

Imperator Magnus Rone stood in the center of the rooftop garden at the House of Galen and wondered what the drak he'd stepped into.

The trees and greenery in the garden were all festooned with strands of red, gold, and silver decorations. The shrub beside him was covered in large balls of mostly red and green. Several trees had stars on top of them.

He shook his head. This Earth tradition of Christmas made no sense.

His gaze moved over the stone walls. He saw the imposing Kor Magna Arena rising up toward the blue sky, and beyond it, the spires of the city. Kor Magna—capital of the lawless desert world of Carthago—was a mix of old tradition and glitzy luxury.

But everything on the planet revolved around the gladiatorial arena and the spectacular fights that went on within its ancient stone walls. Magnus understood fighting and killing. They had been instilled in him by the cyborg program that had created him. When he'd escaped and come to Carthago, he'd fought hard to create the House of Rone. He provided for his gladiators, but fighting had still been at the heart of his life.

Until one woman had changed everything.

Across the top of the garden, strings of lights blinked merrily, long tables were laden with strange food he didn't recognize, and there were several large, bare-chested gladiators standing around. Magnus guessed their bemused expressions matched the look on his own face.

His woman, Ever, had been excited all week for this party. She'd talked nonstop about decorations, gifts, trees, and carols. He'd been happy to see her happy. Whatever his woman wanted, Magnus would go out of his way to get it for her.

He strode across the space toward a tall, broad-shouldered man standing in the middle of the party wearing a black cloak. "Galen."

The emperor turned, inclining his head. A glossy black eye-patch covered one eye on his rugged face. "Magnus. Glad you could make it."

They clasped arms in a traditional warrior's hold.

"Glad I'm here to be moral support?" Magnus asked.

A small smile tipped the corners of Galen's mouth. "I'm surviving the festivities...so far. The women have been begging me for several weeks to hold this Christmas party."

The two emperors turned, hands clasped behind their backs, and watched the women and House servers bustling around. The women were all survivors stolen from the planet Earth—situated on the other side of the galaxy—by alien slavers. They'd all been rescued by the gladiators of the House of Galen and their allies. And all had captured the hearts of the gladiators.

That included the love of Magnus' life, Ever. A woman who'd made a cold cyborg feel.

Working with the survivors from Earth, they'd defeated the Thraxian slavers. Then the women had changed the lives of the House of Galen gladiators irrevocably.

Several children ran past. Magnus guessed they were the children of workers at the House of Galen. Nearby, Raiden—champion of the Kor Magna Arena—was handing out what looked like candy with his woman, Harper, by his side. Raiden's red cloak flapped in the breeze and Harper's smile was wide as the kids danced around them.

Next to the couple was Raiden's best friend and fellow gladiator, Thorin. The big man was hovering over his Earth woman, Regan. She was giggling at him, and when he smoothed a hand over her stomach, her face softened. So did Thorin's. Magnus would never have expected a wild, hardened gladiator like Thorin to be entranced and tamed by one small woman. A woman who was now carrying his child.

Suddenly Regan went pale and clamped her hand over her mouth. Thorin's face turned panicked, and as Regan turned and ran off, Thorin was right on her heels.

"Regan's pregnancy is resulting in morning sickness," Galen said. "I'm told it's normal." The man's icy-blue gaze stared at the doorway where the couple had disappeared.

"Ever had some of the symptoms as well," Magnus said. "It's unpleasant but normal."

Galen grunted. Like Magnus, he was a man used to getting his own way and having his orders followed. It was unsettling when a situation was outside his control.

All of a sudden, another of Galen's gladiators appeared in front of them. Kace's hair was mussed, his leather harness askew, and a slight look of panic was on his face.

Magnus raised his eyebrows. Usually, the military-trained gladiator was neat, orderly, and in control.

"Kace?" Galen said.

"Finley got away. Have you seen him?"

Galen and Magnus shook their heads. Magnus hadn't seen Kace and Rory's offspring anywhere. They scanned around, and that's when he spotted the bright red of Rory's hair across the rooftop.

"You come down now, you little monster," Rory said in a sing-song voice.

The Earth engineer had her arms held up and was calling to the tiny child clinging to the uppermost branches of a tree. The child couldn't even walk yet, but apparently, he could climb. His mix of human and alien genetics meant he was growing at a rapid rate. A mechanical bark sounded and that's when Magnus noticed the robot dog perched on the branch beside the young child.

Kace made a strangled sound. "Wherever Finley goes, so does Hero. Always in drakking trouble." The gladiator strode over to help his woman rescue their son from the tree.

Galen let out a low laugh. "That'll be you before you know it."

*Drak.* Magnus stopped. His daughter was still tiny and not crawling around yet...the thought of her climbing things made him feel ill.

The sound of a man's low laugh reached them. Magnus' gaze fell on a couple standing away from the main party. Lore had swept his woman, Madeline, up in one brawny arm and was holding his other arm above their heads. He appeared to be clutching a bunch of leaves.

"What is Lore doing?" Magnus asked.

"Apparently that's mistletoe, or at least the Carthagoan version," Galen said. "It's a Christmas tradition to kiss beneath it."

Magnus frowned. He just kissed Ever whenever he wanted, he didn't need a bunch of leaves. From what he could tell, Lore was always kissing his woman as well. Although, as Madeline leaned into her gladiator, love shining on her face, she didn't appear to mind this strange tradition.

Like his thoughts had summoned her, Ever appeared beside him. "Hey, babe." She thrust their infant daughter into Magnus' arms. "I need you to take care of Asha while I help Sam and the others with some party stuff."

Magnus was always happy to spend time with his daughter. He snuggled baby Asha into the curve of his arm. “Ever, this Christmas tradition seems very odd. Red balls, bunches of leaves...”

“Christmas is packed full of fun things, Magnus.” She reached up and cupped his jaw. “Give it time. And this is Asha’s first Christmas, so I want to make a big deal of it. Don’t be a Grinch.”

Magnus had no idea what a Grinch was. He glanced down at the sleepy-looking baby in his arms. He knew Asha wouldn’t remember her first Christmas, but he decided not to tell Ever that.

Ever and his child were the lights of his life. They’d made him the man he was.

He leaned down and pressed his mouth to Ever’s. “Whatever you want, my love.”

She shot him a saucy wink. “I’ve got to go and help with the eggnog.”

His brows drew together. “Eggnog?”

But Ever was gone.

“It’s best not to ask,” Galen said. “Sam has been peppering me with questions about this party, and my opinion on things, for the last three days. I just nod and agree.”

Magnus fought back a rare smile. No one would believe that the Emperor of the House of Galen would let anyone, especially a woman, run over him.

Although as Galen’s eyes tracked the tall, athletic Samantha across the rooftop, Magnus knew that like him, Galen would do anything for his woman. He’d already risked his life and freedom to save Sam from the Thraxians. He’d used all his resources and skills to bring down the Thraxians and get justice for the survivors of Earth.

Magnus rubbed his metal fingers against Asha’s cheek, his baby nuzzling into his touch. Love filled his heart to bursting. Some days, he almost wanted to thank the drakking Thraxians.

“You look incredibly cute, Nero,” a feminine voice said. “And remember what I promised you.”

“I look ridiculous, Winter.” Nero’s voice was a deep, grumpy rumble.

The couple swept into view. The barbarian gladiator towered over the dark-haired doctor. Winter was laughing while Nero looked suitably bad-tempered. The gladiator was wearing his usual fighting leathers and harness, trimmed with gray fur, but today he was also sporting what looked like—Magnus peered closer at the top of Nero’s head—a set of antlers.

Winter smacked a kiss on her lover’s cheek, then rushed off in a whirl of skirts. Nero crossed his muscled arms over his chest, while Magnus and Galen stared at the antlers.

Nero’s scowl deepened. “Don’t ask.”

“I believe that’s impossible at this point, Nero.” Galen was smiling.

Magnus bit his tongue. This Christmas thing was completely mystifying.

“Winter said something about reindeers, then promised me sexual favors if I wore these,” Nero grumbled.

Magnus tilted his head, considering. Drak, if Ever had made him the same offer, he’d probably have done it as well.

Another wave of kids rushed in through the doorway. They were shouting and laughing. Right behind them came a man with bandoliers crisscrossed over his loose desert shirt and the swagger of a man used to both taking risks and being in charge. He spied Magnus and Galen and raised a hand. Corsair, the master of the Corsair Desert Caravan, had his other hand tucked into the belt loops of the woman by his side—his Earth woman, Neve. A smile broke out on Neve’s face and she cut a straight path to Ever.

The sisters hugged—both tall, with dark, curly hair. Neve was still slowly warming to Magnus. She was a sharper-edged version of her sister and very protective. Corsair threw an arm around Neve's shoulders and bent down to kiss Ever's cheek.

Ever watched the couple, beaming happily. Magnus knew how pleased Ever was that her sister was happy and in love. When a young girl in desert clothing patted Corsair's leg, he smiled down at her, then tugged on her pigtail. He was as dedicated to his caravan and his people—and now Neve—as any emperor.

The kids from the Corsair Caravan mixed with those from the House of Galen, giggles filling the air. Then yet another wave of children came through the door. This time they were being herded by a tall cyborg gladiator. Magnus hid his smile. These children belonged to the workers from the House of Rone, and he'd tasked his second, Jaxer, with bringing them.

Behind them were two of Magnus' elite cyborg guards, Acton and Toren. The men were looking around the decorated rooftop, their faces carefully blank. All their enhancements and filters dampened their emotions, but Magnus knew all the cyborgs that he'd rescued felt far more than they showed. Right now, he guessed they were hiding a wealth of confusion and bemusement.

Jax waved the children in. That's when Magnus noticed Jax had a small boy clamped to his leg. The boy had a synthetic arm—a child the House of Rone had rescued and helped heal after he'd lost his arm in an accident. As Jax leaned down and smiled at the boy, his long, brown hair swung forward. He ruffled the boy's hair and then led the Rone children over to where Raiden and Harper were giving out candy.

A tinkling, musical laugh cut through the noise. A small, blonde woman rushed into the garden, glancing back over her shoulder. Mia was a former pilot and right behind her was her

alien gladiator mate, Vek. The blue-skinned male followed along behind his woman and had a red hat on his head. Mia called out greetings to several of the Earth women, then hurried over to a small stage set up in one corner. Vek stood close by, looking like he was waiting for an alien beast to leap out so he could tear it apart before it threatened his mate. Mia moved over to a microphone and with no instrument, started singing.

Magnus listened to Mia and decided she needed no music to accompany her. She had a voice worthy of being the star attraction in Kor Magna's best casinos. In fact, she often sang at the Dark Nebula Casino to sell-out crowds. He listened to the lyrics, something about jingle bells, a sleigh, snow, and laughing all the way. He found himself smiling.

Suddenly, someone clapped their hands. Magnus turned to see Galen's partner, Sam, calling for attention.

"Listen up, kids." The tall woman smiled, her golden skin glowing in the sunlight. She wore slick leather pants and an emerald green shirt. "You're in for a treat today. Today is Christmas, a special time on Earth, where many of us are from. And on this special day, a very important visitor comes."

"Is it a gladiator?" a child called out.

Sam smiled. "No."

"An imperator?" another asked.

"No. But it is someone who comes bearing gifts for all good, young children. So, I'd like you all to welcome Santa Claus." She threw an arm out.

*Santa?* Magnus followed the direction of Sam's hand and saw a man in a red suit walk into the garden. He was tall and broad shouldered, with a huge belly stretching the red suit he wore.

He also had long, white facial hair that was out of control and unruly. A red hat sat on his white hair. He was also carrying a large sack of gifts over his shoulder.

Magnus narrowed his gaze on the man. It was clearly Blaine Strong, the lone male among the Earth survivors. Magnus knew for a fact that the man had no large belly or white hair. No, he was packed with muscle and a hell of a fighter.

Blaine let out a deep, booming laugh, and headed toward the group of children. Beside him, his woman, Saff—one of Galen’s best gladiators—sauntered alongside her man. Her long, lean body was encased in some sort of green costume—green-and-white striped socks that reached her thighs, a short green dress that looked good against her dark skin, and a pointed green hat on her black, braided hair.

She was smiling at the children, most of who were staring at “Santa” with uncertain looks on their faces. They looked like they weren’t sure whether to be excited or afraid.

“Merry Christmas,” boomed Blaine. “I have gifts for everybody.”

The kids got over their uncertainty and cheered.

They mobbed Blaine, and he and Saff started giving out brightly wrapped gifts to all the children. Among the crowd was a tall man with the beautiful dark-haired woman with him. Bren and Mersi were Corsair’s right hands on his caravan. They were herding a young girl and a huge dog closer to Blaine and Saff. The girl accepted her gift, opening it shyly. When she looked up, Magnus saw her face was shining with happiness.

Bren slid an arm around Mersi and then ruffled the girl’s hair.

“Sorry we’re late,” a woman called out.

Ryan and Zhim strolled into the party, arm in arm. Magnus almost did a double take. The Earth woman was dressed in a very short dress covered with bold white and red stripes. Her straight black hair hung loose and small red-and-white-shaped canes hung from her ears.

She turned around, went up on her toes, and pressed a kiss to Zhim's lips before she hurried away. The information merchant stood with a pleased smile on his handsome face.

"I'm liking this Christmas thing," the man said. "I discovered it's customary to give gifts, so I got Ryan a new component for her comp system."

Galen snorted. Magnus knew Galen hired Zhim and Ryan to take care of his tech, because he didn't much care for it. The last gift Galen would want was comp parts, but Magnus wasn't surprised that Ryan, a comp system genius, would be pleased with components.

Zhim's smile sharpened. "And Ryan gave me my gift in bed." A heated look filled his eyes. "And have you *seen* that dress?"

Galen just shook his head. Sam sauntered over, leaning into the imperator's side. Galen wrapped a tattooed arm around her and held on tight.

"Thank you for this, Galen," she murmured. "I know you weren't sure about throwing a Christmas party, but it's made a lot of people happy."

Galen simply dropped a kiss to Sam's lips.

Asha gurgled and Magnus looked down at his daughter. She smiled back at him.

Then he looked up and saw Neve and Ever smiling at each other. Several gladiators were sampling the different foods. The kids were yelling and laughing, showing off their gifts. It was all set to the soundtrack of Mia's sweet voice singing Christmas songs.

Jax stepped up beside Magnus looking like he'd just survived a fight in the Kor Magna Arena. "This is crazy. Large men in red suits with long white beards, decorations everywhere, screaming kids." The cyborg shook his head.

"No." Magnus had just realized that it wasn't crazy. This was about family. Whatever had sparked the tradition of Christmas on Earth, he realized now that it was a time for family and friends. A time to be together, to give, to celebrate.

The women from Earth—Magnus glanced at Blaine—and the lone man, had changed everything for the gladiators of Carthago. They all had a lot to celebrate.

Jax crossed his arms. "Well, I'm not convinced."

"Probably because you don't have a sexy Earth woman warming your bed," Nero said.

Magnus watched as his second glanced over the party. Something moved through Jax's eyes for a second before he hid it, pasting on a wide smile. "I don't want a woman in my life, bossing me around, demanding things, and convincing me to have strange parties."

"Careful, Jaxer." Galen pulled Sam close. "Sometimes the fates grant you what you least expect."

Sam elbowed the emperor.

Galen smiled. "And I wouldn't change a single thing, my imperatoress."

"I hope we haven't missed anything important," a deep voice drawled.

Magnus turned his head and saw an elegant man in a dark suit and crisp white shirt. A woman wearing a sleek red dress was with him. Rillian—owner of the Dark Nebula Casino—and his Earth woman, Dayna. Behind them stood Rillian's head of security, a gruff, taciturn man called Tannon.

"Merry Christmas, Dayna." Sam moved to hug the woman.

Then Dayna moved over to Magnus, reaching down to stroke Asha's cheek. "Hello, baby girl."

Magnus studied Dayna's face. The former law enforcement officer wasn't radiating the same excitement and fun like the other women.

"What's wrong?" He lifted his head to catch Rillian's black-and-silver gaze. The casino owner wore a serious expression.

"Tannon came to me. It's the reason we're late. He's heard some more rumors of possible people from Earth being kept as slaves."

Magnus felt a hitch in his gut and shared a look with Galen. They'd been hearing rumors that more people from Earth had been snatched in the same attack that had enslaved the women they'd rescued. They'd been searching for these people for weeks. But every single lead they followed ended the same way—with nothing solid.

The unsmiling Tannon nodded. "My security team keep feelers out for any information that could affect the Dark Nebula. I have informants in place across the city."

Asha started to fuss and Magnus jiggled her. "It's been just whispers. Every lead we've had peters out. Even Zhim hasn't been able to find anything."

The information merchant shook his head. "Every time I think I'm onto something, it goes up in a puff of taint smoke."

"They know we championed the survivors of Earth," Galen said. "If there are slavers out there who have imprisoned humans from Earth, they're going to ensure that word of it doesn't reach us."

Beside Magnus, Jax went stiff. "We will *not* leave these people to be sold, abused, or killed." There was a deep thread of anger in the cyborg's voice. Once, Jax had been in a similar situation,

when the military program he and Magnus had been in had deemed him defective. He was going to be decommissioned—killed and discarded without a single thought.

“No, we won’t.” Galen’s voice held a hard edge.

“Jax has been leading our investigation,” Magnus said. “Rillian, I suggest he work with Tannon to investigate this latest lead.”

Rillian inclined his head. “I agree.”

Jax straightened and Tannon nodded.

“The children...” Jax said.

“I’ve got them,” Magnus answered.

“We’ll report as soon as we know anything,” Jax said.

The two men walked out, shoulder to shoulder. Magnus released a breath. There was nothing they could do for now but wait.

When Asha let out a squawk, he lifted her closer and pressed a kiss to her head.

“That looks good on you,” Sam said with a smile.

“It feels good too.” Magnus looked at the party again. The women of Earth had brought so much joy and love to their lives. And just thinking that there might be more humans out there...

He made a vow to himself. No human would spend another Christmas lost and alone. Not if he and the House of Rone could stop it.

Ever appeared with a wide smile, greeting Dayna and Rillian. Then she looked at Magnus and her smile faded. “What’s wrong?”

“Later.” He didn’t want to ruin her first Christmas in her new home, or baby Asha’s first holiday.

She stared at him for a beat. She knew him well enough to know it was important, but she nodded.

“I have a present for you.” She nudged him away from the others, holding up a small box.

Magnus shifted Asha and using his organic hand, opened the box. He stared down at the red lace, then back at Ever. “I don’t think it will fit me.”

A sexy smile curled her lips. “It’s for me to wear, but for you to enjoy.”

Magnus felt a bolt of desire. When Asha fussed again, he thought it wasn’t right to feel this aroused while holding his baby girl.

But that was his Ever, igniting all kinds of emotions inside him. She’d done it from the first day he’d met her.

“When can we leave this party?” Magnus knew his voice sounded strained.

Ever wrapped her arms around him and smiled. “Soon, my cyborg, soon.”

“Hey, you two.” Neve’s raised voice. “Get over here and join the party. I want to snuggle my niece.”

“Magnus,” Galen called out. “You have to try this eggnog.”

Ever’s smile was blinding. “Merry Christmas, Magnus.”

He pulled his woman and child closer, aware of their family and friends surrounding them.

“Merry Christmas, Ever.”