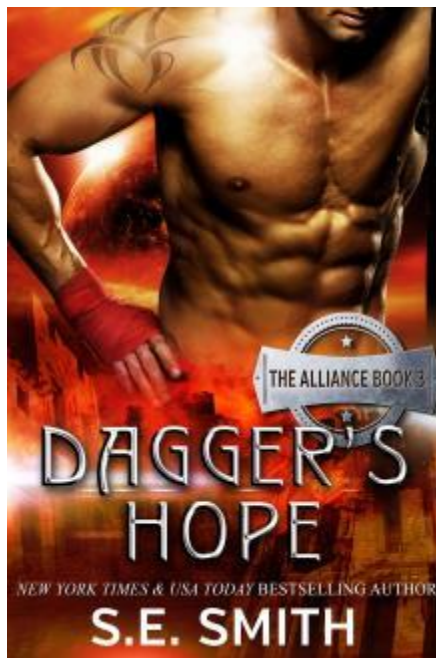


**Dagger's Hope:  
The Alliance Book 3**



**By S. E. Smith**

Science Fiction Romance

Dagger's Hope: The Alliance Book 3

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## Chapter 1

Dagger clung to the top of the cage holding him, his back pressed upward against the cold metal. He had braced his feet in the narrow slats and held onto the thick bars with his left hand as he watched the secondary door slowly open. In his right hand, he held a long chain filled with razor-sharp blades designed to slice through flesh and bone.

He ignored the blood running down his arm, watching disconnectedly as it dripped to the floor of the cage far below him. Holding his body perfectly still, he waited for the massive creature under him to turn. A sense of cold calculation kept his mind sharp, even as his body threatened to weaken from exhaustion.

"Fight, fight, fight, fight!" The crowd chanted, wanting him to drop down.

Dagger tuned out the crowd. He had seen what was about to be released into the cage with him and the other male long before they did. He knew if he was to survive, he had to use every skill he possessed.

As it was, three out of the four men that had been in the cage with him were already dead. The fourth man wouldn't last long from the way he drunkenly staggered away from the door. The man was coated with blood, both from his own wounds and from the blood of the male he had just killed. The beast would attack the moment it caught the scent of him, which was why Dagger had turned and climbed up the woven half-dome bars that formed the cage.

He had killed two of the males that littered the ring. The crowds surrounding the cage had screamed for him to finish the other two men that were locked in a battle of life or death, but he had ignored their demands. He knew that he needed to conserve his strength for what was to come.

Instead, he fell back against the side of the cage and drew deep, calming breaths as his eyes roamed the arena searching for the one responsible for him being there. He knew the male was somewhere in the crowd watching him. Dagger could feel the male's gloating gaze on him, just as he did every time he fought.

His eyes scanned over the packed arena. For a moment, he paused on the Drethulan sitting in the box seat high above the crowds. While Jolin Talja owned and operated the fight ring called *The Hole* now, he was second on Dagger's list for termination.

No, he was searching for the one who thought he 'owned' him; the one that lent him to the owners of the illegal underground groups that enjoyed the profit of watching men and women like Dagger fight for survival. Dagger was an enigma. He had survived longer than any of the other fighters, so far, and was the most profitable one to date for both his 'owner' and those who bet on him to win.

His eyes froze on the third row up as a familiar set of beady black eyes stared intently back at him. For a moment, everything around Dagger narrowed to the one figure leisurely sitting back in the reserved box in

the stands. Their eyes locked in a silent battle of will; one in triumph, the other in promise.

The pale white complexion of the male stood out among the other colorful spectators in the stands. He didn't try to hide his face in an effort to remain anonymous. He knew that Dagger would search him out and he wanted to be found. A deep hatred burned bitterly inside Dagger, threatening to boil over until he thought he would explode.

He stared back at Cordus Kelman. The billionaire mercenary's bald head shone brightly under the lights of the arena. He was on the most wanted list in numerous star systems. The bastard was smart enough to stay on the outskirts of the Alliance's boundaries, not quite out of it, but not quite in it either.

Kelman stayed in the space that was considered primitive and dangerous to any who entered. It was a lawless area that no star system wanted to deal with because they knew that as long as the area existed, then those that inhabited it would stay out of their own regions. That had been true until Kelman attacked the planet where Hunter, Dagger, and several other Trivator forces were trying to regain control. The attack had turned out to be a trap.

Kelman had been the mastermind behind the staged battle that led to his capture. He didn't know what happened to his partner, Edge. Dagger had been knocked unconscious when their transport had crashed. That had been over two years ago. Since then, Kelman had attended every fight Dagger had

been forced to participate in. The mercenary watched him night after night, gloating at the rage and creeping insanity that was slowly taking over Dagger's mind.

Dagger's eyes broke contact when he heard the hoarse scream of the last male as the beast under him turned. The male hung by a leg for a brief moment before he disappeared down the creature's throat. The sickening sound of bones being crushed was muted by the shrieks of the audience.

Dagger waited, the arm holding him locked at the elbow, in an effort to keep his body still as the beast turned in a circle, sniffing the air. The Gartaian was a mammoth gray creature that lived in the swampy areas of the planet Kepler-10. He had only seen images of them in some of the training videos he had watched during his downtime on board the different warships over the years.

The creature stood almost four meters high and weighed in at over ten thousand kilograms. A series of three tusks in varying sizes protruded from each side of its mouth, allowing it to uproot trees and other debris in its constant search for food, as well as provide protection for it. It was genetically enabled to eat and digest anything. The Gartaian's tongue could reach out almost two meters, allowing it to drag its prey into its wide mouth. The teeth were thick and flat and were designed for crushing whatever it found before it swallowed the remains of its prey. Being crushed and eaten was not on Dagger's list of ways to die.

The Gartaian had one weakness that Dagger knew of, it was virtually blind. It depended almost solely on its sense of smell. The one advantage Dagger had, was that the arena was coated in the blood of the dead men and covered his own scent.

He waited patiently until the beast turned in a semicircle, presenting its thick, gray back to him. Pushing off the bars with his feet, he released his grip and fell onto the creature's back. The long, blade-filled chain in his hand swung around and under the beast's chin. He bent forward, grabbing the end of it with the tips of his fingers as it swung back up on the other side of the creature's neck.

Dagger tightened his grip on each end, knowing that if he lost the advantage he had, that it would all be over. Leaning back, the muscles in his arms strained as he pulled the razor sharp blades against the beast's thick flesh. The loud, furious roar from it shook the arena.

Locking his knees behind the creature's neck and pressing his heels into its massive shoulders, he began working his hands back and forth in a sawing motion. He was almost unseated when the beast swung around and slammed its body into the metal cage. The only thing saving him from being crushed between the huge body and the metal cage was that his left leg was pressed along the inside curve of its shoulder, protecting it.

The force of the blow was enough to bend the bars. The spectators standing near the cage jerked back, some screaming and falling as others pushed to

get away from the long tongue snaking out. One female that had fallen wasn't fast enough. Her loud, piercing scream filled the chaotic stands when the tongue slipped through the bars and wound around her ankle. Those surrounding her pushed to get away instead of helping her as the Gartaian pulled her forward.

The loud screams from the female suddenly died when her leg snapped and was ripped away as the Gartaian tried to pull her through the narrow slits. Dagger ignored everything, but his continued assault on the beast's throat. He felt when the thick flesh gave way under the sharp blades and the softer flesh under the skin was opened to him.

The Gartaian stumbled as he sliced through the main artery in its neck. A wave of black blood poured from the pulsing wound, coating the floor of the arena in a thick, putrid stench as it flowed through the bars. Keeping a constant pressure, he waited until its front legs gave out on it and it began to collapse before he released the tip of the blade and swung it back around in a high arc.

The end of the deadly whip wrapped around the bar at the top of the cage. Dagger released his grip as the beast fell from under him, holding on to the end of the whip with both hands. The spectators' cries and screams had turned to a stunned silence as the Gartaian drew in a last shuddering breath before its tongue rolled out of its mouth and its eyes glazed over in death.



Dagger could feel the hundreds of eyes on him as he hung from the center of the cage, his body slowly rotating. His own eyes stared back in rage as he glared back at them. It was only when his eyes swept over a lone figure, standing off to one side at the very top of the arena, that the fury dissolved.

He would have missed the slender, cloaked figure if he hadn't been so high. He watched as pale hands reached up and slid the hood of the cloak back to reveal the face hidden in its shadow. For just a moment, no more than half of a second, his eyes locked with a pair of haunted hazel eyes.

Dagger's throat worked up and down as he watched the figure quickly replace the hood and step back into the dark recess as another figure approached. His arms trembled as the last of his strength drained from him. Glancing down, he released his grip on the whip and dropped down onto the side of the dead Gartaian. He knelt on one knee and breathed deeply as confusion flooded his mind.

The loud applause from the spectators washed over him, pulsing through his exhausted mind. He rose up on the beast he had landed on, trying to see over the standing crowd. A loud hiss of rage escaped him when he felt the loop of the long poles around his wrists as the guards rushed to contain him. He fought briefly, trying desperately to see over the heads of the cheering crowd, but it was useless. Sliding off the back of the Gartaian, Dagger stiffened his shoulders as Kelman stepped into the entrance gate, slowly clapping his hands.

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"Well done, Trivator," Kelman mockingly chuckled. "I earned a year's supply of Vaspian liquor off of this fight."

Dagger jerked forward, dragging the guards on each side of him. Kelman took a step back, a narrow, thoughtful look on his face. Three more guards surged around Kelman. Dagger staggered when one of them hit him in the chest with a power rod. He trembled for a moment before his legs gave out as the man hit him again with another powerful shock.

"I... will... kill you," Dagger hissed out as his head fell forward.

His shoulders burned as the guards holding him, dragged him out of the arena and back down to the cells three floors below the fight ring. Nausea and exhaustion competed with the pain from the deep cut on his shoulder and back. The pain and exhaustion he could handle. It was the nausea that was almost his undoing. Nausea that his fractured mind would be so desperate to see Jordan Sampson one last time that it would make him think she would be in such a place as *The Hole*.

"Never," he whispered in a voice hoarse with disuse.

He blinked several times, trying to clear his vision in the dim lighting. The guards had dropped his body on the cold, hard stone floor. Two of them stood over him, holding his wrists to the floor as two more reattached the chains to the cuffs on his wrists and ankles.

Once that was done, the healer stepped into the cell. Kelman always sent the healer in after a fight to take care of his wounds. The mercenary wanted Dagger ready for the next competition.

His eyes closed as the healer doctored the wound on his arm and shoulder. The old male muttered nonsense under his breath before he slapped an injector to Dagger's neck and depressed the trigger.

Dagger didn't bother opening his eyes as the old man rose unsteadily back to his feet. A minute later, silence filled the long corridor. He was the only prisoner on this level. They had separated him from the others shortly after he arrived when he had incited several of the other fighters into attacking the guards.

Rolling over onto his back, he gazed up at the ceiling. He could feel the medicine coursing through his system, numbing the pain and pulling him toward sleep. Something told him that the old healer had defied orders when he gave him the injection.

For a moment, Dagger fought to keep his eyes open, but exhaustion pulled at him. His mind wandered aimlessly before a beautiful, pale face rose to push everything else away. Jordan. It was her face that he saw in the quiet solitude of his cell between fights.

He was afraid he was finally losing his hold on sanity. He could have sworn he saw her, but he knew that was impossible. Regret and loneliness sent a chill through his body. Releasing the tight control he kept over his mind, he opened his memories, hoping they

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would warm him for the few hours he would be given until the next fight.

"Please," he whispered in a soft, rusty voice.  
"Please keep her safe."

He gave up on trying to stay awake. Instead, he thought back to the first time he saw Jordan Sampson. Regret burned through him that he wouldn't be able to keep the promise he gave to her the last time he saw her. It was that promise and the one and only time he had kissed her that gave him hope and the determination to fight until his dying breath.

An unfamiliar burning in his eyes caused them to water. He would never admit the tear that squeezed past his tightly closed eyelids. Because to admit it, would be to admit that he had given up all hope of ever seeing her again.