

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANNA
HACKETT

EON WARRIORS

KING OF EON

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EON WARRIORS #9

ANNA HACKETT

King of Eon

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WHAT READERS ARE SAYING ABOUT
ANNA'S ROMANCES

**Heart of Eon - Romantic Book of the Year (Ruby) winner
2020**

Cyborg - PRISM Award Winner 2019

**Edge of Eon and Mission: Her Protection - Romantic Book
of the Year (Ruby) finalists 2019**

**Unfathomed and Unmapped - Romantic Book of the Year
(Ruby) finalists 2018**

**Unexplored – Romantic Book of the Year (Ruby) Novella
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**At Star's End – One of Library Journal's Best E-Original
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CHAPTER ONE

He stalked silently under the giant Arcadix. Dappled light filtered through the trees' canopy, and the scent of cassia blossoms filled his senses.

Gayel Solann-Eon paused, cocked his head and listened.

I know you're here.

He felt a pulse from his helian, and his enhanced senses spread.

Yes. With the help from his symbiont, he could hear the heartbeat of the neegall. It was a vicious creature, a hunter that liked to stalk its prey.

But Gayel was an Eon warrior. Clad in his helian armor, his body covered in black scales, the helian on his wrist pulsed again. He'd been bonded to the alien symbiont since he was young, and it gave him—gave all Eon warriors—incredible abilities. For a moment, he savored the sensation of the link.

As King of the Eon Empire, he didn't get to indulge his warrior instincts as much as he liked.

That was why he'd snuck out on this solo hunt.

He climbed over a huge, fallen log. Massive tentra vines fell in a tangle from above. He scanned the branches overhead. Neegalls like to ambush from overhead.

He picked up a foul stench—old blood, dirty fur.

It was close.

With a simple thought, his sword formed on his arm, glowing with hints of purple.

Another step—

The creature moved blindingly fast, launching off from a branch above.

Gayel swung his sword up, but he already knew he was too slow.

The neegall slammed into him, driving him to the ground. Hot, fetid breath washed over his face.

Gayel's sword shrank to a jagged knife.

He and the creature rolled. He tried to stab it, but it blocked the move with a powerful arm.

With a grinding sound, claws raked his armor. Grunting, Gayel heaved and they rolled again, across the layer of rotting leaves and moss.

The neegall sprang off him and Gayel rose to his feet.

The creature was vaguely humanoid, but had powerful legs and a curved back. Both its hands and feet were tipped with long claws designed to rend. It was covered in a layer of dense, brown fur, with a face that elongated to a shaggy muzzle filled with wicked fangs.

It snarled.

They circled each other. Gayel took a deep breath, and kept his gaze on his opponent. His heart thumped steadily and his blood sang. He was a warrior, doing what he did best.

The neegall launched at him.

Gayel leaped.

They clashed. Gayel swung his blade, catching the predator in the gut.

It yowled. With a powerful front kick, Gayel sent it flying and it hit the dirt.

Advancing, he never shifted his gaze off his foe. The neegall rose, and gave a vicious howl.

With a burst of movement, Gayel attacked. *Swing, slice, stab.*

His blade slid between the creature's ribs and hit one of its two hearts.

The creature made a coughing sound, and collapsed.

Gayel stepped back, sucking in air and smiling.

Cren, he didn't get to do this enough. Since he'd become king after the death of his father, he'd been dedicated to his people, to the Eon Empire.

That meant endless meetings, dinners, diplomatic missions, trade negotiations. It also meant dealing with security concerns as their enemy, the Kantos, loomed.

With a sigh, he cleaned off his knife.

The sound of a twig snapping made him spin.

A woman in full armor, sword in hand, stepped out of the trees.

She scowled at him. "You don't sneak off from your personal guard, Your Highness."

When she said "Your Highness" with that tone of voice, he was fairly sure she meant, *you idiot*. There was distinct annoyance in her voice and in eyes that echoed his own—fathomless black threaded with purple filaments.

She had the same deep-brown hair, as well. Most Eon looked alike, and there wasn't much variation in their species, but Adlyn looked even more like him, since she was his sister.

"We're in the Sanguinis Wood, right outside our shining capital." Gayel dissolved his blade with a single thought. "What risk is there here?"

She shot the neegall a pointed look.

"I can deal with one neegall," he said.

"The Kantos are planning our annihilation, Gayel. They could send any sort of bug to attack you, our King. If they hurt you, they hurt all of us."

Yes, the Kantos. Gayel felt a pulse of revulsion and anger. The insectoid species had one directive—devour.

They targeted planets, then invaded and consumed. They engineered all manner of ugly, deadly bugs, although the main, four-legged Kantos soldiers were the backbone of the Kantos army.

Recently, they'd targeted a small planet called Earth.

After a string of attacks, Earth had reached out to the Eon. It had been in an unconventional way—one of their Space Corps sub-captains abducting an Eon war commander—but they'd certainly succeeded in getting the Eon's attention.

Gayel's father had been set in his ways. He'd banned contact with Earth decades ago, after first contact with the Terrans had gone badly.

But the Terrans were stubborn, persistent, and resilient.

And Gayel was not his father.

Or at least he worked hard every day not to be.

Needless to say, the Eon Empire and Earth now had an alliance, and beyond that, several Eon warriors were now mated to Terrans.

“Gayel,” Adlyn said impatiently. “We need to get back to the palace.”

He sighed. Duty called. His father had been a firm and rigid king. Gayel was aiming for firm, but fair. He'd been raised knowing his duty to the Empire, but he was doing things his way.

“The Terran shuttle with your bride candidates is arriving within the hour.”

A sensation moved through him, and it wasn't entirely pleasant.

To cement the alliance with Earth, he'd decided to take a Terran bride.

He nodded. “Let's go.”

“You’re still going ahead with this lunacy?” his sister asked.

“A king needs a queen and an heir. It will bring great stability to the Empire, and a wedding will be a great celebration for our people. Especially now, in the midst of battle with the Kantos.”

Adlyn wrinkled her nose. “You sound like father.”

Gayel bit back a growl.

“Don’t you want to find your mate?” she asked.

His jaw tightened. “Mating is not a luxury a king can afford.”

His parents hadn’t been mated when they’d first married. It had been an arranged union, although luckily for them, mating had come later. They’d had a content, prosperous marriage.

Mating—where a warrior’s helian bonded with his mate as well—had gotten extremely rare for the Eon. Their best scientists had studied the problem to no avail, before turning their attention to medically helping normal, married couples to conceive.

Helians controlled a warrior’s fertility, and without a mate, they weren’t fertile.

Adlyn was one of the lucky ones—she’d found her mate early. She had a young son, although she’d tragically lost her mate over a year ago.

Gayel and his sister headed back to where he’d left his drail—the massive steeds native to Eon.

Deep inside, Gayel might dream of feeling the mating bond, but he squashed that dream.

As always, he would do his duty.

As for the group of potential brides, he was sure he’d find a kind, compassionate intelligent woman to stand at his side. He’d provide for her, be true to her, and protect her from any danger.

“Any word on the Kantos?” he asked.

His sister scowled and shook her head. “Nothing. It’s so quiet, I almost want them to attack.”

It might be quiet, but Gayel knew that they weren’t gone. They were biding their time, and no doubt planning something.

He already knew they’d been working on a pathogen designed to splinter the bond between warrior and helian. His gut hardened.

He wouldn’t let the Kantos continue to kill or harm his people.

War wasn’t coming, it was already here.

“WE’LL BE LANDING SOON, CAPTAIN.”

Captain Alea Rodriguez looked up from the console. “Thanks, Ben.”

Finally. She’d be happy to get off the ship and get her charges on the ground.

Her second-in-command, Lieutenant Benjamin Knox, stood in the doorway of the office that Alea had commandeered aboard the *Olympias*. Ben was fifteen years older than Alea, a Space Corps veteran, but had never once been upset reporting to a younger commanding officer. He was fit, had a craggy, rugged face, and graying hair that was cut short. He’d never been married—he maintained that he was married to his career at Space Corps.

Ben was dependable and loyal, and life had taught Alea just how valuable those traits were.

They’d been space marines together, and when Alea had been offered the job as Head of Security at Space Corps Headquarters in Houston two years ago, she’d instantly asked Ben to be her second-in-command.

“You going to tell our charges?” Ben grumbled.

Alea straightened. “You need to hide that sneer a little better, Lieutenant.”

Ben’s rugged face stayed impassive. “I’ll just be happy to spend less time with that group of women.”

Alea agreed, although truthfully, the women hadn’t been too bad. The group of ten women—Earth’s best, brightest, and most beautiful—were all potential candidates for the king of the Eon.

Alea felt like she was on some reality wedding TV show.

Still, she’d seen firsthand what the Kantos could do. Anything that cemented their alliance with the Eon was worth it.

Her gut churned, but she made sure her reaction didn’t show on her face. A Kantos strike team had attacked Space Corps Headquarters recently. A teenaged boy had been one of the casualties. He’d died in Alea’s arms.

She hadn’t been able to save him, nor had she been able to save two members of her security team.

It wouldn’t happen again on her watch.

“Alea?”

She looked at Ben, then nodded. “I’ll inform the ladies to be ready.”

After leaving her office, she straightened her uniform and headed down the corridor of the *Olympias*.

It was a mid-size cruiser with a good crew. It wasn’t built for passengers, but she’d made sure the women and the VIPs in their delegation hadn’t been uncomfortable.

She paused at the door of the forward observation deck, and heard the murmur of female voices inside. She pressed her palm down on the door control and the door whispered open.

The ten bridal candidates were sitting on low gray couches. When they weren’t in their quarters, they were usually here. Some worked, others used the ship’s gym.

“Ladies,” Alea said.

They were a mix of blondes and brunettes, and one redhead. Some were tall, others short, some were slender, others curvy, their skin tones a range from milky white to gleaming black. Two were successful models—one who also was a designer, while the other ran a skincare and makeup line. There was a doctor, a biologist, a sculptor, two lawyers. A couple of business owners. One ran a nonprofit charity, and the other was an Olympic runner.

King Gayel would have his pick.

“We’re in range of the planet Eon, and we’ll be boarding a shuttle to the surface soon.”

Excited titters filled the room.

“Please have your belongings packed, and on your cabin beds to be taken to the shuttle.”

A tall, blonde woman rose. “I need to change. *Finally*, I get to meet the king.”

Natasha was one of the models. She was already wearing a tiny, blue dress. Alea had only ever seen the woman in tiny dresses that showed off her mile-long legs. She was the only one as tall as Alea, although Natasha’s heels always made her taller.

“You have thirty minutes,” Alea warned.

“Yes, Captain.” One of the others, Chloe, tossed her a sloppy salute.

God help her. Alea motioned to the large, rectangular window. “In a moment, you’ll be able to see the planet.”

Sure enough, a few seconds later, the Eon homeworld came into view.

The women rushed to the observation window. Alea took a step closer, as well.

Beautiful.

It was a large, green orb. Eon had fewer oceans than Earth, but from what she’d read, it was covered in lush forests, striking mountains, and jewel-blue lakes.

The capital city of Auris was the crown jewel—a center of commerce, science, and the arts.

Alea was excited to see it.

“My gosh, I could be the queen of that,” one of the women said breathlessly.

“No, because I will,” another said.

“Ladies, that hunky Eon king is *all* mine. Queen Melinda has a nice ring to it.”

They all laughed. Filled with eagerness.

Alea shook her head. There was no way she’d ever be a queen. The daughter of drug dealers wasn’t exactly queen material.

She shot one last glimpse at Eon, then strode out.

She was a Space Corps lifer. Being a queen would make her crazy.

Her comm badge chimed and she touched it. “Rodriguez.”

“We’re entering orbit, Captain.”

“Acknowledged.”

It was time to pack her own gear. Her thoughts shifted to the powerful king waiting below.

King Gayel Solann-Eon.

He’d visited Space Corps’ Headquarters on Earth recently. She’d been so busy overseeing security for his visit that she hadn’t met him. She’d only glimpsed him from a distance.

A funny sensation moved through her chest, but she shrugged it off as normal. The guy was gorgeous.

Being a king hadn’t made him soft. He was every inch an Eon warrior—tall, broad-shouldered, square jaw, longish brown hair the color of oak.

He had a commanding presence. Even from a distance, the man had radiated authority.

Alea wondered which lucky lady would snag his attention.

She shook her head. *Let's get dirtside, Rodriguez. You have a job to do.*

Over the next thirty minutes, she transferred her duffel bag to the shuttle, oversaw the loading of the women's gear, and got the women on board.

After checking long-range scanners, they got ready to depart.

Thankfully, there was no sign of the Kantos.

She wasn't taking any chances with the women's safety. They would make a nice, juicy target for the Kantos. Alea frowned as she headed into the shuttle bay. The Kantos had been quiet since their last brazen attack. During that, they'd abducted Medical Commander Thane Kann-Eon of the *Rengard*, and Commander Kaira Chand, a Terran who'd been in charge of security for a secret Terran weapons facility. Luckily, the pair had survived their deadly encounter with the enemy, and ended up mated.

Alea didn't like it. It was highly unlikely that Kantos would be this deep in Eon space, but she had no doubt they'd be busy cooking up something nasty. Fortunately, their escort was the premier warship in the Eon fleet, the *Desteron*.

In the shuttle bay, she noted some *Olympias* crew using what looked like flamethrowers, except they gave off a white mist.

"Ensign?" Alea called out. "What's going on?"

"Captain." The young woman closest to her nodded. "Some bugs from Earth got aboard. The Sub-Captain thinks they got in via the new plants in the hydroponics bay. We're fumigating."

Alea tensed. "You're sure they're from Earth?"

The woman nodded. "Nothing alien has shown up on internal scanners."

Alea relaxed. "Very good." She boarded the shuttle.

A young male pilot spotted her and straightened.

“At ease,” Alea said.

Ben stomped aboard behind her and nodded.

Alea checked on her charges in the main cabin. “Everyone strap in. We might encounter some turbulence.”

All the women had changed. They wore everything from pantsuits to flirty dresses, makeup all done, and a cloud of mingled perfumes filled the shuttle.

“We’re just waiting on the VIPs and Ambassador Thann-Eon,” Ben said.

“I’m here.”

A brunette appeared at the shuttle door. A hulking Eon warrior stood beside her and her pregnant belly stretched her shirt.

Alea nodded at War Commander Davion Thann-Eon. The man nodded back and touched his mate’s back. The pair had flown over from the *Desteron*.

Eve Thann-Eon, formerly Sub-Captain Eve Traynor, was a legend at Space Corps. The pair were now mated and expecting the first Eon-Terran baby. The woman had since become an ambassador to the Eon Empire.

The three Earth VIPs entered, all wearing suits. They’d won a lottery to select the VIPs to visit Eon. The European delegate was a dashing, handsome politician from France, the Americas’ delegate was a retired Army general with snow-white hair and a square jaw from the United States, and the African delegate was a tall, willowy, dark-skinned humanitarian from Kenya.

Alea nodded and waved them through to the cabin. “Please take your seats and strap in.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Jean-Michel Aubert said with a slow, warm smile.

The man took every chance to flirt with her. She kept her face blank. She had to give the guy credit, despite no encouragement from her, he wasn’t deterred.

Behind her, Ben made a choked sound and she resisted the urge to kick him.

“Take it easy,” Davion said to Eve.

“Sure.” Eve rolled her eyes.

Davion’s brows snapped together.

Alea hid a smile. Eve wasn’t exactly known for sitting still.

“We’ll watch over her, War Commander,” Alea said.

Eve scowled. “Don’t encourage the man. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“I’m heading back to the *Desteron*, but I’ll be down for the ball,” Davion said.

Eve patted her mate’s chest. “Go do your training sessions. I’ll be fine.”

They kissed.

As Davion circled a muscular arm around his mate, Alea felt a tug of...envy, maybe? Alea hadn’t had sex in a long time, so maybe it was just that. And she’d never had time for any sort of long-term relationship.

She wasn’t even sure she’d be good at long-term. Letting someone close enough to see your vulnerabilities? Nope, not for her.

“Go.” Eve waved her man off, and dropped into a seat. “Pilot, I want a steady ride. This baby is squishing all my internal organs. Don’t make it worse.”

Alea nodded at the pilot in the cockpit. “You heard the ambassador. Let’s have an uneventful trip to the surface. Next up, the capital city of Auris.”

CHAPTER TWO

“I still don’t believe this is the best course of action.”

Gayel refrained from rolling his eyes. Across from him, Adlyn leaned against the wall. She didn’t refrain from tipping her eyes toward the ceiling.

Gayel eyed his advisor. “Councilor Tann-Felis, the candidates are about to land. I’ve already committed to taking a Terran bride.”

The councilor straightened. He had the height of a warrior, but he’d gone soft around the middle. He wore voluminous robes of a traditional Eon style. He’d been an advisor to Gayel’s father. He was pompous, stuffy, set in his ways, and often annoying, but he had a good grasp of Eon law.

“They are...an inferior species,” Councilor Tann-Felis said with a sniff.

“They are resilient, ingenious, and creative. Not to mention, brave. And several of our best warriors now have Terran mates. We’ve had more matings these past few months with Terrans than the Empire has seen in years. They are staunch allies in the fight against the Kantos.”

Councilor Tann-Felis looked like he’d bit into a tart nara fruit.

The sound of a shuttle flying overhead filtered through the room. Gayel glanced through the window and watched the Terran shuttle sweep in to land.

“Let’s go.” He strode out of the room, and seconds later stepped outside. As he walked down a stone walkway, the sun shone bright overhead. The palace sprawled over the side of a hill, made of a gleaming white-gray stone.

The city of Auris filled the valley below. His gaze slid over the domes of the Warrior Academy, the universities, and the Academy of Science.

Gayel lifted his chin and watched the shuttle land in a courtyard below.

He felt a trickle of...not excitement. Resignation.

He stomped on it. As he’d told Councilor Tann-Felis, he’d committed to this course of action. He was a king. He acted with certainty and authority, even if he wished some things could be different.

Adlyn and his other personal guard, Ryphen, flanked him. The councilor joined the other advisors following behind.

Duty. Gayel had a duty to his people, and he’d carry it out without hesitation.

The side of the shuttle opened, and a man in a Space Corps uniform of dark blue stepped out.

Then the women exited.

They...looked like a flock of multicolored vin’a found at the lake where Gayel had played as a child. The birds were generally a nuisance.

The women oohed and ahed, looking around the palace courtyard.

Even from a distance, the mix of their perfumes hit his enhanced senses. He kept his face straight. It wasn’t pleasant.

He let his gaze run over them. They were attractive, in many combinations. One woman with golden hair caught his gaze and gave him a wide smile, her own gaze running over his body.

Several people stepped off the shuttle and he guessed these would be the visiting leaders from Earth.

“Welcome to Eon. I’m King Gayel Solann-Eon.”

At that moment, another woman stepped off the shuttle, her body fluid and her steps light.

She was tall, athletic, and clad in the same dark Space Corps uniform as the other officer. She straightened and lifted her head.

Their gazes met.

Hot, electric.

Gayel straightened, and saw the woman frown. She had sharp, attractive features, dark-brown hair that was almost black, and tied back in a long braid. Her eyes were a golden brown.

This woman reminded him of the lake hawks. Silent, still, perched in the branches by the water, ready to attack their prey.

Adlyn cleared her throat and Gayel pulled his gaze away from the woman. He looked back at his potential brides.

“I look forward to meeting you all, and getting to know you better. And of course, showing you my homeworld. The Eon greatly value our alliance with Earth.”

He glanced back at the Space Corps woman. She was helping another heavily pregnant woman off the shuttle.

Eve. He smiled.

A chorus of fluttery sighs came from the group of women.

“Tonight, we’ll hold a welcome dinner in the main palace courtyard to welcome you all here. For now, I’ll have the palace steward show you to your quarters.”

He waved the steward forward. Camara was an older woman with steel-gray hair, who had run the palace like clockwork since Gayel was a child.

“This way, please,” Camara said.

Gayel headed toward Eve.

One woman, with dark skin, short, black hair, and a long, slender body grabbed his arm.

“It’s *so* amazing to be here. I really look forward to getting to know you *really* well.”

Gayel inclined his head. He saw the stark ambition in her gaze and crossed this one off his list.

He wanted a partner. One who would care about serving the Eon like him. Not a woman who wanted to be queen for her own desires.

“I need to greet Ambassador Thann-Eon. I’ll see you at the dinner.” He strode on, ignoring Adlyn’s low chuckle.

“Not off to a great start,” his sister murmured.

He kept ignoring her. “Ambassador.”

Eve rolled her eyes. “I told you not to call me that.”

“Eve.” Gayel hugged her. “You look radiant.”

“I look like I swallowed a basketball.” She rubbed her belly. “The doctors don’t even know when the munchkin will appear.”

“I’m told Eon pregnancies are a couple months longer than Terran ones.”

Eve winced. “But he’s growing fast, so they just don’t know.”

Gayel lifted his gaze and met steady, gold-brown eyes. “Eve, introduce me to your Space Corps escort.”

“Oh, right. King Gayel, this is Captain Alea Rodriguez, and her right-hand man, Lieutenant Benjamin Knox.”

“Welcome to Eon.”

The man shook Gayel’s hand first. He was a tough, seasoned soldier.

Alea. She looked like she didn’t want to take his hand, but she did. He got the suspicion she was a woman who wasn’t afraid of anything.

Her shake was firm, and she had soft skin except for the calluses that told him that she'd held a sword.

She pulled her hand back fast. "I'd better go and check on your brides and the delegates, Your Highness." She had a smooth voice, and it made him think of his favorite Silvesse whiskey.

"For any logistics issues, please talk with the palace steward, Camara. For security issues, Adlyn and Ryphen can help you."

Captain Rodriguez nodded. "Our plan is to avoid any issues while you...select your bride."

She strode off with her lieutenant.

"I'm going to get off my feet," Eve said. "I'll see you at dinner."

Gayel nodded, but his gaze was still on the back of Captain Rodriguez.

Adlyn elbowed him.

He frowned. "What?"

"You'd better get your gaze off the captain, and onto your bridal candidates."

"I wasn't—"

Adlyn snorted. Ryphen grinned.

"You've always liked a warrior woman, Gayel, and this is why I think this bride business is idiotic."

"Don't start. I get enough from Councilor Tann-Felis." Gayel felt a headache threatening. Right at that moment, he almost wished for a Kantos attack.

ALEA WOKE WITH A JERK.

It took her a second to shake off the nightmare and remember exactly where she was.

She was in the lovely palace bedroom that had been assigned to her on Eon, not at Space Corps Headquarters, clutching a dying teenager as he bled out after the Kantos attack.

For a second, she still saw his blood on her hands.

Blood on her hands wasn't new to her.

Shit. She pressed her hands together and hummed a familiar tune under her breath. An old, haunting lullaby that never failed to soothe her. It was her little secret, that she loved to sing. She even had a decent voice, inherited from her father. The one good thing he'd ever given her. He'd been a beautiful singer, when he wasn't high or conducting illegal drug deals. He hadn't done it often, but sometimes he'd sung the song to her when she was little.

Alea blew out a breath and stood. She'd sat down in a comfy armchair by the window to catch a power nap before the dinner.

Space Corps had learned the wisdom of not breaking and burning out its marines. She knew a short nap worked wonders to recharge the batteries, increase focus and reaction time. Stress, then rest, that was how you got stronger.

Except when nightmares intruded.

She strode through the open doorway and onto the stone balcony outside.

God, it was beautiful here. A breeze caught her hair. Below, there were lush gardens and past the stone walls was a dense forest.

Off to the left, she saw the sprawl of the city. She leaned against the railing and breathed deeply.

The nightmares about Callum, the teenager, had also stirred older nightmares. A bad taste filled her mouth. Nightmares of when her parents had died in a hail of gunfire and blood.

She'd had nightmares as a child for years. She'd wake up screaming and only stop when her aunt would backhand her

across the face.

Alea thumped her fist on the railing, hard enough to hurt.

She welcomed the pain. It helped her push the past away. She dealt with her childhood demons by ignoring them.

There was always work to do. Something to sink her teeth into. Alea liked to be productive and successful. She'd vowed long ago to do anything and everything to prove herself better than what she'd come from.

As she stared at the forest, she watched the sun setting in the distance, turning the trees gold and turning her thoughts to King Gayel.

The warrior sure packed a punch in the flesh. Her hands curled around the railing.

The man was...perfect. Tall, rugged, yet with an aristocratic look to his face. Good breeding. He was muscular and strong. And the way he'd looked at her...

She cut that thought off.

Everyone said he was a good man. An exceptional king. Alea straightened. She had no right to be thinking about him in any way other than as the ruler of the Eon. As the future husband of one of the women she was here to guard. She strode back inside.

It was time to get ready for the welcome dinner.

She freshened up, and put on a clean, pressed Space Corps uniform. Then she pulled her hair up in a ponytail, and allowed herself some light makeup.

Benjamin was waiting outside. "Ready?"

"Let's get this show on the road."

They went down one level and knocked on the women's doors. Her charges appeared, dressed in their very best.

"Ooh, I can't wait to see King Gayel again," the cute, pretty Chloe bubbled.

Alea set off with the women chatting behind her. They reminded her of flitting butterflies. The mixture of perfumes was strong, and again she wondered how it affected the enhanced Eon senses.

“The courtyard is this way,” Ben said.

“How do you know?”

He gave her a faint smile. “I sweet-talked a palace worker.”

Alea snorted. “You? Sweet talk?”

Ben excelled in grunts and mid-battle shouts.

There was a set of open doors ahead, and the din of conversation caught her ear. They walked through the doorway.

She barely stopped her mouth from dropping open.

They stood in a huge internal courtyard, surrounded by high stone walls. It had a mosaic stone floor and overhead, lights were strung up, crisscrossing the space. They looked like fireflies dancing in the air. Behind it was the night sky, with the planet’s three moons rising. One was larger than Earth’s moon, and the other two were smaller.

Long rectangular tables were set up in the space, and at the front, one table was set on a raised platform. Each table was beautiful with greenery draped along the center of it, dappled with sweet smelling blue flowers.

Palace workers darted between the tables, setting down jugs of drinks and platters of food. Some Eon guests were already seated, and others were milling, talking.

Lots of people turned to look at them. No doubt curious to see the bridal candidates.

The warriors wore fitted trousers and loose shirts tucked into belts. It accented their broad shoulders and lean waists. The shirts were also sleeveless, so they gave good views of brawny arms. The women wore flowing dresses that made Alea think of Greek goddesses.

A female server appeared, in a simple dress edged in blue. She dipped a curtsy. "This way, please."

They followed her to a long table near the front, and she waved for the women to sit.

The server tentatively glanced at Alea. "You're welcome to join the warriors." She motioned to another table and Alea spotted Adlyn and Ryphen.

"Thank you." Alea jerked her head at Ben, and they moved to the next table.

"Good evening," Adlyn greeted them.

Alea nodded. "Evening."

"Nice digs," Ben said.

Adlyn raised a brow at the expression, but clearly worked it out. "I'm glad it meets your standards, Terran."

The pair eyed each other like they were about to draw swords and fight.

Alea touched a hand to Ben's arm. "Be nice." They sat.

Ben reached for a drink.

Adlyn's black-and-purple eyes narrowed, as she studied them. "Are you two mated?"

Ben, mid-drink, choked.

Alea raised a brow. "I don't mix work and pleasure. And Ben here is a friend, mentor and brother all rolled into one."

"And yet you're the commanding officer, Captain Rodriguez. You say he is your mentor?"

"He knows more than I ever will, but he prefers action to giving orders. And please, call me Alea."

Adlyn nodded. "Alea."

"And don't fight with her," Alea said to Ben. "She's the king's sister."

Ben's brow snapped together.

Adlyn smiled and sipped her own drink. “How did you guess? I’m told we all look alike to you.”

“You have a similar nose. And it was the way you two interacted.”

Adlyn’s gaze narrowed. “You’re observant.”

“It makes me good at my job.”

Trumpet-like music sounded. Everyone rose, and Alea pushed to her feet.

From a side door, Gayel swept in, Eve on his arm.

They were followed by the VIPs from Earth and several Eon advisors in long robes.

There was also an older, regal-looking woman, in a rose-pink dress, with a circlet of gold on her light-brown hair.

“The Queen Mother,” Adlyn said softly, for Alea and Ben’s benefit.

Despite the dress, the Queen Mother looked like she could draw a sword and take anyone down.

The group moved to the front table, and Gayel waved for everyone to sit.

“Please, everyone, drink, eat, and enjoy. This is a chance to welcome our special guests, and to strengthen the ties between the Eon and Earth.”

Cheers and polite applause erupted.

He looked so masculine. Alea couldn’t drag her gaze off of him. He wore a blue shirt that looked good against his golden-bronze skin. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on him. Around one muscular bicep was an intriguing twist of gold.

His head turned and met her gaze.

Damned if her pulse didn’t skitter.

He nodded.

She nodded back.

A moment later, he spoke to a server. The woman went to the table of Earth women and talked to Natasha, one of the models.

The blonde woman beamed and stood. She strode to the head table like she was on a catwalk.

Gayel spoke to her, and held out a chair beside him.

Alea's drink suddenly tasted sour.

Jeez, Alea, focus on your job.

She was here to protect the women, and wait until the king picked one of them, then she'd escort the rest back to Earth. Nothing more, nothing less.

Her hand clenched on her glass. She looked up and saw Adlyn eyeing her.

Thankfully, the servers brought the food.

CHAPTER THREE

Gayel sipped his wine and eyed the courtyard. Everyone appeared to be having a good time.

Beside him, the Terran woman, Natasha, droned on. She'd been talking nonstop since she'd sat down. About herself.

"So, my dear," his mother said. "You said your work on Earth is to...show off new clothing."

Gayel shot his mother a warning look. She might be covered in jewels, but she still wore a thick, brown band at her wrist. His mother was an Eon warrior, through and through.

"I own my own business as well. Skin care." Natasha looked around. "I wondered if there would be opportunities to sell my products here."

His mother smiled. "It is highly unlikely your...lotions are the same quality as what we have here."

The woman launched into a passionate defense of her organic ingredients.

He scanned the closest table. Adlyn was laughing. That was good to see. She'd been broken by the loss of her mate. Captain Rodriguez was leaning close to Ryphen, the pair in an intense discussion.

The younger warrior looked smitten.

Even in her simple Space Corps uniform, she stood out. Her hair was so dark, so unlike the Eon. Her face was composed, but he could tell she was alert, aware of everything going on around her.

“Your Highness?”

He turned his head. Natasha watched him expectantly.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “My mind wandered. Some pressing political matters.”

The woman smiled. “Of course. You’re so important. So busy with matters of galactic importance.”

He glanced at his mother, and saw her roll her eyes.

Suddenly, one of the Terran women at the next table stood up. She had gleaming-red hair. “Something touched my leg!” She wiggled, slapping at her shin.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Alea rise from her chair.

Another Terran woman jumped onto her chair. “There’s something under the table. Is it a mouse? I hate mice.”

The first woman screamed, and suddenly, blood splattered from her thigh.

What the cren? Gayel surged to his feet.

Alea and Lieutenant Knox were already racing across the courtyard. Guards stepped closer to Gayel’s table.

“Stay back, King Gayel,” one said, blocking his way.

All of a sudden, a creature leaped onto the Terran table, knocking over glasses and rattling dishes.

It was a little larger than his hand.

“Oh, God,” Natasha breathed in horror. “It looks like a cross between a rat and a spider.”

It had six legs, a long tail, and appeared to have some metal parts.

It leaped at one of the Terran women, clinging to her hair.

She let out a terrified scream. “Get it off me!”

“Hold still.” Alea rushed in and grabbed the creature.

Its tail whipped around, curling around her wrist. She wrenched it free of the woman, and took several strands of the

woman's red hair with it.

"Everyone back up," Alea ordered.

Half the courtyard was in pandemonium, the other half frozen.

Alea slammed the creature against the table.

It released her arm, flipped, and scuttled along the table, knocking things over.

"Alea!" Ben yelled.

Another creature sprung out from under the table. It ran to the second one, and they clamped together.

Cren. As Gayel watched, they seemed to melt into each other, bones shifting and melding into one larger creature.

His jaw clenched.

Kantos.

They had to be responsible.

"Guards, get the guests out," Gayel ordered. "Clear the room. Arion, escort the ambassador, the Earth delegates, and my mother out of here. I want warriors at all exits. These creatures can't be allowed out of here."

With nods, the warriors raced to do his bidding.

Adlyn and Ryphen moved in close, watching the fight like hawks.

The larger creature spun to face Alea, and let out a hiss.

The Space Corps captain's face was vigilant, composed. He saw no fear or panic.

She snatched a knife off the table. The creature leaped toward her and she dodged, pivoted, then slashed it with the knife.

With a screech, it landed on the table. Plates fell and smashed on the floor.

Alea charged.

She swung the small knife down. The creature darted to the side. Its tail whipped around and hit her cheek, drawing blood.

The creature ran along the table.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Alea leaped onto the table and chased it.

She was incredible.

Gayel strode closer, gesturing to his warriors.

Alea dived and brought the knife down. She skewered the alien to the table.

The creature flailed. Gayel saw the strain in her face as she fought to hold it.

“A little help here,” she growled.

Warriors rushed toward her, but Gayel was closest. He’d already formed his armor and sword. He rammed his sword into the creature, and twisted the blade. Green blood squirted.

The abomination jerked, then went still.

Alea sat back on her knees on the table. There was a mix of red and green blood on her face. She heaved in a breath and met his gaze. “Thanks.”

“Thank you for containing it.”

Alea looked around. “Jenna? The injured woman?”

“Already on her way to Medical.”

“Good.” Alea slid to the edge of the table and rose. “I’m guessing that wasn’t planned entertainment.”

“No.”

She looked up at him. “Kantos?”

“I think so.” He nodded at the warriors.

Several moved forward, holding a containment box to put the remains in. “My scientists will study it.” He frowned. “And determine how it got here.” In the heart of Eon space, where no Kantos should be.

There was movement in the crowd and Councilor Tann-Felis pushed closer, his face was flushed. “This *thing* appeared when the Terrans did. They brought it! They must be conspiring with our enemies.”

Alea bristled.

“Councilor.” Gayel fought for some patience. “That is a grave and unfounded accusation. Captain Rodriguez just risked her life to stop it.”

“Staged. To lull us—”

Gayel held up a hand. “Enough.”

At the tone of his voice, the councilor’s bluster stopped.

Alea stepped closer, her voice low. “If you think Earth would have anything to do with the Kantos, a species who’s killed us, hunted us, and wants to annihilate our planet, you’re an idiot.”

Tann-Felis clamped his mouth shut, but Gayel saw that it cost him. The man loved to talk.

Suddenly, another bug flew out from under the table.

Straight at Alea.

Without thinking, Gayel wrenched her to him. She collided with his chest as he swung his sword.

He cut through the bug, and the creature hit the floor with a wet slap.

“I want the room searched,” Gayel ordered. “Check to see if there are any more. After that, run a systematic search of the palace.”

His sword dissolved and he looked down at Alea.

She had a cut on her cheek. It wasn’t deep, but it was weeping blood.

He touched her cheekbone. “You should get this checked out. There’s no telling what germs these creatures carry.”

She touched her cheek and nodded. “And I need to check on my charges.”

“Then after that, meet me in the lab. Ryphen or Adlyn will show you. We’ll take a closer look at our intruders.”

She nodded again.

“And captain? You fight well.”

There was faint color in her cheeks. “So do you.”

ALEA ESCAPED the palace Medical with her cut cleaned and treated.

Ben was waiting for her outside in the corridor. Her second pushed off the wall.

“How are the women?” she asked.

“Shaken. Feeling better knowing they have Eon warriors stationed at each of the doors.”

Alea scraped a hand through her hair, tiredness hitting her. The cut on her cheek stung. The Eon doctor—a bossy, older woman called Medical Commander Erisha Narann-Eon—had given her an anti-venom shot. It made her head a little foggy. She’d tried to avoid it, but the doctor must have some drill sergeant in her blood. She’d ignored Alea’s insistence that she was fine and didn’t need treatment.

“Jenna?” Ben asked, referencing the injured woman.

“Still in Medical. She’s sedated. The creature scratched up her leg pretty badly. But she’ll be fine.”

“Hell of a start to our trip.”

Alea grunted. “She’s asked to be excused from bridal consideration. She wants me to pass her apologies onto King Gayel. She just wants to go home.”

“Can’t blame her.” A pause. “You and the king looked good, swinging into action.”

She shot Ben a hard stare.

Adlyn appeared. The woman walked with brisk, economic strides. “There you are. I’m to escort you to the lab.”

“You going to try and blame us for this?” Ben said to the warrior.

Adlyn pegged him with a hard stare. “Should I?”

He stepped closer. “What do you think?”

Alea cleared her throat. “Can we see the remains of the bugs?”

Adlyn nodded and swiveled. Alea shot Ben a warning look before following the warrior.

They turned a corner. The palace somehow managed to look old, but with modern, comfortable touches. The stone felt ancient, but the discreet lighting was high-tech, and the rooms were all the perfect temperature.

“You and my brother made a good team back there.” Adlyn sounded amused.

Alea stared straight ahead and didn’t respond.

They moved downstairs into the lower levels. Alea imagined dark dungeons, but she was led into a light-filled, modern lab.

Her gaze went straight to Gayel. He’d changed his blood-splattered shirt. The one he wore now was black and tight fitting, with gold trim. His muscular arms were crossed over his chest.

His gaze flicked to hers. The strands in his eyes glowed rich purple.

“You’re healed?” he asked.

His concern made warmth thread in her belly. “Fine. It’s just a scratch.” She winced. “The shot of anti-venom hurt, though.”

“Not my favorite, either.”

They shared a beat of sympathy.

Then Gayel turned and waved a hand.

“Captain Alea Rodriguez and Lieutenant Benjamin Knox of Earth’s Space Corps, this is Science Commander Garvin Narann-Eon. Head of my palace science team.”

The older man had graying hair and was tall and fit, with a no-nonsense look on his face.

“You wouldn’t happen to be related to Medical Commander Narann-Eon would you?” Alea asked.

A faint smile appeared on his face. “My mate.”

Alea wrinkled her nose.

The man’s smile widened. “She doesn’t take no for an answer, and she has a way with recalcitrant patients. Had to learn with this one.” He nodded at Gayel.

“Yes, well, I hope *not* to need her help again.” Alea looked at the bench. “It’s Kantos?”

The two creatures were spread out on the bench and strapped down.

“Yes,” the science commander replied. “I haven’t seen anything quite like this before. It’s made of both organic and metal material.”

Alea leaned over the bench. Metal bones and spikes were mixed into the organic matter. “Say what you like about the Kantos, but they are relentless with their experiments.”

Gayel nodded. “Agreed.”

Science Commander Narann-Eon shifted over to a clear computer screen. He swiped the surface. “I’ve run some tests. The cassia flowers are blooming at the moment, and they’re only found here on Eon.”

Alea frowned, not following.

“It leaves a telltale, benign trace in the blood, until you are no longer exposed.”

The doctor paused. “These creatures are only showing a few hours of cassia exposure.”

The implication crashed into Alea. She stiffened. “They came on our shuttle.” She swiveled to meet Gayel’s gaze. “We are *not* in league with the Kantos. The alliance with the Eon is vitally important to Earth.”

“I know.” He touched her arm.

Electricity skated through her. It took everything Alea had not to let it show on her face. “Your advisor believes otherwise.”

“Councilor Tann-Felis is old, and set in his ways.” Gayel’s gaze bored into hers. “I don’t believe for a second that Space Corps planned this.”

Alea’s mind churned. “They must have snuck aboard our ship.”

Ben frowned. “We conduct regular scans.”

“Maybe someone brought them with them?” Adlyn suggested.

Alea blew out a breath. “I highly doubt the women, all dreaming of being queen, would jeopardize that opportunity.”

“The delegates?” Ben asked skeptically.

“The Kantos are known to infect people with small bugs and control them,” the science commander added.

Alea winced. Being controlled...she hated the idea. All through her childhood—with her drug dealer parents, then her bitter, mean aunt—she’d had no control over her life. Being in charge of her life was enormously important to her. “We need to explore all options.”

Gayel nodded. “Your people need to be tested.”

The women would just love that.

“Of course. And Ben and I will scour the shuttle, and contact the *Olympias* for a thorough check.” She glanced at the doctor. “Can you scan Ben and me, first?”

“I have all the scanning equipment here,” the science commander replied.

It took a while, but the process was painless.

Finally, Ben and Alea got the all-clear.

“Get some sleep, Ben.” Alea fought the urge to rub her temples. “The shuttle’s under guard for now. We’ll give it a once-over tomorrow.”

Ben nodded. “Good night.”

When they stepped out of the lab, she was surprised to find Gayel waiting for them.

Ben flashed her a grin, then headed down the hall.

Alea closed the distance to the king. She spotted Adlyn and Ryphen farther down the hall, leaning against the wall. As Ben walked past, he and Adlyn shared a long, hostile stare.

“Even in your own palace, you can’t wander alone?” Alea asked.

“Usually I can, but tonight’s events have them a little twitchy. Sometimes they forget I’m a warrior, as well.”

“This isn’t how I’d hoped this visit would start.”

“The Kantos like to ruin all good plans.” His gaze moved to her cheek. “It doesn’t hurt?”

She shook her head. This close, she could smell him. Some wood and citrusy scent mixed together.

Get your mind off the king, Rodriguez.

“Ben and I will search our shuttle tomorrow. The science commander will scan our people and your potential brides.”

The corners of his eyes tightened. “Come. I think we’ve both earned a drink.” He waved her through a doorway.

Alea didn’t want to spend more time with him. No, that wasn’t exactly true. She wanted to, far too much, that’s why she should decline and head to her own room.

She walked through the doorway.

It was some sort of sitting room. The stone floors gleamed, lovely hangings in blue and cream hung on the walls. Gauzy curtains fluttered by the open windows. The climate was so

temperate on Eon—not hot, not cold. Gayel passed some low, flat couches in warm cream and stopped by a lovely wooden cabinet.

There was an intriguing collection of daggers on the wall, many with beautiful jeweled hilts. She saw the heavy-cut decanter of amber fluid sitting on top of the cabinet and watched as he poured two glasses.

She guessed this was some sort of reception room where he met guests and dignitaries for more casual meetings.

He handed her a glass. “Silvesse whiskey from the planet Felis. My favorite. Said to have been first brewed by the great warrior Ston.”

Alea wasn’t much of a drinker, but as she sipped, she had to admit the smooth, mellow flavor was delicious.

“I think it’s best we continue with the events we have planned for the next few days.” He sipped his own drink. “The routine will help keep people calm.”

Alea ran through the agenda in her head. “Tomorrow there is a...garden party.” It sounded boring.

He smiled. “Yes. Including a demonstration of fighting by our warriors.”

Okay, that sounded better.

“You look like you’ve used a sword before,” Gayel said.

She smiled. “You could tell from my skill wielding a dinner knife?”

He smiled back.

She froze for a second. Oh man, his smile was gorgeous. It made her want to just bask in the warmth of it.

“You are very skilled with a dinner knife,” he teased.

She shook her head to clear the daze. “I was a space marine. We’re trained in various types of weapons.”

“As are Eon warriors. I’m glad you’re here, Alea.”

She straightened. “Of course. You have a wife to choose and it’s my job to keep her safe.”

His smile vanished. “Yes. I have a duty to my people.” He suddenly looked troubled.

“I’m told you’re a good king.”

He pulled in a long breath. “Sometimes being responsible for so many lives, it pulls you in a lot of different directions. It’s a balance to ensure you never step too far in the wrong one.”

She detected something under his words, but reminded herself it wasn’t her business.

The attack came without warning.

One of the Kantos spider-rats leaped out from under a couch. It slammed into Gayel’s head, knocking him sideways. His glass fell to the stone floor and smashed.

Fuck. Alea dropped her own glass and lunged for the daggers on the wall. She ripped one off.

Gayel gripped the creature, trying to tear it free.

“Drop your hands,” she yelled.

He did it instantly. Alea cut at the Kantos. It made a horrible noise and clamped harder. She saw Gayel’s body jerk.

Dammit. She jabbed the knife into its body, hoping to hell she didn’t cut too deep and hit Gayel.

The spider-rat released him and leaped into the air.

It landed on one of the flat, backless couches. Alea dived on it. Her knife sank deep, pinning it to the cushions. She lay flat on the couch on her belly and she put all her weight onto the alien.

But the damn Kantos was strong.

It flailed and jerked. Its tail wrapped around her forearm, gripping hard enough to hurt. She ground her teeth together and held on. Her knife cut through both the spider-rat and the couch cushion beneath. Green blood soaked into the fabric.

The alien heaved up and she knew she couldn't hold it much longer.

She couldn't let it loose. To stalk the palace and hurt more people.

Its tail tightened on her arm and she grunted through the pain.

Then a big body came down on hers and Gayel's arms pressed on top of hers. Together, they kept the spider-rat pinned down.

It kept struggling for another minute, then went still.

Yeah, Alea wasn't falling for that. She stared at Gayel's big, strong hands over hers. "Now what?"

He made a low sound. "If I get up..."

"It'll get loose. Will you have time to contain it before it runs?"

"Probably not." He was silent a moment. "Adlyn will be in to check on me soon. We'll hold it until then."

Great. She closed her eyes. She was highly conscious of the long line of his muscular body pressed over hers.

"Are you comfortable?" His warm breath brushed against her ear.

"Sure, as long as its damn tail doesn't snap my forearm."

"I will ensure that doesn't happen."

The spider-rat flailed again, and she and Gayel leaned onto it.

"So," he said. "How long have you been in Space Corps?"

She choked out a laugh. "We're going to have a chat while keeping a killer Kantos creature pinned under us?"

"It might help pass the time." She heard the smile in his voice.

"Since I was eighteen. I joined straight out of school."

"You were young."

She'd been desperate to escape her aunt's home. "I... wanted a fresh start. To find a place to belong."

Gayel was quiet a moment. "You had a difficult childhood?"

A rock lodged in her throat. "My parents died when I was young. I lived with an aunt who wasn't that interested in raising a child."

Alea felt his body tense, felt the air charge with his anger. No doubt it was amplified by his helian.

"She mistreated you?"

"She didn't beat me." But she was quick to slap and Alea had learned to duck.

"There are other ways to cause a child pain."

Alea turned her head and realized his lips were so close to hers. Her belly coiled tight. "Personal experience?"

He released a breath. "My father was...a difficult man."

Funny, she'd thought being an heir and king would have shielded him from so many ordinary hardships. "I'm sorry."

Gayel shook his head. "He taught me a lot. Good and bad."

"I think it's best not to have kids. Too many ways to screw them up." And she came from a gene pool that didn't need to be passed on.

"It's obvious that you're a protector, Alea. You'd be a fierce mother."

Her belly cramped. God, was she really discussing kids with the king of the Eon? She really needed to change the subject. "So, what do you do on your time off? For fun?"

He laughed, a masculine, sexy sound that shimmied down her spine.

"Kings don't have much time for fun. You?"

"Workaholic Space Corps officers don't have time for fun either." She looked at their joined hands and the ugly alien

creature beneath them. “I like to ride. We have animals called horses on Earth.”

“I know of them. They are similar to our drails here on Eon. I enjoy riding too. We have a hunt coming up, so you’ll get to ride.”

Suddenly, the spider-rat jerked. Its tail tightened, coiling hard around her forearm, and the excruciating pain made her groan.

Gayel cursed and tried to get a finger under the tail. “Keep talking, Alea.”

She could barely think through the fog of agony. “I...like to sing. Its private. I only do it when I’m alone.”

“I’d like to hear that.”

The door burst open and Adlyn and Ryphen rushed in.

“*Cren.*” Adlyn sprang forward.

The guards helped contain the creature. Gayel ripped the Kantos’ tail off Alea and she hissed. She pulled her arm to her chest.

Gayel eased off Alea’s body and helped her up.

“Containment box,” he yelled at the new guards at the door. “Get that thing to the science commander.” Then he gently maneuvered Alea’s arm, his fingers gentle on her skin.

“It isn’t broken,” she said.

Red marks curled around her forearm.

“It’ll bruise. You should get Medical—”

“Oh no, I’ve had enough of Medical Commander Narann-Eon for one night. I can deal with a few bruises.”

Gayel frowned at her, his fingers still stroking her skin.

And Alea found herself wanting to lean into his strength. She already missed that big body pressed against hers.

Crap. It was like he’d cast some sensual spell on her. She needed to get back to her room and get her head straight.

She forced herself to watch Adlyn and his warriors stuff the still squirming Kantos bug into a heavy box.

“I’d better get some sleep,” she said. “Good night, Your Highness.”

He grabbed her hand. “Gayel. We’ll be dealing closely with each other. Gayel and Alea.”

Her blood pumped loudly in her ears. She needed to get away from him and his overwhelming masculinity, immediately. “Good night...Gayel.”

“Sleep well, Alea.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “And I look forward to hearing you sing for me soon.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Gayel stood in front of the screen, watching as the image flared to life. It showed the brown-and-silver-haired Medical Commander Thane Kann-Eon of the *Rengard*, and Medical Commander Aydin Kann-Ath of the *Desteron*.

They were both doctors and warriors. The men inclined their heads.

“Your Highness,” Thane said.

“Good morning. You have an update for me.”

They were some of the best medical minds in the Empire, and had both been working hard to find a way to neutralize the Kantos pathogen. If their enemy ever deployed the pathogen, it would tear apart the bond between a helian and a warrior.

If they succeeded...

Gayel’s gut clenched.

He would *not* let the Kantos destroy his people, or their allies.

“We’re still studying the pathogen.” Aydin rubbed his brow. The man looked tired.

Thane blew out a breath. “The Kantos have clearly been experimenting with helians for some time. It’s complex.”

Gayel crossed his arms and scowled. Helians were a lifeform, sentient. They bonded with a warrior, giving a warrior amazing abilities. In return, it gave the helian a chance to thrive, to use its powers.

What the Kantos were doing killed helians, and would leave a warrior dead or so badly injured they would never recover. It was murder.

“So, you have no way to nullify the effects?” Gayel asked.

“Not yet.” Thane paused. “You know when Kaira and I were on the planet Crolla, we saw the Kantos elite council ‘gift’ hunger on the Kantos soldiers.”

Recently, when Thane and his Terran mate, Kaira, were abducted, they’d learned that the Kantos weren’t born destructive and ravenous. The Kantos elite somehow turned new Kantos that way.

“Yes,” Gayel said.

“Well, an element of the pathogen contains the same substance that causes the hunger,” Thane said.

Gayel frowned. “Can that help us?”

“I’m not sure yet, but we’re running every test we can.”

The screen chimed. He had another call coming in.

Cren. Gayel was also due at the garden party. He should be excited to see his prospective brides...

Instead, he was interested to see if Alea enjoyed the exhibition fights.

Alea. The way she’d fought the Kantos bugs, with skill, absolutely fearless. His gut hardened, but he made himself focus on the screen.

“Keep working. If you find anything, let me know.”

The medical commanders nodded.

Gayel pressed his palms to the screen and accepted the incoming call.

An Oronis knight appeared in the screen. The man’s visor was retracted, revealing a sharp face, with a hawkish nose and unique blue eyes. They were a deep blue covered in a web of cracks. His black hair curled at the collar of his black armor.

“Knightmaster Ashtin,” Gayel said.

“King Gayel.” The knight bowed his head.

“I trust you are well.”

“Yes. My ship is currently providing assistance to an Oronis colony in the Nemesia System. They were bombarded by meteors.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Do you require Eon assistance?”

“No. Gayel, we picked up faint readings on our scanners.”

Gayel heard the serious tone in the knight’s voice. “Go on.”

“Kantos ships. A lot of them.”

“Where?”

“At the edge of the Nemesia System. Near our boundary with Eon space. I sent knights to investigate, but we found nothing.”

Gayel cursed.

“I could write it off as scanning interference. There’s no way to hide that many ships. But—”

“It’s the Kantos.” Gayel rubbed the back of his neck.

Knightmaster Ashtin nodded. “Yes. We both know they’re preparing to end this war.”

“Thank you, Ashtin. If you see any more Kantos activity...”

“I’ll report in. Gayel, if you need us, the Knightqueen has decreed we render any and all aid. The Eon are our allies and it is our honor to fight alongside you.”

To the Oronis, honor was key. “Again, thank you. Express my greatest thanks to Knightqueen Carys. And the same applies if you ever need Eon assistance.”

Gayel ended the call and stared at the empty screen.

He could feel the Kantos closing in. They’d wanted to destroy Earth and the Eon had stopped them. Now they were coming full force for the Eon.

His father would already be sending the Eon fleet into Kantos space to destroy any and all Kantos they found.

And no doubt his father wouldn't hesitate to use an Eon king's greatest weapon.

Gayel's stomach turned to a hardened ball. He would protect his people, make brutal decisions, if necessary, but until then, he'd fight to keep all options open.

The door opened and Councilor Tann-Felis bustled in. "You're late for the party, Your Majesty."

"I'm coming." Gayel wore a dark-blue shirt today, tucked into his black pants. He followed his advisor out of the palace and they took a meandering path over a small stone bridge. The bushes were covered in cassia flowers. It was the scent of his childhood. He had fond memories of running through here with Adlyn, playing pretend battles.

He even had some fond memories of his father. His father could be harsh and demanding, but he'd taught Gayel to fight.

Ahead, he heard the murmur of voices, followed by the clash of swords.

They strode through a stone archway.

Ahead was a flat lawn in a lush green. Chairs had been set out, including a large, empty one for him. A long table was loaded with refreshments.

But the center of attraction was the fight ring, laid out with a weapons rack beside it. Two bare-chested warriors were currently fighting, using their helian-created swords.

Gayel let his gaze drift over the Terran women. Some were in dresses, others in pants, all wearing different colors.

His gaze tracked to a figure close to them, wearing a dark-blue uniform. Her hair was in a long tail today. Alea was watching the fight, a faint smile on her face.

He strode over. "Good morning, ladies."

They all smiled and called out hellos. His gaze sliced to Alea and she nodded.

“I hope you’re enjoying the Eon food. My palace chef worked hard to put together delicacies suited to the Terran palate.”

“Those little berries are divine,” a dark-skinned, elegant woman said.

“And I hope you enjoy the demonstration fights.” He turned to Alea. “Captain, a moment?”

Frowning, she stepped aside with him.

“My warriors have found no sign of more Kantos bugs.”

She blew out a breath. “Ben’s been searching our shuttle.” She looked like that’s where she preferred to be. “Nothing yet.”

“Okay.” Gayel shook off the sense of frustration. “Jenna?”

“Recovering well, your doctor tells me. But she has regretfully pulled out of being a bridal candidate.”

“I understand. I’m glad she’s recovering. Your arm?” His gaze dropped, but the sleeve of her uniform covered her arm.

“A few bruises. It’s fine.”

Her tone warned him that she wouldn’t let him check for himself. “Are you enjoying the fights?”

“Immensely.” Her eyes lit up. “It’s nice to watch the moves without the pressure of a life-or-death situation.” She stared at the dueling warriors.

Suddenly, Gayel didn’t want her watching the half-dressed warriors.

“Your Highness?” one of the women called out.

“You’d better get back to your brides,” Alea said.

He watched her walk away. For the next little while, he chatted with the women. Daraja from a country called Nigeria told him about her business promoting local female artisans. Blonde, curly-haired Chloe from Australia talked about her non-profit charity for children. Melinda from India was a doctor. Yanlin from China was a biologist. They were all

pleasant enough, some stimulating to talk to, but he realized he had little in common with them.

He frowned. It didn't matter. Marriage for a king wasn't a love match. It was a duty, for the benefit of the Empire.

"King Gayel," Avril—a lawyer from France—said, smiling. "Would you fight for us?" She gripped his arm. "I know I'd love to see you fight."

"Oh, yes," Daraja said.

Daria, another lawyer from Russia, nodded.

Gayel shrugged a shoulder. "Of course."

The women clapped.

Gayel headed to the fight ring. He saw Alea talking with a warrior by the weapons rack, no doubt asking questions. He saw her lift a sword, testing its weight.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

She swiveled. "It's a beautiful weapon. Perfectly weighted."

"Obviously with a helian, warriors can make their own weapons, but not all Eon are warriors, so our weaponsmiths are careful not to lose the knowledge." He started unfastening his shirt, then pulled it off. "Brodrick, I'm going to fight."

"As you wish," the warrior said.

When he glanced back, Alea was staring at his chest. *Cren*. A shot of heat hit him. He wanted her to look. He liked seeing the flames in her golden eyes.

An idea formed.

"Captain, care to join me in the ring?" He allowed his sword to form.

She tore her gaze off his chest, looking at his sword. "I... shouldn't."

"But you want to." He lowered his voice. "Since we rarely get the chance, let's both do something we really want."

She eyed him suspiciously, then she hefted the sword she held.

“Okay, Your Highness. You’re on.”

SHE STEPPED onto the flattened grass of the fight ring and swung the sword.

Alea had a hundred other things she should be thinking about, or doing. From young age, she’d pushed herself hard—at school, at the Space Corps Academy, in her job. She’d felt the need to escape where she’d come from. She should *not* be tangling with a tall, powerful, sexy, warrior king.

She should be worried about the Kantos bugs and her charges.

She pulled in a deep breath and gripped the sword hilt. It really was a beautiful weapon. It was almost like it was made especially for her.

She looked up at her opponent. He looked like he was made for her, as well. Plucked from her deepest, darkest fantasies.

He isn’t yours. Will never be yours.

She heard the women cheering behind them.

“Go, Captain!” one of the women—Simone, an Olympic runner and business owner—yelled.

Alea met Gayel’s black-purple gaze.

He smiled. “Ready? I’ll take it easy on you.”

He did *not* just say that.

Alea darted in and swung. He jumped back fast, barely blocking her sword with his own.

His smile slipped.

“Don’t worry,” she drawled. “I’ll take it easy on you.”

Something ignited in his eyes, the purple strands glowing.

Hmm, a man who liked a challenge.

Just like her.

He came at her.

Alea stayed light on her feet. He swung, and she parried. They turned and she thrust her sword at him.

He was big, but not slow, his sword inches longer than hers. Still, she was faster, and more agile. She'd use that to her advantage.

They crashed again.

“Stop holding back,” she hissed.

His mouth tightened. “As you wish.”

His next charge was fast and furious. The blows came blindingly quick and strong.

Dodge, dodge, strike.

As their swords met, the power of the blow radiated up her arm. Alea gritted her teeth, but dammit, her muscles were warm, and her blood was hot.

There wasn't anything like a good fight.

Especially with an opponent as skilled as Gayel. He might be a king, but it was clear he didn't lounge around all day.

He thrust and Alea parried. They ended up close, bodies inches apart.

“Is that the best you've got, warrior?” she drawled.

With a growl, he came at her.

Smiling, Alea spun away. His next blows were long and powerful. She danced between them, and sliced.

He leaped back, but the very tip of her sword cut a thin line across his chest.

Shit. “Gayel, I'm so—”

He rushed her.

She darted back and blocked his sword. She saw he was smiling, eyes glowing.

“A scratch doesn’t hurt,” he said. “What else have you got?”

She narrowed her gaze and charged.

As he dodged, Alea kicked his knee. He stumbled, and the spectators gasped.

Gayel’s blade sliced wide and Alea ducked.

On the next swing, their blades connected, their bodies pressed close.

“You’re very good, Alea,” he murmured.

“I know.”

She felt the heat pumping through her, between them.

Those fascinating strands in his eyes flared. “I really want to kiss you.”

His voice was low enough for only her to hear. Her stomach coiled and her lips parted. She saw his gaze drop to her lips.

Oh, God.

She was frozen, but her belly was alive with desire.

“Captain?”

Ben’s deep voice snapped her out of her Gayel-induced haze.

She stepped back and lowered her sword.

It did little to tame the violent need inside her. She *couldn’t* want this man.

She made herself look at Ben. His brows were drawn, his gaze flicking between her and Gayel.

“Yes?” she forced out.

“I found something on the shuttle you need to take a look at.”

She nodded and glanced at Gayel. Or rather over his left shoulder.

“Thank you for the fight, Your Highness.”

Her cool, polite tone made him scowl, and a muscle ticked in his jaw. “I’d like to come with you.”

No, no, no. She needed some space. She needed to get this ill-advised attraction under control. The man took up way too much room, and he was impossible to ignore.

“Your Highness.” His fussy, rude advisor appeared. The man sent Alea a barely concealed look of disgust. “You’re scheduled to spend some one-on-one time with your bridal candidates. To get to know them.”

All of the warm sensation in Alea froze solid. For a second, she’d forgotten that he would be selecting a bride soon.

She stepped back.

Gayel stepped forward.

“I’ve arranged refreshments in the Olivae garden,” the advisor continued. “Romantic, intimate.”

Alea lifted her chin. “You have your duties, Your Highness, and I have mine. I’ll give you a report on anything relevant that we find.”

His jaw worked, and it looked like he wanted to argue. “Very well.”

She swiveled, and handed the sword back to the warrior beside the rack. “Ben, keep an eye on the women.”

“Sure thing.”

On her way to the shuttle, Alea tried to clear her mind.

It was easier said than done.

She clenched her hands, released them, then did it again. She couldn’t afford to take her eye off her job. She’d done that at headquarters, and the Kantos had killed people. Callum had died before he’d really started living.

She had to stay sharp.

The shuttle pilot met her.

“Hi, Jai.”

“Captain.”

“What have you found?”

“I’m not sure exactly.”

The thirty-year-old pilot had brown skin and thick, black hair that was always well-styled. His crewmates gave him hell for it, but he didn’t care. He led her to the cockpit and flicked up a recording.

“As you know, we do internal scans in a random pattern. Standard Space Corps procedure.”

To check for stowaways, or damage to the ship. She nodded.

Jai leaned one lean hip against the console. “One scan prior to our trip to the surface showed a minor blip. It was below threshold.”

Alea frowned. That meant it was tiny. Too small to be considered a threat.

She leaned forward, staring at the image of the cargo area. She spotted the faint flicker of something in the air.

“There.” She froze the image and leaned even closer. “It looks like...”

“Dust,” the pilot said. “Or tiny—”

“Insects.” She watched until they eventually disappeared off screen. “Definitely not those spider rats.”

“No.”

“They were fumigating the *Olympias* right before we left. Insects from Earth got aboard. Could this be those?”

Jai frowned and stroked his chin. “Maybe. Absolutely nothing has shown up. And they’ve been scanning the *Olympias* too. Nothing yet.” He paused. “There’s one other

thing, though. Something drained our hydraulic oil supply in the shuttle storage bay. It's for engine repairs."

"Drained?"

He nodded. "The container was punctured. Not even a smear of the stuff left."

Alea released a breath. "So, we have some microscopic insects and missing oil."

Jai held his hands out. "Sorry, Captain. That's all I've got."

"I'll take a look around the cargo bay."

"Ben and I did a search, but another set of eyes will help."

It would keep her mind off the women fluttering their eyelashes at the king. She strode through the shuttle. *Damn.*

She was jealous.

She paused and closed her eyes. She couldn't lust after him. End of story.

No more quiet chats. No more fights.

She straightened her shoulders, and got to work.

CHAPTER FIVE

Alea blew out a breath and swiped an arm across her forehead.

She was sweaty, dusty, and had nothing to show for it.

She'd been over every inch of the shuttle cargo bay. If the Kantos had been in here, she'd found no evidence of them.

The spider rats had just appeared out of nowhere.

It was getting late, and her stomach grumbled. She'd missed lunch.

At least while she'd been busy, it had kept her mind off Gayel having cozy little meetings with his potential brides to be.

She growled to herself.

Then she heard a noise.

She spun.

She saw something dart behind a crate. Alea's hand went to the blaster holstered at her hip. She crept closer...

A pair of black-and-purple eyes peered at her over the crate.

She blew out a breath. "Come out of there."

The boy stepped out. She thought he looked ten or so, but she was no expert on kids, and she guessed Eon kids were probably tall, so he could be younger.

"You shouldn't be in here," she said.

A belligerent little chin jutted at her. “This is *my* planet, and I’m royalty. Nowhere is off-limits to me.”

Her eyebrows winged up. “Really? Does that usually work for you?”

The boy’s shoulders slumped. “No, not really.”

He bore a strong resemblance to Gayel, but as far as she knew, he didn’t have any children.

“My uncle, the king, would get mad. That I snuck here, and used my connection.”

Uncle. “Your mother is Adlyn?”

The boy nodded.

“And your father?”

A brief flash of intense grief that hurt to look at. “He died.”

Alea stuck out her hand. “I’m Alea. Captain Alea Rodriguez of Earth’s Space Corps.”

The boy eyed her hand and took it awkwardly. “I’m Kyber Solann-Eon.”

She showed him how to shake correctly. “Keep it nice and firm. It’s an Earth handshake. It’s nice to meet you, Kyber.” She paused. “Both of my parents died when I was very young.”

Those amazing eyes met hers. “Really?”

“Really. I know it hurts.” Even when they’d been crap parents who’d rarely paid her any attention.

Kyber looked at his boots, then back at her. “Are you going to tell my uncle that I snuck aboard your shuttle?”

“No. Not if you help me.”

His brow creased. “Help you?”

She nodded. “I’m looking for Kantos.”

Kyber straightened, and she saw the promise of the warrior that he would one day be. Her gaze dropped, and she spotted

the thick band on his wrist. He was already bonded to his helian.

“Shouldn’t you be in school, though?”

“I attend the Warrior Academy, but we’re on vacation right now.”

“Okay, Kyber, well I’m going to put you to work. Did you hear what happened at the dinner last night?”

He nodded, excitement on his young, handsome face. “Kantos bugs attacked. A Terran woman and my uncle killed them. Wait, was that you?”

Alea nodded. “I think they came here hidden aboard the shuttle.”

The boy’s eyes narrowed and he scanned the cargo bay.

“But, there’s no record of anything on our scanners. Only a few tiny insects. The only other thing that’s missing is oil from the storage in the engine room.”

“Is there any oil in here?” he asked. “Or other chemicals?”

Alea smiled. “Good thinking. There are some cleanup chemicals in case of a spill.” She strode to the storage compartment and opened the lock. They both crouched and looked in.

There were several rugged containers, that all looked intact. But she smelled the sharp scent of chemicals and it burned her nostrils.

“I smell chemical.” Kyber crawled inside.

“Be careful,” Alea warned. The last thing she needed was to get the king’s nephew injured.

“Everything looks okay... Wait.” He spun one canister around. “Look.”

The back of the canister was gnawed open.

Shit. Alea crawled into the space. There was a hole in the metal grate flooring where the chemical had spilled, eating into the metal.

“What the hell?” she muttered.

Kyber poked at the other canisters.

They were the same. Torn open. The metal eaten.

“Looks like something bit or ripped these open, and drank the contents,” Kyber said.

Drank the contents? Chemicals? She didn’t like this.

“Come on, kid.”

They rose and hurried to the cockpit. She put a call through to Science Commander Narann-Felis.

“Yes?” The man’s rugged face appeared on screen.

“Science Commander, I—”

“Call me Garvin, Captain. It’s a bit of a mouthful, otherwise.”

“Deal. And I’m Alea.”

He inclined his head.

“I found signs that something’s consumed oil and chemicals aboard our shuttle.”

The science commander frowned and tapped another screen. “The Kantos bugs showed high levels of chemicals in their bodies.”

Shit. “Okay, thanks.” She closed the communication link.

“What are you thinking, Alea?” Kyber asked.

“I’m thinking small, near-microscopic Kantos got aboard.”

“Small enough to avoid your scanners.”

Alea nodded. *Smart kid.*

“Then they fed,” Kyber finished.

“And grew,” she said. “I need to update King Gayel.” When she headed off the shuttle, she turned to Kyber. “Thanks for the assist.”

His chest puffed up. “I’m available if you need further assistance.”

She hid her smile. “Thank you.”

The boy smiled back at her. “I want to learn more about Earth.”

“Well, you might have a Terran aunt, soon.”

Kyber frowned. “I’ve seen the Terran ladies... They’re like halliana.”

“What’s that?”

“Small insects that fly in the gardens. They’re pretty, but I’m not sure they can teach me what I want to know.” He cocked his head. “But you could. You’re a warrior.”

“Well, while I’m here, feel free to ask me any questions you’d like. Now, off you go. I need to see your uncle.”

Kyber left with a wave.

Alea strode into the palace, navigating the corridors. She found Ben near their quarters.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

Her second nodded. “Women all got some one-on-one time with the king.”

Alea’s gut hardened. “Great.”

“And his sister is a real hardass.” A scowl settled on Ben’s face. “Got in my face about some security stuff. Second guesses everything.”

“She’s one of the king’s personal guards, Ben, and his sister. That’s her job.”

He sniffed. “I don’t like her.”

Alea shot him a dry look. “I think the feeling is mutual.”

He muttered under his breath. “Anyway, the king’s back in his quarters now. No dinner tonight.” A faint smile crossed the man’s face. “I’m thinking Gayel has had enough Terran socializing for one day.”

“Well, I need to update him.” Alea ran through what she’d found in the shuttle.

Ben scowled and ran a hand over his short hair. “Hell. I hate those bugs.”

“Me too. All right, get some rest, Ben. I’ll talk to Gayel.”

“Gayel?” Ben raised his brows.

“King Gayel,” she amended. “Something tells me this situation is going to get worse before it gets better.”

“Par for the course, with the Kantos involved.”

Alea hit the stairs and headed up toward the King’s quarters.

So much for avoiding him.

She squared her shoulders. She had a job to do and she’d do it.

GAYEL STRODE INTO HIS QUARTERS, unfastening his shirt.

This was his private domain where he could turn off being king for a bit, and just be a man.

Spending time with the Terran women had been fine. Some were interesting, and very intelligent.

But he wanted to be alone for a while.

He frowned. He hadn’t felt any particular connection to any of the women. He needed to talk with his mother, and ask how she’d dealt with entering into an arranged marriage.

Perhaps he hadn’t thought this all through carefully enough.

Especially when he couldn’t stop thinking of a certain Space Corps officer.

He strode from the front sitting chamber through the arched doorway to his bedchamber, and jerked to a halt.

His huge bed was covered in deep-blue covers, with a carved, wooden headboard—a coronation gift from the planet

Ath.

On the bed, artfully sprawled, was one of the Terran women, wearing only a tiny scrap of lace.

“Hello, there,” the woman, Avril, purred.

Gayel frowned. “How did you get in here?” He had guards in the hall.

She sat up, her brown hair falling around her shoulders.

“I’m a lawyer, Your Highness. I’m good at strategy, and arguing my point.”

And sneakiness. “This is my private suite. I rarely let anyone in here.”

Avril stilled. “Oh.”

“This is my own personal space, where I prefer to be alone.”

“Ah, sorry.” The seduction leaked off her face. “I just...” Her cheeks turned pink. “I thought we had such a great talk today.”

They had. Avril was smart, interesting to talk to. “We did, but this is highly inappropriate, and unwelcome.”

“God.” She rose and hurried to a black robe he hadn’t noticed and wrapped the silk around her. “I messed up. I just...” She met his gaze.

She was embarrassed, but he saw that she was taking responsibility for it.

“I really want this. I think I’d make a good queen, and I have the best interests of my planet and your Empire at heart. I’m good at negotiating.” A wry smile. “And I’m ambitious.”

It was hard to stay angry at her. He smiled. “I can tell.”

“And you’re hot,” she added.

He wasn’t going anywhere near that. “Let’s stick to getting to know each other the traditional way.”

She tucked some hair back behind her ear. “And you’re a good guy, too. The total package. You can’t blame a woman

for being very interested.”

There was a knock at the door of his chambers. Probably a guard.

Gayel would have the guard escort Avril back to her room.

He wrenched open the door. When he saw Alea standing there, all his thoughts fled.

“Your Highness,” she said. “I have—”

Gayel heard the footsteps behind him.

Alea stiffened and her gaze went past him. Avril stood there in her silk robe, lace peeking out the neckline. She looked disheveled.

Alea’s golden-brown gaze moved back to Gayel, then dropped to his open shirt and bare chest.

She stepped back. “I’ve interrupted.” Her face was an impassive mask, her tone cool. “I’ll give my report to Adlyn—”

Gayel grabbed Alea’s arm. “No.” That was probably a little too forceful. He lowered his voice. “Avril was just leaving. I want to hear the report.”

Avril slid past them and smiled. “I...thanks again, Your Highness.” The woman headed down the hall with a sway of her hips.

Alea’s face looked like it was carved from the toughest grana stone. “I really need to go—”

“No.” He towed her inside and slammed the door.

“You didn’t need to make her leave,” Alea said stiffly.

He spun Alea around. “I just got back. She snuck in to surprise me.” He scowled.

Alea eyed his face. “Ah.”

“Yes, ah. I didn’t invite her. I explained that this wasn’t welcome. She was embarrassed. She is—”

“Attracted to you.”

“—eager to be queen.”

“Right. Well.” She straightened. “I conducted a search on the shuttle. My current working theory is that the Kantos snuck tiny, microscopic insects aboard.”

Gayel frowned. “Small enough not to set off your scanners.”

She nodded. He noted that she was avoiding his gaze, looking at his left ear, all stiff and proper.

He wanted to see the woman he’d fought with. The blood lust of the fight on her face, and challenge in her eyes.

“I think they fed on oil, chemicals, and metal on the ship. The containers were torn open. They fed and morphed into the creatures we saw at the dinner.”

By Alqin’s axe. Gayel frowned. “If there are more—”

“They might still be feeding.”

And growing larger. The clear conclusion remained unspoken.

“I’ll have my warriors check our chemical stores. So, what’s their purpose?”

She shrugged her shoulders, still looking at his ear. “To target you? Disrupt your bride selection? Chaos?”

“We can’t let that happen.” He stared at her, willing her to look at him.

Something was becoming very clear to Gayel.

There was one Terran woman he felt a connection with.

“Alea, look at me.”

“I need to get going.” She stepped backward toward the door.

“Alea, I didn’t touch Avril.”

“That’s none of my business.”

“I’m not interested in her that way.”

Now, gold eyes met his. “You should be. She’s one of your potential brides.”

He stalked toward Alea, and she backed up several steps before she stopped herself.

“I’m not interested in any of them.” He kept moving, backing her up against the wall.

She pressed a hand to his chest. “Gayel—”

“I love it when you say my name like that, Alea.”

Their gazes clashed.

“Do you feel it?” he asked quietly.

Her eyelashes flickered. “What?”

“You know what. *This*. This pull between us.”

She muttered a curse, then he hauled her close and slammed his mouth down on hers. She made a hungry sound, then leaped on him.

As she wrapped her legs around his waist, he cupped her ass. He pinned her to the wall, plunging his tongue deep into her mouth, kissing her wildly.

“Yes.” *Cren*. He growled against her lips.

“Damn you,” she muttered. Her hands slid into his hair, tugging hard.

She kissed him back furiously. Like she needed to kiss him to exist. Like it was only the two of them and nothing else mattered.

He squeezed her toned ass and she moved against him. His cock was as hard as tanium steel, throbbing with need.

He needed to be inside her.

Just through the doorway, he could spread her on his own bed and gorge on her.

Then she ripped her mouth free.

“God. *God*.” She wriggled. “Put me down.”

Her face was set and closed.

Gayel felt like a stone had lodged in his gut. It almost hurt to release her.

She pushed against him and slid around his body. Then she pressed her palms to her face and straightened.

“This can’t happen again.”

That cool tone made his anger flash. “I beg to differ.”

“You’re searching for a *bride*. I won’t be some fun diversion—”

He growled, and stepped toward her. “That is *not* what this is.”

“We can’t do this,” she said. “I...have a job to do.”

“I don’t care about your job right now.” Cren, he couldn’t let his anger get the better of him.

“The job *is* me. It’s important to me. It’s all I have.”

He saw some deep emotion in her eyes. “Alea—”

“You don’t know me, Gayel, and I’ll be gone soon.”

“What are you so afraid of?” he asked. “I didn’t think you were a coward.”

“Like I said, you don’t know me.”

“I know you’re a warrior, good at your job, that you like to ride and sing.”

Color filled her cheeks, then she pushed past him and out the door.

Cren. He leaned against the wall. That had gone badly.

Well, one thing was certain—he’d found the Terran woman he wanted.

CHAPTER SIX

Alea banged her knuckles on the metal ledge in the shuttle cargo bay and cursed. Shaking her hand, she tried to focus. She'd had a crappy sleep—alternating between angry tossing and X-rated dreams about a certain warrior king.

Touching her.

Stroking her.

Licking her.

With a growl and a curse, she set down her tool with a clang.

“Is that a bad word on Earth?”

She glanced up. She hadn't even heard Kyber she was so distracted.

“Yes,” she said. “Don't use it.”

The boy nodded.

He was so serious. Too serious. Like she'd been after the death of her parents.

They hadn't been good parents, but they'd had their moments.

And their death had been ugly.

Jeez. She pushed her hair back and re-tied her ponytail. A bad night's sleep combined with kissing Gayel had really put her in a mood.

No, if she was being honest, seeing Avril prancing around him in her underwear had put Alea in a mood.

None of which was the kid's fault.

“Any more signs of the Kantos?” Kyber asked.

She shook her head. Frustration tasted like sludge. She'd combed the ship, searched the surrounding part of the palace. Nothing. No signs of more bugs. She should be happy, but it left Alea with a nagging sense that something bad was on the horizon, and she couldn't see it yet.

“I looked too,” Kyber said.

“Thanks.”

There was a clunk of heavy footsteps, and Ben entered the cargo bay.

He had his hands on his hips, and when he spotted Kyber, he raised a brow.

“Lieutenant Benjamin Knox, Kyber Solann-Eon. Kyber, this is Ben. Kyber is Adlyn's son.”

Ben held out a hand to the boy. Kyber eagerly shook it like she'd shown him.

“Good grip, kid.” Ben looked at Alea. “Any sign of bugs?”

“No.” She sat on a nearby crate. She realized she was filthy from crawling around the cargo bay. “How was the visit to the city market?”

Ben had escorted the women to the markets. Gayel had met them this morning for morning tea—which Alea had avoided. He'd then had duties to attend to, so the women went into the city with a guard of warriors and Ben.

Her second grunted. “Fine. Shopping is shopping, regardless of the planet.”

His typical male grumpiness made her smile.

His gaze ran down her dirty uniform. She had dirt—well, she wasn't sure what all the grime was—smeared down her front.

“You going to be ready for this ball tonight?” Ben asked.

The way he said ball warned her that he wasn’t thrilled to attend.

“Sure. Shower, put on a clean uniform. Done.”

Kyber shook his head. “You can’t wear uniforms to the ball. That’s not our custom.”

Alea raised her brows. “I didn’t pack anything else.”

“Well, I had clothes delivered to my room while I was out,” Ben said.

Kyber nodded. “I’m sure you have, too, Alea. The palace steward thinks of everything.”

Shit. If she had to doll up for this ball, she probably needed to get started.

Dammit.

She’d avoid the entire thing if she could. Avoid Gayel. Avoid looking at him. Avoid watching the women fawn all over him.

God. It wasn’t the fault of the women. It was what they were here for.

“I want to do one more sweep of the engine room—”

“I’ll do it,” Ben said.

Kyber straightened. “I can help you.”

Both of them saw desire in the kid’s eyes. He was lonely. Hungry for attention.

“Sure, kid. I’d welcome the help.”

Aww, Ben was such a good guy. “Right. Well, I’ll go and get ready for the ball.”

“And be a girl.” Ben grinned.

She pointed at him. “Here I was thinking you were a nice guy.”

“Go. You need time for hair, makeup—”

She lunged at him, but he was too good and dodged.

Kyber grinned at them.

On her way back to her room, Alea passed two Eon women in dresses who both glanced at her dirty uniform with vague horror.

She'd barely gotten through the door when there was a knock. She yanked her uniform jacket off, leaving her in her sweaty T-shirt. She opened the door.

A female palace server stood there holding a long box. "Captain?"

"Yes?"

"A delivery for you." The woman held up the box. "Clothing for the ball."

"Sure, come in."

The woman hustled inside and set the box on the bed.

"What's your name?" Alea asked.

The woman looked surprised for a second, blinking her black-and-silver eyes. "Lanka."

"Okay, Lanka, let's see what we've got."

The woman lifted the lid and Alea stared at a swath of cream and blue.

Lanka gasped and stared for a second, then she pulled the dress out.

Alea sucked in a breath. It was gorgeous.

It was vaguely Grecian-looking. It was sleeveless, with two gold clips at the top of the shoulders, and a deep *V* neckline. The bodice was a cream that made Alea think of the inside of an oyster shell.

The color changed down the dress, turning to a deep, rich, blue at the bottom. It would fit in close to her waist, where there was another gold brooch at her hip, then a long, swishing skirt.

"It's beautiful."

Lanka eyed her. “It is. I’m to do your hair.” She looked at the top of Alea’s head. “You should wear it up.”

“Sure.” It would at least keep it out of her way.

“Captain—”

“Please, call me Alea.”

Lanka nodded. “Alea, this is a dress designed for a female warrior.”

Alea cocked her head. “It is?”

The woman moved the fabric and Alea saw the large slit up one side. For ease of movement.

“It is Eon tradition for a female warrior to wear a blade strapped to her thigh.” The woman eyed the blaster still on Alea’s hip. “Other weapons are not permitted at the ball.”

“Right.”

Lanka bent over the box and pulled out a smaller box. “It appears whoever selected your attire included a blade.”

Alea opened the smaller box and gasped.

Now, these were pretty.

There were two knives. She’d expected something decorative, but these were the real deal. Perfectly formed from smooth, unadorned metal. A soldier’s blade.

She lifted one, testing the weight. *Perfect.*

“I’ll have to thank the steward for picking out the dress and the blades. These are stunning.”

Lanka looked at the floor and made a sound.

“Problem?” Alea asked.

“No, no. You should wash now, then I can do your hair.”

“Great.”

Alea had never been to a ball. She’d gone to prom in a borrowed dress, but nothing like this.

After her shower, she stood in front of the mirror. The dress fit her perfectly. She moved a little, watching the hemline swish around her ankles. Her toned arms were on perfect display, and when the slit parted up the skirt, she could see the two knives strapped to her thigh.

She smiled.

Her bruises were also on display. She tilted her forearm. She had a rather interesting spiral bruise in purple-black. *Oh, well.* Not much she could do about it without tangling with the strict, bossy medical commander again.

Lanka had piled Alea's hair up on top of her head, and Alea hadn't gone too heavy with the makeup. She'd emphasized her eyes, dabbed on some bronzer, and swiped some pink across her lips.

The shoes provided thankfully had a low heel. She wouldn't trip. She could count on her fingers how many times she'd worn heels.

"You look stunning, Alea." Lanka clasped her hands together.

"Guess I'm ready. Thanks for your help."

"An honor." With a secret smile, the woman dashed away.

Right. Alea would get to the ball, eat, keep her charges happy and safe, and avoid Gayel.

As she strode down the hall, she saw people looking at her. Mmm, she guessed it wasn't every day they saw a Terran in an Eon getup.

Ahead was the ballroom. There were some people milling around outside, and several warriors eyed her, appreciation in their gazes.

She strode through the doors.

Wow.

If she thought the courtyard for the dinner had looked good, this was something else. There was a high, vaulted ceiling in the massive room, and large pillars of glowing,

cream rock. They flanked either side of the space. Above, round lanterns were floating in the air. It looked like they were held up by magic. They were cream, gold, and blue.

It looked like a fantasy land, and she took a second to take it all in.

She scanned the guests. She spotted her group and noted that more people were staring at her.

Man, she hadn't put the dress on backward or anything, had she? Ben noticed her, the appetizer he was eating frozen halfway to his mouth.

There were a few couples dancing to the low strains of some sort of string music.

She noticed Gayel was one of the dancers, laughing down at Chloe, as he tried to teach the woman an Eon dance.

Alea's good feelings curdled.

Then he looked up.

His eyes widened as he took her in, something flaring in them that she couldn't quite identify.

GAYEL JUST STARED.

Alea was wearing the dress he'd selected for her.

She was in his colors.

Satisfaction knifed through him. Was she wearing the blades that he'd had the palace smith craft for her today? Was there steel lying against smooth, bronzed skin?

"You have a tough nut to crack with that one."

He blinked and looked down at Chloe. It was hard to pull his gaze away from Alea.

The blonde woman's curls danced around her smiling face. "You look at the captain the way every woman dreams of a man looking at her."

Gayel swallowed. "I'm sorry."

This woman had left her planet, agreed to consider a union to an alien stranger on a far-off world.

"Don't be. You never know who you'll connect with. But Your Highness, Captain Rodriguez has defenses on top of her defenses. You have a battle ahead, so good luck."

He smiled back. "Thank you."

He led Chloe back to her table.

"The others haven't worked it out yet." She winked at him. "I won't say anything."

He saw Alea talking with Adlyn, Ryphen, and some of the other warriors.

Cren. She was gorgeous.

"My son."

Gayel turned. His mother wore a sleek, blue dress, and looked as beautiful as always. "Mother."

"I hope your potential brides are enjoying the ball?"

He glanced at the table. They were chatting and eating and drinking. Some were dancing. "It appears so."

His mother's shrewd gaze zeroed in on his face. "Care to tell me why one of the Terrans, a member of the security team, is not only in Royal blue, but wearing your personal colors?"

How was it that even as an adult, a warrior, and a king, that tone of his mother's made him feel about Kyber's age? "I don't have to answer that."

Her gaze narrowed—purple and black like his. "You might be king, but you are still my son."

"I... She is a warrior, Mother. She calls to me. I sent her the dress."

"Does she understand the significance?"

He stayed silent.

His mother blew out a breath and shook her head. “You want her?”

“Yes.”

“Does she want you?”

He shifted. “She desires me—”

“But she has no interest in being queen,” his mother finished. “Oh, Gayel.”

“We just met. She’s a Space Corps officer.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I want time with her.”

His mother’s lips curled. “I think a challenge will do you good. You know, this reminds me of me and your father.”

Gayel frowned. “You had an arranged union.”

“Yes, but I was a warrior in my father’s army before I married. I didn’t want dresses, jewels.” She smiled, old memories in her eyes. “I made him work for it.” Her face cleared. “We have several events still planned for your bridal candidates. We can’t cancel them now. We have the hunt tomorrow.”

He nodded.

“But if you can find some time with your warrior, take it.”

“If the Kantos give us time,” he said darkly.

“Yes. It is time to deal with the Kantos, Gayel, once and for all.”

“I know. The battle is coming.” He worried what choices he’d be forced to make. How many lives would be lost?

His mother touched his arm. “You are so strong, so smart, and I see how you ask questions and assess all your options.” Her nose wrinkled. “I loved your father, faults and all. I know he could be stubborn, set in his ways, and sure he was right. I’m proud of the king you’ve become, Gayel.”

His chest filled. “Thank you, Mother. I know the Kantos must be stopped. I just don’t want to be backed into a corner.”

She tilted her head, gaze darkening. “You’re referring to using the helindai.”

The ultimate power an Eon king could unleash.

Something so powerful, once started, it couldn’t be stopped.

“I know father used it. On the Kognak.”

His mother looked away and pulled in a breath. “He rushed into using it, so certain he was making the right choice.” She looked back at Gayel. “He had nightmares about it. Regrets.”

Gayel’s stomach turned to rock. “I hope I can make the right choices.”

But at the end of the day, he was the King of the Eon, and he would fight for his people.

She patted his cheek. “Enough talk of war and death. Tonight, there are no Kantos. You are so handsome, my boy.”

Yanlin appeared, her straight black hair falling to her shoulders. She curtsied. “I’m told it’s not too forward to ask you to dance?”

Gayel glanced to the dance floor and saw Ryphen leading a smiling Alea onto the dance floor.

His chest locked with a hot rush of emotion he’d rarely felt before.

Jealousy.

“Dance with the woman, Gayel,” his mother said.

He took Yanlin’s slim hand and walked onto the dance floor.

The music was a classic Eon dance—the beat fast and lively. Yanlin moved well, laughing a few times when she got a step wrong.

He looked over her head.

Alea was looking his way.

Then she glanced away, and she and Ryphen whirled into the crowd of dancers.

Gayel watched her. Alea moved well too, although she held herself tall, a little stiff, not fully letting go.

No, Alea Rodriguez didn't release that control of hers easily.

He thought of the wild kiss in his room. He liked the controlled, disciplined captain.

He also liked the fierce, focused warrior.

But he *really* liked the hot, passionate woman he'd glimpsed.

Ryphen said something to her, and he saw her smile.

Gayel swallowed a growl.

He wanted her smiles.

He wanted her in his arms.

The couple passed him on the dance floor. Those brown eyes stared at him. Almost defiant.

Finally, the song ended.

Yanlin dipped to curtsy. "You're an excellent dancer and teacher, Your Highness."

"Thank you, Yanlin."

She headed back to the group of Earth women.

He scanned the room. No sign of Alea.

He saw Ryphen, alone.

Gayel's gaze moved to the open doors to the balcony, which led out to the gardens.

Before anyone could grab him, he slipped out the door.

He caught her scent.

As he followed it, his gut hardened into knots. A part of him wanted to crush this violent need he had.

He was a warrior, a king. Not a man to be ruled by his desires.

At the end of the darkened balcony, he spotted her. A splash of color against the black.

He strode toward her silently, but she still turned.

“You’ll be missed,” she said.

“I don’t care.”

Her gaze ran over his face.

“I want to dance with you,” he said.

“You can’t. Dance with your brides.” She looked away.

He stepped right behind her, eyeing her smooth shoulders. So beautiful. There was just the tiniest space between them.

“I don’t want them.”

She shivered. “What am I wearing, Gayel? People keep staring, giving me startled and surprised looks.”

“You’re wearing the dress I selected for you.”

She looked back over her shoulder. “You picked it?”

“Yes. You’re in my colors.” He didn’t bother to hide his satisfaction. “I don’t want them, I want you.”

She turned, shaking her head. “No. You don’t know me.”

“I know the important things. I know I’ll enjoy learning every little thing about you.”

She shook her head again.

His gaze snagged on the bruise circling her arm. He cursed. “You should have had this healed.”

“It’s a bruise. Not the first I’ve had and not the last.”

He lifted her arm and pressed his lips to the dark marks marring her skin. She let out a shaky breath. “Gayel.”

He leaned closer, and her gaze moved to his mouth. “Tell me you don’t want me.”

Her face spasmed. “I can’t.”

“Alea—”

She pressed her hands to his chest. “Gayel, I’m a marine. I’m also...the daughter of criminals. I’m not good enough for you.”

Anger filled him and he scowled. “That’s pure *cren*-cursed bullshit.”

Her eyebrows winged up at the Earth term.

“Adlyn learned that,” he said. “She uses it all the time. You’re a decorated Space Corps officer. And I don’t give a *cren* who your parents are.”

She blinked at him. “Damn you.”

“Alea—”

She yanked him close and kissed him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

God, he tasted so damn good.

Alea slid her hand into his hair, running her tongue against his.

Gayel yanked her closer, their bodies plastered together. He felt so hard against her, and this close, she realized how much bigger than her he was.

He groaned into her mouth, and she loved the sound.

“*Cren.*” His hands twisted in the skirt of her dress, and cupped her ass. “Alea, you drive me to the edge of my control.”

She bit his lip, and instigated another fierce kiss.

Desire pulsed through her—molten hot. When had anyone ever wanted her this much?

“Are you wearing my blades?” His voice was guttural. “I had them made for you.”

Her womb clenched. She didn’t stop to think about what it said about her that a man giving her knives turned her on. Or that the man in question seemed to know her so well after such a short time.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I want to see.” The purple strands in his eyes were glowing neon. “I want to see them against your skin.”

Pulse fluttering and heat pooling in her belly, she nodded.

Gayel sank to his knees in front of her.

God. It nearly made her cry out. The king of the Eon was kneeling before her, raw desire stark on his handsome face.

He pushed aside the lush fabric and found the slit in the skirt. He bared her thigh.

Alea leaned back against the stone railing and watched him take in the two exquisite knives strapped to her thigh.

“Beautiful.” He stroked her skin.

She shivered, need arrowing through her. His touch ignited flames.

Then he groaned. “I can smell your arousal.”

Alea licked her lips, trying to get a hold on the riotous desire within her and failing.

His hands slid higher. He touched the edge of her panties and she jolted.

He looked up. All she could see were those neon-purple strands.

“Alea?”

She knew he was asking her permission. She looked up blindly. They were tucked away in a shadowed corner of the balcony. There was no one close, but she could hear the low murmur of voices, the distant beat of the music.

She slid her hand into his thick hair and urged him closer.

He made a raw male sound. His fingers slid up and brushed her panties.

She bit her tongue to keep from crying out.

“*Alea.*” A reverent murmur. He pushed the silk aside and stroked her.

Now she cried out, a low, husky cry. Her fingers clenched in his hair.

He shot her a molten look, then pressed his mouth to her. She jolted hard, his tongue lapping at her. She was so wet, dripping with need.

His mouth ravished, and she wrapped one thigh around his head.

He growled against her flesh. Her head fell back and he licked, tongue plunging into her. Then he shifted and his lips found her clit.

Oh. *God.*

She bit her lip so hard she tasted blood, then yanked on his hair, pushing him closer, but also needing something to hold on to.

He sucked and her world splintered apart in a kaleidoscope of pleasure.

“*Gayel.*” She bucked against him. *Oh, oh.* It was too much, not enough. She rode the wave of intense pleasure.

He rose, wrapping his arms around her. He held her pinned to him.

Alea panted, trying to control her breathing. She felt like she’d run a race.

He gripped her chin and forced her gaze to his.

Then he kissed her.

He tasted of her, and it was so erotic, intimate, sexy.

“You taste as beautiful and tart as I’d guessed,” he said.

She pressed her face to his chest. Partly because she felt good, and partly because she was embarrassed. She’d just let the king of the Eon Empire go down on her outside, in public.

She heard footsteps close by and she jerked back.

Gayel shot her an intense look, then resettled her dress and turned.

A warrior in a black, sleeveless shirt showcasing massive arms appeared.

“Your Highness.” The warrior bowed his head.

Alea swallowed and hoped that what they’d just done wasn’t written all over her face.

“Darilan,” Gayel said.

“There’s an urgent call from War Commander Malax Dann-Jad from the *Rengard*. It’s about the Kantos.”

She stiffened. It had to be really urgent for them to interrupt Gayel during a ball.

“I’m coming,” Gayel said.

“I’m coming, too,” Alea insisted.

He nodded.

Inside, she detoured briefly, and found Ben. “There’s an urgent call. Watch the women.”

Ben nodded.

She and Gayel swept out of the ballroom. She wasn’t used to almost running to keep up with the man’s long strides. He led her up some steps.

Alea fiddled with her hair and looked at Gayel. His hair clearly looked like someone had run their hands through it.

“Wait.” She brushed at his hair, and he tilted his head down. “You look like...” *Hmm*.

“Like I was just ravished by a delectable Terran on the balcony?”

Don’t blush. Don’t blush. “There, that will have to do.”

“It won’t matter,” he said.

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Eon warriors have enhanced senses, remember?”

She continued to frown.

He gave her a faint smile, then pressed his thumb to her jaw and stroked. “They’ll smell you on me.”

With that, he turned and strode into the room.

Smell her... *Oh, God.*

She rolled her eyes to the ceiling, then mentally locked what happened on the balcony away. She’d deal with it later.

She strode into the room. Eve and Davion, and Adlyn and Ryphen, were already there. There was a dark, pensive air to the room.

On screen was the image of War Commander Malax Dann-Jad. He looked like a typical, muscular Eon warrior. His rugged face looked grim.

“Malax,” Gayel said.

“Gayel, I’m sorry to interrupt the ball. This couldn’t wait.”

There was a hard edge to the man’s voice that made Alea’s gut tighten.

“Malax, this is Captain Rodriguez of Space Corps.”

The war commander nodded.

“What did you find?” Gayel asked.

“We were patrolling at the Suzor border. We received a distress call from an Eon cargo convoy en route to the Fennelore worlds. It’s best if I just show you what we found.”

An image appeared on screen beside the war commander. Large pieces of debris were hanging in space. Alea sucked in a breath.

The ships had been destroyed. Several bodies were floating in the vacuum of space.

Jesus.

“God,” Eve breathed.

A muscle ticked in Gayel’s jaw. “How many ships lost?”

“Seven.”

Then Alea saw Kantos bodies drift across the screen. Some looked torn up. The Eon freighters had clearly fought back.

“The Kantos,” she said.

“Yes. The cargo freighters managed to take down some swarm ships,” Malax said.

“The Kantos did this.” Gayel’s voice vibrated with rage.

Alea felt it fill the room. She knew his helian amplified the effect.

On screen, Malax nodded. “It had to have been a large force, but there was no sign of them.” A pause. “It looks like they moved deeper into Eon space.”

Davion cursed.

Alea stared at the debris.

No.

THE NEXT MORNING, Alea stepped out of the palace and into the bright, Eon sunshine.

This morning was the hunt.

She ran her hands down her brown leather riding breeches that had been left in her room. *Nice*. Without thinking about it, she'd strapped on the knives that Gayel had given her to her thigh. She wore a fitted blue shirt and boots up to her knees.

Excitement about riding filtered through her blood. Not quite as potent as the thought of seeing Gayel.

Blowing out a breath, she strode toward the palace stables. Soon, she heard excited voices ahead, and scented animals.

She turned a corner, and spotted the women from her group. Most were smiling, looking excited for the hunt. A few looked tired, and Natasha and Avril looked hungover. The delegates were dressed much like Alea and looked around with interest. When he spotted her, Jean-Michel gave her a smile and winked.

Alea ignored him and fought the violent need for a coffee. Again, she hadn't slept well. After the conversation with Malax, Gayel had called a meeting with his top war commanders, and so she'd headed to bed.

And tossed and turned.

She'd alternated between worrying about the Kantos, and remembering what she and Gayel had done on the balcony.

Her stomach jittered, but she didn't let it show.

Ben caught her eye and raised a brow. "Rough night?"

"Couldn't sleep."

"The Kantos."

She lifted her chin. It wasn't a lie, exactly.

She turned her head and saw Gayel.

A gentle wind was blowing, ruffling his hair. Today, he was dressed in all black and looked so good. He swung around and spotted her. He smiled.

God. She felt that smile in every part of her body.

She nodded at him.

"I hope you're excited for the hunt," Gayel called out to the crowd. "It's an old Eon tradition. You'll get to see more of the countryside and wildlife. We'll all ride the drails. The famous hunting steeds of Eon."

Stable hands were bringing the huge animals out. They looked like horses on steroids, but with smooth skin instead of fur. They had powerful, muscled bodies, much sturdier legs, and their heads were streamlined, narrowing down to a pointed snout. Instead of a long mane, they had a few small tufts of fur running down the back of their neck.

Alea noted some of the women shifting uneasily. Only Simone, the Olympic runner, looked excited.

"Don't worry," Gayel continued. "These ones are quite tame, and used to riders."

He patted a gray one and it headbutted him with a familiar touch.

Gayel smiled. "Yes, Azek. Today, you'll get a run."

The drails were all shades of brown and black, with a few gray mixed in. They had a faint, iridescent sheen to their skin. Gayel's was almost a silver-gray.

“Um,” Dahlia, the other model and designer, called out. “A hunt?” She touched her braided black hair. “I don’t really want to *kill* anything.”

Gayel’s smile widened. “You won’t. No one will.”

A pack of canine creatures were led out, accompanied by a chorus of yips and barks. They almost looked like wolves, lean and predatory.

“The throk hounds will track our prey, the hirah. The hirah are a small, fast mammal. It’s for sport. The hirah will be released unharmed at the end. There are predators in the woods, but it’s unlikely we’ll encounter any this close to Auris. And we have warriors on hand.” He waved an arm to the warriors already mounted on their drails. “Now, let the stable master match you to a drail steed.”

“Captain Rodriguez?” Adlyn stepped up beside her. “You have an urgent call from Space Corps.”

Damn. She looked to Ben, then Gayel.

Gayel frowned.

“Go,” she said. “I’ll catch up.”

“We can wait—”

She shook her head at Gayel. “Go. I’ll meet you. This shouldn’t take long.”

“I’ll take good care of the Lieutenant,” Adlyn drawled.

Ben’s gaze narrowed, but for once, he didn’t take the bait.

But the call took longer than Alea expected. It was a call to Space Corps Headquarters to speak with Admiral Barber.

Admiral Linda Barber’s ash-blond hair was in its usual sharp bob. Her brown eyes looked serious. “Captain Rodriguez, how are the bridal candidates holding up?”

“Fine. Jenna Montgomery has pulled out after she was attacked by a Kantos bug, but she’s recovering well.”

The admiral’s brow creased. “Has King Gayel taken a liking to any of them?”

Alea thought of the balcony and fought to keep her face blank. "I couldn't say."

"Very well. Update me on the Kantos situation."

Alea gave a brief run down, and did not mention the attraction between her and King Gayel.

After she ended the call, she headed out. When she reached the stables, it was quiet.

"Hello?"

She didn't see any drails.

The stable master came out, scowling.

"I need a drail to catch the hunt," she told him.

"I don't have any good mounts left for a beginner."

Damn. As if to emphasize the point, the drail in the closest stall kicked the wall.

"I'm not a riding novice," Alea said. "I've ridden horses on Earth." She'd been on several camps for disadvantaged children, and discovered a love for riding. She often rode on her rare vacations.

The stable master frowned. "Drails are unique, and this guy here is hard to handle."

She had to catch the hunt. "I'll take him."

The man shook his head, but opened the stall. He led the animal out and Alea sucked in a breath.

He was gorgeous, skin a dark, pewter-like gray, but even bigger than the ones she'd seen earlier. She ran a hand down the pointed head and the animal snorted.

"No eyes?" she asked, glancing at the stable master.

The stable master shook his head. "The drail use all their other senses. They're highly developed."

The man led the animal to a platform. She stepped up, then mounted. The drail reared.

"Settle," the stable master's voice was commanding.

Alea gripped the reins and settled into the light saddle.
“What’s his name?”

“Ston.”

After one of the original Eon warriors they revered like a god. “All right, let’s do this.”

The stable master led them out into the yard.

“Follow the main path to the meadows. You’ll spot the group. Listen for the throk hounds.”

She nodded.

“If you fall and break your neck, don’t blame me.”

“Don’t worry.” She urged the drail forward and set off.

The drail darted and pranced, and she almost lost her seat.

“None of that.” She pulled on the reins and kept her tone brisk, in charge.

They went out through the main gate and moved into a trot.

Soon, they picked up some speed, but Ston played some dominance games. It was then that Alea realized that the drail was restless, with energy to burn.

“Okay, big guy. You want to run, let’s run.”

She urged Ston to go faster.

He took off.

Oh, wow.

She leaned over the powerful neck, and they *flew*.

The beautiful landscape became a blur. To her right was a dense forest and to the left, rolling fields dotted with flowers.

Ahead, craggy mountains made a beautiful backdrop.

Alea laughed into the wind and let go of some of her worries. It wasn’t long before she saw the group ahead. They weren’t moving very quickly.

She tried to slow her drail, but Ston had his blood up and didn't want to slow down.

Oh, well. She raced up to the group and saw some of the warriors turn to look.

When her steed finally deigned to stop, she was laughing and breathless. She patted his neck. "Stubborn, but gorgeous."

She looked up. Gayel was riding like he'd been born doing it—and he moved up to her.

There was heat in his gaze.

God, the last thing she needed was to be turned on right now.

"You ride well," he said.

"I told you I enjoy it." She glanced at the women. "How's the hunt going?"

"Nothing yet." He frowned. She followed his gaze, and saw that some hounds had stopped and were staring into the meadow. Their bodies were stiff, alert.

"What's wrong with them?"

A deep groove appeared on his brow. "Something has spooked them."

She scanned the meadow. It was carpeted with beautiful, green grass, and dotted with tiny, yellow flowers, all drenched in sunshine.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. I'm not detecting anything."

She didn't like it. A skitter of concern slid down her spine.

Gayel frowned. "We'll move on, then—"

A short, feminine scream filled the air.

Alea spun in her saddle.

Chloe had lost control of her drail. It sidestepped, then took off across the meadow.

The woman screamed, bouncing in the saddle, and holding on for dear life.

Oh, hell. Alea yanked on her reins, and Ston exploded into action.

She raced after Chloe.

A second later, Gayel's beast was beside hers, and they raced across the meadow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

C*ren.*

Gayel gave Azek, his drail, the lead.

They flew across the verdant grass, Alea's mount keeping pace. It was wilder, hungry for speed.

She rode like a warrior goddess, looking graceful and strong, even going so fast.

They flanked Chloe. Her drail was out of control, and the Terran woman was still screaming.

"Gayel, get her off," Alea yelled. "She's about to fall."

It was true. He could see the woman teetering to the side. He urged Azek on, while on the other side, Alea crowded the out-of-control drail so it couldn't turn away.

Gayel reached over and plucked Chloe off the saddle.

"Oh, God," Chloe cried.

He sat her in front of him, Azek slowing.

Ahead, Alea's magnificent drail and Chloe's ran neck and neck. She reached for the other animal's reins, and eventually bought both drails to a stop.

"Wow, she's good," Chloe said.

She was. He dragged his gaze off Alea. "Are you all right?"

Chloe gave him a shaky smile, pushing her tumbled blonde curls off her face. "Not yet. My heart is racing about a million

miles a minute. But I'll be fine soon. Thanks for the rescue.”

He smiled at her, then looked up.

Alea was riding back, leading Chloe's drail behind her. Both animals were slick with sweat, their powerful chests heaving.

A faint tremor rumbled through the ground beneath them.

Gayel frowned and Azek side-stepped. Chloe grabbed onto him.

An earth tremor? It was rare on Eon.

Suddenly, he heard a sharp animal cry.

Chloe's still-panicked drail reared. It yanked Alea out of her saddle.

Gayel's chest locked. *No.*

She hit the grass and rolled, but the rearing drail's hooves flashed, tearing up the dirt and grass.

Cren. If it hit her... He kicked Azek forward.

Alea's mount rushed in with a fierce whinny. It blocked the other drail from hitting her.

She rose and raised her arms. “Easy. You're okay.” She kept watching the frightened animal, then ran one hand along the flank of her own mount, standing protectively at her side.

“That's it, easy.” Her tone was calm.

Gayel slowed to a stop. He didn't get too close, in case he spooked the animal more.

Alea slowly advanced, her hand out. He wanted to yell at her to run, to get away from the panicked animal.

After a tense stare-off, Chloe's drail lowered his head and nudged her palm.

Alea smiled. “There you go.” She stroked his head. “You're fine.”

Gayel let out a breath. He helped Chloe off and then swung down.

Alea turned. “He’s fine now. Did you feel that tremor? It spooked him.”

Gayel eyed the animal. It seemed perfectly happy now with Alea stroking it. Gayel didn’t blame it.

“Chloe, are you all right?” Alea asked.

“Oh, fine. Thanks to you and King Gayel.” She ran a hand through her curls. “That is one ride I do *not* want to do again.”

“Will you be okay to ride with him slowly, now he’s calmed down?” Alea asked.

The woman nibbled her lip, then gave a decisive nod. “I really don’t want to walk the whole way back to the palace.”

Alea scanned the meadow. “What spooked him in the first place?”

“No clue. He’d been fine up until then. Really docile.”

Alea stroked the drail again. “Maybe he picked up a small tremor that we didn’t detect.”

Maybe. If there had been an earlier tremor, Gayel would’ve felt it.

“Okay, Chloe, up you go.” He helped the woman up and gave her a minute to settle.

“Good boy,” Chloe murmured.

Suddenly, there was another tremor, stronger than before. Alea stumbled and Gayel caught her.

All three drails side-stepped and snorted.

“Oh, no,” Chloe whimpered.

Gayel grabbed the harness of the woman’s animal. Alea tried to calm the drail.

“Does this area get a lot of quakes?” Alea frowned.

“No. None.”

They scanned the meadow. A breeze was making the grass and flowers dance. It looked peaceful on the surface.

Something tickled along Gayel's senses, but he couldn't tell what it was, or where it was coming from.

All of a sudden, another tremor hit. Ahead of them, the ground burst open, spraying dirt into the air.

A giant creature pulled itself into the sunshine.

Alea gasped and Chloe gave a short scream.

Gayel stared. It couldn't be.

It looked like a targon of old—a beast of myth and legend. It had four powerful legs, a stocky, scale-covered body, and two huge horns topping its powerful, triangular head. But it looked different from the pictures he'd seen. Mutated.

Slime oozed off it in globs, and drool dripped from its fangs. It had patches of raw skin, and oozed green blood.

Green blood.

The Kantos had green blood.

“Get her out of here,” Alea yelled, as she swiveled to face the creature.

The beast stomped one scaled leg, then lifted its head and roared.

Cren.

“Hold on.” He slapped the rump of Chloe's drail. It took off back toward the hunting party.

“What is that?” Alea asked.

“It looks like a targon. A fierce, scaled creature that used to live on Eon.”

“Used to?”

“It once was hunted by the warriors, but it's been extinct for centuries. Some scientists believe that they went into hibernation, deep beneath the ground. But this one, it's different. Corrupted.”

“It has green blood.” Her gaze met his. “Kantos?”

“I don’t know how, but I’m assuming yes.” He morphed his armor, scales flowing over him and his sword forming.

The creature stomped once more, its crazed, red eyes locking on them.

“How do we kill it?” she asked.

“Legends say that they can be killed by destroying the heart.”

Her eyes widened. “Which I’m guessing is inside its scaled, heavily protected chest.”

“Yes.” Gayel wanted her far away from the tainted targon. He glanced back. Chloe was almost back at the others, and he saw his warriors racing toward them to help.

“Alea, get on your drail and go.”

Her face hardened. She yanked her knives off her thigh.

He took half a second to enjoy the fact that she was wearing them. But she couldn’t fight this monster with knives.

“No,” she said calmly.

“I’m giving you an order.” Fear was not an emotion he was familiar with.

She gave him a faint smile. “You’re not my king, Gayel. I’m not leaving you to deal with this thing alone.”

The targon threw back its head, its massive jaws unhinging. It let out a deafening roar.

Cren. Its mouth was full of rows of long fangs. It was a meat eater, and its teeth were designed to tear flesh.

Alea raised her knives.

Gayel shoved fear for her aside and lifted his sword.

The targon roared again and charged toward them.

It towered over them, giant and fierce.

There was no fear in Alea’s face.

“Come on, Your Highness, let’s take this monster down.”

THE TARGON SMELLED BAD—LIKE rotting garbage, dirt, and sewage.

Alea gripped her knives and wished for her combat sword. Gayel stepped closer, his gaze locked on the creature.

His black-scale armor fit him well—outlining his powerful form. His sword was in hand, with glints of purple along the blade.

With a roar, the targon rushed them.

Alea darted left.

The monster locked on Gayel—no doubt seeing him as the biggest threat.

Big mistake.

She raced to its side, taking in the thick, brown scales. She rammed her knife in.

Ugh, it was tough. She worked the blade in deep, grunting.

She finally hit something soft. The targon screeched and reared. She yanked her blade free and darted back.

Gayel slashed with his sword, attacking the creature's neck. It snapped at him and he dived.

He hit the ground, then rolled back onto his feet.

She ran his way. "The scales are too thick."

He gave a brisk nod. "The underbelly is soft. So is the inside of its mouth."

He'd been assessing it for weak spots as well. So, get under its massive body or dance with its massive fangs?

Choices. Choices.

"It's got some very raw patches of flesh," she said. "We can attack it there."

He nodded.

Suddenly, it opened its mouth and flames poured out. It turned its head toward them, spraying fire.

Oh, shit. Gayel hit her, lifting her off her feet. He jumped so damn high, then they dropped. They fell on the grass.

Both of them leaped into a crouch and turned.

Where they'd been standing before, the grass was burning around a large black scorch mark.

"It breathes fire?" she said incredulously.

"I had been hoping that part was just a myth."

"Okay, we need to keep it busy, so one of us can get underneath and open it up," she said.

"My sword is better for the opening part."

"Agreed. That leaves the distraction bit to me."

He didn't look happy about the plan. Then he grabbed her. "Alea, don't get hurt. Or I'll be very, very unhappy."

She traced his strong jaw with her gaze. "Right back at you."

They faced the monster.

Alea stared at it. "Okay, you big beast. Look at me."

She ran to the right, and it tracked her. It roared and she jumped at it.

She clung to its neck and stabbed at its eye. She missed, the blade hitting hard bone. It shook its massive head.

She leaped free. She couldn't see Gayel anywhere. She ran again, using all the speed she had. She stabbed her blade into its side. *Stab. Stab. Stab.*

The targon roared and stomped.

She wasn't doing any real damage, but she was definitely keeping it distracted.

Now, the creature's body shifted, and she spotted Gayel. He was crouched, sword in hand, ready to run beneath it.

Alea waved her arms at the targon. “Come and get me.” She couldn’t let it spot Gayel.

She took aim and threw one of her knives.

It hit the creature’s eye. It reared, and in a flash of movement, Gayel lunged beneath it.

She smiled.

That Eon sword drove right into the lighter underbelly. Gayel powerfully stabbed at the creature.

Now the sound the targon made was earsplitting. Alea winced.

It stomped its massive, claw-tipped legs.

Then she froze.

Gayel was crouched, shaking his head. He looked dazed.

Oh, no. Her pulse went crazy. With his enhanced senses, the loud noise must have hurt him.

The targon spun, still stomping—

It was going to hit Gayel.

No.

Alea ran and leaped onto the creature’s back.

She threw her arms out for balance, and ran up its spine.

It jerked, trying to buck her off.

Dammit. She fell, slapping facedown on its scaly back. She drove her knife into the thick skin and clung to it.

The targon spun and her body flew out wildly. She gripped the knife and saw Gayel stabbing at the creature below.

Time to go.

She leaped off.

She started to run, when suddenly, the targon collapsed. The ground shook.

“Alea!”

Gayel was running toward her.

A flash of movement out of the corner of her eye. The ground shook harder.

Another targon burst out of the soil, right in front of her, spraying her with dirt.

A massive claw swiped at her. It lifted her off her feet and threw her.

She sailed through the air and slammed into the ground. Pain exploded through her body, and for a moment, she couldn't move.

“Alea!”

Painfully, she pushed to her knees. Gayel was running to her.

“I'm... Okay.”

She hoped that wasn't a lie. She hurt all over. She looked down at three slashes across her shirt. They were bleeding, but she was upright, and they didn't hurt too badly.

“Come on,” she said. “We need to kill it.”

She saw the targon eye its dead mate. It backed up.

Then it started shaking.

“What the *cren*?” Gayel barked.

“Come on, we can't let it get away,” she said.

She jogged past the dead targon. Its massive head was still, and she leaned down and yanked her knife out of its eye.

The new targon arched, body shaking. Then its belly burst open.

Fluid and flesh sprayed, splattering Gayel and Alea.

Oh, gross. She grimaced.

Three smaller targons landed on the grass, each about the size of a grizzly bear.

The mother collapsed.

They were all corrupted as well, oozing with green blood, and their eyes blazing. Two targons fixed on Alea and Gayel.

The third backed up.

“It’s going to run,” she cried.

“We can’t let it get away,” he said.

From behind them, shouts echoed. Gayel’s warriors had arrived and were circling around the beasts, drails flying.

Together, Alea and Gayel sprinted at the monsters.

The first targon leaped at them. Gayel’s sword slashed so fast it blurred. The creature fell to the grass in a spray of green blood.

Alea jumped at the second targon and threw one knife. The blade embedded in the scales, and the creature roared.

Her vision blurred for a second, but she held it together. She couldn’t afford to go down now.

As the targon roared again, its jaws wide, she smiled. *Got you.*

She threw her second knife right into the creature’s mouth.

The targon froze and jerked. It stumbled sideways. Green blood poured from its mouth and it went down.

Two down.

She swiveled. Gayel was sprinting after the last targon. Warriors were closing in from the other side as well. Gayel leaped, his powerful body sailing through the air.

Man, he sure was nice to watch.

He landed on the smaller targon’s back and raised his sword up, blade pointed down.

He brought the sword down, right into the back of the targon’s neck.

It died instantly. Like a puppet with its strings cut, it collapsed.

Gayel jumped off.

He swiveled and caught her gaze.

She fought to stay upright, and smiled.

They'd won.

He strode to her, his intense gaze locked on her.

In that moment, it was only the two of them.

They were covered in blood and gore. Clearly, he didn't care. He swept an arm around her, and kissed her.

Heart thumping, Alea didn't care either.

She kissed him back.

CHAPTER NINE

As his warriors raced to them, Gayel reluctantly let Alea go.

She was covered in blood, but he didn't want to stop looking at her, or holding her.

Fire pumped through his veins. Part of it was from the fight, but part of it was from watching her fight.

She'd been incredible.

He dragged in air, fighting back the need to kiss her again, or drag her to the ground and tear her clothes off.

"*Cren*, Gayel." Adlyn stared in horror at the corpses of the corrupted targons.

"Organize a search," he ordered. "We need to see if there are more of them. The Kantos bugs might have found more hibernating pairs. If there are, and they're tainted, they must be hunted down."

His sister nodded and turned. "Okay, spread out. Check for any more targons."

"The hounds could help," Ryphen said.

Gayel nodded. "Do it."

"How the *cren* did the Kantos get here?" Adlyn's jaw tightened. "How did they even find a targon?"

All questions he wanted answered. He scanned for Alea.

She'd recovered her knives, and moved toward the edge of the group of warriors, cleaning the blades on the grass. He frowned at her. She was holding herself stiffly, her face pale.

"I only caught the end of the fight," Adlyn said. "But your Terran was impressive."

"She was." Pride and need filled him, but as he watched, he saw her waver.

His frown deepened.

Then she collapsed.

"Alea!" He sprinted toward her.

She'd fallen on her side, and was breathing shallowly.

Gayel rolled her and shoved her shirt up.

Three wicked scratches crossed her abdomen. They weren't too deep, but he detested seeing them on her skin.

Then he noticed the clear slime on the edges of the cuts. It had a light-green tinge. He leaned down and sniffed. He smelled a faint undertone of sickly sweetness. Poison.

She arched. "Hurts."

Cren.

"Gayel?" Adlyn knelt beside them.

"I think it's some sort of poison."

"We didn't bring any havv with us. We were just on an easy hunt."

The healing fluid was packed with biological organisms akin to their helians that could enhance healing. "I'll get her back to the palace and to Medical."

"I'll come with—"

"Adlyn, I need you here to take care of the targon search."

His sister huffed out a breath. "Okay. I'll send a message ahead so they're expecting you."

"Have the medical commander ride out to meet us."

Alea was so pale, and sweating and shaking. He lifted her into his arms.

“I need my drail,” he roared.

A warrior brought his steed. Alea’s drail trotted beside it, huffing. It moved closer and nudged Alea.

“She’s going to be fine,” Gayel said.

Ryphen took Alea, while Gayel settled in Azek’s saddle. The guard handed her up, and Gayel settled her in front of him. Her head lolled, her body limp.

His heart clenched. He hated seeing her like this.

He nodded at Adlyn and Ryphen, then urged Azek into a fast run.

They flew across the meadow, Alea’s drail following. In the distance, he saw the hunting party, but aimed away from them toward the palace.

He had to get her to the healers.

They were halfway back when she moaned, and her body convulsed.

Her eyes opened, but they were hazy and delirious. “Gayel... Too handsome. So good.”

“Quiet, Alea. You’ve been poisoned. We’ll be at the palace soon.”

She thrashed. “Hurts. *Burns.*” A low moan escaped her lips.

By Ston’s sword. They weren’t going to make it. He could hear how sluggish her heartbeat had become.

She started scratching at her abdomen. “Burns.” She cried out.

Her pain speared through him. *No.* He scanned around, then turned off the path. He leaped off the drail with her in his arms and plunged into the forest.

He let his senses expand. *There.* He altered course and soon heard the sound of the burbling stream.

When he reached the water's edge, he clutched Alea tighter in his arms. He strode toward the stream. The water was crystal clear, and surrounded by rocks that had been smoothed by water and time. He strode in, splashing, then dropped to his knees.

As the water hit her, she gasped. It was fresh and cool.

She started tearing at her clothes, and Gayel helped her. He tossed her torn shirt and pants on the bank.

She tugged at her bra, and he formed a knife and cut it off.

Her breasts spilled free. She splashed water on herself, and Gayel slid an arm around her, and scooped more water with his other hand.

"You're going to be fine." There was an unfamiliar panic in his voice. He couldn't lose her.

Together they kept washing her skin. Over and over. Handfuls of water.

"Everything will be fine. The Kantos will pay."

"Gayel."

"I'll ensure it. With every resource, every last breath in my body." The insectoids would pay. They'd pay for leaving such a strong, dynamic woman pale and shaking, and close to death.

"Gayel!"

"You're going to be all right."

He heard a sound, then Alea shifted. Her breasts pressed against his chest and her mouth covered his.

He stilled.

Her tongue slid into his mouth. Her taste filled him.

Alea. Something snapped inside of him, and he kissed her back.

With his arm around her back, he pulled her closer and took her mouth hungrily. She gripped his hair, her tongue licking his.

Finally, he dredged up some control and pulled back. He nuzzled her temple. “You’re okay?”

She nodded, panting a little. “I tried to tell you, but you weren’t listening. Once that gunk washed off, the pain stopped. I feel okay.”

He scanned her face. Her color was back to a healthy bronze, and her gold-brown eyes were clear and steady.

His gaze dropped and instantly his cock throbbed. Her bare breasts were a thing of pure beauty. Perfectly sized, her pink nipples had become hard nubs from the cold.

He couldn’t stop himself. He cupped one globe.

She moaned.

His gaze moved to her face and he watched her arch into him, fire in her eyes.

By the warriors, he shouldn’t be doing this now. “Alea—”

“Do it. Touch me, Gayel.”

With a growl, he pulled her up and lowered his head. He closed his mouth over one hard nipple.

She cried out. “Yes.”

He sucked, then swirled his tongue. He shifted his weight, the water splashing under them where they knelt. Alea clutched his head to her. At her urging, he moved to the other breast, giving it the same attention.

“God. *God.*” There was pleading in her voice.

He slid one thigh between hers and she rubbed against him.

He kept licking and sucking her breasts. Frenzied, she rubbed her sweet core against his thigh.

He dropped his hand, arrowing into her panties.

“Yes. *Please—*” she panted.

So beautiful.

He drove his fingers inside her and found the small nub above her sex with his thumb. She cried out. He kissed her deeper. With another flick of his fingers, she shattered.

She jerked against him, sobbing his name through her pleasure.

Gayel tightened his arm on her. Then he heard the shouts in the trees.

“Your Highness!”

“King Gayel!”

He recognized Medical Commander Narann-Eon’s voice.

He squeezed his eyes closed. No doubt they’d seen Azek and Alea’s drail on the path, then tracked them through the forest.

Alea stiffened, her eyes widening.

“It’s okay,” he murmured. He kissed her, then rose, lifting her with him.

She crossed an arm over her bare chest and glanced at her discarded clothes.

“You can’t put those back on,” he said. “The poison.”

He set her down and after ensuring she had her balance, he stripped his shirt off and pulled it around her.

It was way too big, but at least it covered her panties, barely.

She glanced at her naked body in his shirt, then at his bare chest. “Oh, God.”

With an arm around her, he dropped a kiss to her head. “It’ll be fine.”

She was alive. That was all that mattered.

Then Medical Commander Narann-Eon and several warriors burst out of the trees.

ALEA TRIED to stay still as the medical commander finished treating her scratches.

She felt perfectly all right.

She wanted to get out of Medical. She needed a shower, clean clothes—any clothes would be an improvement on only panties and Gayel’s shirt—and she needed time to process.

The fight. Gayel. What they’d done in the river.

Hell. She closed her eyes. She was no good for him. She’d screw up all his plans. He needed a Terran wife that his people and Earth would admire. Someone would dig up her past eventually, and realize she wasn’t good enough for him.

But when it was just the two of them, nothing seemed to matter.

And watching him fight—she shivered.

“All right?” Medical Commander Narann-Eon asked.

“Fine. I just want to get back to my room.”

The doctor arched a brow. “Young lady...”

Man, it had been a long time since anyone had called her that.

“You just survived a vicious fight, and a dangerous Kantos poison.”

“I know, Medical Commander, I was there.”

That earned her a narrow stare. She closed her mouth.

“Call me Erisha, and then promise me you’ll *actually* follow my medical advice.”

“I can’t make any promises.”

The older woman rolled her eyes. “The warriors save me from bad patients.”

“You don’t win any awards for your bedside manner, do you?”

Erisha’s lips twitched. “No. But my patients don’t die. Your body absorbed some of the poison. I’ve given you anti-

venom.”

Yeah, she’d felt that, too. The injection had hurt like hell.

“Your body is processing the last of the poison. Very soon, you’ll crash and sleep for hours.”

Great. “All the more reason for me to get back to my room.”

Gayel had been immediately whisked away by his councilors. They were all up-in-arms about the attack and the targons.

She’d seen the frustration in his face. He hadn’t wanted to leave her.

Hell, she hadn’t wanted him to leave. But it was for the best.

The doctor shook her head. “Fine. There’s someone here to see you, and get you back to your room.”

Her pulse spiked as the door opened. Ben strode in.

Oh. Of course, Gayel wouldn’t be able to get away.

“Hey,” she said.

“You’re alive, I see.” Ben’s tone was light, but his gaze was concerned.

“Still kicking.” She sat up and her head spun a little. Okay, maybe no kicking for a while.

The medical commander gave her an “I told you so” look.

Alea let Ben help her off the bunk. It took her a second to get steady on her feet.

He held out his arms. “Want me to—?”

She glared at him. “If you even think about carrying me, I will hurt you.”

Ben shot the doctor a look. “She seems fine.”

Erisha just sniffed.

Alea elbowed him. “Come on.”

“Remember, rest, no exertion, and no more fights,” Erisha called out.

Alea waved a hand. She and Ben hobbled out of Medical. Well, she hobbled. Ben strolled like usual.

He frowned. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Just tired. My system’s been pumped full of anti-venom. I need some rest.” As they walked, she realized her body wanted to keep tilting to the right.

Ugh. She hated anything impairing her.

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be out,” she continued. “Take care of the women. They could very well be targets. And liaise with Adlyn.”

Ben grunted.

“Without killing each other. It’ll look bad if a Space Corps officer kills the king’s sister.”

“I’d be doing everyone a favor,” he grumbled.

“Ben...”

He sighed. “I’ll take care of everything.”

They finally reached her room.

“I’ll be okay from here.” She gripped the doorway.

“No more tangling with Kantos.” He hugged her.

“I’ll try. Thanks, Ben.”

She closed the door and crossed her room in a mostly straight line. It took longer than usual, but she managed to shower and wash her hair. She pulled on her pajamas—blue boxer shorts, with a black tank.

After the shower, she felt much more awake.

She headed out onto the balcony. The sun was setting, and she breathed deeply of the cool, deliciously scented air. It was beautiful here. She leaned against the railing, eyeing the first of Eon’s moons appearing in the darkening sky.

“You should be in bed.”

Gayel's deep voice made her jolt.

She looked back over her shoulder at him and drank him in.

He'd changed clothes, but looked tired.

"How did you get into my room?"

He stopped his intense perusal of her body. "I knocked. There was no answer, and I was worried about you, so I broke the lock."

She arched a brow.

He shrugged. "I'll get it fixed. Now, you should be in bed."

"After my shower, I didn't feel so tired. The targons?"

"No sign of any more of them." He moved closer. "You smell good." He ran a finger down her arm.

She shivered.

"You smell even better when you're aroused and moaning."

Her belly clenched into a tight point. "*Gayel*. You shouldn't be here."

"Yes, I should." He slid an arm around her.

She knew she shouldn't, but she leaned into him.

"We aren't right," she whispered.

"Yes, we are."

Leaning on him, the last of the tension in her body seeped away. Tiredness rose up like smoke. She sagged against him. "I'm nobody, born to drug dealers, raised by an aunt who hated me. You need—"

"No." His tone held a thread of anger. "You're Alea. Captain Alea Rodriguez. Smart, strong, and brave." He slid his arm under her legs, then lifted her and strode back inside.

"Stubborn." She leaned against his chest.

"Yes, I am."

She was barely aware as he laid her on the bed, and pulled the covers over her.

Barely aware of the whisper-light kisses on her eyes, nose, cheeks, lips.

“Rest now, Alea. I’ll keep you safe.”

She’d never in her life drifted off to sleep so easily, but this time, she did.

WHEN ALEA WOKE, the bright sun was piercing through the windows.

With a groan, she curled around her pillow.

Hang on, what time is it?

She sat up and pushed her hair back. It looked like midmorning to her. She’d slept away the remainder of the evening, all night, and half the morning.

She was feeling better. Her energy was back. She stretched, and the scratches on her belly stung a little. She pulled her shirt up. The claw marks were just thin, red lines and they didn’t hurt too badly. They seemed to be healing just fine.

She stilled. Gayel had put her to bed. She chewed on her lip. Or had that just been a dream? She turned her head and saw a flower in a small vase on the bedside table. She raised her eyebrows.

It was a lush, red bloom that smelled divine, but the stem was covered in small, knife-like thorns.

There was a note written on the cream card beside it.

Reminded me of someone. It’s called a lilacoris bloom. It starts life as a plain green flower and grows in any soil, like a weed. But if you care for it, and water it under the moonlight, it’ll transition into this exquisite flower.

I’ll see you later.

G

She stroked the petal. It was beautiful.

Right, time to face the day, check on her charges, and track down the Kantos. She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

When she stood, she was pleased to see that she felt fine, and her energy levels were normal.

Then she heard a noise on the balcony.

She paused. *What was that?* She carefully opened the door and moved outside.

The balcony was empty. At the railing, she peered over.

Down below, there were some dense bushes in the garden. They rustled.

What the hell?

She crouched, quiet and still. Minutes ticked by.

Then a creature slunk out of the bush.

The breath lodged in Alea's throat. It was some sort of Kantos bug.

It was an unassuming brown, with six long legs, and a misshapen, bumpy body. It had a round, black head, topped with a sucker-like mouth rimmed with sharp teeth. Ugh, it was really ugly. It had no eyes that she could see, but two long antennae vibrated on top of its head.

She had to stop it.

She rose, pressing one foot to the railing.

But it seemed the bug sensed her. It turned its head her way for a brief moment, then darted away at blinding speed.

No, dammit.

She didn't have time to go and change. In her pajamas and bare feet, she leaped over the railing.

She had to track and kill the thing.

CHAPTER TEN

Gayel was bored.

He sat in the Alqin Building. The stone structure was set aside for things like business meetings and dispute hearings.

He was used to boredom. Being king meant he often had to listen to people drone on.

A city official was standing at the front, projections in the air. Gayel tried to focus, but all he wanted was to be with Alea.

He'd been told that she was still sleeping, and that it was a normal part of her recovery. He sat back in his chair, his hands steepled. He'd sat beside her bed most of the night, watching her sleep.

He shifted in his seat and heard a yawn.

The Terran women were sitting off to one side of the room, present at the meeting to experience this part of royal life. They all looked glassy-eyed.

Well, Avril looked interested.

He wondered if Alea was awake.

Suddenly, he heard running footsteps. The guards by the door stiffened.

Alea sprinted in and skidded to a stop.

She was wearing the tiny shorts and the tank top she'd slept in, her feet bare, and her long sheet of dark hair was loose.

Gayel rose. “Alea?”

She swiveled, scanning the room.

His advisors spluttered.

“This is highly irregular,” Councilor Tann-Felis bellowed.

Adlyn strode to Alea. Gayel followed.

“I tracked a Kantos bug here,” Alea said. “I spotted it from my balcony. Brown. A sucker mouth.”

Adlyn frowned and drew in a deep breath. “I don’t sense anything.”

Alea’s jaw tightened. “I tracked it here. It left a faint trail, and disturbed some plants.”

“Maybe you’re hallucinating?” Councilor Tann-Felis suggested, condescension in his tone. “You are still recovering, after all.”

Alea stiffened and met Gayel’s gaze. “I didn’t make it up.”

“Your Highness, the Terran woman—”

“Killed a corrupted targon yesterday.” Gayel’s tone was unyielding. “If she saw a Kantos bug, she saw it.”

The Terran women looked worried, shifting uneasily in the seats.

“The women need to go back to the main palace,” Alea said. “I think—”

Her eyes went wide. Suddenly, she jumped at Gayel, slamming into him.

Screams echoed through the room.

Gayel staggered, catching Alea against him. He watched the bug land just beyond them.

He saw the black head, and sucker mouth, on the bulbous, brown body.

Cren, it would’ve hit him.

Its antennae vibrated. Who knew what it could do? He tensed.

“Adlyn!” Alea held out her hand.

Gayel’s sister yanked a sword off her belt and tossed it.

Alea caught it and Gayel formed his armor, the scales molding his body. With a screech, the bug leaped again.

Alea ducked and swung.

Her sword flashed and missed the bug by the barest amount. She spun around and Gayel rushed it.

The bug hissed, its mouth opening wide. A proboscis extended out as it leaped at him.

Gayel swung his sword hard.

The bug threw its body out of the way and skittered under some chairs.

“Dammit.” Alea stepped forward, scanning the floor. “Where did it go?”

The women were screaming, and standing on their chairs.

“Let’s find it.” Gayel looked at Alea’s bare feet and legs. “You should go. You’re not wearing armor.”

“Not until that thing is dead.”

“I second that,” Adlyn said.

They fanned out.

“It came right to this place,” Alea mused.

Gayel frowned and crouched to look under a chair. “Perhaps it’s after the Terran women.”

“Or you,” Alea said.

Cren. He straightened. “Well, it won’t succeed. I’m not easy prey.”

Alea’s gaze narrowed and she moved to where Gayel had been sitting.

She kicked his chair over.

The bug flew out. Under the chair, it had left a slimy smear of green fluid.

Alea threw her sword and clipped the bug. Droplets of green blood splattered on the floor.

It flipped over and ran.

“Follow it!” Gayel yelled.

Alea snatched up her sword and wiped it on one of the cushions.

The bug flew up some stone steps.

“Adlyn, wait at the bottom in case it comes back down,” Gayel ordered. “Guards, clear everyone out of here.”

His sister gave him a reluctant nod.

“Where does this go?” Alea asked as they pounded up the stairs.

“The clocktower.”

The stairs narrowed. Air was sawing in and out of Gayel’s lungs as they reached the top.

At the top, open arches offered glimpses of the beautiful view of the city below. The clock sat above, a large mechanism of moving gears and parts sliding soundlessly in perfect rhythm.

They weren’t all required, but this piece was part clock, part artwork.

Alea looked at the clock before scanning around. Under the clock was a clear void back to the lower floor.

“Where’s the bug?” She turned in a slow circle.

He felt a tickle on his senses. “Here somewhere.” Gayel walked through the space.

A drip of water fell on his shoulder.

He frowned and touched the fluid.

Not water, green slime.

He jerked his head up.

The bug dropped down on him.

Cren.

He caught it. The sucker mouth unfurled, the proboscis extending, and the stench was unbearable.

He pushed at it to keep it from clamping onto his face.

By Alqin's axe, it was strong.

“Gayel!” Alea rushed to him and stabbed at the alien.

Her sword hit metal with a screech.

“It’s got metal parts!” she cried.

Green blood hit Gayel’s shirt. The bug screeched and twisted, then broke out of his hold.

It flopped on the floor, then leaped up at the clock gears.

For a second, he thought it would hit it, but it twisted and dropped down into the void below the clock.

“Hell.” Alea raced to the railing.

They both looked over. The bug had disappeared from view.

“Come on,” he said.

They pounded down the stairs.

They were both panting by the time they reached the bottom. The meeting room was quiet. Everyone had evacuated.

They lifted their weapons. He saw chairs tipped over and cushions strewn on the floor.

Then he spotted Adlyn’s legs on the floor, her boots drumming a panicked tattoo into the stone.

His body locked.

“Adlyn. *Fuck.*” Alea lunged forward.

The bug was clamped to Adlyn’s face.

“Adlyn!” Gayel roared.

He grabbed the bug and Alea gripped it as well.

“Pull,” she cried.

They heaved together. Adlyn’s body half lifted off the floor.

Alea and Gayel grunted, and pulled harder.

He wouldn’t lose his sister.

In a sudden rush, the bug came free. Alea and Gayel fell back and the bug jerked out of their hands.

“Adlyn.” Gayel crawled over to her.

His sister sat up, leaned over, and vomited. Her hair was wet with slime.

“I’m...okay.” She coughed, rubbing her throat.

He touched her back and hugged her.

She coughed again. Blood stained her lips and her face was red from where the bug had clamped onto her.

“Go,” he ordered. “Get to Medical. Alea and I will stop this *cren*-cursed abomination.”

His sister gave him a tight nod. He helped her up and she limped out.

Alea was already searching for the alien.

They heard a sound and both of them spun.

A chair tipped over. They strode to it.

The bug scuttled out, its body jerking and shaking.

What was wrong with it?

They shifted closer. The thing was starting to glow orange.

“Gayel?” Alea stared at the creature.

“Back up,” he said.

“No, we need—”

The bug turned red-orange and swelled.

Cren.

Gayel snatched Alea off her feet and ran.

But it was too late.

Boom.

The bug exploded. The room filled with blinding light and heat.

Gayel wrapped himself around Alea. The shockwave picked them up off their feet.

There was a loud crack and a groan from above.

They crashed into the floor, then the ceiling of the clocktower caved down on them.

Then there was only darkness.

ALEA STIRRED, then coughed. She was in complete darkness, with a warmth behind her.

“Are you okay?”

Gayel’s deep voice. She realized it was his big body wrapped around her.

She blinked. There was faint light coming from somewhere, and she saw stone inches from her face.

Oh. God.

“What—?”

“The Kantos bug exploded. It brought the whole building down on top of us.”

Shit. She’d hoped he wasn’t going to say that.

“We’re safe for now.”

She heard the faint tremor in his voice.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. We’re in a small pocket of space. My warriors will come for us.”

Alea blew out a breath. “Okay. So, the bug was some sort of bomb?”

“So it seems.” His tone was dark.

“It had metal in it. And I’m certain you were the target.”

He grunted.

“They want to assassinate you, Gayel. Kill you, and it would be a blow to the Eon.”

“I’m sick of the Kantos being one step ahead of us. Constantly.” Anger vibrated through him.

“Hey.” She reached back and touched his shoulder. “There is no way the Kantos will succeed.”

“No. Because when we get out of here, it’s time to go on the offensive.”

She shifted and realized her hip was hurting. She shifted again, bumping against him.

“Alea.”

She stilled. “Sorry.” Then she fidgeted again.

His hand gripped her hip, and she heard his low groan.

That’s when she felt the hard bulge against her ass. *Oh.*

“Now you’re still,” he said dryly.

“Sorry.”

“I’m not.”

She closed her eyes. She liked him. Was drawn to him.

But she couldn’t think about that right now. Right now, she needed a distraction from knowing that she was covered in tons of rubble.

“So... You come here often?” she asked.

That got a laugh out of him. “We won’t be here long.”

“Good.” She swallowed. “I have a confession to make. I hate small, dark spaces.”

“Why?”

She stared at the rock inches in front of her face. She didn't want to share old, ugly memories.

But doing so might make him realize that there could never be anything between them.

“My mother would sometimes lock me in a closet. She'd leave me there for hours.”

She heard Gayel's harsh intake of breath.

“My parents would do drug deals, and have other drug dealers and users over, and they wouldn't want me in the way.”

She felt his hand on the back of her neck, strong and comforting.

She closed her eyes. “Sometimes they'd get high and forget about me.”

“Alea—”

“I was nothing to them. Less than nothing.”

“You escaped. You've made something of your life. That's what counts. Your actions, not theirs.”

“It's easy to forget that in the dark.” She pulled in a breath. “Then one time, I was able to sneak out. I realized the door hadn't properly latched.” She heard the remembered echoes of gunshots and screams. “I interrupted a deal. My mom screamed at me. Dad was usually nicer than her, when he remembered me. The deal went bad—”

Gayel squeezed her neck again.

“There were so many bullets and so much blood. My mom tried to run, to save herself, but my father pulled me down to the floor. I saw the bullets hit him, covering me in his blood. I watched him die.”

“No child should have to endure that.”

She blew out a breath. “Life isn't always kind or easy.”

Gayel shifted—making her notice just how big and hard that warrior body of his was. His mouth brushed her ear.

“That’s why when you find someone you connect with, it’s special.”

“Gayel, you’re the king of an empire.”

“Yes. So?”

So damn stubborn. “And you’ve got a bunch of attractive, well-bred, accomplished women who want to be your bride.”

“I don’t want them.”

“But—”

Faint sounds above them interrupted her words.

“Finally. My warriors are getting us out. It shouldn’t...be too long,” he said, before he slumped against her.

“Gayel? Gayel?” *Oh, God. “Gayel!”*

Tamping down her panic, she awkwardly rolled over to face him, banging her elbow in the process.

“Gayel?” He must be hurt. She patted him down. Chest, arms, legs. Nothing.

She reached around him.

“Come on, warrior, talk to me.”

That got her a groan.

There. Wetness on her fingers. Blood.

She probed his lower back and her heart stopped. A large piece of metal was lodged in him. His back was covered in smaller scratches and wounds.

God. She swallowed and realization hit her. He’d shielded her when the building fell. He’d used his body to protect her.

She checked the wound. He groaned again. “I know. I’m sorry.”

She gripped the jagged, metal shard and leaned half over him. Then she pulled it out.

His low groan of pain speared through her.

“I know, babe. Hang in there.” She put her hand on the wound and pressed down. She needed to stop the bleeding and give his helian a chance to heal him.

“Just hang on.” She pressed into him. “You saved me, now it’s my turn.”

He pressed his face against hers, breathed in, and seemed to relax a little.

“Alea,” he mumbled.

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Don’t...leave me.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

Come on. She willed their rescuers to hurry up.

She wasn’t sure how long she lay there, her hand on his wound, his blood on her fingers.

It felt like an eternity.

She started to sing quietly. A song about a woman in love with a man she couldn’t have, and her heart bleeding love.

His breathing evened out more.

Then, dust trickled down from above and she blinked. Suddenly, rubble shifted, and light poured in through the gap.

“Help!” she yelled. “Gayel’s hurt.”

“They’re over here!” a warrior shouted.

Warriors swarmed around them. Soon, several lifted Gayel’s prone body out of the hole.

Someone helped Alea out. She was covered in dust, blood, and grime.

“He needs Medical,” a warrior barked.

Gayel was loaded onto a stretcher and carried off by four warriors.

As they set off, Alea followed.

“Alea?” Ryphen appeared, frowning at her.

She nodded. "I'm fine, but Gayel's hurt."

The guard took her arm. "He's strong."

They reached the palace. Gayel was carried into Medical and the medical team burst into action. He was carried through another doorway.

Alea moved to follow.

But warriors blocked her way. They all wore the sash of the palace guards.

"No one is allowed in the Royal medical suite when the king is injured," the guard said.

Alea gritted her teeth. They'd just survived the building collapse. She wasn't leaving him. "Let me in."

She was met with stone-faced looks.

Suddenly, Councilor Tann-Felis swished in. He glared at her like she'd collapsed the building on Gayel herself.

"It's Royal protocol. No outsiders near the king when he's injured."

Ryphen took her arm. "Come on, you. Let's get you checked over and cleaned up."

She felt tears threaten. What if Gayel didn't make it? "I promised him that I wouldn't leave him."

"You saved him. Come now."

She looked back through the doorway, hoping for one last view of him. She bit her lip and looked at her blood-stained hands. She already knew that life was too damn short. That people could be yanked away in the blink of an eye.

Live, Gayel.

Then she let Ryphen lead her away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Alea stood, leaning against the stone archway, looking down at the city below.

Auris really was beautiful. The sunlight made the buildings gleam. It made it seem like nothing bad could ever touch this place.

But she knew that wasn't true.

She'd been told Gayel was fine. Sleeping under the watchful eye of the Medical team. She dragged in a breath. They hadn't let her see him.

Her scrapes and bruises had been treated as well. Erisha had also delivered a stinging lecture on resting and not getting herself attacked or blown up for a few hours.

Alea tried to shake off the edgy feeling riding her. She'd contemplated breaking into Gayel's quarters, but she was pretty sure if she was caught that it would cause a diplomatic issue.

Ben was taking care of the women and the delegates, with Eve's help. All Alea had to do was rest.

All she wanted to do was see Gayel. Wanted to see with her own eyes that he was okay.

Her parents had died, fellow marines had died beside her in combat, Callum had died in her arms on the Space Corps Headquarters lawn. So much loss. She rubbed her closed fist against her heart. She just couldn't bear it if the Kantos succeeded in killing Gayel.

The swish of skirts.

Alea looked up and stiffened. The Queen Mother, clad in a deep green, one-shouldered dress appeared, her shrewd gaze—purple and black like Gayel’s—narrowed on Alea.

Swallowing, Alea looked back at the view.

“Captain.”

“Queen Mother.”

“I wanted to thank you for saving my son.”

Alea glanced at the woman. “According to Councilor Tann-Felis, I almost got him killed.”

“Tann-Felis is a bigot and a fool. Should have retired years ago. I’ve told him that a hundred times.”

Alea fought back a smile. Gayel’s mother wasn’t afraid to speak her mind. Alea had been harboring this idea that a queen had to be kind, and gracious, and nice all the time.

“The fool bit or the retirement bit?” Alea asked.

The Queen Mother smiled. “Both.”

Alea shrugged a shoulder. “Gayel shielded me. He got hurt protecting me.”

“No, he got hurt fighting the Kantos, and doing what he believed was right. I heard you ran down there, in your sleepwear, tracking the bug that was hunting him. And you fought beside him against the tainted targons and at the dinner.” She cocked her head. “I think I like you Captain Rodriquez.”

Something unfurled inside Alea—a hot mix of emotions. She snatched onto the fear. “I’m not good enough for Gayel. He’s strong, handsome, and so damn good. I’m a nobody, from bad parents who broke the law, who’s made a career as a marine.”

The Queen Mother smiled. “So you’re someone strong, resilient, and loyal.” The woman turned to face her. “Captain —”

“Please call me Alea.”

“Alea, I was a warrior before I met my husband. I dreamed only of protecting my family’s estates and the Eon people. I liked fighting. I was good at it.”

Alea’s gaze dropped to the woman’s helian band.

“It’s not just for show,” Gayel’s mother said. “I was dragged to my marriage with the king, perhaps not kicking, but I was less than pleased.” She smiled. “Thankfully, it worked out in the end, and I set about supporting my mate, serving my people, and making the role of queen mine. I also became a mother, and you can’t possibly understand a mother’s driving need to see their children happy. And here is what I want you to understand, I do not want my boy marrying a woman who wants to be queen. I want him to find the woman who puts him first. Who sees the man, not the king.”

Alea stayed silent.

The Queen Mother inclined her head. “I have an engagement to attend. I’m glad you are unharmed, Alea. It was nice to meet someone else who has my son’s best interests at heart.”

“Thank you.” Alea bowed her head.

The woman walked away with a regal stride.

Alea looked back at the view. Well, she knew where Gayel had inherited his core of strength and persistence from.

She rapped her knuckles against the stone. She was tired of holding back what she wanted. Tired of doing what was expected.

Maybe it was time to take a risk.

HE WOKE WITH A GASP.

Gayel sat up in his bed. The curtains fluttered by the window.

There was a familiar burn inside him. The healing sensation of havv, enhanced by his helian. He touched his lower back. He could tell that the faint, almost-healed wound was nothing more than a scratch now. Then he touched the small scanner patch pressed to his chest.

“Your Highness.”

Medical Commander Narann-Eon stood in the doorway with her usual, unamused expression.

“Is Alea okay?” he asked.

The doctor moved closer. Erisha checked the comp screen she held, no doubt assessing his vitals.

“Captain Rodriguez is fine. She overextended. I told her to rest after the poisoning, but no, she almost gets herself blown up.”

Gayel swung his legs over the edge of the bed. “She wasn’t hurt?”

“Scratches and a few scrapes. You shielded her. Councilor Tann-Felis is very unhappy.”

Gayel grunted. He didn’t care about the pompous advisor. “Where is she?”

The medical commander set the screen down. “The councilor barred her from Medical. Protocol says that when the king is injured, no one of outside blood can be present.”

Gayel felt a spurt of anger. “Meddling, old fool.”

The woman’s lips twitched. “He sure is. Man should have retired years ago. I’m not sure where Alea went.”

Gayel rose. “I’m going to find her.”

“I thought you might.” Erisha arched a brow. “Don’t overdo it.”

He grunted again.

“Why do I even bother with the both of you?” She shook her head. “Ever since I helped your mother birth you, you’ve been a pain.”

“Thanks, Erisha.”

He dressed and went straight to Alea’s room. It was sunset. It looked like he’d slept most of the day.

Her room was empty.

Cren.

He searched everywhere, and there was no sign of her. He found the other Terran women in the recreation area. He also saw Ben was there, but the Space Corps officer told him that Alea had needed time to rest and regroup.

Regroup. Gayel stomped back into his room. He knew what that meant. She’d rebuild her walls and fortify her defenses to keep him out.

He knew that she believed that there could be nothing between them. *By Eschar’s embrace*, she was wrong.

Gayel wanted Alea.

The fierce Terran warrior.

The attractive, potent woman.

The vulnerable woman she’d shown him glimpses of.

She possessed so much strength to rise above the bloodbath of her childhood into the strong, capable woman she was today.

Yes, he wanted her. In his bed. In his life.

As his queen.

He winced. It might take him a while to convince her about that last part.

Back in his room, he unbuttoned his shirt and headed out onto his balcony. Night had fallen and a gentle breeze was laden with the scent of the cassia flowers.

There was a knock from inside.

“Enter,” he called.

Adlyn appeared. Kyber rushed past his mother and collided with Gayel.

Gayel hugged his nephew. He was getting so tall, but was still just a boy. “I’m fine, Kyber.”

The boy nodded, face still hidden against Gayel’s chest.

He stroked the boy’s back. “I’m all healed.”

“You and mother got hurt.” Kyber’s voice hitched.

Cren. Kyber still felt the loss of his father keenly. “Your mother is far too tough to die.” He looked at Adlyn. “Are you all right?”

His sister nodded, shadows in her eyes. When Kyber finally released Gayel, he hugged her.

“You?” She touched his cheek.

“You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“*Cren*, I have been hoping.”

He tugged on her hair, then glanced at his nephew. The boy was looking back through the doorway. Gayel smiled. “Go on.”

Kyber hesitated. “I shouldn’t...”

“Go. That’s an order from the king.”

With a whoop, Kyber raced for the bed and started bouncing on it.

A small smile touched Adlyn’s lips. “You shouldn’t let him do that, but it is so good to see him happy.”

“Do you have an update?”

“I’ve assigned extra patrols around the palace. The teams are searching for any sign of any Kantos—in the palace, in the city, in the countryside. Nothing so far.”

Gayel gripped the railing, his fingers biting into the stone. “They’re here. Somewhere.” He dragged in a breath. “Alea believes they are here to assassinate me.”

“That makes sense.” Adlyn’s face hardened. “The attacks appear centered on you. The remnants of the one that... attached to me and exploded are being studied. There wasn’t much left, and what we found was trying to drag itself away.”

He turned his head. The shadows in her eyes had deepened. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“It took me down.” She shifted. It was uncomfortable for a warrior to face their own weaknesses. “It stuck to my face, sticking...that protuberance in my mouth. The *cren*-cursed piece of shit.”

He lifted his eyebrows “Piece of shit?”

“Another Earth phrase.”

“Who taught you?”

Color filled his sister’s cheeks. “No one.” She cleared her throat. “I...it’ll take a while to stop remembering.”

Gayel realized that it had been a violation that had shaken her confidence. He gripped her shoulder. “You’re a brilliant warrior, Adlyn.”

She looked through the doorway at her son still jumping on the bed. “I could’ve left Kyber without a mother.”

“It didn’t happen. And you know he’ll always be loved and cared for.”

She nodded. “Anyway, Alea and I studied the remains of the Kantos we got from the rubble of the explosion—”

“You’ve seen her? She’s all right?”

His sister studied his face. He’d tried to keep his tone even. Maybe he hadn’t succeeded.

“She’s fine. She synthesized something called candy for Kyber. It was so sweet, so no surprise he loved it. She also showed him some Terran martial arts. He wants to visit Earth now.” An amused smile. “And you might have a competitor for her affections, as I am certain my son is half in love with her.” A disgruntled look. “And Lieutenant Knox. The man might be annoying, but he is exceedingly patient with my boy.”

“These Terrans have a way about them.” Gayel wondered where Alea was now.

Adlyn straightened. “The Kantos bug was a meld of organic and metal parts. It had the explosive embedded in it.”

Gayel ground his teeth together. “They like to experiment with their abominations.”

“They do.”

“And Alea’s certain it came on the Terran shuttle?”

“Yes. The Terran ship in orbit succeeded in isolating some small insects. They were designed to read as Terran on the scanners, but they’re Kantos. Once they got to Eon, the tiny insects consumed the chemicals, oil and metal on the ship to grow.”

Gayel leaned back on the railing, trying to fit the pieces together.

“Alea thinks they grew, morphed and changed.”

“Grew?” he said.

Adlyn nodded. “Based off the ones that attacked at the dinner, they can combine into larger more complex bugs.”

“Like whatever ones must’ve infected the targons, and the one that exploded.”

Adlyn nodded.

“The attack at the dinner was a diversion,” he said. “That’s when the others snuck out of the palace.”

His sister tapped her chin. “That makes sense.”

And they were here to kill him. The Kantos had learned as well. They’d always been about full frontal, brute force attacks. But they’d learned to be sneakier, more cunning.

“Keep up the searches. I’ll contact Davion and Malax. We have to find that Kantos fleet. I’m fed up waiting for the Kantos to make their attack. We need to go on the offensive.”

Adlyn smiled, a little sharp and mean. “Good. I like the sound of that.”

“Now, do you know where Alea is?”

His sister's smile changed to smug. "She was with me for several hours. I have no idea where she is now."

Gayel managed to hide his frustration.

"Gayel, I like her."

"I do, too."

"She's not a woman to toy with."

"I know."

"You can't dally with her—"

He met Adlyn's gaze. "I know."

"By the warriors, you want her."

"I'm going to make her my queen."

His sister laughed. "You have a bunch of beautiful, accomplished women hanging on your every word, but you go for the hard-edged, dangerous Space Corps officer."

"You have a point?"

She laughed again. "No. I'm just going to enjoy this dance." She slapped a hand to his back. "Good luck, brother."

She headed inside and nabbed her son. Kyber's laugh was a sweet sound since the boy had grieved for his father for so long. When they were gone, Gayel leaned on the railing, and looked up at the stars.

He wanted Alea.

He wanted to get to work tearing down those walls of hers. Showing her how good they could be together if she let him in.

Frustration made him rake a hand through his hair.

Then he sensed...something.

He heard the sound of something scraping on stone, and all of a sudden, Alea pulled herself over the railing.

He blinked. She'd scaled the wall and managed to avoid his guards in the process.

She swung her legs over, her gaze on him.

Then she stood. “Hey.”

NERVES WERE NOT something Alea was used to.

Combat training, battle, and leadership had all helped her to learn to control any nerves she had. But looking at Gayel and his gloriously muscled chest made her feel more than a little jittery.

“You’re all right?” her voice was husky.

“Yes.”

“Can I—?” Damn, she had no right to ask.

He turned, showing her his back.

She saw the pink mark, the freshly healed skin. She reached out to touch, then stopped. He grabbed her hand and pulled it to him.

Warm skin. Other things jittered through her. She stroked his skin, and felt a shudder go through his body.

Damn. Just a small touch from her made this big warrior, this alien king, shudder.

She dropped her hand.

He spun. There was a spark of temper in his gaze.

“I knew you’d spend this time finding ways to shore up those walls of yours. To keep me out. Alea, I—”

She stepped in close and threw her arms around him, her body slamming into his. Then she pressed her mouth to his.

Clearly, she’d surprised him. For one second.

Then he kissed her back.

The kiss turned hard, rough. He growled, deepening the kiss until it had an almost brutal edge.

Oh, God. Sensation arrowed through her, pooling between her legs.

He bit her bottom lip.

She moaned. “Actually, what I was thinking is that I almost died, and you almost died, but we survived. We’re alive, and life is too damn short.”

“Okay.” His hands skated down her body, tugging at her shirt. He yanked it free of her pants. She tugged at the waistband of his trousers.

“I almost lost you,” she whispered.

“And I almost lost you.” Gayel made a sound and lifted his head. “Someone could see us here.” He lifted her into his arms and strode inside.

His long legs ate up the distance to his bedroom. He set her down and tugged at her clothes again. In seconds, her shirt was gone. His fingers fought with her bra and he made an annoyed sound.

“You need to wear less clothes.”

Alea laughed. “Yes, Your Highness.”

Moments later, everything was gone and he yanked her close again.

Her bare breasts pressed to his bare chest. *Oh*. She cried out, clutching his muscled biceps. She rubbed against him. “More.”

He lifted her off her feet.

Alea felt the smooth, cool covers at her back.

He worked her pants off, and she drank him in. Big, perfectly formed, all that golden skin.

And a very large bulge tenting the front of his pants.

Mmm.

Then she was naked.

Flames flared in those eyes, licking along the beautiful purple strands. He leaned over her, his hands cupping her breasts.

Pleasure shot through her. He watched, flicking his thumbs at her hardened nipples.

“You’re so soft and pretty here.”

Two words she rarely heard used to describe her. She writhed.

“I can smell how much you want me. Intoxicating.”

He stroked his hands down her sides. His touch was almost reverent.

Had anyone ever wanted her this much?

He pushed her thighs apart. “You’re so long, strong, beautiful.”

She felt his warm breath between her thighs.

Oh, God. She’d never been a huge fan of a guy going down on her. Maybe she was just too self-conscious, or maybe —

Gayel’s mouth closed on her. His tongue plunged.

“Oh, my *God.*” Sensation burst and she couldn’t think, couldn’t speak.

All she could do was feel.

He licked and sucked, working that small bundle of nerves hard. She cried out, her arms arching above her head. Her body bowed from the intense pleasure.

Blindly, she looked down. It was a jolt to see him pleasuring her. He looked up her body and her belly clenched.

It was way too intimate and sexy to watch him while he ate her. His tongue slid deep and she gasped. She couldn’t get enough air, and she didn’t care.

Then his tongue was back on her clit. His mouth closed on it and sucked.

Pure lightning speared through her and down her spine.

“I... *Gayel.*” She arched, coming, the pleasure so potent that she was sure she’d actually passed out for a heartbeat.

Her vision blurred. When she could think again, she was sprawled on the bed.

Gayel dropped light kisses up her belly.

A new need flared inside her.

She needed him. *Now*.

She couldn't bear not being connected to him any longer. She grabbed at his waistband.

He caught her wrists.

"Off. *Now*." Her voice was sharp, demanding. "I want you inside me."

"There's no need to hurry. We have all night."

She saw something on his face, and she was certain he wanted to say more. Then she palmed his cock through the fabric. His body jolted and his deep groan was pure beauty.

"I want this free," she said. "Then I want you inside me."

His handsome face was flushed with blatant need that made her belly clench.

He rose and shoved his pants off. His cock sprang free.

She sucked in a breath. It was as beautiful as the rest of him. Long, thick, perfectly formed, and very hard.

One look, and she was trembling, need hot and ruthless.

"*Gayel*."

Just saying his name made something snap.

He dragged her up to kneeling, leaned down and kissed her. It was a hard, demanding kiss. His hand slid into her hair, tugging her head back. He assaulted her mouth, then dragged his teeth down her neck. She cried out.

With a growl, he shoved her onto her back. He rose above her—her big, powerful warrior.

He pushed her legs apart and tilted her hips. Then he circled his cock, dragged it through her wetness.

Alea moaned.

“I’m going to make you mine,” he said.

“Yours,” she panted.

He drove himself inside her.

She screamed and raked her nails down his biceps. He thrust into her, with hard, wild plunges. She lifted her hips, meeting his thrusts.

“*Alea.*”

She met his gaze—they were now more purple than black.

“*Gayel.*”

Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her. She saw stars burst behind her eyes and she cried out.

He thrust harder, then his big body went taut.

He plunged deep, pouring his release inside her with a ragged groan.

CHAPTER TWELVE

He woke to the scent of sweet-smelling skin and silk tickling his nose.

Gayel opened his eyes, then smiled. Alea was half sprawled on top of him, the dark silk of her hair spread over him, one breast pressed to his chest and her arm tossed over his abdomen.

Instantly, he was hard.

Cren. He played with her hair, rubbing it between his fingers. He'd had her numerous times already. They'd dozed, then he'd woken and rolled her under him. Once, she'd woken him, and climbed on top, riding him until they'd both shattered.

The desire hadn't dimmed. No, the fire felt hotter and brighter than ever.

He shifted a little to look at her. *By the warriors.* He frowned. There were small bruises and bite marks over her skin. His marks.

He'd never been so...rough, wild.

He stroked a hand down her sleek back. The need had been so strong that all their couplings had been fast, frantic, and wild.

Now the edge was off enough for him to take his time.

He wanted to indulge, explore.

She stirred and he dropped a kiss to her bare shoulder.

Her head whipped around and she looked at him with sleepy eyes.

Captain Rodriguez disarmed. He liked seeing her like this, because in his gut he knew that so few did. He stroked his hands lower, shaping her firm buttocks.

“Sleep well?” he asked.

“When I was actually sleeping. What time is it?”

“It’s still night. We’ve been out for a few hours.”

She rolled onto her side.

His cock throbbed and he skimmed his hand up her body. She arched into his touch.

“I love how you’re made, Alea. Beautiful, strong.” He gently pinched her nipple. “Soft and hard in all the right places.”

He skimmed her jaw, traced her lips. She sucked his finger into her mouth and his gut clenched hard.

He leaned over her and kissed her.

He pushed his tongue between her lips and she moaned. Her hand arched between them, short nails scraping over his abs.

When she found his cock, he hissed.

Alea made a humming sound. “I think it’s my turn to explore this hard, glorious body of yours.”

He pushed into her palm. “I’m all yours, *shara*.”

She sat up, gaze running over him, spending time on his hard, jutting cock.

He groaned.

“Lie back,” she ordered. “Arms above your head. Grip the headboard.”

Heat flashed through him. He was a man who gave orders, not obeyed them.

But for this woman, he was happy to oblige.

Gayel reached back and gripped the carved wood. The muscles in his arms and chest flexed, and he saw hunger ignite on her face.

“You are so damn beautiful.” She straddled him, stroking his chest. “Designed to drive a woman to bad mistakes.”

“This is *not* a mistake,” he growled. “*We* are not a mistake.”

She smiled, but he saw the doubts dancing in her eyes. She’d come to him, to his bed, but she still wasn’t convinced.

His jaw clenched. He was the king of the Eon. He’d find a way to convince her.

Alea leaned over him and explored. She ran kisses over his chest, stopping to nibble whenever and wherever she wanted.

Gayel’s fingers clenched on the wood, his breathing turning ragged.

She moved lower, and raked her teeth over the ridges of his abs. He jerked.

“Don’t let go,” she warned. Her finger flicked at his flat nipple. When her hand gripped his cock, he groaned. It took everything he had to hold the headboard. To not spring up and pin her beneath him.

Like the rest of him, she took her time stroking, exploring.

His groans turned guttural. His gaze locked on her, watching her stroke him. *Cren*. This made the need worse.

Then she lowered her head to his cock. Her mouth closed over him.

“*Alea*.” It was half plea, half prayer.

She licked and sucked, and Gayel slammed his head back into the pillows, his hips bucking up.

He drove more of his cock into her mouth. She sucked harder. His groans filled the room.

“*Shara*, now. Please.”

She looked up his body. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes fever bright.

Then she shifted, crawling up and parting her legs wider.

She rubbed where she was hot and damp over his straining cock. Then she positioned herself, lowering enough so the swollen head of his cock slipped inside her.

Desire had claws. Gayel couldn't control it any longer.

He reared up, gripped her hips, and thrust her down.

She took his cock, all the way, and cried out. Her cry mingled with his strangled shout.

"*Gayel.*" She shivered, her hands clenching on his shoulders.

"Move, Alea." He slid a hand into her dark hair and tugged.

She lifted her hips and rode him.

Watching her move, pleasure on her face, drove him higher. *By Eschar's embrace*, she was stunning. *His.*

He slid his hand down to the small nub between her thighs. She cried out.

"That's it," he groaned. "Come for me."

Her lips parted. She sank down on his cock again, and then she jolted. He watched the shock of pleasure hitting her. She writhed, crying out.

More. Deeper. Filled with a primitive need, Gayel reared up. He spun her onto her hands and knees.

"Need to get deeper." He palmed her ass and she pushed back against him.

He positioned his cock and sank deep with one thrust.

Her body clenched on him and he groaned her name.

She fell forward, her cheek to the bed. Stretching her arms out to the sides.

Gayel gripped her hips and thrust into her, pistoning into her with an urgency that drove him onward.

“*Alea.*”

“Come inside me,” she panted.

He thrust hard, his fingers biting into her flesh. She’d have more bruises.

The orgasm hit him in a blinding rush, and he realized she was coming again, too. He groaned, his body shuddering until he felt wrung out.

He heard her gasping breaths. He lay beside her, curling around her and tangling their legs.

“Glad you scaled my balcony,” he said.

She sighed. “Me, too.”

He still felt those walls inside of her. And he was still determined to bring them down. But for now, she was warm and relaxed in his arms, and that was all that mattered.

A PART of her didn’t want to wake up. She was in a comfy bed, she felt slightly achy, but her body was loose and relaxed.

Mostly, Alea knew she had to face reality if she opened her eyes.

She smelled Gayel’s masculine scent, mingling with the scent of sex. Unsurprising, considering that they’d had a lot of it during the night.

Alea opened her eyes.

The bed beside her was empty. For a second, she wondered if she dreamed it all.

No. There he was.

He was standing at the window, the curtains dancing in the breeze. It was still early, the room filled with murky, silver light.

He was naked, and she drank in the expanse of muscled back and that gorgeous ass.

He was delicious, so potently masculine. Even now, achy and tired from everything they'd done, she wanted him.

Sensing her, he turned.

"Good morning." His voice was a deep rumble.

"Hi." She sat up.

He strode toward her. "I don't want you to regret this."

"I don't, Gayel." She sighed. "I just need time to process." She had no idea where they went from here.

His hand cupped her cheek. The purple strands in his eyes glowed.

Then his other hand touched her shoulder, her breast.

She realized he was touching the smudges of bruises and marks he'd left on her.

"I should be sorry," he said.

"You don't sound sorry."

"I'm not." He scooped her up.

"*Gayel*." He strode across to the balcony. "Where are you taking me?"

"You'll see."

When he stepped outside, she squeaked. "Gayel. We're naked."

That's when she realized that they weren't on the main balcony. This was a smaller one off his bedroom. Private. It was surrounded by walls covered in green vines.

A small hot tub burbled quietly.

"Oh."

He stepped into the tub and sat down. The water was warm and soothing.

Alea swallowed a moan. It felt so good.

He sat on the ledge and settled her on his lap. She leaned back against him. She was a Space Corps officer; he was an alien king. One who needed to marry for the sake of his Empire. It left a sick feeling rolling through her. She didn't see how they'd make that work.

She had no answers, but for now, she'd soak up simply being with him.

"Moments like this are rare," he said.

She'd already seen how many demands he had on his time. When did he get a chance to just be Gayel? The man? Did he ever let his guard down and do something that pleased him?

"For me, too," she said. "On a starship, there's always a crisis to deal with. And since I took over Space Corps Headquarters security, my workload hasn't lessened."

"Do you like your work?"

"I am my work." Enlisting in Space Corps had saved her life. Otherwise, she might've ended up like her parents, or her aunt. She bit her lip. "I'd be nothing without it."

His hands flexed on her skin. "You're more than your work and duty, Alea."

She stayed quiet.

"Do you think all I am is a king?"

She swiveled. "No!"

"Then—"

"You're a son, a brother, and an uncle."

He stilled, cupping her jaw. "And you don't have that."

His face was so aristocratic, so handsome.

"No."

"Through no fault of your own. You're still Alea, not just Captain Rodriguez." He cupped her breasts. "A passionate, beautiful woman."

She stared at him. He saw more in her. "Gayel—"

“I want time with you.”

She closed her eyes. “My job is to bring you your potential brides, not sleep with you.”

She saw anger flare.

“Sleep with me? That’s not all this is.”

“Gayel—”

“There’s more to us and you know it.” His kiss was fierce, hard on her lips.

He gripped her and rose. Dripping wet, he carried her back inside. His mouth hit hers again—hot, a little angry.

She was so weak. She kissed him back instantly.

Alea wanted him so damn badly. He set her down beside the bed.

Suddenly, there was a sound of a door opening.

“Gayel?” His sister called from the sitting chamber.

Alea froze. *Oh, God.* They were both very wet and very naked.

With a muttered curse, Gayel snatched a blanket off the bed and wrapped it around both of them.

“I have a—oh.” Adlyn stumbled to a halt in the doorway.

God. Alea dropped her face to Gayel’s chest.

“Adlyn, I require you to knock,” Gayel said.

“Right. Sure.” He sister’s voice was full of amusement. “I’ll remember for next time. Hi, Alea.”

“Adlyn.”

The woman was smiling. But a second later, it dissolved. “I am sorry to interrupt, but we have an emergency call from the *Rengard*.” The female warrior scowled. “It’s about the Kantos.”

Alea sucked in a breath and her gaze met Gayel’s.

“Give us a minute,” he said. “We’ll meet you in the main hall.”

His sister nodded and left.

Alea had no time to deal with getting caught by his sister.

Gayel strode to his closet, and Alea pulled on the previous day’s clothes. She did what she could with her tangled hair.

Not long afterward, she strode down the corridor beside Gayel. She sensed the tension growing in him.

This must be what it felt like to be king. A rare moment to be yourself, before you were pulled back into shouldering all the responsibility.

They entered the great hall. At the far end, a screen was lit up with Malax on screen.

“Malax,” Gayel said.

“Gayel.”

“What have you got?”

“Well, the Oronis were right. There is a substantial Kantos fleet moving deeper into Eon space.”

Alea gasped. “How?”

“They were cloaked. Now they aren’t.” The war commander stared straight at his king. “We don’t know what tech they’ve used, but there are a lot of them. A formidable force.”

Gayel put his hands on his hips. “*Cren.*”

“Gayel, they’re converging on Orzon.”

Alea saw his eyes flare, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

“What’s Orzon?” Alea asked.

“A small planet in Eon space. It’s where our young warriors are trained.”

Her insides went cold. “No.”

“Yes. And there’s also a large civilian population there. Scientists, communities, trainers, schools.”

Malax leaned forward. “They’re amassing what looks to be their entire fleet, Gayel.”

Gayel straightened. “Then we do the same. All Eon warships to Orzon. We will protect what’s ours. Our young, our people, our warriors, our planet.” He looked at Alea. “Our allies.”

She nodded. “We’re with you.” She looked back at the screen. “I’ll contact Space Corps.”

“Alert all our ships and warriors,” Gayel ordered. “Get to Orzon. This is war.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

With his arms clasped behind his back, Gayel stood on the bridge of the *Desteron*.

He felt the faint vibrations of the warship's engines beneath his feet, and the sensation made him realize it had been too long since he'd been on a warship.

He remembered his time aboard the *Deracinon* as a warrior-in-training fondly. War Commander Tann-Ath had not gone easy on him. Perhaps because he'd been the Eon heir.

Davion stood in the center of the bridge, in a stance similar to Gayel's. All around, warriors were at their stations, working feverishly.

Gayel glanced down and a punch of pleasure hit him.

Alea stood beside him. She'd traded her Space Corps uniform for a formfitting, black-and-white Space Corps spacesuit. It showed every lovely part of her fit body. His gut tightened, and he fought his desire down.

Now was not the time.

"Tobis, report," Davion said, voice tense.

The viewscreen flashed.

"War Commander, we're traveling at top speed," the seasoned warrior behind a console said, then paused. "The Kantos fleet will beat us to Orzon by thirty-four ship minutes."

Cren. Gayel clamped his fingers together.

“Orzon is not completely vulnerable.” Davion turned to Gayel. “It has two well-armed cruisers, and planetary defenses.”

Gayel nodded. “Get Base Commander Lann-Jadd on screen.” An image of the blue orb of the planet blinked up. Orzon. Visible was the science space station that orbited the planet. It was where they carried out experimental research.

A face flashed up. Base Commander Lann-Jadd was a young, but experienced, commander. Her brown hair was cut to her shoulders, her eyes a swirl of gold and black.

“Your Highness.” Lines bracketed the female warrior’s mouth.

“We’re en route, Base Commander. But the Kantos will beat us by thirty-four ship minutes.”

The woman’s eyes flickered. “We’ll hold.”

“I know. The Oronis and the Terrans are coming, too. The warrior trainees?”

“We’re evacuating the base as we speak. We’ll shift them into the catacombs.”

The mountains near the main base on Orzon were riddled with caverns. The Eon had reinforced them as safe havens for the trainees, in case of emergency.

“Very good.” He kept the woman’s gaze. “We’re coming.”

She nodded. “Thank you, Your Highness.” Then she was gone.

The noise on the bridge echoed in his ears.

They’d lose people. He knew it in his heart. The Kantos were coming and he was certain they’d launched now because they’d perfected their pathogen.

He wanted to yell, or hit something.

But his people needed his strength and calm.

“Davion...I need your office.”

The war commander nodded. “Of course.”

Near the back of the bridge, he saw his sister and Ryphen straighten from where they'd been standing. He waved them off.

Gayel strode into the office. The compact space was dominated by a large desk and a round window looking into space. He dragged in some deep breaths.

People would die. Perhaps young warriors. He'd failed them.

The helindai. He might be forced to use the ancient power. He released a breath.

The door whispered open.

"Leave," he growled.

"No."

Alea. He scented her. Felt her. Like she was in his bones.

He didn't want her to see him like this.

"I'm not one of your subjects to order around," she said.

A hand touched his back, and she slipped around in front of him.

"I'm here," she said quietly. "I can't make this better, but I'm here, by your side. You don't have to shoulder this alone."

And she didn't think she'd make a good queen.

He cupped her head, and pressed his forehead to hers. And the pressure in his chest eased a little.

"We'll face the Kantos together," she said.

"Alea." He kissed her.

The door chimed and she quickly stepped back.

Gayel straightened. "Enter."

Davion entered, followed by Eve, his Security Commander Caze Vann-Jad and his Terran mate, Lara. Medical Commander Aydin Kann-Ath, Adlyn, and Ryphen were the last to enter.

The group all looked grim.

“What is it?” Gayel asked.

“You know that Thane and I have been working on a way to neutralize the Kantos pathogen or to affect the Kantos,” Aydin said.

“And?”

“We’ve developed an agent. One that violently affects the Kantos nervous system.”

Alea straightened. The air in the office charged.

“It kills them,” Davion said.

Gayel sucked in a breath, processing the implications.

“We’ve only run small-scale lab tests,” Aydin said. “But all Kantos tissue dies.”

“It will annihilate them,” Alea said quietly, her tone devoid of emotion.

“It’s a way to stop them preying on any more worlds,” Davion said.

A muscle ticked in Gayel’s jaw. Like his father had wiped out the Kognak, and driven another species, the Ehla, close to extinction. He’d used the helindai against the Kognak, but he’d launched a powerful biological weapon against the Ehla.

Yes, they’d been antagonistic killers, but it had never sat well with Gayel. And now he knew that his father had suffered regrets.

“There are good Kantos,” Alea said.

Nisid and his rogue allies from the planet Crolla. Gayel frowned. “Can we ensure Nisid and his people remain unaffected?”

“There are no guarantees without a lot more testing.” Aydin shrugged a shoulder. “We don’t have time for tests.”

The Kantos would attack Orzon within minutes.

And Orzon would only be the start. They would continue to swarm other Eon and allied worlds unless the Eon stopped them.

“The Kantos must be stopped,” Gayel said carefully.

Alea swallowed. She was still standing beside him, but he felt the distance growing.

“The Kantos elite council are mass murderers,” Alea said. “Out to annihilate my planet. But does that give us the right to annihilate an entire species in return?”

Gayel felt his warriors watching.

“I came from bad people,” she said. “I watched them being killed. I don’t think they deserved the bloody death they suffered, whatever their crimes. And it affected more than just them.”

Yes, she still bore the scars.

“I hold so many lives in my hands,” Gayel said quietly.

“I know. Eon, Terran...and Kantos.” She stared at him for a beat, then walked out.

Cren. His gut was tied in knots.

So many lives, young ones, depended on him and the decisions he made.

“Gayel?”

He looked at Davion.

“She has some good points, but the most salient point is that a planet full of young warriors and innocents is about to have the helians ripped from them.” Davion’s eyes flashed blue. “Most will die.”

Gayel gave a tight nod. “Aydin, please keep working. I need a solution that stops the Kantos, that doesn’t wipe out the species completely.”

The medical commander released a breath. “Gayel, there isn’t any time.”

“Do what you can. And still prepare the agent. That’s our plan.”

The humans and warriors left, except for Davion.

“Terrans perpetually surprise,” Davion said. “They feel so much. They make you look at things in different ways.”

“My father wouldn’t hesitate.” He might regret it later, but he wouldn’t hesitate.

“You’re not your father, Gayel. You are so much more than he ever was.”

Davion left.

Gayel stared out the window, lost in his thoughts, and feeling alone without Alea.

ALEA PACED the length of the observation room, all the while watching the expanse of star-studded space out the window. They weren’t in visual range of the planet yet.

But she knew the Kantos were out there.

Ready to kill.

The rest of the Eon fleet, along with ships belonging to Earth and other allies were racing toward Orzon.

She knew this was self-defense. Kill or be killed. She believed in all of those. But annihilation of an entire species? No, she couldn’t get behind that.

She wondered how Ben was doing back on Eon. He’d stayed to guard the women and the delegates. Alea really wished he was here, to listen, to offer her his no-nonsense, straight-forward advice.

Eve appeared, rubbing her belly. “I heard about the agent the medical commanders have developed.”

Alea blew out a breath. “Am I crazy to say we shouldn’t use it?”

“No. A part of me wants the Kantos dead. I’ve seen up close and personal how horrible they can be.” Eve shook her head. “But my heart has trouble with the idea of killing an entire species.”

Alea nodded. God, she'd left Gayel with more weight on his broad shoulders. She should've stayed, talked with him about it.

Alarms started blaring.

"Shit," Eve muttered. "Let's get to the bridge."

When they stepped onto the *Desteron's* bridge, it was a flurry of activity.

Warriors raced between stations. Gayel and Davion stood with their gazes glued to the viewscreen.

The display was filled with static.

"Clear it up," Davion barked.

"What's happening?" Eve asked her mate.

Davion wrapped a brawny arm around her.

Alea moved closer to Gayel. He looked carved from stone, his jaw tight.

Someone cleaned up the image. She sucked back a harsh gasp.

The image was of a crisp, clean room. Not a ship, but a lab.

"The Orzon science station," Gayel said. "Orbiting the planet. The Kantos attacked them first."

There were bodies on the floor, and blood sprayed up the walls, both green and red.

A warrior appeared, heaving himself up on the console. He was covered in blood.

"Your H-Highness."

"It's Science Commander Brant Dann-Ath," a warrior called out.

"Brant," Gayel said. "We're almost there."

The warrior grimaced, back arching. "It's too late for me." The man made a low groan. "They...cut me off from my helian."

He lifted his wrist. The brown band around it was withered and bleeding.

Alea bit her lip. She felt the horror from the *Desteron's* warriors.

"I...felt it die." His voice hitched. "They released a plague. It started tearing at the bonds with the helian. They're all dead. All my warriors are dead, and I'm dying."

"Brant..." Gayel's voice was terrible. "I'm sorry we weren't faster."

"It's not your fault. King Gayel, a team of Kantos is on their way to the surface."

Gayel sharpened. "Do you know what they have planned?"

Brant grimaced, coughed. There was blood on his lips. "The elite was talking in my head. Taunting."

Assholes. Alea gritted her teeth.

"They talked of deploying the plague on Orzon. Destroying all our young warriors."

Curses filled the bridge. The warriors were all angry, bristling.

"Brant, how? Did they share anything about their plan?"

The man slumped.

"Brant?"

He lifted his head. "Locust plague. Storms. Clouds."

Alea frowned and met Eve's gaze. *What did that mean?*

"Brant?" Gayel urged. "What locust plague?"

"They'll set locusts, filled with the pathogen, free on Orzon. Destroy the helians and their warriors."

No. No. No. Alea's hands balled.

The man on the screen's voice lowered. "Can't...hold on."

"You did well, Brant. You've helped save lives." Gayel bowed his head. "You and your helians will be avenged."

“Thank you... Your Highness. Save the trainees.”

“Be with the warriors.”

God. Alea wanted to touch Gayel. His jaw was hard and a terrible tension radiated from him.

Screw it. She couldn't just let him stand there and deal with this tragedy alone.

She moved closer and slipped her hand into his.

He didn't look down, but his fingers squeezed hers, hard.

“Your Highness, the Kantos fleet is in visual range,” Davion said.

Gayel nodded. “On screen.”

Alea stared at the ships, ice sliding into her veins. So many. They were all shapes and sizes, most looking like gigantic bugs.

As she watched, she saw a Kantos ship start to bombard the planet. There were two Eon ships defending, but they weren't enough.

“How long until we're in range?” she asked.

Davion's eyes gleamed with blue fire. “Ten minutes.”

“Do you still think we shouldn't kill the cren-cursed bugs?” Caze asked Alea.

“These ones, yes, but they're not all like this. And—” she met Gayel's gaze “—without the hunger forced on them, even these ones would be different.” She shook her head. “I'm sorry. I understand. If these were my people...”

The doors burst open and Aydin raced in.

“I have something.” He held up a vial. It looked like it was filled with black smoke.

“What is it?” Gayel demanded.

“If I'm correct, and my prelim tests look good, this agent *blocks* the hunger.”

Alea gasped and looked at Gayel.

“It stops the Kantos changing and getting more aggressive?” she asked Aydin.

The medical commander nodded.

“You’ve tested it?” Gayel asked.

“Small-scale.” Aydin took a deep breath. “I can’t guarantee it will work, but there’s a chance.”

Gayel looked conflicted.

“There’s more. It doesn’t just block the hunger, it reverses it.”

Alea stepped forward. “It could transform all those Kantos —” she flung an arm at the screen “—back to their natural state?”

Aydin nodded.

“Make as much as you can, Aydin,” Gayel ordered. He turned to the screen.

“Gayel?” Davion said. “We’ll be in range in seconds.”

“Good. Scan the surface for the Kantos.” His lips formed a grim line. “And War Commander, engage the enemy.”

“With pleasure, Your Highness.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gayel watched laser fire light up the space around Orzon. Blue laser arched toward the ugly, insect-like Kantos battle cruisers. Davion was barking commands to the *Desteron* warriors and the rest of the fleet.

“Oh, my God,” Alea murmured.

She stood at his side. She couldn’t know just how much her silent support meant to him.

From his father, he’d learned that a king had to stand alone, as a beacon to his people. But maybe, with just one special person, he could show himself as he truly was. Maybe he was stronger if he didn’t stand alone.

But right now, he would defend his people. Fight for their empire.

A large warship came into view. It was the *Rengard*. On one side of the viewscreen Malax appeared, a small, curly-haired woman at his side.

“What did we miss?” Wren asked.

“Malax, Wren, good to see you,” Davion said.

Gayel nodded. “Malax, take the Kantos down.”

The *Rengard’s* war commander nodded. “Tell our entire fleet to allow Sassy access to their weapons systems. She and Wren have some things planned.”

“Acknowledged,” Gayel said, nodding at Davion.

“Giddy up,” a female voice blasted across the line. “Let’s go bug-hunting.”

Sassy was Wren’s helian-enhanced tablet. Alea had heard the sentient being had acquired quite a personality.

“Let’s try for some decorum,” Wren said dryly.

An amused snort. “Decorum, smorum. Here goes. Initiating.”

All the Eon fleet fired in tandem. The laser fire shot with frightening precision, flying fast and striking multiple Kantos ships.

“Woo-hoo!” Sassy cried. “Let’s do it again.”

A stream of Kantos swarm ships poured out of several battle cruisers. They looked like a brown cloud of bugs.

From the *Rengard*, silver and blue Eon fighters—sleek and fast—shot into space. They moved into streamlined formations.

“Incredible,” Alea said. “You guys sure make pretty ships.”

The swarm ships and fighters engaged in a dizzying display of fighting. Beyond them, lasers filled the black.

“A Kantos torpedo is inbound,” a warrior yelled. “It’s through the defense cannons. Brace.”

The *Desteron* rocked.

Alea staggered and Gayel grabbed her.

“Bring our weapons around,” Davion yelled. “Fire.”

Vibrations rumbled through the ship as they fired. A smaller Terran ship zipped past. It bristled with weapons. The *Divergent*.

It targeted the Kantos battle cruiser, turning dizzying circles around it.

Davion shook his head. “About time you turned up.”

On screen, a man and woman appeared. Captain Allie Borden was one of Space Corps’ best, and beside her was her

mate, Davion's former Second Commander, Brack Thann-Felis.

"We didn't want to miss the fun," Brack said.

"Marines and warriors are boarding the science station," a warrior called out.

On screen, Gayel saw the battered station, and the team cutting through the airlock doors.

"We have several Eon life signs," Davion said, a dark look on his face. "Our team is going in to find any survivors."

Alea smiled. "I see Lieutenant Jamie Park. That woman is badass to the bone."

"King Gayel." A female warrior turned. "We have an incoming transmission from the Kantos. They're asking to speak to you."

Gayel sucked in a breath and looked at Alea, then Davion. "On screen."

Three elites came into view. They were calm, eerie, their eyes glowing.

"You will fail."

They were using a robotic voice synthesizer.

"No, *you* will fail," Gayel said. "Like all your attempts to assassinate me. It ends today. We, the Eon, and our allies will not allow your reign of terror to continue."

The elites made an angry, hissing sound.

"There will be no mercy. We will destroy your warriors and your helians. Without warriors, your Empire is defenseless."

The screen went black.

Cren. Gayel compressed his lips. Alea touched his arm, and it steadied him. "I need an update on the agent."

"The medical commander says he needs a little more time," a warrior said. "They're synthesizing as much of the agent as they can."

On screen, a smaller Eon cruiser exploded. A Kantos ship flew right through it.

His gut curdled. Lives lost.

“War Commander, Your Highness,” another warrior called out. “Something is happening on the planet’s surface.”

The screen zoomed in. Gayel watched banks of clouds churn, moving unnaturally fast.

“What is that?” Davion asked.

“Something is generating wild storms and high winds. Right above the main Eon base. At current calculations, it will cover the entire planet within two hours.”

“The Kantos,” Alea said. “What the hell are they doing?”

“What else have the scans detected?” Gayel demanded.

“There’s a large Kantos presence near the base, and some sort of equipment. We believe it’s a storm generator. It seems to be affecting the planet’s gravity, and I’m detecting pockets of very low gravity around it.”

“*Cren*-cursed bugs,” Davion muttered.

“I managed some high-resolution scans and images before the cloud cover got too dense,” the warrior said.

On screen, Gayel saw Kantos soldiers—rows and rows of them. It looked like they had taken over the Eon base. They were unloading objects from a Kantos ship. He saw several large, roughly spherical, brown pods.

“What are those?” Caze said.

Gayel frowned. “They look like—”

“Eggs,” Alea breathed.

A young warrior nodded. “Scans show that the pods are filled with lots of small bugs.”

“The locust plague.” Ice filled Gayel’s blood. “They’re planning to unleash these. Whatever is in them must be carrying the pathogen.”

Alea sucked in a sharp breath.

“And the storm they’re generating has wild winds that will spread them across the entire planet,” Davion said.

The *Desteron*’s alarms blared.

The warship jolted.

“A Kantos battle cruiser is heading straight for us!” Davion yelled.

The war commander directed his people, and Gayel saw the ship coming. It was damaged, some of its legs missing from the front.

They were on a suicide mission to collide with the *Desteron*.

“It’s going to ram us!” Alea braced.

A black ship blinked into being between the *Desteron* and the battle cruiser.

It was pure black, and covered in spikes. At the bow, the ship was forked, and between the two arms, a blue ball of energy crackled to life.

The ship fired.

The blue ball of energy hit the Kantos ship and it exploded into tiny pieces.

“Who is that?” Alea breathed.

“More allies.” Gayel smiled.

The viewscreen filled with the image of a man covered in black armor. His visor retracted to show his angular, handsome face.

“Excellent timing, Knightmaster Ashtin,” Gayel said.

The man inclined his head. “My fleet will arrive shortly, Gayel. The Oronis are with you in this fight.”

“Thank you.”

The Oronis ship wheeled around and launched into the battle.

“The storm on the planet is intensifying,” Davion said.

“We need to get down there and shut down the storm and plague,” Alea said. “I can go.”

Gayel’s body rejected the idea. Violently.

He didn’t want her in danger. She watched him, her gaze steady and clearly already preparing to fight.

He shouldn’t have fallen for a warrior.

“You need all your ships and warriors up here to hold the line,” she said. “I can go.”

“And I’m coming with you,” Gayel said.

She jerked. “No. You’re the king—”

“All the more reason to fight for my people. I was a warrior long before I was a king.”

The doors to the bridge opened and Aydin strode in. “I’ve made all the agent we can.”

“Good. Alea and I will get to the surface and stop the Kantos plague.”

“Gayel, as your guard, I forbid this,” Adlyn snapped. Ryphen stood beside her, jaw tight.

Davion shook his head. “Gayel, it’s too dangerous—”

“If we take a strike team, they’ll detect us coming. Alea and I have a better chance of sneaking through alone. I was thinking of taking the explora-pods. They are designed to avoid detection.”

Adlyn cursed.

Davion looked at the floor, his face twisted. “The explora-pods are a good idea, but I’ll go.”

“You have a child on the way,” Gayel said. “And a ship to command.”

“I’ll go,” Adlyn said.

Gayel took his sister’s hand. “You have a child waiting for your return. I’m going to do this.” He looked at Aydin. “Load up the agent onto two explora-pods. Now.”

“THE AUTOPILOT WILL DO MOST of the work, but you can switch to manual controls if—”

Alea nodded. “I’ve trained in simulators on most Eon spacecraft,” she told Caze.

“Okay,” the security commander said. “If everything goes smoothly, you shouldn’t need manual flight control.”

There was a space battle raging. Alea didn’t think smooth was an option.

She stepped back. The explora-pods looked like glass balls the size of small cars, but they were made of extra-strong Eon plastic reinforced with metal fibers. The pilot’s seat was in the center, and the propulsion system sat beneath and behind, made of toughened gray metal.

She could see the craft would be extremely maneuverable. You had to love Eon tech.

The medical commander and his team were busy loading canisters of the agent into the small cargo areas of the explora-pods.

The doors leading into the hangar opened, and Gayel strode in, wearing his black Eon armor.

There was no sign of the king now, he was pure warrior. His purple-black gaze met hers and she felt a zing.

He stopped beside her. “Are you ready?”

She nodded. “Ready.”

She saw him wrestle with a flash of frustration. “I really want to touch you right now.”

Warmth filled her. “Me, too.”

She watched him drag in a deep breath, his muscles tense. Again, she felt a thrill, knowing that she affected him this way. This powerful, strong warrior.

She'd need to confront her growing feelings for him soon. She couldn't keep lying to herself or him.

But right now, they didn't have the time.

They needed to get to the surface and stop the Kantos.

They'd talk after. If they survived.

"The agent is all loaded," Aydin said.

"We're ready, then" Gayel said.

"Good luck," Davion nodded. "May the warriors guide you."

Gayel gripped Alea's arm, squeezed it, then climbed into his explora-pod.

Alea slipped through the open door and settled in the seat. A harness slithered across her chest. In the second explora-pod, she watched Gayel settle in his chair. He turned his head and met her gaze through the clear shields and nodded.

She nodded back.

The others left the hangar, and the door of her pod whispered closed. A second later, the main hangar doors opened.

Gayel's pod lifted, and then darted out at high speed.

Alea pressed the controls, and her pod followed.

She was thrown back in her seat. *Wow*. The explora-pod was super fast, and even more maneuverable than she'd expected.

They sped away from the *Desteron* and into hell.

The space battle raged around them. And staring at it, up close and personal, through the clear hull of her small pod made everything in her body clench hard.

Focus, Alea.

She grimly stared ahead. The orb of Orzon hung in the distance.

Gayel's pod dived, and hers followed. They zipped through the worst of the fighting. Suddenly, a cloud of insect-like swarm ships flew past, engulfing them.

It was like flying into a giant hailstorm.

The explora-pod adjusted, and Alea fought the urge to take the controls.

She saw Gayel's pod dodge—left, right, up.

Hers followed right behind...then got clipped by a swarm ship.

The explora-pod spun out of control.

Oh, fuck.

She tumbled over and over, her adrenaline racing, her heart in her throat.

Then she hit something else, and went spinning in a different direction. Alarms were blaring.

“Hull integrity at sixty-two percent,” the computer chimed.

Great. Just what she needed, for her ship to splinter apart. She wrenched the controls and spun wildly, nausea hitting her.

“Alea! Alea!” The roar of Gayel's voice came across the comm line. “Just let the computer correct. It's designed for this.”

She sucked in a sharp breath, and lifted her hands. It went against every instinct in her body.

The explora-pod spun several more times, turning everything around her into a sickening blur. Then miraculously, it leveled out.

She was panting. *Jeez.*

“Are you all right?”

Gayel's explora-pod was right alongside hers. His intense gaze was focused on her like a laser. She took another steadying breath and nodded.

He looked like he wanted to say something, but then he faced forward. His explora-pod shot off.

Alea's followed.

Another turn, and the planet was right ahead of them, taking up all their vision.

It was beautiful. This close, she could make out the details of the landmasses and oceans. And the growing bank of fearsome clouds spreading across the planet.

Okay, they could do this.

Another alarm sounded. *What now?*

Gayel's curse came across the line. "We have a Kantos ship on our tail."

Oh, shit. She swiveled. The battle behind them was all chaos and movement. She had a perfect view of the Eon, Oronis, and Terran ships.

Then she saw the mid-size Kantos ship coming their way. It looked like a giant flea.

"Alea, we need to go. Now!"

"I'm right behind you."

The explora-pod launched forward. The planet got closer and closer.

Kantos fire winged pass them. *Shit.*

"Evade!" Gayel yelled.

The explora-pods dropped, and moved into an evasion pattern, dodging left and right.

They hit the atmosphere, and the ride got even bumpier.

Davion had warned them that the explora-pods were designed for space exploration—exploring asteroid fields and other anomalies. They were less great at going planetside.

She was thrown back in her seat, her teeth rattling.

Please don't let the Kantos ship follow.

There was a massive jolt and she was thrown forward against her restraints.

Smoke-filled her sphere.

“Gayel, I’m hit!”

“Hold your course, Alea.” His voice was tense. “I’ve tapped into your system. Your pod is damaged, but the propulsion is still intact. You can land.”

“I hear a *but*,” she said.

“It’ll be bumpy. Your stabilizers are damaged.”

“Oh, great.” The ship was already shaking like crazy. She coughed, the smoke starting to clear.

They were closer to the ground now.

They charged into the boiling clouds, and all she could see was gray.

Then suddenly, they broke free of the churning clouds and the surface came into view. A large body of water, rivers snaking from it, and then dense, green jungle punctuated by pops of color—red, yellow, lime green.

Gayel’s explora-pod disappeared into the canopy.

Oh, God. She saw the tiny clearing he was aiming for.

Then the jungle swallowed her.

She smiled. They were going to make it.

Then her explora-pod dipped and hit tree branches. It jerked finally, then rolled.

Oh, shit.

Everything was a whirl of green, then there was a giant thump.

Alea felt a flash of pain, then the green turned to nothing but black.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gayel yanked on the harness, anxious to get it off.
Cren. Cren.

He had to get to Alea.

His explora-pod had landed in a small clearing, but Alea's damaged pod had hit the trees. He could see it, tipped upside down in the nearby vegetation.

With a grunt, he yanked free of the chair and the side of the pod retracted.

The scent of the jungle and humidity slapped him in the face. There were so many different, lush, exotic scents, and it almost overwhelmed him. His helian pulsed.

He ran to Alea's explora-pod, his gut tight. It was dented, and the clear shell was decorated in a web of cracks. He saw her inside, hanging upside-down in the harness.

She was still. Not moving at all.

"Alea!" He tried to open the door, but the dent prevented it.

Cren. He morphed a large battle hammer.

Gayel swung.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

The side of the pod tore open. With a thought, the hammer dissolved. He gripped the edges and ripped the pod open. When the hole was big enough, he leaned inside.

“Alea! Talk to me.”

There was no movement.

The pain inside him was like being strangled. Was she breathing? He strained to listen. *There*. He heard her faint breath. And the beat of her heart.

“Alea?” He unfastened the harness and caught her dead weight.

Awkwardly, he maneuvered her out and laid her flat on the damp, jungle floor.

He cupped her face. She had a cut on her temple, a smudge of blood, but it didn’t look bad.

“Alea, wake up.”

Her eyelids fluttered and her eyes opened.

He stared into her golden-brown eyes and relief punched through him.

“Thank the warriors.” He pulled her up and kissed her.

She cupped the back of his neck. “I’m okay,” she whispered against his lips. “Hell of a ride.”

“Yes.”

A crack of thunder sounded overhead and the wind picked up, rattling the nearby branches. A flock of some sort of birds took flight, squawking in distress.

They both looked up.

Alea froze and Gayel’s hand clenched on her.

By Ston’s sword. In the distance, the clouds were churning and spinning in a giant vortex. They were dense and black, and as they watched, forked, red lightning lit up the clouds.

“That looks bad,” Alea muttered.

“That’s where the Kantos weather generator is.” He helped her up. “We need to head there.”

She nodded. “Let’s get the agent.”

He tugged her back in for a kiss. “Don’t get hurt, Alea.”

She nipped his lip. “I don’t plan to. And the same goes for you, Your Highness.”

They packed the canisters into their backpacks and pulled them on.

Gayel eyed the storm overhead. This was not going to be an easy trek.

They headed off.

The vegetation was dense, but Orzon was packed with wildlife, so there were plenty of narrow, winding trails through the trees.

Alea followed behind him. He formed a heavy sword, occasionally cutting vines and bushes out of their way.

They stopped briefly for a drink and a snack. Rain had started to fall lightly. Alea moved well, keeping pace.

“Have you spent much time here?” she asked.

“As a young warrior, yes. These days, I mostly visit the base for graduation ceremonies.” He looked up at the trees above. “It’s been a while since I’ve hacked through the jungle here.”

There was a distant sound and she cocked her head.

“There’s a river nearby,” he told her. “And by the sounds of it, a waterfall. One of the dozens in this area.”

They continued on, and the rain got heavier. They came out of the trees and saw the river.

“Wow.” Alea murmured.

The water was crystal clear, but with liquid strands of bright blue and green in it. It looked like iridescent paint had been mixed into the stream. Large plants with giant leaves larger than Gayel lined the riverbanks.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“It is. But don’t let it fool you, this planet can be dangerous too. We send our young warriors out here to train. Those who underestimate Orzon end up bleeding.”

Gayel heard a noise and froze.

Alea tensed and they scanned the wall of green.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“I’m not sure.” He let his senses expand. There was so much life that it was hard to pick everything apart.

There.

The sound of bodies, moving swiftly. He picked up faint clicking sounds.

Gayel swallowed a curse. “Kantos.”

“Fuck.”

He took her hand. “Come on.”

They broke into a run, keeping to the edge of the river.

Gayel pressed his lips together. “They’re hunting us.” No doubt, they’d found the wreckage of their pods.

“Well, let’s give them a good run.” There was a sharp edge to her smile.

They picked up speed. The roar of the waterfall got louder.

Gayel suddenly stopped.

“Gayel?”

“*Cren.* I can hear more Kantos coming in from the other direction.”

They were trapped in the middle.

“Shit.” She looked around. “We could climb? Hide in the trees?”

He turned. The Kantos were getting closer.

We will hunt you down, Eon.

The Kantos elite's voice echoed in his head.

He wasn't going to let them get their hands on Alea. He felt a driving, protective need to keep her safe, above all else.

Then he glanced down at the water.

"We can hide in the river."

At this point in the river, the water churned around some rocks, making it harder to see into it.

Alea dragged in a breath, then sloshed into the river.

Gayel followed.

Clicking filled the air. Bushes rustled close by.

"Hurry," he said.

Together, they plunged deeper into the water, up to their waists.

Then they both took deep breaths and plunged under the water.

The colored waters of Orzon were all different temperatures. The blues were cooler, the greens warmer. It wrapped around their bodies.

Gayel held her hand and through the water, he saw the distorted images of the Kantos soldiers burst out of the trees.

PRESSURE BUILT IN HER LUNGS, but Alea stayed relaxed.

She'd undergone training to hold her breath in low-oxygen environments.

Through the wavy vision of water, she watched the Kantos soldiers.

They moved easily on their four legs; their bodies made of hard, brown shell. Their blade-like arms were weapons themselves.

Her lip curled, even as a part of her tried to remember that these aliens weren't born hardened killers. She watched them keep searching, her lungs burning now.

She looked at Gayel. It appeared easy for him to hold his breath. His brown hair floated around his face. God, he spoke to every part of her.

She was falling for him—totally, irrevocably.

He nudged her. She looked back and saw that the Kantos soldiers were gone.

They slowly rose, just the tops of their heads above the water.

Everything was still, quiet, except for the beat of the rain. Even the wildlife was silent.

They both sucked in quiet breaths.

“Wait,” Gayel murmured.

Thankfully the water wasn't cold, and her suit protected her. They waited. The rain continued to fall, and the clouds were even denser now. God, how long until they unleashed the plague?

Her belly tied into knots. They had to hurry. The young warriors were in hiding, but they couldn't outrun the pathogen that would destroy them and their bond to their helians.

Slowly, the wildlife started up again, chirping and twittering, moving through the undergrowth. Gayel nodded, and they climbed back up the riverbank where they'd entered the river. She squeezed the water out of her braid.

“We need to be vigilant,” he said. “They won't stop searching for us.”

She nodded and tightened the straps on her backpack. “Let's go.”

They moved at a slower, more cautious pace. Alea ducked under some low, twisted branches. The vegetation was thicker, the rain heavier. It ran down her face, and she blinked the water out of her eyes.

Suddenly, Gayel stopped. Her boot slid in the mud, and she ran into his broad back.

He was stiff, staring ahead.

Through the sheet of rain, it was hard to see anything.

Then she saw movement. A sleek, small bug the size of a dog appeared. It had red-and-black stripes on its shell, several antennae wiggling madly.

“A Kantos scout,” he whispered.

The bug turned in their direction, antennae vibrating faster, then it darted away.

“*Cren*, it’ll alert the soldiers. *Run.*”

They sprinted. It wasn’t long before they heard crashing through the jungle and clicking in the air.

We have your trail, Eon. Soon, you will die.

Alea’s pulse tripped. *Oh, fuck.*

“We’ll cross the river,” Gayel barked.

They splashed into the water. Halfway across, she could no longer touch bottom, and she pulled herself through the water.

Suddenly, sharp barbs hit the water nearby. She glanced back and saw Kantos soldiers were firing barbs from their arms.

“Dive!” she cried.

They dived into the water, kicking hard. Gayel was a strong swimmer and pulled ahead of her.

He stood in the shallow water on the far side of the river, and as she made her way closer, he morphed a large blaster on his arm. He turned back and fired a blast of pure energy at the Kantos on the far bank.

Alea rose. Then she spotted movement in the trees.

More Kantos soldiers raced out on their side of the river.

“Gayel!” She yanked her blaster off her hip and fired.

She heard his curse, and he strode to her, pulling her back into the river. The current caught them, dragging them downstream.

But the Kantos kept pace on either side of the river.

Her chest burned. *How the hell could they get out of this?*

Then the roar of the waterfall got louder, and her breath hitched.

They rounded a bend, and Gayel grabbed a rock, holding them in place. Ahead, the water plunged over a cliff.

Oh, no.

Kantos or the waterfall? Not much of a choice.

“Gayel?”

Face grim, he looked to the Kantos. Three soldiers were splashing into the water, aiming at them.

He met her gaze, the strands of purple glowing. “We don’t know what’s on the other side of the waterfall.”

It could be rocks, or dangerous wildlife. She bit her lip.

The moment of indecision cost them. The Kantos rushed in, and grabbed Gayel.

They almost ignored her—clearly, she was not considered a threat. One soldier kept an arm aimed in her direction and she raised her hands.

Then one of the soldiers rammed a sharp arm into Gayel’s gut. He grunted.

The elite on the bank stared at them.

Kill them.

Alea’s eyes widened. “No!”

All the Kantos gazes turned her way.

“Alea,” Gayel growled.

She couldn’t let him die. She could at least give him a chance.

“Don’t you know who he is?” she yelled.

The elite stared, pinprick eyes glowing gold.

“He’s the king of the Eon,” she said.

The elite straightened.

Solann-Eon.

Gayel cursed.

At least he had a chance now.

More Kantos rushed into the river.

Bring them.

She met Gayel’s gaze. “We survive. We fight.”

She saw pride flare in his eyes. His gaze roamed her face, then something else bloomed.

“You have to survive, Alea.”

He lifted his foot and kicked her.

Alea teetered backward, and threw her arms in the air.

But her backpack pulled her off balance. *No.*

“Live, Alea,” Gayel said.

Then she tipped over the waterfall and plummeted.

The falling water hit her and she tumbled over and over. A second later, she hit the pool below.

Alea plunged deep, fighting to stay calm.

Then she kicked her legs and broke the surface. She looked up at the waterfall, fear and anger a wicked mess in her belly.

Damn him. He’d protected her. Now he was alone with the Kantos.

And they knew who he was.

Fighting her fear, she kicked to the side of the pool. She stayed close to the waterfall, kicking away from the dangerous eddies and rocks.

She used the waterfall for cover, in case the Kantos were looking for her.

She pulled herself onto a long, flat rock and sat for a moment, just sucking in air.

Dammit. Damn him to hell. She was in love with Gayel Solann-Eon. She pressed a shaky hand to her cheek.

Hell of a time to work that out.

And now he was a prisoner of his worst enemy.

Okay, think, Alea.

A downpour of rain hit, followed by a deafening crack of thunder. She pulled in another shaky breath. She needed a plan.

She *had* to rescue Gayel.

She pulled her backpack off and stared at the canisters. Then she pulled out some water and food.

As she nibbled the nutrition mix, she heard a rustle in the bushes.

She yanked out her blaster and aimed it at the vegetation.

Nothing.

She pushed her wet hair out of her face. *Wait.* A pair of teal eyes peered at her from the bush.

She swallowed. "Hey."

They kept staring. She took a slow mouthful of food.

Then another.

There was a rustle and the creature crept out.

Oh, wow. It was stunning.

It was the size of a large cat, colored bronze with touches of brilliant blue and green, like the colors in the water. Two thin tails extended behind it, waving like snakes. And its teal eyes were magnificent and luminous.

"Hello, there," Alea breathed.

The feline hesitated, then slunk closer.

Alea held out her food, and hoped it wouldn't harm the animal. It sniffed, then delicately ate off her palm.

Then, it regally crawled into her lap and brushed against her.

She felt a pulse of calm and relief, and blinked. It was coming from the animal.

Wow. She stroked its soft fur gently.

“I'm sorry, but I have to go. I need to get to the Eon base and rescue the man I just realized that I've fallen in love with.”

The creature blinked its extraordinary eyes.

Then it rose and walked away. It paused and looked back.

It was like it wanted her to follow it. Alea froze.

She pushed to her feet and the cat continued on.

Okay. “You know the way to the base?”

Its tails flicked.

Maybe she hit her head on the way down? She shouldered her backpack. What did she have to lose?

I'm coming, Gayel.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As several blows hit his gut and torso, Gayel bent over, biting back a groan.

He wouldn't give these Kantos the pleasure of hearing his pain.

A hard shove sent him stumbling.

Move, King of Eon.

He glanced up at the elite. "Make me."

Two Kantos soldiers gripped his arms and half dragged him through the jungle. His hands were tied in front of him and he had some black gunk on his helian band, blocking his communication with his symbiont. That meant no armor, and no weapons.

He had tried to slow the Kantos down, but soon, he was bleeding and bruised for his efforts. It didn't matter. As long as Alea was alive.

By the warriors, let her have survived the fall.

The rain was pelting down, and they were moving closer to where the clouds churned like an ugly brew. The rain stung as it hit his face.

They'd torn his backpack off him, and tossed it into the trees. Thankfully, they hadn't searched it, but now he had none of the agent. And he also had none of the antidote needed to free his helian band.

Unfortunately, this left him with limited options for stopping the plague the Kantos planned to unleash.

He let out an unsteady breath. Alea would survive. He held on to that.

But there were so many Eon on this planet, including the young warriors. And Gayel was well aware that it wouldn't stop here.

The Kantos would ravage the Eon Empire, and then Earth, then turn their sights on the Oronis, and beyond.

He had to stay focused and look for a way to stop them.

Finally, the jungle thinned out and gave way to cleared land. Huge walls circled the Eon base. Kantos guards let them in through the gates.

In the huge courtyard, there were no signs of any Eon, just lots of Kantos soldiers, and several bugs of different descriptions. He prayed to the warriors that all the Eon here had evacuated to the catacombs before the Kantos arrived.

He noticed slime smeared on the stones, and webs on the walls, and frowned. The bugs were clearly making themselves at home.

He also spotted the huge, brown generator-like device. He felt the throb of energy off it, its brown shell pulsing red as it sent waves of power skyward. He looked up, and his gut hardened.

Right overhead, the clouds whirled in a deadly vortex. Wind whipped his hair into his face.

Your empire will end today.

The Kantos voice in his head made him turn. An elite stared at him, pin-prick eyes glowing. It shifted on its four legs, and he wasn't sure if it was excited or nervous.

We will unleash a plague and kill your meddling warriors.

Several more elites came out of the main building, gliding over. Their voices joined in, echoing in his head.

This was the elite council.

Heat poured through his veins. This was the real enemy.

“You always underestimate us and our allies. It will be your downfall.”

Look, Solann-Eon. The lead elite pointed to the boiling clouds. Soon, the winds will carry our locust plague across the planet, infecting and destroying your future warriors.

Off to the side, Kantos soldiers pushed out carts, loaded with the large egg pods they'd seen in the images. Things inside the pods were writhing, distorting them.

We will free the krekta, and they will fly.

Revulsion filled Gayel, along with panic. *What the cren could he do to stop this?* He felt a horrible sense of helplessness.

The elite turned to watch the pods being moved into position. Clicking filled the air, and he knew they were talking to the other Kantos.

He couldn't even use the helindai. Not when he couldn't access his helian, and not without some of his warriors close by.

He dragged in a deep breath.

Something brushed his senses.

He lifted his head. He saw a native creature climbing over the stone wall. The xalk were deadly. The felines were vicious, and their tails could be lethal weapons.

It leaped off the wall and darted into the shadows.

Then he looked up and spotted a lithe figure in a black-and-white spacesuit with a backpack, climbing over the wall.

No. *No.* His chest locked. He wanted her safe. Not here, alone, in the middle of the enemy.

Careful not to look directly at her and give her presence away, he kept an eye on her until she disappeared from view.

You should be afraid, warrior king. Your end is close.

Cren, he'd never realized just how much the Kantos liked to talk.

“Less talk, bug, more action.”

The golden eyes flared.

The soldier behind him rammed an arm into Gayel's lower back.

Blocking the pain, he smiled, then spun, jumped into the air, and kicked.

The soldier's head snapped back, and it staggered. Gayel leaped up, landing on the soldier's back. He slipped his bound arms over its head and jerked.

The Kantos soldier's neck snapped.

Gayel leaped off, and as soon as his feet hit the ground, the soldiers were on him.

The blows drove him to the ground. They kept beating him, until he tasted blood in his mouth. But at least they weren't looking at Alea.

Enough. Bring him.

They dragged him across the courtyard. Pain throbbed through him, and he tried to forcefully push it back, as his helian couldn't help to dampen it.

He was pulled over to a tall pole in the center of the courtyard and tied to it. He tested the strength of his bonds surreptitiously. He might be able to pull free.

He glanced around. He couldn't see Alea anywhere.

He wanted her safe. *Needed* her safe.

We have something special, just for you, Solann-Eon.

He looked up. A soldier approached, carrying a small pod. It writhed and stretched in the soldier's arms. This close, he could hear a whispering sound coming from it.

They set it down in front of him.

Nothing to say? The elite cocked its head.

He stared at the elite. “You’re dead. Your reign of terror is almost over. My people, my warriors, my allies, won’t stop fighting you. We protect those we love, and you can never understand that. You’ll never understand what love motivates us to do.” He hoped Alea was listening. “Loving someone, especially a beautiful, strong, woman, brings everything into clear focus. It fills you with hope, with the need to do better for her, to protect her, cherish her, to stand by her.”

The elite shifted, clearly confused.

Gayel looked directly at them. “You had a chance to save your people, to help them be more. Instead, you used them, and robbed them of their free will. For that, you will die.”

Enough. Do it.

One soldier touched a fluid to his helian band, releasing it. His link with his symbiont flared to life. Gayel’s muscles bunched as he prepared to fight.

Then the soldier used its arm to slice open the small pod.

Insects flew out. They whirled in a funnel, their wings fluttering madly.

They were beige, ugly.

They swarmed Gayel.

He gritted his teeth. They nipped at him—and it felt like tiny blades cutting his skin.

Then, a strange sensation welled. Heat entered his veins. In his head, his helian screamed.

No. No! He felt the bond between him and his helian being ripped and torn at. Stretching thin.

The pain was immense. It felt like he was being torn in half.

He threw his head back and roared.

ALEA COULDN'T BREATHE.

The sound Gayel made—raw agony—was like a spike through her heart.

Her hands curled and she bit her lip. She wanted to leap from her hiding place and mow the Kantos down.

She fought for some control. To help him, she had to think.

Carefully, she slipped off her backpack and hid it behind the transport she was using as cover. Her new friend rubbed at her ankles, its colors shimmering.

She peered into the transport. It had a sleek Eon design. She reached in and opened a center console and smiled.

Yanking out the short sword, she gripped the hilt tightly. *Perfect.*

Crawling back out, she peeked over the transport. Locusts swirled around Gayel. She *had* to get them off him. His back bowed and he shouted in pain.

Enough.

Alea leaped on top of the transport and ran.

She jumped into the air, clutching her sword. She spun and beheaded a Kantos soldier. Clicking filled the air and several soldiers raced at her. She ducked and swung, then dodged as a soldier attacked.

Her blade slammed into the legs of the soldier, toppling it.

She had to get to Gayel.

There was an angry hissing sound. Her animal friend leaped at a Kantos soldier. It clamped onto the alien's head and then scratched with its sharp claws. The soldier staggered.

Alea fought with everything she had, whirling and swinging. She reached Gayel. The locusts looked like a whirling cloud.

She charged into the insects, waving her sword.

They bit at her.

God, it hurt. Like knives slashing at her. They were too small to hit with the sword.

She slapped at them, then stomped on the ones close to the ground.

“Alea.” His wide eyes met hers.

Suddenly, her feline friend leaped in...and started eating the locusts.

Holy cow. As more soldiers rushed toward them, she forced herself to look away.

She spun and lifted her sword. She had to keep the soldiers off them.

Her animal friend landed in front of her. It was...glowing. Its tails lengthened and whipped around wildly.

What the hell?

The animal sprang, and its tails wrapped around a soldier’s arm and neck. With one tug, it sliced off the soldier’s head and arm.

Oh. My. God. With a blink, Alea swiveled to face an incoming soldier. Her sword hit a hard arm and she gritted her teeth. She kept fighting.

A slash, followed by a kick, then a powerful swing. She ducked and slashed again.

More Kantos soldiers rushed at her. She blocked their attacks, but each hit vibrated through her body.

They drove her across the courtyard.

One got close and swung its arm.

This time she was a little slow, and the tip of its arm gashed her bicep.

Dammit. She leaped back, gritting her teeth through the pain.

A second soldier raced in and she dove, her body feeling every jolt as she rolled across the ground and pushed herself up.

A blow hit her side, cutting through her suit. She pressed a hand to the wound and felt blood.

Shit. A soldier knocked her legs out from under her and she went down. The sword fell from her hand.

God, get up, Alea.

Instinct had her rolling, and a sharp Kantos arm slammed into the stone, right where her body had been.

She saw the Kantos loom above her, its arm raised.

“Alea!”

Gayel’s roar cut across the space. He was free and covered in his armor.

He was okay. Relief punched through her.

He stood in the center of the mêlée, his muscular body encased in black, sword glowing purple in his hand. The wind whipped his hair around his rugged face.

He was alive, and all that mattered was that he was free.

He was too far away to help her, but he flung out an arm toward her.

Then black scales flew off his arm like smoke. They crossed the space between them and hit her body.

She felt a pulse of warmth as the armor covered her.

The Kantos attacked, eyes glowing. Alea rolled and leaped up, feeling a rush of energy filling her and dulling her pain.

Sword. Sword. She ran the thought through her head.

The blade formed, hilt in her hand—long, beautiful, and deadly.

She smiled and launched herself at the Kantos. She swung the sword and it felt perfect.

She cut the soldier down.

Then she fought her way to Gayel.

“You’re okay?” His gaze raked her.

“Yes. You?”

He nodded, but she saw pain on his face.

“Your helian?” she asked.

“Hurt, but we’re okay.”

Then together, they spun and faced more Kantos. As they fought, the wind picked up, tearing across the base.

Alea stared at the racks of egg pods. They must be filled with more locusts. *God.*

She looked up as a crack of lightning colored the dense clouds.

“We need to stop the weather generator,” she yelled.

He nodded.

At least if the locusts weren’t freed, they wouldn’t be able to spread.

They cut and hacked their way to the brown machine.

Stop them.

The voice of the elite screamed in her head.

She gritted her teeth. *Hell, no.*

A large, centipede-like bug leaped at them, but Gayel jumped and slashed his sword through it.

He was magnificent to watch.

She skewered another bug, and then they reached the device.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready!”

They sliced their swords into it.

She worked her blade through the hard shell, grunting. Suddenly, her animal friend leaped on top of the device.

“*By Ston’s sword,*” Gayel cried.

“It’s okay, she’s with me.”

The creature ripped at the device with its claws.

A second later, the lights blinked off.

Alea smiled.

Suddenly, there was a huge groan of metal and stone. She lifted her head, her pulse spiking.

Nearby, part of the main base building tore apart. The stones from the walls rose up into the air.

Nearby, Kantos soldiers floated off the ground, their legs waving.

What the hell?

Gayel cursed. “The device has affected the planet’s gravity, but only in pockets.”

Bits of rubble and Kantos soldiers were hanging in the air.

Wild clicking and buzzing echoed in her ears. The elites in the courtyard faced them.

Kill the Terran and the Eon king. Kill them now!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Run!” Gayel grabbed Alea’s hand and yanked her away from the incoming soldiers.

“Gayel, we need to deploy the agent.”

“Where is it?”

She tilted her head toward the other side of the courtyard.
“I hid the backpack.”

The Kantos soldiers rushed at them. They exploded into action.

Gayel slashed, watching green blood spray the stones. Alea moved with poetry and precision. She looked incredible in her Eon armor, wielding her sword with deadly skill.

His mate.

Love and pride filled him.

He dodged and slammed into the next soldier, thrusting his sword through the hard shell. Alea was right. They needed to deploy the agent, fast.

He looked up and saw the clouds were slowly dissipating.

Then he heard Alea curse. He spun.

She’d stepped into one of the low-gravity zones affected by the destroyed weather machine. She floated up off the ground.

Two Kantos floated up behind her.

She swung her sword and he realized she was skilled at fighting in space, and could apply that here to the low gravity. She hacked into the closest Kantos.

Gayel ran and jumped. He felt the gravity holding him down drop away, and he sailed upward.

He passed a hunk of rock torn from the buildings. He swung his sword and sliced into the other Kantos.

He reached Alea as she took the final soldier down. They hung there in the low gravity, and he circled an arm around her.

“The backpack is over there.” She pointed. “Behind that transport.”

He spotted it. “Let’s retrieve it, and release the agent.”

She nodded.

He grabbed her hand. She looked down at the armor covering her body. “I guess we need to talk about this after.”

Her tone was hard to read.

His gut cramped. She’d fight this. He felt a weight on his chest and gave her a curt nod.

Then she tugged him toward her. Their bodies collided, hanging in the air.

“We’ll talk,” she said. “Mate.”

Every muscle in him clenched and released. “Alea...”

She pressed her mouth to his.

For a brilliant second, they kissed, hanging together above the battlefield.

Then a loud buzzing filled the air.

They broke apart and looked down.

A new contingent of Kantos soldiers poured into the courtyard. Gayel cursed. The elite had called for reinforcements.

“We have to hurry,” he said.

“Gayel,” she whispered. “There are *hundreds* of them.”

More and more endless bugs swarmed in.

“We can’t give up. Come on.”

He pushed off the closest hanging rock, and they arrowed across the pocket of low gravity. When they hit the edge of it, they plummeted to the ground, both landing in a crouch.

The xalk appeared, colors shimmering, and moved straight to Alea.

Shaking off his amazement again, he didn’t tell her that the xalk were deadly, avoided the Eon, and did not befriend anyone.

They sprinted across the courtyard. A bug darted in front of them, and Gayel took it down.

Then, a soldier leaped out from behind some equipment. Alea swung her sword, connecting with the soldier’s arm. The xalk leaped, ripping at the Kantos’ eyes.

They *had* to reach the backpack.

But more Kantos rushed at them, and soon they were surrounded by soldiers and bugs.

They pushed on, slashing and stabbing. Soon, Gayel’s arm burned, but he gritted his teeth.

Alea’s hair was plastered to her head. The Kantos, as always, had the advantage of numbers. They would overwhelm them, wear them down.

No. He wasn’t giving up. He had a mate to protect. They had to push on—for his people, his family, his mate.

He met Alea’s gaze. She was splattered with gore, but she smiled.

He smiled back.

Gayel took a blow and staggered. He tried to dodge, but the Kantos’ arm slashed across his body.

He fell.

The Kantos filled his vision. It was an elite.

Prepare to die, Eon.

With a cry, Alea leaped onto the Kantos. She plunged her sword into the elite's eyes.

The alien's mental scream ripped through Gayel's head.

Alea kicked the Kantos down and rushed back to Gayel.

"Gayel? Are you okay?" She helped him up.

"Yes." His helian was already diverting the blood flow.

But as he stared at the Kantos surrounding them, he felt a heavy dread. They were both tired and injured. How much longer could they fight on?

He saw a Kantos stab at Alea. She spun, but the deadly arm cut into her arm.

With a growl, she swiveled and rammed her sword into the Kantos soldier's neck.

"Alea?"

She slapped a hand over her bicep. "I'll be fine."

But he saw blood on her hand, felt the echo of her pain through their growing bond.

He looked up. The backpack wasn't far away, but there was a mass of Kantos between them and it.

They'd never make it.

"Gayel." She slashed at another Kantos. "We're *not* giving up. I lost everything I'd ever known as a child, it wasn't much, but it was all I had at the time." She turned to face him. "I haven't let anything, or anyone else matter, except my work, in case I lost that, too. But now... You've turned it all upside down."

A Kantos charged, and Gayel sliced with his sword.

"You arrived on my world, and I knew nothing would ever be the same," he told her. "But I don't want it to be the same. I want you."

Her chest rose. "I want you too. You're everything to me, Gayel."

He'd been his people's king, their strength, their hope. People wanted him for his power, influence, and strength.

But here was a woman who just wanted him, the man.

"Then don't give up." He pressed a quick, hard kiss to her lips.

Shoulder to shoulder, they charged into the next line of Kantos soldiers. They fought side by side, in a deadly dervish. They were more powerful together.

But for every Kantos they brought down, another stepped in to fill its place.

Gayel saw Alea slowing down, felt his own muscles reaching their limits. They wouldn't give up, but they weren't going to win this fight.

He wanted to roar in fear and frustration. He couldn't watch her die.

Suddenly, a bright-blue light appeared in front of them, sending the Kantos flying.

The light swelled, forming a huge, crackling, blue ball of lightning.

Blinded, he looked away. The light faded, leaving behind a small group—Knightmaster Ashtin, Davion, Caze, Lara, and Jamie.

Lara shook her head. "Wow, that was a hell of a ride."

More blue balls of light appeared in the courtyard. More fighters winked into existence. They were all Eon, Oronis, and Terran.

He saw Malax, his second commander Airen, her mate Donovan, and Thane and Kaira, all from the *Rengard*.

Gayel smiled and Alea grabbed his arm.

"We all fight together," he said.

She nodded.

Boom. Boom.

Ships appeared in the sky. An Eon cruiser and an Oronis ship.

Boom. The Divergent appeared, lasers firing.

“Let’s get that agent, my mate,” he said.

Alea lifted her sword. “Let’s do this.”

ALEA SPRINTED AS FAST as she could. Gayel was one step ahead of her, his powerful body eating up the distance across the courtyard.

A mass of Kantos soldiers sprinted at them, cutting them off from where she’d stashed the agent.

Dammit.

Gayel engaged the closest Kantos. Alea swung her sword at another.

There was another brilliant flash of blue light.

A lone female Oronis knight appeared. She wore black armor that fitted perfectly to her gently curved body, a long coat hitting at her knees, and a black visor over her face.

She lifted her hands, a ball of crackling, blue energy forming and growing larger between her palms.

The Kantos backed up.

It was almost pretty to watch. With a graceful move, the woman threw her arms toward the Kantos.

The blue light exploded, sending Kantos scattering.

The female knight leaped into the air, floating, and threw her arms out.

Blue lightning energy flew from her hands, hitting the Kantos and turning them to ash.

Jesus. Alea’s lungs locked.

The knight landed and straightened. Then she turned and nodded at Gayel.

He nodded back and grabbed Alea's hand.

"Wow, she's impressive," Alea said.

"Yes. That is the Oronis Knightqueen."

Double wow.

Alea looked back and saw another knight had joined the queen. Tall and broad, the knight placed himself between his queen and the nearest Kantos.

Gayel leaped on top of the transport and Alea followed. They turned.

Across the Eon base, the battle raged. Eon, Oronis, Terran against Kantos. In places, hunks of rocks and equipment floated in the air in the pockets of distorted gravity.

Overhead, the storm was dissipating.

Time to end this.

Gayel crouched and grabbed the backpack. They checked the canisters.

"We need to get as high up as we can to deploy it." He slipped the backpack on.

Alea glanced at the ruined building closest to them. "There. We can climb up that building." Part of it had been torn off.

Gayel nodded and they ran for the wall.

Just as he started climbing, several ugly bugs rushed them. They had bulbous bodies covered in spikes.

"Go," Alea cried. "I'll hold them off."

She needed to give him time to get up and release the agent.

He hesitated.

"Go, my mate, or I'll be pissed."

He nodded, then climbed.

Alea thought of a blaster and one formed on her arm.

So cool. She fired.

The Kantos bugs flew back. She kept giving cover fire, then spun and climbed the wall.

She paused a few times to fire at the Kantos below.

When she reached Gayel, he stood in a ruined part of the building.

“We need—” he broke off.

Low buzzing filled the air. Several flying bugs rose up over the outer wall. Their wings moved so fast they blurred, and they had wicked stingers on their tails.

“Cren.”

Heart pumping, Alea looked around. “We still aren’t high enough. We want to ensure we cover all the Kantos below.”

Nearby, rocks and rubble hung in the air.

She pointed. “We can climb the floating rocks.”

“What?” he said.

“There’s a pocket of low gravity here. We can climb the rubble until we’re high enough.” The buzzing insects flew closer.

Gayel slashed out, cutting through the wing of one. The creature plummeted down.

The others were buzzing in a group. Soon, they’d attack.

“We have to move,” she said.

Gayel backed up a step, then ran and jumped into the low-gravity pocket. He sailed through the air, powerful and strong, and hit the closest rock.

Alea fired at the bugs, then stepped back. She dragged in a deep breath, ran, and jumped.

She threw herself toward the rock, then felt the gravity disappear, leaving her weightless.

She hit the rock and Gayel grabbed her.

It felt almost like the weightlessness of space. She loved feeling that sense of freedom.

They climbed to the top of the rock, then leaped across the space to the next one. They kept it up, climbing higher. They had a bird's-eye view of the fight below.

Their people were fighting hard, but as always, the Kantos had greater numbers.

Gayel slid the backpack off and pulled out the first canister.

Just then, a flying bug reared up over the side of the rock and slammed into Alea.

She flew through the air, and so did the canister she held.

Shit. She grabbed for the nearest rock and caught hold. Then she snatched at the floating canister and grabbed the handle.

Gayel kicked the bug, then swung his sword.

The dead insect floated in the air, motionless.

Alea pulled herself across the rock to Gayel. He grabbed her. "Okay?"

She nodded and held up her canister. He lifted a second one.

"Ready?"

She straightened. "Ready."

The rock they were on floated right near the edge of the low-gravity zone.

They gripped the canisters, twisted to activate them, then threw them out into the air.

They flew over the fight, and both burst open.

Her heart stopped as she watched. For a second, nothing happened, then black smoke streamed out.

It dipped and curled, and dropped downward.

It engulfed several flying bugs. They slowed, turning docile, wings slowing.

Then the agent petered out, dissipating into the air.

“It’s not spreading,” she whispered.

Gayel cursed.

“We need a way to deploy it.” Her gut cramped. They had nothing. “The Kantos weather machine?”

“Destroyed.” His jaw worked.

Down below, she saw an Eon warrior fall under several Kantos soldiers.

Then she heard the sound of whispers. *What now?* She whipped her head around. “No!”

An elite was slashing open the egg pods. Locusts flew out, arrowing toward the fighting warriors—Davion, Malax, Caze, and more.

“No.” Gayel’s voice was all grit.

The locust plague might not cover the planet, but it would decimate the warriors here. And let the Kantos escape.

“Gayel.” She gripped his hand.

“There’s only one option.” He lifted his chin. “The helindai.”

“What’s that?” She saw the stark lines bracketing his mouth. Whatever it was, it wasn’t good.

“A power only an Eon king can access.” He blew out a breath. “I can pull energy from all my warriors’ helians. Generate an energy wave that will destroy our enemies.”

“Okay.” That sounded good, not bad.

“Once I start...I can’t stop. I’ll lose my sense of self. I could destroy everything in the vicinity. My father used it once and destroyed an entire species and planet. And killed some of his own warriors.”

Oh. God. Bile rose in her mouth. “You won’t do that. You couldn’t.”

His gaze met hers. “No king has ever controlled the helindai. It has to run its course.”

She gripped him. “I believe in you.”

Agonized screams filtered up from below. The cries of the Eon warriors.

Gayel squeezed his eyes closed for a second, then opened them. He kissed her—hard and brief. “I love you, Alea.”

“Gayel—”

He let go and rose. He floated up and threw his arms out.

Alea felt energy build in the air. The hairs on the back of her neck rose, her skin tingled.

The purple threads in Gayel’s armor glowed. The energy built.

The raw power made her shiver. She swallowed. The pressure of it was immense and terrifying.

With a guttural roar, he threw his head back. Energy pulsed off him, his eyes glowing pure neon purple.

The energy wave slammed into her and she gripped the rock, clinging hard.

Down below, she saw Kantos jerk and fall. Bugs fell from the sky. The locusts incinerated.

Yes. She smiled. He’d done it. The warriors on the ground were all straightening, shaking their heads.

Then another pulse hit.

This one slammed into her and hurt. She groaned. She saw several warriors fall. One of the base’s buildings tilted and collapsed.

No. No. *No.*

Another pulse and another building exploded. Rock and rubble flew everywhere.

No. “Gayel, stop!”

She looked up at him. His face looked almost serene. His eyes were pure purple, no black visible.

“Gayel!”

No response.

Fuck this. Alea pushed off.

She floated up to him. Another energy pulse hit her and it felt like a punch to her gut. Fighting through the pain, she reached him and clamped her arms around him.

“Gayel!” She wasn’t giving up on her mate.

It was like he was looking through her.

“I’m not giving up on you.” She kissed him. She poured everything she felt into the kiss. Every growing feeling she had for him. All her hopes and fears. All her hurts and joys.

She saw him blink.

She bit his lip. “Gayel?”

“Alea.” His voice was strained.

“Right here. Where I belong.”

He cinched an arm around her. She looked down. Warriors were pushing themselves upright. Several Kantos were still standing but looked dazed.

Alea held up another canister of the agent. “Are you in control?”

He nodded, black bleeding into his eyes.

“Can you use your kickass energy to spread this?”

“I think so.”

She twisted the canister and threw it. Gayel released another pulse of energy.

The black agent dipped and twisted. The energy caught it and the blackness expanded, then arched downward.

The dark cloud hit more flying bugs, then engulfed the Kantos soldiers, then moved to other bugs on the ground.

Pulse racing, she clutched Gayel's hand.

He squeezed her fingers.

Please work.

The Kantos soldiers froze.

The bugs stopped flying and drifted down to land. On the ground, the other bugs milled around slowly, as though confused.

“It's working.” She spun to face him. “Gayel, it's working!”

He grabbed her, yanked her close. “Thank you, my tough, loyal mate.”

Then he kissed her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Gayel gripped Alea's waist and lifted her down off the last rock.

It was nice to be back on solid ground.

Around them, his warriors were herding the docile, confused Kantos into a group.

"The hunger...it's gone." Alea stared at the aliens. "I can't imagine how they feel. Do they remember everything?"

He took her hand and squeezed. "We'll help them."

A small smile. "You're a good and noble king."

"I'd prefer you describe me as a handsome, strong mate."

She leaned closer. "You're that, too."

"King Gayel!"

Davion and the others jogged over.

"By the warriors, you did it." Davion clapped his hand to Gayel's back.

"Alea and I did it." It was only with his mate's help that he'd controlled the helindai.

The war commander engulfed Gayel's mate in a hug. Despite knowing Davion was happily mated, with a baby on the way, Gayel felt a prick of something uncomfortable. He didn't want any other males around her.

"Your Highness, reports are coming in from the *Desteron*." Caze's eyes were wide. "The Kantos ships just...stopped."

“What?” Gayel breathed.

“The agent, it didn’t just affect the Kantos here on the planet, it affected the ones in orbit too.”

How was this possible?

Alea looked shocked.

“It isn’t just the Kantos here,” a melodious female voice said.

Gayel turned to see Knightqueen Carys approach. Her Knightguard, a tough, big bruiser, followed right behind her, towering over her silently.

The Knightqueen’s helmet retracted. Long, pale-blond hair spilled out behind her. She was beautiful, with an almost delicate face, and an intricate flower marking down the side of her face, running along her hairline.

“Carys.” Gayel bowed his head.

“Gayel. My knights have reported that *all* Kantos across the system have stood down.”

“All of them?” Alea said.

The queen looked at Alea and smiled. “It appears the Kantos’ ravening hunger and drive to consume is gone.”

“Oh, my God.” Alea grinned.

Gayel smiled, her pleasure hitting him. “Carys, thank you for your friendship and the assistance of you and your knights.”

“Our two species are linked, Gayel. The Oronis will always stand with the Eon.” Her sapphire eyes—filled with what looked like blue electricity—moved to Alea. “And now the Terrans. We consider you all allies.”

“The Kantos hunger has been reversed,” Davion yelled to the crowd. “In all Kantos.”

Cheers went up.

“I still don’t understand how it’s possible,” Alea said.

“I might know.” Thane stepped forward. The medical commander was covered in the sweat and blood of the fight. “I spoke with some of the Kantos. We already knew that they are linked telepathically, but apparently, it acts almost like a hive mind. The effect of the agent passed from these Kantos to all Kantos.”

Gayel’s chest filled with a sense of triumph. The Eon Empire and its people were safe.

Earth was safe.

He looked at Alea. She was smiling, sharing looks with the surrounding Terrans and Eon warriors. He pushed toward her.

She stiffened, looked like she wanted to run, but she lifted her chin. “Gayel—”

Shouts echoed from the other side of the courtyard. They all spun.

Young warriors poured into the courtyard.

Again, warmth filled Gayel’s chest. The young warriors were safe. The future of the Eon, their shield to protect the Empire from future threats, was intact.

He hadn’t failed them.

The young warriors filed past him, bowing their heads.

“Eon and our allies.” Gayel’s voice rang out across the courtyard. “Today, we protected what we hold most dear. We fought back against those who would destroy our worlds and our people.”

Almost as one entity, the gathered Kantos shifted uncomfortably.

“And I hope this is a new dawn for the Kantos,” he continued.

He caught the eye of a blood-spattered elite. The alien stared back at him for a moment, then bowed its head.

“The Eon have always sought to expand our minds, our capabilities, to be the best we can be. In the past, perhaps that made us rigid. We followed a path to excellence a little too

doggedly.” He turned to Alea, glanced at the other Terrans—Lara, Jamie, Donovan, Kaira.

“You never stop learning, and we’ve learned so much from our old allies—” he looked at the Knightqueen and the Oronis “—and continue to learn from our new allies from Earth. We’ve also been blessed to find so many treasured mates among the Terrans. I had planned to take a Terran bride to cement our alliance. Instead, I was blindsided by a tough, Space Corps captain, who is my mate.”

A ripple went through the crowd.

“And who I’d also make my queen, if she’ll have me.”

He saw Alea’s cheeks go a little pale. His fierce Terran had faced down the deadly Kantos without hesitation, but the thought of a crown gave her pause.

His gut churned. Or maybe she didn’t want him enough? He wouldn’t force her to do anything she didn’t want to do. What if she didn’t want him enough to withstand the pressure of royal life?

He met her gaze, and let her see all he felt for her inside him.

THE WORLD SHRANK to just Alea and Gayel.

Later, she’d give him hell about doing this right now, in the middle of the crowd.

Then she stared into his handsome face, into the glowing, purple-black eyes she loved, and realized that he was taking a risk far greater than fighting the Kantos.

She saw all the love and desire he felt for her stamped all over his face.

For her to see, for everyone to see.

She’d been so busy guarding her heart, dealing with her own old fears, that she hadn’t really let the depth of her own

feelings free.

This man—this powerful, strong, noble alien king—was hers.

Her mate.

Her love.

Her man.

Alea knew in her heart that Gayel would be committed and loyal, and love her as fiercely as he loved his Empire.

She stepped closer, and saw him tense. She kept her voice low. “I love you, Gayel Solann-Eon. I’m not good at this kind of thing.” She pressed a hand to his cheek. “But I want to be your mate. And for you, I’ll be your queen.”

The purple strands in his eyes turned almost white.

“You’ll have to hold my hand,” she said. “And teach me. But I’ll stand by your side. Support you, fight alongside you.”

He made a low sound and lifted her off her feet. “She said yes!”

The crowd erupted in cheers.

Alea wrapped her arms around him and he kissed her. She kissed him back.

She put everything she felt into the kiss, and when they broke apart, they were both breathing heavily.

He pressed his forehead to hers. “All my life, there have been things I wanted for myself that I couldn’t have. I have a duty to my people, but having you is what I want more than anything. I will fight any army that tries to take you from me. I will stand at your side, always. And I will love you for eternity, Alea.”

She felt a hot rush of tears. “Don’t make me cry in front of these people.”

With another kiss, he set her down.

They were mobbed by well-wishers.

“Queen Alea,” Lara said. “Has a nice ring to it.”

It still made her feel breathless and a little queasy. “Let’s just stick with Alea.”

Lara smiled. “Allying with the Eon sure has made life interesting.”

Alea felt something brush her legs, and she saw her feline friend. She picked the animal up and stroked it. She saw the colors ripple, and it made a low sound, almost like a purr.

Several Eon warriors stepped back.

“That is a xalk,” Davion said carefully.

All the Eon were staring at the animal like it was a ticking bomb.

Gayel’s lips twitched. “It has befriended Alea.”

“It helped me reach the base, sneak in, and fight to free Gayel.”

“They’re *deadly*,” Davion said. “And notoriously antisocial and solitary.”

Alea blinked, then stroked the animal again. “Not this one.”

Davion stepped closer, and the animal hissed at him. The war commander stepped back quickly and made an unconvinced sound.

“We need to convene on the *Desteron*,” Gayel said. “Decide how to best help the Kantos.”

“Help the Kantos.” Caze shook his head. “There’s something I never expected to hear.”

“The leaders here on Orzon are already organizing a cleanup of the base,” Davion said. “We’ll meet with any elites and help them back to Kantos space.”

Alea looked at the milling Kantos. “Will they survive? Without the hunger?”

An elite stepped forward. *We...we will try. For our people.*

“The Kantos rogues led by Nisid have made their own community,” Gayel said. “I think it will pay to contact Nisid

and see if he can help.”

The elite bowed its head.

Suddenly, Alea saw Gayel’s cheeks flush. With a small groan, he bent over.

“Gayel?” *Was he injured?* She could feel her cuts healing up, thanks to the mating bond. But there was also a strange gnawing in her gut that she knew had to be an echo of whatever Gayel was feeling.

“I’m fine.” His hands snaked out, yanked her close. She bumped into him.

He also shot Davion and Caze a narrow-eyed stare.

Both warriors grinned.

Gayel’s hand slid lower, cupping her hip.

She frowned. “Gayel?”

He pulled her up on her toes and kissed her. The kiss was carnal, holding a hard edge that shot heat straight through her.

She managed to pull her lips free, but she was panting and tingling all over.

“You’d better take the first shuttle back to the *Desteron*,” Davion said. “We’ll finish up down here and coordinate with the Kantos.”

Alea blinked. She tried to step away, but with a low growl, Gayel kept her pinned to his side.

“It’s the mating fever,” Davion looked like he was fighting a smile. “Go. We’ll see you in a day or two.”

A day or two? She didn’t have any time to process that. Gayel dragged her through the crowd. He didn’t stop to talk to anyone, and hauled her almost bodily aboard the shuttle.

“*Desteron*,” he barked. “Now.”

The two pilots snapped to attention then looked askance at Alea’s feet.

The xalk had followed them.

“She’s friendly,” Alea assured them.

“Actually, it’s a he,” Gayel said.

“Oh?”

“Keep it in the cockpit with you.” He touched a button and a privacy screen closed between them and the cockpit.

Now it was just her and Gayel in the plush passenger area of the shuttle.

He stalked toward her. “I need you.”

She saw it on him, the hard, desperate need. She felt it in her belly.

No one had ever wanted her like this alien king. Her mate.

She lifted her chin, heat swirling inside her. “So, take me.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

All his attention was focused on his gorgeous mate.

Gayel gave up trying to control the need and emotion raging inside him. He was driven by a deep, primal need to mark her, to make sure she never forgot that she was his.

Right now, he was jealous of anyone or anything that took her attention away from him. He let his armor melt away.

“Take it off,” he growled.

A second later, her armor disappeared. She was in her Space Corps spacesuit. Both of them were scratched up, a little bloody.

He didn't care.

He kissed her, swallowing her moan. He pushed her head back, pressing his lips to her neck. He bit her. She undulated against him and cried out.

Gayel backed her up, need an urgent siren in his head. He ripped at her suit, tearing it and her underwear, off her.

Cren, he loved her body.

Quickly, he stripped his own clothes off. Her face was flushed, lips parted. Her gaze ran across the expanse of his bare chest. His rigid cock throbbed and her gaze dropped. She licked her lips.

With a growl, he pushed her into one of the plush seats. He shoved her legs apart, kneeling on the seat between them.

She ran her hands over his chest.

“Your skin is so hot,” she said.

“I’m burning up for you.”

He pushed her legs wider, over the armrests of the chair. He stroked the plump flesh between her legs. He smelled her arousal, but he wanted to be sure she was ready for him. Because it was going to get rough.

He fingered her and she threw her head back.

“*Gayel.*” His name was followed by low moaning.

The hunger inside him gripped him hard. She was so wet. He thrust his finger inside her and watched her writhe.

Now she made a desperate sound. Her gaze met his. “*Now.* I need you inside me.”

Gayel shifted and gripped his cock. He notched the broad head between her legs, and thrust inside her with one desperate plunge.

She screamed, her nails scratching down his arms.

He let out a rough, low sound. He kept his thrusts steady, and slid a hand down her taut belly. He found the swollen nub and worked it with his thumb.

Her hips jerked up, her cries low and husky.

“Come, my delicious mate,” he growled.

She shuddered, her body clenching on his cock.

Gayel gritted his teeth. He wasn’t ready to be done yet. He wanted to watch her come again.

He pulled her off the chair and onto the floor. He set her on her hands and knees, then gripped her hip and slid his other hand into her hair.

As he thrust inside her, he tugged her head back.

There.

He loved the look on her face as she took him. She met every heavy thrust, pushing back against him.

Everything in him coiled tight. He wouldn't last much longer. He growled. He couldn't see enough of the emotion on her face.

He pulled out, ignoring her protest, and flipped her onto her back.

He covered her and sank deep into her again.

She cried out his name and wrapped her legs around him. Their gazes locked, and he stared at her as he moved inside her.

"Mine."

"Yours," she whispered.

"My mate." He picked up speed as he thrust into her. "You'll make a magnificent queen. Loyal, dedicated, protective."

"Gayel. I love you. I'll do anything to be with you."

He moved faster and faster. She clutched him and he felt hot, pleasure-pain drive down his spine.

On his next thrust, she arched and cried out. As she rode through her climax, her body shuddered and she panted his name.

Her release triggered his. His muscles strained as the pleasure washed over him and he poured inside her.

He slumped over her, trying to catch his breath. Air sawed in and out of his chest.

She ran a lazy hand up and down his back.

"So, a day or two of this?" she asked.

He nuzzled her neck. "Yes."

They were both covered in a sheen of sweat. He already felt the desire growing again.

"Your Highness?" The tentative voice of the pilot over the comm.

"Yes."

“Um, the xalk is howling. And we’re almost at the *Desteron*.”

Gayel wrestled with his desire. They needed to get to his cabin on the *Desteron*, and into the shower.

He imagined Alea naked under the water, and his cock twitched. “We’re about to dock. Let’s get dressed and rescue your pet.”

“My pet?”

“It’s yours now. You’re the first person to ever tame a xalk.” He helped her up and ran a hand down her side. “Now, get that gorgeous body covered.”

She grabbed her space suit, then stilled. “Oh, no. The pilots will know what we’ve been doing.”

Gayel pulled his trousers on. “We’re in the mating frenzy. Everyone in the Empire will know what we’ve been doing.”

She groaned.

ALEA OPENED her eyes and took a second to work out where she was.

She was in a ship cabin.

Naked in a bed.

A heavy male arm was banded around her waist.

She turned her head. Gayel was asleep. His face, while never boyish, looked relaxed.

Hers.

Every cell in her body vibrated with it. This man would be by her side for the rest of their lives. He loved her. All of her.

He didn’t care what she’d come from, who her family was. He just loved her and what she’d made of herself.

Alea shifted and winced slightly at the small aches that rippled throughout her body. She smiled. She’d enjoyed

getting every one of them.

They'd been locked in his cabin, gorging on each other for the last day.

She slipped out of the bed, but Gayel didn't move.

In the washroom, she climbed into the shower and groaned. The water felt so good. She washed off, noting the small bite marks and bruises on her skin. She smiled. She'd left plenty of her own marks on her mate. She pressed a hand to the wall and bent her head under the water.

A second later, a hard body slipped in behind her.

"Hello." His voice was husky as he kissed the back of her neck.

Shockingly, a faint tremor of desire shivered through her.

God, it should be impossible after how many times they'd made love.

"The frenzy isn't done yet," he murmured. "But I really need to get to the bridge and check in with Davion and the others."

She nodded. She wanted an update, as well.

They dressed. She pulled on a black, sleeveless Eon uniform that someone had left for her. They also ate the food that they found outside the room.

Alea tied her hair up, then watched Gayel finish his preparations. He slid a gold twist on his bicep. He looked so delicious she wanted to bite him.

Then he grabbed something off the desk, and held up a small box.

She'd noticed it sitting with the food tray.

"I asked Davion to arrange this," he said.

Curious, she took the box and opened it. A gold armband like his, just thinner and smaller, rested inside.

"A sign of our joining," he said.

“Like an engagement ring on Earth. A ring we wear on our finger.”

“We can get one of those, too.”

She held out her arm and he clipped the gold band in place.

Her throat went tight and she smiled. “It’s beautiful.”

“Not as stunning as my mate.”

They held hands as they walked to the bridge. They passed several warriors who stood to attention and smiled at them.

God, the entire ship knew that they’d been fucking each other’s brains out. Somehow, Alea couldn’t manage to dredge up any embarrassment. She was too happy.

They reached the bridge. Suddenly, a huge dog bounded toward them, tongue lolling.

“Shaggy!” Eve waddled over, one hand on her belly—which looked even bigger than it had a day ago. “He has no manners. Sorry.”

The canine tried to lick Eve. She laughed and rubbed his head.

A smiling Davion came over. “Congratulations on your mating.”

Alea tried not to blush.

Gayel wrapped an arm around her. “Thank you.”

The bridge was crowded with people, including Malax and Wren, several others off the *Rengard*, and Adlyn and Ryphen.

Adlyn shot Alea a smile and a thumb’s up. Alea wondered where the warrior had learned the Earth gesture.

“Your potential bride candidates were equal parts disappointed and happy for you both,” Davion said to Gayel.

“They’re okay?” Alea asked.

“Yes. They’re still at the palace with Lieutenant Knox. We’re currently in orbit around Eon.”

“The Kantos?” Gayel asked.

“On their way back to Kantos space. Several ships are escorting them, including the Oronis.”

“I’ll need to thank Knightqueen Carys again.”

“She’s about to call in. And Nisid as well. He was shocked and happy to hear what happened.”

When Davion stepped closer to Alea, Gayel pulled her back.

Hmm, the frenzy was still in effect. She smoothed a hand down his arm and felt him relax a little.

The viewscreen blinked, drawing everyone’s attention. Knightqueen Carys appeared on a split screen with Admiral Barber, and a Kantos elite.

Alea guessed this was the rogue leader, Nisid.

Gayel inclined his head. “Once again, Carys, your assistance has been invaluable. You have our thanks.”

The blonde woman looked so regal, but at the same time, Alea could sense the steel of a warrior. Suddenly, Alea realized she’d been holding on to preconceived ideas about what a queen had to be, and that she could very much be herself. Like Gayel’s mother and the Knightqueen, Alea could do things her way. The thought gave her a flash of satisfaction and contentment.

“Gayel, the Oronis will always stand with their allies.” The queen’s gaze moved to Alea. “Congratulations on your mating. I have no doubt, Captain Rodriguez, that you will make a wonderful leader and queen.”

“Thank you,” Alea said. “You’ve given me a wonderful example to follow.”

The Knightqueen looked pleased. “Now, I must go. We have another dark danger gathering in a distant quadrant of Oronis space.”

Gayel frowned. “Do you need our help?”

“No. At least, not yet. I hope we can de-escalate the threat, but if not, I will call. Be safe.”

Gayel and Alea nodded.

Then Alea met Admiral Barber's gaze. "Admiral."

"Captain Rodriguez, I heard that I need to recruit a new Space Corps Headquarters security captain."

Alea glanced at Gayel and smiled. "Yes, sorry."

"Well, Queen of the Eon Empire is a hell of a promotion. Well done defeating the Kantos. King Gayel, Earth is forever in your debt."

"There is no debt between allies, Admiral. And soon, I'll have a Terran queen." He rested his hand on the back of Alea's neck. "Our species will be forever linked." His gaze shifted to Nisid. "And it is a new beginning for your people, Nisid."

"I feel a hope for my species that I haven't felt before. Many are still shocked, uncertain, and afraid, but I know that the Kantos can create something new, something better. If we are no longer driven by the hunger, we can learn new things. Love and family. Art and culture. We can be more than we were before."

"And the Eon are here if you need our help."

The Kantos bowed his head. "I am humbled by your friendship, and inspired by your integrity."

Suddenly, loud barking erupted on the bridge. Shaggy raced past, chasing Alea's xalk.

The feline leaped into her arms. Shaggy stopped, paws down and butt up. He growled.

"Shaggy." Eve grabbed the canine's collar.

"By the warriors, that's a xalk," someone yelled.

"He's friendly," Alea insisted.

Shaggy growled. One of the xalk's tails whipped out, and hit Shaggy's nose, opening up a small cut.

"No," Alea said.

The feline snuggled in her arms and gave the canine a baleful look.

Suddenly, Eve grabbed her belly and groaned.

“Eve!” Davion raced to his mate.

She straightened. “Um, my water just broke.”

“What?” Davion looked like someone had punched him. “Have you been having contractions?”

Alea noticed a damp patch on the woman’s long skirt, and on the floor beneath her.

“No! Nothing, I—” Eve groaned again. “But I am now. The baby’s coming.”

Davion went pale, his blue-black eyes wide. “We need to get to Medical.”

Eve grabbed his arm and squeezed. “There’s no time. I can feel it coming now.” She doubled over and groaned.

“What do you mean, now?” her mate barked. Apparently, something did terrify War Commander Davion Thann-Eon.

“As in, I need to push and it hurts like hell,” Eve snapped.

Alea shook off her shock. “We need blankets or towels. Now.”

The bridge erupted into chaos. The viewscreen went black. Blankets were laid out and Davion helped Eve lie on them.

“Where’s Aydin?” Davion shouted.

“The medical commander is on his way,” someone called out.

Eve let out a long groan. “I... The baby’s coming.”

Gayel and the other warriors stood like statues.

“You’ve got this,” Lara knelt down, checking between her sister’s legs.

“Totally.” Wren took Eve’s hand. “Eve, you can do *anything*. You’ve always been scarily fierce and tough.”

Eve squeezed her sister’s fingers.

“I mean, you started all of this when you abducted Davion,” Wren added with a smile.

Alea grabbed Gayel's hand.

"Okay, Eve," Lara said. "Push."

With Davion at her back, Eve bore down.

"I love you, Eve," her mate whispered against her head.

"Davion." She pressed her cheek against his chest and pushed.

A moment later, a baby's cry broke through the bridge.

Lara wrapped the child in a towel. "You guys, your son is here, and he's perfect."

Eve laughed as she took the baby, holding him to her chest.

The fear finally drained from Davion's face. "Eve, you amaze me every day."

"Look what we made, Davion."

Davion stroked the baby's cheek. The couple leaned over their child, Davion's strong arms around both of them.

The doors to the bridge opened, and Aydin rushed in. He came to a halt when he saw the new family, and smiled. He motioned to his assistants to bring a stretcher over.

"You're always in a rush, Eve."

Alea looked up at Gayel, her throat tight. "Another new beginning."

He cupped her jaw. "And we're just starting ours. I can't wait to see where we go. Together."

CHAPTER TWENTY

When Gayel stepped off the shuttle in the palace courtyard, he held Alea's hand tightly in his.

The courtyard was full of people, and when he straightened, cheers erupted. He smiled and looked at Alea. She smiled back.

Gayel waved. He saw his mother. Standing beside her was Lieutenant Knox with one hand on Kyber's shoulder. Just behind them were the delegates and the Terran women. They were all clapping. Chloe put her fingers in her mouth and whistled.

The rest of their group exited the shuttle. Davion and Eve, with their son held securely by his father. Lara and Caze, and Jamie and Aydin. Malax with his arm around Wren, and Airen and Donovan. Thane and Kaira, along with Allie Borden and Brack. Adlyn and Ryphen were the last off.

Adlyn saw her son, and grinned. Then her gaze shifted to Ben.

Then Gayel's usually composed sister was running. Ben stepped away from the group, striding to meet her. Adlyn leaped into his arms. The Terran man caught her, then planted a deep kiss on her mouth.

"What the hell?" Alea breathed, blinking. "They were fighting like cats and dogs."

Or like Shaggy and Alea's xalk.

He watched his sister pull back, cupping Ben's rugged face. She was beaming.

For the first time in a long time, Gayel saw pure happiness on Adlyn's face. "I guess my sister couldn't resist the charms of a Terran, either."

Alea laughed and shook her head. "I will be getting all the details about this story." As the couple kissed again, she wrinkled her nose. "Well, maybe not *all* the details."

Kyber ran to the couple, throwing his arms around them both, grinning widely.

Gayel turned to face the crowd. "I'm sure you've all heard the news. The Kantos' hunger is gone. The threat to our empire is no more. Our planets, our people, and our allies are safe."

Wild cheers erupted.

He tugged Alea forward. "And I would like to present my mate, Alea Solann-Eon. Soon to be your queen."

The cheers and clapping intensified.

Gayel pulled her close and kissed her.

They were mobbed by well-wishers. As he clasped hands with several warriors, he saw his mother hug Alea. The two women smiled and shared some quiet words. It left him with a warm pressure in his chest.

Suddenly, a bright splash of color darted off the shuttle, cutting through the crowd. A woof followed, Shaggy bounding after the xalk. A tiny, fluffy creature followed, making a chittering noise. The xalk, now named Teal, easily evaded the canine. Shaggy crashed into someone, and the small creature—who was named Cutie and belonged to Jamie—leaped onto Shaggy's back.

The xalk turned and hissed at the canine.

"By the warriors, that's a xalk," someone cried.

"He's friendly," Alea yelled. She scooped her pet up and the animal curled into her arms. It shot Shaggy a smug look.

The canine looked disgruntled, his eyes like laser targets on the feline.

“Shaggy, enough.” Eve strode through the crowd and grabbed her pet’s collar. “That damn cat is going to slice you open, and you’ll deserve it.”

A deep, masculine laugh filled the air. Nearby, Donovan was laughing, his mate Airen at his side, shaking her head at the animal antics. With them were Thane and his mate Kaira.

Davion appeared with a tiny bundle held snug in his brawny arms. He stopped by Eve and the crowd went quiet.

Gayel nodded at the couple and raised his voice again. “I would also like to introduce Kane Thann-Eon. The first Terran-Eon child.”

Davion, face filled with pride, tilted the child for everyone to see. Young Kane slept peacefully, unaware of the importance of his birth.

Yes, the first Terran-Eon child. Gayel met his mate’s gaze. But he hoped it wouldn’t be the last.

Councilor Tann-Felis strode out of an archway. His gaze lit up when he saw Gayel, then when he saw Alea, his brows dipped down. He bustled forward, shoving through the crowd.

“Your Majesty, I must congratulate you on your success in the fight against the Kantos. Your greatness will go down in history.”

“You should be thanking, Alea, Councilor. I couldn’t have done it without her.”

The older man’s nose wrinkled. “Yes, well. Thank you for your assistance, Captain Rodriguez. I assume you’ll head back to Earth soon.”

Gayel looked up at his mother. “No one told him?”

His mother’s smile was slow and smug. “No.”

“Councilor Tann-Felis,” Gayel pulled Alea to his side. “Alea isn’t going anywhere. I have selected my queen.”

The man spluttered. “No. This is not—”

“I suggest you watch what you say about my mate,” Gayel warned.

Tann-Felis’ mouth opened, closed, and opened again. “Mate?”

Gayel pressed a kiss to the side of Alea’s head. “Yes.”

The man nodded and pulled in a breath. “We look forward to welcoming you to Eon, Captain.” His words were clipped.

“Thank you.” Alea looked like she was trying not to laugh.

“I think we need a party,” a throaty female voice declared.

Gayel turned. A woman with long, blonde hair and a curvy body strode off the shuttle. He blinked, then frowned. She hadn’t been on the shuttle when they’d left the *Desteron*.

Wren groaned.

The blonde woman shimmered for a second and he realized she was a projection.

“Sassy,” Wren said, “I thought we’d agreed the projection tech wasn’t ready yet.”

“It needs testing, Wren, so I’m testing it.” Sassy fluffed her hair, then smoothed a hand down her side. “I think this body is *more* than ready. I’m hot.” She caught Ryphen’s eye and winked at the warrior. “I want to try dancing.”

The warrior froze.

Alea laughed, the sound full of joy. Gayel wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. “You Terrans sure know how to keep things interesting.”

“Be prepared, Your Highness,” she murmured. “You have a lifetime of interesting ahead of you.”

Gayel couldn’t wait. He was ready for every moment with his mate.

THREE MONTHS later

Okay, so her usual breathing techniques weren't calming her nerves today.

Alea pressed her hand to her belly, trying to ignore the butterflies winging around inside her. The fabric of her dress was so incredibly smooth and she stroked it. Her wedding and coronation gown was beautiful.

The dress was strapless, royal blue in color, and fitted tight to her torso. The skirt flowed down starting in blue and giving way to rich, warm cream. The long train swept behind her—elegant and grand. Her twist of gold was around her bicep and she now wore a beautiful ring that Gayel had given her with a large purple gaala stone in it. It looked like a large diamond and was the color of the strands in Gayel's eyes.

Her hair was down, her makeup was exquisite, and very soon, she would finally be joined to Gayel in marriage. Their mating was enough for her, but she knew this wedding was for their people as much as for them.

Soon, she'd officially be queen of the Eon Empire.

Her stomach turned over again.

"Alea, you look *stunning*."

She swiveled and saw the Traynor sisters enter. The women all wore lovely dresses. Eve's was a long, sleek column of blue. She didn't look like she'd given birth a few months ago. Lara's was silver in a mermaid style, with glittery beading. And Wren's dress was gold, with a princess neckline and a long, full, A-line skirt.

Alea realized they'd matched their dresses to the colors in their mates' eyes.

"I'm so nervous," Alea said.

"Um, you took down the Kantos," Wren said. "I'm pretty sure you've got this."

"You're marrying your mate." Lara smiled. "Nothing to be nervous about."

"Who knew," Eve said, "that when I set off on a suicide mission to abduct the most fearsome Eon war commander, that

we'd all end up here.”

“In love,” Wren said with a sigh.

“Mated,” Lara added.

“Happy,” Eve finished. “And I’m a mother, and mated to the most gorgeous alien warrior.”

“No mine is the most gorgeous,” Wren insisted.

“No mine,” Lara said.

Alea’s nerves settled. Hers was the most gorgeous.

Gayel was everything she’d never let herself dream about. The last three months with him had been amazing. Yes, she’d had to resign from Space Corps, but she’d been so busy learning more about the Eon Empire, helping negotiate deals between the Eon and Earth, and advising on security issues. She loved it.

The Kantos were settling into their new existence. There was still some discord and in-fighting as they determined their new way of life, but Alea knew they’d get there.

The door opened, and Sassy sauntered in, holding a bottle of Terran champagne and four flutes. She’d improved her projection over the last few months and looked shockingly real.

“I think some pre-ceremony champagne to calm the nerves is necessary,” Sassy announced.

“Thanks, Sassy,” Alea said.

Sassy poured the champagne and handed the glasses out. She huffed out a breath. “I *really* wish I could taste that.” She stroked her chin. “I might need to work on a program to allow me to do that.”

As Alea took her glass, her hand brushed Sassy’s. The new projection felt like skin. It was remarkable what the sentient being and Wren were achieving with their experimental projects.

“And I’m ready to try sex now too,” Sassy added.

Alea and the Traynor sisters all choked on their champagne.

“Sassy,” Wren said calmly. “You can’t—”

“I think I can talk Ryphen into it.” Sassy grinned. “That warrior is *divine*.”

Alea laughed. Yes, the nerves were completely gone now.

A flash of blue-green caught her eye and she spotted Teal. As she leaned down to stroke him, he purred. Thankfully the palace staff were getting less nervous around him.

Shaggy bounded in, skidded to a stop—narrowly avoiding a couch. Tongue lolling, the canine watched Teal with adoring eyes.

Her feline and Shaggy had come to an agreement. Shaggy was now madly in love with Teal, and Teal ignored the canine. Although, just the other day, Alea had busted the two snuggled together on her and Gayel’s bed, fast asleep.

Yes, life was good. So very, very good.

“I’m ready,” Alea said.

As she walked down the aisle of the lushly-decorated main hall, she scanned the guests. Former Councilor Tann-Felis caught her eye and gave her a small nod. He’d retired to his country estate the month before.

She smiled at all the warriors and their mates. The bridal candidates had returned for the wedding. They all waved and smiled. Chloe gave Alea two thumbs up.

She spotted Davion with baby Kane. The bright, young three-month old was already sitting up and loved to be entertained. He had his mother’s dark hair and his father’s blue-black eyes. And Alea had to admit the war commander looked incredibly hot holding the tiny baby with such adoration. That would hopefully be Gayel one day, holding their child. Her heart lodged in her throat. She couldn’t wait.

The Queen Mother smiled and inclined her head. Gayel’s mother was fast becoming a friend and confidant. She advised and helped Alea on so many aspects of royal life.

Then Alea saw Ben, Adlyn, and Kyber. She couldn't control her smile. Ben and Adlyn had married the month before. Ben nodded, Adlyn smiled, and Kyber waved. Ben had also left Space Corps and was now working with palace security. He and Adlyn were crazy in love, and Kyber adored his new step-father.

Alea turned her head to the front and her breath caught in her chest.

Gayel was waiting for her.

Her mate looked so handsome in cream trousers and a blue, sleeveless shirt trimmed with gold. His gold twist was around his muscled arm and today, she'd slide a solid band of tanium steel on his finger.

He was her world.

Like her, he was dedicated to both Earth and the Eon Empire. They stood together for the benefit of the people depending on them.

But in their quarters, it was just the two of them—Gayel and Alea. Her mate, who would stand forever at her side.

She reached him and he held out his strong hand.

Alea placed her hand in his, knowing she would never again be abandoned or alone.

Earth and Eon joined forever.

I hope you enjoyed Alea and Gayel's story!

THANK YOU for joining me on all the Eon Warriors adventures. I have loved writing these action-packed stories with strong alien warrior heroes and badass heroines from Earth.

But don't worry, we won't be saying a total goodbye to the Eon and their Terran mates just yet. I am very certain we'll see

some glimpses of them in my future series, the **ORONIS KNIGHTS**.

I hope, like me, you're keen to learn more about Knightqueen Carys, Knightmaster Ashtin and the powerful Oronis Knights.

No release dates yet, but stay tuned!

Looking for more action-packed science-fiction romance?

Read on for a preview of *Gladiator*, the first book in Galactic Gladiators.

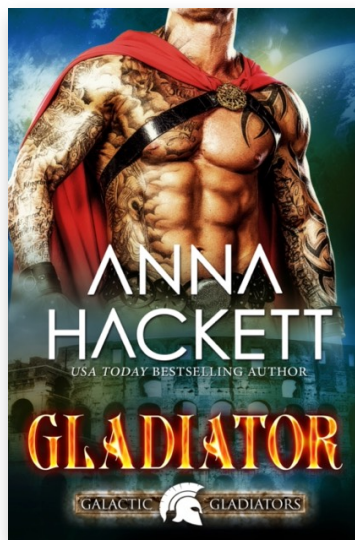
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PREVIEW: GLADIATOR



Just another day at the office.

Harper Adams pulled herself along the outside of the space station module. She could hear her quiet breathing inside her spacesuit, and she easily pulled her weightless body along the slick, white surface of the module. She stopped to check a security panel, ensuring all the systems were running smoothly.

Check. Same as it had been yesterday, and the day before that. But Harper never ever let herself forget that they were six hundred million kilometers away from Earth. That meant they were dependent only on themselves. She tapped some buttons on the security panel before closing the reinforced plastic cover. She liked to dot all her *Is* and cross all her *Ts*. She never left anything to chance.

She grabbed the handholds and started pulling herself up over the cylindrical pod to check the panels on the other side. Glancing back behind herself, she caught a beautiful view of the planet below.

Harper stopped and made herself take it all in. The orange, white, and cream bands of Jupiter could take your breath away. Today, she could even see the famous superstorm of the Great Red Spot. She'd been on the Fortuna Research Station for almost eighteen months. That meant, despite the amazing view, she really didn't see it anymore.

She turned her head and looked down the length of the space station. At the end was the giant circular donut that housed the main living quarters and offices. The main ring rotated to provide artificial gravity for the residents. Lying off the center of the ring was the long cylinder of the research facility, and off that cylinder were several modules that housed various scientific labs and storage. At the far end of the station was the docking area for the supply ships that came from Earth every few months.

“Lieutenant Adams? Have you finished those checks?”

Harper heard the calm voice of her fellow space marine and boss, Captain Samantha Santos, through the comm system in her helmet.

“Almost done,” Harper answered.

“Take a good look at the botany module. The computer's showing some strange energy spikes, but the scientists in there said everything looks fine. Must be a system malfunction.”

Which meant the geek squad engineers were going to have to come in and do some maintenance. “On it.”

Harper swung her body around, and went feet-first down the other side of the module. She knew the rest of the security team—all made up of United Nations Space Marines—would be running similar checks on the other modules across the station. They had a great team to ensure the safety of the hundreds of scientists aboard the station. There was also a

dedicated team of engineers that kept the guts of the station running.

She passed a large, solid window into the module, and could see various scientists floating around benches filled with all kinds of plants. They all wore matching gray jumpsuits accented with bright-blue at the collars, that indicated science team. There was a vast mix of scientists and disciplines aboard—biologists, botanists, chemists, astronomers, physicists, medical experts, and the list went on. All of them were conducting experiments, and some were searching for alien life beyond the edge of the solar system. It seemed like every other week, more probes were being sent out to hunt for radio signals or collect samples.

Since humans had perfected large solar sails as a way to safely and quickly propel spacecraft, getting around the solar system had become a lot easier. With radiation pressure exerted by sunlight onto the mirrored sails, they could travel from Earth to Fortuna Station orbiting Jupiter in just a few months. And many of the scientists aboard the station were looking beyond the solar system, planning manned expeditions farther and farther away. Harper wasn't sure they were quite ready for that.

She quickly checked the adjacent control panel. Among all the green lights, she spotted one that was blinking red, and she frowned. They definitely had a problem with the locking system on the exterior door at the end of the module. She activated the small propulsion pack on her spacesuit, and circled around the module. She slowed down as she passed the large, round exterior door at the end of the cylindrical module.

It was all locked into place and looked secure.

As she moved back to the module, she grabbed a handhold and then tapped the small tablet attached to the forearm of her suit. She keyed in a request for maintenance to come and check it.

She looked up and realized she was right near another window. Through the reinforced glass, a pretty, curvy blonde woman looked up and spotted Harper. She smiled and waved.

Harper couldn't help but smile and lifted her gloved hand in greeting.

Dr. Regan Forrest was a botanist and a few years younger than Harper. The young woman was so open and friendly, and had befriended Harper from her first day on the station. Harper had never had a lot of friends—mainly because she'd been too busy raising her younger sister and working. She'd never had time for girly nights out or gossip.

But Regan was friendly, smart, and had the heart of a steamroller under her pretty exterior. Harper always had trouble saying no to her. Maybe the woman reminded her a little of Brianna. At the thought of her sister, something twisted painfully in Harper's chest.

Regan floated over to the window and held up a small tablet. She'd typed in some words.

Cards tonight?

Harper had been teaching Regan how to play poker. The woman was terrible at it, and Harper beat her all the time. But Regan never gave up.

Harper nodded and held up two fingers to indicate a couple of hours. She was off-shift shortly, and then she had a sparring match with Regan's cousin, Rory—one of the station engineers—in the gym. Aurora “Call me Rory or I'll hit you” Fraser had been trained in mixed martial arts, and Harper found the female engineer a hell of a sparring partner. Rory was teaching Harper some martial arts moves and Harper was showing the woman some basic sword moves. Since she was little, Harper had been a keen fencer.

Regan grinned back and nodded. Then the woman's wide smile disappeared. She spun around, and through the glass Harper could see the other scientists all looking around, concerned. One scientist was spinning around, green plants floating in the air around him, along with fat droplets of water and some other green fluid. He'd clearly screwed up and let his experiment get free.

“Lieutenant Adams?” The captain’s voice came through her helmet again. “Harper?”

There was a sense of urgency that made Harper’s belly tighten. “Go ahead, Captain.”

“We have an alarm sounding in the botany module. The computer says there is a risk of decompression.”

Dammit. “I just checked the security panels. The locking mechanism on the exterior door is showing red. I did a visual inspection and it’s closed up tight.”

“Okay, we talked with the scientist in charge. Looks like one of her team let something loose in there. It isn’t dangerous, but it must be messing with the alarm sensors. System’s locked them all in there.” She made an annoyed sound. “Idiots will have to stay there until engineering can get down there and free them.”

Harper studied the room through the glass again. Some of the green liquid had floated over to another bench that contained various frothing cylinders on it. A second later, the cylinders shattered, their contents bubbling upward.

The scientists all moved to the back exit of the module, banging on the locked door. *Damn.* They were trapped.

Harper met Regan’s gaze. Her friend’s face was pale, and wisps of her blonde hair had escaped her ponytail, floating around her face.

“Captain,” Harper said. “Something’s wrong. The experiments have overflowed their containment.” She could see the scientists were all coughing.

“Engineering is on the way,” the captain said.

Harper pushed herself off, flying over the surface of the module. She reached the control panel and saw that several other lights had turned red. They needed to get this under control and they needed to do it now.

“Harper!” The captain’s panicked voice. “Decompression in progress!”

What the hell? The module jerked beneath Harper. She looked up and saw the exterior door blow off, flying away from the station.

Her heart stopped. That meant all the scientists were exposed to the vacuum of space.

Fuck. Harper pushed off again, sending herself flying toward the end of the module. She put her arms by her sides to help increase her speed. Through the window, she saw that most of the scientists had grabbed on to whatever they could hold on to. A few were pulling emergency breathers over their heads.

She reached the end of the pod and saw the damage. There was torn metal where the door had been ripped off. Inside the door, she knew there would be a temporary repair kit containing a sheet of high-tech nano fabric that could be stretched across the opening to reestablish pressure. But it needed to be put in place manually. Harper reached for the latch to release the repair kit.

Suddenly, a slim body shot out of the pod, her arms and legs kicking. Her mouth was wide open in a silent scream.

Regan. Harper didn't let herself think. She turned, pushed off and fired her propulsion system, arrowing after her friend.

"Security Team to the botany module," she yelled through her comm system. "Security Team to botany module. We have decompression. One scientist has been expelled. I'm going after her. I need someone that can help calm the others and get the module sealed again."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant," Captain Santos answered. "I'm on my way."

Harper focused on reaching Regan. She was gaining on her. She saw that the woman had lost consciousness. She also knew that Regan had only a couple of minutes to survive out here. Harper let her training take over. She tapped the propulsion system controls, trying for more speed, as she maneuvered her way toward Regan.

As she got close, Harper reached out and wrapped her arm around the scientist. “I’ve got you.”

Harper turned, at the same time clipping a safety line to the loops on Regan’s jumpsuit. Then, she touched the controls and propelled them straight back towards the module. She kept her friend pulled tightly toward her chest. *Hold on, Regan.*

She was so still. It reminded Harper of holding Brianna’s dead body in her arms. Harper’s jaw tightened. She wouldn’t let Regan die out here. The woman had dreamed of working in space, and worked her entire career to get here, even defying her family. Harper wasn’t going to fail her.

As the module got closer, she saw that the security team had arrived. She saw the captain’s long, muscled body as she and another man put up the nano fabric.

“Incoming. Keep the door open.”

“Can’t keep it open much longer, Adams,” the captain replied. “Make it snappy.”

Harper adjusted her course, and, a second later, she shot through the door with Regan in her arms. Behind her, the captain and another huge security marine, Lieutenant Blaine Strong, pulled the stretchy fabric across the opening.

“Decompression contained,” the computer intoned.

Harper released a breath. On the panel beside the door, she saw the lights turning green. The nano fabric wouldn’t hold forever, but it would do until they got everyone out of here, and then got a maintenance team in here to fix the door.

“Oxygen levels at required levels,” the computer said again.

“Good work, Lieutenant.” Captain Sam Santos floated over. She was a tall woman with a strong face and brown hair she kept pulled back in a tight ponytail. She had curves she kept ruthlessly toned, and golden skin she always said was thanks to her Puerto Rican heritage.

“Thanks, Captain.” Harper ripped her helmet off and looked down at Regan.

Her blonde hair was a wild tangle, her face was pale and marked by what everyone who worked in space called space hickies—bruises caused by the skin's small blood vessels bursting when exposed to the vacuum of space. *Please be okay.*

“Here.” Blaine appeared, holding a portable breather. The big man was an excellent marine. He was about six foot five with broad shoulders that stretched his spacesuit to the limit. She knew he was a few inches over the height limit for space operations, but he was a damn good marine, which must have gone in his favor. He had dark skin thanks to his African-American father and his handsome face made him popular with the station's single ladies, but mostly he worked and hung out with the other marines.

“Thanks.” Harper slipped the clear mask over Regan's mouth.

“Nice work out there.” Blaine patted her shoulder. “She's alive because of you.”

Suddenly, Regan jerked, pulling in a hard breath.

“You're okay.” Harper gripped Regan's shoulder. “Take it easy.”

Regan looked around the module, dazed and panicky. Harper watched as Regan caught sight of the fabric stretched across the end of the module, and all the plants floating around inside.

“God,” Regan said with a raspy gasp, her breath fogging up the dome of the breather. She shook her head, her gaze moving to Harper. “Thanks, Harper.”

“Any time.” Harper squeezed her friend's shoulder. “It's what I'm here for.”

Regan managed a wan smile. “No, it's just you. You didn't have to fly out into space to rescue me. I'm grateful.”

“Come on. We need to get you to the infirmary so they can check you out. Maybe put some cream on your hickies.”

“Hickeys?” Regan touched her face and groaned. “Oh, no. I’m going to get a ribbing.”

“And you didn’t even get them the pleasurable way.”

A faint blush touched Regan’s cheeks. “That’s right. If I had, at least the ribbing would have been worth it.”

With a relieved laugh, Harper looked over at her captain. “I’m going to get Regan to the infirmary.”

The other woman nodded. “Good. We’ll meet you back at the Security Center.”

With a nod, Harper pushed off, keeping one arm around Regan, and they floated into the main part of the science facility. Soon, they moved through the entrance into the central hub of the space station. As the artificial gravity hit, Harper’s boots thudded onto the floor. Beside her, Regan almost collapsed.

Harper took most of the woman’s weight and helped her down the corridor. They pushed into the infirmary.

A gray-haired, barrel-chested man rushed over. “Decided to take an unscheduled spacewalk, Dr. Forrest?”

Regan smiled weakly. “Yes. Without a spacesuit.”

The doctor made a tsking sound and then took her from Harper. “We’ll get her all patched up.”

Harper nodded. “I’ll come and check on you later.”

Regan grabbed her hand. “We have a blackjack game scheduled. I’m planning to win back all those chocolates you won off me.”

Harper snorted. “You can try.” It was good to see some life back in Regan’s blue eyes.

As Harper strode out into the corridor, she ran a hand through her dark hair, tension slowly melting out of her shoulders. She really needed a beer. She tilted her neck one way and then the other, hearing the bones pop.

Just another day at the office. The image of Regan drifting away from the space station burst in her head. Harper released

a breath. She was okay. Regan was safe and alive. That was all that mattered.

With a shake of her head, Harper headed toward the Security Center. She needed to debrief with the captain and clock off. Then she could get out of her spacesuit and take the one-minute shower that they were all allotted.

That was the one thing she missed about Earth. Long, hot showers.

And swimming. She'd been a swimmer all her life and there were days she missed slicing through the water.

She walked along a long corridor, meeting a few people—mainly scientists. She reached a spot where there was a long bank of windows that afforded a lovely view of Jupiter, and space beyond it.

Stingy showers and unscheduled spacewalks aside, Harper had zero regrets about coming out into space. There'd been nothing left for her on Earth, and to her surprise, she'd made friends here on Fortuna.

As she stared out into the black, mesmerized by the twinkle of stars, she caught a small flash of light in the distance. She paused, frowning. What the hell was that?

She stared hard at the spot where she'd seen the flash. Nothing there but the pretty sprinkle of stars. Harper shook her head. Fatigue was playing tricks on her. It had to have just been a weird trick of the lights reflecting off the glass.

Pushing the strange sighting away, she continued on to the Security Center.

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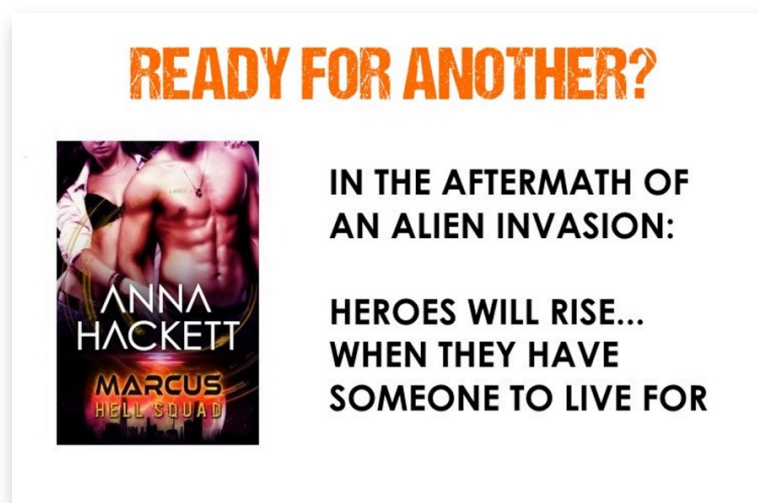
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PREVIEW - HELL SQUAD: MARCUS



In the aftermath of a deadly alien invasion, a band of survivors fights on...

In a world gone to hell, Elle Milton—once the darling of the Sydney social scene—has carved a role for herself as the communications officer for the toughest commando team fighting for humanity’s survival—Hell Squad. It’s her chance to make a difference and make up for horrible past mistakes... despite the fact that its battle-hardened commander never wanted her on his team.

When Hell Squad is tasked with destroying a strategic alien facility, Elle knows they need her skills in the field. But first she must go head to head with Marcus Steele and convince him she won’t be a liability.

Marcus Steele is a warrior through and through. He fights to protect the innocent and give the human race a chance to survive. And that includes the beautiful, gutsy Elle who twists

him up inside with a single look. The last thing he wants is to take her into a warzone, but soon they are thrown together battling both the alien invaders and their overwhelming attraction. And Marcus will learn just how much he'll sacrifice to keep her safe.

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I'm a USA Today bestselling romance author who's passionate about *fast-paced, emotion-filled* contemporary romantic suspense and science fiction romance. I love writing about people overcoming unbeatable odds and achieving seemingly impossible goals. I like to believe it's possible for all of us to do the same.

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