



Loose Id

ENTWINED FATES
CAPTIVE

TRISTA ANN MICHAELS

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CAPTIVE**

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Loose Id^(R)
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Prologue

Vagoran Sector -- Present Day

Damn, I hate the sight of that thing.

Sidious Marcone almost turned his small ship back in the other direction. The closer he got to Prime Minister Rigora's pride and joy, the *Shlictah*, the more tense and irritable he became. He hated coming back to this ship -- this life.

He flipped a switch, turning on the microphone. "*Shlictah*, this is four-nine-seven *Triton*, requesting clearance to dock."

"Clearance granted. Proceed to docking bay ten. Welcome back, Captain Marcone."

Welcome back to hell.

With movements born of habit, he finalized the approach procedure. Rigora's Destroyer loomed before him like something out of his worst nightmare. Only this nightmare had been his home for the last ten years. Once his job was over, he hoped to never see another spaceship, much less live on one again.

A voice broke through his thoughts, and he blinked at the computer screen where the approach vectors flashed.

"Cargo door ten-B is open, my lord."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. *Triton* out."

He flipped the radio off and proceeded to door ten-B. Docking the ship, he powered down the engines and leaned his head back with a sigh. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to get his frame of mind back to where it needed to be. He was so tired. Tired of this place, these people, this life. Some days he wanted so badly to throw up his hands and leave.

But they need me.

The voice in his mind continued to remind him why he'd done this. Why he'd chosen to lead this life. He'd put everything he'd ever wanted on hold -- a life, a family, a woman to love -- all that forgotten for the sake of the cause. He could have his dream *after* he finished this. If he survived.

The commotion outside the ship reminded him he had a job to do -- a persona to uphold. The men loaded the cargo freighter next to him, while the lieutenant shouted orders from the observation loft above. The fumes from the numerous engines that idled in the bay invaded his lungs, and he crinkled his nose in distaste. He would always hate that smell. It would forever remind him of this ship.

With a resigned sigh, he decided to stop feeling sorry for himself and do what he came here to do. He climbed out of his ship and stretched legs that had long since become stiff from cramped quarters. Looking up, he saw Ensign Barker approach, a weary expression in his eyes. Sidious was tempted to yell "boo," just to see if the man would jump.

"Are there any special instructions for the ship, my lord?"

"No. Just do the usual."

"Yes, sir." He bowed slightly and turned to signal the refuelers.

Sidious rubbed the muscles at the back of his neck and rolled his shoulders, trying to work the kinks out and get the blood flowing again. The long flights always exhausted him.

Slowly, he made his way through the mass of soldiers milling around the bay. To his left, a group of men immediately came to attention upon seeing him. They swallowed visibly, and Sidious wanted to roll his eyes in disgust.

Coming to a stop, he raised an eyebrow. "Isn't there something you need to be doing? Unless I'm mistaken, it's still first shift."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, my lord."

The men dispersed quickly, and Sidious continued toward the turbochute. He hated being the hard-ass, but he didn't have a choice. The cold, hard mask of indifference could never fall. There was too much at stake.

As he climbed the stairs to the second level, he noticed his brother's ship secured at the other side of the hangar. Sidious was younger by two years, but everyone assumed Stefan was the younger one.

Sidious dragged a hand over his face. Stress over the last few years had aged him prematurely. Acting as commanding officer of the Imperial Militia demanded intense responsibility, but simultaneously serving as a mole for the rebel forces drove him damned near insane.

Playing both sides in an armed conflict could, at the very least, get him killed, but the risk was worth it. He'd decided a long time ago he'd give whatever it took --

including his life -- to help end the tyranny that had kept Tilarus in a death grip for the last fifty years. And Stefan was in just as deep as he was.

He glanced back at the sleek little runner, then exited the shuttle bay. Sidious had used Stefan's diplomatic status to get him clearance to the ship. That made it easier for them to remain in touch and pass important information. But why was Stefan here? Was it for diplomatic reasons or something to do with the rebels? Before he went to his debriefing, he needed to find out what his rabble-raising older brother had been up to, and why he was here on the Destroyer.

Sidious came to a stop outside the door of the turbochute. He unhooked his communicator from his belt and called Stefan.

"Yeah," Stefan said.

"What now?"

"What the hell is up with you, grouch? No hello, brother? How are you? Is there anything you need?"

Sidious shook his head, a grin tugging at the corner of his lips. Stefan had always been the smart-ass clown of the family. A stark contrast to Sidious's more subdued, serious demeanor. His brother would just as soon find ways to push his buttons as anything else.

"If you're here, then I know it's either something you need or something we need to talk about. Which is it?"

"I had just about given up on you and was about to leave." The doors of the turbochute opened. Stefan stepped off and flipped his communicator closed. His ever-observant gaze raked over Sidious, and his lips lifted in an amused grin. "You look like something Taron dragged in from Veenori." His brows drew together in a concerned frown. "How long has it been since you've slept?"

Sidious flipped his communicator closed as well and accompanied Stefan to his ship. "By sleep, do you mean a good night's sleep or any sleep at all?"

"Sidious." Stefan came to a stop and pinned him with his best older-brother, no-nonsense look. "You've got to get some sleep and relax. The last thing we need is for you to run yourself to the point of exhaustion."

"I'm already past exhaustion." His gaze traveled around the bay, making sure no one was close enough to hear their conversation.

"Do we need to get someone else in here?" Concern laced Stefan's voice as his eyes narrowed.

The desire to take Stefan up on his offer tempted him, but he knew it was also unrealistic. They could never hope to get someone to take his place that quickly. Besides, his rank and position were perfect. Stefan was the firstborn son of a monarch, so his admittance into the militia was forbidden.

"No." He shook his head. "I started this; I'll finish it. Besides..." He noticed the bay personnel watching them, so he put his hand on the back of his brother's shoulder and moved him along. "There's not enough time for that."

In hushed tones, Stefan growled, "This is your life we're talking about, damn it. If you're exhausted, you're going to make mistakes. I would hate to have to explain to our father why you were executed for treason."

The corner of his lips twitched in amusement. "I would think the trial would be self-explanatory."

Stefan scowled. "That's not funny."

"Yeah, well, you always did have a lousy sense of humor."

Stefan stopped next to his ship, gazed at the big scratch in the side, and frowned at him.

"See." Sidious shrugged and indicated Stefan's dour expression with a wave of his hand. "Prime example." He clasped his hands behind his back. "Why are you here?"

"I need you to work your magic."

He inwardly groaned. No doubt his brother had another ridiculously dangerous plan hatched. Every time he pulled these stunts, his heart stopped. If anything happened to his brother, he would never forgive himself.

"What the hell are you up to now? Wait." He held a hand up, then rubbed his eyes. "I don't want to know. How many and what rank?"

Stefan rubbed his fingers over his upper lip and chin. "Two, with a rank of at least captain. One of them needs to be female."

With access to the militia mainframe, Sidious created false identities for Stefan's rebel infiltrators whenever they needed access inside a compound for supplies or intel. Once their jobs were finished, he would then erase the identities and all traces of their activities.

Sidious shook his head. "Yours and Taron's stunts are going to contribute to my death faster than the fatigue."

Stefan snorted. "You love the challenge, so don't even think about trying to make me believe otherwise."

"By when?" he asked with a sigh.

"Two days."

He nodded, then pinned his brother with a stern look. "Whatever it is you're doing, be careful."

"I'm always careful. Taron is the one you have to worry about."

Sidious sighed. He knew what Taron was like. If anyone did something stupid, it would be him. He was a risk taker. He loved the rush. The more dangerous the better. Unfortunately, more often than not, Stefan was right there with him.

"I'll see you in a couple of weeks," Stefan said, climbing through the open hatch to his ship.

Sidious slapped the back of the hull twice to let Stefan know he had the all clear behind him, then watched the ship fly out of the bay. He glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes until the debriefing. He wondered what planet the prime minister was going after now.

* * * * *

Sidious was the last to arrive at the conference lounge. He strolled in, taking his place as the ninth officer at the oval table in the center of the room.

At the head was Carlone, assistant to the prime minister, or to his way of thinking, more like a love-struck fool. The way he followed Rigora around was the subject of jokes throughout the ship.

Next to Carlone was Lieutenant Commander Alonis, an older man in his fifties and in command of all militia scouts -- in other words, Rigora's planet hunters. To his right sat Commander Woods, better known as the pain in his ass. Woods had been trying for the last five years to catch him spying -- unsuccessfully.

You'd think by now his techniques would have improved.

And then there was himself, Captain Marcone. He had the illustrious job of commander of all troops, flyers as well as ground. The other six were various officers in different areas of command, all below him in rank.

"It's about time you showed up, Marcone," snapped Commander Woods. "We've been waiting on you for quite some time."

"I've been busy working, Woods, but I'm sure that's a concept you're unfamiliar with."

Woods narrowed his eyes, hatred sparking from the beady orbs. Sidious raised an amused eyebrow as he tossed a file onto the table.

Clearing his throat, Alonis brought the room back to the business at hand. "As you all know, scouts have been searching for M-class planets within the Delta sector. They believed they had found one, and a surveillance team was sent in about six months ago." Bringing everyone's attention to the view screen at the end of the room, he pulled up a stellar map that displayed the planet's location.

Carlone stood and handed out files containing general information about the prime minister's newest target. "This planet is much more advanced than some of the others Rigora has taken over. Although nowhere near our technological capabilities, they are advanced enough that they could give us problems."

"Does Rigora still wish to invade?" Sidious asked, although he already knew the answer. The prime minister never turned his back on a planet that would benefit him in some way.

"He does." Carlone nodded. "He has gone over the information the scouts have sent to us, and he feels this planet would be an asset, not only for its resources, but for its people as well. Naturally, he feels whatever it takes to get the planet will be acceptable."

Sidious raised an eyebrow in interest. "Judging by that statement, am I right in assuming that you expect a fight?"

"Yes, my lord." Alonis pulled out the seat next to Sidious and sat down. "These people appear to be very independent. It is unlikely they would give into slavery without resisting."

"What do we know of their defensive capabilities?" Sidious swiveled his chair to face Alonis.

The lieutenant commander picked up a sheet of paper and handed it to him. On it was a list of weapons. The scouts had not just named them but described their destructive capabilities as well. He looked it over, his brow creasing in thought.

Carlone cleared his throat. "I understand you have been away handling a problem in the Rineah system, my lord, but the prime minister would like to speak with you as soon as possible about your strategy."

Sidious nodded his head to let him know he had heard him, but still continued to study the list.

"Something that you might consider..."

Sidious turned his gaze to Carlone when he heard his pause. "What?"

"This planet is divided up into several different countries that do not get along. We could use that to our advantage by getting some of the countries to side with us and turn on the others, sort of a divide-and-conquer situation. It worked before on one of the other planets."

Sidious shook his head as he set the list aside. "The planet you're talking about was an exception. The two factions had hated each other for generations, and one was only too happy to help wipe out the other." He turned to look at Alonis. "You've been studying the reports. What do you think?"

Alonis shook his head. "I really haven't seen anything in the reports that would indicate that scenario working here."

Sidious placed his elbow on the armrest and scratched at his chin. "How soon does he want to get started?"

"Rigora expects to leave for the planet as soon as he is done here, probably within the week."

"All right." Sidious stood. "Send everything you have on the planet to my quarters, and I'll get to work on some defense strategies for their weapons. If there is nothing else, I have a lot of work to catch up on."

"Of course, my lord," replied Alonis.

Sidious left the conference lounge with the same feeling of dread and disgust that always plagued him. He half wished this planet would be strong enough to defeat the prime minister, but he knew better.

They might be able to hold their own against the ground troops, and even the flyers, but unless they could get into space and attack the Destroyer, they didn't stand a chance. The ship was protected by a shield even the rebels had not been able to penetrate. As long as the prime minister and his Destroyer were around, troops would continue to arrive.

As he stepped into the turbochute that would take him to the level his quarters were located, he looked down at the folder Carlone had handed him. Across the front, written in big black letters, was the name of the planet.

EARTH.

Chapter One

Nashville, Tennessee -- Present Day

Mikayla Adkins awoke with a start and looked at the clock radio by her bed.

Good Lord, I've overslept.

She jumped out of bed and ran in the bathroom to wash her face. As she rinsed the soap away, she studied herself in the mirror and then wished she hadn't. Her hair was a mass of tangled curls. She glanced at her watch, and an exasperated sigh escaped her lips. *Damn, no time to wash it.*

She'd never been late before, and she hated the thought that this morning might be her first. As receptionist, it was her responsibility to be in the office when it opened and greet any early-morning appointments. Her boss would have her head if she scurried in after a client.

Maybe working the second job at the nightclub across town wasn't such a good idea anymore. She had the money for her house, so she could easily quit. But on the flip side, she hated giving it up. It kept her busy and her mind off her ex-boyfriend, Greg.

For her one and only relationship, she'd managed to find the worst possible guy. He'd done a number on her physically as well as mentally. It took two years to rebuild her self-esteem after escaping him, and she had no desire to date anyone else. She'd had enough of men.

Looking around the cluttered bathroom, she found her giant hair clip. One of these days, she needed to find the time to clean. Or make enough money to hire a maid. Neatness was definitely *not* her forte.

Arranging the thick mass of curls on top of her head, she secured it with the clip and tugged out a few bangs. She gazed at her reflection with a frown. Not the most professional-looking style, but it'd have to do.

She made quick work of getting dressed and then peeked at the clock. With a smile of satisfaction, she realized she just might make it. Grabbing her car keys and purse, she dashed out the door.

Traffic would be a problem, so she whizzed through the back streets and alleys, avoiding as much of the hectic morning commute as possible.

She pulled into the parking lot and stared up at the sign on the glass building of COHEN, MELVAREZ & ROGERS. Taking a quick glance at her watch, she noticed she was right on time, then breathed easy for the first time since waking and, with quick strides, walked into the building.

Opening the bottom drawer of her desk, she shoved her purse inside, then reached over to switch on the computer. The television blared from the break room, and she frowned in the direction of the noise. It wasn't unusual for someone to be in there watching the news, but for some reason, today the volume was louder than normal.

She walked through the doorway and stopped dead, looking around at everyone. There were probably fifteen people in the small room, which was a lot for this time of the morning. Making her way through the crowd, she grabbed a cup from the cabinet and poured herself some coffee. "What's going on?" she asked.

"Haven't you been watching the news?" asked one of the secretaries.

"No, I haven't seen the news in a couple of days. Why?"

"You should see this," someone else said.

Curious, she turned to the television. *Aliens*? She blinked twice to see if her eyes were playing tricks on her. When she glanced back to the screen, the scene hadn't changed. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. This had to be a joke. Right? But once she took a good look at everyone's faces, she knew this was no joke.

From what she could discern from the broadcast, a very large ship had arrived sometime after midnight, orbiting the planet. Satellite surveillance calculated the ship to be about three miles long, one mile wide, and at least fifty stories tall.

So far no signal had been detected from the ship, but the president had called to duty all troops on leave and had even put the reserves on alert. Other countries were gearing up in a similar fashion. No one would leave anything to chance.

"I wonder why they're here," asked one of the attorneys.

"Maybe they're just curious."

"Look at the ship. Do you really think they would come here in something that could hold half of the world's population if they were only curious?" snapped one of the other attorneys.

"Maybe they're just looking for a new home," said someone else.

"Yeah." Mikayla licked her dry lips. "But the question is, do they want to share it with us or take it away from us?"

Everyone was talking among themselves, sharing their ideas or fears, when Josh Cohen, the senior partner, walked into the room. "I think it would be a good idea if we

close down the office for a few days. Everyone go home to be with your families. We'll reopen as soon as we know what this is about."

Mikayla listened with half an ear to the grumbling among the employees. Fear and confusion clouded faces as men and women shuffled from the break room to their desks and gathered their belongings. She thought of her mother in Florida. If anything bad happened, her mother would need her. As she went to the front desk to call her, she heard her best friend, Krista, softly crying.

When Mikayla started working at the firm, Krista, Mr. Cohen's secretary, had been the first to make friends with her, probably because they were so close in age, and they'd been good friends ever since. She also knew that Krista's mother had died last year, and she was pretty certain her friend had no other family.

"Krista." Mikayla knelt by her chair. "Why don't you come to Florida with me? There will be plenty of room, and I really don't want to drive down there by myself. Especially now."

Krista wiped the tears from her eyes. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"I'm sure," she said with a smile.

She had no doubt that Krista was terrified, being alone, with no one to lean on while trying to face this bizarre alien development.

"Let me go call Mom and tell her we're coming; then we'll head out."

After a few minutes of discussion, Mikayla hung up the phone and gathered her things.

Krista walked over quickly, her arms loaded with personal items from her desk. "I'm ready if you are. Is your mother okay with this?"

"Are you kidding?" She smiled as she grabbed a few things of her own. "She's thrilled to be able to see you again. Besides, she didn't like the idea of me traveling alone, so she's relieved you'll be with me."

"Surely between the two of us, we can fight off any aliens that might come our way. Right?" Krista asked, her eyebrow rose in an attempt to be funny.

"Unless, of course, he's grade A hunk material, and then we might just have to keep him around for a while." Mikayla grinned wickedly and wiggled her eyebrows, making Krista laugh.

"Mikayla, you're terrible."

"At least you're smiling now."

The two discussed what might happen as they walked to the parking lot. Since Krista rode the bus every day, they didn't have to worry about what to do with her car, so they piled into Mikayla's Cavalier and headed to Krista's.

"My God!" Krista said. "Look at the parking lot at the grocery store."

A gasp slipped past Mikayla's lips as she turned her head to look. There were people and cars everywhere. As they drove farther down the street, they noticed other stores in similar disarray. "People must think that the world is coming to an end."

"How do we know that it's not?" Krista asked as they looked at each other.

Mikayla's heart pounded at the thought. *She's right; we don't know anything.* Even the news media and the government could only speculate as to why extraterrestrial visitors were here. Her fingers began to tremble, and she gripped the steering wheel harder. She couldn't let herself panic. They had a long way to go. Once she got to her mother's, then she could fall apart.

When they arrived at Krista's, they packed up clothes to suit Florida's weather. Krista picked up a picture of her and her mother. For a second she gazed at it, her eyes full of sadness.

Mikayla gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. Her friend had been extremely close to her mother, but she was a strong person. In some ways, much stronger than Mikayla.

With a sigh, Krista tossed her mother's picture in the suitcase and then zipped it closed. "Maybe we should take the food as well."

"Yeah, you're probably right. From the looks of the stores, there isn't going to be anything left to buy." Quickly, the two of them began to clean out the cabinets.

* * * * *

Sidious sat in the prime minister's office with Commander Woods and Alonis. The four of them had gone over last-minute instructions as well as the speech the prime minister would make to the people of Earth in less than an hour.

Upon their arrival, Sidious had intercepted planetary satellite transmissions and watched them most of the morning. He learned quite a bit by viewing what they called "the news." Personally, he thought they talked way too freely about their military, but he might be able to use some of the information to his advantage. At least for now.

Once he realized how heavily this world relied on satellite communication, he decided that would be the first to go. Getting rid of their satellites would make it more difficult for them to coordinate with each other long range. But first they had to announce their intentions. Once Earth refused to surrender, the invasion would begin.

Learning what they called English had not been difficult. It was actually almost identical to their own mother tongue, Rhinarian -- except for bits of slang -- and it didn't take him too long to figure it out. He would have Stefan check into Earth's history. Someone from the Rineah system had to have settled there at some point. But who?

"How long are you going to give Earth to surrender, your grace?" Alonis's question brought him back to the business at hand.

"Twelve hours, no more. Captain Marcone, are the flyer pilots briefed on what is expected of them?"

"Yes. And the flyer deck is outfitting the ships with the needed weapons as we speak."

"What of the ground troops? Are they prepared as well?"

"Yes, your grace," Sidious confirmed.

His fingers gripped the folder on his lap, their tips turning white. God, he hated this. The thought of Prime Minister Rigora taking over yet another world made him sick. He looked up and caught Rigora watching him intently. He released his hold on the folder and tried to make himself relax. He had to get a better grip on his emotions or he would blow his cover all to hell.

"Very well then." The prime minister gave him one last long look, then turned to Woods. "Commander, if you will inform the engineer I would like to transmit my speech from the bridge within the hour, I believe we can adjourn this meeting. Tell him also to make sure the computer translates my speech into all languages and dialects known to this world."

"I'll get right on it, your grace." Woods stood to leave.

Sidious headed for the door, when Rigora's voice stopped him. "Oh, Captain."

Rolling his eyes heavenward, he turned. "Yes, your grace."

"I want you on the bridge when I address Earth."

"Of course." He bowed slightly, then turned and left the room, gritting his teeth in frustration.

* * * * *

Mikayla and Krista left the suitcase in the car but carried in the bags of food they'd brought and set them on the kitchen table. Mikayla grabbed some empty boxes from her laundry closet.

"We can put the food in these. They'll pack in the car better."

"Good idea." Krista opened the pantry doors and began pulling things out.

While Krista continued to pack, Mikayla went to the bedroom to throw some clothes in a suitcase, but first she grabbed the lock box under the bed. Putting part of the money in her purse, she hid the rest in a bag at the bottom of her suitcase. Not knowing how long they'd be in Florida, she didn't want to leave all her money here.

Under the bed was a crazy place to keep it, but she had gotten in the habit of hiding money from her abusive ex-boyfriend. Even though they had been apart for two years now, she still hid it. Some habits, she supposed, were just harder to break than others.

Turning to the closet, she looked through her clothes. It was April and still a little chilly, so she pulled out a long-sleeved shirt to wear as a jacket over jeans and a tank top.

Mikayla stuck her head out the bedroom door and yelled toward the kitchen, "Krista, start a pot of coffee to take with us, and I'll jump in the shower. I didn't have a chance to take one this morning."

"Okay."

She heard the kitchen water running, then the voice of a reporter with a breaking news report.

* * * * *

"Mr. President." General Conely stood just inside the door. "We need to start preparations to separate the government."

"Of course, you're right, General." President Davis Blake leaned back in his chair and released a heavy sigh. "Is the new hiding place finished and in order?"

"It doesn't make a whole lot of difference at the moment. Ready or not, we're going."

Nodding his head, the president smiled slightly at his remark. In his late forties, Davis had thought he'd seen everything. But he never would have expected this. A science-fiction thriller coming to life right in the middle of his presidency.

"Have all nonessential personnel go home to their families. Get anyone on the list for NORAD on a plane and out of here. The rest of us will wait here to see if they contact us. But just in case, have our people ready to go at a moment's notice."

"Yes, sir," the general replied before turning to leave the Oval Office.

Walking over to the door, the president gazed at the sky. It was a beautiful clear blue, and to look at it, one would never believe the horror that floated just above it. Was he doing the right thing? Was he doing enough?

Please. He closed his eyes in silent prayer. *Please let them have come in peace. God help us if they haven't.*

* * * * *

Mikayla finished her shower, dried her hair, and put on a little makeup. She crammed the last-minute stuff in her suitcase and zipped it closed. With a puff of surprise at the weight, she hefted it off the bed and set it by the front door. Frowning at the bag, she wondered how she'd managed to cram so much into it.

Oh well, she thought with a shrug. She needed it all, so she would just have to deal with it. Walking into the kitchen, she found Krista still at the table watching the news. "Anything new?"

"Not so far. They're just talking about how the stores are selling out of ammunition and food. They're also asking people to make their phone calls as short as possible, because they're tying up the phone lines."

Mikayla just rolled her eyes and scrunched her nose, which made Krista laugh. Suddenly, snow covered the television screen and the noise of static filled the room.

"Did you forget to pay your cable bill?" Krista smiled.

"Nah." She shrugged as she frowned at the screen. "Someone just probably hit a pole."

Just as quickly, the television cleared up again, but it wasn't the news media on the screen.

"Did you change the channel?" Mikayla looked at the strangely dressed man staring back at them with a triumphant glare in his eyes.

"No."

The man appeared to be in his sixties, with short gray hair and a thin build. Standing stiff as royalty, he wore a black uniform with a gold-trimmed black velvet robe draped over his shoulders. A huge gold clasp held the cloak together at the neck, and the lines in the beautiful etched clasp swirled together like initials.

He began to speak in an accent neither of them recognized, his words flowing smoothly like French. "People of Earth. I am Prime Minister Rigora of the planet Kilahnus. After intensive study of your planet, I feel that it and your people would be a great asset to my empire. Your leaders have twelve hours to comply with my demands to turn over the control of your world to me. If they do so, no harm will come to anyone. Life as you know it can continue with only a few minor changes. If, however, your leaders refuse, you will suffer immediate and deadly consequences. I await your unconditional surrender."

The TV immediately switched back to the news reporters, who appeared to be just as shocked and speechless as Mikayla and Krista.

"Come on," Mikayla said. "We better get going. It'll take us longer than twelve hours to get to Ocala."

"Please drive fast." Krista grabbed the boxes and began to load the car.

Chapter Two

Sidious stood off to the side and watched Rigora give his speech. He would have preferred to be almost anywhere else. The more he was with this man, the harder it was for him to hide his true feelings. He sometimes had to bite his tongue to keep from saying something he shouldn't.

It's almost over.

"How was that, Captain?" Rigora asked, pulling Sidious away from his thoughts.

He unfolded his arms from across his chest and pushed away from the wall. "Perfect as always, your grace."

Rigora's eyes bored into his and narrowed. He hated it when he studied him like that. It gave him the creeps.

"Walk with me to the flyer deck. I wish to see how things are progressing." Rigora turned and left the bridge, expecting Sidious to follow.

Once they were away from the Bridge, Rigora turned to Sidious. "I've noticed you've been extremely distant and short lately."

Sidious kept his eyes straight ahead. "No more than usual."

"I disagree. I feel something has been bothering you. Am I correct in that assessment?"

That caught him off guard. Rigora never expressed any concern about his personal life. For him to do so now made Sidious a little nervous.

He met Rigora's questioning gaze head-on. "I have had a lot of things on my mind lately."

"Family matters?"

"Partially."

"You know if there is anything that you need, Captain, you have only to ask."

"Yes, I know."

Rigora nodded and moved his cruel, ice blue eyes back to the long expanse of hallway in front of them. Inwardly, Sidious breathed a sigh of relief. If he were ever caught -- if Rigora ever suspected what he had been up to for the last ten years -- his life would be over.

* * * * *

Mikayla and Krista had been on the road for nine hours, and they had just now passed through Atlanta. The traffic had not been bad until the president gave his speech saying that Earth would surrender to no one.

Within hours, alien ships of all sizes began to arrive on Earth. Small craft flew by so fast, they appeared no more than a blur. Then there were the larger ones that looked like giant rectangles, which Mikayla guessed carried supplies or possibly troops of some sort.

Wrecks were everywhere. Mikayla had to swerve quickly more than once to avoid hitting someone or being hit. Once they reached the city limits, the traffic began to thin out.

An ominous feeling had plagued Mikayla since they started seeing the ships. She couldn't shake it. While sitting in one of the many traffic jams earlier, she wrote her mother's address, phone number, and directions to her house on a piece of paper and gave it to Krista.

"What's this for?" Krista asked.

"I want you to hold on to that, and if anything happens to me, go straight to my mother's; she'll take care of you. There is also some money in the bottom of my suitcase, if you need it."

"What do you think will happen to you?"

"Hopefully nothing, but I can't shake this feeling something will."

"Well, let's hope that you're wrong," Krista had stated.

Mikayla hoped she was wrong as well. But the farther along she went, the stronger the feeling became. She tried not to think about it. Never one to have premonitions, she believed it was only her imagination.

She let out a tired sigh as she tried to find a more comfortable position. She'd always hated the stretch of interstate between Atlanta and Macon. It seemed so long and dark. Especially now, with hardly any traffic.

God, I need a break. But where? She saw the sign for the rest stop and smiled in relief. *Bingo.*

Turning on her blinker, she merged into the exit lane and pulled into the rest stop parking lot. She put the car into park and glanced over at Krista. Seeing that she was still sleeping, she was hesitant to wake her up.

Krista had been a basket case most of the afternoon. She couldn't really blame her; she was just as scared, but she handled it differently. Mikayla was always very quiet when she was nervous or upset; Krista on the other hand talked -- constantly.

Trying to be patient, Mikayla had let her talk, but finally the chatter got the best of her, and she suggested Krista try to get some sleep so she could take over the driving in a few hours.

While still sitting in the car, she took a minute to look around. The place looked deserted, so maybe it would be okay for her to step outside for a minute and stretch her legs. Quietly, she opened the car door, so as not to wake up Krista, and began to make her way toward the restroom.

* * * * *

Mikayla stood at the bathroom sink and splashed cold water on her face. She was exhausted, and they still had several hours left to go.

Maybe a Coke would help to wake me up, she thought, as she dug through the pocket of her jeans for some change.

She stepped through the door to the bathroom and almost ran smack into two men. She opened her mouth to say she was sorry but closed it again when she got a good look at them.

They didn't look any different from any other men in looks, until she saw their eyes. Yellow-green, with long black slits down the center, like a lizard's. Her heart raced faster as she realized these were aliens.

Her eyes raked over the uniforms they wore. She had never seen anything like them. They were all black, long-sleeved, buttoned up tight to their throats, with gold epaulets across their shoulders with unusual markings that she assumed told their rank.

The pants, which were also black, looked like some kind of spandex material that clung tightly to their legs and were tucked into boots that came up to their knees. Both men were holding guns that looked very similar to rifles, only they were silver instead of black. The looks they had on their faces concerned her the most. They were smiling at her as if they had just struck gold.

Her hands fisted at her sides. She had no weapon, no mace. Nothing. She wasn't sure what to do. She couldn't go back into the bathroom; there wasn't another way out. She decided to take a chance. With a deep breath for courage, she ran straight into them.

Catching the pair off guard, she shoved them as hard as she could. She knocked one off balance, causing him to fall to the ground.

Not taking the time to look for the other one, she ran as fast as she could to the car, screaming for Krista as she went.

Someone grabbed her around the waist from behind and lifted her off her feet. She pushed at his arm but, with a groan, realized she only succeeded in having him tighten his grip around her waist.

"Let me go." She kicked at his legs, desperate to get away.

She tried to turn in his arms, tried to scratch at his face. With a growl of aggravation, he grabbed her hand and squeezed.

A sharp pain knifed through her hand, and she sucked in a breath. "Let go of me, damn it," she snarled through clenched teeth.

He squeezed harder, and she winced at the pain. She was sure if he applied any more pressure, he would break it.

"Are you going to behave?" he sneered in her ear.

English?

She nodded her head, and he released her hand, which she immediately used the back of to hit his nose. Pain sliced through the back of her hand, and she gasped.

"*Shetah.*" The alien grabbed his nose.

He looked at the blood on his hand, and another string of what sounded like curses spewed forth. Turning to face the other man, he spoke to him in a language she didn't understand. His grip never loosened, and a feeling of dread came over her. She struggled harder, kicked his shins, but with the boots, her shoes had no effect. She couldn't let this happen. She had to get away.

"Damn you, let me go."

She gasped as sharp tingles ran along her body and bright lights consumed her.

* * * * *

As soon as she heard the scream, Krista sat straight up in the seat and looked out the front window. Not thirty feet in front of her, she saw Mikayla struggling to get away from two men. Reaching in the backseat for the bat they brought along, she started to jump out of the car to help, but before she got one foot out the door, they were gone. Vanished into thin air.

She watched the one man who still remained. Either unaware of her presence or uninterested, he never looked in her direction. He picked up the gun he had dropped and began to walk back toward the field behind the rest stop.

She lowered the bat and sat stunned. *What do I do now?*

Mikayla had told her to go on to her mother's if anything happened to her. But what in God's name was she going to tell her? She didn't even know what had happened herself. One minute she was there, and then suddenly she was gone. But what she didn't understand is what they wanted with her to begin with?

Chapter Three

Strong lights were Mikayla's first indication they were no longer at the rest stop. The brightness was overwhelming, and she immediately squinted until she became accustomed to it. Slowly, she opened her eyes and glanced at her surroundings. The sudden change in location shocked her. So much so, she stopped struggling.

"Where are we?" she asked. *And how the hell did we get here?*

"Your new home."

Her captor loosened his hold around her waist and dropped her on the floor. She winced as her butt hit with a loud thump. His laughter boomed through the room, and she glared back up at him. Other than his heavy Romanian-sounding accent, he spoke English well. How was that possible? But then she remembered the speech given by that man on television. He had also spoken English.

As she scrambled back to her feet, she studied the room. Brushed steel walls, with gray carpeting, and those damn bright lights -- but absolutely no windows. It was fairly good size, only completely empty.

Was it possible she'd been drugged and just now woke up? She didn't think so, for she didn't feel like she had been asleep, but how did they get here so fast? And how was she going to get back to her car? Her heart pounded furiously in her chest, and she struggled to stay calm. She had to think and find a way out of this.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"This is what we call an arrival room. They didn't want us just popping up wherever, so there are several of these rooms throughout the ship for people to transport into."

Mikayla stared at him, convinced he'd lost his mind. Surely he didn't just say "ship." And what did he mean by transport? He had to be lying. She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why am I here?"

"You're a gift for a friend," he replied with a smirk. "I have to make a call to alert your new owner that we are coming, so be quiet until I am finished."

"My new owner? What are you, nuts? You don't own people."

"We now own you." He pulled something out of his belt and, after punching a button, put it to his ear.

We'll see about that. She examined the room again, this time searching for a way out.

She began to inch her way toward a pair of doors on the other side of the room. Glancing back at the man who'd abducted her, she saw he was quietly talking on what looked like a very small cell phone.

She didn't believe for a minute they were actually on a ship. They had to be somewhere close to the rest stop. If she could just find a way out of whatever this thing was, she could get back there. Once she did, she and Krista could continue to her mother's. Taking one more look back at her kidnapper to make sure he was still on the phone, she made a run for the doors.

They silently slid open on their own, and she breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank God for small favors.*

Ignoring her captor's shout to stop, she picked a direction and ran, praying she'd made the right choice.

The halls were just like the room, all metal and lights that seemed to go on forever. Occasionally, there were doors like the one she just came out of, but they led into other rooms, not exits. Every time a door opened onto an office, she wanted to scream in frustration. There had to be a door that lead to the outside.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw the soldier getting closer. Taking a deep breath, she picked up her pace. Her long legs made her a fast runner, so staying ahead of him was easy. Of course, the fact that she had gotten a pretty good head start helped as well.

Coming up on the end of the hall, she made a quick decision to go right, only to run smack into what felt like a brick wall. Stunned, she would have fallen flat on her butt again, if the wall hadn't reached out and grabbed hold of her arm to steady her.

She gulped, trying to recapture the wind that had just been knocked from her chest, and snagged hold of the first thing she could to keep her balance. It was hard and unyielding, and she quickly realized it was an arm. A huge arm. Her fingers didn't come anywhere near encircling it all the way.

Her appraisal took in the massive biceps and the wide chest attached to it. He had on the same jacket as the other soldier. The material felt thick and woven, like wool beneath her fingers, but what had her heart pounding was the concrete beneath it. The man was built like a rock. She pushed against him, but the behemoth wouldn't budge.

"Damn it, let go of me." She shoved one last time, emphasizing her words, but to no avail. He refused to loosen his grip.

With a huff of exasperation, she looked up and found herself staring into the face of one of the most gorgeous men she had ever seen.

She froze, unable to take her eyes off him. Extremely thick, long white hair framed a face she could only describe as chiseled perfection. Black lashes framed beautiful eyes the color of storm clouds that at first held a look of confusion and then twinkled with amusement.

He had a masculine face, with strong cheekbones and a cleft right in the middle of his chin. His lips were full and turned up at one corner in a slight smile.

Mikayla was tall for a woman, but she felt like a child standing next to him. The top of her head came just to his shoulder, which made him at least six feet five inches.

His gaze raked over her in a way that sent chills down her spine. *Well, it's official: even aliens are pigs.*

He tugged on her elbow, pulling her closer. She stiffened as the heat from his body seeped into hers. She inhaled his slight musky scent and fought the urge to breathe deeper. Never in her life had someone rendered her speechless with just a look.

He grinned, and she swallowed down a sudden surge of panic. Raising her chin a notch, she sent him a challenging glare. She had no idea what he intended, but whatever it was, she wouldn't take it lying down. A sudden image of her beneath him flashed through her mind, and she inwardly groaned. *Okay, bad analogy.*

"Lord Marcone," Mikayla's abductor said.

She turned her head to see the out-of-breath soldier behind her. He straightened from a perfunctory bow, obviously in deference to the man holding her. Propping his hands on his hips, he shot her a look of disdain. His glare darted to the man he'd called Lord Marcone, and turned to a look of uncertainty.

"Did you lose something, Lafon?" the man holding her asked with obvious amusement.

Mikayla's breath caught in her throat at the sound of his deep, husky voice. Of course a man of his size would have a voice like that.

"Yes, my lord. I'm sorry. I only turned my back for a second. I'll know better next time." Lafon glared at her, and in a fit of rebellion, she glared back.

The man holding her immediately switched to a different language, and she frowned. Why? Were they saying something they didn't want her to hear? The more she listened, the angrier she became.

Stomping a foot, she once again tried to pull her arm from his grasp, without success. She scowled up at the man who held her prisoner. "If you're going to talk about me, the least you can do is speak in English. I know you can."

"All right," the tall man with the white hair replied.

Mikayla blinked, surprised he had actually obeyed her request. "How is it that you speak English so well?"

"Your English is our Rhinarian."

"What?" She frowned. "You can't be serious."

"Why? Because that would mean somewhere in the distant past, your people were once my people?"

Mikayla shook her head. "If that's the case, then why are you invading?"

The gorgeous man grinned, and her heart stopped. "Maybe we're taking back what was originally ours."

"Yeah, and maybe you're nuts too," she sneered.

"There's always that possibility." He and the man called Lafon shared a chuckle.

Great, she thought, an alien with a sense of humor

"Where did you think you were going?" he asked.

"Home, maybe," she bit out sarcastically.

"This ship is your home now."

She couldn't believe the gall of these people. What did they want with her, and what did they expect her to do for this man they planned to give her to?

"Who the hell do you people think you are? You can't just pick me up and give me as a gift. I demand that you take me back home." She emphasized her statement by trying to wrench her arm free, but Lord Marcone wasn't letting go.

"I really don't think you are in a very good position to demand anything, little one."

His lips twitched, and she had to stomp down the urge to slap him. Glaring at him, she growled, "You can't keep me here against my will. *There is* a way out of here, and I will find it."

The man raised an eyebrow and pulled her into one of the rooms off the hall. It appeared to be an office with a desk and some chairs, but what caught Mikayla's attention was the window that ran along the wall.

Bitter bile rose from her stomach, and she swallowed twice to keep from getting sick. She probably would have fallen into a heap on the floor if her captor hadn't still been holding on to her arm.

Staring out the window, she couldn't believe she was actually seeing Earth several miles below them. Somehow, they had gotten to the ship that was orbiting the planet. *Good Lord. When he said ship, I had no idea he meant that ship.*

"As you can see, the only way off this ship is for you to jump. I would think you would find our hospitality a much more pleasant alternative."

She turned to face him and scrunched her nose in distaste. "I think I'd prefer to jump."

"That is a pity." He ran the tip of his finger down her cheek. "I was looking forward to seeing that pretty face again."

Her skin tingled and burned beneath his light touch. She jerked away and stared at him warily. Never in her life would she have thought a touch could burn. It had to be the alien in him. Somehow, he'd done it on purpose to upset her.

Giving her a knowing smile, he let go of her arm and turned to leave. "Try not to lose her this time, Lafon."

"Yes, my lord."

Lafon reached to grab her arm again, but she sidestepped him. "Don't touch me."

Pulling a small handgun out of his belt, he pointed it at her. Her eyes widened, and she took a step back, her heart pounding a thunderous rhythm. Was he going to shoot her?

"I've had enough of your stupid little games. The captain may find you amusing, but I do not. You will either move now, or you get carried there. Makes no difference to me."

"Fine," she growled as she moved to go with him down the hall.

Mikayla remained silent and concentrated on looking around. She had to figure a way off this thing. One way or another. At the end of the hall, they stepped into what looked like an elevator. The doors closed behind them with a loud swoosh, and she jumped.

"Recreation deck," Lafon said, and the elevator began to move. Not just up and down, but side to side as well.

Once they came to a stop and the doors slid open, they stepped off into what looked like another world. In shock, she stood in the middle of the long hallway and looked around her.

She guessed the width to be about twenty yards. It had light brown carpet and was decorated with trees, plants, and benches scattered all along both sides. It reminded her of a small garden path. Glancing around, she noticed the glass roof two stories above them and the stars beyond. Under any other circumstances, she would have found it quite beautiful.

"What all is on this deck?" she asked. She needed to find out as much about the ship as possible to aid in her escape.

Lafon looked at her and then shrugged. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to tell you. Down to the right are three eating lounges, the training facility, and the briefing auditorium. On this end is the bar. This is where you will be stationed."

"Stationed?"

"Yes. You're a gift to the man who runs the bar, Agnus. He could use someone of your...looks to work in the bar."

Mikayla sneered at the way his gaze roamed over her body, his eyes sparking with lust. A shiver of disgust and fear snaked down her spine. Hopefully, bartending is all I'll be doing here, she thought. Heading to the left, they entered a massive pair of double doors.

"Agnus, we're here," Lafon yelled.

"Be right there." She heard someone say from another room. While waiting, she took a moment to look around.

This bar was the largest she had ever seen. And she'd certainly seen her fair share. Greg's favorite pastime had been barhopping, and he always dragged her along for the ride.

On the main floor was a huge square island made of dark wood, smack in the middle of the room. It had stools all around it, and there were at least sixty tables scattered around the floor.

Behind the island was a wide staircase that led to the second level. It circled the room on all four sides with a beautifully decorated railing that reminded her of something one would see in a Spanish-style home. It had tables as well, but it also had couches and chairs spread about in small conversation areas. But what caught her attention was the window. It was amazing. It ran the whole length of the wall in front of them and went from floor to ceiling. From this window was also a perfect view of Earth.

"What have you got for me, Lafon?" Agnus asked.

Mikayla turned to see who had spoken, and her eyes widened slightly in surprise. He was not what she had expected. Before her stood a man, not much taller than her and at least sixty, maybe seventy, years old. He was thin with short gray hair and light blue eyes. He might not look too bad, Mikayla thought, if he wouldn't frown like that.

"This is the woman I told you about."

Agnus looked her over. "What's your name, girl?"

"Mikayla." She looked Agnus over exactly as he had her, refusing to let him intimidate her.

A small smile tugged at Agnus's lips. "Well, Mikayla, welcome to the prime minister's Destroyer, *Shlictah*. Have you ever worked a bar before?"

"Actually, I have."

"Good, then you'll catch on quickly."

She folded her arms in front of her. "What exactly am I supposed to catch on to?" She would refuse to do anything except serve drinks, even if it meant they would kill her. Being the sexual plaything for a bunch of aliens was definitely out of the question.

Agnus studied her for a moment before answering. "Celine will go over all of that with you in the morning. Right now, I've just closed, and I would like to get some sleep. Lafon, take her up to her room and lock her in. I'll let her out when I get up." He then looked back at Mikayla. "Try to get some sleep as well. Tomorrow will be a busy day."

Grabbing her elbow, Lafon escorted her up the stairs to the second floor. At the top, they took a right and headed for a door at the far end of the room. The door opened on to a long hallway that had three sets of doors down each side. Shoving her inside the first room on the left, he closed the door.

She turned and hit the door with her fist as the lock beeped, indicating it had been set. Well, she thought, so much for trying to get away while everyone was asleep. With a sigh, she leaned against the door and looked around the small room.

The walls were the same gray metal as the rest of the ship. She also realized there was no smell here. She hadn't noticed it earlier, for she had been too busy trying to get away. But now the lack of odor was obvious -- especially here in the bar. Most Earth bars held a smell of liquor and smoke. Apparently, the ship had a very good filtering system. Either that or aliens didn't do things the same way as they did on Earth. Maybe they didn't drink or smoke at all. But then if they didn't, why did they need a bar?

Mikayla sighed, wondering if maybe she wasn't losing her mind, and returned her attention to her surroundings, desperate to try and keep her calm so she could find a way home.

Off to her right was a bathroom, although, except for the huge tub, it didn't look like any bathroom she had ever seen. In the middle of the room sat a full-size bed, and on the long wall to the left stood a small dresser with three drawers. Above the bed where the headboard should have been was a small window the same width as the mattress. Mikayla climbed onto the bed and looked out at Earth.

This all seemed so unreal to her. Never in her life did she imagine she would be in a ship orbiting the planet. Closing her eyes with a sigh, she put her forehead to the glass. Her hands shook slightly as she brushed her hair away from her face. A lump formed in her throat, and she swallowed hard to get rid of it.

She couldn't let herself fall apart. She had to stay calm and think. If she gave into her fear, she would lose the only control she had. She couldn't let them see how upset she was, or how scared. One thing she learned from her years with an abusive boyfriend -- never let him see your fear.

She thought about her mother and wondered if she was okay. Did Krista make it there all right and let her mother know what happened to her? They were both probably worried to death. She would have to keep her eyes open and pay attention. Surely, a way home would soon present itself.

Lowering herself to the mattress, she covered up with several of the blankets folded at the foot of the bed. It must be fifty degrees in here, she thought. Sleep didn't come right away. Her mind kept racing, thinking about the bar, her mother, and surprisingly the man she had run into earlier. He was gorgeous, and she would bet everything she owned that he knew it.

She closed her eyes and tried to think of something else. This ship was so big, she would probably never see him again, which considering the way she'd felt when he looked at her with those gray eyes of his was probably a good thing.

Eventually, exhaustion took over, and she fell asleep.

Chapter Four

Mikayla awoke to the sound of someone in the room. At first, she thought she was at her mother's and she was coming in to wake her. The relief it had all been a dream quickly faded when she opened her eyes and saw Agnus standing over her.

A bony finger pointed to the foot of the bed. "There is a uniform that should fit. You will be expected to wear it at all times. Take a shower, get dressed, do whatever else you need, and then meet me downstairs in one hour. Everything you should need is in the bathroom. If you require something else, let Celine know and she will get it for you."

As he walked out the door, Mikayla looked at her watch. It was almost eleven, by her time anyway. She had no idea what time it was by their standards. She stood at the foot of the bed and picked up the uniform to get a better look at it.

"You've got to be kidding me," she mumbled aloud. Throwing the uniform back on the bed, she rolled her eyes and headed to the bathroom for a shower.

* * * * *

Mikayla looked at herself in the mirror and cringed. The uniform fit her perfectly, unfortunately. Even with all these clothes on, she'd never felt more naked. The black pants were made out of a spandex-type material and fit her like a glove, starting at just below her belly button. The black lace top crisscrossed over her chest, forming a V-shaped neckline that showed more cleavage and stomach than she was comfortable with. The long sleeves were tight until they flared out into a bell shape at the wrists.

At least he had given her a black bra to wear under it, she thought. The little black ankle boots he had also given her were fairly comfortable, at least so far. It was amazing he had guessed her size perfectly.

"Might as well get this over with," she said with a sigh. "The faster I get downstairs, the faster I can find a way out of here."

As she came down the stairs, Agnus nodded his approval. "Mikayla, this is Celine. She will show you around the bar and the storeroom, as well as inform you of the rules and what is to be expected of you."

Celine was a pretty girl, not quite as tall as Mikayla. Her blonde hair hung to her waist and was thick and straight as a stick. She had blue eyes and what looked like a series of swirling designs tattooed on her neck.

"I have paperwork to do, so I will leave you in Celine's capable hands." As he walked off, he turned and added as an afterthought, "Oh, and Mikayla, there will be no more escape attempts. I don't put up with that kind of nonsense, and I assure you, you will not like the punishment. Have I made myself clear?"

"Crystal," she replied.

Once Agnus was gone, Mikayla asked, "Is he always so gruff?"

"Yeah. But he is okay once you get to know him and as long as you do not give him any trouble."

"How long have you been here?"

Mikayla studied the layout of the bar as she listened to Celine talk.

"About two years. The other girl that was here, the one you are replacing, left to get married."

She saw Celine fill a pitcher of water at the faucet and remembered what she wanted to ask. "Where does the water come from?"

Celine raised her eyes to her and smiled slightly. "There are several storage tanks located throughout the ship. It continually refilters itself." She shrugged. "So basically, you just use the same water over and over again. Periodically, it gets low and a supply ship will bring more, but what is in the tanks will last a long time."

Mikayla walked over to the main door and stood before it, silently hoping it would just slide open. When it didn't, she looked around for a button.

"You might as well give up. I can assure you, it is locked and remains locked."

She looked at Celine and shrugged. "Can't blame a girl for trying."

"No, I guess not. So, are you ready to learn the bar?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," she replied.

Celine then began to show her the drinks and how to make them. Most of the men just ordered the Tilariun Ale, but some would want something a little more exotic. She also explained about the officers getting preferential treatment -- meaning they were served first and were always shown respect by being addressed by their rank or title.

"Don't worry, I'll help you with the names," Celine said. "Oh, and also, there is one officer that comes in most mornings and has *Korniga* with Agnus. Apparently he

and Agnus are very close. I usually try to be somewhere else when he is here, because he makes me very nervous. I do not like him. You might want to avoid him as well."

Mikayla wanted to ask her more, but Agnus returned saying they should order some food for breakfast. Celine said that later, when the bar was open, they would each take a dinner break separately so that someone was always there to help Agnus. "He always keeps menus from the eating lounge behind the bar, so just tell him what you want and he'll have it delivered."

Mikayla frowned at the menu and the words that looked like chicken scratch to her. Apparently it was too much to hope that their menu would be in English and not some alien language she couldn't begin to understand. Unsure of what to order, she let Celine do it and hoped the food was edible, because she was starving.

* * * * *

Sidious had spent most of the previous day and night down on Earth going over attack plans with some of the flyers. Satellites orbiting Earth had been destroyed as soon as Earth refused to surrender, effectively knocking out all communications. If they were smart, which Sidious was pretty sure they were, then they had a backup plan for communications in the event that happened.

"Bombing of the major cities started shortly after satellites were taken out," said Sergeant Morgan, as he handed Sidious a report, listing the damage.

Sidious studied the list and then looked at the sergeant. "All these cities have been destroyed?"

"Yes, my lord."

He looked back down at the paper to cover his anger. *Such a waste.* The flyers had done quite a bit of damage in a short amount of time. Most of the major cities were wiped out in less than twenty-four hours.

The prime minister didn't care how many people he killed or how much was destroyed in the process of taking control. Most everything could be rebuilt, even population, so long as the natural resources he was after were not affected.

"Have the ground troops move in and take over a few of the smaller unprotected towns and turn them into prison camps." Sidious placed the report in a folder and dropped it on the table. "We'll hold people there under guard until all this is over. Earth has a large population, so we'll need several of these camps set up."

"Do you want the usual, my lord? Education and medical?"

Sidious nodded as he studied another set of reports handed to him. "Yes."

From the beginning, the population here concerned him. The previous planets had not had this many people on them. He had tried to tell Rigora the number of people could be a problem for them, but he had held up his hand, stopping him. "I believe you are capable of handling this situation, Captain. I want this planet, and I expect you to get it for me. Am I clear?"

Sidious had to bite his tongue to keep from saying what was really on his mind. He didn't need this planet. It was the challenge Rigora craved. The rush of conquering yet another world and forcing its people to do his bidding, to bend to his rule. Once again, Sidious held his temper in check and said exactly what he knew Rigora wanted to hear.

"My lord."

The sergeant's voice broke through his thoughts, and he stared at him with narrowed eyes. "What, sergeant?"

He swallowed nervously, then asked, "Will there be anything else?"

Sidious sighed and turned to leave the tent. "Not at the moment. I am returning to the Destroyer. If you need me, you may contact me there."

"Yes, sir."

Climbing into his personal ship, *Triton*, he started the engines and headed back to the Destroyer. The *Triton* was a little bigger than an Imperial Flyer, but just as fast and maneuverable. It had a long, narrow middle section that could hold two people sitting side by side with about ten feet of storage space in the back that could be used for carrying supplies or baggage. The wings were each about fifteen feet long, with ends that tipped upward like a bird's wings.

Flying low over the northeastern part of the continent -- a region called the United States -- he wanted a look at the destruction firsthand. Then he wished he hadn't. There was so much smoke that covered the city of New York due to fires caused by repeated bombings, the visibility was less than a quarter of a mile. A little farther south, the city of Washington, DC was pretty much in ruins, as well.

They should have just surrendered, he thought, although he understood why they didn't. If he were in their shoes, he would have done exactly the same thing.

He was so tired of all this destruction and conquest. It was time someone put the prime minister where he belonged. He took his time getting back to the Destroyer, flying low over the Earth several times before heading back. It gave him time to get his thoughts together.

It must have been a beautiful place before all this happened. Maybe they could hold on until he and the rebellion could get their plan into motion. As he flew out of the Earth's atmosphere, he came up with a way that he might be able to help them.

He secured the ship on deck six and powered down the engines.

"Welcome back, Lord Marcone." Ensign Gregor rushed forward to greet him as he climbed out of his ship.

"Ensign, refuel her and have her ready to go at a moment's notice."

"Yes, sir." Gregor nodded as he rushed to carry out his orders.

Walking through the docking bay, he heard several men talking about Agnus's new waitress, Mikayla. He couldn't really blame them. He had caught himself several

times thinking about her since the other night. With a grin, he wondered how much trouble she had given Agnus over the last two days.

Maybe he should pop in at the bar. He usually had Korniga with Agnus this time of day. He was sure she would be there also, and he found he was actually looking forward to seeing her again.

He immediately turned and headed toward the turbochute that would take him to the recreation deck.

* * * * *

"Sidious," Agnus said as Sidious came through the door. "I'm surprised to see you this morning. I assumed with the invasion you would still be down on Earth."

Agnus was the only person on the ship who called him by his first name. To everyone else onboard he was either Lord Marcone or Captain. Of course Agnus was also a friend of his father's and had known him since he was a child. That was one of the reasons when the officers decided they needed a bar on board the Destroyer, Sidious had offered the job to Agnus. He had run a bar for years on Tilarus, and he knew Agnus would do a good job.

Sidious nodded. "I just came from there, and all I've heard about since I got back is your new waitress."

Agnus crossed his arms in front of him and sighed. "She is stubborn and a little sassy, but the men like her. I understand that the two of you have already met," he said with a smile.

"You could say that." He grinned as he remembered their first meeting.

"I heard the whole story from Lafon. Thought it was quite funny myself; can't say the same for Lafon, though." Agnus chuckled. "Grab some Korniga and have a seat. I need to get some things from the storeroom, and I will be right back."

Walking behind the bar and pouring himself a cup of Korniga, Sidious looked around and spotted Mikayla. She stood sideways, with her shoulder leaning against the window.

Her position afforded him a perfect view, and he definitely liked what he saw. Letting his gaze travel down the length of her, he admired her perfect figure -- all the way from the tip of her adorable nose to the bottom of her shapely calves.

His appraisal slowed at her firm, flat stomach and perfectly rounded breasts. Blood that should have normally been used for thinking quickly spread to areas south. *Damn.* Taking a deep breath, he tried to clear the not-so-decent thoughts that were running rampant through his mind. Thoughts of fucking her senseless were foremost, and he groaned, trying to think of something else.

The woman took his breath away. Her long, dark brown hair hung halfway down her back in loose curls his fingers itched to slide through. She had long legs he knew

without a doubt would lock around his waist with a perfect fit. And those breasts. He licked his lips at the thought of wrapping his tongue around the tip of one.

He hadn't had this kind of reaction to a woman in years. He'd been too busy with the militia and his duties to the rebellion. He loved women, loved being with them. Occasionally, he would head to Rhenari and find some willing partner, but even that had been quite some time ago.

For a moment, he wondered if he'd just been without a woman for too long. But as he studied her, he knew that wasn't it. It wasn't just physical. It was something else. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Shaking his head, he tried to tell himself he didn't have time for this, no matter how appealing the package. He had too much to do, too much at stake. Even as those thoughts went through his mind, he began to move toward her.

Stopping next to her, he leaned his shoulder against the window and crossed his arms over his chest. "Are you adjusting, Mikayla?" he asked.

She turned to look at him with eyes the color of emeralds, and his breath caught in his throat. *Shetah*. He could drown in those eyes. Even when spitting fire, they were mesmerizing.

"Now, what do you think?" she snapped.

"Things would be a whole lot easier for you if you would just admit defeat and accept the fact that this is your new home."

"If you were kidnapped and taken away from your home, would you admit defeat and accept it?" She raised an adorable eyebrow, waiting for his answer.

One side of his mouth went up in a slight smile. "Probably not."

"So then why should I?"

With that, she turned to head back toward the bar. He followed, watching the sway of her firm backside. Those pants left absolutely nothing to the imagination, and his cock twitched as he fought the desire to grab a handful of that ass, toss her onto the bar, and have his fill of her.

She scowled at him over her shoulder as though she knew what he was thinking, and he winked, unable to resist teasing her.

Sitting on a bar stool, he silently watched her stock the shelves with the bottles Agnus had just brought out.

Agnus sat next to him and chatted in Tilarian about how things were going. Sidious only half listened to what he was saying. Most of his attention was on Mikayla.

Over the last couple of days, he couldn't seem to get her out of his mind. He thought that maybe if he saw her again he could figure out what it was about her that had him so intrigued. She was beautiful, that was for certain, but it was more than that. Looking down at his cup, he realized it was empty. "Mikayla, could I have some more Korniga, please?"

"Sure," she replied as she walked over to take his cup.

Agnus immediately corrected, "That's 'yes, my lord' or 'yes, Captain,' Mikayla."

"Wow." Her eyes widened in innocence, and Sidious had to bite back a laugh. "Two whole titles. Aren't you special?"

"Mikayla," Agnus warned.

"Forget it," she replied stubbornly. "I may cut my nose off to spite my face, but I refuse to show this man respect that, in my opinion, he doesn't deserve."

Agnus scowled and stood. Sidious knew Agnus's temper, and he was sure Mikayla was about to get a tongue lashing about respect. Putting his hand on Agnus's arm, he silently coaxed him to sit back down.

"If you do not wish to call me by my title or rank, what would you prefer?" he asked. He loved her spirit, and he had a feeling whatever she came up with would be amusing if nothing else.

"'Bastard' comes quickly to mind." Her lips thinned into a tight line.

"I'm sure that bastard comes to a lot of people's minds, but surely you could come up with something more inventive."

She scowled and walked to the other side of the counter to fill his cup. While she waited for the water to heat, she eyed him mischievously through her lashes. She's got something up her sleeve, he thought.

"Has anyone ever called you Sid?"

He raised an eyebrow, and Agnus choked on his laughter. "Not and lived to tell about it, I can assure you."

Agnus tapped his chin. "If I recall, there was one man that attempted to call you Sid. Whatever happened to him?"

"They're probably still searching for his body parts along the Klinvik Belt," he replied dryly. He bit back a grin when he saw Mikayla throw him a look of doubt over her shoulder.

She finished pouring his Korniga and then set his cup on the bar in front of him. "Here's your Korniga...*Sid*."

Sidious tried to hide his amusement, and it certainly didn't help to hear Agnus next to him snort and reply under his breath, "This should be good." Tuning Agnus out, he lifted his cup.

"You better be careful, little one. You're liable to find yourself dead where you stand."

She placed her hand on her hip as she tilted her head to the side, scowling at him. "So, are you telling me that you would actually be man enough to take care of it yourself and not send one of your many minions to do it for you?"

He narrowed his eyes at her over the rim of his cup. "You might be surprised at what I am man enough to do, Mikayla."

"I would be surprised that you would be man enough to do anything at all, other than kidnap defenseless females, that is."

"Really?" He set his cup down and leaned closer, lowering his voice. "How about I take you to my quarters and show you exactly what I am man enough to do? Like spreading those thighs of yours and fucking you till you scream." Raising an eyebrow, he waited for her response. If he had surprised her, he couldn't tell.

Leaning forward with her hands on the bar, she brought her face close to his. "You might be a big man where you come from, but in my little world, you would never be man enough for me."

He stood, and her eyes widened slightly in trepidation as he slowly strolled around the bar, never taking his gaze off hers. She moved back a few steps until the bar stopped her progress. In a show of defiance, she raised her chin, glaring at him in seething hatred. Damn, she had spunk, but behind that hatred, he could see a tiny flare of desire.

"How about I show you just how man enough I am, right here?" he murmured.

He braced his hands against the bar on either side of her hips and leaned in close - close enough to see the gold flecks around her pupils. "Or would you prefer the privacy of my quarters when I fuck you into submission?"

"You wouldn't dare," she hissed.

"Is that a challenge?" He glanced toward Agnus, who watched the whole scene with interest. "Tell her how much I enjoy a challenge, Agnus."

"He enjoys a challenge," Agnus replied.

Mikayla snorted.

Sidious studied her for a moment, gauging his next move. He wanted her, but he wasn't into rape. Seduction he could do. "Bring her to my quarters in one hour," Sidious said, then pushed away from the bar.

"Sidious..." Agnus started.

Sidious just grinned as he walked by, heading to the exit, his plan already forming in his mind, making his balls tighten with anticipation. "She doesn't think I'm man enough." Sidious shrugged, his grin widening. "I have to prove her wrong."

Mikayla watched him go in stunned silence. What the hell had she done? She stared at Agnus, wide-eyed. "Surely he was joking," she whispered.

Agnus shook his head. "Nope. 'Fraid not. You and that sassy mouth of yours pushed him too far."

She swallowed as her hands began to tremble in earnest.

"He won't hurt you, Mikayla. Sidious may be a lot of things, but he's not into physically hurting women."

It wasn't the fear of him hurting her that had her so rattled. It was the fear she might actually want it -- that she might actually enjoy what he had in mind for her. The man was gorgeous...sexy...and huge. He was a mountain, which made her feel all the more vulnerable when close to him.

"What do you call rape?"

Agnus snorted. "Please. I saw the way you were looking at him."

Agnus stood and wiggled his finger for her to follow him.

"What?" Mikayla snapped. "I'm not going."

He turned to scowl at her, and she straightened her spine, determined to resist -- to not go willingly. "You will go," Agnus said as he waved his finger up and down along her body. "And you'll go naked. Get those off."

"What?" she yelled. "You plan to parade me through this ship naked?"

"Of course not. You'll be covered... Just not in that."

* * * * *

The door to Sidious's quarters opened silently, and Agnus shoved her through. She stumbled, grabbing hold of the back of the chair just inside the opening to right herself as the door closed shut behind her. Raising her gaze, she caught sight of Sidious lounging in the chair across from the one she stood behind. Her fingers tightened against the leatherlike material as her gaze traveled down his bare, muscular chest to his washboard abs and trim waist.

My God.

She swallowed as unexplained lust traveled to every pore of her flesh. She'd met gorgeous men before -- numerous ones -- but none of them compared to this man, and she certainly didn't understand her reaction to him or this situation.

She wasn't into the whole capture bondage scene, so why? Why did her body tingle when he looked at her with those gray eyes? Those beautiful gray eyes that sent warming sensations through her whole body.

He grinned, making her anger rise to the surface. "Nice to see Agnus is still prompt."

Her outfit left absolutely nothing to the imagination. A see-through black robe with nothing on underneath. Every inch of her heated with embarrassment as she let go of the chair and tried to close her robe together, not that it hid anything.

"All right. You've made your point."

"And what point is that?"

"You're man enough...happy?"

He grinned, sending her heart racing wildly. There was something about the devilish spark in his gaze that made her want to melt. "You can't be serious. I don't

want you to just say it." The devilish look in his eyes turned dark, sultry, sending currents of desire to her womb. "I want you to scream it as you come all over my cock."

She crossed her arms over her chest and licked her lips nervously. Just the thought of screaming that very thing had her pussy getting wet. God, she was so sick. He was her captor, her enemy, and here she was imagining all the things he could do to her and knowing deep down she would love every second of it.

She shook her head. "Not going to happen."

He tilted his head, studying her. "You're only making me that much more determined. You realize that, right?"

"So if I gave into you, you would leave me alone?"

He snorted. "I have a feeling once with you wouldn't be nearly enough...for either of us."

Now it was her turn to snort. "I'm not lusting after you."

"So if I walked over there, right now, and touched between your legs, you wouldn't be wet?"

Her mouth dropped open. "You arrogant prick."

He raised an eyebrow. "If I recall, that right there is what got you in this mess to start with."

"What? Calling it like I see it?"

His smile faded. "Not knowing when to keep your mouth shut."

In her anger, she forgot what little she wore and stepped around the chair to stand before him. "I'm not about to submit to you. Not in any way, shape, or form. You can forget it."

Sidious reached up and grabbed her hand, tugging her to his lap. She landed with a squeal. As her breasts brushed against his chest, the sheer material rubbed across her nipples and sent tingles of awareness shimmying up her spine. He was all hard muscles beneath her hands. Hard-as-steel muscles. She had no doubt he could force her to do his bidding with little effort, and the very idea made her insides flutter.

She shoved against his chest, almost frantic to get away from him. She couldn't do this -- wouldn't do this. In a surprising move, he let go and she scrambled to her feet, her heart racing wildly. She quickly moved several feet away and turned to glare at him, intending to put him in his place. His chuckle startled her, and she stared, unsure what to make of the sexy enigma.

He'd pulled her onto his lap, only to let her go seconds later. Was he playing some kind of game?

"What do you want from me?" she asked.

"Everything."

She pulled the edges of her robe together in front of her breasts. His gaze dropped to stare at them, and her nipples hardened, despite her resolve to remain unaffected. "Meaning?" she asked.

"Meaning." His gaze moved back to hers. "Everything."

Chapter Five

She raised her chin, staring down her nose at him. He was the enemy, and despite how gorgeous he was or how sexy...or how much she wondered how those full lips would feel against her skin...she couldn't give into him. If she did, she would be betraying her home.

He stood, and she took a step back in reflex. Swallowing, she let her gaze wander down his chest. Bad idea. Very, very bad idea. At least he still wore pants, but she definitely didn't miss the massive bulge behind the zipper of those pants. If that was any indication, he was huge.

Her stare shot back to his as he took a step closer, the desire in his gaze smothering her with heat from clear across the space that separated them.

"You ask for too much," she argued, trying to buy time. Although truthfully, she had no idea how she would get out of this.

"I don't *ask* for anything, Mikayla. I take what I want."

"Clearly," she snarled, glancing behind her as she began to back away from him as he stalked forward, like a lion moving in on its prey.

"I expect full submission from the women I fuck."

She cringed at his use of the word "fuck." "That word is so crude," she snapped. "Just like you."

He grinned and pinned her against the wall, his palms resting beside her shoulders, effectively trapping her in place. "You have no idea just how crude I can get."

"Oh, I'm sure you can get very crude," she replied, angry with just how breathless she sounded. "Most monsters can."

His grin faded, and a dark cloud passed over his gaze, darkening the gray. Had she made him angry? Had she gone too far?

They stared at one another, neither moving. Mikayla could hardly breathe with him this close to her. She could smell his musky scent, feel the heat off his flesh, and she shivered.

His gaze dropped to her body as he took one hand and gently pulled her robe open. Her fingers loosened their grip, allowing the material to fall away, exposing her breasts to his gaze. Not that he couldn't see them anyway, even with the material over them. He brushed the backs of his fingers across her nipple, and she gasped at the shock wave that tiny touch sent straight to her womb.

He turned his hand, gently cupping her breast -- weighing it before pushing upward and squeezing it within his palm.

"You intrigue me, Mikayla," he whispered as he leaned closer, resting his elbow against the wall above her head.

His free hand slid lower along her ribs to her hip. Mikayla held her breath, unable or unwilling to move. She had no idea which. He had a power over her she didn't understand -- didn't want to understand -- and needed to be able to fight. Unfortunately, she was powerless against it, and she had a sinking feeling that he knew it as well.

"Then study me from a distance," she said.

He smiled slightly. "And miss exploring this luscious body? I'm supposed to be proving to you that I'm man enough, remember?"

"I didn't." She swallowed as his hand slid around and cupped her ass, squeezing it before sliding back up along her ribs again. "I didn't mean what I said."

"Yes you did," he whispered against her lips. "And I meant what I said. I want you screaming."

His breath brushed over her mouth as he spoke, and her lips parted in silent invitation. She knew she would hate herself tomorrow, but God help her, she wanted him.

"Then I'll scream for help," she whispered, her mind refusing to accept what her body already had.

"No one would come to your rescue," he murmured, then licked his tongue along her bottom lip. "No one would dare."

His hand moved lower, down her thigh, then back up again to swipe around her hip.

"Do you want me to kiss you yet?" he teased.

"No," she answered, but her body said something else entirely as he cupped her ass and pulled her hips from the wall.

He pressed his thigh between her legs, putting gentle but insistent pressure against her pussy.

"Liar," he said, his lips spreading into a grin. "You're proving to be quite fun, Mikayla. I think I enjoy seducing you. I'm definitely enjoying this body. Especially this

ass." His palm squeezed her ass hard, pulling it toward him and causing her pussy to rub against his leg. The coarse material of his pants caused friction, sending heat searing through her veins. She closed her eyes, fighting the desire to moan in pleasure.

He slid his fingers to her pussy from behind, and she gasped as they swiped through the juices coating her labia. Her face heated in mortification. He would know now what he did to her.

"And this wet pussy," he whispered. "It's going to feel good when I get inside you."

She shook her head.

"I will get inside you, Mikayla. I know it, and so do you."

She shook her head again. He moved his hand around to the front and slid two fingers deep inside her channel, making her cry out as he thrust deep enough to push her to her toes.

"I like that," he whispered. "The sound of your cries. Such a sexy sound."

She bit down on her lower lip, swallowing her own whimpers of delight as he slowly fucked her with his fingers.

"Your body doesn't lie, no matter how hard you try to hide it...or fight it. You'll be so tight." His voice sounded rough with desire, sexy, and it sent shivers running down her back.

Her hands fell to her sides, fisting in the material of her robe. His fingers continued to slowly thrust in and out, teasing her, offering her more, then denying it. He pulled out, twirled his fingers around her clit, then thrust back in hard. She gasped, shoving her hips outward against his hand.

"The things I could do to you," he whispered against her mouth.

God help her, the things he *could* do to her? What about the things he *was doing* to her? He still hadn't kissed her, and vaguely she wondered what he was waiting for. Juices poured for her pussy to coat the insides of her thighs. No one had ever made her feel like this with just his hand. No one had ever made her this desperate for sex. Just the fact she was willing to fuck her captor said it all.

"I won't be..." She panted as he increased his rhythm, fucking her hard, forcing his fingers deeper.

"Won't be what? Won't be my sex slave? You already are. This is just the beginning." He turned his hand so that the butt of his palm pressed against her clit, sending sharp lines of pleasure from there straight to her core. "I plan to make you come over...and over...and over," he added in a soft whisper.

She moaned as the pressure inside her built from deep inside. Her fingers fisted in the waistband of his pants, holding tight as a thousand pinpoints of light exploded behind her eyes. Her pussy throbbed against his fingers, sucking them deeper. He held them still inside her, pressing his palm more firmly against her clit and causing her to

explode all over again. She ground herself against his hand, riding out the waves of pure bliss.

With a sob, she sagged against the wall. Angry with him, but mostly with herself.

"The night isn't over," he murmured, and she squeezed her eyes shut. "I haven't even kissed you yet."

Sidious couldn't stop watching her. Her lips were parted, her eyes half-closed, the green several shades darker in her desire. Her skin was flushed pink, and a thin sheen of sweat dotted her brow. He could do this all night -- watch her come.

He removed his fingers from her pussy and lifted them to his lips. She watched silently as he pushed them into his mouth and licked them clean. She tasted like honey, and he smiled before sliding his hand back between her legs, gently stroking her pussy.

She moaned, her hips working back and forth along with the motion of his palm. He could feel her heat, smell her arousal, and his cock threatened to burst free of his pants. He was so damn hard.

"Sidious...please," she whispered, her eyes pleading for him to understand.

He did understand, more than she would ever know. She thought he was her enemy and in some ways he was, but he wasn't the monster she believed, and before the night was over, he'd prove that to her.

He continued stroking her pussy. Juices coated his palm, and he knew she wanted him, despite what her heart was telling her.

"You're mine now, Mikayla," he whispered.

She closed her eyes as he moved his fingers back, spreading her juices between the cleft of her tight ass.

"You're mine to do with as I want."

She swallowed and shook her head in denial. "Maybe my body."

He twirled his finger around the tight, puckered hole, and her eyes flew open, shock, trepidation, and desire mingling within the deep green. No one had ever taken her there, and the thought both shocked and thrilled him. As big as he was, she would need more preparation than he had patience for at the moment, so he moved his fingers back to her sopping pussy.

She was so wet, so hot, he could barely keep himself from taking her right now.

"Your body is all I need right now," he murmured, then drew her bottom lip into his mouth and gently sucked.

He felt as well as heard her sharp intake of breath before he let it go with a soft *pop*.

"Eventually," he whispered, brushing his lips over hers in teasing sweeps. "You'll give me the rest."

"No," she whimpered.

"I want everything, Mikayla."

His lips slanted over hers, swallowing her groan as he thrust three fingers deep into her pussy. His tongue darted into her mouth, coaxing her to join him in the play. Her fingers dug into his sides as she desperately fought submitting. He actually liked how she fought him; he enjoyed the chase, the seduction.

With a deep moan, she slid her palms up his back and returned his kiss, finally dropping that last defense. Her warm tongue twirled around his, answering his demands and sending his senses skyrocketing out of control.

Her fingers moved to the buttons of his pants and jerked at them, freeing his cock from the tight confines of his pants. Tentative fingers gripped his length, and he groaned, breaking free of the kiss.

Mikayla swallowed at his size. There was no way -- no fucking way she could take him.

She shook her head, dropping her gaze to his cock. He was thick, real thick and long. The head came just past his navel. "Sidious, there's no way."

He gave her a small, understanding smile. Cupping her cheek, he again lowered his head and kissed the corner of her mouth. "Trust me," he whispered as his lips worked along her jaw to her neck. "I'll fit."

He took her hand and put it back on his cock, his fingers closing around hers as she gripped the base. She loved sex, but she'd been with very few men in her life. Just in the few minutes she'd been in here, he'd made her feel more than any of the others combined.

His touch was so completely opposite of what she'd expected. He was tender, gentle, even caring. He did things and touched her in ways she'd never expected from him.

His teeth scraped along the sensitive flesh just below her ear, and she dropped her head back against the wall with a thud. She gave up fighting. What he was doing felt so good, she didn't want to fight anymore. She just wanted to feel...to forget, even if it was just for a little while.

His hands moved to her shoulders and tugged the robe down her arms, letting it fall to the floor at her feet. Warm, gentle lips moved lower, across her collarbone, then down to the rise of her breasts. She held her breath as his mouth hovered over her nipple. His hot breath blew across the sensitive nub, and she trembled with growing desperation.

"Sid," she said, then inhaled a shaky breath.

He glanced up through his lashes; then, using his palm, he cupped the underside and pressed upward. His lips encircled her nipple, and she arched her back, moaning loudly. He suckled, sending hot currents of pleasure to every inch of body.

Letting go of her breast, he dropped to his knees, sliding his kisses lower along her stomach. How could he be so unhurried, so determined to take his time? He'd already made her come once...okay, twice, and already she was so turned on she felt on fire. He was killing her. Killing her with seduction, and if he didn't put an end to her misery soon, she'd combust.

With one hand behind her thigh, he lifted her leg over his shoulder. She almost lost her balance, and braced one hand against the wall, the other on his shoulder to keep from falling.

"I won't let you fall," he murmured just before licking his tongue along her slit.

She moaned, her hips jerking away from the wall and toward his face. His mouth was warm and firm as he nibbled at one side of her labia, then the other.

"So sweet," he whispered.

With the pad of his thumb, he pulled at one side of her labia, exposing her clit to his hungry mouth. Mikayla bucked wildly as he closed his lips over the sensitive bud and softly sucked. Three fingers again thrust into her pussy, filling her deep, and she exploded in a blinding burst of light. Every part of her convulsed and spasmed as she rode out the waves of her third orgasm, his fingers thrusting deep and hard.

Sidious moaned his approval, increasing the pressure to her clit before pulling away and sliding the flat of his tongue along her pussy, licking at her cream.

He pulled away, and her leg weakened, making her slide along the wall to the floor. She landed softly in a heap at his feet, still panting and tingling, too weak to muster up even the smallest amount of anger or embarrassment.

He'd won. She couldn't deny that.

Her gaze wandered up Sidious's legs as he stood. He kept his gaze...his dark, burning gaze on her as he pushed his pants down, exposing hard, muscular thighs and a cock that made her breath catch. Again, she wondered if she could do this. But even as doubts plagued her mind, desire cursed through her body.

Squatting, he picked her up into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck, holding tight as he stood easily and carried her toward another room. Would he fuck her now? Or would he find some other way to make her scream out her release, proving again just how much control he had over her body?

But she couldn't let him control her heart. He was still her enemy, and nothing would ever change that. He might make her scream, but she still hated him and everything he stood for -- everything he was doing to her home, her friends.

Tears gathered behind her eyes and spilled out to slide down her cheeks. She tried to fight them but only made them worse. He laid her on the bed, and she turned her face, not wanting him to see them.

He leaned over her and cupped her cheek, turning her so she faced him. She closed her eyes tight, refusing to look into his face, to let him see just how much this hurt her. She felt as though she were betraying everything and everyone she knew.

"Mikayla," he said, then sighed.

"I hate you," she said with a tiny sob.

"I know," he replied, using the pad of his thumb to wipe away her tears. "But that doesn't change the fact that I want you...or that you want me."

She shook her head, swallowing down a lump in her throat the size of a baseball.

"Just get it over with," she snapped.

He laughed, leaning down to kiss her brow. "Absolutely not." He lay over her, his body covering hers from head to toe. "I plan on taking my time and making sure you enjoy every" -- his lips swiped across hers -- "single" -- his thighs spread hers, and the head of his cock pressed just inside her entrance -- "second."

He thrust forward, burying only a portion of his cock inside her, and she gasped, lifting her legs to wrap around his waist. Her pussy burned, stretched tight as he pushed in farther.

She held her breath, struggling to accommodate his thick girth as he forced his way deeper before pulling back out. "No," she panted, tightening her legs around him to hold him inside her.

"I'm not going anywhere," he whispered in her ear. "You feel too good to leave."

He pressed forward again ever so slowly. She could feel every inch of his thick heat throbbing inside her channel as he pressed deeper, filling her even more. She panted at the fullness, the burning pressure as he pulled back, then thrust forward again, this time going balls deep.

She groaned, digging her nails into his hips and lifting her ass off the bed to grind against him. Sidious moaned, grasping her hips with one hand to hold her still.

"You're so fucking tight. Be still, before I lose it and hurt both of us," he commanded in a rough tone that sent tingles up her back.

Lifting up on one elbow, he gazed into her eyes. What she saw there startled her, and she looked away, unable to face in him, or what she fought within herself.

"And you were afraid I wouldn't fit," he whispered as he pulled almost out, then thrust back in slowly, her slick juices easing the way.

Mikayla closed her eyes, sighing as he did it twice more, letting her become accustomed to his size. Again, his tenderness surprised her and made it all the harder for her to resist him.

"Are you okay, baby? Can you take more?"

She nodded, unsure she could even speak at the moment.

"Answer me," he commanded, but in a soft tone.

"Yes," she groaned as he ground his pelvis against her clit, sending shock waves of tingling sparks through her pussy.

He rose above her onto his palms and increased the rhythm of his thrusts. The position pushed him deeper, and she whimpered in pleasure, almost certain if he went

any deeper he'd come out her throat. But it felt so good, so incredibly good she couldn't seem to get enough. She wanted more, needed more, and lifted her knees to his chest.

His look of surprise met hers, and he thrust harder, scooting her along the bed as he pistoned into her. She met every pounding thrust of his hips with one of her own, pushing back as he pressed into her. Her juices leaked out to slide between the cheeks of her ass, wetting the sheets beneath her, but she didn't care. All she cared about was the rising tide of release tightening her stomach. She was so close, she could feel it just out of her reach; she could feel it building higher and higher.

She closed her eyes, bracing against the onslaught of sensation careening through her. With a loud scream, she crested. Every part of her exploded outward in a mass of overwhelming sensation that nearly took her breath.

"Fuck," Sidious snarled, then pounded harder, thrusting deeper than he had before.

Mikayla screamed again, fighting against the desire to pass out as wave after wave raced through her. Her pussy convulsed around his cock, sucking at him as he shouted and found his own release deep inside her.

He dropped back down, covering her body with his and raining soft kisses along her neck. She could still feel his heart beat in his cock against the walls of her pussy and realized it seemed to beat in time with hers.

What the hell had she done? How could he have had this much control over her? He shifted inside her, and she gasped, lifting her hips in reflex to meet his slow thrust.

"Don't," she whispered, despite the response of her body.

He rose up and looked at her. "Am I hurting you?"

"No," she said, not looking at him.

"Look at me, Mikayla," he commanded, and at first, she refused.

He gripped her chin, forcing her to meet his hard stare. "I said look at me."

She narrowed her eyes, her mouth set in a hard, firm line. "I'm looking. What?"

He snickered, his lips twitching in sudden amusement. With a soft chuckle, he let go of her chin. "You're such a feisty little thing," he said.

She stared up at him, startled.

"When are you going to learn -- I will not hurt you."

"I'm not afraid of you hurting me," she admitted. And truthfully, she wasn't. Especially after tonight. "I'm afraid of what you do to me. How you can make me forget who you are and why I should hate you."

He dropped his forehead to hers with a sigh. His hands cupped her cheeks, his thumbs gently stroking her skin at her temples. "I'm not the enemy, Mikayla. I'm not."

"How can you not be?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"You just have to trust me."

Mikayla snorted. "You can't be serious."

Sidious chuckled, and she felt the vibrations against her breasts, making them tingle.

"God," she groaned in exasperation. "You're killing me. Everything you do just..."

"Now you know how I feel," he murmured.

He twisted his hips in an enticing little circle against her clit that made her draw in a sharp breath of air.

"And your little feisty attitude just makes it worse...makes me want you all the more."

"Then from now on I'll be nothing but sweetness and light."

"The hell you will," he said, his lips lifting into a devilish grin. "I won't allow it."

* * * * *

The next morning, Sidious's thoughts were still on Mikayla as he walked into Rigora's office. He didn't think he'd gotten more than two hours sleep last night, if that. He couldn't keep his hands off her, and the way she responded to him only made him all the more hungry for her the next time. He couldn't get enough, and that was not a good thing.

Forcing his thoughts away from the feisty human he'd left sleeping in his bed, he faced Rigora. He hated being in this man's presence, but he couldn't avoid it. Carlone had called on his communicator and said Rigora wanted to see him.

He stopped in front of the prime minister's desk and placed his hands behind his back. "You wanted to see me?"

"How is the invasion going, Captain?" Rigora asked. His eyes remained on the paperwork in front of him.

"Everything is on schedule."

"How long do you expect this to take? I need to start appointing the monarchies for this planet so that they can be in place as soon as the invasion is over."

Sidious swallowed the disgust he felt for the man and went on to tell him, "The population is larger than any we've encountered. We're not only fighting the military, but the millions of civilians as well."

Cold, ice blue eyes stared up at him and frowned. "Are you saying that you think we might lose?" he asked as though he couldn't believe such a notion.

"No, I am saying that it may take us longer than expected."

Rigora sighed and nodded his head. "It will take as long as it will take, *but* I want you to do everything you can to speed this up. I'm counting on you to get this done quickly."

"Yes, sir." He bowed slightly and then turned to leave the room.

Once in the hallway, he hit the wall in disgust. Instead of going to his office, he decided he needed to let off some steam. He headed to the training facility, where he could take his anger out on the punching bag, envisioning Rigora's head.

* * * * *

After an hour of searching the ship, Stefan finally found his brother. Standing back, he watched him beat the hell out of the punching bag hanging in front of him.

He looked so tired and had aged so much. They really needed to end this soon. Ten years undercover as a spy was really beginning to take its toll on Sidious. It was taking its toll on all of them.

"So," Stefan said. "I understand from Agnus that you have finally met your match in a female."

Stopping his assault on the bag, Sidious turned and stared at him.

Stefan was just as tall as Sidious, with the same white hair and gray eyes, but was less beefy in musculature. He didn't spend nearly as much time in the gym as Sidious. Stefan knew that lately his brother had been in the gym quite a bit trying to find an outlet for some of the anger and aggravation he felt.

"Agnus talks too much," Sidious replied before turning his attention back to the bag.

Stefan grinned. "That he does, although he means well. Word has already spread to Tilarus. Mother has picked a summer date for the nuptials."

Sidious narrowed his darkening eyes. "You are a *vigic*, do you know that?"

"Of course." He shrugged. "Isn't that what older brothers are for? Since when do you have such an interest in Agnus's barmaids, anyway?"

Sidious raised an eyebrow. "Since when do you think it is any of your business?"

"Ah..." Stefan began with a chuckle. Could it be his brother was actually smitten? After all, he'd spent the entire night with her, something his brother rarely did.

"Stefan, I wouldn't if I were you." Sidious pointed a finger at him. "Otherwise, you will find yourself hanging here in place of the bag."

He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. "What has got you in such a mood? Other than the usual."

Sidious took off the gloves and tossed them toward the bin a few feet away. He scowled at Stefan. "Why are you here?"

Stefan pushed away from the wall and moved toward Sidious. "I have something I need to talk to you about."

"And it can't wait?"

Stefan shook his head.

Sidious sighed. "One of these days I am going to revoke your damn clearance to this ship."

"You know, you keep saying that." Stefan watched him stroll to the showers. "I'll meet you in the bar."

He chuckled when he heard his brother mumble something under his breath. One of these days, he would push him until Sidious finally snapped and hit him. Oh well, he thought with a grin. It wouldn't be the first time.

Stefan left the training facility and headed to the bar. That was usually where they discussed things. The noise guaranteed they wouldn't be overheard. Besides, Sidious wasn't absolutely certain that Commander Woods hadn't bugged his quarters in one of his attempts to catch him spying.

He had just come from the *Vultair*, and he had some very interesting news Taron wanted him to get to Sidious right away. He was also curious to meet this young woman who'd pushed his brother's buttons yesterday.

Sidious had never had trouble getting women, ever. They flocked to him like Corgons to Veegany. He dated a few, slept with a lot, but he was never serious about any of them.

Stefan had decided a long time ago that what his brother needed was a woman who would challenge him. A woman he couldn't intimidate. And from the sound of things, he thought with a smile, he might have just found her.

* * * * *

Mikayla saw the blond enter the bar and instantly knew he had to be related to Sidious somehow. Except for the way they wore their hair, and their body size, they could easily be twins. Although they both had the same white hair color, this man wore his much longer, letting it trail halfway down his back with only the front part pulled back, as opposed to Sidious's shoulder-length hair.

She had to stop thinking about him and last night. She'd lost count of just how many times he'd made her come. And every time, he'd done it with such tenderness and caring.

She had to continually remind herself that it didn't matter. He was still the enemy -- still the man destroying her home.

Turning her attention back to the blond, she watched as he sauntered confidently over to the bar. She couldn't stop herself from comparing the two of them. Sidious was definitely more muscular, but this guy wasn't small by any means. He was also just as tall.

There was a different air about him, though. He was much more at ease. Much more relaxed. He smiled at her, and his whole face lit up. "You must be Mikayla."

She raised an eyebrow and pulled a glass down from the shelf overhead. "And you are?"

Stefan's grin widened, and his eyes twinkled with laughter. "Oh boy...no wonder he's all in a mood."

She frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing." He held out his hand. "I am Stefan Marcone. Lord Marcone's older brother."

She took his hand and shook it, her eyes narrowing in confusion. "Older? I always thought the older had the title."

"We do. I am Count Marcone, at your service." He stepped back and bowed slightly with a smile. "Lord is a title given to the younger sons of a monarch."

"I see." She eyed him and wondered why he was staring at her like that. He appeared amused. Like he had some private joke he was busting to share. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Yes, an ale."

She moved to pour him one. The bar was still relatively quiet, but she knew that soon it would pick up. It was almost time for a shift change. "Are you in the militia as well?"

"No." He shook his head and took the glass she offered him. "I'm the oldest son of a monarch and therefore not allowed."

"Lucky you."

He shrugged. "That depends on how you look at it, I suppose." His shrewd eyes watched her, and she fought back a shiver. Stefan had the same intense stare as his brother. But Stefan didn't make her body come alive; he just gave her the creeps.

"You don't like it here, do you?" he asked.

"Hmmm." She pursed her lips. "Can't imagine what would have given you that idea."

"Calling my brother Sid was probably my first clue. Even I'm not allowed that privilege. Agnus is convinced you have a death wish."

Mikayla rolled her eyes. "Your brother is beyond arrogant."

"That he is." Stefan smiled, and his eyes crinkled at the corners. "But he's a good man."

"That's a matter of opinion."

The swish of the bar doors opening caught her attention. The minute she saw him come through the door, her pulse quickened. Sidious, she thought with a sneer.

She hated the fact her body reacted this way to his presence. It was as if she had no control over it. She didn't want this attraction to him, and the aggravation she felt with herself came out as anger toward him.

Their gazes locked, and she squirmed beneath his heated stare. He broke eye contact first and raked his gaze over her in a way that made her feel exposed. Turning away, she tried to give Stefan her full attention. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Sidious walk over and place his hand on Stefan's shoulder. With a nod of acknowledgment, he took the stool next to him.

"I see you've met my brother," Sidious said with a smile.

"Yes, and he's quite charming." She placed her hand on her hip and stared at him with narrowed eyes. "Not at all like you."

"I have been told I can be quite charming."

"What your mother says doesn't count," she countered back.

Mikayla didn't miss the smile Stefan tried to hide behind his glass of ale. She wasn't trying to be funny. She was trying to get Sidious to get the hint and leave her alone. She didn't want a repeat of last night. Not again; she couldn't take it.

Their gazes remained locked in silent battle until Agnus broke the spell.

"Mikayla, I need your help over here a minute."

"Coming," she said to Agnus and then turned to Stefan with a smile. "It was very nice to meet you, Stefan."

"Likewise," he said, returning her smile.

Completely ignoring Sidious, she left to go help Agnus.

Sidious shook his head in amusement as he watched her walk away.

"You know, maybe you sh --"

"Shut up, Stefan."

He ignored his brother's knowing smile as he went behind the bar to get himself a drink. He knew she was using her smart mouth as a cover. She was good at masking her expressions, he would give her that, but she hadn't been quick enough. He saw the way she'd looked at him when he walked in, at least before that wall of hers went back up.

It was obvious that even after last night, she was going to try and avoid him. Status quo, apparently. But he'd get her alone soon enough. Eventually, he'd get through to her, or die trying.

Motioning for Stefan to follow him, they made their way to one of the small tables in the far corner. They sat across from each other and began to talk quietly.

Stefan leaned forward and whispered. "It appears we have some new members to our cause."

"Who?" Sidious asked as he took a sip of his ale.

"The Thallion Warriors."

Sidious raised his eyebrows in surprise. Since Rigora hadn't yet announced an interest in the Libra sector, the prime minister had pretty much left the warrior race alone, and there had been an unsteady truce between the two empires for several years. But lately Rigora had been talking about possibly adding them to his collection. He felt their warriors, and especially their warships, would be a great asset for him. Now, it appeared they would be a great asset to the rebellion.

"It seems they've gotten word they are to be the prime minister's next conquest. So in order to beat him to the punch, they have offered the use of their warships and personnel to the rebels."

"That's terrific. We can use all the help we can get. Are you headed back to the *Vultair*?" Sidious asked.

"Yes, but first I need to swing by Tilarus. There was a message from Father that he needs me to take care of something."

"When you see Taron, tell him to get that package ready that I asked for."

"Have you figured out a way in?" Stefan asked.

"Yeah."

"Well?"

When Sidious didn't answer, he eyed him suspiciously. "You are not doing what I think you are!" Stefan snapped.

Sidious rolled his eyes. "I am not getting into this with you, Stefan. It is the only way, and you know it."

"You start crawling around in those ventilation shafts, they will know you're up to something, not to mention the fact that you wouldn't get twenty feet before the alarms start going off."

He shrugged. "I will come up with an excuse to be there."

"And why would they send you and not a mechanic?"

"Stefan." He slammed his glass down on the table and lowered his voice. "I do not have all the answers, yet. But unless you can come up with a better idea, this is all we've got."

"If you try to pull this off, you will be committing suicide, and you know it."

They had been looking at the blueprints for months, and the only way they could see into the shield generators was through the ventilation system. The ship's builders had designed it that way on purpose, to make sabotage that much harder.

Unfortunately, setting bombs off from directly inside the generator was the only way they could effectively wipe out the shields.

"What if we send you in cloaked?"

"What?" Sidious looked at his brother as if he had lost his mind.

"Taron has been experimenting a little with the Litarian Cloak. He thinks we can cloak you and then you can crawl around in there to your heart's content, without detection."

"That might work," he said thoughtfully. "But what about side effects? To my knowledge, no one has ever cloaked a man before, and I have no desire to be a test rat."

"He is working on it now. Hopefully, by the time I get back he will have all that figured out. Of course, you realize we are going to have to figure out a way to get you to the *Vultair* to be fitted for the device."

Sidious sat thinking for a minute. "How close is the *Vultair* to Daego?"

"Close enough," Stefan replied.

"Let's plan on doing it there. Daego is one of the few planets left that is not under Rigora's control. It should be safe enough."

"Just give me at least twenty-four hours' notice."

Sidious nodded as he drank his ale.

* * * * *

Making her rounds about the bar, Mikayla kept stealing glances at Sidious and his brother. With their heads pressed close together, they appeared to be having a serious discussion. How could she possibly be attracted to a man bent on her world's destruction? How could she have submitted to him like she had?

She knew how. She was weak, and he knew it. He knew all her buttons to push, all her weaknesses, and she had no doubt he'd continue to use them against her.

She had to find a way off this ship, but Agnus continued to lock her in her room at night. If she could convince Agnus she'd accepted her fate, he would trust her enough to not lock her door; then she could sneak out and find a way home.

She leaned over to wipe down a table, her eyes still on Sidious.

A man snaked his arms around her waist from behind. "Hey, baby, why don't me and you go find a quiet corner somewhere?"

She cringed as he placed wet lips against her neck. She could smell the lingering scent of ale that seemed to ooze from his every pore.

Trying to dodge his kisses, she wiggled out of his embrace. "I don't think that now is a good time. I have a lot of work to do, and Agnus would be upset if I disappeared."

From experience serving drunks on Earth, she knew enough to be gentle with her words. Unfortunately, this drunk wasn't interested in taking no for an answer.

Grabbing her around the waist, he pulled her body up next to his and once again kissed her neck. "I don't care about Agnus."

Shoving hard at the soldier's chest, she finally got him to let go, but he was so drunk he lost his balance and almost fell. When he caught himself, he turned to Mikayla with a sneer and raised his hand to strike her. Never taking her eyes off his, she reached behind her and felt for anything she could use to hit him with. Suddenly, a hand reached out to stop him midswing.

Great, she growled to herself.

"I think you have had enough fun for one night." Sidious sneered as he shoved the soldier toward the door. "To your quarters, soldier. Now."

The soldier nodded and staggered from the bar.

Mikayla's bit her lower lip as she watched the exchange. Sidious was the last man she wanted coming to her rescue. The anger on his face was unmistakable. That

surprised her. If he condoned kidnapping, what did he care if a soldier got a little rough with the slave?

She watched him turn back to her, his normally gray eyes black with anger quickly changed to desire as they roamed over her. She swallowed down a lump.

Lord help me.

Why couldn't it have been anyone else? Even Stefan would have been better.

"Are you all right?" Putting his finger under her chin, he tried to make her look at him.

Pulling away, she turned her gaze from his. "I'm fine. I could have handled it, though. I really didn't need your help."

She probably shouldn't be such a grouch, but she didn't like the way she felt when he was this close to her. All she could think about was last night and all the things he'd done to her. He was so near she could feel the heat radiating off his body, and hers felt as though it would combust into flames. Even her nipples tingled. Taking a step back, she tried to ignore her own body's reaction to his closeness and concentrated on her anger instead.

"Oh, yeah. It looked like you had everything well under control."

She narrowed her eyes. "I was handling the situation just fine."

"Not from where I was sitting you weren't. Would it kill you to say thank you?"

"If I recall, I never asked for your help. As usual, you just barrel right in and take over."

"And just where have I barreled in and taken over?"

Mikayla should have heeded the tone of his voice but didn't. Instead she continued headfirst without stopping to think about her actions. "My home for one. How many other worlds have you and that sorry excuse for a man you call a prime minister taken over?"

"Mikayla," he said, this time clearly with warning.

Choosing to ignore his threatening tone, she continued, "What? What more could you possibly do? You've taken me away from my home, my family, and you have the gall to stand there and want me to thank you for rescuing me from a predicament that, in my opinion, you put me in."

She knew he wasn't really the one responsible for her being there and that she was being ridiculous, but she didn't care. She was too angry.

"I think it's time I showed you exactly what more I could do," he growled just before he bent down and threw her over his shoulder.

She gasped in shock as she stared at the view of his firm back from her upside-down position. She couldn't believe what he was doing. Once the shock wore off, uncertainty took its place. What the hell was he going to do?

The crowd of men laughed and cheered him on as he turned and headed toward the stairs that would take them to her room.

"Damn you, Marcone, put me down!" She beat on his back with her fists. Not that it did any good. Hitting his back was like hitting solid rock. "Agnus. Do something," she shouted as they went by him.

"You got your own self in this mess, girl. Don't look to me to get you out of it."

She frowned at Agnus's amused expression. "It's not funny."

She continued to pound his back as hard as she could with her fist. "I swear, Marcone, if you don't put me --" The rest of her words were cut off when he jostled her. The force of her ribs hitting his shoulder knocked some of the wind from her, and she gulped for air.

Since hitting him didn't seem to have an effect, she called him every nasty name she could think of. When she couldn't think of any more, she made up a few of her own. She had to get him to put her down, even if it meant he became angrier than he already was. Knowing what he probably had in mind once he got to her quarters only made her struggle that much harder.

"Enough," he shouted as he slapped her backside with the palm of his hand. She couldn't believe he had actually done that. He hadn't hit her hard, but the sound it made certainly caught everyone's attention, and their laughter only infuriated her more.

They were almost at her quarters, so in a last-ditch effort to get him to let her go, she grabbed his ponytail and pulled as hard as she could. Unprepared for the assault, his head jerked backward, causing him to almost lose his balance.

"Damn it, woman," he growled as he grabbed the door frame with his free hand to try to right himself before both of them went tumbling to the floor.

Stalking over to the foot of her bed, he dropped her unceremoniously onto the mattress. Before she had a chance to get up, he was over her, straddling her thighs beneath him. Grabbing her wrists as she tried to hit him, he pinned them to the bed on either side of her head, effectively holding her in place.

"Let me up," she gritted through her teeth as she wiggled to get out from under him.

"Not until we get something straight."

"What?"

"When I'm here in the morning with Agnus, you can fight me all you want to. In fact, I enjoy your temper. But you will show me respect in front of my men. Is that clear?"

"And if I don't?"

His black eyes narrowed to slits as he lowered his face to hers. "I mean it, Mikayla. You don't want to know the answer to that question."

She swallowed down her fear, determined he wasn't going to get the best of her. "What's the matter, *Sid*? Are you afraid for the men to see a little slip of a girl standing

up to you? That maybe they'll see that if I'm not afraid of you, they shouldn't be either?"

He quietly studied her for a moment, his black eyes staring into hers. Mikayla saw the anger in his eyes change to desire, and she swallowed nervously.

I don't think I like where this is going.

He was a gorgeous man, and most definitely way too sexy for his own good. If he wanted her, there was nothing she could do about it -- he was more than twice her size. But it wasn't his physical strength that concerned her. It was the effect he had on her when he looked at her like that.

Her whole body tingled in a way that made her weak. His jacket rubbed her breasts, and she struggled against the desire to arch her back and press herself into his chest. Their lips were so close she could smell the drink he'd had on his breath, and the realization that all it would take to part hers would be a slight flick of his tongue made her breath catch. His eyes moved to her mouth, and she swallowed down a moan.

"What's it going to take, Mikayla?"

"What's it going to take for what? To make me afraid of you?" she whispered and then inwardly chided herself at how turned on she sounded.

"To get you to do as I ask."

Fighting the desire to close the distance herself, she asked stubbornly, "Why should I do anything you ask?"

"Because, if for no other reason, we've been good to you. We haven't asked you to do anything hard or demeaning. And Agnus protects you and takes care of you, doesn't he?"

"Some protector. He hasn't protected me from you."

One corner of his lips twitched at her question. "Do you need protecting from me?"

"Apparently I do, or was I dreaming that little demonstration of male superiority? And of course we can't forget the fact that you still have me pinned to the bed!"

"Oh trust me." He frowned. "At the moment I would love nothing more than to forget that fact."

"Then perhaps you should get off me."

"Not until we finish this."

"As far as I'm concerned, it is finished. I'm not one of your little minions that you can order around."

They continued to stare at one another, at an impasse, when suddenly he grinned, and she got a sick feeling in her stomach. His gaze wandered down her neck to her breasts -- her traitorous breasts, which swelled under the heat emanating from his gaze. She held her breath, waiting, watching. God, what the hell was the matter with her? Why was her body reacting this way?

He shifted, spreading her thighs with his. He pressed forward, and she could feel the evidence of his hard arousal against her pussy. Biting her lower lip, she kept the moan at bay.

Oh God, I can't do this.

"Is this your idea of punishment?" she asked breathlessly. "Sex?"

He pressed against her again, and she moaned, lifting her hips to meet his. He clasped both of her hands in one of his over her head, then used his free hand to free his cock. From his pocket, he pulled out a knife. Holding it up, he hit the button on the side. The long blade popped free with a *click*, and she gasped in startled surprise.

What the hell was he doing?

"Sid," she whispered, and he stared at her.

"Have you not learned yet?" he growled, then slid the blade just under the waistband of her pants.

With little effort, the material split as he slid the blade all the way between her legs to her ass, exposing her pussy, but the blade never once touched her.

"Damn you," she snarled, more angry with the fact what he'd done had turned her on than with him.

"Shut up," he snapped.

He tossed the knife to the floor, then covered her mouth with his.

He thrust his tongue inside, and Mikayla could do nothing more than respond. His kiss was wild, making her feel drunk and wanton. His cock pressed against her pussy but didn't enter. Instead, he slid it through the juices that leaked from her opening.

It amazed her that even now, in their anger, he would make sure she was ready for him.

He put his hand under her ass and lifted just as he pressed forward, filling her deep with his thick cock. At first the soreness from the night before made her hiss, but it soon disappeared, replaced with a growing hunger that had her screaming for more against his lips.

He still had her hands trapped above her head, and she struggled against his hold, but he wouldn't let her go. She wanted to touch him.

"Sid," she whimpered against his lips.

"What do you want?" he murmured, slowing his thrusts, grinding his hips in a circular motion as he pressed deep.

She hummed in pleasure, moving her hips with his as he brushed against her clit. They were still dressed for the most part, and it felt strange not to feel his heat against her, not to feel his chest rubbing across her nipples. She missed it, needed it.

He pulled almost out, then thrust back in hard.

"Oh God," she groaned, undulating beneath him.

"What do you want?" he asked again, and she frowned, unsure what he was asking. He was giving her what she wanted -- every last inch of it, and it felt so damn good, she could hardly think.

"I want you. I want to touch you."

Letting go of her hands, he gripped her ass, tugging her up with him as he moved to his knees. She clung to his neck, inhaling the mixed scent of musk, male, and sex. Her legs lifted to wrap around his hips as he shoved her against the window behind the bed. With shaking fingers, she tugged at the buttons of his jacket, ignoring the cold of the glass as it seeped into her back. His hips pressed against her, holding her in place as they shoved his uniform jacket off and tossed it to the floor.

She could hardly wait to touch him. Her fingers trembled as she ran her hands over the smooth skin of his chest, then around his neck to bury in his hair. Sidious moaned, moving his hips against her, pumping his cock in deep, short thrusts. Her lips slanted across his, this time initiating the kiss. His fingers dug into her ass, squeezing and scratching as he pumped harder, deeper.

"Ah, it feels so good," she moaned against his mouth.

"Fuck yeah, it does," he growled, his mouth moving to bite softly at her neck.

With one hand, he tugged at one side of her top, ripping it and exposing her breast. He dipped his head, hungrily sucking at her nipple. She cried out, arching her back and grinding her hips, unsure which she wanted more, his mouth sucking or his cock.

"Sid," she cried as her release tightened her womb.

She dropped her head against the glass, closed her eyes, and screamed as every part of her shattered into a million tiny pieces of rapture. Sidious raised his head and captured her face in his hands.

"Look at me," he commanded.

She opened her eyes, staring into his as her body rode out wave after wave of pure bliss. He kept pumping against her, prolonging her release and his until she thought she'd beg him to stop. But she didn't want him to stop. With a low, deep growl, he pumped one final time, spilling his hot seed inside her.

She closed her eyes as the realization of what they'd just done hit her square in the chest. It had felt so good, so incredible, she'd wanted it to keep going, and that made her angry. Angry with him and herself.

"Don't," he growled, his breath coming out in harsh pants. "No more fucking regrets, Mikayla."

She stared at him, startled that he could know what she was thinking.

"I'm still mad at you," she snarled. "You can't keep doing this to me."

"Doing what?" he replied. "Giving you pleasure?"

"No." She shook her head. "Stop making me submit just to prove a damn point. I get it, okay! I have no control around you!"

He cupped her cheeks and gave her a shake as he spoke. "I'm not doing this to make a point, damn it. I'm doing this because I want you!"

"You can't have me," she whispered, determined to fight him to the very end.

"I think I just did," he snarled and pressed his cock deeper, proving his point.

Pulling out of her, he let her fall to the bed, fighting the tears that threatened to break free. She refused to cry in front of him again and swallowed them back down. She glared as he fixed his pants, grabbed his coat and knife, then turned to leave, not once looking back at her before walking out the door.

Picking up the glass that was sitting on the dresser next to the bed, she threw it, unfortunately missing him and hitting the door as it closed.

"I hate you," she yelled.

* * * * *

Sidious stopped outside the door and closed his eyes against the pain those three words caused in his chest. She was angry and had every right to be. What the hell had gotten into him? He'd never in his life treated a woman like that. A couple of his men stared with grins on their faces as he strolled back into the bar.

Ignoring them, he headed to the bottom level and Agnus's stash of Signora behind the bar. At the moment, he needed something strong. He had to get his mind off what she did to him. He jumped from wanting to kiss her to wanting to strangle her all in the same breath.

He pulled a glass down and set it on the counter. Opening the bottle, he poured the green liquid, anxious for the numbness he knew would soon follow.

Stefan stopped next to him, his brow drawn together in a frown. Here we go, Sidious thought with a sigh.

"You want to explain to me what the hell all that was about?" Stefan asked, keeping his voice low.

"Agnus doesn't allow the men to manhandle the women. He was at the other side of the room, so when the soldier tried to make a pass at Mikayla, I decided to step in." He shrugged.

"That's not what I was talking about, and you know it."

Sidious ignored him as he brought the glass to his lips and downed half of it in one gulp. The liquid burned his throat, and he cringed.

"Since when do you carry women over your shoulder like a Veenori troglodyte?"

"Since her, apparently," Sidious mumbled dryly as he finished off the glass and poured another one.

Stefan opened his mouth to say something else, and Sidious raised his glass, letting go of it with one finger to point at him.

"Don't start with me. You saw the way she was behaving in front of the men. I wouldn't let one of them talk to me like that; I can't let her get away with it. The men would have expected nothing less from me."

Stefan frowned. "You're getting a little too deep in your role, little brother."

"Well, Sidious." Agnus tossed the towel over his shoulder and snickered. "Quite a show. Will my waitress be rejoining us, or did you completely incapacitate her?"

Sidious rolled his eyes, while the other two had a good laugh at his expense. "I'm sure she'll be down as soon as she's through cursing me to oblivion."

"Yeah, well." Agnus got his laughter better under control. "That's the least you deserve."

Sidious silently agreed. God, he still couldn't believe he'd actually cut her pants.

"I have to admit" -- Stefan smiled, and Sidious inwardly groaned as he swallowed another sip of the liquor -- "it was interesting to finally see you lose that blessed control of yours. And over a woman, of all things. Although a very pretty woman at that."

Sidious watched his brother's eyes roam appreciatively over the woman in question as she came down the stairs. She'd changed into new clothes, her eyes sparking fire as she stared at him. He didn't realize he was frowning until Stefan turned back to him and raised an eyebrow. "What's that look for?"

"What look?" Sidious growled.

"The 'don't touch her, she's mine' look."

He turned away and brought the glass to his lips, taking a sip. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Stefan snorted. "I may have misjudged your look, but I certainly haven't misinterpreted hers. If looks could kill, you, little brother, would be a dead man."

Sidious had no doubt about that, and the thought actually bothered him. He slammed the glass down on the bar, the liquor sloshing over the side, leaving a small puddle. "I'm going to my quarters."

He didn't give either of them another opportunity to say anything before he left. They'd both already said enough. Stepping out into the hall, he breathed a sigh of relief at the quiet that greeted him.

Maybe his brother was right. Maybe he had gotten a little too deep in his role. Sidious would have never done anything like that, but Captain Marcone had.

He stepped into the turbochute and frowned at the closed doors. He'd been at this too long. They needed to end it, to finally bring down this travesty of a government.

Then maybe he could focus on seducing Mikayla the right way.

Chapter Six

For two days, Sidious remained on Earth handling one problem after another. The whole time he was away, his mind continually returned to Mikayla. He couldn't stop thinking about how she'd felt beneath him, the fire in her gaze as she'd stood up to him, refusing to be intimidated. Damn she was a handful -- certainly something he didn't need right now, but he couldn't stop thinking about her, about what she made him feel.

Now he was back on the Destroyer and headed right where he least wanted to be. Or most wanted to be. Which one, he wasn't sure. He stepped off the turbochute and onto the recreation deck, but then stopped.

With a sigh, he looked down at the double doors of the bar. He didn't need this. He didn't have the time to develop feelings for a woman. Especially a handful like Mikayla, but he couldn't stop thinking about her. Nor could his body stop reacting to those thoughts.

Every time he closed his eyes or had even a second of time to himself, he saw her green eyes, and his cock would immediately stand at attention.

He dragged his hand down his face. He needed to talk to Agnus. He just wouldn't pay any attention to her. Right, he told himself as he entered the pass code and strolled through the doors. Like that will work.

"Morning, Agnus," he said.

Looking up from the paperwork sitting in front of him, Agnus smiled slightly. "Morning. I haven't seen you in a couple of days. Everything going okay?"

"As expected, I suppose." He shrugged and poured himself a cup of Korniga. "I will have to admit, this world has been quite a challenge. We've already had to send for reinforcements."

Agnus raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Do you think Rigora may give in and move on?"

"No." He shook his head and took the seat across from him. "I've already tried to talk to him about my concerns with the population. He brushes them off. He will not give up until they either surrender or we all end up destroyed."

"He is a determined man," Agnus replied with a sigh.

He snorted. "Or insane. I haven't quite decided which."

Agnus looked around Sidious's shoulder toward Celine as she came down the stairs. "Celine," he said. "Where is Mikayla? I unlocked her door some time ago."

"She said she would be down shortly; she is not feeling well."

"Not feeling well?" Sidious frowned. "Did she say what was wrong?"

"No." Celine shook her head.

Sidious turned back to Agnus and set his cup down on the table. He hoped it wasn't anything serious. He was tempted to go check on her, but he wouldn't. The last thing he needed to do was be alone with her. Raising his eyes, he caught Agnus staring at him expectantly. Sidious sighed and looked back down at the table.

"You're a trained medic. How about making yourself useful," Agnus said.

Damn, Sidious growled to himself. And he'd just talked himself out of going. "I'll go check on her." Standing, he headed up the stairs.

* * * * *

Mikayla had the worst migraine she could ever remember having. It even hurt to open her eyes. If she lay very still, the pounding would ease off some, just not enough to really make any difference. She hoped it passed soon, but she knew from experience it would be there for hours.

It had to be all the stress of the last few days. She had expected Sidious to return, but he hadn't. Not since that time in her quarters. Her body still hummed at night thinking about how good it had felt; then she would cry herself to sleep, so angry that she could give into him so easily.

Part of her was glad he hadn't come back. Another much smaller part was hurt.

The door opened, and then the bed sank on one side as someone sat down on the edge. Every beat of her heart throbbed in her head, and she cringed. It was probably Agnus, but she couldn't muster up the energy to open her eyes to see for sure. Celine had already been by, and Agnus was the only other person in the bar this early, except for Sidious.

"I'll be down shortly, Agnus. I just need to rest here for a minute and see if I can get rid of this headache."

A warm hand tenderly touched her cheek, and she stiffened. This wasn't Agnus. She felt it in her gut. Opening her eyes, she squinted at the man next to her. Her heart skipped a beat as she looked at Sidious. He could always do this to her, and that thought made her scowl.

"Damn," she growled as she closed her eyes, trying not to look at him and get sucked in all over again. "What are you doing here?"

"Celine said you weren't feeling well," Sidious said.

"Why do you care?"

He sighed. "I ask myself that same question every time you open your damn mouth."

She glared at him. "What do you expect?"

"I don't know." He held up a small metal object about the size of a matchbook. "But since I am about to relieve you of that headache, maybe a little gratitude?"

"I'd rather have the headache." She closed her eyes and turned away from him.

"Shetah, *gooliga teligo defni*," he mumbled to himself.

She eyed him over her shoulder. "Excuse me?"

He narrowed his eyes. "You are a stubborn woman."

"Well, now that that's settled." She pointed toward the door. "There's the door. Don't let it hit you on the ass as you leave."

He raised an eyebrow. "Hit me on the ass as I leave?"

"Yeah." She frowned. "You know. Your butt." She pointed to hers and looked at him.

His eyes traveled down her back to her butt, a grin tugging at his lips. His eyes met hers. "You have a very nice one, by the way."

She rolled her eyes and turned away. The sound of his deep chuckle sent tingles of awareness throughout her body. She scrunched her eyes tighter against the sensations.

I'm in the middle of a migraine and still he turns me on. How sick is that?

"Mikayla, roll over," he said as he gently tugged at her shoulder.

"No. Go away."

He leaned over, his hot breath brushed across her cheek, his voice low and seductive in her ear. "Do you really want me to make you?"

She stiffened. "You wouldn't dare."

"Is that a challenge, Mikayla? Because if it is..." His words trailed off as his palm slowly slid up the outside of her thigh, sending hot, tingling current straight to her aching core.

She jerked around and slapped his hand. The motion caused her head to pound and bile to rise up her throat. "Oh God." She didn't know what to grab first, her stomach or her head.

Sidious laughed. Reaching out, he removed her hand from her forehead and placed the small metal object against her skin. "Be still."

"What is that?"

It began to whine and heat up the flesh beneath it. She frowned and moved to grab it off, but he took her hand in his and held it.

"It's a Medabri. Give it a *senah* and your headache will be gone."

The warmth of his hand on hers caught her off guard, and she peeked through her lashes to watch him. He studied her hand in his, softly running his thumb across the back of it. An electric current spread up her arm, and she frowned.

She wanted to hate him. She needed to hate him. She jerked her hand away, and he met her gaze. Something flashed across his eyes, but before she could determine what it was, it disappeared.

He took the Medabri off her forehead and smiled. "There. Any more pain?"

She shook her head as she stared at him warily. "Why are you here?"

He frowned. "I came up to check on you."

"No. I mean, why are you here? On Earth."

He looked down at his hands as though thinking. "The prime minister was informed of this planet and thought its resources would benefit him. It's rich in Tornatium, a compound your world hasn't discovered yet, as well as salt water. More people under his rule, of course means more currency. Rigora also wishes to expand the shipping lanes, and Earth is in a prime location to be used as a refueling and storage station." He looked back at her. "Actually, once the initial invasion is over, life will resume pretty much as you remember it. The only difference will be that no one can own anything. Ownership of land will only be allowed within the monarchies. Everything else will be owned by the prime minister. He will take a portion of everyone's income for taxes and appoint regent counts, or monarchs, to rule in his absence, instead of the governments you have now."

"And how is that pretty much as I remember it?" she asked smartly.

"Your home will change, but in some ways for the better. You will have medical advancements, technological advancements. You will also have a measure of freedom to do as you wish."

"You call this freedom?" She waved a hand at herself.

"Captives are allowed to be taken only during an invasion."

"Oh, that makes it so much better. Is that how you rationalize it? It's okay because we're invading? Just because you are more technologically advanced than we are doesn't justify what you're doing!" She sat up and climbed off the other side of the bed.

"You're right." He studied the device in his hand. "But unfortunately I don't have any more control over this than you do."

She snorted. "Yeah, right." She crossed her arms in front of her as she studied him through narrowed eyes. "You're his what, second in command?"

He held up three fingers. "Third. But despite my rank, I still have to do what I'm told, just as you do. Whether I like it or not."

"But I'm always looking for a way out. I'm not willing to just lie down and accept it."

"What makes you think I have?"

What did he mean by that? "Take a look in the mirror, *Captain*. I think the uniform says it all."

He didn't say anything, just stared at her. His eyes darkened like gathering storm clouds, and a tremor ran through her. Did he support Rigora, or did he not have any choice in all this? Of course he had a choice, didn't he? Or was he made to enter the militia?

Would it matter if he had been forced and actually believed as she did? Would that make it right for her to feel the things she felt when he was near -- the fluttery heartbeat, the sweaty palms, the desire to feel those muscular arms of his around her, to feel his kiss as he made love to her.

Let's be real. They didn't make love. They fucked...plain and simple.

But in truth, it felt like so much more than that.

My attraction to him is getting out of hand.

Why was she always drawn to the wrong man? First Greg, who turned out to be a sick jerk, now this guy. But if she were honest with herself, she would admit that the two of them were nothing alike. Yes, Sidious was incredibly overbearing and arrogant, but there wasn't the same underlying sense of cruelty to him that there had been with Greg.

Even when Sidious had carried her over his shoulder the other night, he hadn't been brutal. Not really. The slap to her behind had made more noise than it had hurt. And when he'd pinned her to the bed, he'd mostly used his weight and not a harsh grip.

Like that makes it acceptable.

And God. The way he made her submit. It was forceful, dominant, but at the same time, so tender. She swallowed, remembering the way he commanded she do something when he was aroused.

The shrill beep of his communicator made her jump, and she scowled as a sideways smile of amusement lit up his face. He grabbed it and flipped it open. "What?"

He was silent for a moment as he listened, his eyes never leaving hers. She had met men just as handsome on Earth. What was it about him that had her so mesmerized -- so crazy? She had to remember he was the enemy. She couldn't let him get to her, no matter how tender he could be or how gorgeous he was.

"I'll take care of it, Sergeant." He flipped it closed and started walking toward her.

She crossed her arms and gave him a malicious grin. "Earth giving you problems?"

He snorted as he walked by. "Not nearly as much as you are."

She scrunched her nose up at his retreating back.

"I saw that," he said, his voice dripping with amusement.

* * * * *

Sidious headed back down the stairs to rejoin Agnus. Mikayla was certainly a stubborn little thing, he thought with a slight grin. He loved antagonizing her. She was adorable when angry.

"Mikayla all right?" Agnus asked.

Sidious took the seat next to him facing the stairs. "She's fine. It was just a headache that was easily taken care of. Have you heard anything from Stefan?"

"Earlier." Agnus nodded. "His little venture was successful."

"Good." He watched Mikayla make her way downstairs. Her beautiful green eyes shot sparks in his direction, and he fought the urge to grin. Riling her temper was certainly enjoyable, but just once he would like to see her smile at him.

"Sidious."

Agnus's voice caught his attention, and he looked at him, his eyebrow raised in question.

Shrewd blue eyes gazed at him, then Mikayla. "You better be careful. Don't let her become a distraction." Agnus turned back to Sidious, a worried look on his face. "Distractions will get you killed."

"She's already a distraction. I can't seem to stop thinking about her."

Agnus shrugged. "Fuck her till you drop and get her out of your system."

He sighed as he studied the Korniga that had now grown cold. "This is different."

"How is it different?"

Sidious slammed the cup down on the table. "I don't know," he snapped. He looked over and caught Mikayla frowning at them. With a sigh, he turned back to his friend. "I didn't mean to snap at you, Agnus."

He waved a hand, dismissing it. "I'm used to your bark. I've heard it for the last thirty-two years; I'm sure today won't be the last I'll hear it either. You're just like your father when it comes to sudden passionate outbursts." Agnus's lips twitched. "And women."

Sidious began to play with his cup, spinning it in circles. "This particular woman is going to drive me insane. Both in and out of bed."

Celine's voice called from the storage room on the other side of the lounge. "Agnus, could you help me a minute?"

Agnus pushed to his feet. "We'll talk about this when I get back."

"Must we?"

The man he considered his second father threw a look over his shoulder he knew well. Yes, they would be talking about this again later. Sidious continued to watch Mikayla stock the bar shelves with glasses. Her hair fell down her back in loose curls, the soft lights from above caught the lighter shades of brown, giving them a golden hue. The pants hugged her firm behind, accentuating every dip and curve. Just thinking about sinking his fingers into that tight bit of flesh set his blood on fire.

Quietly, he walked up behind her and placed his hand along the side of her waist. He loved her figure. All the right curves in all the right places. His hand moved lower along her hip, and she stiffened. With a gasp, she turned around, craning her neck to look up at him.

"What the hell are you doing?" she snapped.

She was so petite, barely reaching his shoulder. It made her seem fragile. But he knew fragile was the last thing this little spitfire was. He leaned forward, his hands resting against the bar on either side of her hips. Her breath fanned against his lips, and he inhaled the scent of mint. Her body tensed, but he ignored it and moved closer. So close their noses almost touched. Her pulse throbbed in her neck, and he fought the urge to touch his lips to that spot, to soothe her fear and make her heart pound for a different reason.

"Unless I'm mistaken, little one, you forgot something."

"Forgot what?" Her voice sounded breathless, and he inwardly smiled.

His head dipped lower, and she shied away, bending backward over the bar. "You forgot to say thank you."

She put her hand against his chest and pushed. He didn't budge. Well, parts of him south budged, or bulged was more like it. Her close proximity played havoc with his senses as well as his cock. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. He could easily see himself fucking her again right here, and judging by the flare of heat in her eyes, she would be a willing victim.

With an exasperated sigh, she scowled. "Fine. Thank you."

He bit back a grin. "Surely you can do better than that. How about a kiss?"

"How about a knife in the chest?" she sneered.

"Hmmm, I think a kiss would be much more pleasurable."

"Not if you value your tongue."

He closed his lips tightly to keep from laughing. He loved her unexpected remarks.

"Would you please move?" Her voice squeaked with nervousness.

"Why?" He moved closer and rubbed the tip of his nose against hers. Her lips parted as she sucked in a quick breath. "Do I make you nervous?"

She narrowed her eyes. "If you make me feel anything at all, *Sid*, it's disgust."

He grinned at the sound of the nickname she had given him on her lips. In the past he'd always hated that name, but he liked it coming from her. If he told her that, he

was sure she would stop using it. His finger trailed along the side of her throat. He felt a tremor run through her and lightly tapped her pulse point. "I think you and I both know I make you feel things other than disgust."

Her eyes closed on a tired sigh. "Don't do this here. You know I can't tell you no and mean it."

"I think you mean it," he said, a soft smile tugging at his lips. "But wouldn't you enjoy a little exhibitionism? It would make Agnus's day."

Her eyes shot open, and she stared at him, then scowled. "You're teasing me. Right?"

"Am I?" he asked with a grin. "You and I both know I could fuck you right here in front of a full bar. But I wouldn't do that to you."

"Aren't you kind?" she sneered, and his grin widened.

"I don't know that kind is exactly the right word. More like selfish. I don't want anyone else seeing that pretty face when you come."

He smiled down at her startled expression, her green eyes ablaze with a mix of desire and uncertainty. With his fingers, he tried to smooth away the wrinkles in her forehead caused by the frown.

He skimmed them down along her cheek. Her skin was smooth and soft beneath his fingertips. His gaze moved to her impressive cleavage, and he noticed the quick rise and fall of her breasts. She was so beautiful, even now, his cock twitched in his pants to have her -- to feel her wet heat wrapping around him again.

He placed a kiss on her forehead and then walked away before he changed his mind about fucking her. He had a lot of work to get caught up on. Over his shoulder, he said, "Tell Agnus I'll be back later."

Watching him walk out the door, Mikayla sagged against the edge of the bar. The light next to the control panel blinked red, and she knew it had locked the second it closed.

She lifted a shaking hand and rubbed the spot on her cheek that still burned from his touch. No doubt about it, the man was going to drive her to drink. The passion that had sparked from his near-black eyes still made her knees weak. Slithering to the floor would have been a definite possibility if the bar hadn't held her upright.

"Oh God," she whispered to herself, closing her eyes against the tears that threatened. "I am in such deep shit."

Chapter Seven

Sidious stood on the rock outcropping about a mile away from where the United States had its emergency headquarters hidden deep in the mountains of West Virginia. He'd cloaked his ship and flown low over the area several times to see what was there. Finally, he decided to land and watch for a while.

Looking through his binoculars, he saw several people moving around and talking, but he still hadn't found the man they called the president. He knew he was here, but apparently they kept him safely inside the structure.

As he sat, he tried to think of the best way to communicate with them. He couldn't just walk in there, that was for certain. He would need to do it anonymously somehow. He had never tried to do this with one of the planets they were invading, and he knew he was taking a big risk. If he were caught, he would be executed.

Off to the side, he noticed a power line that ran directly into the compound, and an idea came to him. He wondered if they were still using coaxial cable to communicate. If they were, he could tap into it and send them information directly to their computers. Would they take him seriously, or would they think he was setting them up?

He would have to start with something small to gain their trust and then work from there. If their president was as smart as Sidious thought, he wouldn't pass up any opportunity to get the upper hand, no matter where the information came from.

Placing a damper signal around the compound so the Destroyer probes wouldn't find it, he climbed into his ship. He flew around the area and tried to find the best place to tap into the lines.

* * * * *

"Sidious."

Recognizing his brother's voice, Sidious turned and watched as Stefan and Agnus walked toward him.

As he got closer, Stefan frowned, his gaze studying Sidious intently. "You look like death warmed over. What the hell have you been into?"

Rubbing his hand down his face, Sidious let out a deep sigh. He didn't need this right now. "I feel like death warmed over, so if the two of you don't mind, I would like to get some Korniga and try to wake up." He turned and made his way toward the bar.

It had taken him most of the night to find the coaxial line that led into the compound. Then he had to attach the transmitter device and fix up a link between it and the computer onboard the *Triton*. A slow process, to say the least, and he had finished just in time to come back to the Destroyer and begin his regular duties for the next day. Only four hours of sleep over the last forty-eight. If he didn't get some sleep tonight, he would be useless tomorrow. He was pretty darn close to being useless already.

Sidious gazed at his brother with a frown. "I thought you were on your way back to Tilarus."

"I was, but I had ship problems," Stefan replied with a shrug. "They temporarily fixed it on Veena so I could make it back here. The Destroyer was closer than home. So I have a few hours to kill while the ship is in maintenance."

Entering the code to unlock the door, Agnus stepped aside to allow Stefan and Sidious to walk in ahead of him. Even as tired and cranky as Sidious was, he wanted to see Mikayla. The minute he spotted her behind the bar, he felt more at peace.

Damn, I really needed to get a handle on this.

The last thing he needed to do was fall in love with her, but damned if he wasn't already close. She was all he could think about. All he wanted to think about. But how in the hell was he going to get past that wall and turn this into more than just sex?

"Good morning, beautiful," Stefan greeted her with a smile.

"Good morning, handsome." She returned his smile, and Sidious scowled.

He wanted her to smile at him, not his damn brother.

"I love a woman who knows when she has seen a good thing." Stefan leaned his elbows on the bar. "How about you leave this bar and head to Tilarus with me? I could keep you in a lifestyle befitting a queen."

"Until you tire of me?"

"I would never tire of you." Stefan flashed his famous boyish grin, and Sidious ground his teeth.

"But what if I tire of you?"

"Never happen," Stefan replied confidently.

"Stefan," Sidious snapped, trying to get his brother's attention. He knew Stefan wasn't really interested in Mikayla, but for some reason he didn't like seeing her flirt

with him. Jealousy was something he had never had to deal with, and quite frankly he didn't like it, which only served to worsen his already foul mood.

"Do you mind?" Stefan turned to look at him. "I'm busy here."

"Forget it; she's not going anywhere. Especially with you." Sidious saw Stefan raise an eyebrow at him and knew his brother was probably thinking the same thing he was. When did he become so possessive?

Mikayla scowled. "I don't recall anyone pulling your chain."

Stefan chuckled and leaned his elbow on the counter. A teasing smile crossed his lips, and Sidious fought down the urge to clobber him.

"Yeah, brother, now that I think about it, I don't recall that either." Stefan's voice was full of laughter as he teased him.

Sidious looked at him and realized his brother was enjoying himself entirely too much. Turning his eyes to Mikayla, he said, "For your information, I don't require a chain; I'm voice activated. And as far as my brother goes..." He pinned Stefan with a glare. "You don't want to go anywhere with him. He wouldn't have a clue what to do with a woman even if he were lucky enough to get one."

"Apparently I know how to handle a woman better than you do. She's willing to leave with me, after all. You she wants to throttle."

Normally they could go at each other like this all day and neither one would get angry. They had been doing it for years, but for some reason Stefan's comment about Mikayla bothered him, and he sent his brother a scowl of warning.

"Unless the two of you have forgotten, the girl belongs to me and she stays with me." Agnus's remark pulled Sidious from his thoughts of murder.

"Hello." Mikayla waved her hand and frowned. "Don't I get a say in this?"

"No," Agnus and Sidious replied in unison.

"Of course not." She raised her hands and then dropped them to slap her thighs. "I don't know why I would have thought otherwise."

Mikayla turned her back and began to pull cups from a shelf above her, then set them on a tray. Grabbing the pot, she filled each of them full of Korniga, then set the now-empty pot aside. Sidious walked up behind her and gently laid his hands on her shoulders. He felt her immediately stiffen beneath his touch, and he sighed. Would she ever see him as anything but a monster? Would she ever trust him?

He could understand why she didn't. In her eyes, he was her captor. He seduced her, dominated her, made her feel out of control. He placed a kiss on the top of her head, inhaling the flowery scent of her hair. She shifted and stared up at him warily, her eyes full of doubts and questions. He smiled tenderly at her and touched her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

Even now, as tired as he was, he wanted her. He needed her.

"I'll get this if you'll make another pot of Korniga," he said quietly as he took the tray from her.

"You look terrible. How long has it been since you've slept?" she asked as she continued to stare at him.

He set the tray down and turned to look at her. "Is that concern I hear, little one?"

She sighed and pushed past him. "You can't just answer my question. You have to try and make it sound like I care about you."

One corner of his mouth lifted in a grin. He couldn't resist teasing her. "It sounded like a question full of concern to me."

"You definitely need to get some sleep. You're so tired, it's affecting your hearing." She stormed off to the other side of the island to make the Korniga.

Sidious chuckled as he took the tray to the table and handed out the cups. His bones ached with exhaustion as he sat down and took a large sip. The hot drink burned his tongue, causing him to wince.

"Sidious," Agnus began, his brow creased in worry. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off and get caught up on your sleep?"

"I can't." He shook his head. "I have briefings this afternoon as well as the stuff Stefan needs."

Stefan leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table. "Don't worry about my stuff. Take care of yourself."

Sidious sat back in the chair, a tired puff of air whooshing from his lungs. He glanced at Agnus and asked. "Have you checked the bar?"

Agnus nodded. "Every day. Since you found those two listening bugs in your own quarters, I'm a fanatic about it."

Stefan frowned. "You found what?"

"It's Woods. He's determined to catch me doing something I shouldn't."

"Did you take them out?"

"And tip him off?" Sidious asked with a grin. "Nah. He's not going to hear anything from there, except for maybe..." He nodded toward Mikayla. Stefan turned to look with a frown, then grinned.

"Does she know?"

"That someone was probably listening to us having sex? What do you think I am? Stupid?"

Stefan nodded in agreement and chuckled. "Point taken."

"How are you doing with currency?" Sidious asked, trying to change the subject.

Stefan spoke in a low voice, since Mikayla was still close by. "We received another contribution from our anonymous benefactor."

He raised an eyebrow. "How much?"

"Eighty-five *kilnotics*."

Agnus choked on his Korniga, and Sidious slapped him on the back. "You all right, old man?"

Agnus nodded and then looked at Stefan wide-eyed. "Do you have any idea who this man is?"

Stefan shook his head. "And I don't like it. It's a lot of currency, and the rebellion could certainly use it, but I'm uncomfortable with not knowing who this person is."

Sidious lifted his cup and took a sip. He wasn't all that comfortable with the anonymity either, but they couldn't force the man to identify himself. Whoever it was had been sending currency for the last five years. And not small sums either -- huge amounts. His contributions alone had almost built the *Vultair*. "Personally, I don't think you should look a gift horse in the mouth."

"What?" Stefan eyed him as though he'd lost his mind.

He grinned. "Sorry, it's an Earth expression I heard the other day. It means just take the gift and try not to look too closely at where it came from."

"Easier said than done," Stefan replied dryly.

* * * * *

Mikayla had been on the Destroyer for twenty days now and had pretty much settled into a routine. She missed home a lot and worried about her mother even more, but she tried to keep herself busy. If she didn't, she'd go crazy thinking about what was happening on Earth.

She tried to listen to the men to see if she could find out anything, but they usually talked about something else, or in a language she didn't understand. Desperate for any kind of news, she'd asked one of the soldiers how the battle was going. He'd shaken his head, told her she didn't want to know, and then walked off without telling her anything. That certainly hadn't made her feel any better.

That was days ago, and unfortunately, she'd received the same response from several others since then. Eventually, she would just have to bite the bullet and ask Sidious, which was the last thing she wanted to do. She needed to avoid him, not find ways to be near him. But she had to know what was happening, even if it meant bargaining with the devil himself.

And Sidious Marcone was definitely a devil. He had to be to affect her the way he did. Every time he looked at her with his seductive gray eyes, she couldn't breathe, not to mention what his touch did to her.

With a sigh, she tried to get her mind off his seductive presence and gazed around at the empty lounge. It seemed unusually quiet, and a shiver ran through her. They needed some music or something. This dead silence gave her the creeps.

Agnus had left with Celine right after breakfast to pick up a shipment of supplies. Her heart had beaten faster at the thought this might be her opportunity to escape. But apparently her plan to make them think she'd accepted her situation hadn't worked. The second Agnus had gone, he locked the door from the outside, which meant she was locked inside.

Once she cleaned off the last table, she decided to go into the storeroom and start pulling bottles. She stood on the ladder getting some liqueur off the top shelf, when she heard his deep voice from behind her. "You know you really shouldn't try to carry so many of those at once."

She screamed and dropped two of the bottles. They shattered, spreading green liquor and glass all over the floor. She set the other three bottles on the shelf in front of her with a *thud*, then turned to glare at him.

He looked incredible. Even more so than the last time she saw him, with his wide shoulder leaning against the doorjamb and his arms crossed in front of his chest. His hair hung around his shoulders in a thick white mass that her fingers itched to slide through again. The desire that immediately began to swirl low in her stomach only made her glare all the harder.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you that it wasn't nice to sneak up on people?" she snapped, as she climbed down the ladder.

"All the time," he replied with a mischievous smile. "But I was a rotten child and never listened."

"Why am I not surprised?" she mumbled as she turned to start picking up the broken glass.

"Mikayla, don't pick that up with your bare hands; you're going to cut yourself." He pushed away from the door and walked over to get the broom from the corner.

"I'll be fine," she said. "I do this all the -- ouch...son of a bitch!" Mikayla looked down at her bloody hand in disgust, a hiss of pain shooting past her teeth. A large gash cut across her palm to the base of her thumb. How the hell had she done that?

Squatting down on the floor next to her, Sidious shot her a look that clearly read, *I told you so*, then turned to grab one of the rags from the shelf behind him. Grasping her hand, he used the rag to apply pressure to the wound. She gasped at the sting of pain that sprang up her arm.

"Come on, let's get this cleaned up."

He pulled her back out into the bar and over to the sink. Holding her hand under the cool running water, he took a closer look at the cut. "You have to be careful of the glass they use to make those bottles. They can cut off a finger before you even realize it." He replaced the rag against her palm. "Hold that there."

She did and watched through her lashes as he searched through his pocket. Eventually, he pulled out what looked like a fat silver ink pen. As he took her hand back, she tried to ignore the heat traveling up her arm. In silence, she watched as he removed the bloody rag and dropped it into the sink.

"You've cut it pretty deep, so I'm going to have to seal it."

She pointed skeptically to the device he held in his hand. "With that thing?"

"Yes." His gaze met hers, and she almost stopped breathing at its intensity. God, he was so gorgeous. "Trust me," he said with a slight smile.

She swallowed. "You don't ask for much, do you?"

His stare held hers captive. "Would it be so difficult a thing to do?"

"Considering who you are and what you're doing to my world? Yes."

He still held her hand and, as far as she was concerned, stood way too close. He was so close, she could feel the heat off his flesh, and her whole body responded with stunning speed.

"Things are not always as you see them. You should trust what your heart tells you."

She looked into his gray eyes and wondered if she really could trust him. There was something about him that made her think she could, but she couldn't get past who he was. She'd made the mistake of trusting her heart once before. She couldn't do it again. The price was too high.

Thankfully, he turned his attention back to her hand. "You'll feel heat and a little tingling, but it won't hurt."

He pointed the red beam at the cut running across her palm, and starting at the thumb, he worked his way slowly across to the other end. She tensed, waiting for the pain, but just as he said, there was none. The tingling felt like tiny needle pricks, but it didn't hurt. She watched in silent amazement as the cut disappeared -- the only thing to remain a barely visible pink line where the cut had been.

"There, all better." Bringing the palm of her hand to his mouth, he softly kissed where the cut had been.

The kiss made her hand tingle more than the beam, and she quickly jerked it from his grasp. When she looked back at him, he smiled seductively and a whole lot more than her arm began to tingle. She couldn't tear her eyes away from him as he took a step closer.

Noticing what he did, she immediately took a step back toward the bar. This man had way too strong an effect on her. She couldn't let him get too close. Not again. Reaching out, he grabbed her hand and tugged her against him. She gasped, arching back slightly as his palm splayed at the small of her back, holding her close.

"Don't," she said, barely above a whisper.

He tipped her chin up with his other hand and brought his mouth to within mere inches of hers. She inhaled the scent of Korniga and spice and hot, musky male, and every part of her flared to life. Even her nipples, which were flattened against his chest.

"Why?" His lips brushed across her softly, barely touching hers. "What are you afraid of, Mikayla? It's not like we haven't done this before."

She swallowed. "I'm not afraid."

Liar, she told herself. She was afraid of plenty. But most of all, she was afraid of what he made her feel -- what he made her want to do to him and have him to do to her. "We shouldn't..." she began, but he placed his finger over her lips, stopping her.

"Shhh. Can I not kiss you just once without you fighting me?"

As he dipped his head to kiss her, she backed away. Her heart hammered in her chest, her pussy pulsing with a need she found harder and harder to ignore. If he kissed her, she'd be lost, she knew it.

"Don't do this," she whispered.

Swallowing nervously, she stood stiff as a rod, waiting to see what he was going to do. Would he stop? What terrified her most was the knowledge that deep down she really didn't want him to. It wouldn't take much to make her melt. He'd proven that already.

He pulled back and gazed at her. His eyes darkened with desire, but something else sparked from their depths. Something she had been fighting herself. She looked away and tried to pull back from him, but he refused to loosen the grip he had around her waist. Her focus shifted to her right hand, still held by his larger one.

"Why do you fight this, Mikayla?" His breath fanned across her lips, and she swallowed down a lump.

"I have to," she whispered, fighting the desire to press her lips to his. She closed her eyes against the tears and shook her head. "This is wrong."

"It just looks wrong." His lips brushed across hers again, and she sucked in a breath, trying to resist the pull to fall into him, to deepen the kiss.

She shook her head more firmly this time, determined to get through to him, as well as herself. "We can't do this. *I* can't do this. You're destroying my world, my home. I can't do this with you anymore. Why can't you understand that?"

"Things are not always as they appear, Mikayla"

The hand at the small of her back pressed her closer, squeezing her breasts against his chest. She placed her palm on his shoulder to try and keep some distance between them. Breathing had become difficult, not from the tightness of his hold, but the proximity of his lips to hers.

All she could do was watch in anticipation as his mouth lowered to hers. With a tenderness that took her breath away, he sipped at her lips until she opened them, her body melting into his. He tightened his arms as his tongue leisurely explored and teased.

He was gentle and patient, his lips soft against hers. In his arms, she felt cherished and protected. So different than her ex-boyfriend, who took brutality to new levels. Sidious was everything Greg wasn't. He was also the man in charge of the alien army invading her home. He was the enemy. *Her enemy*. God help her, at the moment she didn't care.

Chapter Eight

Sidious's mouth hungrily devoured hers. He couldn't get enough of her taste. He wanted to rip her clothes off and bury himself inside her hot little body until she admitted she had feelings for him. The velvety feel of her tongue sliding along his drove him damn near insane.

His fingers moved along the smooth skin of her lower back to her ribs. Gently, he cupped one breast in his palm, and she moaned, arching her back slightly. His answering growl reverberated deep in his chest as he worked his thumb across her hard nipple.

"Shetah," he groaned against her lips. His cock was hard as a rock within his pants, and he pressed it into her soft stomach.

"Agnus will be back any minute," she whimpered.

"I couldn't care less. I want you, Mikayla. Admit it," he whispered against her parted lips, his tongue softly tracing. "You want me inside you as badly as I want to be there. Filling you, driving into you over and over. Making you scream just like last time."

She swallowed, her breaths changing to pants. "So what? Are you going to take me here? In the middle of the room?"

"Maybe," he purred, then covered her mouth with his again, her taste racing through him.

Her arms lifted around his neck, her fingers dived into his hair, holding him closer. Grabbing her ass with both hands, he lifted her, then set her on top of the bar. It was the perfect position for him to slide between her splayed thighs and press his aching cock right against her pussy. Her heat singed him even through their clothes -- something he desperately wanted rid of.

He pressed into her and swallowed her moan of pleasure. He could make her come here. He wanted to. If he couldn't be inside her, he at least wanted to hear her cries.

"Do you have any idea what I want to do to you?" he whispered, his mouth moving to trail kisses along the side of her neck.

Her head fell back, allowing him better access, and he took advantage, moving lower to nibble at the top of one breast. With a gentle tug, he lowered the lace, exposing her nipple to his hungry mouth. It was perfect -- hard and rosy pink. He covered it with his lips, licking his tongue across the extended nub, and she gasped, arching her back toward his face. He suckled, his other hand at her ribs, holding her upright.

God, the little mewling sounds she made were driving him crazy. His balls hurt so badly he was sure they would explode if he kept this up. But for the life of him, he didn't want to stop.

"Like that, don't you, baby?" he whispered as he palmed her breasts and moved his lips back to her neck.

She whimpered, and he gave her breast a squeeze.

"I bet I have something you would like even better."

Standing straight, he grasped her hips and pulled her against his throbbing shaft. She moaned, bucking her hips against him.

"Look at me," he whispered.

He cupped her cheek, putting his thumb under her chin and forcing her to look at him. He wanted to see her eyes. What he saw sent his heart racing. The desire and hunger darkening her gaze matched his own, and he pressed against her harder, using his other hand to help her slide her pussy along the length of his shaft.

"Sid," she sighed, her eyes closing.

"I bet that hot pussy of yours is wet, isn't it, baby?" he growled, working his hips against her a little faster.

Her lips dropped open on a silent gasp, her cheeks pink from passion. He pinched her nipple, and she moaned, riding his hips faster.

"Imagine my cock is inside you, Mikayla. Filling you. Fucking you," he murmured, fighting his own rising need.

He kissed her chin but kept his gaze on her face -- on the wild rapture she could no longer hide from him.

"Does it feel good, baby?" he asked, and she whimpered in response.

Her fingers tightened on his shoulders, and he knew she was close. He increased his rhythm, pressing harder, faster. She gasped, rocking her hips along with him, hungrily taking whatever he gave her.

"Come for me, Mikayla. Come for me, baby."

She cried out, her head dropping back as her hips bucked and ground, riding out the wave of her orgasm. Sidious almost lost it as he watched her. God, he wanted to be inside her so badly, he ached with it.

Lifting the lace of her top, he covered her breast back up, placing a soft kiss in the V of her cleavage. "Mark my words, Mikayla. We will finish this."

She kept her gaze on the ceiling, her cheeks red from embarrassment and the aftermath of her release. Just to piss her off, he kissed the tip of her nose before letting go of her. He turned to leave the bar before he changed his mind and fucked her right there on the floor.

Stalking into the turbochute that would take him to the docking bay, he placed his hand over his erection and groaned. Damn it, he hurt like hell. That woman was going to be the death of him.

Mikayla sat on the bar, staring at the ceiling in shock. *What the hell have I done? What was I thinking?*

Had she actually let him dry hump her until she came? Covering her mouth with her hand, she closed her eyes against the tears that threatened. She still ached for him and wanted to run after him, call him back to finish what he'd started.

* * * * *

"Excuse me, Mr. President," George said, waiting for Davis to look at him.

"Yes, George." Davis looked up from the reports he'd been studying to see George standing in his office doorway. He couldn't sleep, so he'd closeted himself in his office to try and figure out strategy.

"We've received another message."

Davis immediately stood and left the room with George. His heart pounded as they headed to the communications room. This was the third message they'd received from their unknown advisor. He had somehow tapped into their coaxial cable lines and had been sending them messages directly to their communications room.

"What does this one say, Colin?" he asked as soon as he entered the room.

Colin turned and handed him a piece of paper. "He's informing us of a shipment of weapons and supplies that is expected to arrive shortly not far from here. There is a twenty-minute window of opportunity for us to get it."

"What do you think, Mr. President?" asked one of the officers standing off to the side.

"The last one he sent us turned out to be very helpful. Army forces were able to steal the supplies easily," Jeffrey said.

"Yes," replied Colin, "but he could have been setting us up. This one could be a trap."

Davis stood, looking at the transmission and thinking. Was this a trap, or was this someone on the inside that really wanted to help them? Could they risk taking the chance to find out? They had to, he decided. They had no choice.

"Take a few men and check this out. But tell them to watch their backs carefully."

"Yes, sir," he replied before leaving the room.

"Colin, do we have any idea at all who this man is?" Davis asked.

"No, sir," Colin replied. "We can't even figure out where it is that he's tapping into the lines."

"Could we set some kind of trap to catch this guy?" asked George.

"I don't know that I want to catch him," replied Davis. "He is apparently trying to help, for whatever reason. If we did catch him and tip off the aliens, we might lose what appears to be our only ally. Let's see what happens with this last message he sent. If whoever it is, is on our side, I want to leave him right where he is."

* * * * *

"Mikayla, are you okay?"

Celine's question brought her out of the haze she'd been in for the last several minutes. She had stood there staring at the half-full glass in her hand, replaying in her mind what Sidious had said to her. "*Trust what your heart tells you.*"

But what did her heart tell her? Was he trying to tell her he wasn't who she thought he was? Or was she just being ridiculous?

"I'm fine." She gave Celine a small smile, then turned to dump the contents of the glass in the trash bin.

In reality, she was as far from fine as you could get. How could the man who was attacking her world with such cruelty be the same man who had held her with such tenderness? She squeezed her eyes against the never-ending onslaught of questions.

Deep in her heart, she knew something wasn't right. Something told her he wasn't the monster she thought he was, but her heart had been wrong before. She just couldn't believe it, not until she saw something definite. Something that proved beyond a shadow of a doubt she was wrong about him. But how could that be possible? There was no denying his position -- no denying he was the man in charge. How could he be anything else?

The swoosh of the doors drew her mind back to the task at hand. It was late, and the bar was almost empty except for a scattered few that refused to leave just yet. She drew her gaze upward and watched Sidious tiredly take a seat at the end of the counter.

He looked exhausted. His shoulders drooped slightly as though he carried the weight of the world. For a brief second, she felt bad for him. She had no idea what his job entailed, but more often than not the worry lines across his forehead creased with anxiety.

Grabbing a glass, she filled it full of ale and carried it to him. She needed to know about her people. No matter how bad. Now seemed as good a time as any to try to get some answers. If she could just forget about the other thing he'd said.

"Mark my words, Mikayla. We will finish this."

Just thinking about it sent her body into an immediate state of arousal. He had been right. She did want him to fuck her, and she hated herself for it.

"You look like you could use this," she said as she handed him the drink.

Sidious raised an eyebrow and asked, "Should I have someone else taste it first?"

Mikayla laughed. "No, it's perfectly safe. Besides, if I were going to kill you, I think I would be a little more creative than that. As well as a little more brutal. You deserve to die slowly."

He snorted. "Then maybe I should ask what it is you want." He lifted the glass and took a sip, watching her over the rim with those all-seeing eyes of his.

She hardened against the shiver and shrugged one shoulder. "What makes you think I want something?"

He just raised an eyebrow in amusement.

"Okay." She sighed. "I want something." She took a deep breath and pressed forward. "I want to know what's happening on Earth."

For a minute, she wondered if he was even going to answer her. His fingers fiddled with the glass in front of him, his brow drawn together in a tight line. He looked as though he were trying to decide what to say.

"I don't think that would be a good idea."

"What do you mean you don't think it would be a good idea?" she snapped. "So it's a good idea to leave me here guessing as to the fate of my family and friends?"

He placed his hand over the one she had resting on the bar in front of him and rubbed the back of it with his thumb. "You should try not to think about it, Mikayla. You'll only get upset over something that you can't do anything about."

She snatched her hand out from under his and scowled at him. "My mother is down there, and I have no idea if she is dead or alive. How can I not think about it?"

Sidious watched the last two men walk out the bar doors, then turned to her with a frown. "I know I'm going to regret this."

Her heart beat faster as she waited for him to continue. *Regret what?*

"What city was your mother in?" he asked.

"Ocala, Florida. Why?"

"Ocala was one of the towns made into a prison camp when we first landed. It was taken easily with very few deaths. More than likely, your mother is still there."

Her heart stopped beating and then thundered loudly. "Do they have a list of names possibly, maybe we could see if she is on it?" she asked hopefully.

"Mikayla, please don't get your hopes up. Even if there is a list, there's no guarantee they will be able to find her. But I'll do what I can. It may take several days, if she is even there. What is her name?"

"Amy Adkins." Her smile faded as a thought ran through her mind. "What do I have to do for you in return?"

He slammed the glass down on the table and scowled. The loud *thud* made her jump, and she took a step back as his eyes darkened in anger. Even Agnus stopped what he was doing.

"What the hell makes you think I want anything in return?"

"What else am I supposed to think?"

He stood, placing his hands on the counter, his black eyes boring into hers with an intensity that made her shiver. "Would it be such a stretch to believe that I would do something out of the goodness of my heart? That just maybe I would do something to make you happy?"

He didn't wait for her answer; he just left. Mikayla actually opened her mouth to call him back to apologize but changed her mind. Instead she watched him leave with a heavy heart, then turned a confused frown toward Agnus who looked almost as shocked as she felt.

Agnus shrugged. "Sidious is a man of deep feelings. Always has been." He turned toward the door with a sigh. "It bothers him that you think the worst."

"What else can I think?"

His blue eyes studied her. "You might be surprised, Mikayla. If you would quit being so stubborn."

With a frown, she turned back to the door and watched it as though the answers would just walk right through. She was thrilled that he had offered to look for her mother, but she also wondered if he didn't have an ulterior motive. She just wasn't sure she could trust him, but one thing she knew for sure. She didn't want to leave things the way they were. He was kind enough to do this for her; she should at least apologize...right?

With a sigh, she glanced toward the ceiling. And why should she? He was her enemy after all, not to mention a complete and total ass. God, she didn't know what to do.

Oh, the hell with it.

She turned back to Agnus. "Would you take me to his room?"

* * * * *

Sidious stalked into his quarters. Taking off his uniform jacket, he threw it against the window in aggravation. The gold buttons hit the glass with a *clink*, before falling to the floor. He still couldn't believe the woman had actually hurt his feelings. And to top

it off, he'd stormed out of the lounge like a sulking child. God, when had he become such an ass?

Walking over to the window, he stared at the bright moon. He'd give that to her on a silver platter if she'd let him, but he knew she wouldn't. She'd throw it right back at him. He'd never met a woman he couldn't handle, until her. Was the challenge the attraction?

As soon as he thought it, he knew that wasn't the answer. It was deeper than that. Whenever he made love to her, it felt right. Perfect.

Closing his eyes, he leaned his forehead against the cool glass, racking his brain for a solution. If he could only tell her the truth.

Pushing away from the window, he removed the rest of his clothes and sat on the edge of his bed. Maybe he should consider it. He had to go to Daego soon and meet with Taron. She could go with him. It would be the perfect place for her to see him as he really was, but would knowing the truth make a difference?

He pulled his communicator out of his belt and called the commanding officer in Ocala, giving him orders to search for a woman by the name of Amy Adkins.

"This may take a few days, my lord. There are over four hundred thousand people here."

"Just find out what you can, Lieutenant. And let me know."

"Yes, sir," he replied.

Closing his communicator, he laid it on the table next to the bed and climbed under the covers. He tried to relax and get to sleep, but unfortunately, it wasn't happening. He kept replaying his outburst at Mikayla. He would have to apologize to her tomorrow. She had every right to expect what she did. He hadn't been the most gentlemanly of men lately.

Sidious snorted. When was he ever a gentleman?

A knock sounded at his door, and he frowned, wondering who would be here so late. "There better be someone dying," he snapped as he opened the door and stared wide-eyed at the person standing on the other side.

"Mikayla," he said.

He glanced to Agnus, who shrugged, then walked away. Turning back to Mikayla, he leaned against the jamb and waited with curiosity.

"I wanted to say I was sorry."

"For what?"

"For thinking what I did."

Sidious shrugged. "You had every right."

Mikayla sighed and glanced down at her hands. "I don't know why I'm here." She glanced back up at him, and Sidious could see the anguish in her eyes. "I can't look at you without thinking of home and what you're doing to it."

"I can't look at you without wanting to touch you," Sidious said softly, and she peeked at him through her lashes. "You're like a damn drug."

"It's just physical; it will pass," she murmured.

Sidious chuckled. "And you're delusional if you think that will happen." His gaze wandered down her body. "I think I like the robe you wore the first time much better. Not that this isn't nice, though."

She rolled her eyes. "I didn't come here to seduce you."

"You came to be seduced?"

"Sid," she said with a sigh.

"Mikayla," he replied, mimicking her sigh.

She frowned at him, and his lips twitched, fighting a grin. "Shut up, get in here, and get those clothes off," he said, then turned and walked back into his quarters.

He glanced at her over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow. "Are you coming?"

She opened her mouth to say something, then clamped it shut.

"You're missing out."

She rolled her eyes with a huff of exasperation. "Give me a break."

"I have something to give you, baby, but it certainly isn't a break. My guess is you'll like it just as much, though, if not more."

Putting her hands on her hips, she scowled at him through the door. She still hadn't walked through, but if she really didn't want to, she would have left already.

"You have to be the most arrogant, insufferable..."

She stopped, and he raised an eyebrow in amusement. "That's all you can come up with?"

She let out a heavy sigh. "I didn't come here to fight with you."

"Damn," he teased. "And here I was looking forward to it."

A small smile tugged at her lips before she turned away, trying to hide it. He walked back to the door and held his hand out to her, palm up. She stared at for a second, then slowly placed her hand in his.

"I'm going to hate myself in the morning," she said as he pulled her into the room, shutting the door behind her.

"You always do," he answered with a grin. Tugging her into his arms, he lowered his mouth to hers. "Just let me have you once without a fight."

"I thought you enjoyed the fight," she replied, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He pressed his aching cock into her stomach. "Not when I want you this bad."

Mikayla welcomed the invasion of tongue between her lips, sighing as he deepened the kiss, teasing her tongue with his. Her body was still on fire from earlier,

still desperate to have him inside her, and that might be partly why she'd felt the need to come here.

"How wet are you, baby?" he moaned, shoving her pants down her hips as he walked backward toward a chair, pulling her along.

"Very, I'm sure," she whispered, her own fingers working loose the buttons of his pants.

His cock sprang free, and she gripped it, pumping her hand up and down the hard, long length. He groaned, pushing her hand away.

"You're killing me," he growled as he dropped onto the chair.

She removed her pants, then kicked them aside.

"Now the top," he ordered, and she slowly undid the tie, teasing him. "Now, Mikayla."

She grinned slightly, stepping back out of his reach as he made to grab her. He scowled, making her smile widen as she slowly lowered a sleeve down one arm.

"Woman," he growled. "When I get my hands on you..."

"You'll what?" Mikayla teased, slowly lowering the other sleeve.

Sid stared at her breasts like a man about to go mad. She'd never seen him look like that before, and for a second, she felt a tremor of trepidation. She cupped her breasts, pushing them together before sliding her hands down her stomach. Placing one foot on the edge of the seat, she slid her hands between her legs, rubbing herself, deliberately teasing him.

"Damn it, Mikayla," he growled. "Get down here and get on my cock, right now."

"Make me," she whispered, then squealed and ran when he jumped up from the chair to come after her.

He caught her easily, hauling her back against his chest with a hard tug. Mikayla gasped at his force and strength, but not from fear...from lust.

"Is that how you want it?" he snarled, but it didn't frighten her.

Instead it increased her desire, made her hotter and wetter. His hand moved down her stomach to slide between her legs. She moaned as his fingers separated her labia, stroking through her juices.

"You want me to make you want it?" he breathed in her ear, his voice deep, dark, and almost menacing, making her shudder in delight.

The tip of his middle finger gently circled her clit, and she rocked her hips, seeking a more firm touch. He denied her, deliberately teasing her like she'd done him. She never imagined she'd like this. In her time with him, she'd learned something about herself and about how she liked sex. There was something about the way he seduced, about the way he made her submit, that got her wilder than she'd ever been in her life.

"Get on the bed, on your knees," he demanded, and she wobbled forward, climbing onto the bed.

He moved behind her, dropping his pants to the floor. She braced herself, waiting for that first initial thrust that always made her squirm, but he held back, instead using his fingers to smear her cream up between the cleft of her ass.

She gasped, shocked that she would enjoy it when he touched her there. He pressed one finger deep into her ass, and she moaned, pressing back against him.

"I want you here so bad, I can taste it," he murmured, leaning down to kiss her hip.

His mouth moved lower to her pussy, and she moaned when he thrust his tongue inside her channel. He added a second finger to her ass, and the initial sharp burn made her catch her breath.

"Sid, please," she whimpered, rocking her hips against his hand and face as he slowly fucked her ass with his fingers.

He moved his mouth from her pussy to softly bite at the side of her hip. She moaned, desperate for the release she could feel swimming just under the surface of her flesh.

"Do you want it now?" he asked, his voice rough with the same need coursing through her. He gripped a handful of hair, tugging her head back, and she drew in a sharp intake of air. "Do you?" he repeated, and she swallowed.

She was so close, if he entered her now, she'd come right then. She wasn't sure she wanted it over yet. "I'm so close," she whispered. "Please."

Sid stood straight and held his fingers deep. Positioning the head of his cock at her weeping entrance of her pussy, he pressed forward, adding his thick girth to the fullness of his fingers in her ass. She cried out as the spasms began almost instantly, the addition of his fingers only intensifying her pleasure.

He started thrusting before he was even all the way in, working his cock deeper with every pump of his hips. His fingers thrust in time with his cock, pressing into her ass and adding delicious pressure against her channel from the other side.

Mikayla's fingers fisted in the blankets beneath her as he pounded harder, deeper, sending her flying over the edge with a shout, her whole body trembling uncontrollably.

He leaned over, wrapping his arm around her ribs and holding her close as she rode out the intense waves of release. She slowly relaxed, and he pulled his cock and fingers from her body. She moaned at the loss but was too weak for much else. He never failed to completely drain her, leaving her nothing but a ball of quivering emotions. She'd never met a man like him, and knew deep down, she never would again.

Turning her to face him, he lifted her so her pussy rested at his cock and walked backward until he hit the armless chair against the wall. She wrapped her arms around his neck, inhaling his musky scent and holding him close.

With a groan, he dropped down, letting her thighs straddle his pelvis, her feet dangling against the cold floor.

"Take me inside you."

His deep, sexy voice made her limbs tremble. She doubted she could take another orgasm like the last one, but she couldn't deny him. He'd proven that numerous times, and this time was no different.

She lifted onto her feet and resettled the head of his cock at her entrance. Pressing down, they both moaned as his length filled her, stretched her full.

"God, that feels good," Sid groaned as he leaned forward and wrapped his lips around her nipple.

Mikayla sighed, rocking her hips forward and back in an ever-increasing rhythm, her fingers scraping at his scalp, holding him closer to her breasts. Her clit rubbed against his pelvis, sending tantalizing sparks of pleasure up her spine with every rock of her hips.

Sidious bent her backward slightly, biting at the undersides of her breasts and forcing his cock deeper.

"Do you have any idea what a hot little fuck you are?" he groaned in her ear, sending her heart skipping in her chest.

God, she loved it when he talked like that.

"I can't get enough of you," he whispered, grasping her hips and working them against him faster.

"Sid," she whimpered.

She grasped the back of the chair just behind his shoulders and dug her nails deep into the leather. Her knuckles ached as she held on tight, bracing herself against the wild onslaught of pleasure gripping her womb.

His thick length throbbed against her channel, and she knew he was as close as she was. She could feel the tension in his body, the fierce grip he had on her hips. He was waiting for her.

"Come with me, baby," he whispered against her lips, and she exploded.

Sidious grit his teeth, holding himself back as she pulsed around him. Her pussy sucked at his cock, her walls rippling around him as she rode out the waves of her orgasm. He would never get enough of this -- the feel of her, the tightness of her, the way she whimpered his name. He could stay here forever.

With a growl, he lifted his hips upward, burying his cock deep. He gripped her hips, holding her still as he pumped in short, deep thrusts, emptying his seed deep inside her channel.

She fell forward onto his chest, burying her face in his neck. "I still hate you," she said with a sigh.

He smiled slightly, wrapping his arms around her back and holding her close. "Baby, I hope you keep hating me, if this is how you show it."

He felt the breath of hot air against his neck as she snorted. "How can you be like this?" she asked, her voice soft against his neck. "How can you be like this with me and still be the man who destroys my world?"

Sidious closed his eyes tight against the pain racing through his chest. He didn't know the answer to that himself. He'd tried so hard to turn a blind eye to what he did -- tried to tell himself it was all for the greater good. They needed someone on the inside, and to be on the inside, he had to be someone he despised.

He could be himself with her; unfortunately, she didn't know him. She still saw him as her enemy -- an enemy she couldn't deny -- and he'd used that to his advantage more than once. In some ways, he felt like such an ass for doing it, for seducing her the way he had. But now, when he held her in his arms, he knew eventually it would be all worth it, because eventually he would tell her the truth.

He just couldn't do it here.

He stroked his hand up her back and into her hair. Fisting his fingers within the soft strands, he held her still against his chest. He bent his head and whispered softly, "Soon you'll understand. I promise. You just have to trust me."

She sniffed, and he closed his eyes against the sound of her tears. "I can't trust you."

"I know, baby," he said with a sigh.

Chapter Nine

Mikayla stared out at the stars visible from the window in her quarters. She hadn't slept much the last several days. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Sidious, felt his hands on her body, his lips on hers.

Damn, the man could kiss.

She hadn't seen him in at least two days, and truthfully, she wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. At night, alone in the bed, she would think of him and struggle with her growing feelings. She could not...absolutely could not fall in love with him. It would be beyond stupid, not to mention make her feel even more like a traitor than she already did.

Pushing Sidious from her mind as best she could, she decided to get to work. The best way to forget your troubles was to keep busy.

Stepping out of her room, she almost collided into Dorian, who was leaving Celine's. "Good morning, Mikayla," he said with a smile, sidestepping to miss running into her.

"Good morning," she said as she returned his smile.

After he passed, she looked down the hall to see Celine standing in her doorway watching Dorian. The two of them were so cute together. She hoped that one day she could find what they seemed to have.

"Do you want to go eat breakfast with me, or do you need more sleep?" Mikayla asked with a grin.

Celine laughed. "Give me ten minutes to change, and I'll meet you downstairs."

Mikayla awoke this morning to Agnus's usual quick knock on the door to let her know he had unlocked it. She still hadn't been able to leave the bar by herself. The two times she'd gone to Sidious's quarters, she'd been escorted by guards on her way back. Agnus was convinced if she tried to get away once, she would do it again.

He was right, of course, but it was still aggravating that he kept her on such a tight leash. Coming down the stairs, she found him at his usual spot, sitting at the bar drinking a cup of Korniga and going over the weekly invoices.

"Agnus, when are you going to let me explore the ship a little?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"When *gorgins* fly," he replied and then scowled when he saw Mikayla mouth the exact words, silently mocking him. "You know, someone needs to put you over their knee and beat some of that sass out of you," he said, pointing a finger at her.

"But when I'm sassy, I'm me, and would you really not want me to be me?" she asked sweetly while pouring herself some Korniga.

"I'm not sure. What do you think, Sidious?"

Sidious? Mikayla turned to see him standing behind her. She hadn't even heard him come in, but the minute she saw him, her body reacted just like it always did -- pulsing to life with erotic sensations that made her want to growl in frustration.

Leaning his elbows on the bar, his eyes twinkled with amusement. "Personally, I like her a little sassy, but the idea of putting her over my knee has possibilities. Do you like to be spanked, Mikayla?"

She wasn't sure if it was the way he said it or the mental picture that flashed through her mind, but something sent a wave of shivers down her spine. Brushing it off, she scowled. "Don't you have another poor unsuspecting world to invade?"

He ignored her jab and gave her his best sheepish expression. "But if I left I would be denying you the pleasure of my company."

"And what makes you think that I find you company pleasurable?"

"I thought you certainly did the other night. Are you telling me you don't?" He placed his hand over his heart and tried to appear wounded. "I'm devastated."

"What you are," she snapped, "is full of it."

Sidious's deep baritone laughter floated through the room. Even his laugh was sexy, she thought with aggravation.

"We were just fixing to order some breakfast. Sidious, would you like to join us?" Agnus asked.

"Sounds like a plan to me."

Mikayla would have preferred he leave, but no such luck. Celine wouldn't be happy about it either. She was very shy and quiet, and Sidious made her very uncomfortable. He made Mikayla uncomfortable also, but for an entirely different reason. Mostly because when he was this close, she couldn't think of anything other than jumping his ass for sex.

Sidious quietly watched her as she made her way around the center of the bar. Catching her looking at him over the rim of her cup, he winked, then chuckled when she rolled her eyes. Agnus went to the door to retrieve their breakfast, and Sidious took advantage of the momentary solitude.

Walking up behind Mikayla, he softly touched his lips to her temple. Her body stiffened against him, but he ignored it, nuzzling the side of her neck. "Do you have any idea how gorgeous you are when you're agitated?"

"Do you have any idea what an annoying pain in the ass you are?"

He chuckled and turned her to face him. He tipped her chin up with his thumb and forefinger. "I love it when you fight me, do you know that?"

She swallowed, trying to ignore the heat from his touch as it traveled down her neck to tighten her breasts. "You're a sick man, do you know that?" she countered.

"Why? Because I like a feisty woman?"

She turned her gaze away.

"Mikayla," he murmured close to her mouth.

Her gaze shot back to his and she watched him in silence.

"I'm amazed you haven't yet discovered you could have anything you wanted from me."

"I want to go home," she whispered.

A shadow passed over his eyes. "Except that."

"You said anything."

He dropped his hand and backed away from her. "Except that."

With that, he walked off to help Agnus set out the food, trying to ignore the pain her request had caused him. Damn, he should have kept his mouth shut.

"I'm starving, so you better come and eat before there's nothing left," he said, smiling over his shoulder.

Mikayla walked over and sat down, Celine next to her. Sidious watched her pick at her food and felt a pang of regret at the sadness he could see in her eyes.

Agnus cleared his throat, getting his attention. "I spoke to your father yesterday."

"What's he up to?" Sidious asked as he lifted the warming lid to his plate.

"You mean besides bending my ear about the fact you haven't been by to visit them lately?"

Sidious rolled his eyes. "I haven't had a chance, and he knows that."

Unfortunately, it didn't stop either his father or mother from complaining. He also didn't go home often for another reason. His father's constant bragging and telling him how proud he was could make him feel incredibly guilty. When everything finally came to a head, it was likely his father would disown him, as well as Stefan and their adopted brother, Taron.

"I told him that, but you know your father. He thinks you could make the time if you really wanted to."

Sidious smiled. "Yeah, but who says I want to? Speaking of parents," Sidious said, looking at Mikayla. "I called the commanding officer in Ocala, and he is searching for your mother."

Her startled gaze met his, hope glistening within their depths. "How long does he think that it will take?"

"We won't know anything overnight. They have to see if she is on the list first; then they'll have to actually track her down. It may take them a while."

"At least someone is searching. I'll feel a lot better once I know that she's okay."

"Mikayla," Agnus began. "You may have to face the fact she may not be okay."

"I'll cross that bridge if I get to it," she replied.

Suddenly, he realized that in her concern for her family on Earth, she'd never mentioned a father. "What about your father?"

She pushed her plate aside and picked up her Korniga cup before replying. "My father died about ten years ago."

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely.

"It was a long time ago, and I wasn't that close to him." She lifted her shoulder in a shrug and turned her gaze away.

Sidious watched her, lost in his thoughts about how to handle all this. He would give anything if she would talk to him, trust him, but he knew that would be asking for a miracle until he could get her away from here and tell her the truth.

"Mikayla, we should probably go upstairs and start cleaning," Celine said as she stood to leave the table.

Mikayla agreed and got up. His eyes followed the slight swaying of her hips as she walked away. Her thigh muscles rippled beneath the tight fabric of her pants as she climbed the stairs, and his crotch thickened uncomfortably. Damn, the woman could set his blood on fire without even trying.

Agnus snapped his fingers in front of Sidious's face to get his attention.

"What?" Sidious asked, thinking he had missed something Agnus had said.

"Your eyes give you away."

"Yeah, and if I didn't have this jacket on, there would be another part that would give me away as well," Sidious said dryly as he lifted his Korniga to take a sip.

Agnus burst out laughing.

Sidious grimaced and shifted in his seat. "I'm glad you find it so amusing."

"You would too, if you were in my shoes. Have you set up a time to meet with Taron?"

"Yes." He studied the empty cup in front of him. "And I was thinking about taking Mikayla with me."

Agnus whistled. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"No." Sidious sighed. "But I have to find a way to get through to her."

"Maybe you should stop antagonizing the poor girl, for starters."

Sidious smiled slightly. "I can't help it. Baiting her is entirely too much fun." He glanced to the top of the stairs and caught her watching them.

"Well, it may be fun, but you're driving the poor girl nuts."

Agnus was right; he needed to stop trying to make her angry and start trying to get her to fall in love with him.

* * * * *

Sidious stepped into his office later that morning and spread out maps of the northern United States.

If he had any hopes of pulling this off, he had to make sure no one interfered. He had not been using the militia as he should have been, deliberately holding them back slightly in certain areas. His maneuvering had been so subtle, no one had picked up on it, and he hoped that he could keep it that way. But that would certainly change if too many people started sticking their noses in. He heard the bell at his door, and without looking up, he said, "Come in."

"Here is the information that you requested from the scouts on Europe," said Alonis.

"Thank you," Sidious replied as he looked up to take the folder from him. He was surprised to see him, for it was very unusual for Alonis to deliver anything himself. He had always liked him. He reminded him a lot of his father. "Is there a specific reason you're playing delivery boy, or did you just miss me?"

Alonis returned the smile and replied, "Actually I do have something that I would like to talk with you about."

"Of course." Sidious nodded and pointed to a chair in front of his desk.

Once the two of them were seated, Alonis began. "How are things really going down there? I've been hearing from some of the men that they feel they are extremely outnumbered."

"We are," Sidious replied. "The only real advantage we have on them is the flyers. If we had to fight them with only ground troops, we wouldn't have gotten this far."

"Do you still think that we stand a chance?"

Sidious was quiet for a minute before he answered. "Yes, but I think that it certainly isn't going to be easy. This planet has proven to be much more of a challenge than I initially thought."

Silently Sidious admired this planet and its leaders. Once the prime minister was gone and everything was back to normal, Earth would make an excellent addition to the galactic senate. Of course that was provided they would even want any part of it. Hopefully, he would be around to make them see that joining the senate would definitely be to their advantage.

"Are you having second thoughts about this one, Alonis?" Sidious asked.

"Let's just say that I think Rigora may have bitten off more than he could chew."

"Time will tell."

Chapter Ten

Jeffrey ran into the president's office, his face lit up with a million-dollar smile. "The confiscation of the shipment was successful. There was no trap, just a couple of confused pilots that our men handled without any problem."

"Excellent," Davis said as he too smiled. "It would appear that we have ourselves an ally, Jeffrey."

"Yes, sir, but I would certainly feel better if I knew why."

"At the moment, I don't know that I care about the why. I'm just glad something appears to be going right for a change. Let me know if we receive anything more from him. I'm going to go take a look at what our insider sent us." Davis made his way to the hangar to take a look at the ship and supplies that they had stolen.

* * * * *

Mikayla sighed as she strolled through the upper level of the bar. It had been another two days since she'd seen Sidious, and she hated herself for actually missing him. It wasn't just the sex, but the bantering. She found she actually enjoyed antagonizing him. Didn't mean she wanted to see him, though. She needed this time away to get her head together and to strengthen her resolve to not let him seduce her again.

She stopped at the edge of the balcony and looked to the main floor. Agnus paced back and forth like a caged animal, constantly glancing at the door. *What's up with him?* He seemed awfully agitated today.

The bar doors opening caught her attention, and she ducked behind the chair with a soft gasp, hoping Sidious didn't see her.

Lack of sleep had left her irritable this morning, so having to deal with him was the last thing she wanted to do. She peeked around the fabric with the intention to sneak off as soon as his back was turned, but his words made her decide against it.

"What's the emergency?" Sidious asked as he poured himself a cup of Korniga.

"I received a transmission from Stefan this morning. He had a tail," Agnus said.

She watched Sidious turn his gaze around the room as though looking for someone. "Where's Mikayla?"

"She's still in her room."

"How long has he had the tail?" Sidious asked, a worried frown creasing his brow.

Mikayla craned her neck to better hear. What was the big deal about Stefan having a tail?

"He thinks about three days. He doesn't believe he was there prior, but he can't be for certain. I'm just glad he was handling the trade dispute for your father and not something for..."

For who?

Mikayla peeked farther around, trying to get a better look at Sidious's face. What was going on with the two of them? Sidious slammed his cup down on the counter and cursed in another language. The look of anger on his face made her cringe.

"Was he able to get rid of him?"

"Yes, but you know Woods is behind it," Agnus said, his voice anxious and agitated. "You've got to do something about him. He's getting too close."

Too close to what?

Sidious leaned his hands on the bar, shaking his head in disagreement. "He's grasping at straws."

"Yes, but he could *accidentally* grasp the right straw."

Sidious sighed and rubbed his forehead. "We can't talk about this here, Agnus."

"I've swept through. The room is clean."

Clean of what?

Sidious pressed his lips together and shot Agnus a strange look.

"It's clean, Sidious. No listening devices. Woods may suspect you and have your quarters bugged, but he hasn't gotten in here."

Mikayla frowned, wondering what all that was about. Who would be listening to him? Her eyes widened slightly. Did that mean whoever was listening could hear them having sex?

Sidious sighed. "I can't do anything about it, anyway. If anything were to happen to him, there would be too many questions. He's too senior."

"I don't like this," Agnus hissed.

Mikayla strained to better hear their lowered voices, trying to piece together everything she'd heard. Was he a spy of some sort? That would be ludicrous and beyond dangerous considering how high up he was in rank. Biting her lower lip, she crawled to the back of a chair closer to the railing in the hopes she could hear them better.

"Tell Stefan to take a break. Lie low for a while," Sidious said.

Agnus nodded as he sat on a stool. "He said he was headed to Daego to wait for you."

"Good."

"Are you still considering taking Mikayla?"

What? Mikayla thought. Taking me where?

"Yes. I think time alone away from here, away from all the reminders of what is going on would be a good idea."

"I agree. Time away would be good for both of you. You're too stressed out, and I'm worried about you."

"I'll be fine."

"You always say that," Agnus said with a sigh. "I can tell by looking at you, you're far from fine."

"Let it go. Besides, I still have to handle the burial of all Earth's dead in Dallas before I leave."

His words were barely above a whisper, but Mikayla heard them. Her gut clenched. *Dead?* She closed her eyes against the pain and anguish that threatened to send her spinning. All this time, she'd tried not to think about people dying, but deep down she knew they had. To hear him say it made it so much more real.

"What have they been doing with them, so far?" Agnus asked.

"Mass graves. There's so many, that's the only thing I could think of. If you leave the bodies lying around, stench and disease will take over."

Thoughts of him taking her away were forgotten as anger took over. She heard the words "mass graves" and snapped. Glancing around, she found an empty glass and grabbed it. She stormed down the stairs, her only intent to hurt the man who had caused her people so much pain -- caused her so much pain. Halfway down the steps, she stopped and hurled the glass in his direction.

"You son of a bitch!"

Sidious ducked to the side, the glass barely missing his head and shattering on the counter behind him. His startled expression watched her warily as she ran to a table and picked up another glass, throwing it with all her might in his direction.

"What the hell?" Agnus said as he ducked as well.

"Damn it, Mikayla," Sidious snapped, as he dodged yet another glass.

She was crying now, furious with him and herself. Grief for all those dead people fueled her anger as she continued to search the room for something else to throw at him.

Suddenly, his arms snaked around her biceps, holding her still, her back pressed against his chest. "Let me go," she snarled at him.

"Stop it, Mikayla."

"No. I'm not going to stop it." She kicked at his shin, getting some satisfaction at his grunt of pain.

"I'm not letting you go."

His whispered words in her ear sapped all the fight from her, and sobs shook her body in earnest. All those people dead, and at his hands.

"Please let me go." Her voice quivered with emotion and sadness. "I would rather die with them than stay here with you."

His grip around her tightened, and she could swear she heard hurt in his voice when he answered, "You don't mean that."

"I do." She shook her head. "I don't want to be here." She shoved out of his arms and turned to face him, tears streaming down her face. "How could you do this? How can you support a man bent on destroying anyone that doesn't think the same as he does? Someone that would kill anyone that won't bow at his feet!"

"Mikayla --"

"Don't Mikayla me. You're just like him. You're a power-hungry, arrogant, cruel --"

"I am not like him!" Sidious yelled back. His eyes darkened to almost black, but she ignored it and pushed on.

"You're exactly like him. You don't care about Earth's people any more than he does." She stomped off, determined to get away from him, to go back to her room and have a good cry.

As soon as her door shut behind her, it opened again. Sidious's huge frame took up the opening, his eyes boring into hers in anger and something else. Hurt? Regret? No, not him. He didn't have it in him to regret anything.

"Get out!" She turned her back on him and stared down at Earth, but she could still see his reflection in the glass and knew he wasn't leaving.

With a heavy sigh, she leaned her forehead against the window, tears slipping out of the corners of her tightly closed eyes. Silent sobs shook her shoulders as she tried not to think about what was happening down there, tried even harder not to think about her attraction to the man standing behind her. The man responsible for all that destruction.

Not a man, an alien. He was an alien and her enemy.

She heard the door close and his steps as he came up behind her. He didn't say a word, just turned her and pulled her against him, his hands rubbing her back, soothing her as she laid her head against his chest and cried.

"Mikayla, what did you hear?" he asked in a soft voice, the fingers of one hand stroking her hair.

"The mass graves. How many are dead?" Her voice broke, and she squeezed her eyes against more tears.

"I don't know," he whispered as he kissed her forehead. "I wish I could make it all go away for you, but I can't."

"I keep seeing images of people dying. I keep seeing the faces of my friends in pain. And I'm here, away from it all. It's not fair."

Her voice broke on a sob, and Sidious bent, lifting her in his arms. Hers snaked around his neck, her face buried in his throat. She couldn't fight him, not now. Not when she needed so badly to be held.

She smelled a hint of cinnamon, Korniga, and a musky scent that was Sidious, making her whole body warm. He carried her across the room as though she weighed nothing, her body cradled next to his. His muscles rippled against her as he moved, causing little shots of sensation to scream through her body. Her reaction to him made her cry all the harder.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he placed her across his lap, his arms holding her as she emptied all the tears she had in her. She couldn't do anything to help them. She couldn't even help herself.

His hand gently stroked her back, and in reflex, she snuggled closer, drawing in a shaky breath. She hiccupped, and he hugged her tighter. He was so gentle, so different than the captain he portrayed himself to be before the men, and her mind reeled in confusion. Just when she thought she'd cried herself out, more tears would fall.

"Shhh, Mikayla. I'm so sorry." His deep voice rumbled next to her ear, and she stiffened. Even now, even after what she'd heard, her body reacted to his touch and she hated herself for it. A stray tear slipped down her cheek and his lips kissed it away.

The feel of them against her skin sent a torrent of emotions through her that caused another tear to slip free. "Baby, don't cry anymore," he whispered as he kissed it away as well.

"I can't stop." She sighed as his lips brushed across the corner of her mouth. "I can't stop thinking about them."

His hand came up and gently cupped the side of her face while he continued to kiss away the tears. His lips were soft and warm against her cheek, and her eyes closed, her face turning toward his.

What started out as comfort, quickly became something else as her body came alive with desire and need. In her weakened and upset state, she didn't even try to fight it. She couldn't.

His lips brushed across hers and she sucked in a startled breath. His smoky gray gaze held hers captive as his lips softly touched hers again. She knew she should pull away, but couldn't bring herself to do it any more now than she could all the other times. His thumb swiped away another tear as his lips continued to sip at hers. Closing her eyes, she parted her lips, and he slipped his tongue inside. She moaned as his tongue coaxed and teased hers.

God, he could kiss.

"Mikayla." His hoarse whisper blew across her lips just before his mouth captured hers in a kiss she felt clear to her toes.

She could taste her salty tears in his kiss, could feel the guilt gripping her heart, but she still couldn't stop. It was as though some invisible force drew them together, and she was helpless.

She melted against him, returning his kiss with a passion that matched his own. His hand slid from her cheek to tangle in her hair and pull her closer. She moaned as his mouth hungrily devoured hers, making her head spin -- making her want things she had no business wanting.

Her limbs felt heavy, and her breathing increased as quickly as her desire. Her heart stopped, then pounded out a furious rhythm when gentle lips nibbled on her pulse point. Her body was on fire, tense and pulsating with need.

His deep, husky voice teased her ear as he whispered something in a language she didn't understand. The thought that this was wrong nudged at her brain, trying to gain entrance, but she pushed it aside, wanting only to feel, to forget. She knew he could make her forget. He always could.

Sidious dropped his forehead to hers. Fisting his fingers in her hair, he held her close. "God, I've missed you," he whispered.

His voice was rough, almost gravelly sounding, and Mikayla loved it when he sounded like that, but despite how much she loved his touch, his voice, and how he could make her feel, it still didn't change what he'd done.

"They're all dead because of you," she sobbed. "Why did it have to be you?"

"You think I don't know that?" he growled, his fingers tightening in her hair. "You think I don't live with that every day of my life?"

"Then why?"

"I can't explain it here; just understand, I will."

"Because someone could be listening?" she asked.

He pulled away from her and rubbed his thumbs under her eyes, wiping away the tears. His touch was so soft, the look in his eyes so haunted.

He nodded. "Yes."

"Who?" she whispered. "I don't understand any of this. I don't understand you or me or what's happening --"

"All that matters is what's happening right now, between us."

She shook her head. "No. That's not all that matters."

"Right now," he said, giving her a slight shake. "Right here. Us is all that matters."

He pulled her to him, slanting his lips across hers and silencing any protest she might have. She opened her lips, welcoming his tongue. She sucked softly, and he groaned, deepening the kiss. He tugged at her top, lowering the left side and exposing her breast. He palmed it, squeezing hard, and she arched her back.

She broke the kiss, letting her head fall back as he massaged her aching mounds. He leaned down and kissed the side of her neck, gently nibbling with his teeth, and she shivered from head to toe.

She could hardly breathe and gasped when he sucked at the sensitive flesh just under her ear. A beep sounded from far away, and she struggled to figure out where it was coming from as the noise continued.

"Son of a bitch," Sidious growled. He pulled away and grabbed his communicator. Flipping it open, he snapped, "What?"

Mikayla sighed and laid her head against his shoulder, trying to get her raging body back under control. She knew he'd have to leave, and jumped back and forth between relief and anger. Physically, she wanted him. Emotionally, she needed some space.

"Can you not handle this?" Sidious asked in impatience.

Mikayla pulled away and shook her head. *Go*, she mouthed, and Sidious frowned at her.

"I need you to go," she whispered, silently begging for him to understand.

She could hear the officer on the other side of the line. She couldn't understand the language he was speaking, but she could hear him. Sidious's scowl deepened, and Mikayla tried to climb off his lap. He held her down and shook his head.

Moving the speaker away from his mouth, he growled, "You're not going anywhere."

He brought it back to his mouth and snapped, "Handle it till I get there, and don't call me again about this. I'm busy."

Flipping the communicator closed, he silently glared at her.

Taking a deep breath, she glared right back. "What? Are you pissed now because I don't want to have sex with you?"

"That's not why I'm pissed, damn it," he growled.

She tried again to climb off his lap, but he held her down. "Damn it, Sidious. Let me up!"

With a sigh, he released her elbow, and she quickly jumped off his lap before he changed his mind. "I just need some space," she said, then sighed, brushing her hair back from her face. Glancing down, she noticed her exposed breast and quickly pulled her top back over it.

"I'm not the monster you think I am, Mikayla," he said.

She turned to look at him through the tears gathering in her eyes. "I don't know who you are. That's the problem. You're one person with me, another in front of your men. I hear them talk about how coldhearted you are...how cruel. Then I see the way you are with me, and the two just don't mesh."

He looked to the floor, his cheek twitching.

"I hate myself every time I'm with you. You're destroying my home, my family, my friends!"

He stood and took an angry step toward her, making her jump back in trepidation. His eyes glowed almost black, but the anguish she could see shining in them gave her pause. It was those little glimpses of the inner torture that made her think she might be wrong about him.

He stopped, the muscle in his cheek still twitching, his lips set in a firm angry line. It was when he looked like that, she could see why men would fear him. At the moment, even she feared him. Without a word, he left the room, leaving her alone. She walked to the bed and fell to her stomach. Burying her face in the mattress, she let loose, sobbing into the blankets.

Sidious stood outside in the hall, leaning his back against the wall and listening to her racking sobs. Each one cut a little deeper into his chest. He hated to hear her cry like that and wanted to go back in and comfort her -- he wanted to let her know everything would be okay. But for now, he would do as she asked, and give her space.

With a sigh, he dropped his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. He had to tell her the truth, before he lost her forever.

* * * * *

Mikayla lay across the foot of the bed on her side, staring out the window toward Earth. To look at it from here, it didn't appear as though anything were amiss. She could see the moon just to the right and up a bit, its bright light reflecting down. It was so strange. It didn't seem real even now, to be looking at her home from here.

She'd spent most of the night since Sidious left walking around in a daze. Depression weighed heavily on her chest. She missed home so much. She missed the outdoors, the smell of the grass and flowers. She missed watching the snow fall.

Her lower lip began to tremble, and she swallowed back her tears. She couldn't cry anymore. She needed to stop feeling sorry for herself. Her bedroom door opened, and she froze. In the reflection of the window, she could see Sidious as he silently walked in.

She closed her eyes quickly, pretending to be asleep. Maybe he would leave instead of waking her.

She felt the mattress sink, and so did her heart. He wasn't leaving.

"I know you're awake," he whispered.

She opened her eyes and stared at him. He sat at the head of the bed, his back leaning against the window.

"When you're sleeping, you snore very softly," he said and smiled slightly. "It's cute."

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"I didn't want to leave things the way they were."

"I heard you talking earlier about someone named Woods."

"Yes?"

"Why is he after you?"

"He thinks I'm a spy."

"Are you?"

He was silent for a moment, then nodded, but the next words out of his mouth confused her. "No."

He put his finger before his lips, indicating she should be silent, and she frowned. Was he or wasn't he? And if he was, would it matter?

"I know everything is very confusing right now."

She snorted and sat up. "That's an understatement."

He walked over to her dresser and indicated with a curl of his finger she should follow him. He pointed to the back of the dresser and nodded. She looked, seeing a small black object about half the size of a dime. She glanced back at Sidious and again he put his finger before his lips.

Woods, he mouthed, and Mikayla's heart raced.

Woods must know he spent time in here, so therefore found a way to bug her room and listen. Had that been here earlier? Or the other night when he'd carried her over his shoulder? When had he found it?

She backed away from the dresser and dropped onto the bed. "I heard you say something earlier about taking me somewhere. Where?"

"I have to meet my brothers to take care of family business. I thought I would take you with me." He leaned his hips against the dresser and crossed his arms over his chest. "I enjoy fucking you, so I thought I would mix a little business with pleasure."

She glared at him, and he winked. She instantly understood he said what he did for the listening device.

When? she mouthed silently and pointed toward the dresser.

Sidious licked his lips, then mouthed an answer. *Earlier, while you were in the bar. Agnus saw him.*

She nodded as a shiver ran down her back. Someone was in her room? Someone was listening to them right now? The very thought gave her the creeps.

Sidious walked forward and clasped her hand in his, pulling her to her feet. She had to crane her neck to look up at him. Desire darkened his gaze, and deep down, she knew the desire she felt for him showed in her eyes as well. She couldn't deny it, so she wasn't even sure why she tried. Pride, she supposed. Fighting against the physical pull he had over her made her feel a little better about what she was doing. But in the end, it did nothing to relieve her guilt over her growing feelings for him -- for the tender man who could make her feel so cherished.

He inclined his head toward the door. She followed behind meekly, her hand still clasped within his as he left the room and headed to the second level of the bar.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

He came to a stop in front of one of the many small sofas that dotted the upper level. "Right here for now."

"In my room, you said --"

He put two fingers over her lips. "Not here."

Mikayla sighed and jerked her face away from his touch. "Then where, damn it?" she snapped. "I want some answers."

"And you'll get them. Just not here."

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

He shook his head. Rolling her eyes, she crossed her arms and glared at him. "What makes you think I want to go?"

He shrugged. "You want answers."

"You're an ass, do you know that?"

"Yes. I know." He grinned wickedly, sending a tingle of desire along her flesh. "But you want me anyway."

"Don't rub it in," she grumbled.

He chuckled and took her hand back in his. With a slight smile, he put her hand over his heart. She could feel it beating, the pace just as fast and erratic as her own.

"Feel that?" he asked, and she gave a single nod. "That's what it does whenever I see you, whenever you're close to me."

She swallowed and gazed up at him, sadness and guilt tightening her chest. She felt like such a traitor. If any of her family survived this, how could they ever forgive her? How could she ever forgive herself?

She stepped closer and laid her forehead to his chest. "Don't do this to me again."

He snorted and cupped her cheeks, forcing her to look at him. "I can't change who I am right now. I'll let you sleep tonight, but I'm not giving up. Accept it."

Mikayla watched him go with a heavy heart. What the hell was she supposed to do? She did want answers, and he'd promised them when he took her away from here. But would those answers make any difference?

He walked through the door without looking back, and part of her wanted to run after him. The doors closed, and she waited in silence for the light to turn red, indicating they had locked. Time seemed to drag by, as the light remained green.

It remained green.

She gasped, staring wide-eyed. She held her breath, praying it wouldn't change. Was she seeing things? Why hadn't it locked?

This was her chance -- it may be her only chance.

She had to get off this ship before she ended up even more in love with him than she already was.

Chapter Eleven

Sidious sat behind his desk blankly staring at the paperwork spread out before him. He couldn't keep his mind off Mikayla and how extremely difficult it had been to leave her last night. He'd wanted to stay and make love to her again. He remembered the feel of her hands against his skin, the tight walls of her pussy squeezing him, and his teeth clenched. Hell, he would have been happy to just hold her.

The beeping of his communicator brought him back to the present and away from his wishful thinking. Reaching down, he unclipped it and flipped it open. "Yeah."

"Sidious, Mikayla's left the ship," Agnus said.

"What!" he nearly shouted. "What do you mean she's left the ship?" God, he felt like he had just been kicked in the stomach.

"I had her profile scanned when she first arrived. The computer says she's not onboard."

"I'll see what I can find out."

How had this happened? Then he remembered: he had forgotten to lock the door when he'd left. He opened his communicator again and called the cargo bay.

"Sergeant Brogan here," the man replied upon answering.

"This is Captain Marcone. Have any ships left for Earth this morning?"

"Yes, my lord. As a matter of fact, there was a cargo ship that left not two minutes ago."

"What was its destination?"

"Northeastern section of the area called the US. Battalion sixty."

He snapped it shut and headed to flyer deck six at a run. The *Triton* was much faster than a supply ship, and if he hurried, he should get there about the same time they did. He just hoped that he was right and she was on that ship.

* * * * *

Mikayla sat in the corner of the cargo hold huddled behind some boxes. She couldn't believe how easy it had been to sneak onto it. Several men from the bar had seen her this morning and stopped to talk to her, so at first she was beginning to wonder if she would be able to pull this off.

She told them she was doing a little exploring and asked questions about some of the ships that were sitting around. When she saw one at the far end of the bay being loaded with boxes, she asked about it. The man she had been talking to confirmed it was preparing to leave for Earth.

Finally the man left to get back to work, and she began to make her way slowly over to the ship. No one paid too much attention to her, and when no one was looking, she climbed onboard through the cargo doors.

Once inside and hidden, she realized she had no idea exactly where the ship was headed. All she knew was that it was going to Earth. As she sat there waiting for the ship to land, she began to have doubts about this whole idea.

Maybe luck would be with her and it would land close enough to Florida she could get there without too much difficulty. Sitting back, she tried to be still and just enjoy the ride. She used to love to fly, but this ship felt different; it didn't feel as if they were moving at all. She never felt any turbulence, or movement to indicate that they were turning, nothing. If she couldn't hear the pilots up front talking, she would have thought they had not taken off yet.

Finally the ship landed, and she watched carefully for an opportunity to leave. Her heart raced with nervousness, and she took a few deep breaths to try and calm herself. The door opened, and a warm breeze blew in, carrying the scent of pine and grass. God, how she'd missed that smell.

When she thought the coast was clear, she began to make her way to the cargo door and slowly slip out.

* * * * *

Sidious stood outside the ship, waiting for the doors to open. The second Mikayla tried to step off, he'd grab her. He still couldn't believe she'd go to this extent. The idea she wanted to be away from him this badly gnawed at his gut. He'd fallen in love with her, and it hurt to think she didn't return those feelings. Had he read her wrong? Had it only been wishful thinking on his part?

The men began to gather around in anticipation of the supplies the ship brought. He hated doing this in front of them. The last thing he wanted was an audience, and he was sure Mikayla wouldn't want one either. Looking around, he spotted a building to his far right. It wasn't much, but it might afford them a little bit of privacy.

The bay doors to the ship opened, and he spotted Mikayla immediately, trying to slip out. "Freeze, Mikayla."

She jumped at the sound of his voice, then turned her wide eyes toward him. The disappointment he saw in her pale face was like a punch to his stomach. He was almost tempted to let her go. Almost.

Memories of their last time together flashed through his mind, and he knew deep down she returned his feelings, but her guilt over who she thought him to be was eating her alive. He had to fix it. Even if it meant telling her the whole truth.

He pushed his way forward through the gathering crowd and wrapped his fingers around her wrist. This time she wasn't getting away from him. To his surprise, she didn't fight. She followed along, her shoulders slumped, her eyes shining with unshed tears. This wasn't the Mikayla he knew, and to see her like this tore him apart.

He stepped into the door of the building and snarled, "Out." Everyone immediately vacated.

Sidious let go of her wrist and faced her with narrowed eyes. "Why did you run?" She wouldn't even look at him. "Damn it, Mikayla! Answer me!"

She flinched at his tone, and he wanted to take her in his arms, comfort her. Surely, she knew by now he would never hurt her, no matter how angry he was.

"Because I had to." Her words were barely above a whisper, but her voice raised on the next ones. "I have to find my mother and see that she's okay."

"I told you I was searching for your mother. Why can't you trust me?" His voice was louder than he'd intended, and he walked to the other side of the room, trying to pace out some of his anger.

"Why can't I trust you? Look in the mirror, Sidious. The answer is staring you in the face."

Mikayla watched Sidious pace with a sinking heart. She had been so close. How did he know she was gone? Being this near to him brought back feelings she would rather not look at too closely. Guilt ate at her. She would be betraying her home and family to have any kind of feelings for him. She'd run as much for her own sanity as she had to try to find her mother.

Sidious stomped over, and she took a step back in retreat. His black eyes were still full of anger and something else. Hurt?

He brought his nose down next to hers, his breath fanned across her face, and she caught the scent of cinnamon. She swallowed and brought her chin up a notch. "What?"

"What if I weren't in the militia, would it make a difference? Would it matter if I were actually on your side?"

She didn't know what to say. Would it? She'd asked herself that same question numerous times since he'd hinted to the fact he was a spy, but still had yet to come up with an answer.

"But you are in the militia, and you're not on my side, so the question is irrelevant, isn't it?"

His lips thinned into a firm line as he watched her with eyes as black as night. She shook her head, confused by his question and her own nagging doubts.

"I think it's time I showed you there's more to me than this uniform."

He grabbed her elbow and pulled her from the office before she could utter a reply. His strength was way beyond hers, and he outweighed her by a good one hundred and fifty pounds at least. The only option she had was to follow, although stubbornness kept her from going meekly. She tugged and dug in her heels at every opportunity. It didn't faze him; he continued to drag her forward.

The heat of the early-morning sun felt good against her skin, but the bright sunshine made her eyes water, and she squinted. It had only been a few weeks since she'd been outside, but it felt more like forever.

Looking at her surroundings, she tried to figure out where they were. In the distance were beautiful snow-capped mountains; tall pine trees that towered over them were as far as the eye could see. Colorado maybe? They could be almost anywhere.

As they marched through the field to his ship, Mikayla noticed the men watching them with interest. Some of them actually leered, and again she cursed the skimpy outfit. One soldier suddenly paled, and she glanced at Sidious, who was staring the man down with anger. No wonder the soldier turned away in fear. She would have too. Formidable didn't begin to describe him.

With a sigh, she gave one final tug on his hand. "Where are we going?" He didn't answer, and she dug her heels in again, this time getting his attention. "Damn it, answer me. Are you taking me back?"

"Yes."

"Can't you just tell them you couldn't find me?"

He turned to her with eyes full of emotions. Jumbled emotions that mirrored her own. "I'm not letting you go." He pointed to the ship. "Get in."

In one last show of stubbornness, Mikayla crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him.

Bringing his face to within mere inches of hers, he quietly growled, "Do you really want me to pick you up and set you in the ship myself in front of all these men?"

Looking around, she noticed several uniformed men watching them with interest. "Fine," she said through clenched teeth, then turned to climb into the ship.

Sitting in the passenger side of the *Triton*, she took a minute to look around. It didn't look like anything she had seen before. All across the dash were unusual buttons and switches, and in the middle, a computer screen with a keyboard underneath it. The steering wheel looked like an upside-down horseshoe, only wider, and the seats were like leather captain's chairs that you would find in a minivan. She scowled at his empty seat.

The seats, she noticed, were extremely close to each other. There was barely enough room between them for someone to squeeze by. At the moment, she certainly didn't relish the thought of being this close to him -- for more reasons than one.

Suddenly the door on the other side opened with a hiss, and Sidious slid into the empty seat. He was on the communicator talking to someone again, but she didn't know what he was saying, because he was speaking in his own language. It sounded very pretty, and she was curious as to what it was, but she was too angry with him right now to even ask.

The communicator flipped closed with a *click*, but she continued to stare at the scenery around her. There was no telling when she would see it again, and she wanted to get her fill of the view, the sunlight shining through the trees, the birds flying overhead, the smell of spring. His fingers grabbed her chin, gently turning her to face him. His eyes searched hers, quietly begging her to understand.

"I think I just might have something that will lift your spirits." His voice was soft, almost a whisper.

"Don't count on it," she said as she pulled her face from his grasp.

She was, once again, being taken from her home. In her opinion, there was nothing that would lift her spirits. One corner of his mouth twitched as though fighting a smile. She frowned, and he turned toward the front, preparing to start the engine.

"Are you going to sulk the entire trip?" he asked, an amused expression on his face.

"I'm entitled to sulk, thank you."

He chuckled and flipped a switch. Her eyes remained glued to his hands as he gripped the wheel. Strong, firm hands that had touched her with such tenderness. She swallowed a sudden wave of lust and stared out the window, watching the ground disappear beneath them.

Neither said anything. They were both lost in their own thoughts as the ship flew through puffy white clouds that resembled cotton. As soon as she noticed they were starting to descend, she glanced at Sidious with a questioning frown, wondering what was going on now.

They appeared to be setting down on the outskirts of some town. She could see buildings off in the distance, but directly below them were tents, hundreds of them. Men in uniform, mingling with what looked like civilians everywhere. "What is this place?" she asked.

"Speaking to me now?" he asked, his eyes on the instruments spread before him.

"Would you just answer the question?"

He glanced at her with a sigh, before shutting off the engines. "This is one of the prison cities. They hold people here that have either been captured or have surrendered, until the fighting is over."

"I can't imagine anyone would have surrendered."

"Most of the people that have did it for their families. They had small children or elderly parents. They're treated well here. They have a school, food, and shelter, as well as medical treatment."

"Well, aren't you the angel of mercy?" she sneered.

She noticed a muscle tense in his cheek, and for a second she felt bad. She was so confused, she didn't know if she were coming or going. If she had met him anywhere else, things would have been so different. But this...

"Why are we stopping here?" she asked, trying to take her mind off her twisting emotions.

"There's something that I need to take care of here. But before we get out, I want you to promise me something."

"What?" she asked, her eyes narrowing at him.

"You have to promise that you won't pull any more stupid stunts."

"Why should I make that promise?"

"You will if you want to see her." With a nod, he pointed out the window behind her.

She frowned and turned to see what he was talking about. Her eyes widened, and her hand flew to her mouth in surprise. "Mom?" She had been so mad at him, she never even thought he would be bringing her here. "You found her?"

Standing just a few feet away from the ship was her mother. She looked so thin. Her mother was tall, almost as tall as Mikayla, which made her appear even thinner. Concern for her ripped through Mikayla's chest, and she bit back tears. There were dark circles under her blue eyes, and her hair was much grayer than she remembered. She looked like she had aged so much.

Immediately, she started fumbling with the door, desperately trying to get it open. When it wouldn't budge, she bit back a sob and slapped at the window. Suddenly, the door was opened from the outside, but Sidious stood blocking her way.

"Do we have a deal?" he asked.

"Fine. I promise to not pull any more *stupid* stunts."

His shrewd eyes narrowed slightly. "Maybe we should clarify what is stupid."

"Sidious, please."

Mikayla didn't care that tears streamed down her face. She didn't care if she had to beg. She would gladly beg. She would do anything to be able to speak with her mother. Giving a tiny nod, he moved to the side allowing her to pass.

"Mikayla?" Amy yelled as she began to make her way to her daughter. As soon as they reached each other, they hugged, clinging to one other tightly as they sobbed.

Mikayla saw a bench a few feet away, and she moved her mother there so they could sit down.

"Are you okay?" Mikayla asked.

"I'm as well as can be expected," she replied, wiping the tears from her face. "Where have you been? Krista told me they took you, but she didn't know why."

At the mention of Krista's name, Mikayla asked, "How is Krista? Did she make it here okay?"

"Yes, she's still here with me. She has been a tremendous help, and she'll be thrilled to know that you're still alive. Oh, Mikayla, we were so worried about you. Have you been okay? Are they treating you well?"

"I've been on the ship that's orbiting, they took me to help this man named Agnus with the bar. It's actually not too bad. I don't get paid, but I get all the food I want. You know how I like to eat," she said with a smile. She wanted to ease her mother's mind so she wouldn't worry.

Would talking to her about Sidious worry her? Mikayla wanted to tell her mother everything, to unload all this guilt and confusion. But would she understand or would she stare at her in disappointment?

"Mikayla, are you all right?" Amy asked softly.

Mikayla stared down at her mother's hand over hers and started to cry. How could she explain this? "I don't know where to start."

"Maybe the beginning?"

Mikayla smiled and shook her head. Her mother always could make her smile. Despite that, she kept her face down, her eyes averted. She couldn't handle it if her mother looked upon her with disgust.

"Do you see that man leaning against the ship?" Mikayla asked.

"The one with white hair?"

Mikayla nodded. "Yes."

"The one that hasn't taken his eyes off you since we sat down?"

With surprise, she glanced up and turned to look at him. His eyes bore into hers with an intensity that made her shiver, and she quickly averted her gaze, once again intently studying her mother's hand.

"Has something happened?" Amy asked, her voice shaking slightly. "He hasn't forced you to..."

Mikayla was quick to relieve her mother's fears. "No," she said, shaking her head. She licked her lips nervously. "He hasn't made me do anything I didn't want to."

"I see," Amy whispered.

Seconds of silence ticked by, and Mikayla thought her heart would scream from the stress. She had to know what her mother was thinking. Raising her eyes, she stared into her mother's concerned ones. Amy gave her a reassuring smile. One of understanding, and Mikayla sighed in relief.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Oh God." Mikayla began to cry and talk around her sobs. It felt good to get it all out. Like a weight lifting.

"Mikayla, don't beat yourself up over this. You can't control your feelings. No one can. That's just the way things are."

"But he's the enemy."

"Sometimes these things happen, and I don't think you're a bad person because of it. Granted, I would have rather you fell in love with a nice doctor, but --"

"I'm not in love with him," Mikayla spat venomously.

"Of course you're not, dear."

"That's not funny."

"I know it's not. None of this is funny." Her mother's hand touched her cheek in support. "Is he good to you?"

"You mean when he's not being a pompous, arrogant pain in the ass?"

A tiny grin touched Amy's lips, and Mikayla groaned. She just kept digging herself deeper in the hole. "Yes, he's good to me. Better than anyone has ever been, really. God," Mikayla sighed and wiped away a stray tear. "Why did he have to be the enemy?"

"Why did they have to invade? Why did you have to be at that rest stop? I'm a firm believer that all things happen for a reason. No matter how bad or how good." Her mother studied Sidious for a moment, then turned back to her. "I've always been a good judge of character. I've always been able to read things, to feel things others can't."

Mikayla nodded. Her mother had always possessed that ability, and if she'd been smart, she would have listened when her mother warned her about Greg. "What are you saying? You can sense something about him?"

"Yes. But your friend is approaching, so we'll have to discuss it another time."

"But we might not have another time."

"We will. I know it in my heart."

Amy smiled and laid her palm against the side of her cheek. The warmth of her skin made Mikayla feel secure and safe.

"It's time to go, Mikayla," Sidious said quietly from behind her.

"Can't we stay a little while longer?" she asked, turning to look at him. She wasn't ready to leave yet. They still had so much they needed to talk about.

"No, *kisary*, we have to go," he said, placing his hand on her shoulder.

Mikayla turned back to her mother with tears in her eyes. Her mother enfolded her in her arms, reminding her of when she was a child. "It'll be fine, honey. You go back. I'll still be here when all this is over, and we'll see each other again. I love you."

"I love you too, Mom."

The two women stood, and Mikayla watched as Sidious leaned over and whispered something in her mother's ear. Amy's eyes widened for a second; then a twinkle appeared, and she smiled at Mikayla. "Everything will be fine, Mikayla," she said before blowing her daughter a kiss.

Mikayla walked back to the ship with Sidious, trying not to look back. She wanted to crumble into a heap on the ground and cry her eyes out. Everything that had happened over the last twenty-four hours had drained her, sapped her of all the fight she had left. She glanced at Sidious with a frown. "What did you say to my mother?" she asked.

Sidious shrugged, one corner of his lips lifting in a cocky grin.

"Well?" she prodded.

"You're not ready to hear what I said to your mother."

"What?"

He opened the ship door and waited for her to climb in.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Not yet."

She growled and climbed into the ship. The man was impossible. Turning, she waved to her mother, who stood exactly where she'd left her. As the ship took off, she tried to wipe the tears away from her face.

"Thank you for taking me to see her," she said softly.

"You're welcome. Although I'm not sure you deserved it."

He gave her a teasing grin, but then his brow crinkled in concern when she didn't rise to his bait. He reached out with a finger to raise her chin, making her meet his fathomless eyes. Eyes that could see right through her and had the power to make her melt beneath their seductive gaze. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said and then pulled her chin out of her grasp. The way he looked at her like he was trying to read her thoughts made her nervous, so she turned to look out the window.

As Sidious flew the ship out of the atmosphere, she looked over at him. He seemed deep in thought, and she wondered what he was thinking about. *Probably how to keep me from running away again.*

She thought back to all their times together. He always watched out for her, and he could be quite charming and fun, when he wasn't being obnoxious. Not to mention the fact he was absolutely gorgeous.

As if he had just heard her, he turned, giving her a wink and a very seductive smile. Just that alone made her almost want to slither in the floor and beg him to fuck her.

Mikayla stared back out the window, trying not to think about her traitorous body, and noticed they were coming up on the Destroyer. It's huge, she thought as they

flew by. It was one thing to hear how big it was; it was quite another to actually see it firsthand.

Sometimes she still had a hard time with the fact they were actually in space. It didn't seem real to her, even now. When he got to the end of the ship, she thought he would turn and go back, but he didn't. He kept going farther out into space.

"Where are you going? I thought that we were going back to the ship," she said as she turned toward him.

"I told you, remember? We're going to meet Stefan," he said, not looking at her. He kept his attention on the flight plan he was programming into the navigational system.

"But where are we going?" She crossed her arms and eyed him suspiciously.

"To meet Stefan," he said, staring at her with a pointed look.

"How long will it take us to get there?" she asked, trying to get her mind off the way he kissed, the way he filled her as he thrust in and out of her body.

"Once I open the transport gate, we should be there in about a hour."

"A transport gate?" she asked

"You're just full of questions, aren't you?" he asked, teasing her.

"That's a sign that I'm intelligent," she replied smartly, turning her nose up to appear snobbish.

"After your stunt this morning, I think I'll reserve judgment."

"Could we please try to keep this trip pleasant and not bring that up?"

Sidious chuckled. "I brought you some clothes to change into. What you're wearing, although sexy as hell, isn't appropriate for where we're going."

"That confident you would find me?"

"What can I say? I'm that good." He reached behind the seat and handed her the outfit.

She scowled at him, refusing to take the clothes. "Surely you don't expect me to change here?"

"Why not?" he asked, a seductive light in his eyes. "Don't think I can control myself around you?"

"I think it's already been proven we each have control issues where the other is concerned," she snarled, grabbing the clothes.

He just grinned, which only served to worsen her nervousness. Getting naked in front of him was not her idea of a smart thing to do. "Keep your eyes frontward."

He pointed toward the window, indicating the reflection that could be seen there, and she sighed. Even if he faced toward the front, he would still be able to see everything. His grin widened, and she scrunched her nose at him.

"At least keep your hands to yourself."

"I make no promises," he purred, and the hairs on her arm stood at attention. God, the man was sexy.

She squeezed between the chairs as best she could and tried to balance herself on her knees. The ship was too short for her to stand, so this was the best she could. Not looking at Sidious, she turned, putting her back toward him, and unfastened her shirt and bra. The cool air of the ship hit her breasts, and her nipples formed hard pebbles.

Warm hands reached around and cupped them, making her jump from surprise and moan from pleasure, all at the same time. Quickly getting herself more under control, she swatted at his hand. "You were supposed to keep your hands to yourself, remember?"

He spun her around to face him. With one hand at the small of her back, he pulled her close, and her heart pounded in her chest like a runaway stallion. The other hand moved to the back of her neck, his fingers massaging her skin, sending tiny tremors down her spine. "I said I make no promises," he whispered before capturing her lips with his.

Chapter Twelve

Mikayla couldn't think, couldn't even breathe. All she knew was she didn't want him to stop. His lips and tongue did things to her insides no one else had ever done. He was so gentle but demanding, and his mouth devoured hers like a man dying of thirst.

With shaking fingers, she gripped his jacket, fisting the wool-like fabric in her hands. She wanted it off so she could feel his hot skin, feel the hills and valleys created by his muscular physique. His hand left her neck to fondle her breast, and she gasped as his fingers pinched and pulled her nipple, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger until it beaded into a hard bud.

His hand buried in her hair and tugged, pulling her head back to expose her throat. Gentle lips nibbled along her neck, and she mumbled her pleasure. Her whole body was on fire, not just from his touch, but from his actions. She loved how he dominated her, bent her to his will. It amazed her he could do this and still be tender at the same time.

"So beautiful," he whispered against her breast, and her whole body shivered as he circled her pert nipple with his tongue.

Her back arched, wanting him to take more into his mouth, wanting to feel his lips wrap around her. He kept up with the teasing circles, prolonging the pleasure. When he finally closed his mouth over her, she actually screamed, her hands gripping his hair and tugging him closer.

A growl escaped his lips as he sucked harder, dragging her farther into his hot mouth. His hands feathered down, slowly slipping the pants down her hips. Firm fingers gripped her ass and squeezed. He let go of her breasts and came back to plunder her mouth, pressing her stomach against his hardening shaft.

Just thinking about him sinking that impressive cock deep within her made her wet with need. She couldn't resist him. She'd known that deep down since the beginning. She wasn't even sure anymore why she fought it.

He pushed a finger deep within her, and she groaned, grinding her pussy against his hand. His thumb began to circle her clit, and she was lost. She would do whatever he wanted so long as he eased this ache between her legs.

"Take off my jacket," he ordered, and she obeyed without a second thought.

Once it was off, her hands explored his smooth chest. The heat from his body warmed hers. The musky scent of his skin fueled her desire. She inhaled deeply and placed kisses along his chest, her tongue circling his nipple just as his had done hers.

"The pants, kisary."

"What about them?" she teased, her hands feathering lower.

"Get them off," he growled in her ear, his teeth nibbling on her lobe.

Grabbing his belt, she unfastened the buckle and opened the zipper. She pushed her hand inside and grabbed his hard cock, feeling the thick length with her fingers. His hips jerked into her hand as air hissed out through his teeth. His hungry gaze locked with hers, and she knew this wouldn't be the same gentle lovemaking they had done the other night. This would be wild, passionate, and mind-numbing.

He quickly helped her remove her pants then his in the cramped space. Their breathing was ragged and harsh, their desire for each other all-consuming. Grasping her hips, he pulled her up, settling her pussy against his shaft as he sat back on his haunches. Her arms wrapped around his neck, holding on tight as he lifted her hips, settling the hungry opening of her pussy at the head of his shaft. With a tug at her hips, he dropped her onto his shaft, forcing himself deep inside her, impaling her with one hard, powerful thrust.

She groaned, and her head fell back, exposing her neck and breasts to his devouring mouth. The feel of him filling her, stretching her, was overwhelming but incredible.

"Sid," she croaked, working her hips in a grinding motion.

He groaned in answer, gripping her waist, encouraging her to work her hips faster. With a flex of his hips, he pressed upward, filling her deeper. Her clit rubbed against his pelvis, sending sparks of fire to her womb.

He felt so good, she didn't want it to end. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he bent her back slightly, covering one aching nipple with his mouth. He bit down slightly, and the small bite of pain sent shards of pleasure to every part of her body.

"Oh God," she sighed, her pussy clenching around his length, sucking him deeper.

Sid growled something in his own language, and she shivered in response to the deep rumble of his voice. It didn't matter that she didn't understand him. Just the sound alone made her crazy.

"Your pussy feels so good, baby," he said in English, the fingers of one hand plucking at her nipples. "I can't get enough of you."

The beginning stirrings of her climax rippled through her, making her muscles tighten. Sid's body tensed against her as he approached his own release, his cock throbbing inside her. She knew it would be intense, and she braced for it, her nails digging into his shoulders and leaving half-moons.

Hard, strong fingers gripped her hips, holding her steady and slightly up as he lifted his hips, thrusting inside her hard and deep. She screamed as the explosive climax gripped her, spreading through her body like a shock wave. Sid pulled her down hard, grinding his hips against her clit, forcing her climax to begin again. Her pussy throbbed, sucking at his thick cock as pulse after pulse drained her. She was so lost in the rapture, Sidious's own cry of release as he emptied his seed inside her barely registered.

With a sigh, she sagged against his chest, her body limp and spent. His warm arms wrapped around her in a protective hug, pulling her closer. Her mind replayed all the things they'd just done, and the heat of a blush moved up her cheeks. What on Earth had this man done to her? And the way he talked. Just thinking about it made her body tingle again.

"You're going to be the death of me, kisary," he whispered.

For the first time, she noticed the endearment, and she sat up to stare at him. "What does kisary mean? I've never heard you call me that before today."

He brushed a strand of hair from her face. "It's a Tilarian endearment."

"Like sweetheart or baby?"

"Something like that."

A cute grin touched his lips and made his eyes crinkle at the corners. Whenever he looked at her like that, it made him look years younger. And very mischievous.

"Knowing you, it means something entirely different and you're just doing it to antagonize me."

A look of indignation crossed his features. "I would never antagonize you."

She raised an eyebrow. "You can't be serious. You've done nothing but antagonize me since day one."

"I wasn't doing that." He circled her nipple with his thumb, causing goose bumps to rise along her flesh. "I was flirting."

Mikayla laughed, and Sidious froze, watching her intently. She stopped, suddenly self-conscious. "What?"

"You should laugh like that more often. You're beautiful when you do."

She licked her lips and moved her gaze away from his intense stare. The way he looked at her sometimes made her feel so special, so loved. She shouldn't feel those things. Not with this man. What kind of a person had she turned into to?

"This still bothers you, doesn't it?"

When she didn't answer, he tipped her chin up with his finger, forcing her to meet his gaze.

"A little," she whispered.

"Things are not as they seem, Mikayla. After our trip is over, you'll realize that."

"And how will I realize that?"

He brought her face close to his and softly kissed the corner of her mouth. "It's a surprise," he whispered against her lips.

* * * * *

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

Mikayla opened her heavy eyes with a yawn. Glancing around, she noticed they were in a building of some kind. Bright lights burned her eyes, and she squinted until becoming accustomed to the brightness. The last thing she remembered after getting dressed was climbing into her seat. "Did I fall asleep?"

"Yes, you did. I guess I wore you out."

"Very funny," she said, crinkling her nose.

The action caused Sidious to chuckle, but she chose to ignore him, and instead gave closer study to her surroundings. Whatever they were in was huge. Ships of varying types and sizes were secured all around them. It was like being in a parking garage on Earth; only this one held spaceships.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Daego. Well," he said as he glanced around. "The hangar anyway."

He opened his door and looked back at her. "You coming?"

"Is it okay?" She'd never been to another planet before, and she felt like an idiot not knowing what to expect. After all, in the science-fiction shows she'd seen, they'd always had to wear some type of breathing apparatus. "I mean, the atmosphere."

"Why wouldn't it be?" His amusement was apparent by the twinkle in his eyes.

"Why indeed? Maybe because it's not breathable?" she replied dryly.

A smile spread his lips, and he opened his door more, letting a warm breeze flow through the ship. With it came the scent of exhaust fumes and fuel. She grimaced and waved her hand before her nose.

"It's oxygen just like your planet, at least for the most part. Of course, at the moment, you're breathing ship fumes. You'll be fine. And if you're not," he teased, his voice dropping to a seductive timbre. "I'll be more than happy to administer mouth-to-mouth."

"I'm sure you would," she said with a scowl.

"Come on, grouch," he said, grinning. "I promise you'll be glad you did."

Mikayla climbed out of her side and moved to stand next to Sidious. Glancing down at herself, she adjusted her clothing. The man had good taste, or maybe he didn't. She had no idea what clothes on other planets looked like, other than the uniforms she'd seen onboard the Destroyer. Sidious's brother Stefan didn't wear a uniform, but his clothing was very similar to what a man would wear on Earth, and so was Agnus's.

Again she looked down at herself and made a few minor adjustments to the silklike material. It was a deep green, and she was sure it made her eyes look even greener. The pants were loose at the waist but tapered at the bottom. The jacket opened down the front with no buttons and hung almost to her knees, with sleeves that were wide at the wrists. It covered her from head to toe -- a much welcome change from the bar outfit she was forced to wear.

"Lord Marcone. It's good to see you again. It's been quite a while since your last visit."

She turned to see who spoke. He was tall, probably close to seven feet. He was reed thin, with auburn hair and chocolate complexion. He smiled, displaying fangs, and his red eyes glowed from within their sockets.

Sidious's hand rested reassuringly against the small of her back. "Good afternoon, Milago."

"How long will you be staying?"

"About three days. Will you have maintenance take a look at the ship? She gave me a little trouble coming in."

"Of course, my lord." Milago nodded with a slight bow and turned to handle Sidious's requests.

She glanced back at Sidious and narrowed her eyes, his words finally sinking in. "Three days?"

"Yes. Would you prefer longer?" he asked sweetly.

"I would prefer shorter."

"What's the matter, little one? Afraid to be alone with me?"

The amusement in his eyes was obvious, and that only made her aggravation with him worsen. He knew exactly what effect he had on her, and he also knew she fought it. Although squat good it did.

"Don't be ridiculous," she lied. Her fortitude faltered at his one-sided grin and the arrogantly raised eyebrow. She crossed her arms over her chest and gave him her own arrogant stare. "Even if I were, do you really think I would admit it?"

"Knowing you, probably not."

He gave her a grin and turned toward a door at the far end of the hangar. Occasionally, it opened, and she caught a glimpse of blue sky and a whiff of flowers. The door would then shut, allowing the ship fumes to once again consume the bay.

"Are you coming?" he yelled over his shoulder. "Or are you going to remain here the entire trip?"

With a huff of exasperation, she dropped her arms and caught up to him at the door. He opened it, allowing her to step out first. The springlike breeze blew, and she turned her face into the wind, breathing in the scent of flowers and sunshine. There was also something else, something sweet.

It had been so long since she'd felt the wind in her hair. It felt incredible, and she smiled, savoring the treat just in case she never got to see it again. Finally, she opened her eyes and gasped at what surrounded her.

It was beautiful. A fairy-tale land full of flowers and fountains. They stood on a cobblestone path that led to a massive courtyard, surrounded by buildings two and three stories tall. They were all beige stucco and stone, with window boxes overflowing with more flowers and plants. In the center of the courtyard was a massive fountain, surrounded by young couples and children.

On the other side were more pathways, leading to more courtyards of similar design. It was amazing, and she couldn't stop staring.

"Now aren't you glad you came along?" Sidious asked.

"What is this place?"

"This is Daego. Playground for the elite in galactic society."

"Elite? So only the wealthy may come here? I thought the prime minister owned everything."

"No. There are places in the galaxy that are not under his rule. This planet is one of them. My father owns a house here, on the lake north of the city."

"So your parents are here?" She couldn't imagine him with a father, and for the first time wondered what alien family life was like. Was it similar to her own?

"Probably not. And if they are, this time of year they would stay in town and not the lake house. Matter of fact. I can't remember the last time he used the lake house." His brow crinkled in a frown, but then he shrugged, as though dismissing it.

"Why wouldn't he use it?" she asked as she stopped to study a store window displaying alien artifacts. Something caught her eye, and she moved closer, trying to get a better view.

"My father never really liked the lake house. Stefan almost drowned there as a child, so he prefers to stay in town."

"Can't say as I blame him," she mumbled, her gaze still on the replica of a sailing ship, one very similar to what would be found on Earth prior to the 1850s. She pointed at it and turned to stare at Sidious. "Where did this come from?"

He studied the ship, leaning closer to read the inscription at the bottom. "Delta sector."

"Where's Delta sector?" she asked.

"That's where Earth is."

"Boy, it didn't take them long, did it?"

"Long to what?"

"Start profiting off our planet."

"That's the way of things, kisary," he said as he softly brushed the backs of his fingers across her cheek. "Come with me. I brought you here to have a good time, and that's exactly what you're going to do."

Grabbing her hand, he tugged her along with him down the cobblestone walkway.

"And just how do you plan to do that?" she asked.

"For starters, you can't wear the same outfit all three days, so..." He raised his hand and gestured to another shop window. This one showcased woman's clothing, similar to what she had on.

"You're taking me shopping?" She shook her head firmly. "No."

She wasn't comfortable with that and wasn't exactly sure why. It just felt strange, like he was paying her for sex.

He put his hand at the small of her back and pushed her into the store. "Have you not figured out yet," he whispered in her ear, "that I can be just as stubborn as you?"

Chapter Thirteen

Several hours later, Sidious escorted Mikayla to an outside table and sat down next to her. He'd enjoyed seeing Daego through her eyes. Explaining all the different races and encouraging her to sample all the unusual foods. Once over her initial discomfort of his taking her shopping, she began to loosen up and actually have fun.

Several times, she'd even sent him a seductive look, and he'd been tempted to throw the saleslady out and fuck her right there in the dressing room. He'd spent most of the afternoon in a semi-state of arousal, and it was killing him.

He turned and caught her watching some children playing by the fountain. The smile on her face made his breath catch.

"Do you like children?" he asked, his finger brushing a stray lock of hair from her eyes.

"I've always loved children." She turned toward him. "You?"

He smiled slightly. "I adore children. I always wanted a houseful, but it's just never worked out."

"Well, if you aggravate the women in your life like you have me, it's no wonder," she replied dryly.

Sidious chuckled. Laying his arm along the chair behind her, he leaned down to whisper in her ear, "My aggravating you is a sign of affection."

His lips touched the sensitive spot below her ear and felt the tremor skim through her.

"If that's the case," she replied a bit breathlessly and pulled away from him slightly, "you must love me clear to your toes."

He placed his hand behind her head and pulled her toward him. "Maybe I do," he whispered against her lips.

He loved kissing her. He loved her -- everything about her. Their mouths touched, and the same jolt of electricity he always felt ran through his veins. If he'd been standing, it would have brought him to his knees.

His thumb rubbed against her cheek as his lips continued to sip at hers. She returned his soft butterfly kisses, her sighs becoming lost in his mouth as he deepened it. He pulled away, his lips remaining a hairbreadth from hers as they spread into a smile. The backs of his fingers brushed along her cheek, her skin soft and smooth beneath his touch.

Her eyes stared into his, wariness and passion deepening the green. "You're a very dangerous man, Captain." The scent of the spiced tea they'd been drinking wafted across her nose.

"Not nearly as dangerous as we are together." He captured her lips in another slow kiss, their tongues battling and teasing. God, he loved the way she kissed, the way her lips molded to his. He wanted her, and if he didn't stop this, he'd embarrass the hell out of both of them.

"Really, Sidious. At least take her somewhere a little more private."

At the sound of the female voice, Mikayla stiffened and jumped away from him. She stared in surprise at the woman standing next to their table. She was beautiful, with dark blonde hair hanging almost to her waist and eyes the color of sapphires. She didn't look a day over forty, and with sickening dread, Mikayla realized she had no idea if Sidious was married or even engaged. *What the hell have I gotten myself into?* Turning to him, she sent a murderous scowl.

He gave her a sideways smile. "Mikayla, I'd like you to meet my mother, Kaylar Marcone, Countess of Tilarus. Or as my father likes to call her, Madam Contessa."

His mother?

Mikayla's eyes widened slightly and then turned back toward the woman who grinned at them knowingly.

"Mother, this is Mikayla."

"Countess," Mikayla said and then glanced at Sidious. How was she supposed to address this woman?

"Please." Kaylar waved a dainty hand and took the seat across from them. "Judging by the way my son was just looking at you, I think it's safe to say you can call me Kaylar."

Mikayla blushed a deep red, and Sidious frowned. "Mother."

"What?" she asked innocently. Her eyes sparkled with humor. She brushed her long dark blonde hair from her shoulder and smiled. Mikayla could see now where Sidious got his playful side.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

His hand moved under Mikayla's hair and gently rubbed her neck. She was coiled more tightly than a bow and still had trouble grasping that she was sitting here talking with his mother of all people. It was hard to imagine Sidious with a mother.

"Oh, I'm just giving your father a little piece of his own medicine." She grinned as the waiter placed a cup of spiced tea before her. She lifted it and took a sip.

"What did he do this time?" Sidious asked with amusement as he lifted his own cup.

"He's spending a fortune supporting some secret cause. Last month he sent them eighty-five kilnotics, but he's terribly vague about who this group is or what they do."

Sidious choked on his tea.

Kaylar and Mikayla both frowned at him as he struggled to catch his breath. "Sidious, are you all right?" Mikayla asked as she hit his back with her palm.

He coughed and nodded his head. "I'm fine." He frowned at his mother. "And how is being here paying him back?"

She grinned. "If he can blow money, then so can I."

Mikayla laughed and then covered her mouth with her hand.

"Only a woman would find that funny," Sidious said.

"Only a man would think it wasn't," Mikayla countered back with a devilish smile.

Kaylar laughed. "I like her already, Sidious. Wherever did you find her?"

"Where I least expected to." He smiled at her, and the heat of a blush crept up her cheeks.

"Sidious," Kaylar said, and he turned back toward his mother. A worried frown marred her delicate features. "Your father is convinced something is going on with you and your brothers. He's up at all hours of the night pacing. He's snappy and short-tempered -- not at all like himself. Is something going on?"

"No, of course not." Sidious shook his head, trying not to look too closely at his mother. He hated lying to her like this, but he didn't have a choice. "Tell Father everything is fine."

The idea that his father might be the benefactor still had his head reeling. He'd have to talk with Stefan about it later and see what he could find out. If it was him, then how did he get involved? And did he know about their involvement?

His mother eyed him as though she didn't quite believe him, but didn't push him to say anything else. Her all-too-knowing gaze moved from him to Mikayla; then she smiled slightly. "I should probably leave the two of you alone. Sidious, I expect you to come back home soon."

"Yes, Mother." His voice was dry as sand, which earned him a scowl from Kaylar.

She turned to Mikayla with a smile. "Mikayla, it was nice meeting you. I'm sure we'll see each other again."

Mikayla returned Kaylar's smile, then frowned at Sidious after she left. "You really shouldn't let your mother think we're a couple."

"Why?" he asked with a shrug. "Aren't we?"

She shook her head with an exasperated sigh. "Sidious, today has been wonderful, but nothing's changed --"

"Stop it." He grabbed her chin and turned her face toward his. "Can you honestly look me in the eye and tell me you feel nothing?"

Mikayla stared at his gray eyes and knew she couldn't. She'd fallen in love with him, although she wasn't sure when it had happened. "No," she whispered.

"Then why are you fighting this so hard?"

"I..." She swallowed nervously. "You know why."

He frowned, then stood, pulling her up with him. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"To relieve your guilt, once and for all."

She wondered what he'd meant by that statement as he pulled her out of the restaurant and down the street. They hadn't had an opportunity to talk about what he'd indicated last night. Was he truly a spy, or was he just telling her that to make her feel less guilty?

They entered a huge three-story building and headed toward the stairs at the far end of the lobby. "Sidious? Damn it, what are we doing?" she asked as she tugged at his hand.

He didn't slow. Instead, he pulled her up the stairs and down a richly decorated hall.

"You know, this dragging me around thing is becoming way too much of a habit."

He opened a door, and they stepped into a beautiful suite decorated in shades of burgundy and beige. A cool breeze blew in from the open French doors.

"Whose room is this? Yours?"

"No. It's Stefan's suite."

Following him to the center of the room, she stood next to him as he pulled something from his pocket. "What is that?" she asked.

"It's a transport."

"Oh no." She shook her head and back away. "When Lafon used that thing, it had hurt."

"That's because you were tense. You have to be relaxed."

"No." She shook her head stubbornly. "And besides, why did we have to come in here to do this? Why not out there?"

"I didn't want anyone to see us use it."

"Why?" she asked stubbornly, stalling for time.

"You'll see when we get there."

Sidious grabbed her hand, pulling her close to him. Her nipples brushed against the wool of his jacket, and she closed her eyes, fighting the tingling sensation.

"You're being silly," he whispered against her lips.

His arm snaked around the small of her back, pressing her body against his. Her heart raced, and she burned everywhere. Without thinking, her hands slowly moved up his massive biceps, feeling the hard muscle beneath the fabric. "Can't you just tell me what it was you were going to show me?"

His lips brushed across hers, and she sucked in a breath. "Maybe I was going to do both."

It was so sexy the way he whispered against her mouth. The way his teeth nibbled at her bottom lip made her crazy.

"Kiss me, Mikayla."

After only a second's hesitation, she did. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she kissed him with all the passion she could muster. Her tongue delved and teased just as his had, causing him to moan deep in his throat.

By the time he broke the kiss, they were both breathing heavily. "Damn," he said. "I hate to say it, but we're here."

"What?"

She pulled away from him and looked around the brightly lit room, so different than the suite they were standing in just a second ago. It reminded her of the bridge of the Enterprise on *Star Trek*, but completely empty of a crew. Through the massive window that took up the far wall, she could see the planet of Daego spinning below them. A row of computer panels stood rib high, embedded in a black metal table that curved like an arch. Stepping forward, she tried to read the words flashing across the screen, but it was another language.

"Where are we?"

He smirked playfully. "You ask that question a lot."

She sighed. "Then maybe you should answer it."

"All in due time."

She turned back to Sidious and scowled. "The way you did that was dirty."

"Yeah, but it worked." He chuckled as she slapped his shoulder.

"See if I ever kiss you again. There's no telling where I'll end up."

Sidious laughed and wrapped his arms around her. "Now that you know it doesn't hurt, I won't have to resort to that again." He nipped at her bottom lip, wiggling his eyebrows. "But you're more than welcome to kiss me anyway."

"It's a good thing I don't want to."

"Liar," he mumbled against her lips, before capturing them in a soul-stealing kiss.

And that's exactly what he'd done -- stolen her soul. She had no idea how she would explain this. No idea if anyone would even understand. But she loved him, no matter who he was.

They heard someone clear their throat, and Mikayla began to giggle, breaking the kiss.

"Never fails," Sidious mumbled.

"Then perhaps you should stick to a room," Stefan replied dryly.

Mikayla stared at Stefan in shock. "Stefan?"

He nodded, the grin on his face making him appear boyish and charming.

"Now will you tell me where we are?" she asked as she turned to look at Sidious.

"We're onboard the *Vultair*, the flagship of the rebels."

For a second, she was speechless, her heart soaring in her chest.

"What? Rebels? As in 'fight against the prime minister' rebels?"

Sidious nodded. "Yes."

"And you're one of them? That's what you meant when you nodded yes to being a spy?"

Sidious nodded again. She could only stare in shock.

"Son of a bitch," Sidious said with a chuckle. "I believe I've made her speechless."

Mikayla pursed her lips and frowned. Their earlier conversation with his mother ran through her mind.

"This is what your father is upset about, isn't it?" she asked.

"Possibly."

"What?" Stefan asked as he pushed away from the doorjamb and stood straight. "What's she talking about?"

"I saw Mother on Tilarus. It seems our father blew eighty-five kilnotics on an undisclosed cause last month."

Stefan paled right before her eyes. "You can't be serious. I'll kill him!" Stefan snapped and turned to head down the long hallway.

"Stefan." Sidious sighed, then grabbed Mikayla's hand before taking off after him.

"Wait." Mikayla had to almost run to keep up with their long strides. "I don't understand what the amount of money has to do with anything."

"The rebels have an anonymous benefactor. The amount of money our father donated is the exact same amount of money we received from the benefactor." Stefan threw over his shoulder.

"But that doesn't mean it's him."

"It's too much of a coincidence for my liking," Sidious mumbled.

"I agree," Stefan sighed. "Do you think it's possible he knows?"

"I don't know how."

Mikayla grinned slightly. "When it comes to children, parents sometimes just know these things."

Sidious chuckled. "Dear old Dad always was very good at anticipating our moves."

"Unfortunately," Stefan mumbled, making Mikayla giggle.

"I take it you were caught red-handed?"

"Red-handed?" Stefan and Sidious asked in unison.

"Yeah. In the act."

Stefan nodded, a small smile tugging at his lips. "More times than I care to count."

She would have loved to see them as teenagers. Gallivanting around, getting into trouble. As they made their way through the ship, her eyes traveled around the hallway, looking into open doors. She had no idea how big the ship actually was, but it was obviously much smaller than the Destroyer. The hallway was barely wide enough for her and Sidious to fit in side by side. One thing she noticed right away was that the ship was virtually empty. There wasn't anyone else here that she could see.

"Sidious, where is everyone?"

"Taron and I are the only ones that know about Sidious's involvement. We didn't want anyone to see him, so we sent them all on leave," Stefan said as they stepped into a turbochute.

"Where's Taron?" Sidious asked.

"Engineering, working on your request."

Sidious nodded, and Mikayla frowned at them. For some reason, she felt as though they were talking in code.

"Who's Taron?" Mikayla asked.

"Taron is our adopted brother. He's also the captain of this ship," Sidious said.

"You have another brother?"

"Yes. Taron was raised with us. His mother was our mother's best friend. When our parents married, she brought her friend with her as her personal maid and companion. When Taron's father ran off, then his mother died a few months later, our parents adopted him."

"That was nice of them."

Stefan shrugged. "He was already part of the family anyway. Dad just made it official."

The turbob chute opened, and Mikayla stepped out into what could only be engineering. Computers lined the wall in front of her while to the right a glass wall encased what looked like an engine.

"That's the propulsion system," Sidious said in her ear.

She pointed to a blue ball about the size of a basketball dangling from a black pole encased in glass. It glowed and pulsed with an energy she felt prickling her skin. "What's that?"

"That's what controls the Litarian Cloak."

"Cloak? You mean we're invisible?"

Sidious nodded and smiled. "Yes."

"Interesting."

"It's about damn time you got your ass here."

Mikayla spun around at the sound of the deep voice and stared at the gorgeous man before her who had to be Taron. The name suited him. He was as tall as Sidious, with deep brown eyes and a bald head. The man was a dead ringer for Vin Diesel, especially the broad shoulders and muscular torso.

His gaze raked over her body in interest. "Did you bring me a gift?"

"Not likely," Sidious growled. "Get your own."

Taron grinned at Mikayla. "As busy as he keeps me, I never have time to find my own. You must be Mikayla. I've heard a lot about you." He leaned in and whispered, "I've also heard you've tamed our grouch of a little brother."

Little brother? Mikayla grinned at the image. There was nothing little about Sidious.

"Taron," Sidious growled in warning, and Taron rolled his eyes in response.

They were definitely brothers, she thought with a giggle.

"Let's hurry and get this fitting over with, before the crew starts getting restless and wants to come back," Stefan said.

"They're on leave on Daego. Like that's going to happen anytime soon." Taron retrieved a small device from the table in the center of the room with a chuckle.

In fatigue, Mikayla sank down in one of the leather chairs along the wall. A lot had happened in the last twenty-four hours, and she felt drained, emotionally as well as physically. Leaning her head back, she listened to the three men softly talking to one another and smiled at their brotherly banter. As an only child, she never had any siblings and often missed that as she grew up. Listening to them, she missed it even more. It was obvious the three of them were close.

"How did the three of you get involved in this?" she asked.

Both Stefan and Taron pointed to Sidious.

Sidious snorted. "Actually, they got involved first, then approached me with the idea of joining the militia so they could have someone on the inside."

"Why not Taron?" she asked.

A small grin tugged at Sidious's lips. "Taron has issues with authority."

Taron nodded his head in agreement. "I'm always right, and usually authority doesn't like that," Taron said as he studied the device in front of him.

Sidious glanced at her and silently shook his head, making Mikayla grin.

"You do realize I can see you, right?" Taron asked, making Stefan snicker.

"I'm shaking in my boots," Sidious replied dryly.

"You should be," Taron countered and held up the device he held in his hand, his lips twitching in amusement, his eyes sparkling with devilment. "Your life is in my hands."

"Are the three of you always like this?" Mikayla asked. "Does it ever come to blows?"

"Yes, we're always like this, much to our mother's displeasure, and it's been known to come to blows a few times," Sidious replied.

"Mostly between him and Stefan," Taron said. "I know better than to piss this guy off, Stefan still hasn't learned his lesson."

"Do you break them up when they do?"

"Hell no," Taron said with a chuckle. "I let them fight it out. It's safer that way."

Mikayla chuckled as Sidious rolled his eyes. Stefan remained quiet, adjusting numbers on another computer as Taron called them off.

"We may have an issue with Dad," Sidious said, meeting Taron's surprised stare.

"What kind of an issue?"

Stefan sighed. "It seems Dad donated the exact amount of money to a secret cause that we received last week."

Taron appeared to go pale right before her eyes. "Are you serious?"

"Fraid so," Sidious said with a nod.

"Why would he do something so stupid?" Taron snapped.

"Probably for the same reason we did," Sidious replied. "The bigger question is, does he know about us? And do we confront him about it?"

"God no," Stefan said. "If we confront him and he didn't know about us..."

Sidious nodded. "He would then."

"Maybe we should pick up Sidious's plan and avoid him at all costs."

"I don't avoid him...much."

Stefan and Taron chuckled.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Stefan said. "You avoid him all the time and leave the two of us to try to make up excuses for your absence."

"Which you've done a lousy job of lately, by the way," Sidious snapped over his shoulder toward Stefan.

"Well, here's a solution. Go home for a visit, or call them yourself," Stefan snapped back.

Taron grinned at her. "See what I mean?"

"Shut up," Sidious snarled, but not really in anger. "The two of you don't have to deal with his constant bragging."

"Oh, yeah. How rough that must be for you," Stefan countered.

"It is when you know it's a damn lie!" Sidious snapped.

Mikayla's eyebrow rose in interest. Apparently, Stefan hit a nerve. Stefan noticed it too and stared at him in surprise.

"Jeez. You're so damn touchy anymore," Stefan said, trying to fight a grin.

Sidious rolled his eyes and stared toward the ceiling with a ragged sigh.

"Stefan," Taron cautioned. "Sidious has a right to be touchy."

"Don't fucking placate me," Sidious snarled.

Taron turned to look at her as she watched them from the couch in silence. "Sure you want to be a part of this madness, sweetheart?"

She shrugged, giving them a sideways grin. "He hasn't given me much choice in the matter."

"I can see that," Stefan said. "Sidious always did have a way of just taking what he wanted and to hell with the consequences."

Sidious winked at her over Taron's shoulder, and she smiled. Memories of all the times he'd done just that -- taken what he wanted, sent a warm shiver up her spine. In truth, that was one bad habit she didn't want to break him of. At least not just yet.

Chapter Fourteen

Mikayla opened her eyes and stared sleepily out the open French doors that overlooked the lake. The morning sun sparkled against the water, sparkling like diamonds. The waves resembled the color of the Caribbean Sea. A soft breeze blew, bringing with it the scent of jasmine and pine. She inhaled the sweet fragrance floating in the air and snuggled closer to Sidious's warm body behind her. The satin sheets felt like heaven against her skin as she shifted.

They'd arrived at his parents' lake house sometime very late, and they both had fallen sound asleep in each other's arms. It was the first time they'd just held each other, and it had felt wonderful. Last night was probably the most peaceful sleep she'd had in weeks.

They hadn't talked about anything yet. In truth, she was still processing everything. It explained so much -- the haunted look she sometimes saw in his gaze, the gruff exterior he showed in front of his men, and the gentle, playful man he showed to her. Looking back now, it should have been so obvious.

Warm lips softly touched the back of her shoulder, bringing her away from her thoughts. The gentle kiss sent jolts of desire up her limbs to puddle in her core.

"It's beautiful here," she whispered.

"Mmm," he murmured in agreement.

She rolled to her side, facing him. His eyes were closed, his long hair mussed from sleep. He looked so different here, away from the ship, so much younger, so much more relaxed. With the tip of her finger, she traced his eyebrows, then down his cheek. When she brushed across his full lips, he grinned. "I could wake up to this every day of my life."

Her heart skipped with the knowledge that she could too. Awake every morning with his arms around her, his breath on her neck. He put his hand behind her knee and

lifted her leg over his thigh. With a soft growl, he pressed his hard shaft against her pussy, which was already wet and aching. The man was going to be the death of her.

"Are we alone?" Her lips dropped featherlight kisses along his collarbone, and he shuddered beneath her mouth.

"It's just us and a couple of servants."

She circled his hard nipple with the tip of her finger. He was playing a dangerous game, one that made her nervous and fearful she'd lose him. Now that she'd accepted her feelings for him, now that she'd realized he really was on her side and she could forget all that guilt, she didn't want to have to face her life without him. She'd fallen so hard for him, it sometimes scared the hell out of her.

"That's nice," he sighed, his mouth spreading into a grin.

"Sid?"

"Yeah, baby." His palm cupped her hip and ground her against his cock in a slow rhythm. She gasped, almost forgetting what she was about to ask.

"What if you get caught?"

He stopped moving and met her questioning gaze. "I'll be executed."

Fear gripped her chest, and she stared at him, her eyes wide. His fingers brushed across her cheek, and a tiny smile lifted the corner of his lips. "I have no intention of getting caught, kisary. Not since I've found you."

He leaned down and captured her mouth in a gentle kiss that stole her breath. He tasted of man and sleepy mornings, and she lifted her arms around his neck, returning his kiss with all the passion and love she felt in her soul.

With a slight shift, he rolled her to her back and settled over her. The warmth of his body seeped into hers, creating a stark contrast to the cool sheets beneath her. Breaking the kiss, he moved downward, his teeth tugging at her nipples. She inhaled sharply at the sensations his touch created. Her whole body was on fire.

"You have such a delectable body, Mikayla," he sighed against the flesh of her stomach. His lips traveled lower until they touched the soft skin just above her pussy. Her breathing increased. Oh God. She wanted him to touch her there, to lick her pussy and ease the ache that was quickly building to an inferno.

He inhaled and grinned. "Hmm, I wonder if you taste as good as you smell."

One finger pushed deep within her throbbing channel, and her hips lifted from the bed, sucking him deeper. Pulling his finger out, he never broke eye contact with her as he slid that finger into his mouth, softly sucking her juices from around his knuckle. She watched, mesmerized by his actions and the tantalizing effect they had on her.

"Delicious," he mumbled and, with his palms, spread her legs wider.

Gently he blew against her labia, and she moaned, bucking her hips. Damn, she was going to orgasm, and he hadn't even really touched her yet. God help her when he did.

"Sid," she whimpered as his tongue lightly licked up her slit.

One finger slid deep in her pussy while his tongue teasingly circled her clit, sending sharp shards of pleasure over every inch of her flesh. Without warning, he moved his finger to the tight channel of her anus, slowly pushing past the tight ring of resistance. She stiffened at the unusual invasion, her eyes rolling back as the bite of pain quickly morphed to blinding pleasure.

He pressed the finger deeper, then added another, as his tongue gently licked at the juices pouring from her channel. With scissorlike movements, he stretched her anal passage, igniting a hunger she never imagined existed.

She gasped, her breath coming out in pants as he slowly increased the rhythm and pressure. At the tender invasion of a third finger, she closed her eyes, her hips moving in time with his hand. She didn't know what he was doing, what spot he was rubbing against, but the sensation was incredible. It kept building, getting stronger. Her anal muscles clenched around his knuckles, pulling them in deeper.

His tongue resumed the gentle circling of her clit, making her pussy clench. Her stomach tightened and tingled as pressure built within her body, moving outward in sharp tingles. He flattened his tongue against her swollen clit, applying soft and persistent pressure. She screamed as wave after wave of pleasure slammed through her. Her pussy spasmed, along with the muscles of her anus, and she gasped in shock at the intense pleasure.

"You're killing me," she sighed as her body relaxed into a mass of Jell-O against the mattress.

"Ah, baby. I haven't even begun."

He settled over her and slid his cock balls deep in one long, slow thrust. She moaned and lifted her legs around his waist, forcing him even deeper. God, he was huge, and he stretched her almost to the point of pain, but he felt so good as he thrust in and out, grinding against her sensitive clit on the down thrust. Each time applying just a little more pressure, each one lingering just a second longer.

"You feel so good, Mikayla," he moaned against her lips. "So tight and hot. So perfect."

"Sid," she screamed as his thrusts increased in rhythm, forcing her to take more of him. "Oh God."

"That's it, kisary. Come for me. Let me feel your pussy squeeze my cock."

"Oh yes," she growled. How could she be doing this again so soon? How could he make her body feel this much pleasure?

Her climax rocked through her, her pussy gripping his shaft, pulsing against him in waves of ever-increasing pleasure. Sid growled and stiffened above her, his hot seed emptying into her spasming channel.

Settling on his elbows, he dropped his forehead to hers, his eyes closed, his breathing as harsh and ragged as hers. Lifting her hand, she feathered her fingers through his hair, enjoying the feel of the silky strands. She loved his hair and hoped he never cut it.

Slowly, their hearts began to beat in time together, and she touched the side of his face. His eyes opened and gazed into hers, still black with passion and something else. Something she felt deep within her own heart.

"I love you, Mikayla," he whispered.

Her chest tightened, her lower lip quivered. "I love you too. And I'm not even sure when it started."

He grinned. "I think I've loved you since the day you told me I wasn't man enough."

She laughed as she remembered that day, which now seemed so long ago.

"So," he said, his voice a deep rumble in his chest she felt vibrate in her own. He dipped his head, biting softly at the sensitive flesh below her ear. "Am I man enough for you after all?"

With excruciatingly slow movements, he began to move in shallow thrusts, teasing her, his cock thickening with every movement of his hips. All she could do was moan and move with him. The feel of him inside her was unlike anything she'd ever known.

"Definitely," she whispered.

He kept his thrusts slow and shallow, his kisses light and teasing. His hands framed her face as his lips softly brushed across hers, swallowing her sighs. It felt so good just being one with him, just letting their bodies move together in a gentle rocking rhythm. It was perfect.

* * * * *

Sidious led Mikayla through the massive hallways and down a gorgeous flight of stairs that circled around and emptied into a beautiful mahogany entranceway with tile floors and huge windows that overlooked the front lawn. It was such a beautiful house, but so empty. Only a few of the rooms were furnished.

"Where's all the furniture?" she asked. "Storage?"

"No. Remember when I told you Stefan almost drowned here as a child?"

"Yes."

"Well, when that happened, my father packed them up and moved back to Tilarus. My mother never finished decorating the house."

"That incident must have really frightened your father." She could understand why it would. It would be so hard to lose a child. "How old was Stefan at the time?"

"Two, I think."

Walking through the alcove, they emptied into a brightly lit room with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the veranda and the lake just beyond.

"It's so beautiful here," she sighed.

Sidious placed his hands on her shoulders, giving them a gentle squeeze. She leaned back, resting against his chest as his arms snaked around her waist, holding her close.

"Good morning, you two."

Mikayla turned to see an older woman with gray hair and shining blue eyes standing in the kitchen doorway holding a tray of cups. Her smile was so friendly, so open, Mikayla couldn't help but smile back.

"Good morning, Gaviny," Sidious said as he moved to take the tray from her and place a kiss on her cheek.

"Oh, Sidious. She's lovely," Gaviny said as she stepped forward and took Mikayla's hands in hers.

Mikayla smiled slightly, then glanced to Sidious with a questioning expression. Who was this woman?

"Gaviny, you're going to embarrass her," Sidious chastised, but Gaviny waved her hand in dismissal. "Mikayla, Gaviny was my *Fortac*. She is now retired and lives here at the lake house, taking care of it."

"Fortac?" she asked in confusion.

Sidious pursed his lips in thought. "You would probably call it a nanny."

"Oh," Mikayla said with a nod. All this seemed so strange. She still couldn't imagine Sidious as a young boy.

"Honey, the stories I could tell you about this boy." Gaviny giggled, making Mikayla smile in interest.

"Really? I would love to hear some."

"No you wouldn't," Sidious said with a grin. "They're all lies anyway."

"Sidious Marcone. You should be ashamed." Gaviny narrowed her eyes at him in censure. "Accusing your Fortac of telling fibs."

He placed his hand over his heart as he sat down at the huge wooden table in the center of the room. "Please forgive me. I momentarily lost my head." Mikayla snorted at the image he tried pathetically to portray. "But please, Gaviny, I beg you. You can't tell her how rotten I was as a child; she'll leave me, in fear that our children will grow up to be just as rotten as their father."

She and Gaviny both laughed. It was hard not to, he was so adorable.

"What would the two of you like for breakfast? Name it; it's yours."

Sidious smiled wickedly at Mikayla, and the heat of a blush moved up her cheeks. Who would have imaged she would be here with the very man she assumed all this time was her enemy, sipping coffee at a table overlooking a magnificent lake, talking to his nanny? Would she wake up shortly to find herself back at the ship and none of this happened?

"I'm starving this morning, Gaviny," Sidious said with a wide smile. "Give us the works."

Gaviny walked over and cupped his face. "It's so good to see you your old self again. She's good for you, I think."

"I think so too," he replied with a wink, and Gaviny headed to the kitchen, humming softly.

Mikayla took the chair next to Sidious and lifted the cup of coffee he slid across to her. "Your old self? How have you been lately?"

Sidious shrugged and grinned sheepishly. "Absent."

She sipped her coffee, watching in silence as she waited for him to elaborate.

"I have a hard time sometimes looking my father in the eye. He acts all proud of my military career, but if he knew what I was really doing..."

"But you suspect he's your benefactor," Mikayla reasoned. "Could his pride be a front, just like your surly demeanor?"

"Surly, huh?" he grumbled.

"Yeah. Just like that."

He chuckled and lifted his cup to take a sip of the hot brew. "There is that possibility, I suppose."

"This is good," she said and lifted her cup slightly. "I can't believe you have coffee here."

"We've had it here for years. I think someone brought it here from Earth. I thought the fact Earth had it was too much a coincidence."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "So people from space have been visiting our world for quite a while?"

"Did you not really look at the town? There are areas of Earth that look just like it."

"Maybe," she said with a frown. "I guess I just didn't put two and two together. Your world is so much more advanced than mine."

"When you were still fighting with swords, we were just starting space travel."

"How many other worlds are out there, do you think?"

"Thousands. We still haven't found or explored them all. For all we know, there's a world out there even more advanced than ours."

"What will happen to your family's title once the prime minister is taken down?" she asked.

Sidious shrugged. "Nothing. The title was around long before the prime minister came along. Tilarus has had counts as rulers for centuries."

"So the prime minister just left it?"

"He modeled the other worlds after it. Those titles will fold, and the worlds will revert to their original governments or possibly create new ones. At one time, there was a galactic senate that reigned over the regional governments."

"Do you plan to bring the senate back?"

"That's the plan," he said with a grin. "Each planet will be represented by a senator or senators, depending on the size and population."

"Similar to our own government," she said with a nod. "Who's over the senate?"

"A regent, which would be similar to your presidential position. But this time, things will be put into place to stop a repeat of what happened with the prime minister."

"How did he do it?" she asked in curiosity. "How did they allow that to happen?"

"He used a war as a way to manipulate the senators and convinced them to give him more power than they should have. Once he had firmly established himself as leader, he abolished the senate. That was about fifty years ago."

Her brow raised in surprise. "Fifty? He must have been young."

Sidious shook his head. "No. He's from a race that lives much longer than we do. Our life span is pretty close to the same as yours. His is several decades longer."

"Oh," she said as she studied him. "How old are you?"

He grinned as he lifted the coffee cup to his lips. "How old do I look?"

"Right now, much younger than you do on the ship."

"I'm thirty-two, but at times feel sixty-two."

"I can certainly see why," she replied dryly. "How have you managed to not get caught?"

He shrugged, a sad look clouding his eyes. "I'm good at what I do and gave them no reason to suspect me."

"What you do bothers you, doesn't it?"

He glanced at her through his lashes, then took a deep breath. He leaned his elbows on the table, closely examining the cup he held between his hands. "We've invaded so many worlds over the years, killing so many people, just so he could expand his empire."

She reached out and laid her hand over his. He smiled slightly, turning his hand to grasp hers and bring her fingers to his mouth. He kissed the back of her knuckles softly, sending a warm tingle up her arm.

"In the beginning, I had nightmares, but I learned to turn a blind eye to everything, I guess. I did what I needed to do and thought only of Stefan and Taron, keeping them safe and informed. Keeping the rebels one step ahead of the prime minister. I'll have to live with some of the things I've done for the rest of my life, but if we succeed, I will consider it worth it."

This man was amazing. He was too good to be true, and in some ways, that scared the hell out of her. "I treated you so badly. Thought the worst of you."

"You had every right to think the worst, Mikayla. You'd been kidnapped. And if you had any idea what was going through my mind that first time I saw you in the bar, you'd really have reason to hate me."

She snickered. "Can't be any worse than what we've already done."

He grinned, sending little shots of trepidation down her spine. "Baby, we haven't come anywhere close to doing all the things I want to do to you."

She smiled back but quickly changed the subject. The last thing she wanted to do was go at it on the table when Gaviny could walk back in at any second. "So what made you fall in love with me? Do you like being abused?"

A deep chuckle rumbled through his chest, making her heart flip. "I didn't intimidate you."

"Oh yes you did. I just didn't show it."

His eyes smiled at her warmly, so full of love and mischief. How had he done it? How had he kept his cold, hard persona up for so long? No wonder he was tired and wanted this battle at an end. He wanted his life back. He wanted to be able to be himself again.

"How about you and I spend the day in town? We'll go eat an early dinner, then come back here and make love in the lake."

Her lips twitched slightly as he lifted her hand to his lips. His teeth sank gently into the flesh of her knuckle, making her body shiver in anticipation of him sinking his teeth other places as well.

"Won't it be cold?" she asked.

He shook his head, his thumb rubbing the back of her fingers. "The water's heated by thermal caves within the core of the planet. Water's the perfect temperature."

She grinned and leaned forward to brush her lips across his. He tasted of coffee and slow, lazy mornings. She had no doubt life with him would be amazing. "I say that sounds like a wonderful idea."

* * * * *

Kaylar stood at the entrance to the store, her lips pursed in thought. Something was up; she knew it deep in her gut. Sidious avoided his father like the plague. Stefan was gone more often than not, and Lord only knew where. Taron as well. Damon was up all hours of the night pacing, insisting there was nothing wrong, but she knew better. Her husband tried to put on a calm facade, but he failed miserably.

Then there was the money. Huge sums of it, and this last installment Damon had forked over hadn't been the first. It had only been the first one she'd confronted him about. The money wasn't really the issue. Lord knew, they had plenty. It was the

secrecy. The worry she could see etched in Damon's forehead, the nervousness in his eyes. Eyes so like Sidious's and Stefan's.

They were the spitting images of their father -- so handsome and strong. Also lousy liars. The three of them may be able to fool everyone else, but they hadn't fooled her. She just couldn't figure out what was going on.

"There you are."

At the sound of her husband's deep voice, she turned and smiled as he came down the sidewalk. His shoulders were still just as broad as they were over thirty-five years ago, his waist just as trim. He'd kept his hair long, and to this day, she still loved running her fingers through it. With a smile, he leaned down and placed his warm lips at the corner of her mouth, and like always, her body shivered in response. His presence never failed to make her heart flutter wildly.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her lips spreading into a smile.

"Just making sure you don't break me," he replied in amusement. "What were you staring at so intently?"

"Your son. And what do you mean break you?"

He just grinned and pulled a windblown piece of flower from her hair. He loved to tease her about her spending. It would take much more than what she spent to break him.

"Which son is here?" he asked, deliberately avoiding her question.

"Sidious."

"He's here?" he asked, suddenly turning serious, his eyes glancing around the crowded streets of Daego.

"Yes. Over there."

Kaylar turned and pointed to their son across the street. Beside him was the young woman he'd introduced her to yesterday.

"Good. I need to speak with him."

Damon moved as though to join him, but Kaylar put her hand on his arm, stopping him. "Don't," she whispered. "Look at him, Damon. When was the last time you saw him smile like that?"

They both watched as Mikayla stood on her tiptoe, whispering something into Sidious's ear. He leaned down slightly to better hear her, and his lips spread into a huge smile just before his chest began to shake in laughter. His eyes sparkled as he smiled down at the young woman who barely reached his shoulders.

He looked so happy, so in love, and her heart soared for her son. He'd been so troubled lately, so tired.

"Who is she?" Damon asked as they watched them.

Her dark brown hair was piled on her head in a loose knot. A few tendrils brushed her cheek in the afternoon breeze. The blue sleeveless dress hugged her body,

complementing her curvy figure. Sidious was also dressed in street clothes, the casual black slacks and blue button-down shirt suiting his frame much better than that horrid uniform he wore.

"I met her yesterday. Her name is Mikayla."

"Mikayla. Unusual name. Where's she from?" Damon asked in interest.

"I don't know. All he said was he'd found her where he least expected to."

"Ah," Damon said with a grin. "Same place I met you."

She returned his smile and hooked her arm around his elbow as they strolled along behind Sidious and Mikayla, watching the two of them.

"So is this what we're doing today? Following Sidious around?" Damon asked in amusement.

"For a while," she murmured. "I like watching them. I've never seen Sidious like this with a woman."

"I've never seen him interested in a woman long enough to be like this," Damon said with a sideways grin. "He was too focused on his military career."

Kaylar didn't miss the slight sneer to his voice but remained silent about it. Damon often gave off mixed signals when it came to Sidious and his choice of career. In front of other people, he acted all proud, which made Sidious extremely uncomfortable, but at home, she could tell his choice worried him.

Sidious leaned down and whispered something into Mikayla's ear, making her laugh. Breaking off a piece of the cake she had in her hand, Mikayla reached up and placed the piece at his mouth. He opened his lips, and she settled the bite on his tongue; then Sidious grabbed her hand, placing a single kiss on the inside of her palm. A slight blush heated Mikayla's cheeks as she stared up at Sidious, the love she felt shining so obviously in her eyes.

"Spy on him with all his women, do you, Madam Contessa?" Damon teased, and she swatted at his arm.

"Of course not. I just noticed them a few minutes ago. They're staying at the lake house. Gaviny called to let me know."

"I'm sure that's not all she let you know," Damon said with a smile. "That woman would make an excellent spy."

Kaylar laughed. "She was certainly able to keep on top of the boys when they were younger. I swear, I don't know what I would have done without her. She said he's like his old self again -- teasing and laughing."

She glanced up at her husband and didn't miss the frown that suddenly creased his brow. "What's going on, Damon? I know there's something you're not telling me."

Damon sighed and placed his hand over her fingers that rested at his forearm. "I'm afraid the boys might be in over their heads."

Kaylar stopped in her tracks, fear gripping her chest. "Over their heads in what?" she demanded.

"I don't have all the details, Kay. I'm not even sure if what I think is correct."

"Well, what is it you think is going on?"

"Kaylar," Damon said with a sigh.

"Don't you dare," she snarled. "They're my children too, and if they're involved in something, I have a right to know."

Damon glanced around, then leaned closer to speak softly. "I think Stefan and Taron may be involved with the rebels, but I'm not sure about Sidious. He keeps avoiding me."

"What?" she cried loudly, then turned her head to notice Sidious had stopped in his tracks and turned to stare at them with a frown. He'd noticed them, thanks to her big mouth.

She brushed her hair from her face with a sigh and gave her husband a pointed look. "We'll finish this discussion later."

Sidious let out a tired sigh as he watched his mother and father cross the street to head in their direction. Maybe Daego wasn't such a great place to go after all. "Looks like we have more visitors," he said with an apologetic smile toward Mikayla.

She looked toward the couple heading their way, then back at Sidious. "That man has to be your father. You're his spitting image."

"Mmm," Sidious grumbled, and her eyebrow rose adorably.

"Sidious," his father chided, and inside he groaned. "Why didn't you tell us you would be here?"

"Well, because I didn't know until last night. Dad, this is Mikayla. Mikayla, my father."

"It's nice to meet you, Mikayla." Damon smiled down at her, but the smile never reached his eyes. They moved to lock onto Sidious, making him squirm uncomfortably.

Damn, he wished he could tell his father. He hated keeping secrets from them, and it was getting harder to do so.

"How did you get away from the Destroyer?" Damon asked.

Sidious shrugged. "I was due some time off."

Damon's eyebrow rose a fraction.

Mikayla immediately felt the tension in Sid's body. As she watched Damon, she had a sinking feeling Damon knew. Or at the very least suspected. Even Kaylar stared at her son as though she wanted to say something but held herself back. Sid's arm snaked around her waist and pulled her to his side.

"Sidious. You and I need to talk --" Damon began, but Sidious wouldn't let him finish.

"I know, and we will. Just not today. Mikayla and I only have one day left, and I'd like it to be a stress-free one. She's been through enough lately."

Damon nodded, but the worry was still evident in his gaze. "Think we're going to end up in an argument?"

Sid's lips twitched. "We did last time, if I recall."

"I certainly recall," Kaylar added dryly. "I had to step between the two of you, and I'll be damned if I'll do it again. The two of you get into another argument, and you can just beat the hell out of each other until you can't move."

Mikayla tried to hide her grin, but Damon caught her. "We're not normally like this, Mikayla. I promise. But lately, for some reason, Sidious and his brothers find it necessary to keep their father in the dark."

"And there's nothing you're keeping us in the dark about...Dad?" Sidious asked.

"I'm doing the only thing I know to do. Perhaps if I were more in the loop..."

Mikayla watched Damon and Sidious. Damon knew. She could see it in his eyes.

"There is no loop," Sidious said in a firm voice, and Mikayla inwardly sighed. Why didn't he tell him?

Damon gave a resigned nod, sadness fading his gray eyes. Mikayla glanced at Kaylar, silently pleading for her to do something. Anything to break the tension that had formed. With a slight nod, she smiled softly and moved to place her palm against Sidious's cheek. "Enjoy your day," she said. "And please, be safe. We're here if you need us."

"For anything," Damon added, staring pointedly at Sidious.

"I know. Just..."

"Just what?" Damon asked.

Sidious sighed and glanced down at Mikayla before turning back to his father. "Just trust that it's better this way."

Damon opened his mouth to speak, then changed his mind, his mouth clamping closed with a frown. Turning, she and Sidious headed back down the street, for a moment neither speaking. Finally, Mikayla couldn't take the silence anymore and spoke.

"He knows."

Sidious shook his head. "He suspects."

She stopped and placed her hand on his arm, making him turn to look down at her. "Sid. He knows. You have to tell him. You can see in his eyes this whole thing is killing him."

He took her hands in his and brought them to his mouth, his lips softly kissing the knuckles of each hand. "As long as I don't confirm it, maybe he'll stay out of it."

"If he's your benefactor, he's in this just as deep as you are."

"But at least they can't prove it, if this isn't successful. Mikayla, maybe you should stay here."

"What?" she demanded, pulling her hands from his grasp. "The hell I will. How would you explain not taking me back?"

He sighed, his hand dragging through his hair in agitation. "I don't know."

Putting her hands at his waist, she stared up at him. She didn't want to stay here. She wanted to be by his side for as long as possible. "I want to go back. I would be terrified to stay here, not knowing what was happening, not seeing you."

He cupped her face and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. Suddenly Earth and the war didn't seem so far away anymore.

* * * * *

Mikayla stood at the edge of the veranda. The two full moons, one half the size of the other, shone bright above her. Their beams lit up the lake, making the waves sparkle like diamonds. Beyond the moons was the planet of Metalon. Its iridescent rings the color of amethyst. Sidious said they changed color periodically, sometimes shining red, others almost green or deep blue.

A low rumble of thunder could be heard in the distance, and she glanced over her shoulder toward the eastern sky. Dark clouds moved closer, carrying with them a cooler breeze and the smell of rain.

Sidious came up behind her and settled his arms around her waist. "I hate that it will storm our last night here. We'll miss swimming in the lake," she whispered, sagging into his embrace. "Do we have to go back?"

"I'm afraid so." He kissed the top of her head and tightened his hold. "But I promise we'll be back. How about we make this our house?"

She smiled at the thought of living here with him. It was so beautiful, so peaceful. "Doesn't it belong to your parents?"

"Yeah, but I think I can talk them out of it."

Mikayla drew in a deep breath and sighed. So much had changed over the last two days. The man she once thought of as her enemy was actually not. She'd admitted she loved him. In more ways than one, she thought with a satisfied grin. They'd had so much fun here. They'd talked, made love. Sidious had an adorable playful side she'd only caught glimpses of on the ship.

Darkness still loomed over their future for they still had to defeat the prime minister. She tried not to think about the fact that the rebels could fail. There was no guarantee their plan would work, and the idea that Sidious could die scared the hell out of her. She'd just found him, just come to terms with what they meant to one another. She couldn't bear it if she lost him now.

"What are you thinking about so hard?" he asked, his breath blowing along the side of her neck and sending sharp tingles to tighten her womb.

"Going back," she said with a sad sigh.

He turned her to face him and softly kissed her lips before laying his forehead to hers. "When we get back to the ship, I may not be around much. Things won't be like they are here."

"I know. You have an image to uphold. You have to play the captain."

"Yeah."

There was such a sadness in his eyes, the set of his shoulders. The world and all its problems had suddenly dropped onto them again.

"I wish I could leave you here."

"Don't. We've been through this. I won't allow you to leave me behind."

"You won't *allow*, huh?" he said, his lips twitching. "Aren't you the bossy one? I love you, Mikayla. Never doubt that."

"I won't."

"I promise. When this is all over, we'll come back here and live happily ever after," he whispered.

She smiled and brushed his hair from his face. "My Prince Charming."

"Prince Charming?"

"It's an Earth thing."

"I see," he purred playfully, then turned more serious. "I like some of the crazy things you say."

"Do you?"

He nodded, moving her head with his since their foreheads were still touching.

"I like some of the crazy things you *do*," she whispered, her cheeks heating.

His gaze turned dark, sultry making her breath catch. "We haven't even scratched the surface of things I want to do to you."

"Is that so? What things do you want to do to me?"

His palms slid lower caressing her hips. He watched her closely, his face still so very close to hers. She flattened her hands against his chest, slowly sliding them up, enjoying the feel of his thick, hard muscles as they twitched beneath her touch.

"Do you trust me?" he whispered, gently brushing his lips across hers.

"Uh-huh," she murmured, barely able to speak past the lump of desire in her throat.

"Good."

Bending, he picked her up in his arms. She squealed in surprise, wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her face against the warm flesh there. With a giggle, she kissed him just under the ear. He growled something in response, making her smile.

She hoped to one day understand the language he often reverted to when aroused, but for now she would enjoy the way his deep voice sounded when he spoke it.

“I hope you meant what you said,” he murmured, before tossing her onto the bed.
“You’re in for a hell of a night.”

Chapter Fifteen

Mikayla watched as the gray of his eyes darkened to almost black. He shrugged his shoulders, allowing his shirt to slide down his arms and drop to the floor. Staring at his chest, she took in a deep breath to steady her pounding heart. Her flesh burned and her pussy clenched, both in lust and a slight hint of apprehension.

She was pretty clueless when it came to sex, her experience limited, so she couldn't help but wonder what more there was they hadn't done. Whatever he came up with, she had no doubt it would be amazing.

"Just what is it you have in mind?" she asked, then squealed with laughter as Sid grabbed her ankles and tugged her to the foot of the bed.

He didn't say anything, just softly kissed the inside of her knee, his palm slowly sliding the hem of her dress farther up her thigh. His eyes met hers, burning a path straight to her insides, and she drew in a soft breath, waiting, anticipating what he had in mind. His kisses moved upward, barely brushing across her tingling flesh as he made his way to her panties. Putting his hands under her hips, he lifted them, then tugged her underwear down her legs, tossing it to the floor.

With a grin that sent shivers down her spine, he gripped her hand, tugging her to her feet. She couldn't take her eyes off him as he bunched the fabric of the hem in his fingers, pulling it up her body and over her head. His hands replaced the fabric, warming her flesh as his fingers explored her skin with excruciating patience. He placed featherlight kisses along her shoulder, then her neck, making her knees weak. Just as they were about to buckle, he wrapped one arm around the small of her back, holding her upright.

His teeth sank gently into the sensitive flesh just below her ear, and she reached out to grip his upper arms. A soft gasp escaped her chest, and her fingers sank into his muscles. She was desperate to hold on, for if she didn't, she'd surely collapse in a heap

on the floor. It never failed to amaze her the things he could make her feel or want. And right now, she definitely wanted him.

She'd give anything to stay here, to keep them in this moment forever. But deep in her heart, she knew it wasn't possible. He had to help his world, and she loved him all the more for it.

Relaxing her fingers, she slid her palms up his arms and across his wide shoulders. Lifting his head, he brushed his lips across hers. Barely touching, his mouth teased hers until she buried her hands in his hair, tugging him closer. Her lips parted, allowing the invasion of his sweet tongue to explore and coax, tease and tempt.

He never failed to set her body on fire. To make her feel things she never imagined she could.

"On your stomach," he ordered against her lips, and she nodded, moving to climb across the mattress and lie on her stomach.

She felt the bed sink as Sidious climbed on, his thighs straddling hers. He leaned forward, his palms resting on either side of her shoulders. His lips blazed a trail down her spine, making her shiver in delight. Lower still, he kept going, his teeth gently nipping where the rise of her ass began.

"Up on your knees, baby," he whispered, and she rose up, her heart racing wildly. Something long, thick, and cold slid inside her pussy, making her gasp.

"Shhh," he whispered in her ear. "Remember, trust me."

She nodded, swallowing down her desire to jerk her hips back to take the thick toy deeper inside her. When he removed the toy, she frowned, glancing at him over her shoulder. He slid the tip between the cheeks of her ass, spreading the juices from her pussy to the tight rosebud opening. She held her breath, wondering what he was up to. She didn't have to wait long as he pressed the tip past the tight ring of resistance.

She gulped at the burning sensation, the pain as the toy stretched her wider as it slid deeper. To her surprise, the pain soon blended into blinding pleasure, filling her deep inside with a dark, pulsing need.

"Such a pretty little ass," Sid murmured, sending goose bumps along her flesh.

Rapture burned in her belly, making her wilder with unanswered need. She wanted him there, not the toy. She wanted to feel his thick, hot length taking her, dominating her, filling her.

"Sid," she groaned as he slowly worked the toy in and out.

He pressed it deep, holding it still as he bent down and licked his tongue along her wet slit. She gasped, pressing her hips back, spreading her thighs wider to allow him better access.

"Do you think you can take me here?" he whispered, wiggling the toy slightly, making her insides clench.

"Yes," she panted.

She wasn't sure, but she definitely wanted to try. She wanted him to take her where no one else had. She wanted him to have that part of her.

He moved away, and she watched over her shoulder as he spread lubricant over his engorged cock. She licked her lips, trepidation at his size beginning to make her heart pound. Could she do this?

Moving back to her, his eyes burned with a hunger that surpassed her own. They practically glowed. His jaw twitching with the strain of holding back, he pulled the toy from her ass and replaced it with the head of his cock. She braced herself as he pressed forward, filling her, stretching her, forcing himself past that tight entrance to bury his cock deep inside her.

With a scream, she dropped her forehead to the mattress, trying her best to remember how to breathe. She felt so full, so consumed, she never wanted it to end.

With a deep growl of his own, he pressed deeper still, then pulled out, only to plunder her again. Over and over, he thrust into her, sending her spiraling to the stars and back only to do it again and again. She cried out her pleasure, screaming at him to fuck her harder, take her deeper.

Sidious gave her all that she begged for, until she couldn't take anything else. With a shout, she fell into her final orgasm, her body trembling from head to toe, her mind a jumbled mass of nothing. He thrust once, twice more, before following her off that cliff, losing himself to his own release.

* * * * *

Stefan sat alone at the table in the observation lounge looking out the huge window that ran the length of the outside wall. Below him, he had a perfect view of Argonia, which he stared at but didn't really see.

They'd left Daego hours ago and stationed the *Vultair* in orbit around the small planet of Argonia. The barbarian race here had offered the help of their fighters in the attack against the prime minister. Taron had gone down to help get them organized and go over last-minute tactical reports and check out the local entertainment.

Taron was big on having a little fun before a major battle. The men went into it more relaxed and energized. Stefan had to admit that strategy had worked well for them. Unfortunately, he just wasn't in the mood.

It was strange to see a barbarian race, primitive in most every way, except space travel. They kept all technical equipment hidden, choosing to live off the land and what the planet provided. Despite their primitive ways, they were a wealthy and powerful race. One Stefan was thrilled to get on his side.

Turning from the window, he stared at his computer screen. He had been trying to write the letter to his parents explaining what they had tried to do and why, just in case anything went wrong and they were both killed. He knew Sidious and Taron had

already written theirs, but he had been putting off writing his own. He just hated the thought of doing it.

He'd talked with Sidious earlier, and his brother had informed him he believed their father already knew what was going on. He was just waiting on one of them to come out and admit it. How had he found out? Had one of them slipped up, or had he been silently involved since the beginning? This is insane, Stefan thought with a sigh as his fingers squeezed at his temples.

Once he wrote his, if he could ever get it finished, he would set all of them up on a timed delivery. If Stefan didn't put in a password on a certain day, the letters would automatically be sent to his father's computer. At least this way he knew his parents would get the correct story.

"What the hell are you doing? Didn't I tell you if you weren't going to go to the bar, to get some sleep?" Taron asked from the doorway.

Stefan turned in his chair to look at him. Taron was dressed as a barbarian -- black leather pants, vest, and knee-high boots. With his massive physique, he looked the part. He'd chosen that outfit to better blend into the Argonian environment.

"You're back early. Couldn't find any women that would have you?"

"Early, my ass. Have you not looked at the time? And for your information, I can satisfy two women in the time it takes you to satisfy one."

Stefan snorted. "What's your hurry? I prefer to take my time and pleasure the woman more than once."

"Taking your time, huh? I always thought it took you that long to figure out what to do with them."

Stefan chuckled.

"You just can't do it, can you?" Taron replied with a slight smile.

"Do what?"

"Relax."

"I'll relax, thank you, when all this is over," Stefan replied smartly.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I wonder where I've heard that before."

"Don't start with me, Taron."

Taron snorted. "Why would I start? We're only going to attack the largest fleet in Rhenari's history in two days, and you're sitting here instead of trying to get some sleep."

Stefan rubbed at his forehead. "I can't sleep."

"Worried about Sidious?"

"Yeah."

Taron came farther into the room and sat down. "If there's anyone in this rebellion that I have no doubt will make it out alive, it's our brother. He'll be fine. It's our asses we have to worry about."

Stefan shook his head, a wry smile spreading his lips. "Are we really going to be able to pull this off?"

"Hell, yeah," Taron said with a grin. "Or die trying."

"It's the die trying part I'm worried about," Stefan remarked dryly.

* * * * *

"It's about time the two of you got back!" Agnus yelled. They had just walked through the doors and hadn't even gotten out a hello before he immediately jumped them.

"Nice to see you, too, Agnus," Sidious replied with a smile. "And yes the trip was wonderful, thank you for asking."

"You always were a smart-ass even as a child," Agnus grumbled. Mikayla covered her mouth to hide her smile. "And don't think that I don't see that smile, girl. You got three days of work to make up for; I suggest you get busy."

"My, aren't you in a snit?" Mikayla said as she passed him on her way toward the bar. Agnus didn't say anything he just looked at Sidious with his eyebrow raised in question.

"It's not her fault, Agnus. You knew I was taking her with me." Sidious crossed his arms in front of him.

"Not for three days. Judging by your good mood, I can only assume that your little trip went well."

"It did, not only with Mikayla but with Stefan."

"So everything is in place?" Agnus asked suddenly becoming serious.

"It will be as of five a.m. day after tomorrow. Your ship is on flyer deck nine, fueled and ready. Just make sure you get her out of here." Sidious nodded toward Mikayla at the bar.

"I'll be off this thing long before the first explosion goes off. You just make sure that you get off."

"Don't worry. I have every intention of making it out alive." He was talking to Agnus, but he was watching Mikayla. Her gaze locked with his, and he winked. She smiled slightly before returning to stocking the shelves.

Agnus patted Sidious on the shoulder. "You better get back to work. Woods has been looking for you everywhere, and he's pretty pissed off that he couldn't find you."

"Woods will get over it," he replied as he turned to walk out the door.

* * * * *

Sidious went by Rigora's office to let him know that he had returned and then headed to his own. Walking through his door, he frowned when he saw Woods sitting

behind his desk. "What the hell are you doing in here?" he demanded, giving Woods a cold look that would freeze most men in their tracks.

"I was looking for you."

"I don't think that you're going to find me in my desk drawer." Sidious stalked over and slammed the drawer shut. There wasn't anything in there that would incriminate him, but that wasn't the point.

"Get up," he snarled at Woods, who got up out of the chair immediately and went to the other side of the desk. "What was so important that you felt you had to search my desk to find me?"

"We believe that someone on the inside is helping Earth."

"We, or just you, Woods?" he asked tiredly.

Ignoring his question, Woods continued. "Earth seems to be getting things that they shouldn't, such as weapons and supplies."

"That happens sometimes when you're at war, besides I knew about this before I left," Sidious replied as he began to look through the files Carlone had given him.

"Did you? Did you perhaps know because you were the one making it possible for them to get the shipments?"

Unbelievable. He's getting braver. And too fucking close.

"Of course, Woods. You've found me out. I meet regularly with the leaders of Earth to exchange secret information." Sidious didn't even look up from the file. "Surely there is somewhere else you need to be besides standing here annoying me."

"Where were you the last couple of days?" Woods asked, suddenly switching the subject.

"Taking care of a personal matter. I do have a life outside the militia."

"Does that life include a certain barmaid from the ship?"

Sidious at first didn't answer. He didn't like where this conversation was headed. He pinned Woods with an icy stare. "What I do on my own personal time and who I choose to do it with are none of your business. I suggest you remember that."

"Hit a nerve, Marcone?" he asked snidely.

"Enough!" he shouted, slamming the file closed in front of him. "Get out, or I'll throw you out."

Woods did leave, but the smile on his face made Sidious's skin crawl. He didn't like the fact he'd mentioned Mikayla. If he did anything to her, he'd kill him, regardless of his rank. He'd have to keep a closer eye on that man.

* * * * *

Stefan walked into the observation lounge, their chief engineer behind him. He tossed a Meedcorder on the table in front of Taron with the latest readings from the engines. Also seated around the table were the captains and first officers of the other

ships in the rebellion, eight in all. One being the huge battle cruiser that carried the rebellion's flyer fleet. The smaller flyers would engage the Imperial flyers while the larger ships took on the Destroyer. They had met here to go over last-minute preparations and adjustments to the ships before the attack.

This was not Stefan's first encounter with the Thallion Warriors, but it would be their first joint endeavor. So far, the officers had proven to be very helpful and cooperative; he just hoped that it stayed that way. They had a reputation for being difficult to work with when they weren't in charge.

"Good evening, Captains," Stefan said with a nod as he took a seat next to Taron.

"Count Marcone," they returned, their heads bowing in respect to his title.

Stefan grimaced. "My father is count. Here, I'm just Stefan."

Several nodded, one even smiled, which surprised him. Thallion Warriors never smiled. Their deep rust-colored skin was like leather. They had two horns that protruded from their foreheads and curled upward. Their eyes glowed orange in the fluorescent light of the ship. Stefan was tall, but these men would be considered giants, towering a good foot above him.

"Have all the ships been equipped with the Litarian Cloak?" Taron asked the engineer, Troy, and Stefan turned his attention to the task at hand.

"They have, and all the engineers report the cloaks are working perfectly."

"Good."

Stefan touched Taron's arm, letting him know he wished to speak. "Troy. Coordinate with the other engineers and fix up a communications link between the ships. I want everyone to be able to keep in contact at the same time without having to constantly reopen and close communication channels."

"That should be easy enough." Troy nodded. "Anything else before I get started?"

"No, not unless there is something that anyone else wants done?" Taron asked and looked around the table. Once everyone had shaken their heads no, he turned to the engineer. "Guess that's it, Troy."

"You know where to find me if anything comes up." Troy nodded and turned to leave the room.

"He should refer to you as sir," Captain Moorose said with a disapproving frown. He was the captain of the Thallion warship *Meetar*. He was a good captain and an excellent military strategist, but rumor was he ruled his ship with an iron fist.

Stefan smiled slightly. "You'll find that things are much more relaxed onboard the *Vultair*, Captain. Everyone on this ship is like family, but I can assure you, when the chips are down, they know their place and who gives the orders."

A grunt was all Captain Moorose had to say.

"Do you plan to be around for the attack, Stefan?" asked Commander Chang.

"Are you kidding?" Stefan smiled. "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

"What exactly is our plan of attack, Captain Sinnar? Will we receive some sort of signal from our insider?" asked one of the other Thallion captains.

"Our informant has given me a pass code access for the Destroyer's engine and shield readings. We'll know the minute those shields are down," Taron replied.

"What if the prime minister tries to escape the Destroyer during the battle?" asked Moorose.

"Rigora's escape shuttle has been tagged with a tracking beacon. If the shuttle leaves the ship, we'll know and immediately destroy it. Rigora thinks the shuttle is a secret known only to his top officers. So I have no doubt he will try to use it, thinking he can slip by us undetected."

"Very clever," Captain Verosh replied with a slight smile. He was also a Thallion captain, but not quite as ironfisted as Moorose.

"Thank you." Stefan nodded. "But I'm afraid our informer will have to take the credit for that one."

"I look forward to meeting this man," replied Captain Shone of the battle cruiser *Star Bird*. "The rebellion owes him a lot."

Stefan sighed. "Let's just hope all his hard work was not in vain."

If this didn't work, Sidious could never go back. He would be a wanted man; for what he was about to do would certainly blow his cover.

* * * * *

Later that evening, Mikayla stood behind the bar, filling orders and listening to the soldiers talk about various things. She already missed the little planet of Daego, but it was also nice to be here. She had actually come to like Agnus and Celine, and now that she knew her mother was safe, she felt she could relax a little. She still missed her, but Sid had assured her it wouldn't be long before she would see her again.

Smiling slightly, she thought about Sid. The minute they were back onboard the Destroyer, Captain Marcone had returned, but she knew now that was mostly a facade. Before getting to know him, she had heard several of the men refer to him as the Dark Lord, but now she knew he kept up the gruff and cold exterior so the men wouldn't get too close and see what he was really doing.

"Good evening, Mikayla."

She looked up to see Commander Woods and inwardly cringed. For some reason, she really didn't like this man. There was something about him that made her uncomfortable.

"Good evening, Commander," she replied cautiously. "Can I get you something to drink?"

The pupils of his gold, lizardlike eyes dilated, then shrunk. It gave her the creeps when he did that. Woods was from the planet Veenori. All Veenorians had the lizard

eyes and pale, almost-translucent skin, but there was something about this man that radiated evil.

"An ale will be fine."

He flicked his tongue, and she shivered. Mikayla planned to hand him the drink and then leave, but he stopped her by grabbing her wrist just as she set the drink before him. The cold, clammy feel of his touch sent a shock of warning to her brain.

"Did you enjoy your time away with Captain Marcone?" he asked snidely, watching her carefully.

She tried to pull her wrist from his grasp, but he held firm, applying pressure to the bones. She bit down on her lip to hide the wince of pain.

"Let go of me," she replied through her clenched teeth.

"Not until you answer my question."

"What makes you think that I was with Marcone?"

"The two of you were away at the same time, and then you arrived back at the ship together. Rather obvious, don't you think? Not to mention the fact that everyone on this ship knows he's fucking you."

"What difference does it make to you?"

Pulling her across the bar, he put his face close to hers and whispered, "The man is a spy, Mikayla. I know you don't want to get mixed up in his troubles. I can make things much easier for you if you tell me everything. Otherwise you'll go down right along with him."

She kept her face blank and devoid of any emotion. The years she spent with Greg had made her very good at hiding her fear. "I don't have the foggiest idea what you're talking about."

Suddenly someone grabbed Woods by the hair and jerked his head back. Gasping at the pain, he closed his eyes, then immediately released Mikayla's wrist, allowing her to step back out of his reach. It didn't surprise her to see Sidious had come to her rescue, but what did surprise her was the cold anger to his voice, the dark menace in his eyes as he leaned down, putting his lips close to Woods's ear.

"I thought I already told you once today that what I did and who I did it with were none of your business."

He shoved Woods's head forward as he let go of his hair. If he hadn't caught himself with his hands, his forehead would have hit the bar, hard. He looked at Marcone and narrowed his eyes in hatred.

Moving his nose to mere inches from Woods's, he replied in a deadly tone that made it clear he meant business. "I'm only going to tell you this once. You want to continue to annoy me with your fantasies about my being a spy, that's fine, but you leave her out of it. Is that clear?"

"Clear as glass...Captain," he snarled as he got up to leave the bar.

Sidious watched him go and then looked at Mikayla. Noticing that she was holding her wrist and rubbing it just made him even angrier. He motioned with his finger for her to follow him to the storeroom.

"Are you all right?" he asked as he took her wrist and examined it. It was red, but it didn't look broken. "Did he hurt you?"

"A little, but it's fine." She pulled it out of his grasp. "Sid, he knows."

"He only thinks he knows."

"Oh, gee," Mikayla snapped with sarcasm. "That makes me feel much better. This whole situation might not bother you, but it scares the hell out of me."

"Even if Woods does know something, he can't prove anything," Sidious reasoned and touched the side of her face with his fingers.

"Yet," Mikayla said quietly.

Lord, she sounded just like Agnus, he thought with a slight smile. Agnus was always worried about Woods as well. "Sweetheart, look at me." He crooked his finger under her chin and lifted it. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Then trust me when I say that everything is going to be fine."

She closed her eyes and sighed. "I hope you're right."

"I'm always right. Just ask Stefan and Taron," he teased.

Mikayla snorted, and he grinned. No doubt about it. This woman would always keep him on his toes, and he loved it.

"Just please be careful," she whispered as she put her hands at his waist and stepped closer.

Her flowery scent invaded his nostrils, and they flared, breathing her in deeper. Would she always have this effect on him? Would she always make him crazy?

"I'm always careful," he said with a smile and bent his head down to kiss her.

"Didn't the two of you get enough of that while you were away?" Agnus asked, then sighed in mock exasperation.

Mikayla spun away, trying to hide her smile while Sidious turned toward Agnus with his hands at his waist. "Think you're funny, don't you?" he snarled, narrowing his eyes at him.

"No, just busy." He snapped his fingers and pointed to the bar with his thumb.

Mikayla raised her hands in surrender and made her way back out to the crowded bar. "I'm going. I'm going."

Agnus stood at the door, still watching him with that silly smile on his face. "What?" Sidious snapped.

"Can't say that I've ever seen you this smitten."

"Can't say as I've ever been this smitten." Sidious smiled and made his way to stand at the door next to Agnus.

"I heard Woods was bothering her," Agnus replied quietly while he looked around the bar.

"Yeah. Apparently he thought he could scare her into telling him something."

"Well, I don't think you have too much to worry about there. Mikayla doesn't seem to scare easily."

"I still don't like the idea of her being dragged into this. The sooner this is over, the better. For everyone."

"You'll get no argument from me on that one," Agnus replied dryly.

"I'm going to the flyer deck to take care of some things with the *Triton*." He patted Agnus on the shoulder. "Tell Mikayla I'll be back later."

"Watch your back, Sidious."

"I always watch my back," he replied with a smile.

* * * * *

"Mr. President."

"Yes, Jeffrey." Davis tried to rouse himself and sat up in the bed. He was exhausted, but he'd told his assistant to wake him if they heard anything else from the messenger.

"We received another message."

"I'm on my way. Just let me get some clothes on," he said as he began to climb out of bed and rub the fatigue from his eyes.

The last message had told them to lie low, and he wondered what this one would have to say. They had learned in the last few days that their informant was also communicating with Great Britain, Russia, Japan, and China.

Whoever this man was, he was extremely clever, and Davis hoped that when all this was over he could meet him. They had tried to find a way to get messages back to him, but so far, they had been unsuccessful.

There was only a skeleton staff in the communications room, which was not unusual at this time of night. All three of the officers present, as well as Jeffrey, were sitting at the table discussing the message.

"What does this one say?" Davis asked. Lieutenant Sharp didn't say anything just handed it to him to read.

"Five a.m.? That's all it says?"

"Yes, sir," Sharp replied.

What is the significance of five a.m.? "The last message told us to watch the skies. Does this mean that he wants us to watch the skies at five?" Davis asked no one in particular.

"That would be my guess, sir," Colin replied.

Watch the skies for what? "Colin."

"Yes, sir?" Colin stood, waiting for his orders.

"I'm going on a hunch here, but I want you to spread the word to have everyone ready at five. I'm not sure what is going to happen, so have them be prepared for most anything, but if this is an opportunity for us to end this thing, I don't want to miss it."

"Yes, sir." Colin went to wake the necessary people.

"Jeffrey," Davis snapped in his excitement. When Jeffrey looked up at him, he went on. "Have someone set up a telescope at the top of the mountain. I want to see if I can find the ship in orbit when it gets close to five. I don't know if that is what he meant by watch the skies, but if it is, I want to make sure we see it."

Jeffrey nodded as the two of them made their way to the staircase that would lead them to the exit at the top of the mountain.

* * * * *

"Carlone!" Rigora yelled through the door of his office.

"Yes, your grace," Carlone replied as he came quickly to the door.

"Call Commander Woods and tell him that I want to see him right away."

"Yes, sir."

Rigora studied the small transmitter that one of his officers had just brought him. The transmitter was used to tap into communication lines, but what bothered him was that the transmitter was meant to send, not receive. Considering it was found attached to Earth coaxial lines meant that someone on the inside was feeding Earth information. But who?

Several days ago, Woods had been to his office with a concern about Marcone, but he hadn't really listened to him. Captain Marcone was one of his best officers. He had a brilliant military mind and had done nothing that would make him think he had been anything but loyal. But lately he had noticed a change in him. He seemed more distracted and distant, and this battle with Earth was taking much longer than it should have.

Maybe he should listen to Woods this time and seriously consider what he had to say. In the meantime, he wanted someone to watch Marcone closely. Deep down, he wanted to believe Marcone was loyal, but he also wasn't going to take any chances.

Chapter Sixteen

"I'm exhausted," Celine said and threw the towel on the counter. "I think I'll save the cleaning for tomorrow and go ahead and turn in. Maybe I can get in a little nap before Dorian gets here. You coming, Mikayla?"

"No, I'm not really sleepy yet. You go on ahead."

"Okay. See you in the morning."

Mikayla was tired as well, but she decided to stay up and clean for a while. Sleep was probably something she wouldn't be doing anyway, for she was too worried about Sidious.

Warm arms encircled her waist from behind, and she smiled, leaning back against the hard chest just behind her. She didn't have to look to see who it was, she could smell him, feel his heat, his presence. It was as though her body recognized his just by touch alone.

"I thought she would never leave," he murmured close to her ear.

"I didn't hear you come in."

"That was the general idea."

His lips softly touched the side of her neck, and a tremor ran through her. "Trying to sneak up on me?"

"More like trying to seduce you," he whispered suggestively in her ear.

"Really, Captain." She stepped away from him, mock shock widening her eyes. With a flick of her wrist, she swatted at his chest with her towel. "I'm not that kind of girl."

"No?" he teased, slowly stalking her back against the bar. "I think I could make you into that kind of girl."

"Confident, are you?" she asked, her lips twitching.

"I'm very confident," he drawled, his voice dropping to a deep, seductive timbre.

God, the man really knew how to get to her, and he hadn't even touched her yet. His palms settled on her rib cage just below her breasts, and her breath hitched. Strike that. The man just touched and set her flesh on fire. His thumbs moved upward, stroking the undersides of her breasts.

"Tease," she whispered against his lips, which were scant inches from hers.

Quick as a flash, his thumbs brushed across her nipples, making them harden like pebbles. She moaned and arched her back slightly.

"Can't say I don't aim to please," he mumbled as his teeth nibbled a trail down her neck.

Oh, and God did he please.

The door to the bar opened with a whoosh, and Dorian strolled in, breaking their seductive moment. When he saw them, he stopped dead in his tracks, his face red. His lips opened to speak, but the words died in his throat.

Sidious wrapped his arms around the small of her back, pulling her against him. She laid her head against his chest and smiled at Dorian. The questioning look on his face made her smile even broader.

"It's all right, Dorian. Go upstairs to Celine," Sidious said.

"Yes, sir," he stammered, then quickly fled, only once looking over his shoulder at them in surprise.

Mikayla chuckled. "I take it, it's not often the men see you with a woman."

Sidious snorted. "He's probably amazed a woman would even have me."

She laughed. "I have to admit. I wondered that myself a time or two."

"Is that so?" he growled. He swatted her behind, making her squeal, then laugh. "Perhaps I should remind you why it is you've had me and enjoyed every second of it."

"Is that what you think?" Mikayla guffawed, her mouth twitching in amusement. "I didn't have any choice in the matter, remember?"

He grinned and waved his hand in dismissal. "It's all a bit hazy now. But I do seem to recall a certain woman screaming in my ear as she came."

"A moment of weakness, that's all."

Sidious chuckled. "Come with me, you little wench."

Taking her hand, he tugged her behind him toward the stairs. On the way, he picked up a bag that had been set on the floor.

"Planning on moving in?" she teased.

"Maybe." He threw the bag over his shoulder with a smile. "Or maybe it's a surprise for you."

"A surprise? For me?"

His eyes glanced around the room. "That's funny. I never knew this bar to have an echo."

She swatted at his arm, and he laughed. She loved the sound of his laughter. It was sexy and rich, coming from deep inside his chest. She'd learned over the last few days with him that he was a man who loved to laugh and loved life. If only he didn't have all this weighing on him. All this responsibility.

Sidious passed up her room and went to the other empty one across the hall. She frowned, then remembered the listening device and understood. "Are you sure there's not one in here?" she asked as they came into the room.

He dropped the bag and turned to face her, a confused frown on his face. The confusion quickly disappeared, and he shook his head. "No. Agnus checked it earlier. We're good here."

She nodded and glanced around the room identical to hers, except no view of Earth outside the window -- only dark space and bright stars.

"Get that worried frown off your face, woman."

"What?" she asked, slightly confused. Had she been frowning?

"Stop worrying."

"I know I should, but sometimes I can't help it."

His palms cupped her cheeks. "I know."

She gave him a sexy grin and slid her arms around his waist, letting her hands roam up his hard, muscular back. "Maybe you should help me forget and give me this surprise you have."

He chuckled. "Just like a woman." He smiled and reached for his bag, then crooked his finger for her to follow him to the bed.

She sat on the edge, watching him pull a small bag from his larger one. "What have you got?" she asked in curiosity. Knowing him, there was no telling.

He handed her the small brown bag and sat down next to her. "Open it."

Eyeing him quizzically, she opened the bag and peeked inside. The scent hit her first. Strawberries? "Are these what I think they are?"

"Strawberries? Yes. I remember you telling me how much you liked them when we were on Daego. I scanned Earth and found these in a field."

"You picked these yourself?" She stared at him in shock. It was such a small thing, but so big to her. That he would have actually taken time to do this. "How do you do these things and still do your job?" He rubbed at his chin, his eyes downcast, and Mikayla grinned. "You had someone pick these for you, didn't you?"

He grinned sheepishly. "I told him I was curious about them. He gave me a strange look, but followed through on the order."

Mikayla laughed and threw her arms around his neck. "I love you."

His arms tightened, holding her so close she could barely breathe. "I love you too. Promise me something, Mikayla."

"What?" she asked, pulling back to look at him. Concern creased his brow, and his eyes darkened in worry.

"Some things are going to happen later tonight, and it may get a little hairy around here. So I want you to promise me you'll stay as close to Agnus as you can and do exactly as he says."

Terror snaked along her spine. "What about you?"

"I've got some things I need to take care of before I leave the ship, so I won't be with you. That's why I want you to promise me you'll do as I ask." He took her hands in his and placed them against his lips, giving her a pleading look.

"Of course I will. I promise. But what's going to happen later?" She knew the rebels had something planned, she just didn't think it would be this soon.

"If everything goes as it should, you and Agnus will be out of here before anything starts. I don't want you to worry about this."

"Sid," she admonished.

"I mean it, Mikayla. I only want you to think about getting yourself off. Not me."

"So you're saying you think it would be better if I didn't know?" She narrowed her eyes at him. Anger snaked through her at his overprotective attitude.

"Yes, I think it would be better if you didn't know."

"Damn it --"

Sidious cupped her cheeks and brought her face close to his. "I'm serious about this, Mikayla. I need to know you're safe. I need to know I don't have to worry about you."

"All right," she said as she looked at him and realized he was right. He needed to have a clear head, not be worrying about her. "But you have to promise me something."

"Okay."

"Promise you'll make it back."

Smiling he pulled her closer. "I promise," he whispered just before his lips touched hers for a slow, sweet kiss.

Pulling away, he reached into the bag and settled a strawberry against her lips. She opened her mouth, letting him slide it between her lips. It tasted wonderful, like heaven -- ripe, juicy, and sweet. She closed her eyes, savoring the taste as she slowly chewed. Opening her gaze, she watched him as he stripped off his jacket, laying it across the dresser. She sighed as his chest muscles rippled when he moved, making her own juices flow from her core.

She grinned at him and reached for another strawberry. "If you keep doing things like this, you're going to spoil me. And then I'll be terrible to live with."

"What makes you think you're not already terrible to live with?" he asked as he popped a strawberry into his own mouth, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"But you love me anyway," she said with a seductive smile.

"That I do, brat," he said with a chuckle as he pushed her back on the bed and settled next to her. Lying on her back, she smiled up at him as he drew small circles on her stomach with his fingertips. Still propped on his elbow, he smiled down at her and asked, "Did you like your surprise?"

"I loved it. Thank you."

He could do some of the sweetest things sometimes, she thought as she looked at him. Taking the bag from her, he dumped the rest of the strawberries on the bed between them as she rolled to her side.

Picking one up, he studied it. "These are pretty good. I see why you like them so much."

"Don't you have anything like this on Tilarus?" she asked as she took a bite of another one.

"We have something similar, but they're blue instead of red. Also, not quite as sweet."

As she reached for the last one, he quickly grabbed it instead. "I have plans for this one," he said. Only biting off half of it, he took the rest and rubbed the berry juice along her bottom lip. Leaning down he gently nibbled and sucked until all the juice was gone.

That was interesting, she thought as tingling warmth began to spread throughout her body and settle in the lower part of her stomach. But he wasn't finished. Softly rubbing the berry down her neck, he replaced the berry with his lips and tongue as he slowly pushed her to her back.

Closing her eyes, she giggled slightly as he nibbled on the sensitive spot behind her ear. She hadn't even been aware that he'd opened her shirt until she felt him tug her bra down and rub her breast and nipple with the berry. Biting her lip, she softly moaned as he did the same thing there that he had on her neck.

"I think I like these strawberries," he whispered as he kissed a path back to her mouth. "We should get these more often."

I agree, Mikayla thought to herself as his mouth captured hers in a passionate kiss. Running her hands down his chest, she grabbed the waistband of his pants and tried to undo them. Pushing her hands away, he whispered with a mischievous smile, "Oh no you don't. I'm not through with you yet." Leaning down, he kissed her again, even more passionately than before.

Grabbing the waistband of her pants, he gave a hard tug, pulling them from her body. The cold air of the room hit her fevered skin, and she shivered. With half-lidded eyes, she watched him crush the remainder of the strawberry in his fingers, then move to her aching pussy. The cold mush hit her hot core, and she gasped from the completely opposite sensations. His fingers played and delved, spreading the strawberry around and inside her.

When his mouth plunged between her legs to feast, she bucked her hips, moaning her pleasure. His tongue delved and licked, teasing her mercilessly.

"Sid," she moaned, her head shaking from side to side, her fingers gripping the pillow behind her.

"You taste so good, baby."

His mouth continued to leisurely sip at her body. Her muscles quivered, trembling with the force of her oncoming orgasm. When the tip of his tongue flicked across her clit, she gulped in air.

"Again?" he asked and flicked it across her clit again.

She moaned, her hips bucking and reaching up. His hot mouth clamped down on her throbbing bud and sucked, taking the very breath from her lungs on a scream. Wave after wave of pleasure racked through her body, and he kept going, kept licking, kept driving her further off that cliff.

"Sid, God," she groaned. "I need you. Please."

He sat up and removed his pants, then quickly tugged her to a sitting position. "On your knees," he rasped.

She flipped over, letting him settle between her splayed thighs. She braced herself for the invasion of his massive cock. He was so huge, he always took her breath away as he filled her, stretching her to the limit. The head of his shaft toyed with her opening, then moved to rub against her clit. She moaned, moving her hips with him, her juices coating his hard cock. The stirrings of a climax skimmed through her limbs. She rubbed against him faster, their hips working in a quick, shallow rhythm. Just as the throbs hit, he thrust into her, deep and hard.

She screamed as her orgasm increased, gaining in intensity as he pounded into her, over and over. Harder and deeper his cock drove, until she thought she might faint from the pleasure. The sensation of his taking her, filling her, drove her damn near over the edge of insanity.

"Fuck," he growled and pressed deep, spilling his hot seed deep within her.

She could hardly breathe, much less move. Every muscle shook with exertion and release. Her whole body hummed with pleasure and bordered just on the rim of pain. The intensity of it shocked her. They'd had sex several times on Daego, but never like this. Never this wild, this...hard. His arms wrapped around her ribs and tugged her upward, pulling her back against his chest. They remained joined, his semihard cock buried deep within her channel.

"Are you all right? I didn't hurt you?"

"Oh God, no," she sighed, laying her head back.

One arm remained tight around her; the other hand he buried in her hair, his lips placing light kisses along her cheek and temple. Her fingers moved up to comb through his hair, tugging at the soft strands.

"Please come back to me," she whispered.

"I promise you, baby. I will do everything in my power to make it back."

With a sigh, she let him lead her again to that pinnacle, that lofty high she could never get enough of. Only this time it was slow and gentle until they collapsed, their arms entangled. Each holding tight, never wanting to let go of the other.

* * * * *

Lying on his back, Sidious listened to Mikayla's even breathing and knew she had fallen asleep. Kissing the top of her head where it lay against his chest, he wrapped his arms around her a little tighter. Taron should be out there anytime now waiting for him to do his part, and hopefully it would all go off without a hitch.

Sometimes he still couldn't believe they had actually pulled this off. It had taken much longer than they had expected, but as he thought about the woman lying in his arms, he knew it had taken as long as it should have. For if it had ended sooner, he never would have met her, and he couldn't imagine his life without her now.

Running his hand softly up and down her back, he frowned. He really wished he had left her on Daego, but he had been concerned about how it would look if he didn't come back with her. Would they have been suspicious, or was he just being selfish and only convinced himself of that to justify bringing her back here? If anything happened to her, he would never forgive himself. Suddenly he felt her stiffen in his arms and then sit straight up with a gasp.

Scared to death, Mikayla jumped when Sidious sat up and put his hands on her shoulders. "Shh," he said as he ran his hands soothingly up and down her arms. "It was just a dream, baby."

"How long was I asleep?" she asked as she tried to trample down the fear she felt. She had that same feeling again that something was going to happen. Just like she had right before she was brought here.

"Not long. Probably about fifteen minutes." He pulled her into his arms. "Do you remember what it was about?"

"No," she replied as she shook her head. "Not a thing."

"That's probably for the best. If you can't remember it, you can't dwell on it," he replied smiling slightly. She didn't return his smile, for she still had that nagging feeling of fear she couldn't seem to shake.

Tipping her chin up with his finger, he smiled. "Everything is going to be fine," he whispered as he kissed her forehead.

"How long before you have to go?" she asked.

She wanted desperately to cling to him and beg him not to, but she knew that this was important to him. It was important to Earth as well. For if the rebels could win this battle, it would free her world too.

"I actually need to be getting dressed now," he said, but he made no move to get up. "You should get dressed too, that way you'll be ready when Agnus comes to get you."

"I will," she quietly replied.

Putting his hand on her cheek, he softly kissed her one last time before getting up. Lying on her side, she lay in bed and quietly watched him dress. She was so worried something would go wrong, but she was determined not to say anything. He needed to keep his mind on what he was doing, not on her and her fears.

Once everything was in place, he pulled what looked like a watch out of his bag and put it around his wrist. Turning toward her, he sat down on the edge of the bed and handed her a small square piece of metal. In the middle was a deep red button, very small and recessed slightly in to the gray metal.

"What is this?" she asked as she sat up and looked at it.

"It's an emergency transport. If anything should happen to Agnus, I want you to push this button," he replied as he pointed to it. "It will immediately transport you to Stefan's ship."

"How are you getting off?" she asked.

"I'm flying the *Triton*, and I'll meet you there. If you get off with Agnus, you'll be going straight to Tilarus. My father will help you get your mother if I don't make it back."

She shook her head, unwilling to accept such a possibility.

"Listen to me, Mikayla. These are things you need to know."

She nodded her head as she looked at the device in her hand. "I know."

"Remember to relax if you have to use that. Otherwise, it will hurt."

She again nodded, swallowing back her impending tears. The device was so small, she just hoped she didn't lose it.

"Hey," he said as he lifted her chin. "Remember, whatever happens, I love you."

"I love you," she replied. Smiling, he kissed the tip of her nose and then stood to leave.

"I'll see you soon, baby," he said just before leaving the room. As soon as the door shut, she closed her eyes and fought the tears that threatened to flow.

* * * * *

Sidious began to make his way down the corridor that would take him to the vent shafts. Ever since he had left Mikayla's room, he'd had a bad feeling he couldn't seem to get rid of. Something was going to happen. What? He didn't have a clue, but it nagged at him, made the hairs at the back of his neck stand on end. He tried not to focus on it and instead tried to ignore it.

Once he entered the engineering section, it didn't take him long to figure out he wasn't alone. Increasing his pace slightly, he turned the corner and stopped. Lifting his hand, he hit the button on the wrist control for the cloaking device and immediately disappeared.

Standing quietly, he waited for the man who was following him to make an appearance around the corner. The soldier stopped dead in his tracks. His wide eyes scanned the empty corridor. Sidious almost laughed out loud at the expression on the soldier's face when he realized he had lost him. Staying perfectly still, he waited until the man had gone farther down the corridor before he turned it off and headed back in the other direction toward the maintenance shafts.

It was obvious the man was following him, but who had put him up to it? Probably Woods, but right now he didn't have the time to worry about it. He had to get these bombs set.

Finally, he came to the opening of the ventilation shaft that would take him to the generator. Checking to make sure no one was around, he pulled the cover off. Hitting the button on the control, he once again disappeared and climbed into the shaft. He pulled the cover back into place as quietly as possible, then turned and began to make his way to the center.

The space was small -- almost too small for him. He had to crawl through on his hands and knees, so it was slow going at first, but he eventually began to pick up his pace. He had to remain as quiet as possible, because the cloak would keep the motion detectors from detecting him, but it would not keep out any noise he made.

When he came upon the first set of motion sensors, he hesitated. His heart raced, the sweat on his palms making his hands slide along the metal of the shaft. *Well, Taron, here goes nothing.* He moved past them quickly and waited, then smiled. No alarms, so far so good, he thought as he kept going.

* * * * *

"Let's go, Mikayla," Agnus said as he opened the door to her quarters.

"I'm coming."

She finished tying her shoe and stood up, taking one more quick look at herself to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. Picking up the transporter that Sid had given her from the dresser, she placed it inside her bra and then left the room. As she came down the stairs to the main floor, she looked around for Celine but couldn't find her.

"Where's Celine?" she asked.

"Dorian had leave for three days, so I told him last night I was giving Celine a couple of days off and he should take her home for a short vacation. They left right after that," he replied as he gathered a few papers together and then folded them to fit in his pocket.

"They were probably afraid if they didn't leave right away, you might change your mind," Mikayla said with a slight smile.

"There is always that possibility," he joked as he returned her smile. "Actually I told him to go ahead and take her then, before I did change my mind. It was the only way I could think of to get them out of here without telling them any of the truth."

"I'm just glad he got her off here." She knew Dorian would take good care of her. Plus, with him gone, he wouldn't be here to fight in the battle that was sure to come. Celine would be glad of that. If only Sidious didn't have to fight.

Agnus turned to look at her. "We need to move as quickly as we can, so do your best to keep up. I want to get to my ship, preferably before everything gets too crazy."

Sidious hadn't really told her anything about what was going to happen. He had just told her things might get rough, so she should stay as close to Agnus as she could. Definitely nervous, but trying her best to not let him see that, she swallowed her fear and told him she was ready. He had enough to think about, and she didn't want to slow him down, for she wanted out alive just as much as he did.

Leaving the bar, they stepped into the turbochute that would take them to the deck his ship was on. The doors closed with a soft *whoosh* just before the chute began to move. A couple of seconds after it started moving, there was a massive explosion from somewhere in the center of the ship. The noise wasn't that loud, but the Destroyer shook violently. So much so, it threw both Mikayla and Agnus to the floor as the turbochute stopped dead in its tracks.

Chapter Seventeen

Sidious set the last bomb in place and then pulled out the detonator to arm it. All he had to do now was hit the button. But first, he had to get out of here. It had taken him a little longer than thirty minutes, and he was starting to feel the effects of the cloak. He couldn't turn his head too fast, or he would immediately become dizzy. He was starting to feel a little light-headed and nauseated as well. Hopefully, that would disappear as soon as he turned off the cloak.

Making his way out much faster than he had gone in, he came to the end of the shaft. Checking to make sure no one was around, he climbed out and snapped the hatch back into place. Lifting his wrist, he turned off the cloak.

"Lord Marcone," the sergeant said with surprise as he rounded the corner and almost ran into him. "Where did you come from?"

Trying to get the dizziness under control, he placed his hand on the side of the wall to support himself. "Sorry to startle you, Sergeant," he replied quietly. "I was just heading to engineering."

One of Rigora's security guards, or lackeys as Marcone called them, came around the same corner. "Sergeant have you seen Captain Mar --" he started and then realized he was standing right there. "Captain Marcone, sir," he replied. "I've been asked to deliver you directly to the prime minister."

Apparently either he'd been found out somehow, or they just wanted to question him, for the officer had his hand on his weapon, ready to draw it quickly if he needed to. Either way, he didn't have time to deal with this. "Of course, Lieutenant. Lead the way." He nodded, keeping his voice as carefree as possible.

"No, sir. I have to ask that you lead the way."

Marcone smiled slightly at that one. Smart man. Moving to walk in front of him, he began to slowly make his way down the corridor. As soon as he was far enough away, he would hit the detonator and then make a run for it.

Taking the long way out of engineering so he could avoid the elevator, he slowly began to get his bearings back. Thank God, it didn't take long for the effects of the cloak to wear off.

Looking over his shoulder to the man behind him, he asked. "What's all this about, Lieutenant?"

"I wouldn't know, my lord, I've just been asked to escort you."

Sidious made a face at that. He should have known they wouldn't tell him anything. Did Woods finally get through to Rigora, or did something else give him away? Always in the past, if Rigora had wanted to see him, he would just have Carlone call him on the communicator. Sending an armed officer after him was a dead giveaway.

Turning the corner that brought them out of engineering, he pulled the detonator from his pocket and hit the button. Immediately a loud explosion went off that rattled the ship, knocking the lieutenant off balance. Taking advantage of the situation, Marcone turned and hit him hard in the jaw, knocking him out cold. Straightening, he looked around to make sure there was no one else and then took off down the hall to the flyer deck and the *Triton*.

Silently, he prayed Agnus and Mikayla were making it out okay. He had set the bombs off a little early, but not so early Agnus shouldn't have already left the bar.

* * * * *

Everyone onboard the bridge of the *Vultair* stood silently waiting for the shields to drop. Taron was at the helm, Troy was at the engineering station to keep a close eye on shield status, and Kaycose at tactical. Taron looked over at Stefan, who was quietly pacing back and forth occasionally looking out the large window that ran the length of the bridge. Directly in front of them and less than a half mile away was the *Shlictah*.

Watching him with a raised eyebrow, Taron couldn't ever remember seeing Stefan so uptight. But then, he also couldn't remember Sidious ever doing anything quite so dangerous either. If anything happened to Sidious, Stefan would be devastated.

Taron took another look at the helm panel in front of him. Normally the ship would fly on auto or by voice command, but they would be maneuvering so close to the Destroyer, he thought it would be better if he flew the ship by hand. It may be a little arrogant on his part, but he always thought he could fly evasive maneuvers better than the computer.

The area around him hummed with nervous energy and fear. Even though he hid it well, he was just as nervous as the rest of them. He would be a fool not to be. This was

their final attempt, and if this didn't work, then there would be no others. More than likely, if this didn't work, they would all be dead.

Suddenly Troy broke the quiet. "Shields are down on the Destroyer." The bridge immediately came alive with activity.

"Well, this is it." Taron took a deep breath, his fingers flexing in anticipation of taking the controls. "Spread the word, Stefan. All ships decloak and fire at will."

* * * * *

"Mikayla, are you all right?"

She blinked her eyes, trying to dispel the fog around her brain. Her ankle throbbed, and she flexed it with a wince. At least she could move it. "I think so. What happened?"

"I believe Sidious detonated the bombs," he replied as he stood and studied the ceiling.

"What bombs?" she asked, standing as well. "You know, Agnus, I think it's time you told me what's going on."

"Sidious didn't tell you?" he asked as he looked at her.

"All he told me was that it was going to get hairy and I should stay as close to you as possible."

"Well, it just got a lot hairier than I think even he thought," he replied quietly.

"Agnus. Out with it."

"I'll tell you about it while we climb out of this thing. We need to go out through the roof and climb the ladder that is on the right side of the shaft. I'm not sure what level we're on, but we need to get to level nine." Grabbing a pole from the emergency box, he pulled the flap down that covered the opening in the roof. Inside the flap was a drop ladder.

Thank God for small favors, she thought when she saw the ladder. She knew she didn't have enough arm strength to pull herself up without one. Climbing the ladder, she stepped onto the roof of the turbocute, praying with all her might that it would hold. "Okay, Agnus, talk."

With a sigh, he began to tell her. "Sidious set bombs off in the generators that control the shields as well as the propulsion engines. Once the shields are down, the rebels can begin firing at the Destroyer, and with the engines blown, the ship shouldn't be able to go anywhere."

"There's only one problem with that." She looked over the side of the elevator to the huge drop below, then wished she hadn't. Nausea rolled through her stomach at the mere thought of falling into the dark abyss below. "We're stuck on the ship!"

"We weren't supposed to be. For some reason, he set them off early." Motioning for her to get on the ladder, he continued in a firm voice, "That's why we need to get a move on."

"Up or down?" she asked before getting on.

He pointed up with his finger. Just don't look down, she tried to tell herself as she made her way up. Suddenly another explosion rocked the ship, causing Mikayla to lose her grip on the rung. She slipped to the next one before catching herself. She winced at the pain in her wrist but retained her hold.

"Damn it!" she said.

Mikayla stopped for a minute to catch her breath and control the shaking that had started in her hands. She held tight to the rungs, silently praying they didn't experience another blast, at least until they got out of here. Agnus had moved closer behind her and placed a hand against her thigh.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah," she said as she took a deep breath and let it out.

"Good. Just hold on and keep in mind that if you fall, I'll have to fall with you."

"What?" She glared down at Agnus. The minute she did she realized her mistake and squeezed her eyes shut as she turned her head back to the ladder. The drop was so far down, it made her head swim just looking at it.

"If anything were to happen to you, Sidious would kill me, so I might as well just go ahead and die right along with you."

"Agnus, don't be ridiculous. Sidious wouldn't kill you," she said as she began to once again climb the ladder. Apparently, the rebels had begun their attack, because she could hear one small explosion after another coming from the other side of the ship. Fearing another one that would make her fall from the ladder this time, she began to climb much faster.

"Believe me, Mikayla," he said dryly, "when it comes to you, Sidious would kill me."

* * * * *

"What the hell just happened?" the prime minister yelled. He was on the bridge with General Carlone and Commander Woods, and the three of them, along with everyone else in the room, had been knocked to the floor with the force of the explosion.

Quickly trying to get back to his station, Ensign Floari checked the status of the systems. "It appears there's been an explosion in the shield generators. Shields are down as well as propulsion systems."

"What kind of an explosion, Ensign?" Rigora asked.

"I'm not for certain," he replied as he looked over the damage reports that were coming in on the screen in front of him. "But my guess is, it wasn't a problem with the generators. They should never have exploded like that."

"Are you saying it was a bomb?" asked General Carlone.

"Yes, sir, that would be my guess."

"Sir," Captain Forbey interrupted, "we have eight ships decloaking directly in front of us."

"Who are they?" he asked with dread. This wasn't good at all.

"Unknown, your grace." He wasn't able to say anything else, for the ship was suddenly hit with fire from all sides, once again almost knocking them to the floor.

"The rebels," Rigora said with a sneer.

"Your grace," Carlone replied, "we need to get you out of here."

Nodding his head at Carlone, he turned to Woods. "They had to have had someone on the inside to do this. Find Marcone. Dead or alive, I don't care. Just find him!"

"Yes, your grace," Woods said, a smile of ultimate satisfaction spreading his lips. "It would be my pleasure."

Turning to the captain, Rigora yelled, anger and aggravation quickly rolling to the surface. How dare that son of a bitch cross him. "Do whatever it takes, Captain, but destroy those ships and do it quickly. With our shields down, this thing is a damn sitting duck."

"Yes, sir." Turning, he told the tactical officer to return fire.

* * * * *

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing, Jeffrey?" the president asked as he looked through the telescope at the battle going on above them.

"Yes, sir," he replied in awe.

Davis had never seen anything like this. It looked like at least eight ships, maybe more, had just, quite literally, appeared out of nowhere and started firing on the prime minister's ship. It was amazing watching them circle and fire like a flock of vultures circling their prey.

Pulling his eye away from the eyepiece, he had to readjust the telescope in order to stay with them. They wouldn't have this view for long, he realized.

"Mr. President, we're getting reports from all over that the flyers are leaving," Colin yelled to him from the doorway.

Davis didn't turn around to answer. He kept looking through the telescope at the battle going on above them. "They're probably going to try and help the main ship."

"What are you talking about?" Colin asked, clearly confused.

"Take a look for yourself." He stepped away from the telescope, allowing Colin to step forward and look through the eyepiece.

"Oh my God," Colin said. "Do you suppose this was the help our informant was referring to?"

"I would assume so, but whether it is or it isn't, I want to take advantage of the opportunity. With those flyers gone, we stand a much better chance of taking on the ground troops."

Colin looked at him and smiled, already knowing where he was going with this. "Already on it," he said as he ran to the communications room.

As he left, Davis put his eye back to the telescope. He wanted to watch this for as long as he could. Soon the rotation of the Earth would prevent it.

* * * * *

After what seemed like forever, Agnus and Mikayla reached the opening to level nine. Mikayla moved over slightly to the left to allow Agnus to climb to the rung just below her. Ramming a bar in the center of the two doors for leverage, the two of them pushed until the doors opened with a *swish*.

"I'll climb out first and then help to pull you in," Agnus replied as he wedged the doors open with the bar. Once he was out of the shaft, he turned and reached for her. Grabbing the edge of the floor, she pushed up with her arms and twisted her body to set her bottom on the floor next to her hands. Agnus stayed extremely close behind, ready to grab her in the event she lost her balance and fell.

Pulling herself up, she looked to both ends of the hall. There were people running everywhere, dodging each other and fallen objects that were in the way. It was utter chaos. The lights were out, leaving the hallways illuminated by only the emergency bulbs. Smoke filled the area, making her cough and the back of her throat burn. Suddenly another explosion rocked the ship, and she had to grab the wall to remain upright.

Turning to Agnus, she asked, "Now where?"

"This way," he replied as he pointed down the corridor to the right. They had come out on the wrong side of the ship, and they still had a long way to go. Falling in with the mass of people who were trying to get to the same place they were, they began to make their way down the hall.

* * * * *

Sidious grumbled in aggravation. He had been stopped way too many times by soldiers asking what they should do. They should have been trained for this, but the ship personnel were not his responsibility, they were Woods's. That shouldn't surprise him. Woods had always been arrogant in thinking nothing would ever happen to this ship and that training in the event it did would be a complete waste of time.

I bet he wishes he had taken the time now.

Making his way down one of the side corridors on level nine, he tried to pick up his pace. The flyer deck was off the main corridor, which was just a short distance ahead of him. Things were falling apart quickly. The ship had already lost the turbochutes as well as power in some sections. It wasn't completely dark, for the emergency lights kicked in, but it was dark enough that it added to the already chaotic atmosphere.

Quickly dodging a beam that was falling from the ceiling, he ducked out of the way. Looking at it lying on the floor, he gave a sigh of relief, for it had only missed him by mere inches, if that. God he hoped Mikayla and Agnus were already off and not somewhere in the middle of all this mess.

He turned and headed back down the hall again, then turned a corner. He came to a complete stop, staring right into the smirking expression of Commander Woods.

"Well, well," he said as he raised his gun to Marcone's chest. "Going somewhere, Captain?"

* * * * *

"What's our shield status, Troy?" Stefan asked.

"Primary shields are still at eighty percent. As long as they stay above sixty, secondary shields will not kick in."

"Kaycose keep an eye out for the *Triton*. I want to know the minute it leaves the docking bay."

Nodding his head, Kaycose continued to bombard the *Shlictah* with firepower. Taron wasn't saying much, most all his attention was on flying the ship and avoiding being hit as much as possible. The *Shlictah* was huge, so the only hope they had was to continue to hit her over and over again.

Continuing to fire upon the weak areas Sidious had pointed out as well as locations as close to the bridge as possible, they were beginning to make some progress. Stefan could see the flyers fighting each other all around them, and he knew that soon Sidious would have to fly his way through that to get to the *Vultair*. Getting off the Destroyer was only half his battle. He knew Sidious was a good pilot, but that still didn't stop him from worrying.

Brother, he said to himself, you leave me to explain this to our father by myself, and I'll never forgive you.

* * * * *

"My God, the ship is falling apart around my ears," Rigora said as he avoided being knocked down by a piece of the ceiling falling. He couldn't believe this was actually happening. The minute he got off this ship and back to the capital city of

Rhenari, he would see that Lord Marcone was executed for high treason. Even if he were lucky enough to get off the ship, there wouldn't be a planet anywhere he could hide. He would make sure of it.

General Carlone was directly in front of him, leading the way to his escape ship, which he had hidden on flyer deck twelve. The only problem was they couldn't get to flyer deck twelve, the hallway was blocked by fallen debris.

"We can't get to the ship, sir. We're going to have to find another way out," General Carlone yelled over all the commotion.

"I'm open to any suggestions," Rigora replied.

"I have a ship on level ten. If we can get to it, maybe we can get out of here."

"Lead the way, General," Rigora said as he motioned with his hand for Carlone to go ahead of him. Quickly, the two of them began to make their way to the stairwell that would take them to level ten.

* * * * *

"Mikayla, come on, we have to hurry," Agnus said over his shoulder.

"I'm right behind you. Go as fast as you need to, I'll keep up."

At least I hope I will. She winced, dodging electrical sparks and fallen debris. *My God, it's like being in a nightmare that you can't wake up from.* There were men everywhere, some running, trying to get away just like they were. Others were trapped by fallen beams or already dead. *God, please let Sid be okay and please let us get out of here in one piece.*

Glancing ahead of her toward the end of the corridor, she caught sight of Sidious and heart leaped, but in the same breath, it fell. Before him stood Woods, a gun pointed at his chest. *Oh God. No. Please.*

"Agnus!" she yelled, pointing toward the end of the hall.

"I see them."

* * * * *

"Woods," Marcone sneered.

Damn it. Why didn't I think to have my gun out?

As Sidious watched him, he wondered if Woods was going to try to take him into custody, but then decided that would probably not be the case. Woods had hated him for years; more than likely, he would use this opportunity to kill him.

"You did this, didn't you?" Woods asked with a sneer.

Sidious remained quiet and watched, waiting for an opportunity to hopefully turn the tables. The thought of never seeing Mikayla again made him determined to find a way out of this. But so far nothing short of taking a chance and trying to grab the gun was coming to mind.

"What do you think you can accomplish by destroying this ship? He'll just build another one."

"Will he?" Sidious asked. If everything went as it was supposed to, the prime minister wouldn't be around to build another one.

"Did you really think you would get away with this?" he asked.

Sidious shrugged. "I got away with it for ten years."

"It's over, Marcone. I'm going to do what I should have done a long time ago." He pulled the trigger, and Sidious braced himself for the impact, but suddenly someone jumped in front of him, taking the bullet.

"No!" Sidious yelled as Agnus was thrown against his chest. Holding Agnus with one arm, Sidious reached behind him with the other and pulled out his gun.

Woods's eyes widened, and his face drained of all color. "It's over, damn it," Marcone sneered and fired, hitting the commander in his forehead. Woods fell back against the wall, his eyes gazing lifelessly at the ceiling.

"Oh my God," Mikayla said as she ran forward and helped Sidious lower Agnus.

"Agnus, what were you thinking?" Sidious asked as he gently laid his head on the floor.

Quickly trying to undo his shirt so he could see the damage, Sidious knew his chances were next to none. He had taken a hit directly in the chest at short range, and they didn't have time to get him to the Med Lab on the *Vultair*.

"Sidious," he heard Agnus say, and then reached to take the hand he was holding up to him. "You must finish this."

"I will, Agnus. I promise." He swallowed, trying to fight the tears he wanted desperately to let fall. Agnus dying would be like losing his own father.

Mikayla reached into her bra and pulled out the transporter Sidious had given her earlier. Sidious reached for her hand, but she quickly jerked it away. "Mikayla," he snapped.

Placing it into Agnus's palm, she quickly closed his fingers around it after hitting the button in the middle. Within seconds, Agnus was transported to the *Vultair*.

He stared at her, his eyes narrowed in anger. What the hell had she just done?

"Stop looking at me like you could throttle me and figure out a way to get us off this ship," she said when she looked up and caught him staring at her.

He wanted to scream at her, for that transporter was supposed to get her off. But he also wanted to hug her for making that sacrifice for Agnus. As he looked at her, he realized that only made him love her more. They would make it off. Together.

"Come on," he said as he stood and took her hand. "We don't have a lot of time."

* * * * *

"We've got someone transporting aboard," Kaycose said just a second before Agnus appeared on the floor in front of them.

"Holy hell!" Stefan yelled when he saw the chest wound. "Kaycose get me a med kit. Agnus, can you hear me?"

Agnus grunted in response, his eyes rolling back in his head. Once Stefan got a good look at the wound, he realized they didn't have time to move him, so he and Kaycose worked on him there on the floor of the bridge. Placing a sleep inducer on Agnus's forehead, Stefan then began to work as best as he could under the circumstances to repair the damage.

"Can you fix him?" Kaycose asked as he handed Stefan the instruments he asked for.

"I'm not sure, Kaycose. There's an awful lot of damage." He was way out of his league, but he had to try. This man was like a father to him, and he knew Sidious felt the same way.

Anytime either one of them needed something, or just needed to vent about their father, this man was there. Agnus had pulled Stefan and Sidious out of more scraps than they cared to count. Now it looked like he was going to return the favor; he just hoped he could.

* * * * *

"Ahhh!" Mikayla yelled as a beam came down. The edge caught her shoulder, cutting deep into the flesh. She covered it with her hand, blood seeping through her fingers. She wasn't sure what hurt more, the deep gash or the burn as the hot metal singed her skin.

Sidious grabbed her hand, moving it aside. "Let me see." After a quick look, he glanced at her eyes, a worried frown on his brow. "It needs to be closed, but it will have to wait. Think you'll be okay?"

"Yeah, just get us out of here."

Reaching down, he tore off a section of his jacket at the bottom and wrapped it around her arm. She winced but held still, letting him apply as much pressure as he could to stop the bleeding. "That should help. You ready?"

Nodding her head, she turned to follow him. They could see the hangar entrance just a few feet away. The main power was out, so the doors wouldn't open on their own. "I've got to find something to wedge them open with," he said as he began to look around.

Finally finding a long metal bar, he slipped it between the small gap and pushed. Slowly, the doors began to open. Once there was a big enough gap, he pushed Mikayla through first and then he followed. The space was too small, and he had to push it wider to get his whole body through.

Once on the other side, he grinned. "I guess I need to lay off those pastries for a while, huh?"

She gaped at him in shock. "I can't believe you're trying to be funny at a time like this."

Sidious smiled slightly at her and turned to head toward the *Triton*, which appeared at a distance to be all in one piece. Mikayla climbed inside and fastened her seat belt, trying not to think about the pain in her shoulder and various other parts of her body. She had taken numerous falls as the ship shook beneath her feet every time it was hit by rebel fire. She was sure there wouldn't be a spot on her body anywhere that didn't have a bruise on it.

"You holding up, baby?" he asked as he started the engines.

"As well as can be expected, I suppose," she said with a slight smile. At the moment, she was just extremely relieved they had made it to his ship. Leaning her head back against the seat, she took a moment to close her eyes.

"We're not out of the woods yet," he said as he piloted the ship off the deck and out into space. "We still have to make it through all this."

Mikayla opened her eyes to see what he was talking about and gasped. There had to be thousands of them. How in God's name would they get through this? Gripping the armrests of the seat, she sat quietly as Sidious zigzagged his way through the numerous fighters.

Several times it looked as though he were going to hit one head-on; then he would quickly change course at the last second. She tried to close her eyes, but then decided she didn't like that either. How does he tell the good guys from the bad guys? With growing trepidation, she watched him fly around, occasionally returning fire.

Suddenly the ship shook as they were hit with fire from behind, but since he had the shields up, there was no damage done. Turning the ship, he started flying directly toward the four-story communications tower of the *Shlictah*, an Imperial Flyer following close behind.

"Word must have gotten out about me," he drawled. "It's my own men that are firing at us."

"Sid, what are you doing?" she asked as they kept getting closer to the tower, her fingers gripping the armrest so tightly, her knuckles turned white.

"Trust me," he said, never taking his eyes off it.

Chapter Eighteen

"Stefan, the *Triton* has left the *Shlictah*," Troy said from his position at tactical. Kaycose remained on the floor, helping Stefan.

"Keep an eye on him, and as soon as he's close enough, grab him with the tractor beam."

"You got it," Troy said.

Stefan felt a huge amount of relief for Sidious as well as Agnus. He'd just closed the last bleeder and was about to seal the exterior wound. Now all he would have to do is give Agnus a shot of Lovar Serum and they could put him in bed for a few hours to let him heal. The serum would help his body to quickly repair any damage left that Stefan missed or couldn't get to, as well as make his blood multiply three times faster than normal. He would need that, for he had lost a lot of it.

"Well, Agnus, old man," he said as he slowly worked the laser up his chest. "Looks like you're going to be with us a little while longer. Kaycose, help me carry him to my quarters so we can put him to bed."

"Yes, sir."

* * * * *

Carlone finally reached his ship. Dragging sulfur-filled air into his lungs, he readjusted the prime minister's heavy weight against his shoulder. Rigora had been knocked unconscious by a falling beam, and he had to carry him most of the way here. Opening the door to the ship, he set him in the seat as best he could.

He needed a doctor; both of them did. Leaning over, Carlone examined Rigora's head wound. It bled profusely, and that made it very difficult for him to see the extent of the damage. Fastening the harness around Rigora, he quickly went to the other side of the ship and climbed in.

Please start, he thought as he closed his eyes. His prayers were answered, for soon the engines roared to life. However, his relief was short-lived. The *Shlictah* exploded into a huge ball of fire. He gasped in fear, pushing the ship as hard as she would go. He prayed they could get out of there before they were consumed along with everything else.

* * * * *

Mikayla wanted to close her eyes, but she couldn't. She couldn't take them off the tower. Surely, he wasn't thinking about trying to fly through it. They continued to fly straight toward it, approaching the tower at speeds she couldn't even begin to contemplate. Tightening her grip on the arm of the chair, she desperately fought the urge to scream as he closed the distance between them and the tower.

At the last second, he made a sharp right turn while the flyer behind them flew directly into it, exploding into a massive fireball. Looking over at her, he smiled. "Piece of cake."

"I swear, if you weren't flying this ship, I would knock the crap out of you."

Laughing, he turned back toward the front and continued to make his way through the mass of fighters. A loud alarm echoed through the ship. "Tractor beam lock on."

Sidious let go of the wheel. Fear snaked down her spine that they'd been captured, would once again have to return to the Destroyer to be consumed in the explosion like everything else.

"Who?" she asked.

"The *Vultair*," he replied. "Since they are moving at such a high rate of speed, they need to guide us in."

She watched with fascination as they were pulled into a ship that she could only describe as something you would see in a nightmare. She'd only seen the inside of it on Daego. What she saw now resembled a predator, an evil-looking bird that swooped and circled around its prey. It was nowhere near as big as the *Shlictah*, but it was huge nonetheless. The docking bay they flew into held five other ships, all the same size or bigger than the *Triton*, and still had plenty of room for more.

She looked through the window at the darkened bay, red lights illuminating the area, giving it a creepy look. "It's not normally this dark, is it?"

"Not normally. It's only this dark now because all the unnecessary power is being used for the shields."

He took her hand and helped her climb out of the ship. Her arm was really hurting her, and it was beginning to stiffen up along with the rest of her body. She staggered and placed her hand against the side of the ship to brace herself.

"Doing all right?" he asked as he looked at her.

"I'm the same as I was the last time you asked me," she said with a slight smile and then looked at the wound and blood-soaked bandage.

"That's going to have to be looked at. Soon. Let's get you to the bridge."

She nodded, fatigue slowly creeping through her. "'Kay."

He took her elbow and led her across the bay and into a small elevator

"Bridge," Sidious said, and immediately they began to move.

It hadn't been five seconds, she didn't think, when the door to the elevator opened and the two of them stepped off onto the bridge.

"Glad to see you made it, little brother," Stefan said with a smile.

"If it weren't for Agnus, I wouldn't be here at all. How is he, by the way? Did we get him here in time?"

"He's fine. He'll sleep away the next few hours in my quarters. Once we're finished here, I want to hear all about it."

"You will."

Sidious escorted Mikayla to a seat and helped her sit down. Turning to Stefan, Sidious said, "Watch her; she's hurt."

Stefan nodded and moved to stand next to Mikayla, a medical scanner in his hand. "I'll take care of her."

Mikayla watched as Sidious walked over to one of the stations, tugging his jacket off as he went. "Burn that damn thing, Troy," he said and tossed the jacket toward a tall young man who smiled.

"You bet."

"What's her status, Kaycose?" Sidious asked.

"She's about to fall. A few more shots in just the right places, and she's history."

"Any sign of the prime minister's ship?"

"Not a one. Do you think they got trapped and couldn't get out?" Kaycose asked.

"That's possible. She was literally falling apart at the seams."

Of course, there was always the possibility they had taken another ship. Taking a seat in the captain's chair, he touched the computer screen in front of him, bringing it to life.

Good, we're still linked.

Punching in his pass code, he asked the computer the location of the prime minister. According to the computer, he was still onboard, somewhere on level ten. *Perfect.*

Walking back to tactical, he patted Kaycose on the shoulder. "Take a break, my friend."

"She's all yours," he returned with a smile.

Sidious took his place at tactical and began putting in coordinates for locations he knew would do the most damage, saving a specific one for last.

"Taron," Sidious said.

"Yeah."

"Bring the *Vultair* around and hold her directly off the bridge."

"Will do."

Once in position, he hit the button, sending the final shot right into the heart of the Destroyer.

That's for ten years of hell, you son of a bitch.

He stood, watching as the Photon torpedo flew into the bridge and explode.

"We need to move the fleet, Taron. She's going to blow," he replied as he studied the readings on the screen in front of him.

Troy let the rest of the fleet know to move as Taron turned them and flew a safe distance away. Sidious, as well as the rest of them, stood and silently watched as the ship shattered into millions of pieces that fell harmlessly into Earth's atmosphere. Some of the Imperial Flyers had been destroyed as well in the explosion, for they couldn't get away fast enough. The others that were not, either immediately surrendered or flew off in the hopes of getting away.

At first no one said anything, and it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Everyone watching the ship break apart was each lost in his own thoughts about what had just happened and how many people had to die to make this possible.

Someone yelled over the communications speaker, breaking the dead silence. "Yes!"

"My sentiments exactly," Troy said with a smile, and that got the rest of them going, hugging and laughing, congratulating each other on a job well done. All their years of hard work and sacrifice had finally paid off.

Mikayla stood back and watched them in relief. She couldn't believe it was actually over. Smiling, Sid walked over and hugged her around the waist. Picking her up, he spun her in circles, the both of them laughing.

"It's over, sweetheart," he said as he set her down.

"What will happen to Earth now?" she asked.

"They'll begin to rebuild, and hopefully will decide to become members of the senate. Even if they don't, I still plan on getting the new senate to help them with the rebuilding," he said as he took his hand and moved the hair that had fallen into her eyes.

Stefan walked over to them and placed his hand at Mikayla's elbow. "Come on, beautiful. Let's get you to the Med Lab and get that arm fixed."

"You go with Stefan. Taron and I need to work on getting a transport ship here to get all those troops off Earth." Sidious leaned down and placed a soft kiss on her cheek. "I'll be right there."

Smiling at him, she turned to leave with Stefan while Sidious and Taron took care of arranging the final clean up.

* * * * *

As she walked into the Med Lab, she still couldn't believe this had all happened and they had been successful. She was so happy and relieved, she felt like crying. Everything would be fine now. Earth would be free; she would see her mother again. She had Sidious, the love of her life. They still had so much work ahead of them, but for now it just felt good to enjoy their victory.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Stefan said with a smile as he began to remove the rag from around her arm.

"You know, I should feel bad for all those people on that ship, but all I can think about is all the people that died on Earth," she said as she turned her head to watch what Stefan was doing. Sucking in a breath, she winced when he began to probe at it.

"Here, this will help," he said as he raised a short pen and placed it against her arm. Pressing it against her skin, he pushed a button. She bit her lip at the small pinprick of pain before her upper arm numbed.

"I feel bad for some of those people as well," Stefan said. "For they all weren't bad, some were just there because they didn't have anywhere else to be, but we couldn't save them all."

"What about all those ground troops and the flyer pilots?" she asked.

"Most of them will be set free and sent back to their families. Some I'm sure will not want anything to do with us. What did this?" he asked as he cleaned the gash and burn surrounding it.

"The corner of a beam as it fell."

It didn't take Stefan long to return her arm to normal. The fact he could do so quickly and painlessly amazed her. She couldn't even tell there had been a gash there. Their medical advances were incredible, and she hoped they would share some of them with Earth.

"Sidious is much better at this," Stefan said as he studied the light pink scar.

"Looks fine to me," she said with a grin.

Once he was done, he grabbed the medical scanner to check the rest of her. "What are you doing?" she asked when she saw him turn it on and hold it close to her, slowly moving it up and down.

"Just checking you out. As much as you were thrown around, you could have an internal injury we aren't aware of." He solemnly studied the screen on the scanner, and she frowned.

"Is something wrong?"

"No," he replied with a smile. "Everything checks out fine. For you and the baby."

"I beg your pardon?" she asked, suddenly feeling as though the wind had been knocked out of her. Surely, she hadn't heard him correctly.

Chuckling at the expression on her face, he held the scanner screen up for her to look at. "You're pregnant, sweetheart. About four days, according to this."

Pregnant? She took the scanner from him and stared at it in shock.

Stefan watched her with amusement. Putting his hand on her shoulder, he asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just shocked. Four days?" she asked as she looked at him. "You can tell that soon?"

"That thing can pick it up as soon as it's conceived. It can detect any change to the body, no matter how small."

"That's amazing," she whispered, turning her gaze back to the screen.

Stefan chuckled and placed a soft kiss on her temple. "I'm going to be an uncle," he said with a smile.

About that time, Sidious walked through the Med Lab doors, catching the kiss. "Get your own woman, Stefan," Sidious teased, a tiny grin pulling at his lips.

"But I like yours, brother," Stefan replied as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, teasing him back.

"Gentlemen, please. I believe there is enough of me to go around."

Stefan chuckled and turned to leave the room. Sid pinned her with a menacing glare. "Forget it."

"Like I said, he never could share," Stefan replied, smiling from the open doorway, making Mikayla laugh.

"Out!" Sid yelled, but he was laughing right along with them. Turning to Mikayla, he examined her arm. "Everything okay?"

For a second, she didn't say anything, unsure if she should just yet. Deciding not to, she climbed down off the table and headed for the door. "Everything is perfect."

He watched her walk away and frowned. He knew her, and he definitely noticed something was up. She'd hesitated too long before she said anything. Not to mention the fact she didn't even look at him. He narrowed his eyes. *What is she not telling me?* Seeing the scanner on the table, he picked it up.

"Freeze," he bellowed.

With a sigh, she stopped and turned to face him. "We've got to work on this bossy attitude of yours."

He held the scanner up, his gaze never leaving hers. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

Walking over to him, she crossed her arms in front of her. "Maybe, maybe not."

Gazing down at her, he pursed his lips thoughtfully. It may be silly, but he wanted to hear her say it. He wanted to know she was as happy about this as he was. Putting his hands at her waist, he picked her up and set her on the exam table so he wouldn't have to look down on her while they talked. It would also be easier to keep her from getting away.

She scowled, looking absolutely adorable. "I hate it when you do that."

Placing his hands on the edge of the table on either side of her hips, he leaned over and smiled at her. "No you don't. Now stop trying to change the subject, you little minx. Out with it."

"Did you ever stop and think that maybe I was saving this news for the right time? That maybe I wanted to think of a way to tell you that would make it special?" she asked, aggravation obvious in her tone.

"Sweetheart, you could have yelled this news to me across a room and it would not have made it any less special," he assured with an amused smile. He had never been more thrilled about anything in his life.

With a sigh, she looked at him and said softly, "I'm pregnant."

"I know," he said with a huge smile.

"Are you okay with this?" she asked.

"I am more than okay with this," he replied as he took her face in his hands. Leaning down, he softly kissed her. "I love you, and I am thrilled we're having a baby. Our baby," he added with a smile.

Returning his smile, she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him. "I love you too. Oh my God, we're actually having a baby."

His laughter echoed off the walls in the room as he hugged her tightly. He would never get tired of this, he thought. He was looking forward to a lifetime of laughter and love with the woman of his dreams.

"Sid," Stefan's voice said over the speakers. "You better get to the docking bay. You're not going to believe this shit."

They both frowned at one another. "On my way," Sidious replied.

Sidious held tight to Mikayla's hand as they made their way to the docking bay. They arrived the same time as Stefan and Taron, then stared in shock at what they were seeing. He blinked, then shook his head as the door to his father's ship opened, and he stepped out.

Anger tightened his chest, and he let go of Mikayla's hand and stepped toward his father. "What the hell?" he snapped. "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"Watch your mouth!" Damon snapped.

"Watch my mouth?" Sidious snapped back. "You're here in the middle of all this mess, and you're going to tell me to watch my mouth? Where the hell is Mom? Does she know you're here?"

"She's home safe, and no, she doesn't know where I am."

"Dad," Stefan said as he came forward as well. "What were you thinking?"

Damon scowled. "I was thinking about helping my sons, whether they wanted it or not."

"Did you not stop to think about Mom? What if this hadn't worked? Damn it, Dad!" Sidious yelled.

"Your mother would have been fine. I made sure nothing would have happened to her."

"How did you even find out?" Taron asked.

"Agnus."

"Son of a bitch," Sidious said with a shake of his head.

"You were the benefactor," Stefan said.

Damon nodded. "One of them."

"For how long?" Sidious asked.

"Since I began to see a change in you," Damon said as he stared at Sidious. "I heard the stories about you, and I saw how it was eating you up inside. I know you. I knew you wouldn't be doing this without a damn good reason."

Sidious sighed. "So I gave it away?"

"Pretty much, yes. I then began to pay attention to Stefan's and Taron's disappearances, then confronted Agnus. He was on the Destroyer with you. I knew if anyone knew what was going on, he would. He admitted to Taron and Stefan, but never truly admitted to you."

"Unbelievable," Taron said with a grin.

"He didn't want to risk giving you away, even to me. But I knew, and tried so many times to get you to admit it. I could have helped you."

Sidious shook his head. "You've helped enough. I didn't want you involved."

"I think that's a moot point at this stage. So which one of you mongrels came up with this brilliant idea?" Damon asked dryly.

"The rebels were already out there, Stefan just organized them," Sidious offered. "Then once Taron was on board, they approached me."

"Stefan," Damon said, narrowing his eyes toward his oldest son. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

Stefan shrugged slightly. Damon's gaze landed on Mikayla, and he smiled briefly. "I hope you can keep him a little more in line, Mikayla," he said.

Mikayla grinned and glanced at Sidious. "I don't know that there're too many people who can handle that job."

Damon grunted, then glanced toward Stefan and Taron. "What's next on the agenda?"

"We're going to Earth," Taron said. "You're going home."

Damon frowned, making Sidious grin. His father didn't like being told what to do any more than he did.

Epilogue

Things went quickly once the prime minister's ship was destroyed. Earth gained control of the ground troops and held them until the transport ship arrived to take them away. World leaders were getting together making plans for the rebuilding process as well as ways to get their economy going again.

President Blake finally got to meet his informant and was thrilled with the idea of joining the Galactic Senate. He worked hard over the next few months, convincing the other leaders this was the right thing to do. Once it came time to pick their representatives, it was a unanimous decision that Davis Blake would be the first man from Earth to be appointed to the Galactic Senate. He accepted with gratitude and a good deal of enthusiasm.

The news media were all over the Marcone brothers, spreading the word of their sacrifices, their hard work, and even their private lives. Stefan took it all in stride, trying his best to answer questions and help the world adjust. Taron always close by, ever watchful and lending a hand when needed. Sidious and Mikayla went into hiding, returning to the lake house on Daego. Sidious had had enough and wanted to live the quiet life, far from the prying eyes of the press and the responsibility of the militia.

Thirty days after the final battle, just as the sun was setting on Daego, Mikayla and Sidious were married before a small gathering of friends and family. He had insisted on handling everything himself, once again surprising her with just how romantic he could be.

Her mother at first had been a little reluctant to travel to another planet, but she swallowed her fear. She wasn't about to miss her one and only daughter getting married, and she definitely wanted to be there when her first grandchild was born. Even Krista was there, standing as Mikayla's maid of honor.

Everyone commented on what a handsome couple the two made. He in his tailored black suit, and she in an ankle-length gown made of cream-colored satin with

the same color lace overlay. It's a good thing they were marrying now, a few more days and the dress wouldn't have fit anymore.

Placing her hand over her stomach, she smiled. These few extra pounds she would carry around with pride.

The ring he placed on her finger during the exchanging of vows took her breath away. "They reminded me of your eyes," he whispered as he slid the wide gold band encrusted with three large, rectangular-cut emeralds onto her finger.

Looking up at him she smiled, a single tear rolling down her cheek. With his thumb, he wiped the tear away just as the regent said with a smile, "I now pronounce you man and wife, Lord and Lady Marcone. You may now kiss your bride."

Tipping her chin up with his finger, he leaned down to kiss her, but just before he did, he whispered against her lips, "I love you, my lady."

"I love you, my lord," she whispered back.

THE END

Trista Ann Michaels

Trista lives in the land of dreams, where alpha men are tender and heroines are strong and sassy. When not there, she visits the mountains of Tennessee. Not a bad place to spend a little spare time when she needs a break from all those voices in her head. Unfortunately they never fail to find her.