

To Clan and Conquer

Chapter 1

Nobek Lidon zeroed in on a two-man fighter in his single-man ship. He felt no remorse as he fired on the vessel, though it was Kalquorian. Taken in a bloody raid by the Tragooms, the fighter was now the enemy.

Squad Leader Lidon's twenty-fighter force was one of five squads. His home ship, a Kalquorian destroyer, sent plasma bursts and percussion blast volleys at the massive Tragoon warship. The opposite of the sleek lines of the Kalquorian craft, the enemy vessel was typical of a Tragoon craft cobbled together from a myriad of other species' best technologies. It resembled something a group of semi-bright five-year-olds might have constructed if the five-year-olds were also insane.

The enemy had slipped into Kalquorian Empire space undetected and was trying to escape with the latest in Kalquor's famous technology. Five days prior, the marauder had mounted an attack on the manufacturing plant.

Lidon snarled. Over three hundred Kalquorians had been killed on the station, a hundred captured, along with all the newly constructed fighters the Tragooms could fly.

Tragooms didn't develop their own technology. They chose to steal what they could instead. That a roving band of the misbegotten species had ventured so far into the empire's space to do so was unacceptable. Heads would roll for this fracture in Kalquor's supposedly remarkable defenses. Nobek Emperor Yuder would no doubt have his ire publicly taken out on as many hides as he could find responsible.

Lidon concentrated on destroying as many stolen fighters as possible. His targeting computer had locked on another objective.

His fingers flew over the control panel's commands. He fired a burst of devastating percussion power on the two-man craft, which sadly contained only a single Tragoon. According to one of the three vids floating before his eyes, his arms-force levels were low. Thirteen years of manning a lightning class fighter left Lidon confident he could still render his target into so much space dust. He was right. The fighter in front of his guns broke apart in the first volley, then shattered at the next. The idiot pilot, unfamiliar with the newest line's configurations, hadn't raised defensive shielding. Cold satisfaction swept through Lidon.

His blood surged. Fifty of the enemy remained to kill. Unfortunately, power levels had been depleted. By the time he recharged and rejoined the fight, his fellow attack pilots would have finished the job. He grimaced despite having taken out fourteen of the bastards himself. "Great is the man who can share glory," his Imdiko father, a temple priest, would say.

"I can't keep it all to myself," Lidon reluctantly agreed with his absent parent. He commed the destroyer. "Squad Leader Lidon of Rizpah Squad reporting in."

The answer was as clear as if the man handling communications sat next to him. "Go ahead, Squad Leader."

"I'm out of firepower. Request permission to dock. This fight's all but done."

"You're clear, Squad Leader. The captain offers his congratulations on your work. This is among your highest kill runs."

Lidon scowled. Dramok Piras, the destroyer's captain and Lidon's committed lover for the past year, knew better than to offer public praise outside of ceremonial recognition. Especially on an open com link.

He'd grown tired of correcting Piras. The fun of pounding fellow Nobeks bloody for daring to call Lidon the captain's pet was wearing thin. He'd have to have another talk with his would-be clanmate.

"Squad Leader Lidon to Second of Rizpah."

"Second Squad Leader."

"I'm done for this little skirmish. You have command."

"Acknowledged. Second Squad Leader Resok assuming point."

Lidon headed for the destroyer. Skirmish indeed. There'd been a few good moments in the fight when he'd found an enemy worth his skills. He looked forward to counting the scorch marks on his fighter to see how close he'd enticed death before scaring it off.

The drone of tactical updates and advisories from his com was abruptly interrupted by an intense voice. "Squad Leader Lidon, you have company coming in fast and wagging your tail."

Despite maintaining a constant eye on his vids, Lidon rechecked everything. Instrumentation detected nothing, and he snarled. The lack of information meant his pursuer had a chameleon-class fighter using signal-cloaking shields.

A blip sounded, and Lidon noted a lightning class fighter, a stolen vessel, coming at him from starboard. "How close is the chameleon?" he asked.

"Seven clicks, closing on you at a rate of two-point-seven-five. I can't get there in time to engage."

Lidon grinned in feral delight. He'd either add more bodies to his kill count or meet a glorious death. For a Nobek, both were equally welcome.

Adjusting his heading and speed to mask the oncoming Tragooms from each other, he muttered, "The Book of Life says, 'The enemy's sins are only redeemed when he offers peace or his throat.' Come on in, you useless blight on the ass of the galaxy, and find redemption."

The lightning class closed in exactly where he wanted him. He had to count on fortune to keep the chameleon steady on its path to destruction. His grin grew larger, and his hinged fangs unfolded from his palate. He waited for brute instinct and hard-won experience to give him the go-ahead.

The moment came. Lidon pitched the nose of the fighter down and executed a steep roll, effectively turning his course at a right angle. His vids showed him the sleek lines of the chameleon as it hurtled over him and in the path of the bulkier but better-armed lightning. They collided with gorgeous force, and Lidon howled victory.

Damn, he loved his job.

His moment of triumph was cut short as sensors chimed a warning. Several huge pieces of the chameleon flew straight at him, too many to avoid being hit. Fingers flying over his navigational computer faster than he could bark voice commands, Lidon veered from the biggest segment. He braced as another hurtling missile closed in.

He heard the impact before he felt it. Claxons went off, vids blinked frantically, and a flash of fire erupted in front of his face for a bare instant. The cockpit was doused in extinguishing foam, killing the blaze and wetting Lidon from head to toe. The foam turned to clear liquid and dripped from his console.

A moment later, pain hit. Lidon's leg screamed in brutal agony, and he screamed in tandem. It felt as if dozens of huge, jagged blades stabbed his calf and thigh at once. He jerked against the

torment, but the limb was pinned in its hellish space. The hull had collapsed, crushing and trapping his leg.

Lidon fought to hold onto consciousness in the grim realm of anguish. Gritting his teeth to keep from screaming again, he said, "Squad Leader Lidon to destroyer."

Only then did he realize the constant relaying of information had ceased on his link. He had no communications. As if to taunt him, the blinking vids went out. The entire cockpit went dark as the ship's power failed. For a moment, Lidon drowned in utter darkness and overwhelming pain.

Backup emergency lighting came on, bathing the smooth and now featureless control panel in orangey-red light. Lidon smashed his fist against the panel in frustration. He left no damage. The ship was designed to take the abuse of irritable Nobeks.

He hit it again anyway. "Fucking great. Someone has to tow my sorry ass in."

How badly had he been injured? His leg howled in misery Lidon hadn't experienced before. He stuck his hand in the tight confines where he couldn't see anything six inches below his groin. Wet heat greeted his touch, and he withdrew the hand. Despite increasingly hazy vision, he saw blood dripping from his fingers.

The fighter shuddered around him. Someone fired on his dead ship, finishing him.

His lips were tingling and numbing from blood loss. He heard himself slurring as he closed his eyes. "Sixteen enemies dead. Glorious death on the battlefield instead of safe in my bed." His words were what every Nobek hoped to recite. He prayed his ancestors agreed he'd earned the right to speak them.

He'd face those who had gone ahead of him soon enough. At least the pain would stop.

Lidon couldn't seem to stop the flow of words pouring like his life's blood. "You'll understand when I miss our dinner date, Piras. An opportunistic shithead cancelled by killing me."

The fighter shook as it took abuse from the enemy. Lidon looked forward to his death, to escaping the pain. He suspected the damage to his leg would have disabled him had he survived. What kind of life could a Nobek in his prime enjoy with such a handicap? Not one worth living.

Lidon uttered the words his Imdiko father had used to bless the bodies of his Dramok and Nobek fathers: "To every man, death must come. Death, the destroyer of sorrows. Death, dark friend to the sick. Go, and be unafraid."

The fighter shook harder than ever. The motion jarred his leg. It shrieked in misery. Lidon shrieked with it.

He wanted to die, to at least relinquish consciousness, but the hurt went on, and on, and on...

Lidon woke gasping in his lover's darkened quarters. His leg, his damned leg. Fuck. He'd rolled onto it in his sleep. He sat up, grinding his teeth to keep from making noise and waking Piras.

Fifteen years after the incident, the agony possessed the power to return him to the hideous instant when his life had changed. While he was grateful to have purpose and be of continued use to the fleet, the harrowing beginning to his ordeal lived on in his nightmares.

Such nights didn't invite words from the Book of Life to comfort Lidon. Instead, the long-ago mantra from Nobek training camp ran through his mind.

Pain is my friend. Pain gives me a challenge to show I've overcome and will continue to do so. I worship my pain, and I invite it to give me strength.

He glanced at Piras. The Dramok slept like a rock, fortunately. He lightly snored, arms and legs slung wide, hogging the sleeping mat as he often did. The bed surface was clan-sized, big enough for three men and their Matara, should they be so lucky as to have a rare female in their number. Piras managed to take up most of it. Lidon had rolled to the edge to escape, ending up on his bad right leg.

His gaze wandered over the other man's body, uncovered by the linens to the waist. Piras was a long, lean, graceful man, tall and elegant to look at. His strong jaw was at odds with the rest of his delicate face. It no doubt came from him grinding his teeth in near-constant frustration. Those jaw muscles had gotten quite the workout in the last fifteen years. Piras was easily annoyed, often because of Lidon.

Lidon's expression as he looked over his longtime lover was a mix of affection and irritation. He debated waking Piras for sex. A ridiculous dual erection had shown up despite the torment of his leg.

It would be cleansing to fuck after the nightmare, and Piras was never averse to being on the bottom. He was averse to missing sleep, however. If Lidon roused him, he'd be a vicious brute to his crew during his shift. For such a docile lover, the captain was an unmitigated bastard outside the sleeping room. Nobeks loved serving on his crew.

Lidon decided the guilt of watching Piras make everyone else's life miserable wasn't worth relieving his lust. Nor was it worth listening to his would-be Dramok complain even as he put his ass in the air for Lidon's use.

Lidon considered returning to his own cramped quarters and meditating, but his heart continued to drum quicker than normal from the nightmare. He doubted he could sit still.

To the bridge then, though little would happen as long as the captain slept. Lidon pushed the covers from his perspiration-sheened body and swung his legs over the side of the sleeping mat.

Even in the dim sleep-mode lighting of the room, Lidon noted the differences in his legs. The calves were nearly identical in shape. The right was crisscrossed by scars. The muscles of the lower leg hadn't been nearly as damaged as the thigh.

Damaged? His thigh had been demolished. Crushed and torn, it was a miracle any of it had been salvageable.

Lidon gazed at his leg with consternation and pride. A patchwork of scarred and lumpy flesh, it was a badge of honor fellow Nobeks stared at with open envy and awe. Few men received such a horrific battle wound and were able to keep the limb to show off. Surgeons had begged Lidon to replace the shattered leg with a robotic prosthetic. He'd flatly refused, ignoring it meant constant pain and an obvious limp.

Pain is my friend. I invite it to make me stronger.

Lidon dressed, putting on his red-trimmed black formsuit, which had been tossed on the floor. He debated going to his quarters for a clean uniform, then decided against it. He'd shower and change before his regular shift.

Putting his knee-high boot on the afflicted leg was an exercise in torture, and he hissed. Piras didn't wake.

Lidon got to his feet, putting his weight on his left leg as he reached for his brace. The stiff metal contraption kept his weakened leg from collapsing under him. It fit over his boot and ran up to his groin. It looked like an ancient torture device, which was why Lidon used it instead of a newer invisible-field brace. It elicited respect. Unfortunately, it also encouraged medics to pester him about more surgeries.

His utility belt and its collection of tools and knives went on his waist. He limped to the door, and it hissed open, letting in a wedge of light. Piras sighed and rolled over. He didn't wake. Leaving his lover slumbering, Lidon slipped from the room.

He lurched down the crew section's corridor, empty of activity. It was only when he crossed to the destroyer's more functional middle section that he saw crewmates. Night shift personnel acknowledged him with quick nods.

His route took him past the medical department. Feeling foolish but hopeful all the same, he slowed and peered in. No one was being treated in the examination portion of the unit, though there might be patients in the private cubicles. A few orderlies and techs stood around talking. The door to the head doctor's office near the department entrance stood open, but the room was dark.

Lidon continued past and entered the nearby transport, a tube-system conveyance. The small room he stood in was as bland as the hallway.

"Bridge." The transport's door closed, and he felt the slightest sensation of motion beneath his feet. In less than thirty seconds the door opened, and he was in the brain center of the destroyer.

The bridge during the ship's normal sleeping hours was quiet. The room was a half-circle, the first officer, captain, and weapons command's podiums at the center of the flat end of the room. Next to weapons command was the security station where five Nobeks kept tabs on everything from the destroyer's defensive shielding to policing the ship's crew.

Directly in front of those stations were the communications banks, both in-ship and fleet monitors, run by five crewmembers. Beyond them were navigation and piloting, handled by a complement of three.

Along the most forward part of the curved section were the monitors, giant vids that kept the bridge informed of everything they needed to run the ship efficiently. Central was the constantly scrolling status-read, giving up-to-the-second information on the ship's condition, position, and anything of note happening outside of it. A quick glance told Lidon they were on course for CP-108, a small moon boasting an acceptable atmosphere for life forms such as Kalquorians.

As he limped out of the transport, the first officer looked at him from the captain's station in surprise, which Lidon shared.

Dramok Tranis, Piras' second-in-command for the past four months, was young for his rank. Very young. Thirty years Lidon's junior, he carried himself with maturity and assurance. Despite being caught off guard by Lidon's sudden appearance, there was only a slight widening of eyes and steady stare to betray his concern.

The first officer's deep voice was smooth, betraying nothing of his feelings as he acknowledged Lidon. "Weapons Commander? You aren't on this shift's rotation."

"Neither are you, sir." As the senior security officer for the entire destroyer, Lidon's rank was a step below first officer. As Piras' lover, he could get away with the borderline show of disrespect.

Lidon didn't tend to indulge in his unique status. Sleeping in the captain's bed shouldn't mean special treatment, but because Tranis was so new, he couldn't help but test him.

Tranis' brows rose over sharp blue-purple eyes. His slitted pupils widened. The corner of his mouth twitched. Damned if he didn't appear amused by Lidon's slight challenge instead of affronted or scared. Dramok Tranis was different from most. He seemed to grasp when to let situations lie peacefully and when to bite.

He returned to his readouts, which hovered over the captain's computer station. He kept his body angled toward Lidon and his head tilted so the weapons commander remained in his peripheral vision. It resembled a watchful Nobek pose. Tranis wasn't threatened, but he kept an eye on Lidon anyway.

"I'm filling in for Ranem," he said.

Lidon allowed his gaze to enjoy the strong, wide shoulders and chest of the Dramok. The formsuit uniforms Kalquorians wore informed a man of exactly what he was getting when it came to other men. The first officer's promise was exceedingly nice. Tranis was more muscled than Piras. Shorter too, close to Lidon's height. In the Nobek's opinion, the view on the bridge had vastly improved since Tranis had come on board.

He forced himself to stop his inspection. "Is Lieutenant Ranem sick?"

"Injured. He insulted a fighter squad leader." Tranis' hint of a smile became the real thing. "Five broken bones and internal injuries. He'll return to duty tomorrow after the repairs take hold."

Lidon snorted and limped to the weapons computer station, where a lieutenant commander stepped aside, bowing to his superior. A curved floating platform similar to the one where Tranis stood, the black podium put everything Lidon needed to do his job at his fingertips. He glanced at the vids floating over it. The Nobek lieutenant, slightly younger than Tranis, had brought up the latest ship diagnostics, security communications, and flight course scans for immediate inspection. Lidon wouldn't have to punch him for sloppy command transfer.

An item caught his attention, and he read it, his brows drawn together. "That's an interesting report from the border defense."

Tranis nodded. "I wonder what those anomalous energy readings coming from Joshadan space might be. They look like power signatures from ships, but the defense stations can't lock down a source."

"If those are ships, they're not answering communication attempts." The border defense on the perimeter between the empire and Joshadan space was thought by many to be a joke, more a punishment for misbehaving Nobek soldiers than real duty. Joshadans were a peaceful lot and disinterested in technology beyond what they absolutely needed. Kalquor provided defense to the small world and its colonies, which typically consisted of beating back occasional Tragoom raids. A destroyer sweep of the area, as their ship currently performed, was akin to taking a vacation.

Underlining the typical attitude for the Kalquorian-Joshadan border, the weapons lieutenant muttered, "I can't imagine anything dangerous coming from Joshada."

Lidon shot him a glance. "There is nothing as dangerous as not recognizing the potential for danger."

"Sir?"

Tranis' voice came from Lidon's left. "The Book of Life, right?"

Lidon turned his attention to the first officer, restraining the urge to smile. Young ones rarely paid attention to the philosophical arts. "Seventh chapter, twelfth verse."

His lieutenant persisted. "What trouble could come from Joshadan space?"

Lidon kept his tone steady while acknowledging privately he might have to punch his underling after all. A good brain-rattling blow might clear the fog from a lazy mind. "Ships of multiple origins could indicate Tragooms since they steal from everyone. And we know next to nothing about the new species that showed up recently."

Tranis gave him a curious gaze. “Earthers? I haven’t heard of them being particularly aggressive, but some say they strictly adhere to religious precepts. An aide to an ambassador I spoke to said they’re easily affronted by anything not conforming to their beliefs.”

“They’ve attacked none of the members of the Galactic Council of Planets. It doesn’t mean they won’t, eventually.”

Tranis shot him a speculative glance.

Lidon quirked a suggestion of a smile. “Don’t look so worried, Commander Tranis. Nobeks, especially those who’ve seen what I have, are a suspicious lot. I have yet to meet an Earther, so I naturally expect the worst.”

“Naturally. Deferring to your greater experience, Weapons Commander, is it your opinion I alter course toward the nearest defense station and check on those anomalous readings?”

Lidon’s estimation of him edged up a notch. Officers hellbent on climbing the ranks often felt it lessened their standing to ask the views of those under them.

He studied the intelligence before answering. “I see no reason to divert. The defense stations on the border are armed and protected by fighter squadrons. Without confirmation of an enemy, you’ll be better off letting Captain Piras make the call.”

“Thank you for your recommendation, Commander. The captain will be on the bridge in a couple of hours anyway.”

Lidon went back to his reports, a sense of satisfaction warming his gut. Piras was a hard man to serve under, but Tranis would work out fine.

A few minutes later, he sensed someone approaching him. A pleasant, masculine scent wafted to his sensitive nostrils. He looked up to find Tranis standing at the edge of his station.

The first officer wouldn’t have approached unless he wanted a semi-private conversation. Lidon took a step closer. Close enough to feel Tranis’ warmth. His cocks twitched. No shock there. The Dramok was attractive and had a personality he found easy to relate to. Nice fantasy material.

His voice low, he asked, “Can I help you, First Officer?”

“Maybe. We’ll be entering orbit around the CP-108 in seven hours.”

“I’m aware. Our Nobeks will enjoy shore leave. The break will leave them less likely to take Dramok insults personally.”

Lieutenant Ranem’s violent run-in with the squad leader was no surprise to Lidon. Fights were breaking out frequently. Piras had pushed the Nobek crewmembers’ limits when it came to regular breaks from the destroyer’s tight confines. He liked demonstrating his power as their captain, which was an essential component to his command. Still, he’d be in a pretty mess controlling nearly a hundred and fifty claustrophobic Nobeks with only a third of that number of Dramoks and Imdikos. Sometimes Lidon thought Piras pressed the crew’s warrior breed too hard.

Tranis’ voice lowered to a near-whisper. “I’m trying to put together a kurble game. Are you in?”

Lidon stared at him. He’d be punching someone after all, a jokester of a Dramok. “Who put you up to this, Commander?”

Tranis betrayed a hint of humor again, sending a spike of hot fury through Lidon’s skull. “No one put me up to anything. I realize your leg isn’t a hundred percent, but the position of hurler defense doesn’t require running. You’d only have to stay upright long enough to slow the attackers while the hurler throws the ball.”

Lidon’s fists clenched. “I’m well aware of how the game is played.”

“I know. I used to watch you when you caught and ran for the Lotna Fleet Training Camp’s team. My brothers took me to the home games.”

Surprise replaced anger. Lidon blinked. “Your brothers attended Lotna?”

“The oldest was three years behind you, so I doubt you met them. You were amazing. I always wondered why you didn’t turn pro.”

Lidon relaxed. If Tranis had Nobek brothers, he’d understand a disabled member of the breed would look to prove his strength. Tranis wasn’t fucking with him. He was offering him an opportunity.

“I wanted more adventure than the kurble field provided.” Lidon glanced at his brace. “I found more than I anticipated. How many brothers do you have, Commander?”

Tranis grinned, lighting his handsome face. Lidon’s cocks twitched. “Five. All older, and all Nobeks.”

“Being the youngest brother to five of my breed must have been interesting.”

“They taught me how to play kurble. I love the game. The trouble is, most Nobeks don’t take a Dramok seriously when he tries to get a match going.”

Lidon could see his point. There were also Nobeks who’d enjoy taking apart a Dramok daring to step onto their turf. “I might know a few who’ll take you up on your offer. What’s your position?”

“Hurler. I could use a smart defender.”

“Especially since Nobeks of the opposing team will think you’re an easy cart-off.” Cart-offs were injured players carried off the field, a humiliating outcome.

“I might surprise them.”

Lidon scanned his strong body. He had the sturdy build required of a hurler who’d be thrown to the ground time and again.

You’re certainly surprising me. Too bad you’re so damned young, or I’d invite you to play other games. I bet you’re an animal in bed.

As opposed to Piras, who gave up control too easily.

“Are you in, Commander?” Tranis prodded.

Lidon considered. A hurler defender was in the thick of the action, but Tranis was right; he’d only have to be in the attackers’ path and hold them off long enough for Tranis to throw the ball. It offered plenty of opportunity to hand out pain.

Piras, no fan of kurble and no fan of Lidon playing it, would hate the idea.

“I’ll be your left flank defender.” The position would afford some protection for his damaged right leg. “I’ll see who else I can round up for the match.”

Tranis’ youth showed as boyish delight suffused his features. “Thank you, Commander. I look forward to it.”

The first officer returned to the captain’s station. Lidon couldn’t help watch him walk away, admiring his muscular thighs and ass.

Amused at himself, the weapons commander returned to his reports. Tranis was no doubt too young to consider Lidon for a sexual romp, especially given the Nobek’s disability. It was still fun to fantasize about.