffened.

Leaning down, he whispered in her ear, "It's just me."

Her hair smelled like lavender and he inhaled the scent. She always smelled of lavender. He wondered if she bathed in it.

"I'm making breakfast, would you like some?"

He grinned at the breathless quality in her voice. "I'll take a side of you with that bacon." He placed a soft kiss just under her ear and smiled to himself when he felt the tremor run through her.

"Knock it off." She nudged him in the stomach with her elbow.

He grunted. "Yes ma'am," he mumbled with a grin.

Moving away from her, he ordered coffee from the replicator. "Do you need some help or have you figured it all out?"

"I think I've figured it out." She smiled and proudly held up a plate. Grabbing a piece of bacon off it, she set it in the center of the table with the rest of the food she'd prepared.

"Hungry this morning?" Stefan raised an eyebrow at the amount. There was bacon, eggs, potatoes, toast and fruit.

"Actually I am. In case you haven't noticed it's almost lunchtime and we missed breakfast." Krista grabbed her own coffee and sat down.

He smiled as he sat across from her. He liked this. Waking to find her in his kitchen, cooking breakfast, grinning at him over her morning coffee. He liked her smile much more than her surly attitude. Although he had to admit her smart mouth could certainly be entertaining.

"What's it like outside?"

Her question snapped his mind back to the present.

"That's right. You were asleep when we landed." He scooped some eggs onto his plate. "It's mostly wooded. There are a couple of clearings, one with a large lake. Some of the men used to fish there. This time of the year it's a little too chilly for that, though."

"Not too chilly to go out, I hope." She offered him the plate with toast on it.

"Thank you, sweetheart."

He grabbed the plate and their fingers touched. For a second he didn't move, just let them rest over hers. "You look gorgeous when you blush."

Krista jerked her hand away so fast he almost dropped the plate. She narrowed her eyes. Picking up her fork, she stabbed a few potatoes. Stefan got the distinct impression she wished they were his head.

"You never answered my question," she said.

"Oh, yes." He nodded. "Back to the weather." He put his coffee cup to his mouth to hide his grin. "It's cold right now, but not too terribly bad. Were you warm enough last night?"

"Yes. I found some extra blankets in a trunk at the foot of the bed. The fireplace really kept the chill off."

"If the cold ever gets to be too much for you, you're always welcome in my bed."

Krista snorted. She couldn't believe the gall of this man. "Only if I could hogtie you first."

"Hmmm." Stefan took a bite of bacon and chewed thoughtfully.

Krista could just imagine what was going through his mind. *Probably the same thing that's going through mine*. The image of Stefan tied up in a bed was definitely interesting.

"If you hogtie me will you have your way with me? Or better yet..."

Her fork stopped halfway to her mouth and she scowled at him.

"Why don't I tie you up and have my way with you?"

"Okay, look..." Krista dropped her fork onto her plate with a loud clang.

Stefan raised an eyebrow in amusement. "You brought it up." One corner of his mouth twitched up as he fought a smile.

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry I did." She picked up her plate and took it to the counter.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and she knew Stefan was behind her. She fought the wave of desire that surged through her like a runaway train as he placed his hands on her shoulders and gently squeezed. He'll just use me and I refuse to be used.

"I'll take care of these. You go find some warm clothes and we'll head outside for a while." She turned to look at him and he shrugged. "If we don't see sunshine occasionally, we'll become claustrophobic."

She eyed him warily, unable to bring herself to relax after his latest comment.

"I promise to behave myself." He put his hand over his heart, his expression turning somber.

"Where have a heard that before?" she mumbled as she headed toward her room.

Stefan chuckled. "Yeah, but that time I had my fingers crossed."

Krista smiled despite herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista turned her face up toward the sky and sighed. The trees were so tall and thick she barely saw the lavender sky peeking out between the tips of the branches, which made the valley floor dark and cold.

Just being outside made her feel ten times better. The cool wind against her cheeks, the smell of damp dirt and dead leaves mingled in the breeze, tickling her nose. She could hear a stream in the distance, but the further up the mountain they went the further away the stream sounded.

Coming to a stop, she put her hand against the side of a tree. She ran her fingers over the smooth blue skin of the trunk. No grayish bark here. It almost felt like the leathery skin of a frog. Holding back a shudder, she let go of the tree and put her hands back in the pockets of the jacket Stefan had loaned her.

"You doing okay?"

She brought her gaze to Stefan's and smiled slightly. He was standing sideways, one foot resting on the log beside him, his hands on his hips. He didn't look the least bit winded, whereas she was almost breathless.

"I'm fine. Just taking a breather."

He studied her with a frown. "I keep forgetting you're not used to the atmosphere on this planet. I shouldn't have brought you up this far."

She shook her head and went to sit on the log next to where his foot rested. "It's not that. I just haven't hiked like this in ages. I didn't realize how out of shape I was."

One side of Stefan's mouth twitched as he let his eyes roam over her from head to toe. Her body immediately responded and heated up several degrees, her heart racing out of control.

"You look pretty in shape to me."

Krista scowled and reached out, slapping the side of his leg with her hand. Stefan laughed and the sound echoed in the trees.

"We can head back if you want," he said, sitting on the log beside her. The heat coming off his thigh seeped into hers and she ran her sweaty palms down her jeans.

She shook her head. "No. I'm not ready to go back yet. I like it out here. Is the whole planet like this?"

"Pretty much."

It suddenly became darker, and he looked up at the sky with a frown.

"What is it?" she asked as she raised her eyes as well. The blue had been replaced by dark gray clouds that obscured the tips of the trees. She pulled the edges of Stefan's jacket more firmly around her as the wind began to pick up. "Is it a storm?"

"Looks like it." He stood and pulled her to her feet. "We better get back."

She had no idea how far they were from the entrance to the cave, but she knew they had been outside for a while. Stefan came to a stop and she grabbed his elbow to steady herself on the slope. Following his gaze, she gasped.

Directly in front of them was nothing—everything was obscured by white. At first she thought it was fog but it appeared to move. "What is that?"

"It's snow."

She sucked in a breath as she watched it slowly approach them. "Oh my God, a whiteout? How are we going to find our way back?"

He squeezed her hand and gave her a firm look. "You hold onto my hand and don't let go, no matter what. Do you understand?"

She nodded her head and swallowed nervously. She could feel the biting cold of the wind as the storm moved closer. Never in her life had she seen anything like it. Holding tight to his hand, she followed him into the blinding white of the storm.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stefan stopped and tried to get his bearings. As a child he'd had a strong sense of direction and had been taught to use it. He just hoped he still could. It had been years since he actually had to rely on it.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes for a second, trying once again to get a feel for the direction he needed. The mountain was to the right, he just knew it. Slowly, he began to make his way toward what he hoped to be south.

He could still feel Krista's hand in his, although he really couldn't see her that well. The snow was coming down too hard. He knew she had to be cold, he was freezing.

The wind had picked up and more than once almost knocked them off their feet. The cold felt like knives slicing through his skin. The snow coated their clothes, making them wet and only adding to their misery.

He turned sharply when he heard her squeal then felt the tug on his hand as she fell to the ground. Immediately he was down on his knee next to her. With one hand on her back, he leaned down next to her ear. "You okay?"

"Yeah." She nodded her head, her lips quivering and blue from the cold. Her nose was bright red, her cheeks already chapped. They had to find the cave soon or they were both in trouble.

"We're almost there. Hang onto me." He put her hand firmly back into his and helped her stand before starting off again.

After what seemed like an eternity, the white in front of him began to grow darker. Putting his hand out, he touched cold rock and let out a sigh of relief.

*The entrance has to be here somewhere.* 

Moving to the left, he quickly found it and helped Krista inside. She let go of his hand and ran farther into the cave ahead of him. She wrapped her arms around her, shaking from head to toe. "Oh God. I am so cold."

He came up behind her and pushed her toward the hall, heading straight for her quarters. Once in the door he stood her before the fireplace and then headed to the bathroom.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm running you some water. I want you in a warm bath. While you're doing that I'm going to go fix us something hot to eat."

"What about you?"

"I'll be fine. You get in the tub."

She raised an eyebrow. "Yes, sir, bossy."

From his position sitting by the tub, he turned to look at her and almost laughed. She tried to scowl but her quivering lips only made her look comical. The idea of getting into the tub with her flashed through his mind, but he quickly pushed it aside.

Neither one of them had eaten since their brunch earlier and that had been several hours ago. He hadn't meant to keep her out that long. Reaching down, he swirled his hand through the water, checking the temperature.

"I can run my own water, you know."

He eyed her over his shoulder. She had come into the bathroom and was leaning her shoulder against the doorjamb.

Lord, she was tempting. Her hair was damp from the snow, her cheeks still kissed pink from the cold, her nose red. Her lips continued to quiver, and he was tempted

beyond reason to cover them with his, to warm them until they stopped and melted against his own. Just thinking about it made him shift uncomfortably before standing.

"By all means."

He walked over, never taking his eyes off her nervous ones. Reaching out, he tugged at one of the buttons of her shirt. She swatted his hand away and he grinned.

"I guess that means you don't need any help disrobing, either?"

"Nope." She frowned and stepped aside, allowing him room to slip through the door.

"Okay, I get the hint." Before going completely out, he stopped. Putting his hand on the frame, he turned to look at her. "Would you like anything special for dinner?"

"Anything warm is fine."

"Warm it is." He winked at her before heading to the replicators.

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista sank deeper into the tub and let the warm water cover her shoulders. With a sigh, she looked around the unusual bathtub. People of Earth would pay a fortune for this look—the rock walls and floor. It was like sitting in a pool.

Reaching out, she touched the wall with the tip of her finger. A tiny waterfall cascaded along the rock and into the bath water. The trickling sound relaxed her and she leaned her head back, closing her eyes.

She tried not to think about Stefan, but her mind kept recalling the way he looked at her. The concern in his eyes when he thought she had overdone it, the seductive way he gazed at her, making her skin heat up. The way his lips felt on hers... God, just thinking about it sent a shiver of awareness through her body.

Watching the water ripple with her movements, she wondered if she could have a physical relationship with him and not let her heart get involved. But then what would she do if it did get involved? She didn't want to spend night after night crying herself to sleep, hating herself for once again losing her heart to someone she shouldn't.

She was almost thirty years old. She should know not to believe in fantasies. Stefan was one of the richest, most powerful men in the galaxy. He would never want her for anything other than a fling. And she couldn't forget that for even a second.

"Dinner's ready."

She jerked in surprise and swung her head toward Stefan's voice. He stood just inside the door, one hand on his hip, the other on the doorframe. He had changed into a pair of dry beige pants and what looked like a blue wool tunic. Slipping further into the water, she frowned at him. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

He grinned and leaned his back against the corner of the jamb. He tilted his head to the side, studying her as he crossed his arms over his chest.

She growled and splashed water at him, hitting the floor by his feet.

"You missed."

"You know, it just amazes me that some woman hasn't had you shot yet."

Stefan chuckled. "You may very well be the first." Reaching into a drawer, he pulled out a towel and laid it on the side of the tub.

She warily watched him as he stepped back into the bedroom, giving her some much-needed privacy. Standing, she quickly grabbed the towel—keeping her eye on the door the whole time—and dried herself. She realized she didn't have any clothes and groaned.

Wrapping the towel around herself, she called out, "Stefan."

"Yes?" He came to the door but kept his back to her. Silently, she commended him.

"I need a robe. Is there anything out there that would work?"

"How about this?" He held his hand up, a black robe dangling from his finger. "I must have left it the last time I stayed here."

"That will work." She snatched the robe from his hand and stepped back into the bathroom. She slipped her arms through the sleeves, then tied it tightly around her Star Crossed

waist. Looking at herself in the mirror, she wasn't at all comfortable with the thin, revealing robe.

Krista could see her distended nipples through the silk and with her hair piled on her head, a few damp tendrils hanging down, it made her look sultry. Which was most definitely not what she had in mind. Maybe clothes would be a good idea.

"You better hurry or dinner's going to get cold."

The amusement in his tone was obvious, and she scowled in the direction of his voice. When she heard her stomach growl from hunger she decided to just forget it and go eat.

She stepped into the bedroom and was struck speechless by the scene. He had moved the small table to the center of the room and covered it in food that smelled heavenly. Her stomach growled so loudly she was sure he could hear it.

There were candles everywhere. On the dresser, on the table and even scattered along the walls on little ledges created by the uneven rock. The candlelight reflected off the damp walls of the cave, creating a shimmering effect she found beautiful—and very romantic. She stared back at him, an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"I wasn't in there that long. How did you do all this?"

"You were in there longer than you think." He grinned as he pulled her chair out for her.

"I fell asleep?"

She wasn't sure she believed that, but now that she thought about it, maybe she had.

"You were snoring."

Krista frowned. "I do not snore."

Stefan just smiled in response.

"What's for dinner?" she asked as she sat in the chair, changing the subject.

#### Trista Ann Michaels

"It's a Tilarian soup called mishowie." He ladled the food into a bowl and handed it to her.

"It smells wonderful." She lifted her spoon and took a small bite, then smiled. "It tastes similar to chicken soup."

"There's also fruit and bread," he said as he lifted the cloth cover. "As well as chocolate cake."

"Lord, if I eat all this I'll gain twenty pounds."

He shrugged as his eyes roamed over her. "You could afford a couple of pounds here or there."

She set her spoon down and eyed him. "Like your women a little chunky, do you?"

He chuckled as he reached for a piece of bread. "I wouldn't say chunky, since I don't have a clue what that is. But I definitely don't like overly skinny."

"So you think I'm overly skinny?"

She tried her best to look offended without grinning but it was hard. Especially when she saw him redden slightly before tripping over himself trying to explain.

"You're by no means overly skinny."

"So you think I'm fat?" She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped a finger.

Leaning his forearms against the table, he leered. "I don't know. Perhaps you should take off the robe and let me check for myself."

She rolled her eyes. Uncrossing her arms, she reached for a roll.

"Stefan one, Kris zip," he said.

He was rewarded with a roll in the face, which caused them both to laugh.

"See, you're laughing. And to think, earlier you wanted to shoot me. Now what would your life be like without me?" he asked.

"Peaceful?" She raised her eyebrow.

"Boring."

"Maybe I like boring." She took another spoonful of her soup.

Stefan snorted. "Yeah and maybe I like men."

"Really? I would have never guessed," she replied seriously and then giggled at the expression on his face.

Pointing his finger at her, he started to say something but shook his head with a grin. "You are something else."

"And you are a very good cook." She smiled as she took another sip.

"It doesn't take a whole lot of talent to push a button."

"Have you ever cooked real food?"

"I cook whenever I'm at my home on Tilarus. When I'm on Rhenari I usually don't have the time and just use a replicator. I enjoy cooking. Does that surprise you?"

"Actually, yes."

"Why?"

Krista shrugged. "Things are so advanced in your world it's just hard to imagine anyone doing something as mundane as cooking."

"My mother was from a farming community called Ricktoric. They had never even heard of replicators until she married my father. She was the one who taught me."

For a second she stared at him. "Your mother wasn't a monarch like your father?"

Stefan shook his head. "You didn't know that?"

"No, I just assumed... I thought your royalty system worked like ours, royalty marries royalty."

"In most cases, yes. But leave it to my father to do the unusual."

She watched him dip his bread in the soup. "You don't approve of what your father did?"

Stefan drank some of his wine and gazed at her over the rim. Shaking his head, he set his glass back down on the table. "I don't agree with arranged marriages—never

have." Lifting the bottle, he filled her glass. "I think you should marry who you love, not who will enrich the family name."

"That's an unusual sentiment."

"True, and I might have felt differently had my father not married a farmer's daughter. I think the way you see things has to do with the way you were raised. I come from a very close family and I grew up seeing how happy and in love my parents were. I want the same thing they have." Krista couldn't seem to move her gaze from his as he stared into her eyes. "I want my wife to love me for me, not what I can do for her."

Clearing her throat, she studied the bowl in front of her. They were alone in this incredible place, they were attracted to each other. It would be very easy for one thing to lead to another. Again.

"How did your father meet your mother?" Krista asked as she scooped some pineapple onto a small plate.

"He crashed his ship on their planet. On my grandfather's property actually. My mother found him and they took care of him. When he regained consciousness he didn't remember who he was. In time he regained his memory, but by then he had fallen in love with my mother."

"What did your grandfather have to say about that?"

"Which one?" Stefan asked with a grin.

"Both."

"They were furious, but for different reasons. My mother's father thought he had used her, because she was pregnant with me at the time." He leaned across the table and whispered, "But don't tell my mother I know that."

She chuckled and whispered back, "Okay."

"My father's dad was angry because his son refused to come back to Tilarus and marry the girl they had picked out for him. Eventually everything worked out. But not before my father had some serious amends to make with my mother. She had found out he had regained his memory but didn't tell her."

"Sounds like quite a mess." Krista grinned and popped a grape into her mouth.

"Yeah." Stefan reached for a piece of chocolate cake. "But love like that is worth fighting for, no matter the mess it's in." He smiled seductively. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"I suppose." She looked down and twirled her spoon in the soup. "But how will you know that she really loves you and isn't just after your money?"

"She'll look at me the way my mother looks at my father."

At that, she brought her gaze back to his. The color of his eyes had deepened somewhat and he searched hers as though trying to read her innermost thoughts. She quickly averted her gaze. "You can fake that."

"No." He shook his head. "You can fake many things, but not that."

He stood and walked to her side of the table. Taking her hand in his, he brought her to her feet. She followed in a daze as he led her to a clear spot in the floor and pulled her into his arms. Slowly they began to dance. What was he doing?

"You do realize there's no music?" she asked.

He grinned and pulled her closer. "We don't need any."

His hand rested at the small of her back, sending jolts of tingling warmth up her spine. He grazed his lips against her cheek, stopping just short of her mouth, and waves of desire swirled in her stomach.

Clearing her throat, she moved her head to the side, pulling away from him. "So back to this idea that you can't fake it."

One corner of his mouth twitched as though fighting a grin. "Someone who is very good might fool some people, but I've spent most of my adult life learning how to read reactions. The eyes are the easiest to read, I think."

"For you, maybe. For me I don't think it would be that easy."

"Sure it would. You just have to pay attention. For example..."

She brought her gaze up to his and the corner of his lips lifted in a smile. "Your body tenses when it's this close to mine." He trailed the tip of his finger down the side of her neck, pausing to rest over her pulse point. "Your heart rate speeds up, I can feel it here."

Krista's face burned. Her skin tingled under his finger. Was she so easy to read?

He leaned down to kiss the throbbing spot with his lips and her mouth went dry. When his teeth found the sensitive spot below her ear she closed her eyes and tried to swallow the mewling sound deep in her throat.

"I can hear your sighs."

He ran his hand through her hair and removed the clip holding it on top of her head. As her hair cascaded down, he grabbed a handful and tugged her head back, exposing her throat.

He nibbled along her neck as he untied her sash. She gripped his shoulders, praying her knees didn't give out. His hands slipped inside her robe, and she shuddered as his featherlight touches ran up her ribs and grazed along the sides of her breasts.

Taking her hand in his, he placed it over his heart. The pounding rhythm matched her own and she looked up into his eyes.

"You can't fake this," he whispered as he lowered his lips to hers.

## **Chapter Eight**

Krista groaned as his lips covered hers. He kept them light and teasing, nibbling on her lower lip before pulling it into his mouth and sucking on it.

She opened her mouth, but he didn't deepen the kiss. Instead he softly brushed his lips along hers—perfectly content to tease. With one hand at the small of her back, he raised his other and ran the back of his fingers along her cheek.

Her limbs felt heavy and her eyes drifted closed as she leaned into his hand. He planted soft butterfly kisses along her jaw.

She wanted him to kiss her, really kiss like he had the other night. He was so unhurried, so slow and deliberate. His hand roamed along her spine, making her tremble.

She slid her hands into his hair. It was thick and soft, like silk between her fingers.

"Don't ever cut your hair," she whispered as her hand continued to weave through its softness.

"Is that an order, blue eyes?"

She could hear the amusement in his soft husky voice as they continued to sway to an imaginary tune.

"No," she whispered. "Just a request."

He opened his eyes and gazed into hers. "What do I get in return?"

"What do you want?" Oh God, that was a bad choice of questions. She knew it the second she saw his grin.

"I want you."

Those three little words made her heart trip. "You want me? Whatever for?"

He chuckled seductively. "For starters," he leaned down and lightly kissed her, "I want to kiss you." He placed another kiss on the corner of her lips. "And I want to touch every inch of you."

She sighed as he nibbled his way to her neck.

"Kiss every inch of you."

The way he seductively whispered those words sent tingles along her skin. His light kisses continued across her shoulder as he pushed her robe down her arms, leaving her completely naked. The cool air of the room hit her feverish flesh and she shivered. His thumb circled one taut nipple and she swallowed down a groan.

"I want to kiss you here," he whispered against her lips.

She moaned into his kiss as he cupped her breast and gently squeezed before moving down her stomach and teasing her navel. "And here," he murmured. "Around this adorable navel ring."

His fingers moved further down and sifted through the hair at the juncture of her thighs. She sucked in a breath and held it, helpless against the sensations coursing through her.

"And here. I want to taste your cream as you come."

He was driving her crazy, she thought as she licked her suddenly dry lips. Why should she fight it anymore?

He watched with heavy-lidded eyes as she grabbed the bottom of his tunic and yanked it over his head. Her breath caught as she stared at him in wonder. She softly trailed her fingertips along his hard chest and swallowed. She recalled the day of the wedding, when she'd seen him without a shirt for the first time, and how much his muscular build had surprised her. He was hard and toned and oh so gorgeous.

Her fingers continued along his washboard stomach and he sucked in a breath, the muscles along his rib cage twitching. She swiped her thumb across his nipple and felt it harden beneath her touch. She peered up at him through her lashes and leaned forward

to flick her tongue across the hard peak. A groan rumbled through his chest as he grabbed her face in his hands, pulling it back to his.

"No," he growled, nipping at her lower lip. "I barely have any control as it is. You start that and I won't have any at all."

Burying his hands in her hair, he captured her mouth with his. She moaned as his tongue slid past her parted lips to do battle with hers. It was a demanding kiss, one that stole her breath and left her weak. He pulled back and gazed at her, his finger running along her bottom lip.

"You are so beautiful," he sighed.

He made her feel beautiful with the way he looked at her, the way he touched her. He made her feel cherished and special. She could hardly breathe as he bent down and picked her up in his arms.

Putting one knee on the bed, he leaned over and placed her in the center of the mattress. The coolness of the sheets felt good against her hot flesh. She watched as Stefan stood and removed his pants, slowly revealing every inch of his glorious limbs, his skin glowing gold in the candlelight. Her eyes found his erection and her heart raced. It stood straight and thick, coming almost to his navel, and she remembered how good it had felt buried in her pussy.

The warmth of his hard body coming in contact with hers as he settled over her made her sigh. His lips took hers in hot urgency while his hands expertly explored every inch of her sensitive skin.

With featherlight touches they slowly moved down her stomach, then across her hip. She shifted as his fingers ran down the outside of her thigh, then slowly back up to tangle in the curls between her legs.

He drove her mad. Never in her life did she think sex could be like this. His touch was gentle yet passionate, soft yet demanding. She was completely out of control. She wanted him, but he was in no hurry as he continued with his slow seduction.

Sliding his hand between her thighs, Stefan moaned at how wet and hot she was. Pushing a finger inside her, he almost lost his willpower to take it slow. She was so passionate. It took everything in him to not bury himself inside her—to lose himself in her velvety softness.

"Like this?" he whispered against her lips as he moved his finger in a slow, gentle rhythm.

"Mmmm...yes."

His thumb lightly circled her sensitive clit, spreading her juices all around, teasing but never completely touching. He lowered his head and captured a nipple between his teeth, softly biting and then gently sucking.

"Stefan, please." She buried her hands in his hair as she arched toward his mouth.

He left her breast and moved lower along her stomach. Heedless of her pleas, his tongue teased her navel and his teeth tugged at the belly button ring. "This thing is sexy as hell, whatever possessed you to get one?"

"It was an impulse thing," she murmured.

"Good impulse." Moving even lower, his lips brushed the hair between her thighs. She gasped and spread her legs wider. Keeping his finger deep inside her, his tongue gently circled her swollen nub. He licked, nibbled and sucked, inhaling her sweet fragrance. "Shetah, you taste good, Kris."

The tip of his tongue grazed across her swollen clit and her hands gripped the sheets as sensation raced through her body like a speeding freight train. She wanted him inside her.

"Stefan," she gasped.

He kept teasing her, kept pushing her ever closer to that elusive pinnacle.

"What, kisary?"

She moaned, unable to form words as his tongue and fingers continued to turn her to mush.

"This?" The tip of his tongue flicked across the right spot. Lifting her hips off the bed, she screamed as her release hit her full force. He continued until every last aftershock had passed before lifting his body above her and settling between her thighs.

His eyes were a deep black, his jaw clenched tight. He looked as though he held onto his control by a thin thread as his gaze locked with hers. Something passed across his expression, but just as quickly it was gone. Like a ghost. Had she only thought she'd seen it? Was it wishful thinking on her part?

Her questions were soon forgotten as he spread her thighs with his and thrust himself inside her. "Damn, Kris."

In answer, she lifted her hips against his. He pulled back slightly then pushed further in, burying all of himself deeply. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, lost in the sensations of him filling her, the perfection of how they fit together. A moan escaped her lips and he covered them with his. Her taste lingered on his lips and she swiped at her juices with her tongue, intrigued.

He made love to her with slow, deep strokes that fulfilled her like no one else ever had. His expert moves and thrusts once again ignited her passion, making her hunger for that release she knew instinctively only he could give her.

She felt so close, her body tense, her nerve endings screaming as she clung to him. The more he gave, the more she wanted. She couldn't get enough of him.

"Stefan. Ahhh..."

"I know, kisary."

He gripped the back of her thigh, pulling it up around his hip. "Let it go. Come for me," he whispered against her lips.

She gasped as he slid deeper, his thrusts becoming harder, more demanding. She closed her eyes as the sensations within her body built to a fever pitch.

Suddenly everything shattered as a release unlike anything she'd ever felt before took hold. She screamed his name, lifting her hips higher against his.

He moaned, slowing his thrusts, moving in a way that prolonged her pleasure. He could feel every contraction milking him, pulling at him, bringing him ever closer to his own release. Finally giving in, he buried himself deep inside her, his body trembling from the force of his own orgasm as he emptied his seed deep inside her.

Slowly their breathing returned to normal and he lifted himself up on his elbows. He gazed down at her and brushed the back of his fingers across her cheek. Her eyes drifted closed and he softly kissed her temple, his body still weak and trembling. He'd never experienced anything like it. Or anything like her.

My God, when did I fall in love with her?

She opened her eyes and stared up at him. She could still see the remnants of passion in his gaze, the tenderness she always associated with him.

He dropped his head and softly kissed her lips. "Kris, I..."

She held her breath. *Oh God, don't say it. Please don't say it.* 

He closed his eyes and laid his forehead against hers. A shaky sigh escaped his parted lips. She let out the breath she'd been holding, relieved that he hadn't finished his thought. She knew if he said it, she would be lost.

She couldn't love him. No matter what, she had to remember that.

\* \* \* \* \*

The beep of his communicator woke Stefan from a sound sleep and he inwardly groaned. He reached to the floor and quickly grabbed it before it woke Krista. Looking at the screen, he saw the code for the *Vultair*.

Damn.

He slipped out of bed and threw on his pants. Before leaving the room, he walked over to Krista's side of the bed and stared down at her. His heart ached to tell her how he felt, but she had tensed up last night when he almost told her he loved her. He knew she wasn't ready to hear it.

Leaning over, he pulled the cover up around her shoulders. He would wait until she was ready—or until she told him.

A sense of dread passed over him. Was she stubborn enough to keep it in and never tell him? He wouldn't let that happen. He would confront her first, make her admit how she felt. Whether she realized it or not, he could see it in her eyes.

He placed a kiss against her temple and then left the room, quietly shutting the door behind him.

Once in the rec room, he sat at the desk and hit the switch to bring the computer to life. He punched in his access code to signal the *Vultair* and waited impatiently while it searched for the ship.

His feet were cold against the stone floor and he realized he should have grabbed his shoes. The signal was finally found and Taron answered after the second beep, his tired face appearing on screen.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" Stefan scowled.

"No." Taron raised an eyebrow and brought his hand up, pointing at a spot where his neck met his shoulder. "But I have a pretty good idea what you've been up to."

Stefan brought his hand up and touched the side of his neck with a frown. It quickly dawned on him what Taron indicated and he grinned. He remembered Krista had bitten him there, and he was sure he had a good-sized love bite to show for it.

"This better be good." He looked pointedly at the screen and Taron chuckled.

"I'll make it quick so you can get back to other things. I talked to the informant today and found out Carlone has a place on Shevalli. I'm heading there first thing in the morning."

"Shevalli? Isn't that a farming community?"

"Yes, apparently his grandfather owned a farm there and left it to him when he died."

#### Trista Ann Michaels

"That's interesting." He sat back in the chair, crossing his arms over his bare chest.

"How did Carlone end up in the militia coming from that background?"

"It's a long story."

Stefan nodded. "Keep me informed."

"Will do. As soon as we're done I'll head to the camp."

Stefan grinned. "Take your time."

"Lucky ass," Taron grumbled before signing off.

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista heard the door open and waited quietly for Stefan to climb back into bed. Her eyes wandered his firm body appreciatively as he stripped his pants off and slipped under the covers. Earlier had been so incredible. He had been incredible. He met her gaze and smiled. "Did I wake you?"

"No. The beeper did."

"I'm sorry." He rested on his elbow and rubbed her cheek with the pad of his thumb.

She shrugged. "It's okay. Was it anything important?"

His fingers running along her neck and collarbone again inflamed her desire. Her skin heated, her heart raced, even the spot between her legs throbbed. *How can he do this to me so easily*?

"It was just Taron. He'll be here in a day or two."

She placed her palm against his bare chest and watched the slow rise and fall of his breathing. She felt the steady beat of his heart beneath her fingers, the warmth of his skin. Had she made a terrible mistake? Did she love him?

No. She briefly closed her eyes, hardening her resolve. *I don't love him. Lust after him, yes. But I don't love him. I can't love him.* 

"Kris?"

The question in his voice caused her to open her eyes and look at him. They were soft and filled with concern and something else she wouldn't name. He opened his mouth to say something and she placed her hand over his lips, silencing him.

He grabbed her hand, his brows drawn together in a frown. "You can't keep avoiding this or changing the subject." She leaned over and placed a kiss on his shoulder. He smiled slightly. "Or trying to distract me."

She kissed his neck, then softly bit it. "Is it working?" she whispered against his skin.

He moaned softly. "What do you think?"

Her hand slowly skimmed along his hard stomach, her fingers teasing every valley. The muscles twitched beneath her exploring touch and his chest muscles trembled under her gentle kisses.

When her fingers wrapped around his rock-hard shaft, she grinned. "I think it is."

Stefan grabbed her shoulders and rolled to his back, pulling her up on top of him. He wrapped one arm around her waist, the other hand he used to brush the hair away from her face.

"What am I going to do with you?" he whispered.

Her breath caught in her throat at the intensity of his stare. Could he see in her eyes how she felt about him? Could he tell in the beating of her heart?

"Make love to me." The words left her mouth before she even realized it.

He smiled slightly as he brought her lips down to his. "Gladly, kisary."

It was far from slow this time. But wild and passionate. His kisses sent her falling out of control and she wiggled her pussy against his hardening cock. "Damn, woman," he growled and rolled her to her back. "You're killing me."

"And you're driving me crazy," she answered back. "I want you, Stefan. Now."

"Ah, fuck," he groaned. "Move to your knees."

She smiled, intrigued with the idea of him slamming into her from behind. With a devilish glance over her shoulder, she positioned herself in front of him and wiggled her behind. He grabbed her hips and held her still as he invaded her tight passage with his massive cock. She screamed and laid her forehead against the mattress. He felt so good inside her. He pulled out, then slowly pushed back in with a moan. "God, that feels so fucking good."

It did, but she wanted more. "Stefan, stop playing. I want you to fuck me."

Stefan closed his eyes with a smile. He loved how she talked dirty when she was desperate. Putting his hands along her ribs, he lifted her against his chest, making sure to keep his cock deeply seated. His palms squeezed her breasts, and she thrust them forward with a sigh.

"I like your breasts, Kris." He pinched her nipples, making them harden. "I like how you respond to my touch. How well we fit together." He thrust his cock deeper to prove his point and smiled as she wiggled her hips against him. "Feel how well we fit together, Kris."

Taking her hand, he moved it to her pussy. She could feel his cock slowly moving in and out, her juices making him slick and wet. Her thumb brushed her clit, making her gasp. He felt so good, so right. Never in her life had she been this wild with someone, this uninhibited. With his hand over hers, she moved to toy with her clit. The sensitive nub hardened and swelled beneath her touch. She moaned as Stefan's hand moved in conjunction with hers. The two of them moving as one.

"It feels good, doesn't it, baby?" he whispered. "Make yourself come for me."

She groaned as her fingers moved faster, applying just a little more pressure. "That's it, baby." Stefan's hips thrust faster, his cock filling her impossibly deep. "Stefan," she screamed as her body shuddered from pleasure.

Falling forward, she braced herself on her hands as Stefan continued to plunder her pussy. Over and over he plunged and her body responded with another more powerful orgasm. Every muscle quaked in pleasure and she screamed as her release skimmed through her body again and again. Stefan growled and hot jets of semen emptied into her spasming channel.

"Oh, God," she sighed, her forehead lying against the cold comforter.

With a sigh, he pulled from her body and tugged her against him as they settled beneath the sheets. His warmth seeped into her relaxed body and it wasn't long before she fell sound asleep nestled in the safe cocoon of his arms.

# **Chapter Nine**

"Oh, my God."

Krista sighed as she gazed around at the winter wonderland spread before her. She and Stefan had just finished lunch and decided to head outside to check out what the storm had done.

It was absolutely beautiful. Wet snow clung to branches and rockfaces, turning everything within view white. The sunlight glittered off icicles hanging from tree limbs, causing them to sparkle like diamonds.

The air was still cool and crisp and smelled fresh. With a smile, she inhaled deeply. "Now if we just had a sled."

Stefan raised an eyebrow in question. "A sled?"

"You're kidding, right?" she asked with surprise.

He shook his head.

"You don't know what a sled is?"

"No."

She placed her hands on her hips and studied him. "What did you used to do as a kid when it snowed?"

"We used to take a scrap piece of ship, go to the top of a hill and slide down on it."

She raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Stefan, that's a sled."

He shrugged and walked toward her. "You call it a sled. I call it a *gleent*." He smiled seductively, coming closer. "Have you ever made love in the snow?"

Narrowing her eyes, she held her hand up in front of her. "Stop right there, Senator."

He stopped and raised an eyebrow.

"You wore me out this morning."

"Did I?" He grinned as he began to walk toward her again.

She took a step back, moving toward the rockface. "Yes, you did. I'm quite sore."

She tried to keep a straight face, but was having a difficult time of it. He looked gorgeous this morning in his jeans and wool tunic, the white turtleneck underneath a stark contrast to the deep blue of the wool.

His gray eyes sparkled with a devilish light. Occasionally that flash of something she couldn't identify shone in his eyes but as soon as it was there it was gone again. She wondered if he was trying to keep his feelings hidden from her. Or maybe it was something he himself didn't even know was there.

Her back hit the rock wall, and she stopped. His hands on either side of her head kept her pinned in place. He wiggled his eyebrows. "Maybe I should kiss it and make it better."

Her laughter echoed through the valley around them. "You are so bad."

He returned her smile, then bent down, tossing her over his shoulder.

"Hey," she gasped. "What are you doing?"

"We're going to find something to make a gleent with."

"What? You don't think I can walk on my own?"

"I'm sure you can." His hand slowly made its way up the inside of her thigh and she gasped. "But this is so much more fun."

"Stefan Marcone!" She tried to reach around and swat at his hand, but she couldn't reach it. His laughter made her scowl. "You're impossible."

\* \* \* \* \*

Finally finding a piece of metal, they spent the next couple of hours sledding down hills and challenging each other to snowball fights. He couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed like this, the last time he'd felt this alive.

Whenever he looked at her he fell a little more in love. He knew it now, without a doubt. But she still kept that wall up, only allowing him so close. The snowball to the side of his head caught him by surprise. His eyes closed and he fell to the ground in a heap.

"Stefan?" Her laughter stopped and concern filled her voice. "Stefan?"

He heard the crunch of the snow as she made her way to his side. Just as she dropped to her knees next to him he grabbed her arm and pulled her down. Rolling over, he pinned her beneath him.

She squealed and looked up at him with shocked eyes that quickly narrowed. "You faker." She swatted at his shoulder and he chuckled. "You scared me to death."

He smiled down at her. His lips softly brushed her cheek. "Were you afraid you'd hurt me?"

"No." Her breathing sped up slightly as he nibbled her neck. "I don't know how to get out of here. If anything were to happen to you, I would be trapped."

He stopped what he was doing and looked down at her with a raised eyebrow. "That's it?" he asked incredulously.

One corner of her lips twitched. "Well, what did you expect?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Lie to me. Tell me you can't live without me."

"It's more like I can't live with you," she grumbled.

They looked at each other and laughed. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her he loved her, but he was afraid it would push her away. Fear was something he didn't often feel and to feel it over a woman made it even more strange and unsettling.

Slowly he dropped his mouth to hers, trying to convey what he couldn't say out loud yet. Her lips were cold and trembled slightly, but they quickly warmed against his as they kissed, their tongues in slow battle.

He moved his hand to her hip and gently squeezed. The way her body perfectly molded to his never failed to amaze him. The way she responded to his touch never failed to take his breath away. He put his hand at the back of her leg and raised it as he slid his thigh between hers. The desire he felt for her, coursing through his veins, shocked him. It seemed the more he made love to her the more he wanted her. She made him feel whole, complete, and he couldn't get enough.

His fingers lifted the hem of her sweater and brushed along the skin of her stomach. It felt soft and hot to the touch. She sucked in a breath and shivered.

"My hands cold?"

"A little," she sighed as he placed soft kisses along her jaw. "I'm getting all wet."

He grinned against her neck. "In more ways than one, I would imagine."

She poked her finger in his side and he chuckled.

"You know what would really be incredible right now?" she asked.

"Besides this?"

His thumb brushed across her nipple, and Krista had to concentrate hard to remember what she was saying. Shivers ran down her spine that didn't have anything to do with the temperature. At the moment she didn't even feel the cold.

She watched as he reached over and popped a small bit of snow in his mouth. "Lying in it isn't enough?"

He grinned as he raised her sweater and moved the lace of her bra aside. Bending over, he captured the peak of her hard, hot breast in his cold, snow-filled mouth, and she almost screamed at the sensation.

Slowly the snow melted and his mouth warmed as his tongue continued to stroke and tease her sensitive nipple. She buried her hands in his hair, arching further into his touch.

Lifting his head, he pushed her sweater back down, then moved to place nibbling kisses along her lips.

"What were you saying?" he whispered against them.

"I...uh..." She swallowed as his tongue traced the edges of her lips. "I was thinking a warm bath would be great about now."

"Mmmm." He shifted his thigh, rubbing it between her legs.

She sucked in a breath and moved her hips against it.

"A warm bath does sound nice," he whispered.

He bit her lower lip and then sucked it into his mouth. He pressed his thigh tighter against her aching pussy and she moaned.

"Stefan, you have to stop this." His lips covered hers. His tongue traced her teeth then retreated. "We can't make love in the snow."

"Who says?"

She giggled. "Me. I'm freezing."

Stefan smiled and kissed the tip of her nose. "Come on, then. I'll take you up on that bath idea."

"What makes you think I wanted to take a bath with you?"

Stefan bent over and grabbed her hands, pulling her up in front of him. "Just for that, you little minx," he hissed, bringing them nose to nose, "I'm going to make you beg."

Her lips twitched at the corners, fighting a grin. "Beg for what? The bath?"

"No. Me."

He quickly bent at the waist and lifted her in his arms. She squealed, her laughter floating around them. She buried her face in his neck and placed soft kisses at the spot where she could feel his pulse racing.

"Maybe I'll make you beg," she whispered against his neck.

She felt the tremor run through him and smiled. He stepped into the cave and headed for her room.

"Do your worst, kisary. We'll see who makes who beg."

\* \* \* \* \*

Okay, so I begged.

Krista grinned and snuggled deeper into his arms, her head on his chest, one leg across his. The man was certainly talented, but there should be more to a relationship than sex. The reality was they were from two different worlds. Not just literally, but figuratively as well.

Stefan was royalty and no matter what he tried to tell her about how he wanted to marry for love, the fact of the matter was she didn't belong in his world. A countess she was not. And never would be.

A thunderous noise echoed throughout the cavern, jolting her from her thoughts. Her eyes widened and she sat up.

Stefan grabbed his beeping communicator and flipped it open. "It's okay. It's Taron."

"Is that a ship?" she asked as her nervous gaze took in the glasses shaking on the table.

"Yeah, he's in the docking bay. Sound echoes through here pretty good." He tugged on a small strand of her hair. "Hey, *kisary*. Come back down here."

"Don't you need to meet him or something?"

He grinned. "Taron knows his way around. We'll greet him in the morning."

She lay back down next to him, his arms wrapped tightly around her. He kissed her forehead and she smiled, snuggling closer to his warmth.

She finally remembered to ask about what he had called her. "What does *kisary* mean?"

"It's a Tilarian endearment."

She rose up on her elbow and looked at him. "But what does it mean?"

"It means stubborn."

She grinned. "No, it doesn't."

He studied her hair as he softly ran his finger through it and pushed a curl behind her ear.

"Well." She lifted an eyebrow. "Are you going to tell me?"

He rolled over and propped himself on his elbow as well. Bringing his lips extremely close to hers, he studied her thoughtfully. "Hmmm. Why should I?"

She smiled seductively and trailed a finger along his chest. "Because you can't resist me."

A chuckle rumbled through his chest. He put his finger under her chin and tipped it up. His fathomless gray eyes bored into hers, and she felt as though she was branded, made his just by a look. "It means 'my love'."

What was he saying? Was he saying he loved her? Or was "my love" just something like "sweetheart" or "honey"?

She knew this was a mistake. They were from opposite ends of the spectrum. A middle-class country girl and a monarch whose level of royalty would be equivalent to that of Britain's king. How would she ever go back to see her friend? She would always be worried she would run into him, and God forbid he should marry someone. She would be heartbroken.

She opened her mouth to speak, to tell him how she felt, but before she could utter two words his lips captured hers in a kiss that stole her breath.

She tore her mouth from his. "Stefan, we need—"

He didn't let her finish. He once again sought her lips with his as he pushed her to her back and settled over her.

Against her mouth, he whispered, "Shh. Be quiet, Kris. Just let me make love to you."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and returned his hungry kisses. She'd take this while she could. Soon it would be time for her to return home to her job, her apartment...and a life without Stefan.

# **Chapter Ten**

Early the next morning Stefan found Taron at a table in the rec room. His brother looked troubled as he stared into his coffee. "How did it go on Shevalli?" Stefan asked as he ordered coffee from the replicator.

Taron sighed. "The house blew up before I could give it a good once-over."

Stefan choked on his coffee. "It what?" He took a seat and set his cup on the table in front of him.

"Carlone apparently anticipated someone coming there and had the house rigged."

He frowned. "For what purpose?"

Taron pursed his lips as he studied the cup on the table. "My guess would be just for kicks. As far as I could tell there was nothing there."

"There had to be something there. Why would he blow up an empty house?"

"Maybe in the hopes he would get one of you in the process?"

Stefan whipped his gaze around to see Krista standing not ten feet away. She looked adorable in her tight pants and one of his oversized shirts. It swallowed her whole, but he loved seeing her in it. It looked right.

Suddenly he frowned. He didn't want her concerned about what was happening. "Would you like some coffee?" he asked as he stood and headed for the replicator.

"Yes. Thank you."

Stefan handed her a cup and their fingers brushed. The electricity in that touch made him stop short. His gaze locked with her blue one, and he winked. With a blush, she set her cup on the table.

"So, Taron. How's the investigation going?" she asked.

"I think we've stalled. It seems no—"

"Taron." Stefan pinned him with a glare as he pulled his chair out and sat down.

"What?" Taron shrugged.

"You better not be doing what I think you are," Krista snapped at Stefan. Krista hadn't missed the look Stefan gave Taron. He was trying to keep her in the dark, but why? She narrowed her eyes at him. "I'm not a child."

"I never said you were."

"Then why are you trying to keep me out of the loop?" She leaned her elbows on the table and raised an eyebrow, her coffee forgotten.

Stefan opened his mouth but stopped when Taron stood. "Maybe I should just let the two of you hash this out alone."

"Oh no." Stefan reached up and grabbed his arm. With a scowl, he pointed to the chair Taron had just vacated. "Sit. This is all your fault to begin with."

Taron frowned. "Mine? Where the hell did you come up with that nonsense?"

Krista held up a hand and snapped, "Enough."

She almost laughed at the men's expressions. Both looked shocked to say the least. "Taron, sit down."

The corners of Taron's lips twitched as he took his seat. Stefan leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. His shirt was open down the front and she fought the desire to let her eyes roam over his muscles. She brought her gaze back to his eyes and noticed they were filled with laughter.

"Are we about to be put in our place?" Stefan asked with amusement.

"You are."

Taron chuckled but stopped when Stefan flashed him a glare. She watched the two of them and would have fought back laughter of her own if she hadn't been so mad. Stefan had a bad habit of babying her, and she'd had enough.

"At least Taron has the decency to treat me like an adult and not hide things from me. I'm in this just as deep as you are, remember?"

Stefan sighed. "You're right."

*Wow, that was easy. Too easy.* 

She eyed him with suspicion as he stood and walked to her side of the table. Squatting down on his heels, he put one hand on her knee, the other on the back of her chair. Some of her anger began to melt away as he rubbed her thigh with his thumb. Tingles spread along her skin, and she placed her hand over his to keep it still.

"Why don't I fix us all some breakfast and we can talk about this later?" He smiled up at her. "How's that?"

She crossed her arms in front of her. "I have an even better idea. How about we fix breakfast and continue discussing the assassin."

Taron choked trying to hold back a chuckle and Stefan glared at him. "I'm so glad you find this amusing."

"Come on, Stefan. She's right."

"Why are you having such a hard time with this?" She touched his hair and let a lock of it fall between her fingers.

"I just don't want you involved."

He stood and walked over to the replicator, keeping his back to her. She faced Taron and he nodded his head in Stefan's direction, a ghost of a smile tugging at his lips.

"Stefan?" She stood and walked over next to him. She touched his arm and felt the muscles tense beneath her fingers, but he didn't pull away. Instead he turned to her with eyes full of guilt and remorse.

"I don't want anything to happen to you because of me. If I hadn't brought you up to the rings of Metalon you would still be on Daego shopping and sightseeing."

She tugged at his shirtsleeve and grinned. "Shopping and sightseeing sounds rather boring after a few days here with you."

Stefan didn't rise to the bait. Instead he frowned slightly.

With a sigh, she continued. "We can play the 'what if' game all day. In the end it's still the same. I don't blame you, and you shouldn't blame yourself. I'm actually glad I came with you." A cocky grin spread across her face. "Besides, I can take care of myself, you know."

The corner of his mouth lifted in a grin. Some of the tension eased out of him and his arm relaxed. "Is that so?"

"Yep. Do I need to prove it?"

He chuckled and touched the side of her face with the back of his fingers. "No, kisary. You don't need to prove it."

His eyes softened and he tipped her chin up with his finger. She held her breath, anticipating his kiss as he dipped his head, but Taron's loud cough stopped them. "I hate to interrupt..."

"Then don't," Stefan growled.

"But I'm starving."

She listened to Stefan's halfhearted grumbles about Taron being a pain in the ass and laughed.

"Okay," she sat at the table and took a sip of her coffee, "So back to what we were discussing."

Stefan sat a plate of Tilarian finger foods on the table and everyone dug in. Krista loved the small sweet cakes that were similar to donuts.

"Any sign of Carlone on Daego?" Stefan asked.

"Sidious has people looking, but so far nothing. I'm beginning to wonder if maybe he just happened to run across you in space."

Krista swallowed her bite and cleared her throat. "Could he be in some sort of disguise and that's why no one is seeing him?"

"That's a very real possibility." Stefan sat back in his seat and tapped his finger on the side of the coffee cup. "The question is what kind of disguise is he using?" "What kinds are there?" She shrugged her shoulders.

"Unfortunately, numerous," Taron replied dryly. "But before we get off track, I received a transmission from Senator Woods yesterday. Several of the senators have decided to postpone their upcoming meetings for the time being, until this assassin can be caught."

Stefan nodded his head. "That's probably a good idea."

"They've decided not to postpone the upcoming vote, though."

"That doesn't make any sense. Why would they postpone meetings but not the vote?" Krista frowned.

Taron turned to her. "Meetings are expendable. They can always discuss what needs to be discussed later or conference through transmissions. They've been preparing for this vote for months. They weren't willing to put it off."

Her gaze went from one to the other. "When is the vote?"

"Three days," Stefan said.

She watched Stefan study his cup. What was he thinking? Did he want to attend the vote? More than likely he did. He hated being cooped up here. Even though he tried to make the best of things she could tell that he was fidgety and ready to finally have this problem at an end.

"What if you took me back to Daego? I should be safe enough at Sidious' estate. He isn't even after me, I was just in the way." She waved her hand toward Taron. "You said yourself you don't believe Carlone is there."

Stefan brow drew together in a frown. "What brought this on?"

"I just thought you might want to get back in the swing of things instead of being stuck here taking care of me."

"I like taking care of you."

The intensity in his eyes made her breath stop short. She averted her gaze and intently studied her cup.

"It's settled. We're staying," Stefan said.

Her head snapped up and she frowned. "It's not settled. Frankly, I'm tired of being cooped up here. I want to go back to Daego."

Taron coughed and raised an eyebrow at Stefan. "Go ahead and say it, Taron," Stefan sighed.

"I agree with Krista. I think she would be fine on Daego. I can put the *Vultair* in orbit cloaked and transport you straight to Sidious' study undetected. Maybe if we play our cards right, your going to Rhenari might just work in our favor."

"So you want to use me as bait?"

"What?" Krista snapped but neither man paid attention to her.

Taron nodded. "Your return might be the very thing that will lure him out. I think it's time we played this card. I'm tired of chasing the son of a bitch all over the galaxy."

"I agree." Stefan stood to get more coffee and Krista followed.

"Wait a minute."

Stefan turned to look at her and raised an eyebrow. "What is it, Kris?"

"When I suggested going back to Daego, I didn't think you would be putting a target on your back."

He glanced at Taron and he stood, setting his cup on the table. "I'll go prep the *Vultair* and get her ready for the trip."

Stefan nodded then turned back to Krista. He took her hand in his and kissed the backs of her fingers. Fear for him tightened her stomach but she refused to admit to herself the real reason she was scared.

"Everything will be fine."

She opened her mouth to argue but Stefan put his finger over her lips. "Trust me. You'll be fine with Sidious while Taron and I take care of this."

The question "what then" formed on the tip of her tongue, but she already knew the answer. She would return to Earth and Stefan to Rhenari. What they shared would be a fond memory and her life would return to normal, but she knew in her heart she would never love anyone like she loved him. She wasn't sure what hurt more—the thought of him being killed, or the thought of loving him but never being able to have him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stefan loaded the new runner onto the docking bay of the *Vultair* and they took off for Daego. Krista stood on the bridge and watched the stars shoot by like in the screen saver on her computer. She had no idea how fast they were going, but she was sure it was well beyond anything Earth was capable of.

She noticed Stefan approach in the reflection of the glass, the smile on his face making the corners of his eyes crinkle. As always, the sight made her heart beat faster. His arms gently wrapped around her and pulled her close. The warm heat from his chest seeped into her back, chasing away the slight chill of the bridge.

"You okay?" he asked. "You've been awfully quiet since we left the camp."

"I was just thinking how much I'm going to miss that cave."

"I'm going to miss what we shared at that cave. Now we'll be back in the middle of the usual Marcone three-ring circus. We'll have to get creative when it comes to privacy."

She had been thinking about that ever since they left the old rebel camp. It had been fun and absolutely incredible but maybe she should call an end to it. After all, they were back home now. The fantasy was over.

"Stefan," she began.

"If you're fixing to say what I think you are, I'm going to put you over my knee," he growled in her ear.

"You're going back to Rhenari in a few days and I'm going back home to Earth. Why prolong it? It was fun while it lasted."

"What?" He stepped back and ran a hand through his hair, then turned to Taron. "How long until we reach Daego?"

"About two hours. Why?"

"Can you handle it without me?"

Taron snorted. "Now that's a stupid question. It's my ship."

Stefan nodded and grabbed Krista's hand, pulling her behind him.

"Where are we going?"

"You and I are going to talk." He dragged her into the chute that would take them to the residential level.

"There's nothing to talk about," she said, her frustration rising quickly to the surface.

He turned to face her, his eyes ablaze with anger. "There is something to talk about and I'm not about to let you push it aside and ignore it."

The door opened and she followed him down the hall to his quarters. "I'm not ignoring it, I'm facing reality."

"Your perceived reality," he said as he stepped into his quarters.

She entered just after him and the door closed with a swoosh behind her. The elegant room drew her up short. Taking a second, she looked around. A huge window took up one wall, a massive bed sat against the other, a blue silk comforter draped over the top. It was a beautiful room, decorated with top-of-the-line furnishings and paintings. The scene only brought home the fact they didn't belong together.

"You're only forestalling the inevitable," she said with a sigh. "You know it as well as I do."

He stepped closer and glared down at her, his hands resting on his hips. "I know no such thing."

"Please don't make this any harder than it has to be. Mikayla is the only family that I have left."

He shook his head, his brow wrinkling with a look of confusion. "What does that have to do with us?"

"That has everything to do with us. If we make this hard, it'll be too difficult for me to ever come back. I don't want that to happen." With a shaking hand, she wiped away a tear as it slipped down her cheek. "You're a monarch for crying out loud!"

"And you're a commoner, is that it?"

"Exactly."

"That won't hold water with me and you know it." He took a step closer, his hand gently wiping away another tear. "My mother was a commoner, Mikayla is as well. You're making excuses, Krista."

"I'm trying to be realistic."

"This is realistic," he said as he dipped his head and lightly touched his lips to hers.

"You and I are real. What's between us is real."

His breath whispered across her lips like a soft breeze, and she swallowed the desire to feel his lips against hers again. She couldn't let him do this. Shaking her head, she opened her mouth to argue, but Stefan interrupted.

"I'm not willing to walk away from this and I'm not going to let you either." His mouth captured hers in a kiss that robbed her of speech and breath.

All she could do was melt against him and surrender to the passion raging between them. His arms slipped around her waist, pulling her tightly against him. Her aching breasts pressed into his chest and she moaned, trying to bring them closer.

Tongues mated with a fierceness that made her weak and hungry for more. Stefan's hands moved between them to the front of her shirt. He jerked it apart and she gasped as buttons broke free and hit the metal walls of the ship with pings.

"I'll buy you a new one," he whispered against her lips as he pushed the shirt down her arms.

He was making love to her in anger, trying to prove a point. She knew it but couldn't bring herself to stop him. Her body wanted this too much.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she groaned as his hands covered her breasts and squeezed. Slowly his kisses gentled, his touch becoming more tender, loving. This was the Stefan she knew, the Stefan she loved with all her heart.

He broke the kiss and laid his forehead against hers. The gentle touch of his hands against her cheeks sent tingling sensations to the pit of her stomach.

"I'm not letting you go," he whispered.

"Why?" Swallowing down a lump, she continued, "Why can't you just accept this is what I want?"

"If you can look me in the eye and tell me this is truly what you want I'll agree to let you go. Can you do that? Can you tell me you have no feelings for me at all?"

She shook her head as more tears slipped free. Of course she had feelings for him. She loved him. His lips kissed away her tears and that only made more fall.

"Don't cry, *kisary*," he sighed against her cheeks. "I never thought I would ever love anyone. Until you. Your stubborn, opinionated, sarcastic attitude stole my heart."

She smiled and sniffed, trying to keep the tears at bay. "I'm not stubborn."

"Not stubborn, my ass." A chuckle rumbled through his chest as he held her tight. "I love you so much, Kris. Commoner or not, you're the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. The woman I want to have my children."

She shook her head and looked up at him, her eyes pleading for him to understand. "I have no idea how to be a countess."

"I'll teach you." He kissed her forehead with a grin. "It's not that hard." Lifting her chin with his finger, he forced her to look at him. "Is that all that's bothering you?"

She took a deep breath before replying. "I'm afraid I'll disappoint you."

He shook his head, a tender smile spreading his lips. "Kris, you could never disappoint me. I have faith in you."

Relief tugged at her heart. Could they really make this work?

"I love you," he whispered just before his lips captured hers in a soul-stirring kiss. One full of promise and love.

Sliding her arms around his neck, she clung to him and kissed him back with everything she had in her. His lips left hers to nibble along her neck, sending goose bumps down her arms. The tip of his tongue touched her pulse point and she gasped. Heat spiraled down between her legs and she gripped his shirt in an effort to remain upright.

With deft hands, he removed his clothes as well as hers and turned her toward the bed. "Lie on your back."

She did as he demanded, then grinned devilishly. Spreading her legs, she locked her gaze with his and let her hand roam down her body. Her fingers pinched her nipples and his eyes darkened a shade. Moving lower still, her fingers settled between her legs, rubbing and circling her clit.

She could tell by his desire-filled expression he liked what she was doing. Moving closer, he grabbed her hand and brought her juice-coated fingers to his lips, licking off every last drop. The bed was so high his cock rested easily against her dripping pussy as he stood between her thighs. The head of his shaft teased her sensitive clit, gently rubbing against it.

She moaned and moved her hips in rhythm with his.

"Like that?" he asked, lifting her legs over his shoulders.

She nodded, her eyes closed tight against her oncoming orgasm.

"Do you want me to fuck you, Kris?"

Again, she nodded.

"Tell me how you feel."

Her eyes flew open. Slowly, he pushed the head of his cock into her tight channel before quickly withdrawing it and continuing his teasing massage. Trista Ann Michaels

"You know how I feel," she whispered.

"Then say it," he demanded, his shaft poised to enter her hungry flesh.

"I love you."

With a growl he penetrated so deep and hard she cried out in pleasure. With each thrust he took her higher, ever closer to that elusive height. Resting his hands by her shoulders, he leaned forward, pressing himself even deeper. His grinding hips against her swollen nub caused sensations to scream through her, making her body shake with the intensity of her release. Within a second Stefan tensed above her, his own growl drowning out hers.

With a shift of his arms he lowered her legs and laid his forehead against hers. His eyes closed as he tried to regain control of his breathing. Her hands feathered along his ribs and back, listening to the sound of their sighs mingling in the quiet room.

"You're mine, Kris."

She opened her eyes and caught his possessive gaze. The love she saw reflected in the depths of his gray eyes took her breath.

"I'll always be yours," she whispered.

"Don't ever forget it," he snarled playfully.

# **Chapter Eleven**

After dinner that evening on Daego, everyone decided to take desert and coffee on the veranda. It was an unusually cool night and the men decided there would probably be a storm moving through later. Storms on Daego were scary. They made Earth storms look like spring showers.

Krista walked out and placed the cake platter on the table in front of Mikayla. With a glance toward Stefan, sitting on the wicker sofa, she began to pour coffee into cups. He looked so gorgeous she couldn't stop staring at him.

Picking up the knife, Mikayla looked around at everyone. "Okay, who wants cake?"

"I'll take a piece if you come with it," Sidious said as he wiggled his eyebrows at her.

Pointing the end of her knife at him, she smiled slightly. "Behave yourself."

"Never," he growled as he leaned down and kissed the side of her neck.

Laughing, Mikayla tried to wiggle away from him.

"Excuse me," Stefan drawled, teasing the two of them. "But some of us are still waiting for our cake."

Sidious looked at his brother and scowled. "I've got your cake." He picked up a small piece and started to throw it at him.

"Sidious, don't you dare!" Mikayla hissed as she grabbed the cake from him. "You're not about to start a food fight on my veranda."

With a raised eyebrow, he looked at her. "Since when did it become yours and not ours?"

"The minute you tried to start trouble," she said, making Sidious chuckle.

Smiling, Krista grabbed her cake and coffee then sat down on the wicker sofa next to Stefan. She loved being around these people. Growing up it had only been her and her mother so all this family interaction was new to her.

She loved the way they were with each other. They could tease without becoming angry and could even argue. It was obvious they were all very close. But what she loved the most was just sitting around and listening to them talk amongst themselves.

As she ate her cake Stefan slipped his arm around the back of the sofa and slid his hand under her hair at the base of her head. With a featherlight touch he ran his fingers along the back of her neck. Goose bumps rose along her arms and she shivered.

"You should save some of that cake for later," he whispered as he ran his fingers down the side of her neck.

"Why?" she asked, trying to ignore the goose bumps that his fingers were leaving along her skin.

Leaning down, he softly whispered in her ear what he planned to do with the cake, then chuckled when she almost choked on her coffee.

"You can't be serious," she said, wiping the coffee from her lower lip. The heat of a blush moved up her cheeks as she visualized what he'd just said.

"Stefan, what in the world are you saying to her?" Kaylar asked, which only made Krista blush even more.

Damon jumped in, a teasing glint in his eyes. "Probably nothing that I haven't said to you at one time or another." Leaning over, he nibbled the ticklish spot behind Kaylar's ear, making her giggle.

"Take it upstairs," Sidious said dryly. Damon shot him a glare while everyone else laughed.

"I don't know, Sidious," Stefan said with a snicker. "At their age a trip up a flight of stairs may just do them in."

"Speak for yourself," Kaylar replied as she looked down her nose at her son.

### Star Crossed

"Don't encourage them, Stefan," Sidious said with amusement.

"Sounds more like a challenge to me," Damon said with a slight smile.

"Maybe I'm just trying to get rid of you," Stefan countered.

"Am I going to have to ring the bell and send the three of you back to your corners?" Mikayla asked as she walked to stand beside Sidious' chair. Reaching up, Sidious grabbed her hand and pulled her down onto his lap.

"It wouldn't be dessert and coffee without the three of them going at it," Kaylar said with a grin.

"We do not go at it." Stefan looked at Sidious, then the two of them began to chuckle. "We have spirited discussions."

Mikayla smiled and scooted down on Sidious' lap slightly so that she could lay her head against his shoulder.

"Tired, baby?" he asked, kissing her forehead.

"A little."

"It is getting late," Kaylar said as she looked at her watch.

"Come on, old woman." Damon stood and held his hand out to his wife. "Let's see if we can help each other up these stairs and into bed."

Krista smiled as she watched the two of them walk into the house. It was so wonderful to see two people that had been married as long as they had still love each other like they did.

"I think I'm about ready for bed, too," Mikayla said sleepily from her position on Sid's lap.

"Come on, sweetheart. Let's go." Sidious helped Mikayla to stand and they headed into the house.

"Good night, you two," Mikayla said.

"Good night," Stefan and Krista offered in unison.

"It's about damn time they left," Stefan grumbled with a slight smile and leaned down to nibble below her ear. Hearing the low rumble of thunder in the distance, they both looked up at the darkening sky.

"Do you suppose it will be a bad one?" Krista asked. She'd always hated storms, even as a child.

"Probably." Stefan grabbed her chin turning her to look at him. "But we'll be fine." He leaned down and softly brushed his lips across hers. "Matter of fact, I can just about guarantee you won't even hear it."

"Is that a fact? Awfully sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"I know my strengths," he replied with a smile as he gently kissed the corner of her mouth, sending little jolts of awareness through her veins.

"And to think, you don't believe you're arrogant."

Slipping his arm under her knees, he lifted them and turned her so he could place them crossways over him. She didn't think she would ever get used to the way he made her feel. She had thought once she made love to him some of the attraction would wear off, but instead it only seemed to have made it worse. Before, she could only image what being with him would be like. Now she knew, and that seemed to be all she could think about.

He was gentle and attentive, always seeming to know what she wanted even before she did. Breaking off a piece of cake, she waved it in front of his face before popping it into her mouth. He grinned as he watched her, his finger softly tracing her jawline.

"Want a piece?" she asked before placing another one on her tongue.

"I would love some." He leaned forward and captured her lips in a passionate kiss, expertly taking the cake she had just put in her mouth. Breaking the kiss, he smiled mischievously at her.

"I don't believe you just did that."

Chuckling, he broke off another piece of the cake. "It's the best way I know of to eat cake," he said just before he placed another piece in her mouth and once again kissed her.

She giggled and pulled away from him with a blush. He could do some of the wildest things sometimes. His deep gray eyes roamed over her face as though trying to memorize every line.

I must be out of my mind to even be considering this, she thought as he put his finger under her chin and brought her lips to his. But the second he kissed her, she forgot all about her misgivings and lost herself in his touch.

Framing her face with his hands, he continued to place one gentle kiss after another against her lips. Long, slow kisses that made her body melt and her heart race furiously. She had completely forgotten about the approaching storm until a clap of thunder sounded so loudly it shook the cup on the table next to them.

Just as they pulled away from each other rain poured down in heavy sheets, drenching them in seconds. Krista squealed and laughed. The two of them quickly jumped up and took off toward the house, trying to get away from the deluge. Once inside they shut the door against the increasing wind.

"God, that rain is so cold," Krista said as she hugged her arms around her.

Grabbing her, Stefan pulled her wet body against his. "I'll warm you up."

I have no doubt about that, she thought as she opened her lips beneath his. She already felt as though she were on fire inside. He put his hands at her waist and walked her backward. "Where are we going?"

"The den," he whispered against her lips.

Once in the den, he shut the door behind them and started a fire in the fireplace. Helping her to remove her wet clothes, he set them on the chair next to the fire to dry. Throwing a couple of pillows and a blanket on the floor, he took Krista's hand and pulled her to the floor with him.

There they spent the rest of the night making love by the warm glow of the flames. And Stefan had been right—she didn't hear the storm at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista opened her eyes and looked around the bedroom decorated in shades of blue and burgundy. When had they come back to Stefan's room? She smiled sleepily at the sight of Stefan lying next to her. He was on his side facing her, his eyes closed in sleep. She couldn't resist lightly touching his lips with the tips of her fingers. They were so full and always gentle. With a sigh, she realized they also had way too much power over her.

Their time together had been incredible. She was completely in love with him, and she knew in her heart she would never feel this way about anyone else. As she watched him sleep she thought about the night before, and that brought a smile to her face.

The man was certainly insatiable, but then so was she. All it took was a look or a touch and he would have her wiggling and pleading for him to take her, fuck her until she screamed. He knew every trick and position in the book.

"What's that smile for?"

His sleepy voice broke her from the naughty thoughts running through her mind, and she glanced up at him. "I was just thinking about last night."

He took her hand and placed it over his rigid cock. Heat traveled up her arm to settle in the pit of her stomach. He was so large and always felt so good. "Apparently, so was I."

Her fingers gripped him, roaming over his silken length. "I like how you do that," he moaned.

"I like how you kiss."

He grinned cockily. "Would you like another demonstration?"

"Most definitely."

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she welcomed the onslaught of his warm tongue against hers. He was so slow, so unhurried, so seductive. His lips moved to the side of her neck and the entire length of her body trembled in response.

"They're waiting on us downstairs. It's time for breakfast." Her words were a whisper as he softly bit the sensitive spot behind her ear.

"Breakfast can wait."

She grinned and pulled away from him with a teasing giggle, turning to scoot off the other side of the bed. "But I'm starving."

"So am I," he growled as he grabbed her around the waist, pulling her back against him. "But not for food."

His free hand moved up to cup her breast and she arched into his hand with a moan.

"What exactly are you hungry for, then?" she asked, a grin tugging at her lips.

"For you." His lips continued to nibble along her shoulder as his hand moved downward, closer to that spot that ached for his touch.

Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back against his chest. The feel of his palms along her skin made her body burn. It was always quick like this—instant passion that never failed to amaze her.

"But if you would rather go eat..." he trailed off, waiting for her answer.

Panting breaths escaped her lungs as his fingers sifted through the hair at the juncture of her thighs. Her hips shifted, trying to get him closer to the spot that now throbbed with wanting him. "Like you said, breakfast can wait."

He chuckled against her neck, then gently sucked on her pulse point. The beat of her heart fluttered in her chest and she sighed, turning her head to give him better access. Bringing her hand up, she fisted it in his hair. His musky scent surrounded her, enveloped her, and she inhaled deeply, bringing his essence inside her.

His hard shaft pressed into her hip and she moved against it. A growl from deep in his throat rumbled through his chest, vibrating against her back. She liked it when she teased him to the point he lost control, but this morning he didn't. He kept his control and drove her to the point of losing hers.

Teasing fingers shifted lower, toying with the wet opening to her sex. "I like it when you're like this," he whispered against her ear. "Hot and wet."

"Stefan," she sighed, moving her hip against his erection.

She tried to turn but he held her still, his fingers continuing to work their magic, teasing, delving. If he didn't do something soon, she would scream. She wanted him inside her, filling her.

Lifting her leg, he slid his shaft between her thighs, rubbing the tip against her opening. "Arch your back."

She did as he said then groaned as he slid himself into her. Her thigh rested over his as he continued to make love to her slowly, his lips kissing her neck, his hand messaging her breast. Placing her hand over his, she pressed his palm against her, encouraging him to squeeze harder.

Slowly his fingers slid lower, coming to rest over her swollen nub. Biting her lower lip, she tried not to scream, tried to let him lead her, carry her over that edge she clung to so precariously. In her ear she heard his whispered words, but they were in Tilarian. For the first time she cursed not learning that language. Even though she didn't understand him, his voice was so deep and seductive it still made her insides burn like molten fire.

Her blood pounded through her ears. Her tense body hummed with pleasure as his middle finger applied gentle pressure to her sensitive clit. Suddenly her whole body erupted into a mass of sensations as a scream tore from her throat. From behind her she heard Stefan's groan as his own body tensed and his hot semen emptied into her spasming channel.

"I don't think I could walk downstairs, even if my life depended on it," he sighed in her ear.

Krista giggled as she relaxed against him, his arms tightening around her stomach, pulling her closer. The erratic beat of his heart thumped against her back as her own slowed. Eventually the two beat in time and she snuggled closer.

His hand rested possessively over her lower stomach and she placed her hand over it. For the first time, the realization that they hadn't even once used protection hit her like a slap in the face. She could be pregnant. Where on Earth had her mind been? How could she have been so careless?

"What are those wheels in your head turning over?" he asked.

She wasn't sure she wanted to talk about this yet. How would he feel if he thought she might be pregnant? Or had he been trying to get her pregnant all along? "What makes you think they're turning over anything?"

"Your body tensed. Something upset you."

Was she that easy to read? "I was just thinking that everyone in the house probably heard that."

She felt as well as heard his chuckle. "We're on the third floor. I'm sure they didn't hear a thing." He rose on his elbow and tugged her to her back. Grasping her chin, he turned her so she had to look at him. "But I don't think that's really what you were thinking about."

Unable to tell him the truth, she lied. "I was thinking about your return to Rhenari. I'm concerned about you."

The corner of his lips lifted in a slight smile, the back of his fingers sent goose bumps down her spine as they brushed along her cheek. "I'm too stubborn to get rid of that easily."

"I hope you're right. I don't know what I would do if anything happened to you."

"I'll be fine." His hand rested possessively over her stomach.

She cupped his cheek with her hand. "Just please be careful and come home."

He turned and kissed her palm. "I will. I promise. I've decided after the vote tomorrow I'm going to make the announcement that I'm retiring."

"Retiring?" Krista said, staring up at him in surprise. He had never said anything about this before. "Why?"

"I thought when I first started this that I could handle the senate as well as the responsibilities as count, but I can't. Maybe I did at first but now it's just getting to be too much. Dad has helped some, picking up the slack with Tilarus, but he wants to retire, that's why he went ahead and passed the title to me. I can't keep asking him to help. Besides, I want to settle down, marry and have children. Our children," he said as he rubbed his hand back and forth over her stomach. "I can't do it all. Something has to go and I think this is the best thing."

"Who will take your place?"

"Probably Count Britton. He has a lot of political experience behind him. I think he would make a good senator." He softly bit the tip of her finger and grinned. "Think you could tolerate me being around more often?"

"I don't know." She winced and blew out a long breath. "That's asking a lot, but I think I could handle it."

"Minx," he growled and quickly found her most ticklish spots.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So what did the two of you find out?" Damon asked as the men gathered in Sidious' study later that morning.

"Not a lot," Taron replied with a sigh. "We know that Carlone was on Shevalli not long after the destruction of the prime minister's ship. Unfortunately, anything that might have been useful was destroyed in the explosion."

"So where do we go from here?" Sidious asked, mostly to himself.

Stefan heard Taron call his name but he didn't reply. He sat on the corner of the desk watching the women and Hayden play in the yard just beyond the veranda. Krista's laughter floated across the distance and wrapped around his heart. He wanted to shout his love for her. Scream at the top of his lungs from the highest rooftop that she was the only woman for him. His soul mate.

"He's got it bad," Damon said with a chuckle.

"What?" Stefan frowned at everyone's laughter. "I hope you all are enjoying whatever joke I seem to be the butt of."

"Sorry, Stefan," Taron said as he chuckled. "You just seem to be a little distracted today."

"I heard you," he said, looking back out the window. "You said you didn't find anything on Shevalli. I already knew that."

"Any suggestions as to where we should go from here?" Taron asked as he took a seat in one of the chairs next to the fireplace.

Stefan turned to Taron. "I want you to make one more run to Veenori and talk with Devlin. See if he's found anything else out. We'll meet back here tomorrow and head back to Rhenari."

Taron nodded.

"Excuse me? Did I just hear you say you were headed back to Rhenari?" Damon demanded.

"I have to go back for the senate vote."

"The hell you do!" Damon's voice thundered through the room.

"Don't start with me, damn it, I'm not a child."

"No. What you are is daft."

"Should we run for the hills?" Taron mumbled to Sidious.

"No," Sidious said. "If it gets out of hand, you take Stefan, I'll take Dad."

## Trista Ann Michaels

"That's not funny!" Damon roared toward the two of them. "The two of you can't seriously be supporting this nonsense."

"Using Stefan as bait is not my first choice, but it's the best idea we've got. The galaxy's too big, Dad, he could stay hidden forever. We've got to get this guy."

"Bait?"

Stefan rolled his eyes. He'd thought Damon would have figured out that's what they were doing, but apparently not. "You didn't think I was going just for the vote, did you?"

Damon paced, Tilarian curses spewing from his mouth. "I'm against this."

"I kind of figured that," Stefan grumbled.

"Stefan," Sidious cautioned, shaking his head.

Turning, Damon pointed his finger at Sidious and Taron. "I'm holding the two of you responsible."

"Don't worry," Sidious snorted. "I have no desire to take over his title of count."

"I think I would almost prefer that to trailing him all over the galaxy," Taron snickered, trying to bring some humor back into the room. Three angry Marcone men were not something he liked being in the middle of.

"Well, Taron," Damon said with a grin that made Taron cringe. "As my *adopted* son who's older than Sidious, that makes you next in line."

"Ah, hell."

Stefan and Sidious laughed.

# **Chapter Twelve**

Taron stepped into Devlin's office on the top floor of the Veenori bar, Mirage. To his right, a one-way glass window looked out over the crowded bar area. Scantily clad women sauntered through the throng of men offering drinks or other, more personal wares.

Devlin sat behind his desk, a set of nude identical twins on either side of him. His black hair hung around his shoulders in unruly waves, his sapphire eyes shining bright with intelligence. They never missed a thing, no matter where he was or what he was doing. Devlin had uncanny reflexes—quick, and when necessary, deadly.

His broad frame, even in the chair, dwarfed the twins, one of whom had her hand in Devlin's shirt. The other nibbled along his neck. Taron cleared his throat. All three pairs of eyes turned in his direction. The women's twinkled in interest, Devlin's sparked amusement.

Taron grinned. "Ladies," he drawled. "May I have a moment alone with Devlin?"

The one on Devlin's left pouted and moved forward. With a wave of her hand she brushed her thick, flame-red hair back and he noticed the tattooing on her chest.

A Beganite?

One Beganite woman was quite a catch. Their powers in the bedroom were unmatched by any other female species, but to have twins was almost unheard of. The two of them together could probably paralyze a man.

Her gold eyes raked over him and she licked her full, sensuous lips, running her hand down to his cock. "My," she purred, "it feels very nice."

"It is nice, sweetheart."

"Would you like to join us?" Her twin came forward as well, her lips nipping at his ear. "We've always wanted two men at once."

"Something tells me the two of you have already done that, more than once." He stepped back from them, trying not to breathe their essence in too deeply. It was their scent that sent men into an immediate state of undeniable arousal. "I appreciate the offer, ladies. But Devlin and I need to talk."

"That's a shame," she pouted, giving his straining bulge one last squeeze. "He seemed so ready for the task."

She sauntered out of the room, her firm ass swaying in invitation.

"Damn," Taron murmured.

The other one left as well, her hand lingering on his backside as she walked by. Taron turned back to Devlin. "Where the hell did you get twins?"

"I won them," he answered with a grin.

"You weren't by any chance trying them out when I walked in?"

"You don't think I would unleash them on my customers without experiencing them firsthand, do you?"

"Of course not, lucky ass."

Devlin chuckled. "Whenever you want to try them out, they're yours for free."

Taron raised an eyebrow in amusement, stepping further into the room. "That's very generous of you."

Devlin shrugged. "I owe you one or two, if I recall."

Taron took a seat across from him. The huge mahogany desk took up most of the room, leaving little space for other pieces of furniture.

"Please tell me you have something," Taron said, suddenly all business.

Devlin nodded. "Yes and no. The *Negash* was docked here and a man was seen asking a lot of questions about it. He wanted to know who flew it in."

"It wasn't Stefan. He ditched the ship a while ago."

"The mechanic found a long-range tracer on it. I'm assuming that's how Carlone was able to track it here."

"You know for certain it was Carlone?"

"No. But my gut tells me it is. We searched through the docking bay security film until the mechanic recognized him." He tossed a picture toward Taron. "That's what he looks like."

Taron frowned down at the image. The body size was right, but it was the wrong face. Was Carlone working with someone?

"My guess is," Devlin folded his hands beneath his chin, "if it's Carlone. He's wearing a new skin mask."

*Damn*. "Hopefully, he only has the one."

"I'll get this, as well as the other image of him, out to all the planets and stations. Surely someone will recognize him."

"I hope you're right," Taron sighed. "At least with his face plastered everywhere he won't be as free to roam the galaxy as he was."

"There's a little more."

Taron raised an eyebrow in interest.

"He left here this morning in a ship."

"Any idea where he was headed?" Taron asked.

"Carlone, if that's who it is, covers his tracks well. The security cameras picked up no markings on the ship of any kind, nor was there any information given to the hangar crew prior to his leaving. The only thing we can determine is that the ship was of Litarian design."

Taron sighed and tossed the picture back onto the desk. "So basically we know he left here but we have no idea what he left here in or where he was headed."

Devlin sat back in the chair behind his desk and folded his hands in front of him before replying. "Apparently when he landed he didn't leave any instructions for the ship so the hangar crew pretty much ignored it. Unfortunately that's what the people here pay them to do, ignore things. "

Taron nodded. "If it's Litarian, that would mean it's fast."

"Yes," Devlin replied. "And more than likely also means it has cloaking capabilities."

Looking up at the ceiling, Taron replied, "Is there anything that's going to go right with this investigation?"

Devlin smiled slightly. "Do you really want an answer to that?"

"The only answer that I want to hear is yes. If you can't tell me that, don't tell me anything."

Devlin leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. "I can't tell you yes, but I think I can do one better."

"What?" Taron asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Did you know that the Litarian cloak, when used on such a small vessel, puts out a large amount of gamma radiation?"

"No, I didn't know that," Taron replied with interest.

Devlin turned his laptop around so that Taron could see it. "As soon as we found out he left and what he left in, I scanned the area surrounding the planet and came up with a gamma trail."

Taron smiled and said. "Dev, man you're a genius. Can we follow the trail to where he is?"

"No, unfortunately it disappears quickly. But I can tell you that he's headed in the general direction of Rhenari."

"And so is Stefan." Taron grinned. "Perfect. Maybe now's our chance to catch the son of a bitch."

\* \* \* \* \*

Stefan took a moment to look around his office, trying to decide what he wanted to take and what he didn't. He had decided to keep the apartment, for he was sure he would be back here periodically. And everyone else in the family could use it as well, whenever they chose to.

For a moment sadness enveloped him, for this is where he had spent the majority of the last two years. Running his fingers along the top of the desk, he moved to stand behind it. He smiled. Fondly he remembered all the times he had fallen asleep in his chair while trying to work, only to be awakened by Taron yelling at him for working himself into a stupor.

All that was going to change. He had a reason to be home more. Krista. He was definitely looking forward to becoming an old married man like his brother. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled a ring out and smiled. The bright office lights made the lavender stone sparkle with blue flecks. The center stone was round, with one ring of white diamonds circling around it.

The color reminded him of the wedding and the lavender punch she dumped on his head. It was the first time he'd kissed her and, he was certain, the very minute he fell in love with her.

With a sigh, he put the ring back in his pocket. He would present it to her later, when he returned. Sitting in the chair, he leaned down and began pulling files from the bottom drawer. If he was going to get this done he might as well get started. He piled them on the desk and began to go through them one by one.

Taron strolled in and took the seat across from him. His usual spot. His shoulders slumped and Stefan glanced at him, his brows creasing in worry. "Nothing?"

"Not a damn thing."

"Word is spreading fast that I've resigned. I've already had five senators come in here and say their goodbyes." He sighed and dropped a file into an empty box. "I have a bad feeling, Taron."

Taron frowned. "About?"

"I don't know. But something has been gnawing at my gut all morning."

Taron nodded. "Finish getting your stuff together. We'll head back to Deago shortly. I'm beginning to think like you. We're wasting our time here."

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista strolled through downtown Deago, her mind not really on the window-shopping. It was focused more on Stefan and her love for him. Could she do this, be a countess? Would she disappoint him? Would she hate it?

She'd never been one for social gatherings and public appearances. She was a homebody. She liked watching movies and working in a garden. All afternoon she'd watched Kaylar. Stefan's mother was graceful, gracious. Everything Krista thought a royal should be. And everything she wasn't.

With a sigh, she sat on the edge of the center fountain. She loved Stefan so much. He had quickly become her whole life. Reaching down, she twirled her fingers in the water, watching the ripples move along the surface. She knew she shouldn't have done this. Falling in love with him had been such a huge mistake, but how could she now go on without him?

He was so good to her and so good for her. He made her more confident, brought out a side of her she didn't even know existed—especially in the bedroom. She'd never dreamed she could be so wild, so uninhibited. And it was all due to him.

"Ms. Sinclair?"

Krista looked up at the man standing above her, shielding her eyes from the midday sun. He wore a hat, the brim putting his face in shadow. A shiver ran down her spine as she stared at him.

"Yes?"

"I'm Vorhala. A friend of Stefan's."

"It's nice to meet you." She stood and tried to get a better look at the gentleman, but he shifted, keeping his face within the shadow of the brim. "Can I help you?"

"Actually, yes."

"How so?"

"I would like to show you something." He held his hand palm up. "Would you come with me?"

Krista hesitated. She didn't know who this man was or why he wanted her to go with him. Something wasn't quite right but she didn't know what. She'd left the house without telling anyone where she was going, only a note saying she needed time alone to think. Now she realized the folly of her actions. She hadn't believed the assassin would want her, but now she began to rethink the idea.

"I don't think that would be a good idea. I told my friend I would be right back and she's expecting me. Maybe another—"

Something hard poked her in the ribs and she glanced down. A gun? *Oh my God,* what have I done?

"You will come with me. Now."

Her heart raced like a runaway train. What the hell was she going to do and who was this man? "What if I don't? Are you going to shoot me right here?"

"Yes," he sneered, "I will. Make no mistake."

"Who are you?"

He pushed her along using the tip of the gun. "Let's just say you and I have a mutual acquaintance."

"Stefan?" He grunted and she licked her lips, thinking fast and hard for a way out of her situation. "Taking me won't help you find him."

"If I take you, I won't need to find him. He'll come to me."

Krista closed her eyes against the scream that wanted to rip from her chest. *Stefan, I'm so sorry*. Taking a deep breath for courage, she slung her purse as hard as she could, smacking him on the side of the head. While he was distracted, she took off down the

street as fast as she could, refusing to even take the time to look over her shoulder to see where he was.

She should have. A hard yank to her hair brought her to an abrupt stop. She yelped, grabbing at the hand that held her and pulled her into an alleyway.

The man growled in her ear. "Stupid bitch. I can take you alive, or I can take you in pieces. It doesn't matter to me."

She cringed at the evil and anger in his voice. "You're making a mistake," she snapped. "He has no reason to come for me."

"I think otherwise," he snarled and slung her against the stucco wall of the building.

Her head cracked against the wall and pain shot through her neck. Her vision blurred and she slowly slid to the hard stone of the alley. Why isn't anyone helping me? she wondered as darkness closed in around her.

# **Chapter Thirteen**

Stefan transported into his brother's den from the *Vultair*, anxious to see Krista. Nothing had gone right today. The assassin hadn't made the move they thought he would. Stefan was still in the dark and still a target. Where the hell to go now was a mystery. He was tired of hitting that damn brick wall.

Glancing around, he noticed the pensive frown on Mikayla's face. She bit at her nails and Stefan immediately went on edge. Mikayla never bit her nails. Turning his stare toward Sidious, his anxiety worsened at his brother's worried expression. Sidious wouldn't even look him in the eye.

After further study of the room he noticed his mother and father, both standing by the fireplace. His mother stepped forward and placed her hand on his arm in support. "Stefan, sweetheart, you should sit down."

"Why?" he demanded. His gaze whipped around the room again, immediately noticing the absence of Krista. "Where's Krista?"

His heart slammed in his chest. He knew now why they were all here. Why Mikayla was biting her nails.

"Carlone has her." Sidious stared at his desk, a muscle in his cheek working furiously. "We just heard from him."

"What?" Regret and anger slammed through him with a force he couldn't control, and he lunged for his brother. Sidious didn't budge, but Damon and Taron stepped forward, each grabbing an arm. "You son of a bitch! You were supposed to be watching her. You promised me she would be protected!"

Sidious appeared crestfallen. Guilt contorted his face. "Stefan I'm sorry..."

Mikayla stepped forward, coming between him and his brother, the man he most wanted to strangle right now with his bare hands. He strained against the two men who held him fast. "Calm down, Stefan," Damon snapped. "This isn't going to help matters."

"Stefan, listen." Mikayla placed her hands against his chest, her eyes pleading. "She left the house without telling anyone. She didn't believe she was in danger. She just wanted time to herself. To think. I found the note right before we heard from Carlone."

Stefan sighed. "I'm fine. Let me go."

Both men released their holds, but reluctantly. As soon as he was free, Stefan stepped forward and punched Sidious hard in the face. His head snapped to the left, but he remained upright.

"Damn it, Stefan," Damon yelled.

Sidious raised a hand, silencing him. "Let it go." His eyes bored into him, and Stefan waited for the retaliation but none came. "I deserved it, but hit me again and I will hit you back."

"Fair enough," Stefan snarled, his hands fisting at his sides. God, he wanted to hit him again, but he knew a brawl wouldn't do anything to get Krista back.

"All right, that's enough." Taron stepped between the two of them, a hand on each chest holding them back. "This won't solve anything and you know it. Did Carlone say anything other than that he had her?"

Sidious shook his head, sadness in his eyes. "No. He also didn't keep the channel open long enough for us to trace it."

"Son of a bitch." Stefan raked a hand through his hair and walked to the window. "So we're just supposed to sit here and do nothing?"

"He said he would be back in contact with us."

Stefan shook his head, tears burning the back of his eyes. The thought of losing Krista was more than he could bear. He'd never loved anyone in his life like he did her. "I can't just sit here and wait."

"What are you going to do, Stefan?" His mother came up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder, the other on his biceps. "Run around the galaxy blind? You have no idea where to even start."

"I have to do something."

"I know, sweetheart, but please think this through. Don't do anything stupid. I know you love her, and she loves you. The two of you are meant to be and we'll find her. I promise, we'll find her."

Stefan placed his hand over his mother's and squeezed. He hoped she was right. Going on without Krista was not something he wanted to contemplate.

\* \* \* \* \*

Devlin stood at the window in his office, looking out over the floor of his bar. He'd had the window especially made so that he could see what was happening on the floor without anyone knowing it was there. He felt more in control of things when he could see what was happening.

Since losing Skylar, he'd made sure he knew everything that was going on around him. He refused to be caught unaware again. With a sigh, he thought about the beautiful woman he'd loved so much. She hadn't deserved what happened to her and if it hadn't been for Taron he'd have died right along with her. Sometimes he wished he had.

With a shake of his head, he brushed his thoughts aside. There was a time and place for thoughts of his beloved Sky. He still dreamed of her every night, still relived her death and his inability to save her. But right now he needed to focus. Taron and Stefan needed him and he wouldn't let them down.

As he watched the floor, he noticed a man come in and take a seat at the bar. There was something about him that looked familiar. When the man turned toward the hidden window Devlin noticed the scarring on the side of his neck and face. Burn scars.

Narrowing his eyes, it dawned on him who he was. That was the man that Taron was looking for.

Turning away from the window, he walked over to his desk and opened a communications channel to Deago.

It didn't take Taron long to answer. "Hey Dev. What's up?"

"The man that you've been looking for is here," Devlin replied, getting right to the point.

"Carlone is there?"

"He's sitting at my bar as we speak. Do you want me to hold him here?"

"No," Taron said quickly. "He has Stefan's girlfriend. I need to know where he goes from there."

Devlin nodded. "I'll stay on him when he leaves here. Call me on the secure com when you arrive."

"Will do."

Closing the channel, Devlin left the office and went downstairs. He wanted to be able to stay as close to this man as he could. Silently, he held his hand up, telling his bouncers not to approach him. He took a seat in the corner of the room, keeping his eyes on Carlone. When Carlone left the bar, Devlin wouldn't be far behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carlone sat at the bar waiting for the bartender to get his order. He'd ordered four bottles of Veenori Keenar, a drink similar to Earth whiskey, only a lot more potent. He had dropped the woman off at the shack he had in the foothills of the mountains to the north of the city. Locking her in one of the back rooms, he made certain that she couldn't get away.

She still hadn't come to before he left. That was fine. He wasn't in any hurry. Stefan had no idea where he was and he planned on taking his sweet time before telling him. Maybe even have a little fun with his woman before he arrived. That thought made him

smile. It had been along time since he'd had a good fuck and the beautiful blonde was exactly what the doctor ordered.

Carlone had every intention of making that son of a bitch senator pay for what he had done. Stefan had taken everything away from him. Now he would take everything away from Stefan, starting with the woman.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mikayla stood on the veranda staring out toward the lake, her arms wrapped around her stomach. Sidious hated seeing her like that. He knew she was worried about her friend and he'd have given anything to help her.

Walking up behind her, he slid his arms around her waist, pulling her against him. He placed a kiss on the top of her head and inhaled her jasmine scent. Sidious could well imagine what Stefan was going through. If he loved Krista anywhere near as much as he loved Mikayla, his brother would be dying inside.

Mikayla leaned into him and he tightened his hold. "How's Stefan holding up?" she asked.

"As well as can be expected."

"What do you think the chances are that she's still alive?"

Sidious sighed. He wouldn't lie to her. "I don't know. I can only hope Carlone hasn't done anything to her yet."

Her lips began to tremble. He turned her to face him and wiped a tear from her cheek. "I'll do everything I can, baby. I promise."

She nodded. "I know."

"Sidious, let's go."

Sidious turned to see Taron and Stefan in the doorway. "Go where?"

"We just heard from Devlin." Stefan checked the charge on his gun and placed it in the back of his pants. "Carlone is on Veenori." "Any sign of Krista?" Mikayla asked.

Taron shook his head. "No. He just saw Carlone, but he's going to tail him and we're meeting him two miles west of the Veenori mines. It should be far enough outside the city to not attract attention."

Damon came outside as well, a weapon in his hands. All three men frowned. "Where do you think you're going?" Sidious demanded.

"With you."

Sidious stepped forward and shook his head. "No."

"Excuse me?"

"Someone needs to stay here."

"He's right, Dad," Stefan agreed.

"So leave the old man behind, is that it?" Damon snapped.

Taron snorted. "That's not it and you know it."

"Dad, please. We need to think of the women. The three of us can handle this. Four if you count Devlin."

Damon relented with a sigh. "You're right." His troubled gaze met Sidious'. "If he has any brains at all, he'll be prepared for you."

Sidious nodded in agreement. "I know."

Damon stepped closer, lowering his voice. "Watch out for your brother. He's not thinking clearly."

Sidious placed his hand on his father's shoulder. Damon had always counted on him and Taron to watch out for Stefan. Despite the fact Stefan was the oldest, he was also the one out of all of them that would run off half-cocked and do something without thinking it through. "I'll take care of him."

Turning to Mikayla, Sidious took her hand in his. She didn't beg him not to go, just squeezed his fingers and smiled her support. "Please be careful."

He grinned. "I'm always careful."

Leaning down, he placed a soft kiss on her lips. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you."

With one final kiss to her forehead, he nodded to Taron and the three transported to the *Vultair*.

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista felt the pounding in her head before anything else. Raising her hands, she realized immediately that they were tied together. What in the world, she thought as she slowly opened her eyes and looked at her bound hands. Then, in a flash, it all came back to her.

The scared man that came to her on Deago, the threat against Stefan and then being dragged in the alley and thrown against the wall. After that she didn't remember anything.

Sitting up on the bed, she looked around the small room. There was no window, only a single door and a bed. The walls were made out of rough wood, like an old country cabin would be. The floors were rough wood as well, with no carpet or rug to soften them.

Walking over to the door, she wiggled the handle and then let out a sigh when she realized it was locked. She should have known whoever took her wouldn't be stupid enough to leave the door open.

"Hello?" She beat against the door with her bound fists. "Let me out!"

When no one answered she leaned her forehead against the rough wood. "Is anyone out there?" Still no one answered.

She stood still and listened for any movement from the other side. Unfortunately she didn't hear a thing. Only the sound of her own heartbeat.

Making her way back to the bed, she placed her head in her hands. It still hurt terribly, and she squeezed her eyes closed to try and ease off the throbbing. She was terrified. Not just for herself but for Stefan as well. Please don't let Stefan do something stupid.

Silently she waited for the man who had kidnapped her to make an appearance.

\* \* \* \* \*

Taron, Sidious and Stefan arrived on Veenori to meet with Devlin. They parked the small runabout ship they flew to the surface at the exact coordinates Devlin had given them.

After about thirty minutes, Stefan couldn't take the confinement of the ship anymore and decided to go outside to get some fresh air. As he paced back and forth along the length of the ship he kept an eye on the desert horizon for any sign of Devlin.

The heat on this planet was unbearable. The wind blew dry sand in his face and he swiped at it in aggravation. He certainly wasn't a patient man and the waiting was driving him nuts, as well as making him extremely short-tempered. He tried everything to keep from thinking about what might be happening to Krista. And he refused to even consider that she might already be dead.

If she were, he'd kill Carlone. There wouldn't be a planet anywhere he could hide. He'd find him and make him suffer the worst death imaginable. Raising his head, he noticed a speeder approaching in the distance. Looking through the binoculars he held in his hand, he verified it was who he thought it was. Devlin. He hit the side of the ship to alert the others and impatiently waited for the approaching speeder to come to a stop.

"Do you know where he is?" Stefan asked as soon as Devlin turned off the motor. The two others had gathered around as well, having come outside when they heard Stefan's knock.

"Stefan, listen to me. You have to relax."

"I can't relax, Devlin," Stefan replied angrily. "We have to get her back."

"We will get her back, but don't jump the gun and make the same mistake I did. Trust me on this."

With a sigh, Stefan relented. "You're right." He ran his hand through his hair, brushing it away from his face. He had forgotten until just then about Skylar. She had been the love of Devlin's life and for years Dev blamed himself for her death. He always said if he had thought things through better and not acted out of anger she might still be here.

Devlin turned to Taron. "He's in a small, run-down cabin to the north of the city, not far from the mines. I set a monitoring transmitter so we'll know if he leaves it."

"Did you see a woman with him?" Stefan asked.

"I haven't actually seen her, but I was able to get close enough to scan the cabin and there is a female inside. It could be her."

It has to be, Stefan thought trying desperately to keep his composure.

"How does the area surrounding the cabin look, Dev?" Sidious asked.

"It's in the center of a clearing. Sneaking up on him is out of the question."

"What about the body cloak I fixed for Sidious during the rebellion?" Taron asked, getting everyone's attention. "I still have the one that Sidious used when he set the bombs on board the *Destroyer*. I could replicate them and have everyone fitted in less than two hours. There are side effects, though, that kick in after about thirty minutes. But we'll be invisible to Carlone."

Devlin shrugged as he stood from the speeder. "I'll try most anything once."

"Stefan?" Sidious asked, looking at his brother.

"I'll do whatever it takes to get Krista back. You know that," he replied as he stared intently at his brother.

"All right. Let's get back to the *Vultair* and get this started. We'll work out the details while we're waiting on Taron."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kaylar stood at the side of Hayden's bed, watching him sleep. Fondly, she remembered her own sons when they were that age. Hayden looked so much like his

father but even at his young age they could already tell he had his mother's temperament.

Damon walked in and put his hands on his wife's shoulders. "Everything is going to be fine, Kaylar."

"The boys are good at what they do, I know," she sighed. "But I still can't help but worry about them. Any number of things can happen."

"I know," he said as he kissed the top of her head.

Kaylar turned to face her husband. "How's Mikayla holding up?"

"She's okay. Right now she's trying to take her mind off things by working in the garden. She said she and Krista were talking about planting more flowers down by the pool, so she went there to see if she could get started."

"She's not alone, is she?"

"No, Kain went with her to help with the digging and the heavy lifting. Why don't you go down and help her as well? I'll keep an eye on the boy. Being outside might help to take your mind off things."

"You're probably right." Turning, she smiled slightly in thank you and gave him a quick kiss before leaving to head to the pool.

\* \* \* \* \*

Transporting down just inside the line of trees that surrounded the cabin a good fifty feet away, the men talked quietly amongst themselves.

"There's only one way into the cabin," Devlin said as they studied the scanner.

"That means there's also only one way out," Taron added.

"Well, only one way that we know of," Stefan said.

Sidious nodded. "You have a point. Maybe a couple of us should stay outside and make sure we don't see him exit the cabin some other way."

Devlin took his gun out of its holster and checked the ammunition. "Taron and I will stay outside, one on either side, while you two go inside."

"Speaking of going inside, how are we doing this? Are we remaining cloaked or are we just barging in?" Sidious asked.

"We should probably go in cloaked and try to position ourselves to our best advantage before we turn these things off," Stefan said. "I want to do whatever would be best for Kris. If we barge in we might inadvertently put her in danger."

Sidious raised an eyebrow. "Glad to see you're a little calmer and thinking like yourself again."

"Yeah well, can't guarantee I'll stay that way."

"All right, let's get this over with." Taron raised his wrist to hit the control button.

"Wait." Devlin put his hand up and stopped him. "How are we going to keep from running into each other?"

Taron smiled. "Push the button and you'll see."

All of them pushed their buttons at the same time and looked at each other. A red glow outlined their bodies, making them visible to each other.

"Interesting," Devlin said with a slight smile.

"I took a few minutes and interconnected them so that we are all on the same wavelength. They do this whenever they cloak multiple ships so they can see each other when they're cloaked," Taron explained. "We also have a phase shift attached. With that we should be able to walk straight through the door as opposed to opening it."

Stefan put his hand on Taron's shoulder and propelled him forward. "We've got thirty minutes before the side effects kick in. How about we get going?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista sat silently at the table, watching the man sitting across from her eat his dinner. He had set a plate of food in front of her as well but she was afraid to eat it for fear he'd drugged it somehow. "Why am I here?"

"I told you why you are here," he replied as he stared angrily at her.

"What do you want with Stefan?"

"That's none of your concern," he replied nastily.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I think it is."

He caught her by surprise when he reached across the table and slapped her hard. Her head snapped to the side and lightning flashed behind her eyes. The sting took her breath and she blinked rapidly, trying to stay conscious. She refused to show fear and stared at him angrily.

"You'll watch your tone with me," he said as he sat back down in his chair.

"If you're going to kill me I think I deserve to know why," she snapped.

"This is why!" he snapped angrily as he pointed to the scars on the side of this face.

"I was a prominent general. I was Rigora's right-hand man. I could have had anything I wanted but Stefan took all of that away."

"How did he take that away?" she asked. He wasn't making any sense to her. *He's insane*.

"Stefan was in charge of the rebels. Stefan is the one that organized them, the one that led them, the one that is solely responsible for these," he said, pointing to the scars again. "I got these trying to escape from the ship that Stefan blew up."

Looking at him strangely she started, "There were -"

"Shut up!" he shouted and once again slapped her.

She bit her lip, trying not to cry out. Blood filled her mouth and she gagged. He grabbed her chin and turned her face toward his. Krista winced and tried to ignore the pain his grip caused.

"Stefan will come looking for you and when he does I'll catch him and then force him to watch as I do to you what he did to me." With a nasty smile he added, "Then I'll kill both of you."

Letting go of her chin, he sat back down in the chair and continued eating. She knew she should keep her mouth shut and not antagonize him, but for some reason she couldn't resist. "What makes you think that he won't kill you?"

He jumped from his chair and make a lunge for Krista. She screamed as he grabbed her and pinned her against the wall with his hand at her throat. Her feet dangled several inches off the floor. She was terrified but looked him dead in the eyes, refusing to show any more fear. She would not give him that satisfaction.

Her feet kicked against the wall as she fought the blackness that threatened to consume her. *Oh God, he's not going to wait, he's going to kill me now.* 

Slowly unconsciousness overtook her, and she slid silently to the floor.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Stefan heard Krista scream and his chest tightened in fear. He stepped through the front door of the cabin, his heart in this throat. Where was she? Immediately, Sidious' hand was on his shoulder, holding him back, reminding him to stay calm—to find her before he flew off the handle.

His brother was right and he was thankful he was there. Glancing around the room, he found her lying on the floor against the wall. Bile crept up his throat as he rushed to her side, silently praying she was still alive. Placing his hand on her throat, he found her pulse and breathed a sigh of relief.

Anger immediately took its place. Her lip was bleeding and swollen, her eyes already turning black, a sure sign Carlone had hit her.

I'll kill him.

Standing, he glanced around the small room, spotting the swine in a chair, eating his dinner as though nothing had happened. His brother was closer but damn it, he wanted Carlone. He wanted to wrap his hands around his throat and strangle the very life from him.

Raising his wrist, he ignored his brother's warning and turned off the cloak. Carlone's eyes locked with his and widened before quickly he reached for his gun on the counter. Stefan was too quick for him.

"You son of a bitch!" Stefan roared.

He lunged for Carlone and smashed his jaw with his fist, feeling it shatter beneath his knuckles. When Carlone fell to the floor Stefan sat on him and continued to pummel him, over and over. He had never been so angry or had such a desire to kill someone as he did at that moment.

"Stefan that's enough," his brother yelled, but he ignored him and continued to beat Carlone senseless, unable to control the rage that held him in its grip.

"I said that's enough, damn it."

Sidious grabbed him by the shirt collar and pulled him off Carlone. Stefan tried to catch his breath and go back after him, the need to kill him rushing through his blood. "Stefan, stop."

Sidious jerked him around to face Krista. She sat against the wall, trying to wipe the blood from her lips. She looked exhausted and frightened. Her lower lip trembled and his gut clenched. "Go to her. Let me handle Carlone."

Stefan nodded and made his way toward her. She stood and launched herself into his arms, holding tightly around his neck. "Oh, God. You're okay," she whispered. "I love you so much. I'm so sorry I didn't listen to you and stay at the house."

He held her close, never wanting to let her go. "It's okay. It's okay. It's over. I'll never let you out of my sight again." Framing her face in his hands, he studied her. "Are you all right? He didn't..."

She quickly shook her head. "No. He didn't touch me, other than to smack me. But that was my fault. I should have kept my mouth shut."

He gave her a slight shake. "It was not your fault. Don't ever think that."

She nodded, swallowing down a lump. Now that it was all over she felt an overwhelming desire to cry. She was so relieved that he was okay and the assassin wouldn't get the chance to kill Stefan as he'd intended. Instead, he lay motionless on the floor, his face a bloody, swollen mess.

Over Stefan's shoulder, her gaze took in the scene. Sidious's voice was low as he talked quietly to Tilarian security, giving them their location. The whole while, his gaze never left Carlone's body. Another man, tall and dark stood in the door removing a band from his wrist before tossing it to the table.

Taron strolled in as well and tossed a pair of cuffs to Sidious. While Sidious's attention was on catching the cuffs, she saw Carlone inch his hand toward something lying under the table.

"Stefan," she whispered and Stefan turned to see what upset her before shoving her behind him.

Sidious moved with lightening reflexes and pointed his gun directly at Carlone's chest. Carlone froze, his gaze watching Sidious in fear.

"Go for it, you vigic. I dare you," Sidious snarled.

Krista was surprised at the menace and anger etched in Sidious's face. Gone was the teasing, fun loving Sidious and in his place was the Captain Marcone that was so feared during the prime minister's reign. She swallowed and wondered how Mikayla had had the nerve to stand up to that man when she'd first been captured. Silently Krista hoped she was never the recipient of that menacing look.

"You should have been hanged for treason," Carlone rasped and spit toward Sidious.

"And you should have died in the rebellion," Sidious snarled back and cocked the weapon in his hand. "Give me a reason to rectify that mistake, Carlone."

"Sidious," Stefan cautioned in a soft voice.

Sidious kept his gaze on Carlone as he held out the cuffs to Taron. "Tie this son of a bitch up, Taron before I shoot him."

Once Carlone was secured, Sidious turned back to Stefan and tossed a small metal object toward his brother.

"Get her home, Stefan. Take my personal ship, the *Triton*. It's in the docking bay of the *Vultair*. The rest of us will handle this."

Stefan took Krista's hand and pulled her from the cabin. On the way out she stopped to hug both Taron and Sidious. The other man she didn't know, but he smiled

at her gently and touched her cheek. He was gorgeous, with black hair and a muscular build similar to Sidious and Taron, and just as tall.

"Lekala tuinas vohla," he whispered.

Krista frowned. "What does that mean?"

He grinned, making his sapphire eyes crinkle at the corners. They were beautiful eyes, but so full of sadness. "Stefan is a lucky man."

She smiled in return and glanced at Stefan, next to her. "No. I'm the lucky one."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sidious leaned against the doorjamb of his son's room and listened to Mikayla softly singing a lullaby. Hayden must be having trouble sleeping. Whenever he was upset Mikayla would softly sing to him and it would always calm him down. Her voice had the same effect on her husband as well. He loved hearing her sing.

Mikayla continued to softly hum as she walked over to the set of French doors on the other side of the room and opened them to let in some of the cool night air. Sidious had installed screens across the openings so that they could open the doors without fear that Hayden would get outside. Walking over to the crib, Sidious leaned down and spoke softly to his son.

When Mikayla turned back to her son's bed she jumped slightly when she saw the figure leaning over the side, but immediately relaxed. She recognized her husband's form. She would know it anywhere. Walking up beside him, she silently placed her hand on his arm to get his attention.

Turning to look at her, he smiled. "Hey, sweetheart. Was he giving you trouble?"

"He's used to you telling him goodnight as I put him in the bed. You weren't here and I think that upset him."

Sidious smiled slightly and softly touched Hayden's head. "Good night, little man," he whispered.

Then, taking his wife's hand, he led her from the room and down the hall to theirs. "I noticed the *Triton* isn't in the bay. Did Stefan not get here?"

"They were here earlier but Stefan wanted to take Krista someplace where they could be alone."

"How was she?" Sidious asked.

"She may have nightmares for a while, but she'll be fine. I think she was actually more worried about Stefan than herself."

She sat on the edge of the bed and watched her husband undo his ponytail and remove his shirt. The sight of him with his long hair down and his bare chest never failed to make her heart flutter.

As he undid the last button and pulled the shirt from his pants to slide it off his shoulders, he sensed her staring at him. Looking at her through his lashes, he smiled. "You keep looking at me like that and you'll find yourself flat on your back."

Bringing her eyes back to his, she gave him a teasing smile. "Is that a threat?"

"No," he replied as he walked over to her. Leaning forward, he pushed her to her back on the mattress and braced his hands on either side of her shoulders. "That's a promise."

She placed her palm against the side of his face. "I'm so glad you're back."

"Was there ever any doubt?" he teased as he rolled to his side and grabbed her hand, bringing it to his lips to kiss her palm.

Moving to her side to face him, she only smiled slightly in response. She would never admit to him that she had indeed doubted. She had been terrified that something would happen to him. He wasn't immortal, after all.

Bracing himself on his elbow, he tipped her chin up with his finger. "It's over and everything is fine," he said and then added huskily, "So come here and give me a proper welcome home."

She softly touched her lips to his. The feel of his hands on her body never failed to send her senses reeling. She shivered as his fingers worked her robe loose and slid it down her arms. "I love you," she sighed against his lips.

"I love you too, baby," he said as he softly brushed a stray hair away from her face.

"Now come here and show me how much."

\* \* \* \* \*

Krista watched Stefan hover over her like a child. He'd brought them to the old rebel camp yesterday and had been treating her with kid gloves ever since. She loved the fact he'd taken such good care of her, used the *medabri* to fix her cheeks and lip, but enough was enough.

"Stefan, please. You're driving me crazy."

He set a cup of coffee on the table and took the chair next to her. "I just want to make sure you're fine."

She smiled and placed her hand over his. "I am fine. Do I need to prove it to you?" He returned her smile and brought her fingers to his lips, placing a soft kiss to the backs of them. "I know you're fine," he said with a sigh against her knuckles. "I've just never been more scared in my life. If I'd lost you I don't know what I would have done."

"But you didn't lose me. I'm right here."

Standing, she moved to sit on his lap. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she placed a soft kiss below his ear and reveled in the tremor she felt run through him. "See," she whispered, "I'm safe and sound."

He smiled and settled his arms around her waist, pulling her closer. His lips were soft and warm on her temple, and she leaned into him more, wanting to get as close as she could.

"I have something for you," he whispered and held something just under her chin.

With a gasp, she sat up and stared at the ring clasped in his fingers. It was beautiful. Not large, but dainty and absolutely perfect. In the center was a round lavender stone she recognized as a Rhenari *bortac*. Around it was a circle of blue Earth diamonds. "Oh, Stefan. I love it!"

"Lavender always reminds me of you and the day I fell held over heels in love."

She sniffed back her tears with a smile and placed her hand over her mouth.

"Marry me, Kris. Be my countess."

A single tear slipped down her cheek, and she wiped it away and nodded her head. "Of course I will."

He slipped it on her finger, then kissed her. Softly, gently and full of promise for the future.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two weeks later Krista was back to normal and extremely nervous about her and Stefan's wedding. Mikayla's mother Amy had arrived just in time and was thrilled that the young girl she considered her second daughter was officially going to be part of the family.

"Have we taken care of everything?" Krista asked Mikayla as they stood before the dressing mirror in Mikayla's room, putting the final touches on Krista's hair.

She had chosen a simple off-the-shoulder dress of ivory satin that looked perfect on her. Her shoes had been dyed to match and the toes of them just poked out under the hem of the long skirt.

"We've taken care of everything," Mikayla said with a smile. "Relax."

"I don't know why I'm so nervous," Krista said with a sigh as she fingered the string of pearls that Amy had given her to wear.

"All brides are nervous, dear," Amy said as she handed her a bouquet of flowers made of twenty ivory rosebuds with two lavender *seflans*, flowers from Daego that were very similar to carnations.

"Where did this come from?" Krista asked. She hadn't ordered flowers, there hadn't been enough time. She had decided instead she would cut some from the garden and carry them.

"They're from Stefan. He said there's a note attached."

Krista pulled the note from the flowers and quickly read it, then smiled.

"What does it say?" Mikayla asked.

"Are you ready?" Damon asked as he stuck his head in the door, interrupting Krista. She handed the note to Mikayla with a smile.

"Yeah," Krista said and nodded her head. She had been waiting for this day for twenty-seven years.

Damon walked Krista down the garden pathway to Stefan, who was waiting under the rose archway lit only by the light of the two full moons. The air smelled of the jasmine and roses that Mikayla had imported from Earth. The flowers as well as the lake just beyond the edge of the garden created a perfect backdrop for the ceremony. It was absolutely beautiful and there wasn't a florist anywhere that could have recreated such a scene.

Placing her hand in Stefan's, Damon leaned down to kiss her on the cheek before taking his place by his wife behind the couple.

It was a very small ceremony, with only the immediate family and closest friends present, Devlin included. That was the way they both wanted it. Krista had come to realize that she and Stefan were more alike than she'd initially thought. Although their backgrounds were different, they still basically wanted the same things out of life.

She smiled at him as he slid the gold band with three lavender stones on her finger. The band matched the engagement ring perfectly. Bringing her hand up to his, he kissed her ring finger just as the regent said, "I now pronounce you man and wife, Count and Countess Marcone."

## Trista Ann Michaels

Krista's eyes widened slightly when she heard the regent refer to her as Countess Marcone. That was the first time anyone had called her that and her insecurities rose to the surface.

Stefan saw her expression and gave her hand a squeeze. "You'll be fine," he whispered and leaned down to kiss her.

Laying his forehead to hers, he smiled. "I love you, Kris."

"I love you," she whispered back just before they were bombarded with well wishes and hugs from everyone.

The End

## About the Author

Trista penned her first ghost story at the age of eight. She still has a love of ghosts, but her taste and writing style have leaned more to the sultry side. She started writing erotic romance two years ago and with the help of her critique partners was soon published and she's been running full steam ever since.

Raised an Air Force brat, Trista surprised her family by marrying a Navy man. But just as she knew he would, her husband won them over despite his military choice. Together they've had three children, and she attributes their successful marriage to the fact he's away flying a lot. Separation does make the heart grow fonder. After all, if he's not there, she can't kill him.

All joking aside, her family and writing partners are her biggest form of support and encouragement. Trista's a big believer in happily ever after and although she may put her characters through hell getting there, they will always achieve that goal.

Trista welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

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