Chapter One

Pulling the hood more securely around her face, Knightmaster Nea Laurier strode down the dirty street.

To one side, the ugly, brown city of Daibos pulsed with noise and energy. To the left, the vast spaceport that the tiny planet of Drov was known for stretched out as far as she could see.

A huge Nillian freighter flew overhead with a low drone. She paused, watching its rusted, over-patched hull slide past.

It was almost always nighttime on Drov. She wrinkled her nose. It was so different compared to her bright, beautiful homeworld of Oron. The Oronis prized art, symmetry, nature, and beauty. The city of Daibos was its antithesis—brown, drab, and dirty. It was known for the spaceport and its corrosive acid-rain showers. The buildings were all made of reinforced metal, etched and stained.

She kept moving, peering through the mesh fence to scan the ships in the port. She was looking for a particular one.

She moved the folds of her robe, looked at the scanner that she held, and studied the data on the screen. The stealth trail of the ship she was hunting had stopped here. The ship had landed at the Daibos spaceport. Her jaw tightened. She *had* to find that ship.

The ship was carrying the abducted Oronis Knightqueen Carys, and her head knightguard,

Sten.

Nea would not fail.

She was a knightmaster, like her father before her. He'd taught her duty and honor above all else.

And that failure wasn't an option.

Lumbering ground transports moved past her on the street. Probably carting cargo to and from the port. She scanned her surroundings. There was no one else on the street.

She activated her combat implants and leaped over the port's security fence.

She landed in a crouch on the other side, narrowly avoiding a puddle from an earlier acid-rain shower.

Nea rose, and stared into the shadows as she moved deeper into the spaceport. As a trained knight, she'd been taught to move with stealth. She paused against the brown hull of a small cargo ship. Ahead, she spotted some smaller passenger cruisers parked in an orderly row.

The scanner in her hand vibrated, and she pulled it out. Her heart rate spiked.

The trail was growing stronger.

Yes. Energy zinged through her system. *Please, let the knightqueen be close.*

Suddenly, she heard grunts, followed by guttural voices.

Gul. She swiveled and ducked under the hull of the ship. There was an indentation on the side, around the exhaust ports. She climbed into the space and curled her leg up, letting the shadows mask her presence.

The thud of heavy footsteps sounded. Two aliens came into view.

She gritted her teeth.

Gek'Dragar.

They both had tall, broad humanoid forms, with the addition of long, sturdy tails. Their scaly skin was a pale gray that darkened toward the top of their heads. Two ridges ran along sharp cheekbones, and four bony horns—two on each side—swept back from their faces. One had long, black hair tied back at the base of his neck, while the other's hair was a shade lighter and hacked off at his shoulders. Deep-green eyes glowed in the dim light.

They were the mortal enemies of the Oronis.

Centuries ago, there had been terrible wars between the Oronis and the Gek'Dragar. Many Oronis knights had lost their lives defending their people. They'd beaten the Gek'Dragar, and the aliens had retreated into the depths of their own space.

Until recently.

After irritating incursions along the Oronis border, the Gek'Dragar had launched a brazen attack on the Oronis capital, and abducted the knightqueen.

Nea blew out a slow breath as the Gek'Dragar passed. These two were just port workers, not soldiers.

Oh, but she wanted to attack. Her hand flexed. She'd been trained to fight. The deadly combat implants combined with her relentless training made her an excellent knight.

Her father wouldn't allow anything less.

Knightmaster Torquin Laurier had a reputation for drive and persistence. He'd expected the same from his children. He'd been training her, critiquing her, and quizzing her, from the time she could walk.

And expecting her to always follow the rules, to be the best, and to do everything with honor for the knightqueen and her people.

Nea released another breath. She needed to focus on the mission, and not her impossible-to-

please father. She climbed out of her hiding spot and hurried along the side of the ship. The scent of spaceship fuel and the sharp, chemical smell of acid filled her senses.

The Gek'Dragar ship had to be close. And Nea hoped that meant the knightqueen was close as well. She paused, then darted across an open space between some ships.

There was a roar of engines, and a ship lifted off nearby, its landing lights illuminating the ground. She sank back into the shadows.

Once the ship was gone, she continued on. She turned a corner, and found herself face-to-face with a port worker.

This one wasn't Gek'Dragar, but another species, a Phidean.

He had skin with a pink undertone and three horizontal ridges across the bridge of his nose. The side of the ship beside him was open, a toolbox and other parts littered around him where he was working. The male's liquid-dark eyes widened, and he lifted his tool.

Without asking any questions, he attacked.

Nea dodged. She kicked him, and when he staggered, she landed a chop to his arm. He grunted and dropped the tool. It clattered on the concrete.

With a low roar, he snatched up another tool off a nearby crate. This one crackled with energy, glowing a bright blue. He swung it at her.

Gul.

She dodged, but his next swing was fast, and he clipped her arm. Stinging pain hit her, and she clenched her teeth.

She leaped back and tripped over a discarded part. She fell onto the dirty concrete, swallowing a curse.

The Phidean advanced, an ugly smile on his face.

Suddenly, a dark shadow detached itself from a nearby ship.

It attacked the Phidean from behind. The newcomer landed a hard blow to the Phidean's lower back, where the alien had sensitive organs. The Phidean made a strangled sound.

He dropped the electro-tool, and the dark shadow yanked the Phidean backward. Nea heard the distinctive sound of a neck snapping, and watched the port worker's body drop to the ground.

The shadow stepped forward, the light catching his face. Nea hated that her heart gave an annoying thump.

He was tall, all hard-packed, lean muscle, and his short, platinum-blond hair a bright glimmer in the darkness. The sliver of light highlighted his high cheekbones and haughty face. She couldn't make out his ice-blue eyes in the darkness, but she had no trouble picturing them.

"Having a little trouble, Knightmaster Nea?"

Gul, she hated that drawl.

"I had it handled." She rose, dusting off her robes.

One pale eyebrow rose. "It didn't look that way."

She fought back a hot spurt of annoyance. "I can take care of myself, Knighthunter Kaden. I don't need you or anyone else to take care of me. I'm a knightmaster."

A slow smile crossed his face. She hated that it made him more attractive. He'd been striking at the Academy as a teenager, as well. Females had always been panting after him.

He'd been her nemesis. Taunting her, annoying her, playing pranks on her. She hated him, and that overconfident aura of being in charge of everything that he gave off.

No one was in charge of her.

"Don't worry, Nea. I won't tell anyone that I rescued you."

You can't punch him, Nea. She met his gaze.

He smiled. "I can almost hear all the names you're calling me." He reached out a hand.

She tensed.

His fingers brushed over her cheek, and tingles spread over her skin. She sucked in a breath. It must have had to do with the electro-tool that hit her, not him.

"You had a smudge of dirt," he said.

She knocked his hand away. For better or worse—and right now, it was a *worse*—he was her partner on this mission.

"Let's find the ship." She spun and started walking.

She felt a prickle on the back of her neck. A part of her hated turning her back on him.

He was a knighthunter—part spy, part assassin. They couldn't be trusted.

Plus, he was Kaden Galath.

He *definitely* couldn't be trusted.

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He loved watching Nea's long-legged stride.

Especially when she was angry.

Knighthunter Kaden Galath followed his partner deeper into the spaceport. One part of his mind took note of the different ships around them, but most of his focus was on Nea.

Drov was near the border of Gek'Dragar space. It was a hub for trade and cargo, and lots of different species visited, lived, and worked here.

It was also a cesspool. Lots of unscrupulous types did business here.

As a knighthunter, it wasn't his first trip to Drov.

He and Nea were keeping their identities under wraps. If the Gek'Dragar guards spotted any Oronis knights… Well, they'd end up with a fight on their hands. Their priority was the

knightqueen, and Knightguard Sten.

The queen's guard had managed to get a dura-binding on himself and the queen. The tether couldn't be removed without killing both of them. It had been clever. It meant the Gek'Dragar had been forced to take Sten, too.

Kaden's mouth pressed into a firm line. He hoped they were both still alive and unhurt. Kaden held onto the fact that if the Gek'Dragar had wanted Knightqueen Carys dead, they would've killed her instantly, not abducted her.

Nea suddenly halted, looking at her handheld scanner.

Kaden let his gaze run over her fit body. Even draped in a robe, he could tell from the way she held herself that she was in good shape and could take care of herself. Her black hair was hidden, but the hood just accented the bold lines of her face.

His gut tightened. He'd wanted her from the first day at the Academy.

Beautiful, smart, athletic. She came from a well-respected Oronis family. She always did the right thing, followed the rules, and helped people. The perfect knight.

For a boy who'd come from nothing—worse than nothing—she'd seemed like perfection.

And she would never, ever be for him.

Kaden had worked hard to keep a gulf between them. At first, it was to protect himself. He knew that letting people close put you at risk.

As he got older, it was partly to protect her, as well.

He was constantly drawn to her. Even at the Academy, and far too many nights since, he'd dreamed of Nea—naked, under him, taking him deep, sucking his cock.

He swallowed a curse. They were on a dangerous planet, in enemy space, and the last thing he needed was his hard cock getting in his way.

Kaden drew in a deep breath. He needed to keep Nea safe, and that included from himself. He'd never sully her, or drag her into the darkness with him.

If he had to have her hate him to do that, so be it.

He saw her frown. "Nea?"

"We're close." She turned ninety degrees, and walked between two parked ships.

Voices ahead caught his ear. His implants were attuned to the tiniest sound vibrations. All the enhancements that a knighthunter needed for spying.

He grabbed Nea's arm and spun her. She let out a quiet gasp, but was smart enough not to speak. He pressed her against the side of a ship, his body flush with hers.

As she drew in a breath, he felt her full breasts against his chest.

Gul. He met her gaze. Even cloaked by shadows, he could still see her aqua-blue eyes.

The voices got louder, and she stiffened. They stared at each other, as whoever it was passed by on the other side of the ship.

Once the sound was gone, Nea shoved him.

Kaden didn't move.

"Back up, Knighthunter," she whispered.

"When I'm ready."

"The universe doesn't revolve around you." She shoved him again.

By the coward's bones, she was gorgeous. "It does when we're sneaking around enemy territory."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're a bossy *gul*."

"And you're stubborn." He stepped back. He always liked that about her, except when she ran herself down.

He remembered at the Academy that she liked to ace all her tests. She was so stubborn, and she'd stay up all night studying, and not eat or sleep enough.

She was the same on missions.

Well, he wouldn't allow that on this mission.

She stalked off, then stopped, staring ahead. He followed her gaze and saw the Gek'Dragar cruiser. It wasn't too old, but was nothing flashy.

Nea looked over her shoulder. "That's it."

His gut tightened and he nodded.

They moved together swiftly. He pressed a palm to the panel on the side of the ship and used his implants to link to the ship's computer.

"The security system isn't active."

Nea's face twisted. She knew, as he did, that it meant they were unlikely to find the knightqueen aboard.

Kaden activated the door, and it slid open. A short ramp extended.

They strode inside.

The first thing Kaden saw was the large cell at the back of the ship. It contained two narrow bunks. As Nea went toward the rear, he cleared the front of the ship.

There was no one aboard.

"Kaden?"

He strode toward her. She was crouched in the cell.

She pointed, and he saw the markings scratched into the wall. A straight line with two triangles above it. A sword and crown. The symbol of the knightqueen.

"They were here," he said.

Nea rose, her face grim. "But where are they now?"