

Chapter One

She was being hunted.

Knightqueen Carys crouched in the shadows behind a large boulder. Down here, at the bottom of the huge ravine, the ground was littered with broken rocks, and the shadows were deep and dark.

She looked up at the sheer walls of rock that rose high above her. She had no idea what planet she was on, but so far, all she'd seen were jagged mountains and cavernous ravines.

The deep snort of a beast made her pulse pick up. She breathed out slowly, her muscles tense. The sharp scrape of claws on rock caught her ear.

She might be the Knightqueen, the ruler of the Oronis people, but she was also a trained knight. Her body contained combat implants that made her a skilled fighter.

She pulled a face. She couldn't access her implants completely at the moment. Her captors had pumped her full of drugs to block her abilities.

But now that she was free, she was slowly regaining access to some of her implants.

She might be filthy and exhausted, and wearing the tatters of what had once been a grand, gold ballgown, her bare feet scraped and bloody, but that didn't matter. She was an Oronis knight to the core. Her enemy would pay for abducting her.

There was a skitter of rocks, and Carys quickly darted over to the next boulder.

The most important thing, though, was that she wasn't alone.

She glanced at the faint, gold glow of the band around her wrist. The dura-binding ran along the rocks, disappearing into the darkness. A bond of pure energy that no one could break.

Focus on the creature, Carys. She lifted her gaze. Come on, beastie. Show yourself.

A low growl raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

With a speed that shocked her, the beast leaped onto the boulder in front of her, lifted its head, and roared.

It had scaly, gray skin, two powerful back legs, smaller front legs, and a thick, long tail studded with spikes. There were no eyes that she could see but she knew it was looking at her. It opened its mouth, revealing sharp fangs. Drool dripped on the rocks by her feet.

Carys steeled herself and raised her hands. Energy flowed through her veins. It was weaker than it should be, but she'd make sure it was enough.

Pushing, she felt the flow increase, warm and electrifying. Her *oralite* nano-implant kicked in, channeling the energy, a ball of blue light forming between her palms.

She threw the energy ball.

The monster dodged. The blue energy clipped it and it snarled, tail whipping behind it.

More energy pulsed, filling her body. Her anger joined it. She'd been snatched violently from her very own ball in her own palace. She'd been forcibly taken from her planet, Oron, and treated like an animal. Caged, beaten, locked in a prison.

Her enemy, the Gek'Dragar, had done this. Her jaw tightened. They would pay.

She knew they were building up to an attack. They wouldn't stay in their own space long. No, soon, they'd come for Oron.

There was *no way* she'd let that happen. It was her duty to protect her people.

She would *not* let the Gek'Dragar win.

Carys threw out her arms and tried to form her armor. She felt the weakest pulse of energy, then nothing.

By the coward's bones. Instead, she focused on a weapon.

The sword formed in her hand, energy swirling, growing into existence. She gripped the hilt as the blade glowed blue.

The monster shook its head, its eye-less face fixated on her.

“Come on, then.” She lifted the sword horizontally over her head. She'd trained with the blade since she could walk.

The creature roared, more drool dripping off its huge fangs onto the rocks below, and nothing but mindless rage radiated off it.

It leaped, its powerful, scaled body sailing through the air.

Carys' heart thudded hard. *Wait. Wait.*

Then a large figure leaped in from the left, his big body a blur.

Knightguard Thorsten Carahan soared through the air. He held a giant, blue broadsword in his hands.

Her pulse leaped as she watched him. He used his strength and momentum to drive the sword into the beast's body.

Carys dived and rolled, conscious of the dura-binding linking her to her knightguard. They'd lengthened it to give them room to maneuver, but she didn't want to get tangled up.

Sten and the monster crashed to the ground. He pulled his sword free of the animal's hide, and ugly, black blood dripped onto the rocks. He stabbed it again, ensuring it was dead.

“Carys.”

The low rumble of his voice moved through her and she fought back a shiver. She closed the distance between them. “I’m fine. I play the bait very well, I think.”

Sten made an unhappy sound. She knew every scowl, every look, and every sound that her knightguard made. He’d been her personal guard for over a decade. He’d protected her without question. He’d trained for it all his life.

She’d never ever questioned his ability, or his loyalty.

He glanced her way. His brown hair was short, and his features rugged. One cheek was covered in scars he’d gotten protecting her. No one would accuse Sten of being handsome, and if they did, he’d probably hit them.

No, Sten was pure strength and rugged power.

“I still can’t make my armor,” she said.

“Me neither.” He wore his own ripped, dirty black clothing he’d been wearing at the ball. His shirt had several tears, bronze skin showing through.

And he still made her breath stutter.

Alone, lost on an alien planet, it was just the two of them.

There was no protocol, palace workers, other knights, or the thousands of meetings and gatherings she attended as queen to keep them locked in their roles of knightqueen and knightguard.

It made it harder for her to hide her feelings.

Suddenly, several small creatures skittered over the rocks.

Oh, no. The beasts down here never stopped. These ones had lots of legs, and hard bodies, but their fangs looked just as sharp.

She tensed. “Sten.”

“I see them.”

He swiveled, and they pressed their backs together. Carys lifted her sword.

“Wait for them,” he said. “Wait.”

Carys waved her sword, a wash of blue light lighting the area around them.

The small creatures reared, spikes appearing on their legs.

“Go!” Sten roared.

They charged together, blades swinging and slashing.

She gritted her teeth, her sword cutting through hard shells and sharp claws. Black blood splashed the rocks.

Whirling, she and Sten moved with power and precision. He threw an energy ball.

Several more alien creatures came up over the rocks. Her jaw tightened. She’d be no one’s meal today.

She slashed at more creatures, then formed another energy ball and tossed it into a crowd of the beasts.

“Sten.” She ran in his direction.

It was like he read her mind. He bent forward and she rolled over his back and sent out a wave of energy. It hit the creatures, the powerful blast tossing their bodies into the air.

The last few alien monsters retreated, skittering back into the shadows.

Quiet fell. All Carys could hear was her and Sten’s harsh breathing.

She dissolved her sword. Sten waited another beat, before dissolving his, as well.

He straightened and scanned the area.

She studied his rugged face, and the scars that slashed down one cheek.

He’d gotten them protecting her when she’d been a teenager. They’d been attacked by a

vicious creature intent on assassinating her. Not once had he given up, or slackened from his duty, even when he'd been injured and in pain.

Suddenly, tiredness hit. Carys was so sore, weary, and hungry. They'd been held captive for days, and been carted halfway across the quadrant to... wherever they were. The entire time she'd worried about Oron and her people.

When they'd escaped the Gek'Dragar prison, she'd been filled with hope. But after a day of travelling through these beast-infested ravines, fighting for their lives, she was tired.

Sagging, she dropped onto a rock.

"Carys." Sten knelt in front of her and cupped her face.

"I just need a minute. I'll be fine."

She was always fine. She had to be. Her people wanted to see strength and grace in their queen.

Not a woman who often felt alone. A woman who keenly felt the weight of her people's safety weighing on her. There were always vital decisions to make, political alliances to navigate, and enemies waiting for a moment of weakness.

"You're exhausted," he said.

She met green eyes she knew so well. "So are you."

His callused thumbs moved on her cheeks, and she hid the shiver of pleasure that ran down her spine.

Then a fierce frown crossed his face. He leaned down and picked up one of her feet in his hands. He made one of his unhappy sounds. Her skin was torn and bleeding.

"The bindings came off," she said.

He'd wrapped her bare feet the best he could in shreds of his shirt.

“It’s fine, Sten.”

“No, it’s not,” he growled.

“They’ll heal.” Another benefit of their combat implants was that they helped their wounds heal faster.

“But your healing rate is still slow after the drugs the Gek’Dragar gave us.” His scowl turned savage. “Another thing I will ensure they pay for.”

She touched his wrist. His skin was warm. Back in the palace, they rarely touched. But out here, everything was different. “First, we focus on escaping. There will be time for vengeance.”

His serious gaze bored into hers. “Nothing is more important than your safety.” He dragged in a breath. “You need food and rest. Not to be fighting these infernal beasts.”

She reached up and touched his jaw. “Sten.”

Turbulent green eyes met hers.

“I’m with you, so I’m fine,” she said.

His face was so solemn, and her heart squeezed. She loved those rugged features.

She loved him.

Her chest squeezed. Not that he knew it. He’d be horrified to hear it. He didn’t see her as a woman, just as his queen, his duty.

She was destined to pine for a man who didn’t see her the same way.

At balls and events, men from around the quadrant praised her beauty. But the one man she wanted most, didn’t see her that way.

Oh, he knew her—what she liked, what she disliked, what made her mad, what made her happy. But he didn’t see a sensual woman.

He only saw her crown, the person he had to protect.

Sten cocked his head. “What are you thinking about?”

Sometimes he knew her too well. “Getting out of here.”

Then he glanced past her, looking down the ravine. He cocked his head, gaze narrowing.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Someone’s coming.” He scooped her up into his arms.

“You should unfasten the dura-binding,” she said. “We’ll be able to move more easily.”

“No.” He’d already refused many times before, worried the Gek’Dragar would capture them again.

He’d slipped the bond on when they’d been attacked in the palace on Oron. It couldn’t be removed by anyone else without killing both of them. It was why the Gek’Dragar had taken him, as well.

He moved along the cliff wall, and found a crack large enough for them to squeeze into. They pushed into the tight space, and he quickly stacked some rocks in front of them, then turned to her.

They were pressed together, his arms wrapped around her. She felt his hot breath on her neck and closed her eyes. He felt so big, so strong.

Then, sounds echoed in the ravine. Heavy footsteps and deep voices.

Her breath hitched.

Through a small crack in the rocks, she saw a Gek’Dragar soldier step into view.