



## 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.

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"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.”