



## Chapter One

With a wild shout, he brought his sword down, slashing through the training dummy.

The emotions inside Blaine Strong were boiling and molten. A second dummy popped up through an opening in the sand of the training arena, and he sliced its belly open, before spinning in a circle, sword raised above his head.

Two more dummies appeared and, using all his strength, Blaine thrust his sword through the closest dummy's stomach, and chopped the arm off the second.

As the final dummy appeared, he leaped into the air and decapitated it with one wild slash. He landed, skidding through the sand, then attacked the damaged dummy again, with violent hits and thrusts of his sword, completely destroying it.

No more dummies sprang out of the ground. He stood there, chest heaving. The anger inside him was like a beast—wild and hungry, and out of control.

In that moment, even though sunshine from the two large suns in the sky warmed his skin, and a brisk breeze ruffled his too-long dark hair, he was back in the bowels of the underground fight ring that had been his life for several months.

Images peppered his head like a movie on fast-forward. All of them were the faces of the people he'd killed.

Blaine sucked in a deep breath, forcing himself back to reality. Even though he was free, the ghosts didn't seem to stop haunting him. He took another deep breath, which just reminded him that a side effect of all the drugs his captors had pumped into him was losing his sense of smell. Right now, he smelled none of the scents of the arena. He hadn't realized how much he'd used the sense until it had been dulled to nothing.

He scanned his surroundings and reminded himself that he was standing in the House of Galen training arena. He stared at the new gladiator recruits training on the sand not far away, and then over the training arena to the walls of the main Kor Magna Arena adjacent. The immense structure was made of a warm, cream stone, and was a mecca for spectators coming to watch the alien gladiators fight. But unlike the hell of the underground fight rings, no one battled to the death there.

He flicked his gaze to the right, and contemplated the tips of the glitzy buildings in the District. It made him think of a long-ago trip to Las Vegas when he'd been younger. The desert planet of Carthago and the city of Kor Magna offered all kinds of spectacles and entertainment.

Blaine shook his head. He was a long way from Earth and his old life. His previous job had been as a space marine-turned-security specialist for the Fortuna Space Station orbiting Jupiter. But that was all long gone.

He'd been abducted by Thraxian slavers, and after months of captivity, sold into the fight rings run by the Srinar aliens. Forced to fight and kill.

He pulled in a shuddering breath, unable to rid himself of the drowning sensation dragging at him.

Then he heard a laugh—full-throated and feminine.

He looked up, his gaze zeroing in on the long, tall form of Saff Essikani.

The female gladiator was walking into the training arena, her back straight, and her muscled, athletic body clad in dark leather. Her leather top hugged her slim torso lovingly, and left her muscular arms bare. Her long, black hair was in tiny braids that she'd caught back at the base of her neck, and her skin was dark and glossy.

Blaine heard his heart beat like a drum in his ears. It was clear she was strong and an experienced fighter, but he also spotted small touches of femininity. The elegant tilt of her dark eyes, unbelievably long eyelashes, and her long, slender neck.

It took him a second to realize she wasn't alone. Harper Adams strode beside her. Harper had been Blaine's fellow security specialist on the space station. She'd been the first to be rescued and taken in by the gladiators of the House of Galen. In turn, she'd helped to rescue several other human women who'd also been abducted. He wondered if there were any others they didn't know about, out there, somewhere, suffering.

Anger threatened, nipping at the edges of his consciousness. To fight it back, he focused on Saff.

She was tossing a small device up and down on her palm. He knew the egg-shaped item was a net. When thrown, it exploded outward, entangling an enemy. She held a sword in her other hand. Harper was holding two swords, swinging them through the air and smiling.

The women found a spot on the sand, and then began to spar.

Every thought of captivity disintegrated. The women moved with a power and grace that was impossible to ignore.

Blaine had sparred with Harper quite a few times, and trained alongside her on the space station. She was an athletic woman, who used her power and speed to her advantage.

But Saff's style was very different. She was taller, but slightly leaner than Harper, the long lines of her muscular body graceful and elegant. Every time she leaped into the air, leading with her sword, the tiny black braids flew out behind her. He couldn't help but picture her as a warrior queen.

He watched the women move across the sand, swords spinning and crashing, shouting and laughing at each other. They were both working up a sweat, but he could tell this wasn't a fight where there was supposed to be a winner.

Finally, they broke apart. Saff slung an arm around Harper's shoulders, smiling. Then Harper spotted something across the arena and straightened. She waved to Saff and headed over toward a huge, tattooed gladiator who'd just arrived. Raiden Tiago, Champion of the Kor Magna Arena.

Blaine had been shocked to discover that many of the female human survivors had fallen in love with some of the alien gladiators who'd rescued them. He watched as Raiden—his body covered in intricate black tattoos—wrapped an arm around Harper and pulled her up on her toes to plant a solid kiss on her mouth.

Movement caught Blaine's gaze, and he turned back to see Saff sauntering toward him.

Now he could make out the studded detailing on her leather vest, and better see the way her black leather fighting pants molded to her long legs. She walked like a panther on the prowl.

Blaine felt a rush of heat through his body. It made him stiffen. He hadn't felt much except anger and despair for so long. For the last few months, all his angry emotions had been enhanced and intensified by the drugs the Srinar had pumped him full of before his fights.

To feel this fresh, warm desire for this magnificent woman took his breath away.

"Hey, Earth man. Think you can fight a real gladiator?" She glanced at the destroyed training dummy at his feet, a hint of challenge in her dark eyes.

"Any day," he answered.

A faint smile appeared on her face. "Then let's see what you've got."

He lifted his sword, still getting used to the weight of the new weapon. Saff lifted her own.

Blaine attacked. As his blade met hers, he focused on the fight. She blocked his hit, spun away, and came right back in. She was good.

She fought every day in the arena, and no doubt trained for hours on end. Metal rang on metal, and he saw a few of the new House of Galen recruits stop to watch them. A small crowd gathered around.

“Come on, human,” Saff taunted, dancing backward. “You can do better than that.”

With a growl, he charged at her. But by the time he swung his sword, she was gone. She ducked down low, and he felt a slice across his fighting leathers on his thigh. Not enough to cut, but enough to leave a deep groove in the material.

*Dammit.* Gritting his teeth, he attacked again. Emotions flared up inside him, an aggressive anger he couldn't control. Most days, he felt it hammering to get out of him. Before his abduction, he'd been a composed man, in control. If he'd been his usual self, he'd have less trouble fighting Saff.

She came in from the side, and slammed her sword against his. The blow vibrated up his arm and he lost his grip on the hilt. The blade fell in the sand.

The next thing he knew, she knocked into him, and they were rolling through the sand. They ended up with her on top of him, straddling his chest. She laughed, a jubilant sound that rocketed through his body.

“I win, Earth man.”

She pinned his arms down. He pushed against her but couldn't move. Damn. She was stronger than she looked.

“Again,” he growled.

She looked down at him, studying his face intently. Could she see the ugly blackness that clawed inside him?

“Again,” he repeated, shoving the dark thoughts away.

She inclined her head. “Sure. I can beat you all day long.”

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As Saff got to her feet and snatched her sword up off the sand, she felt the anger pumping off Blaine. It pummeled against her empathic abilities and she was glad she'd only inherited a very minor ability to sense emotion in others from her mother.

Ever since they'd rescued him, he'd been fighting this battle inside himself. She'd felt glimpses of his struggles with terrible withdrawals from the drugs the sand-sucking Srinar had used on him. Drugs to pump up his aggression. His first few days at the House of Galen had been spent in agony.

Saff fought back a punch of sympathy, along with the need to skewer any Thraxian or Srinar on her sword. The poor guy had been abducted, pumped full of drugs for months, and forced to fight to the death. He'd been deprived of everything good for a long time.

It was expected that he'd have a little trouble adjusting to his freedom. Especially when the transient wormhole back to his planet was long gone, and he and the other humans were stuck here. She knew Galen was still making Blaine take some therapy sessions with the healers, but it was going to take time.

When she turned around, he was already rushing at her, sword lifted.

Their weapons clashed, and she turned her focus back to the fight. He was human, but he was a big one. She'd gotten used to the women being smaller and not as strong. But Blaine definitely wasn't small or weak, with his powerful body and muscles honed hard by the fight rings. As he wore only a simple strap of leather across his chest, it revealed that there wasn't any fat left on his body anywhere, and also a spill of intriguing dark tattoos over one shoulder.

As his next blow rattled up her arm, she gave herself a mental shake. He was fighting with wild slashes—undisciplined and out of control.

She knew that lack of control bothered him.

Saff danced back a few steps, and discreetly pulled out her net device. As he rushed at her again with a wild roar, she tossed the net. It spun, exploded, and wrapped around his legs, sending him down like a slain *gorgo* beast.

He fought against the net, growling and cursing. She neared him, his emotions slammed into her like a rival gladiator, and she gritted her teeth. She realized he'd lost some sense of reality. He was no longer in the training arena, but fighting like the net was a fight ring killer out to take him down.

*Drak.* Saff leaped on top of him, pinning him beneath her. She pulled out her knife from the sheath strapped to her thigh, and slashed the net open.

“Easy.” She reached down and pressed her palms to his face. “Easy, Blaine.”

Dark eyes locked on hers. The torment in them made her throat close.

“Easy, Earth man. I’m here. Listen to my voice.” She dug her legs into his side, feeling that heaving chest beneath her body, and grabbed his arms. All that hard strength and power. She ignored the inconvenient and inappropriate trickle of desire.

Finally, he settled beneath her, those strong muscles slowly relaxing. She felt the wild churn of his emotions calm a little, although the savage look in his eyes never quite went away.

She released his arms. “You’re a good, strong fighter, Blaine. But you need to learn to use your rage to your advantage.”

He sat up, their faces only a whisper apart. “I don’t want the rage. Before the drugs and captivity, I had perfect control.”

She nodded. “I know you’re still dealing with everything. Give yourself some time.”

He just stared at her, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

Saff shook her head. She spent her days surrounded by tough, stubborn males who were terrible at asking for help. “Give yourself a break, and accept what you can’t change.”

She saw his gaze flick past her. She turned her head, and saw the three human women they’d rescued, along with him, from the fight rings. Dayna, Mia and Winter were all slowly settling in at the House of Galen.

Dayna was showing off some earrings she’d obviously purchased at the underground markets. The big, bold hoops inlaid with colored stones suited the confident woman. She was letting Winter feel them. Despite the best efforts of the House of Galen healers, they hadn’t yet been able to fix Winter’s eyes. The Thraxians had used the woman as a test subject during her captivity and blinded her. Despite that, she was smiling as she admired her friend’s new jewelry.

“They’re adjusting,” Saff said quietly. “And in time, so will you.”

“The Srinar...they changed me.” He hesitated, as though the words were caught in his throat. “They forced me to fight, and now I’m...different.”

Yes, he was. And if he kept trying to get back to the way he’d been before, he’d just keep being disappointed. But something told Saff that Blaine needed time to accept that.

“Come on, Earth man. I’ll buy you a drink.”

She jumped to her feet, holding her hand down to him. Just as she had in that fight ring when she’d rescued him.

Reluctantly, he slapped his hand in hers and allowed her to pull him up.

Then she cocked one hip, wanting to distract him. “Race you to the drinks table. First one there is the winner.”

She saw him tense, but she didn’t wait for him to respond. With a laugh, Saff spun and sprinted across the sand. A second later, she sensed him racing after her.