



FIGHTING FOR THEIR MATE

INTERSTELLAR BRIDES® PROGRAM:
BOOK 12

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GRACE GOODWIN

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*Captain Seth Mills, ReCon Unit 3, Sector 437, Hive
Controlled Freighter*

SMOKE CLOUDED the air as my team swarmed the tight hallways of the small freighter, setting explosive charges. The Hive had maintained control of the vessel for the last eighteen hours. Too long by Coalition standards, which meant I had to get my team in, save the Prillon warriors pinned down in the engine room, and blow this fucking ship into so many pieces the Hive had no hope of ever putting her back together.

“Seems like a waste, sir.” The man next to me, Jack Watts, was a former SEAL with a southern accent that only confirmed he was from Atlanta. Other than the fact that we were both from Earth, we had nothing in common. I was Army, six-four, two-twenty, and had no tolerance for bullshit. Which was one of the reasons Commander Karter had given me command of this unit. Jack, on the other

hand, was Navy, five years younger, and still had the bright shine of excitement in his eyes when we were on a mission.

But then, he hadn't lost two brothers out here to these Hive fuckers either.

"Shut up and set the charges, Watts," I all but growled. "You know the rules."

He placed an explosive on the wall next to us and pushed the button, activating it. "I know, but it seems a waste to blow up all these ships just because the Hive squatted here for a few hours. It's our damn ship."

"Not anymore." Three hours was the ReCon deadline. Eliminate all Hive on board within three hours or the ship was considered contaminated. Too dangerous to resume service in the Coalition Fleet. We moved on, farther down the hazy corridor with two of the unit on point, scouting ahead, and the rest following behind, checking the charges and watching our six.

"You humans stop chatting and get your asses down here. We've got a situation." The rough voice of a Prillon warrior I knew well came through the Coalition channel in our helmets. Along with the sounds of warriors yelling, ion blaster fire, and shouts to *hold the door*.

I picked up my pace. "Dorian. It's Mills. What's going on down there?"

"Hive blew the door. We're holding, but they hit half of us already. We won't last long."

"How many?" I started to run, my team falling in line at the urgency we could all hear in the pilot's voice. Dorian Kanakor was a big, golden son-of-a-bitch and one of the best pilots in our sector. He had a cousin and a brother in

Battlegroup Karter as well, all three of them like giant lions when they entered a room. Golden hair, golden skin and yellow eyes, and the eldest, Dorian's brother Xanthe, with a permanent scowl on his face.

"At least twelve. Probably more. Double that transported in, but we took out at least six and the rest went to the control deck." Where they could alter the ship's course and upload Hive contaminated programming into the ship's systems.

"Fuck." That was Jack, and I didn't have the heart to chastise him because I felt the exact same way.

"Soldiers or Scouts?" I asked.

"Soldiers and..." The long pause made me nervous and I blinked the sting of sweat out of my eyes.

"And?"

"They have an Atlan. Well, what's left of one."

That just wasn't fucking possible. My entire team froze in place for a heartbeat, two. We were all dead if what he said was true. "Is he in beast mode?"

"Not yet."

"Roger that." I didn't know if the Earth slang would translate well or not, nor did I care as I turned to my team. "Set the charges now. Ten minutes."

No one argued. We either got through to the Prillon crew or we didn't. But either way, a captured Atlan beast turned Hive? He had to die. This ship, and everyone on it, must be destroyed.

I met and held the gaze of every man and the one woman on my team. Counted them off one by one, waited for their nod. When I hit my own detonator—the only

remote one that would set off the entire interconnected set—the clock would start ticking.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath, opened them and used my gaze to select the proper command in my visor display. A tap on my wrist activated the countdown, the numbers popping up in red in the corner of everyone's display. A countdown.

“Check your weapons. Everything on max. I don't care if we blow a hole in the side of this fucking ship. The Hive aren't getting off.” I yelled the orders and moved at a run once again, racing to confront our enemies, feeding my unit the plan as we hustled. “I'm going in low, on the left, with Jack. Two men on the right. I'll throw the DPG and then we open fire, pull back. The rest of you hold back until we draw them down to the first turn in the corridor. We'll lure them away from the Prillon crew and pick them off in the smaller side corridor.”

Beside me, Jack's face was grim. “And if he goes beast?”

Jack knew the answer to his own question, but our entire unit needed to hear it. “We keep the integrated Atlan busy until the charges blow. Whatever happens, no one gets past us. Are we clear?” The experimental DPG, Disruption Prototype Grenade, was so new, we would be the first to use it. The Coalition Intelligence Core had gotten their hands on some new Hive tech, tech my friend Meghan had taken from the skull of a blue freak in a cave during the battle on Latiri 4. I didn't know much, and she couldn't tell me more, but I was willing to try anything to get my soldiers off this ship alive.

“Crystal.” That smoky, sultry voice belonged to Trinity, the only woman on my team, a hardworking, hard-playing Brit from somewhere around London. She’d been with me for two months and I didn’t know her story. I didn’t bother to learn their stories anymore. I’d lost so many soldiers to the fucking Hive, learning the details just made it hurt more when they died. Near as I could figure, I lost about a third of the team every few months.

The odds of going home were pretty much zero, and we all knew it. How I’d survived for so long, I would never understand. The other ReCon teams had started calling me Nine, as in nine lives, like a cat. I knew the truth. I’d been lucky. When the Hive took me the first time, my sister, Sarah, and her beast had come for me and dragged me out of hell. After that, I’d been more cautious, more meticulous in my planning. But nothing I did saved everyone. They all thought I was a lucky charm. Everyone wanted to be on ReCon 3.

“You’re out of time, Mills.” Captain Dorian’s voice was harsh and a roar reverberated through the corridor with such force that the vibrations passed through my chest like a clap of thunder.

“Holy shit.” That was Trinity, and she spoke for all of us. The Atlan had gone beast. A cyborg enhanced, Hive controlled, beast.

“Keep your shit together, people. Ion blasters will take him down. We’ll take them all down.”

“Not without dying, we won’t,” Trinity said.

“We’re all going to fucking die anyway, Trin. So shut the fuck up and do your job.” That was Jack, my second-in-

command, and that hardcore order was the reason. "Unless you want that beast getting back to the Karter and taking out the whole goddamned world."

Battlegroup Karter was a collection of ten military and civilian ships holding this sector of space from Hive advancement. More than five thousand warriors plus civilian support staff, mates and children lived under Commander Karter's protection. And we served Karter. "These bastards aren't getting anywhere near the Karter." We spoke specifically of the main battleship where we were stationed, but the nickname covered the entire group. My voice was a snarl but it calmed everyone down just in time.

Another roar.

One more turn. Thirty steps. Maybe less.

I motioned the bulk of my team to stay back and ran forward with Jack and two others on my right. DPG in my left hand, blaster rifle in my right.

"Low." I yelled as I slid down onto one knee and threw the DPG. "Fire in the hole!"

The Prillon warriors were close enough that I heard them shout and take cover. The Hive...I had no idea what the Hive did because my men and I were crouched on the other side of the turn, ears covered. Waiting for a blast that never came.

"One-one-thousand. Two-one-thousand. Three-one-thousand." Jack counted out as we waited.

Nothing.

"Well, we can officially tell the IC that was a bloody dud," Trinity's clipped British accent was icing on the cake.

Swinging around with my rifle, I took a look. The Hive were doubled over in silent screams, hands covering their ears. Two vomited, several stumbled into one another. They were disoriented and scrambling, confused. The DPG was working...on the Hive.

Except the beast wasn't affected. He stood, hands in fists at his sides, staring me straight in the eye. Shaking. He was shaking, but not reacting as the other Hive were. I couldn't explain the way the DPG worked and I didn't want to take the time now to figure it out. But, it was obvious it was set up to fuck with those fully integrated and the beast's response proved there was still some Atlan left.

Jack peeked around behind me and yelled for the others. "Take them all out. Now. Shoot to kill. Open fire."

The rest of the unit raced up the corridor behind us and it was like shooting fish in a barrel. The beast took a hit to his shoulder. His leg. His hip. The rest of the Hive Soldiers, mostly Prillon warriors converted by their evil Integration Units into Hive servants, were going down easy. But not the beast. Killing an Atlan in beast mode was difficult, but I'd never seen one take so many direct hits and stay on his feet. Hell, he acted like we were shooting paint balls at him.

I didn't want to kill the beast, but I had no doubt, if he were in his right mind, he'd prefer death to the condition he was in now. I'd been a Hive prisoner, faced the possibility of being turned into a mindless drone. The reality was beyond terrifying. I had fought alongside enough of the other alien races to know their warriors felt the exact same way I did.

Even my sister's mate, the Atlan Warlord Dax, had spoken of it on many occasions. No one wanted to end up covered in Hive tech, mind not his own.

It was a fate worse than death. And this poor Atlan? He needed to die for his own good.

"Hit them all. Trinity, you're with me. Focus your fire on the beast. We need to take him out."

The Hive Soldiers were falling fast. It took three or four shots to take them down, but they were still frozen, paralyzed by the new experimental weapon vibrating at their feet with a strange, high-pitched whine, like the buzz coming off high voltage electrical wires. My team and the Prillions inside the other room fired without mercy. Some of these Soldiers were once Prillon warriors, or Trion, or human. Hell, I had no idea where they were from. Some had oddities that I assumed had come from halfway across the galaxy, in a world I'd never seen or heard of.

We all knew death was better than being a Hive. Not only was the existence hell, but we would be turned into killing machines. Killing Coalition fighters, those we'd fought beside until the Hive took over.

And a mindless beast could destroy entire ships. There was a reason they built containment cells on their home world. Executed unmated beasts after a certain age. They were one-man wrecking crews.

I shot the beast, dead center in the chest. A merciful kill shot to his heart. He barely swayed.

"Jesus, what did they do to him?" Jack came up on my left, Trinity on my right and we all aimed at the beast just as he lifted his huge hands and removed his helmet. Most

of his face was covered in silver, but there were pieces of him showing through. Dark eyes. Not silver.

I lifted my rifle for a headshot and his gaze locked with mine. Sane. Himself. Desperate. Hands at his sides, he dropped the helmet on the floor and waited for me to kill him. What the hell?

I hesitated.

"Kill me, Mills." The deep voice rumbled, but not with threat. It was a plea. And how the hell did this Atlan know my name?

"Do it now. I am Warlord Anghar. Kill me."

"Shit. Angh?" My body turned to stone. This was Warlord Nyko's friend. Nyko's best friend and commander. I'd served with him for two years and hadn't known he'd been taken by the Hive. Fuck. Shit. "Damn it. Hold your fire."

I glanced to Trinity and Jack, the raw pain I saw in Trinity's eyes a shock. Jack, however, looked at me like I had lost my damn mind.

"As soon as that signal goes down, he's going to be gone. You know that." Jack grimaced, his rifle still aimed. Steady.

"I know. But he's in there."

"Don't you shoot him, Jack. Don't you fucking dare." Trinity lowered her rifle to the side and shot one of the remaining Hive Soldiers standing behind the beast. We'd wiped them out. Almost all of them.

The beast stared and I stared back, searching my mind for answers. There had to be a way to save him. If Angh was in there, fighting against the Hive integration that took

over almost all of him, then there was no way I could take him out. He deserved better. He deserved a chance at life.

The signal from the DPG faded and what was left of the Hive regained control.

Which wasn't much. Two Soldiers. It would have been nothing, an easy clean up, except for the beast.

With a roar, he turned and ran away from us, tearing through what was left of the doors so he could enter the room where the Prillon crew had been trapped.

"Take care of those two, retrieve the DPG and make sure the rest are dead," I ordered as I followed him in. Warlord Anghar. Christ. What a mess.

Our Prillon teammates hadn't wasted their resources. All around the edges of the room they'd set up barriers and defensible positions. But nothing was going to stop the beast.

"About time, Mills," Captain Dorian yelled, standing up to fire at the beast from behind a capsized table on my right.

The beast roared and advanced mindlessly, swinging his huge fists like wrecking balls. So much for his lucid moment. Whatever was left of Angh wasn't in there now. He was a drone. A servant of the Hive.

I knew the Atlan warlord was still inside him, somewhere. He'd shown himself. Briefly.

Everything had gone according to plan, everything except this. "Don't shoot." I held up my hand and gave the order as the rest of ReCon 3 flooded the room.

"The rest are dead," Jack reported and I nodded as the Prillon crew stood from their hidden positions and every

single ion blaster and rifle in the room was pointed at the beast.

"Hold your fire," I ordered again, just to be clear.

"What the fuck are you doing, Mills?" Dorian bellowed at me as the beast advanced on him.

"Trust me." I caught my friend's eye. "Keep him occupied, but no head shots. Body shots won't kill him. Draw his attention. I need some time."

"You're insane, Mills." But the big golden Prillon warrior nodded and took a step back, firing at the enraged beast, careful to aim at his shoulders. His thighs. I had no doubt Dorian didn't realize it was Warlord Anghar. The beast's face was practically unrecognizable. Even then, I only knew Angh through Dax and Sarah. The Prillon had probably never met the Atlan. The fighting teams rarely mixed on the battlefield.

"Whatever you're going to do, do it now," Dorian shouted at me as he fired again and again. The beast's body was singed, visible vapor rising from his shoulder into the air, but he kept walking. The Hive tech had turned a beast into a true monster. Stronger than any living creature I'd ever seen.

"Trinity, have the tranqs ready."

"How many?" she asked.

"All of them," I said. I meant to take Angh down, and take him home. "If he doesn't go down, take him out."

"You can't be serious," Jack grumbled, but Trinity was already reaching into her gear for the tranquilizers as Jack moved up to cover her.

I stepped back and grabbed the tranquilizer injections from her just as the beast reached Dorian. He wrapped his hands around Dorian's neck, lifted him off the ground like the seven-foot Prillon warrior weighed nothing, and threw him against the wall.

Dorian fell to the floor but was instantly on his feet in a crouch, blood dripping from his head, battle fury glazing his eyes. His battle cry was loud, a clear challenge meant to keep the beast's attention as I advanced on him from behind.

The distraction worked as the beast took a step forward to finish what he'd started.

I slung my rifle to the ground and dropped all my gear. I needed a running start and didn't want the extra weight. I ignored Jack's cursing and checked the angle of the injectors in my hand.

"Now!" Dorian's order was a boom in the room and I ran as he reached for the beast, used every ounce of strength he possessed to hold Angh in place for precious seconds so I could make my attack.

Silently, I sprinted forward and jumped on the beast's back. The moment I made contact, I jammed the injectors into the side of the warlord's neck.

With a roar, the beast reached behind him, grabbed me by my armor and threw me so that my back hit the wall next to where Dorian had been moments ago. I slid to the ground in a heap and struggled to right myself, head spinning, the pain like I'd cracked open my skull. The iron scent of blood filled my helmet but I blinked it away as

Trinity opened fire to keep the beast off me, shooting at his legs.

“Hold your fire!” I tried to yell, but the order came out more of a croak. I didn’t need to worry. The beast swayed on his feet, fighting the drugs that flooded his system, but I’d given him enough to take down a large elephant. Even the Atlans weren’t that strong.

Jack fired once. Twice. Like Trinity, keeping the strikes to the Hive implants on the beast’s legs and shoulders until he toppled, unconscious.

Trinity lifted her helmet and looked at me, a slight shimmer in her eyes as she stared at the felled Atlan. “Why did you do that, Seth? Why did you have us save him?”

“Because he’s my friend.” One of the few still alive, if being implanted with Hive technology could be considered living. But at least now he’d have a chance. The docs could remove most of the tech and send him to live on The Colony. He’d never fight again, but at least he’d survive.

He might hate me for it. I knew that on a gut level. But I’d seen too much death. He’d just have to fucking get over it. Get tested for a mate, like my sister, Sarah, had talked me into last year. In a moment of weakness, full of whiskey and reminiscing about home, I’d given in and let her take me to the testing center for her Christmas present. She was so in love with her matched mate, Warlord Dax, that I simply couldn’t tell her no. She’d risked everything to save my life. Denying her was not an option.

The testing? Yeah, that had been a huge mistake. First, it had been a year since I’d sat in that stupid chair and still no match. Second, I doubted I’d survive until the end of my

tour long enough to get one. And if I did get matched before my service was up, leaving a grieving widow was not something I wanted to do. A pregnant wife? A child? No fucking way. Because if I had a mate, I'd want it all, but that was impossible. That was beyond cruel. I couldn't be that selfish.

Sarah didn't understand. She lived a different life. Warlord Dax had retired once they were mated and the two of them settled into civilian life on Atlan. They were wealthy, living in a massive home with servants and accolades for his time in the Coalition Fleet. They hosted dinner parties and played with their daughter. A different life and not one I could offer any woman.

Dorian crouched down next to me and I lifted my gaze to meet his. "You are one crazy bastard, Mills."

I couldn't help it, I grinned. It wasn't the first time Dorian had said those exact words to me, and I doubted it would be the last.

"Thanks for saving my life. And what's left of my crew. How long do we have before my ship explodes?" Dorian asked, wiping his brow.

I glanced at the countdown in my helmet's visor. "Two minutes."

He grinned back at me. "Plenty of time."

Moving in teams, we rushed to the emergency evacuation shuttle, six Prillon warriors carrying the unconscious Atlan between them. The transport rooms would be crawling with Hive and we didn't have time for another fight.