

# Prologue

*Blessed darkness.*

Prime nestled into a quiet corner of the cruiser, monitoring the chatter of the pirates in the cockpit above. He loved traveling with pirates because they never asked any questions. No awkward inquiries about your identity or where you had just come from. Pirates didn't care. If you had the credits, they'd take you into the heart of a churning black hole. All they wanted was the money.

Dozing in a nest of stolen pelts, Prime heard a name he hadn't heard in a long time. Harmony Knox. An arresting fear seized him as he strained to listen. Loud male voices bled through the bulkhead.

"Yeah, the bounty hunter," a gruff voice said. "She's getting out in a few weeks."

Someone whistled. "Hate to think who she slept with to pull off such a short sentence. If it'd been you or me caught on *A*Essyria with a blast weapon, we'd rot in their jail for decades."

"I hear she's been doing the *A*Essyrian general," a third voice chimed in.

"Wouldn't surprise me. She's a certified head case. She'd probably do *anyone* who could get her out of stir."

*Soon she'll come for me. She'll never stop.*

A brief pause followed. Then someone said, "What's that?"

“Rick’s. A low-end storage business,” Gruff said. “Might be some good pickin’s though. Let’s request a docking bay and take a look around.”

There were only two storage facilities in this sector. If Harmony had been forced to place her ship here for safekeeping while imprisoned, he might be able to stop her from coming after him when she got out.

Prime scurried to an antiquated console and, using the touch screen, sent a message to the pirates. “If you find Harmony Knox’s ship in storage, I’ll pay you double to destroy it.”

Prime stared at the black screen, his antennae twitching.

A message came across the screen. Its viridian letters read, “*Consider it done.*”

# Chapter One

Harmony woke up the same way she had for the past year—dragged from sleep by the desperate roars of alien prisoners. The smell of old urine coupled with dank sweat washed through her nostrils, and the suffocating humidity clung to her skin like slime on a river rock. She rose stiffly from her wooden cot and tried to ignore the deafening noise echoing off the prison walls. Outside the dark jungle erupted into a chorus of avian screeches as the animals rejoiced at the first hint of the rising suns.

She removed a small triangular piece of lava rock wedged between the planks of her bed and crossed off a row of nine lines etched into the wall. They were the last in a long list of accounting marks that covered the stone squares from top to midway down. Then she smiled.

Today was the last day of her sentence.

If all went according to schedule, she should be released within the hour. Soon she would be off this furnace and free to roam the stars hunting whatever bounty offered the biggest profit. But there was only one bounty she really wanted. Prime. That hydrocore brain-eater had been the *only* bounty to ever escape her. Once she had her freedom, she would stop at nothing to find him. Not only was he the one who got away, tarnishing her perfect record, but he was also the reason why she'd lost a year of her life rotting in this filthy cell.

Oh yes, the two of them had serious unfinished business.

*I made it. I'm going to be free.*

Keys jingled and the familiar sound of boots scraping stone echoed down the corridor, growing louder. *Finally*. A guard strolled up to her cell holding a mess of chains and shackles in his right hand. You'd think she was a mass murderer instead of a bounty hunter.

"Turn around and face the wall," he said. "Your ride's here."

"You're seriously going to put manacles on me?" Harmony turned her back to him and heard the manacles click closed. "I *want* to leave this hellhole, remember? Running away is really not what I had in mind."

"Rules are rules, Knox. You get the same delicate pampering as everyone else. I might actually miss you for a minute or two. Who am I gonna get to correct my grammar all the time?"

Tanner walked down the galvanized steel ramp of the *Aries* into the suffocating heat of an *AE*ssyrian summer. A dry wind exhaled a gust of dirt across the black granite landing pad, momentarily obscuring his vision. An alien soldier approached him through the dust cloud, and even before his boots hit the ground the soldier's large gloved hand landed on his chest.

Tanner halted. The soldier wore a gray uniform with brass buttons and two gold chevrons on the right arm indicating he was low-ranking regular army. The dark olive tones of his green skin were usually found among residents of the northern provinces where most of the quarries and mines were located. Even though life as a soldier was more dangerous, the food and perks of the army probably beat the hell out of working in the mines with its dirty, backbreaking labor.

The soldier glared at Tanner from under a thick prominent brow that shadowed two piercing greenish-yellow eyes.

A slow, smoking anger filled Tanner's gut, a conditioned reflex instilled in him years ago, and he clenched his hands into fists to keep it contained. He scowled at the soldier, then at the hand that had just touched him. The soldier's jaw muscles bulged as he moved his bulk in front of him, boldly locking his gaze with Tanner's.

*Keep cool. Don't let this guy bait you. You're just here for a pickup. You don't want to spend the next few months in jail.* Tanner took a step back and the contact was broken.

Tanner reached into the breast pocket of his jacket, brought out a piece of paper and held it out to the soldier. For a moment, the soldier didn't move, then he snatched it and read it. He opened his mouth to speak but quickly reconsidered when his general rode over.

General Gavin Theron was an older bull-male who probably weighed over three hundred pounds and dwarfed the young soldier in front of him. Mounted on a reptilian horse called a *hyperia*, the general exuded a potent mixture of hidden violence and rancorous authority. He had some facial scars and his left eye was covered with a black patch. He didn't even glance at the paperwork the soldier gave him before folding and stuffing it into his black tunic.

Tanner worked at keeping his expression neutral. *A*Essyria was one of his least favorite alien worlds, where it didn't take much attitude to get imprisoned or killed. All he wanted was to get his pickup and hightail it the hell out. Every move he made left him feeling as vulnerable as an ancient Christian thrown into an arena of hungry lions.

"Stand down," the general said to the soldier in his native tongue. The soldier gave Tanner a nasty parting look and took a few steps back.

Although Tanner didn't speak much *A*Essyrian, he noticed the general carried a minor guttural accent only heard in the lower classes. The general must have grown up poor and improved his speech much later in life.

“I take it you’re here to claim Miss Knox,” the general said in perfect English. He spoke with a crisp British accent that was in total opposition to his cruder-sounding *A*Essyrian.

“Yes, General.” Tanner worked to keep the surprise out of his tone.

A coach rode up, pulled by a team of large reptilian beasts with short stocky bodies and yellow-crested heads. They croaked in complaint as they were reined to a stop. The coach itself was little more than a square box with barred windows on all sides. The metal door creaked open and a woman was thrown out. Shackled at the waist, she hit the ground hard, landing on her chest. A powdery patch of dust puffed up from where she landed, settling lightly on her green T-shirt and black pants. She crawled a few inches and struggled to her feet, turning to deliver an acid glare to the guard who’d tossed her out.

This was his pickup, the infamous Kirillian bounty hunter, Harmony Knox.

God, how he loathed her.

Harmony walked toward the coach and stood with her wrists flexed outward, waiting for the guard to unlock her. He snorted, slipped the key in and removed the cuffs. She rubbed them as a cool, quiet rage colored her pale cheeks. She looked the guard up and down as if he were something she’d accidentally stepped in.

At five foot six, Harmony was very short for a Kirillian. In fact, to the untrained eye she appeared more human than anything else. But she was a prime example of things not always being what they seemed, because not only was she one of the most aggressive bounty hunters in the galaxy, she was also one of the most productive. And to top it all off, she had the unfortunate reputation of being insanely driven.

If Tanner had spotted Harmony at last call in a bar and she was the only woman left, he might have passed her over

for a bedmate. It wasn't that she wasn't attractive, but in his experience there was a hardness to all Kirillians, a rigid toughness he found particularly unsavory. Studying her closely, he had to admit she was more than pretty, she was a handsome woman with wavy brown hair the color of dark chocolate and bright copper eyes framed by thick black lashes. Her hair had brassy highlights, which he attributed to long hours of hard labor under the relentless *A*Essyrian suns.

Her lips were a natural pink and slightly pouty, giving her the appearance of someone who wanted desperately to be kissed. Harmony's full round breasts were modest but inviting, sitting high above a long torso and narrow waist. A round, plump bottom filled out her snug black pants, making him fantasize about how her buttocks would feel pressed against the palm of each hand.

He liked the metallic glow of her eyes and couldn't stop staring at them. When he did, he noticed a small scattering of dark freckles over the bridge of her nose and upper cheeks. After a few moments of study, he had to admit he was aroused by her in spite of what she was. She seemed to be an acquired taste, like imported beer.

Harmony came over to where Tanner and the alien general were waiting. "Gentlemen," she said in flawless *A*Essyrian.

The general took a small bundle of weapons out of his saddlebag and dropped them at her feet. Harmony knelt and methodically removed each weapon, inspecting it for damage. Tanner exchanged an amused look with the general. When Harmony was satisfied that her inventory was intact and accounted for, she attached her holster to her hip and sheathed her knives. The general's hyperia pawed the ground in boredom. Harmony flinched and took a step back.

"Listen, young lady," the general said in English, "I was able to help you this time and get you out early. But the next

time you smuggle in blasters, I guarantee you won't be so lucky."

Harmony pulled her lips back in a forced smile and replied in *AEssyrian*. "Yes, General, I know. I'm very grateful for your assistance in getting my sentence reduced. Thank you."

Tanner impatiently shifted his weight to another foot and rolled his eyes. He couldn't tell if she was insisting on *AEssyrian* because she was vain or just showing off to impress them both. *Fucking arrogant Kirillians*. He stared at her lovely pale throat and suppressed the urge to wrap his hand around it and squeeze.

Seemingly satisfied by her apology, the general signaled to his men. All the soldiers rode around him in a tight formation and followed him out of the landing area. The prison coach took up the rear and disappeared down the dirt road.

Suddenly they were alone.

Standing on the landing pad, Harmony met Tanner's gaze. An unexpected charge of sexual want fired his blood.

"Is your tracker up?" She pushed past him to get inside his ship.

"Yeah." He followed behind her and closed up the ramp. "Why?"

"I want to see if Prime has gone off world." Harmony sat at his computer and brought up a series of 3-D command images. With her fingertip, she reconfigured the purple glowing boxes into a different order then jabbed one, causing its contents to expand. Her fingers flew over the console, frantically opening search icons and scanning their contents. She was completely intent on the task at hand, displaying all of the wild enthusiasm of an escaped lunatic.

Tanner sat in the command chair. Did she seriously think her skip would still be on *AEssyria* after a whole year? "And Prime is...?"

She looked at him as though he'd resorted to speaking in tongues. "My skip, Tanner. The hydrocore-brain-eater from Pyrus Four. Remember that piece of work? Who do you think I'm talking about?"

He interlaced his fingers across his stomach and stretched out his legs. "Your skip's gone."

Harmony didn't respond. Like all Kirillians, she was an emotional fortress. Her carefully crafted stone wall was a hallmark of her race, designed to guard against the onslaught of unnecessary feelings like gratitude or kindness. After the way the Kirillians had treated him in the past, Tanner never missed a chance to get his own back whenever an opportunity presented itself—and Harmony Knox would be no exception.

He was good at reading people and could sense vulnerability in her. She had a crack in her foundation that he could feel as easily as if he were touching its jagged edge. And in those few seconds of stifling quiet, he saw exactly how he could exploit that crack.

A second later Harmony finished scanning the last search command, which confirmed what he had just told her. She stared at the empty stage, her lips set in a grim line. "I need to get to my ship. Will you take me?"

Tanner smiled. He moved his gaze down her body and his hunger grew. "Only if you ask me nicely."

She let out an exaggerated sigh. Her breasts rose and fell with the effort of that breath. "Honestly, Tanner, why do you insist upon aggravating me?"

"Because it helps you."

"Bullshit."

"You know that's not the word I want to hear."

"Tanner, will you *please* take me to Rick's Storage so I can get my ship?"

"Baby," he said with a grin, "I'd be happy to."