



## Chapter One

Galen swung his sword in a massive arc, cutting down his opponent.

Swiveling, he ducked under an arm and rammed his boot into the gut of another attacker.

Pulling back, he raised his short sword, his chest heaving. Every muscle in his body burned, and his chest and head ached. He was tired. So tired.

He watched as even more fighters raced across the sand of the lawless desert arena. He stayed motionless, and waited, savoring the brief respite. He'd fight. He'd keep fighting. And he'd never give up.

The wooden stands that surrounded the arena were packed with screaming spectators. They shouted and jeered and booed in a deafening cacophony of noise. Overhead, the desert suns beat down on the floating platform that housed the arena.

Sweat dripped into Galen's right eye. He reached up, swiping it away and adjusting the eyepatch that covered his useless left eye socket. He pulled in a shuddering breath. He'd lost track of how long he'd been here at Zaabha.

Three days? Four? They hadn't let him sleep or rest. They just kept him fighting. Fighting and fighting, waiting for exhaustion to do him in.

*Drakking Thraxians.*

The large, horned aliens had always thrived on enslaving and hurting others. And he'd been their enemy a long time.

Galen lifted his sword another fraction and watched the fighters come. They wore ragtag clothes, and most of their faces were filled with both terror and determination. But their essences mixed in the air, hitting his senses. All Aurelians had the ability to feel a being's personality. He sensed weariness, exhaustion, and resignation. They were victims too. People snatched from their ships and planets, and forced to fight for the entertainment of sand-sucking cowards.

He saw several fighters pull ahead, coming closer. He spotted the glint of silver at their temples and his gut curdled. The Thraxians had been experimenting with implants, and it looked like they were perfecting their tech. Galen felt the pale shadows of their essences. They'd been turned from unwilling, unruly slaves into ruthless, obedient fighters.

The closest fighter—a big, green-skinned Ergite—charged at Galen with a roar. Their swords clashed. Galen swung and ducked, but he knew he was getting sluggish.

He slashed with the sword and then drove it deep. The Ergite fell and Galen spun to face another opponent. But he was too slow. He felt the cut on his arm, but the burn just melted in with all the other aches and pains.

A giant alien stomped into view, towering over Galen. He couldn't place the species, but with shiny, bronze skin and ropes of muscle, the man was formidable.

Galen dredged up some energy and moved to kick the alien. But the alien blocked him and slammed his own blade against Galen's sword. Galen staggered back, falling on the sand.

*Get up, Galen.*

What did it matter? His people had gotten away. Raiden, the prince Galen had been bred to protect, was safe. The others from the House of Galen—the house he'd sweated to create and cultivate—were safe.

He saw a war axe slamming down toward him and he rolled just in time. It sliced into the sand near his head.

Fighting was what Galen knew. Honor and duty were in his blood.

So he'd fight. He pushed to his knees, and the pain made him grit his teeth. He was so *drakking* tired, and maybe he was getting too old for this.

The pitch of the crowd's shouts suddenly changed. They hammered their feet against the boards and their screams turned feverish. He spotted another fighter running toward him. The alien who was almost on him swung his head away from Galen.

A crash of swords echoed across the arena, and then Galen saw her.

She leaped into the air, flying over the heads of several fighters. She landed, one leg out to the side, her palm touching sand.

Then she stood.

She was tall for a woman from Earth, and being the Champion of Zaabha had honed her body to strong, lean muscle.

They'd given her a ridiculous outfit, but it did show off her body. The metal corset covered her breasts but displayed a toned abdomen and arms. The leather battle skirt came to mid-thigh, and showcased her muscular legs.

She swung her sword in a flashy circle and then she charged.

She had brown hair threaded with streaks of gold, burnished by the hot Carthago suns. The strands flew out behind her as she attacked. The shattered remains of an implant were visible at her temple.

Samantha Santos sent the fighters flying. She fought her way through the group and reached Galen. Her essence hit him like a warm breeze: strong, steadfast, and threaded with steel.

“Get up, Emperor.”

She had a throaty voice, and he could tell she was used to giving orders.

“Not sure I can,” he replied.

Deep-brown eyes met his. “Yes, you *can*.” Her voice was firm and unyielding.

She spun, whirling fast. A new wave of implanted attackers rushed at them. Without hesitation, she launched herself at them.

As she fought, Galen managed to get himself off the sand.

Over the last few days, they’d sometimes let her in to fight with him. As an opponent reached him, swinging a staff, Galen attacked. Grunting, he drove the female fighter back, sending the staff spinning away. His gaze flicked over to watch Sam. She moved like water—strong and graceful, but with power. Watching her shook off some of his lethargy.

She was magnificent. Galen had spent decades honing and training gladiators for the Kor Magna Arena. He knew within seconds of watching a fight who would make it and who would fail, who was good and who could be great.

He watched her sword move through the air. She was sure, true, and relentless.

Galen dragged in a breath. He was Emperor of the House of Galen. A force to be reckoned with in Carthago’s gleaming capital of Kor Magna. He thrust his sword at an incoming fighter,

and sent the man staggering. The Thraxians, the sand suckers responsible for this abomination of an arena, were his sworn enemies.

And they were going down.

Filled with new energy, Galen strode forward. He was going to grind the Thraxians to dust beneath his boots.

He reached Sam's side, and together, they fought their way through the fighters. He kept moving his sword, trying to only wound the attackers. He could easily see that most were neither good nor skilled, just desperate. They were forced to fight and were trapped, just like him.

He spun and found himself back-to-back with Sam. Metal clanged on metal, and then Sam rolled under his arm and cut down another fighter. But the fighters just kept coming. The marauding Thraxian ships ensured the arena had plenty of slaves. Almost all were abductees, just like Sam and the other humans who'd been taken from a space station near their home planet of Earth.

Sam took two steps and leaped into the air. Her legs scissored, her feet connecting with two more aliens, taking them down. He watched as she ran back toward him and jumped again, slashing at several other fighters.

Stunning.

"Galen."

She was still airborne, her gaze on more fighters running at them. He slapped one of his hands against the other, holding his palm up. Her sandal hit his hand, and he threw her up into the air with all his strength. She rocketed up, spun, and swung out with her legs and sword.

More fighters fell to the sand.

Sam landed and moved back to his side. A fresh wave of Zaabha attackers was incoming. He scowled, taking in more of those *drakking* silver implants embedded in the people's temples. Their blank stares left Galen's gut rolling.

These poor souls were following the Thraxians' orders, whether they wanted to or not. It sickened him.

Then, suddenly, the implanted fighters stopped their forward charge. They stepped back, moving into a line, like soldiers in formation.

*What now?* His muscles tensed. He saw Sam push her sweat-dampened hair from her face, her impassive gaze narrowed on the motionless fighters.

Then the ranks broke and several large Thraxian guards strode forward.

They were big, with tough, brown skin that looked like parched desert ground. Beneath, their veins glowed gold. A set of black horns swept back off each head, and their eyes were black as darkest night.

They were all holding long stunner batons.

*Drak.* Right then, his rage for the Thraxians was incandescent. "Sam."

Her mouth tightened but she lowered her sword. The stun batons were pure agony.

The lead Thraxian reached Sam and wrapped an arm around her abdomen, lifting her off her feet. She struggled.

"Sam!" Galen called.

Her gaze met his just as the other Thraxian guards reached Galen. He felt a stunner jam into his lower back, and electric current rushed over him.

The intense pain made his teeth click together. He shuddered, his body crashing to the sand. Then Galen was swallowed by agony and darkness.

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At the sound of the opening cell door, Sam Santos jerked awake.

She'd been dreaming of home.

She could smell her mother's cooking, hear the echo of her brothers arguing, her *papá* calling for another beer, and her young nieces giggling.

But as Sam shifted, the chain on her ankle clanked, and memories of home evaporated like mist. Opening her eyes, she stared at the dank rock walls of her cell and smelled her own sweat. Her gut clenched. She knew exactly where she was, and it wasn't her parents' cozy home in New San Francisco.

It was her own personal hell—Zaabha.

She stilled as despair tried to shove through her. She couldn't let self-pity or despondency seep in. If it did, she'd be done. She'd curl up in a ball and give up.

And Samantha Gabriela Santos did *not* give up.

She lifted a hand to the itch at her temple. She felt the jagged metal shards still embedded in her skin. Thankfully, the Thraxians hadn't tried to repair the damn thing after Galen had destroyed it. The thought of being under the Thraxians' control again, little more than an automaton, made her shudder.

She sure as hell wouldn't give the Thraxians or their allies, the Srinar, the pleasure of seeing her break. They'd already destroyed the space station where she'd worked as head of security, and killed so many innocent people.

She'd heard them talking—guards in the corridors, in the arena. They were testing the damn implants on the fighters...but they supposedly had a bigger plan for them. Her gut churned. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be good for anybody.



Movement at her cell door made her tense. Two of the ugly Srinar guards opened the door and tossed a body onto the floor. The Srinar homeworld had suffered a plague in their past, and the survivors had fled, but had been left with huge growths and tumors that mottled their faces and skin. The door clanged shut without a word from her captors.

Sam swallowed, her gaze locked on the unmoving body lying facedown on the stone.

She took in the powerful form. Ripped leather trousers encased strong legs and he was shirtless. His bronze skin was covered in blood, and deep scratches and gashes. He'd been tortured.

Air whistled through her teeth. She could only see a bit of his battered face, and it was dominated by the black eye patch over his left eye. He had dark hair that he kept cut short, with a sophisticated-looking touch of gray at the temples.

Sam dragged herself over to him. When she pressed her fingers to his strong throat, she felt a pulse. She sucked in a relieved breath.

She pushed his hair off his face. "Galen." She stroked his temple. "Galen."

*Don't leave me alone.* She'd been alone here for months. She'd played the Thraxians' games in order to survive. She'd used her skills and creativity to become the Champion of Zaabha.

She'd spared the lives she could, but she'd also killed when she had to. Her chest tightened. She was no longer the responsible daughter, the smiling big sister, the fun aunt, or the dedicated security specialist.

And she knew she never would be again.

"Galen." She'd been alone until this man, along with his gladiators and her fellow surviving humans, had tried to rescue her.

She'd been alone until this man had stayed behind with her. He'd told her he was going to get her out, but now they were both prisoners.

A groan vibrated through him. Sam slid an arm under him, helping him to roll over.

She took a second to study the glorious tattoos on his arms and shoulders. They looked almost too beautiful and delicate to be on his rugged body. She also noted the scars gouged across his chest. They were red and thick, like they'd been made recently, but up close, she could see they were old. He'd been wounded badly in the past.

He was a fighter, this one.

He opened his eye, and she was struck once more by the icy-blue color.

"Sam Santos." His voice was deep and scratchy from whatever the Thraxians had done to him, but it still held a ring of authority.

She reached out and touched his stubbled jaw. She knew they'd made him fight non-stop for three days, and then they'd tortured him.

Sam knew they had to get out of there. The Thraxians would kill Galen, for sure. Hell, she was amazed he was still alive

"You with me?" she asked.

That blue eye locked on her. He managed a single nod.

"We need to get out," she said.

"Destroy... Zaabha. Destroy the Thraxians."

Her lips quirked. "Don't think you're up for that today, *mi amigo*."

He frowned, and a deep groove formed on his forehead. She was pretty sure this man was used to frowning.

"*Mi amigo*? My translator didn't translate those words."

“It’s a different language from Earth. My family is Puerto Rican, and I grew up speaking Spanish and English.”

“What does it mean?”

“My friend.”

His eye glittered. “Are we friends, Sam?”

She helped him sit up. Damn, he was heavy. The man was all solid muscle. “Today, I’m your best friend. We’ve not only fought together, but now we’re going to work together to get out of here.”

His frown turned fierce as he fought through his pain. “Escape.”

“We need to get back to the House of Galen.” For a second, Sam let herself think of her friends. She knew Blaine and Harper from her security team were safe at the House of Galen, along with several other women.

“Harper and the others...they want you out of here,” Galen said. “Been searching for you for a long time.”

Warmth filled Sam’s chest. All this time she’d felt so desperately alone, and she hadn’t been alone at all.

“Take it easy there.” She leaned Galen back against the rock wall.

She moved over to the small bucket of water her captors left for her. Quickly, she washed his face, scrubbing away the blood. His skin felt hot.

“You know about the Thraxian implants?” she said.

He nodded, his gaze sharpening.

“They have a plan involving them,” she said.

“What plan?”

“I don’t know all the details. But I know it’s bigger than Zaabha.”

His eye widened, then narrowed, and his gaze turned inward. He gave a small, slow nod. “For now, we focus on our escape.”

“Galen, I want to ask you something.” She paused for a moment. “Why did you take the humans in?” she asked. “Everyone here whispers about all the resources you’ve used rescuing humans.”

A tiny smile tugged on his lips, and it suddenly occurred to Sam that there was some handsome under all the rugged.

“My gladiators keep falling in love with humans.”

Sam splashed more water on the cloth and wiped down his neck. “Do you have someone you love back home? Someone who’ll be worried about you?”

“Love isn’t for me.”

She looked up. “Why?”

“On my planet, I was raised as a royal bodyguard. Love was forbidden. The only attachment I was allowed was to my charge.”

“Your charge?”

“The crown prince of my planet.” A flash of pain crossed his face. “Raiden is my prince. Our planet, Aurelia, was destroyed by a rival planet. They’d hired Thraxian mercenaries to murder the royal family and destroy Aurelia.”

Sam sucked in a shocked breath. The thought of anyone destroying an entire planet was horrifying. “I’m sorry.”

“And I’m sorry you lost yours as well, Sam. Earth still exists, of course, but you have no way home.”

His words were like a blow to her belly. “What?” she breathed.

“You didn’t know?” His gaze traced her face. “The wormhole the Thraxians used was unstable and is gone. Even with our fastest ships, you’d be dead before you reached Earth.” He exhaled softly. “I’m truly sorry.”

*No way home?* She sank back on her knees. No way back to her family. A family she’d never see or hug again. The pain of that realization was worse than any slash from a sword. She’d never again hug her mother or smell her perfume. She’d never again elbow her brothers and tell them to quit being idiots. She’d never again snuggle up with her *papá* to watch a ballgame, or tickle her nieces.

“Sam—”

“We need to get out of here.” She shoved her pain away. She couldn’t deal with it right now. It was another pain she’d process at a later date.

Galen studied her for a second before he gave her a nod. Sam thought she saw a glint of respect in his eye.

“Plan?” he asked.

She eyed the door. “I’ll call the guards in and tell them you’re dead. We’ll surprise them and take them down before they have a chance to call reinforcements. After we take them down, we run. We need to get to the lower levels and find an exit to get off this platform.”

He pulled in a breath. “Not sure I can fight.”

“I saw you out there, Galen. I have no doubt that the man who saved his prince, who built the most successful gladiatorial house on Carthago, and who rescued an entire group of humans, can do this.”

Air whistled through Galen's teeth. He nodded and held something up. It was a shard of metal from a broken sword.

"I found this on the sand in the arena and managed to hide it."

She closed her hand around it. A weapon. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

He nodded at the chain on her ankle. "What about that?"

She smiled. Reaching up, she pulled a thin sliver of metal out of her hair. It took her two seconds to pick the lock and remove the chain. "Let's do this."

She watched as he shifted back down on the floor. He might be injured, but there was a vital heat that pumped off him, and an aura of command. The Thraxians sure picked the wrong man to make their enemy.

But Sam also sensed that he was a man who held himself apart. Even in the middle of the busy House filled with his people, he wasn't one to lean or share his own needs. Sam knew because she'd been the same. Being the boss meant putting other people's needs before your own.

Galen slumped down and Sam moved to the door.

"You killed him!" She raised her voice, banging on the bars set into the door. "Galen's *dead*. You killed him."

It only took seconds before there was a thump, and the door scraped open.

She stepped back, making it look like her chain was still attached. This time, two Thraxian guards entered.

*Assholes*. As always, just looking at them and the golden glow beneath their dark, cracked skin made white-hot fury flow through her veins.

Rage replaced her exhaustion.

She watched one alien toe Galen with his boot, but Galen didn't move. The Thraxian went down on one knee.

"*Dios mío*, he's dead." Sam channeled some of her mother. Her *mamá* was the queen of drama when it suited her.

The aliens weren't paying her any attention as they prodded Galen. She crept closer, moving up behind the closest guard. The one that was kneeling moved to roll Galen over.

Sam launched herself at the standing guard and jammed the metal shard into the alien's back.