



Chapter One

The sound echoed off the stone walls around him.

It wasn't thunder, or the roar of an engine. It was the combination of thousands of voices chanting his name.

Kace Tameron stood at the tunnel entrance and assimilated all the information. The heat of the setting suns on his skin. The thunder of the crowd sitting in the seats circling the arena. The bright strobe lights shining into the darkening sky.

His heartbeat stayed steady and he shifted his combat staff, the smooth steel cool and familiar against his palms. In his head, he ran through an Antarian fight chant to focus his thoughts.

Once he got the order, he'd step out onto the sand of the Kor Magna Arena.

It was the fiercest gladiatorial arena on the galaxy's outer rim. Where slaves fought for freedom, where fighters battled for glory, and where soldiers, like himself, came to hone their skills.

Around him, his fellow gladiators were stretching, checking their weapons, focusing their thoughts.

"I'm ready to smack some Thraxians into the sand," Thorin shouted, slapping the head of his axe against his palm.

Kace eyed the giant SIRRUSH gladiator. Thorin was a little wild and deadly on the sand. His fighting partner stood beside him, the champion of the Kor Magna Arena, Raiden Tiago. The man's tattoos gleamed on his bronze skin, and there was no missing the fact that he was built like a fighter, and not the prince he'd once been.

Just beyond them in the tunnel stood another fighting pair from the House of Galen. Mountainous Nero and showman Lore. Kace was a career soldier. He'd worked with some of the best fighters on his planet, but this team was beyond good.

Here, projectile weapons were banned and considered dishonorable. Here, most technology was frowned upon, too. Here, you fought up close and personal, and you had to be good.

It was one of the cardinal rules of the arena—and there weren't many rules in Kor Magna—that a gladiator not be enhanced, or controlled by tech. They fought robots, used some energy shields and weapons, and raced chariots. But at the end of the day, it was gladiator against gladiator, man against man.

Someone bumped his shoulder, and Kace looked down at his own fighting partner. Saff Essikani was grinning at him, her teeth white against her darker skin. Her long, black hair fell to her waist in a mass of tiny braids. She was tall and muscular, and a hell of a gladiator in the arena.

While eagerness wafted off Saff, Kace stayed still and composed.

He wasn't an arena slave fighting for freedom, or a lifer like his friends, who considered the desert world of Carthago and the city of Kor Magna home. Kace was military. Born and bred to fight. He was here on a contract for two years to hone his skills.

A man stepped in front of them, wearing all black. His black shirt covered one arm and left his other muscled bicep bare. He moved his powerful body with a precision that let you know he could burst into action when required. Kace recognized a fellow warrior when he saw one.

With a scarred face and a black eye patch over one eye, Galen, Emperor of the House of Galen, was an imposing man.

"I don't need to tell any of you to fight well. You do every time you step in the arena." His single icy-blue eye took them all in. "I will tell you that the House of Thrax is still very unhappy with us."

Kace knew that was an understatement. They'd rescued several women from the Thraxians, and beaten the aliens time and again. Kace felt a very un-soldier-like lick of satisfaction. The Thraxians were slavers, and they deserved everything they got. They snatched people from all over the galaxy to sell to the highest bidders, and they'd made the unfortunate mistake of taking a transient wormhole to a distant star system on the opposite side of the galaxy.

They'd abducted a group of women off a space station near a planet called Earth. The diminutive women had also proven to be very tough and fierce. Thinking of them almost made him smile. The Thraxians hadn't known what hit them.

Kace, along with the other gladiators in the House of Galen, had helped free the Earth women. And now Harper, Regan, and Rory were stranded here, unable to return to their planet.

"The House of Thrax is looking for revenge," Galen said, his voice deep. "Watch yourselves out there."

Kace tightened his grip on his staff. It was of typical Antarian design—his people made some of the best weapons in the known galaxy. In the military, he also used ranged weapons, but here in the arena, it was considered cowardly. His proficiency with the staff had increased substantially in the six months he'd been a member of the House of Galen.

Right now, he was ready to pit himself against the Thraxian gladiators.

He heard footsteps behind them. He turned his head and he saw Harper, one of the women of Earth, move forward. Her smile was centered on Raiden.

"We came to wish you luck," Harper said.

The tough gladiator snatched the woman up with one arm, and pulled her in for a kiss. She was far shorter than her lover, but Kace had fought with her in the arena, and she was a hell of a fighter. Watching the two of them together made something in Kace's chest tighten.

Love was a foreign concept on Antar. In fact, it was expressly forbidden. It was fascinating to see the emotion shining off this couple.

Another woman moved forward. Dr. Regan Forrest was even shorter than Harper. Her flowing white dress accented her full curves and billowed out as she threw herself into Thorin's brawny arms.

Kace resisted shaking his head. Of all the gladiators in the House of Galen, he would never have picked big, wild Thorin to fall for a tiny, sweet Earth girl.

Unwillingly, Kace's gaze searched for the final woman from Earth.

There she was. Aurora Fraser, better known as Rory.

She was short as well, but somewhere between Regan and Harper in height. She didn't have Regan's curves, or Harper's athletic physique. She was built straight up and down, with slim hips, and toned arms. She wasn't wearing a dress like Regan, or fighting leathers like Harper. Instead, she wore simple black trousers and a white shirt that wrapped around her body, hugging

small, high breasts. Her unique red hair fell in a wild tangle of curls around her face. Green-gold eyes watched everyone and everything, and a faint smile flirted on her lips.

She'd suffered horribly at the hands of the Thraxians. Then, they'd sold her to the deplorable Vorn. She'd been beaten, treated worse than an animal, but here she was, smiling.

The women of Earth were tough, stubborn, and strong.

Her green-gold gaze met his and she moved closer. "Ready to fight, pretty boy?"

"Always." He fought the urge to tell her not to use that silly name. He was an Antarian soldier, there was nothing pretty about him. She'd called him that from the moment he'd rescued her in the House of Vorn. She'd also given him a black eye during the rescue.

If there was one thing Kace had already learned about Rory Fraser, it was that she swung her fists first and asked questions later.

She boldly eyed him up and down. "I believe it. I'm excited to see you fight."

Kace paused for a second, absorbing the fact that she was going to be watching him tonight. Something inside him liked that.

"Do you get nervous?" she asked.

"No."

He saw her nose wrinkle, and that drew his attention to the interesting splash of dots across the bridge of it. Freckles, she called them.

"Not at all?"

"No." Antarian soldiers didn't feel nerves.

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, gladiator. Well, be careful out there."

"All right, time to move," Galen called out.

Kace gave Rory a nod, even as he noted Raiden planting a huge kiss on Harper. Kace wondered for a brief second what Rory's lips felt like.

Then he shook his head and turned. Sex wasn't outlawed on Antar, nor was it endorsed. Soldiers were encouraged to pour all their emotions into their training, not frivolous activities.

He walked out of the tunnel, lifting his staff and centering his thoughts.

Together, the House of Galen gladiators stepped out onto the sand.

Around them, rows and rows of arena seats were packed full of people. When the crowd saw them, they roared their approval.

Thorin shook his axe in the air, while Saff pumped her fists at the crowd. Lore did a turn and tossed something in the air. Fireworks flew upward and broke off in all directions in silver and red—the House of Galen colors. Nero scowled at him.

Raiden barely paid the crowd any attention, his red cloak flaring behind him as he strode into the heart of the arena. He'd never pandered to the spectators, and he'd still become champion. He was a warrior at heart, and Kace followed his example.

As the others called out to the crowd, Kace knelt and picked up a handful of sand. He let it run through his fingers. He never let himself forget that here, he would be tested and challenged. These weren't fights to the death, but injuries always happened. Blood would splatter the sand. He wasn't here for the glory, he was here for duty and honor.

The tenor of the crowd changed, and Kace straightened.

Their opponents had entered the arena.

He moved to join his team, and saw the Thraxian gladiators coming toward them. Not all the warriors in the House of Thrax were Thraxians, but tonight, most of them were.

They made an impact. Seven feet tall, with powerful muscled bodies, the Thraxians had tough, brown skin, and a set of black horns on their heads. Their eyes glowed orange, and it matched the glow of orange veins visible through their skin.

Saff stepped up beside him. "Ready, military man?"

"Ready."

As the Thraxian gladiators moved into a jog, loping toward them, Raiden turned, a hard look on his face. "For honor and freedom."

"For honor and freedom." Kace raised his voice to join the others. They broke into a run and raced to meet the enemy.

Kace swung his staff, cracking it against the sword of a Thraxian fighter. He spun, bending one knee, and moving his staff upward. It was a fast move, and the Thraxian barely had time to react. The weapon slammed into the alien's side. With a roar, he staggered backward.

Again, Kace swung his staff, and again. His weapon was like an extension of himself. Soon, the Thraxian fell to his knees in the sand, and Kace brought the staff down on the back of the man's neck.

Thwack. The Thraxian plummeted to the sand. Kace leaped over the top of the fallen man and kept moving. He flanked Saff, and they both stared up at the giant Thraxian charging at them. He towered over both of them.

The female gladiator lifted a small, egg-shaped device. Kace nodded and watched as she tossed it at the giant.

The device exploded outward, and a wire-mesh net flew at their opponent. It tangled around his lower half, tripping him over. As he struggled, Kace leaped up, his staff raised above his head. He swung it down and slammed it against the man's lower back. He heard the crack of bones, and the Thraxian roared.

"Nice work." Saff slapped Kace's arm.

They continued to fight through the crowd of gladiators. Nero and Lore fought with determination and a lethal grace. Thorin and Raiden plowed through their opponents.

Finally, Kace pulled to a stop, as Thorin and Raiden engaged the last of the Thraxians. Kace rested the end of his staff in the sand and looked toward the stands.

His gaze zeroed in on the House of Galen seats, down close to the arena floor. Instantly, he spotted that brilliant glow of red hair. He saw that Rory was watching him, grinning.

"Incoming," Saff called out.

Kace whipped his head back and saw a gladiator had broken free from Thorin and Raiden. He was racing toward Saff and Kace. This one was a Gavia. A reptilian species that could spit poison.

Saff tossed her net device up and down in her palm, watching and waiting. When she got like this, she reminded Kace of a hunting cat, patient and cunning.

Usually, Saff was all fire and unrelenting power when she fought. Patience was Kace's skill, not Saff's. More often than not, she charged in without planning.

But this time, Kace didn't want to wait. He felt an extra rush of energy this evening, a need to show off his skills. He rushed forward to meet the gladiator.

Kace used his most dramatic moves, swinging his staff in a wild, lethal dance. He wore the other man down, slamming the staff into him at all the sensitive spots on the Gavia's body. The alien groaned, swinging wildly and spitting green blood onto the sand. His movements were slowing, losing coordination.

Then Kace swung the staff sideways, taking the Gavia down at the knees. He swung again and caught the alien under his jaw, slamming his head back. As the Gavia cursed, he moved his head, and a shower of dark-green poison sprayed out of the alien's mouth.

Kace dived, rolled through the sand, and came back up on his feet. He could hear the poison sizzling on the sand. Again, he swung his staff around and caught the Gavia in the back. The alien fell forward on his hands and knees, struggling to get back up. Then, finally, he collapsed.

The crowd went wild.

Saff appeared beside him, one dark brow arched. "Well, look who ate his Wheaties today."

Kace frowned. *Wheaties?* "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's a phrase that Regan taught me. Means you ate something that gave you some extra energy today."

Kace didn't respond. Another House of Thrax gladiator was back up, and lumbering toward them. He was big, muscles bulging across his broad chest and wide shoulders. His name was Naare, a Varinid from the planet Varin. He'd been a gladiator with the House of Thrax for years. Kace kind of liked the guy, and knew he had almost earned his freedom. He was very good with an axe.

Naare engaged, swinging his weapon in a wild arc. Saff and Kace ducked and rolled.

Kace spun, bringing his staff up. He struck Naare in the side, then the shoulder.

Kace frowned. The Varinid was usually lightning-fast on his feet. Today, he was slower than a green recruit. Again and again, Kace swung his staff into his opponent, while the other man never got a hit near him.

Naare's eyes were dull. Another two hits of the staff, and the gladiator went down.

Kace frowned. Naare was close to gaining his freedom, and he usually was a challenging opponent.

But tonight, something was different. Maybe Naare had picked up a drug habit? Kor Magna drew spectators from around the galaxy for the fights, but outside the arena walls, the city—and its shiny, glitzy District—catered to a lot of vices. Gambling, drugs, women, men... whatever you wanted, you could find it here. Kace was well aware more than one gladiator in the arena dealt with their demons through the use of chemicals.

Suddenly, the wail of a siren echoed out over the arena. He heard the announcers calling out, declaring the House of Galen the winners.

Kace wiped his arm across his face, brushing away the blood and sweat. Right here, right now in this moment, he felt a clarity he rarely felt anywhere else.

On Antar, with his squad of soldiers, he'd always felt part of a team, fighting to protect their planet.

But it wasn't until he'd come to the arena that he'd truly felt alive. Here in the arena, he'd learned a lot—about fighting, about strategy, about people. What he hadn't expected was to make friends.

A big fist punched into his shoulder. "Hey there, military man." Thorin hit him again. "What got into you tonight?"

Raiden slid his sword back into his scabbard. "You used some pretty fancy moves out there."

Kace shrugged. "I was in the mood."

"You were just showing off," Saff teased.

"An Antarian soldier does not show off."

His friends continued to rib him as they crossed the sand. As they neared the tunnel, he looked up at the House of Galen seats. He saw Rory at the railing watching him. She was jumping up and down, her arms above her head. He watched as she put her fingers to her mouth and let out a shrill whistle.

Kace's gut hardened as realization set in. *Drak*. It hadn't just been a need to test his skills. The reason he'd acted out of character was sitting in the stands, celebrating his win.