



## Chapter One

He sat in the meeting, listening to his imperator talking, yet he could barely make out the words.

Toren was inundated by stimuli—the light was too bright, the sounds too loud, and scents cascaded through his senses. His heart hammered loudly in his ears.

He forced himself to stay still, gripping the arms of his chair.

Worse than all the other inputs were the unfamiliar, overpowering emotions. They churned inside him like a storm.

He was a cyborg. He'd spent his lifetime not feeling much—only mild, fleeting sensations. He'd been created not to feel. Now, all he experienced was an ugly mix of anger, fear, frustration, and other things he couldn't name.

Toren's hands curled harder around the metal, his grip so tight that he wondered if the chair would snap. He tried to focus on what Imperator Magnus Rone was saying.

Around him stood his fellow elite cyborgs of the House of Rone. Their second-in-command, Jax, stood, nodding at what Magnus was saying. Mace had his brawny arms crossed over his wide chest, and, beside him, Acton's head was tilted as he listened to the imperator. In the chairs beside Toren sat the newest additions to their elite group—Zaden and Seren. Handsome, young

Zaden leaned forward as he listened intently. Seren had a cool expression on her face, which also bore the black, tattoo-like markings of her species. Her space-black hair was pulled tight behind her head, and two small, metallic, horn-like implants protruded from her forehead.

When Magnus paused, Jax started speaking, updating them on some injured citizens of Kor Magna who were being treated by the House of Rone healers.

Here in the capital city of the desert world of Carthago, everything revolved around the famous gladiatorial arena and the spectacular fights that happened inside it.

Spectators came from planets all across the outer rim quadrants to watch, scream, cheer, and place their bets. The House of Rone, like the other houses, spent a lot of money on acquiring and training their gladiators, and ensuring the fighters stayed fit and healthy.

But the House of Rone was different. It was a house of cyborgs.

Toren forced himself to look at Magnus. The cool, controlled cyborg sat motionless behind his massive desk. The emperor's cybernetic arm—made of silver-grey metal—rested on the desktop. A metal implant circled one of his eyes that right now glowed a faint, neon blue.

He was the cyborg who'd started it all. He'd escaped a violent military program along with Jax, and created a haven for people who needed enhancements and implants. The House of Rone was known for its superior weapons-making skills, and for the high-tech implants, enhancements, and prosthetics its team of healers gave injured people who needed putting back together. They could heal just about anything.

Toren's fingers flexed.

Except for him.

“Toren, are you all right?”

The female voice made him look up, and he stared into pale-green eyes. Ever Haynes was Magnus' mate. The dark-haired female from Earth sat beside her man.

Toren managed a nod. As he shifted on his chair, he realized everyone was watching him.

Resentment welled. Since he'd been injured, they were always checking on him. Watching him like he was a luma bomb about to explode. Anger and helplessness choked him.

"I'm fine." His voice was gritty.

Magnus shot him a cool look. Toren knew what Magnus felt now. The imperator was in love with the pretty Ever—a woman who'd been abducted from her distant homeworld by alien slavers.

Magnus had rescued her, along with several other women of Earth. The House of Rone had dedicated themselves to rescuing every single one of them from the Edull. *The Edull*. Toren's pulse spiked. A *drakking* species of alien scavengers who hid in the desert like cowardly crudspawn.

Fresh anger burned through him, out-of-control and painful. On their last mission to rescue Simone, a woman from Earth, and her child, Grace, the Edull had captured Toren. They'd strapped him down, torn his implants out. His mouth went dry and his chest tightened. These were all sensations he wasn't used to feeling, and he didn't like them.

Before, he hadn't felt. He'd been cool, in control, but now...

A dull roar of noise echoed in his head. The healers couldn't fix him. The damage to his nerves, where his implants joined his organics, was extensive. The head healer had blathered on about needing time.

Toren didn't look at his shoulder, but he felt the weight of the metal there. He was a sniper, and since the desert mission, his damaged shoulder weapon hadn't been replaced. Mainly because they didn't trust him to have the control to use it.

It felt like losing a limb. Now, he just had a smooth, metal plate fused with his skin, covering nothing.

But worse than that, he'd been banned from missions. He was too unstable.

His jaw worked, and he tried to force back the overwhelming emotions. But he was losing the battle.

Jax had resumed speaking. "The Edull are continuing their campaign of revenge against the House of Rone. Some of our gladiators were attacked at the underground markets."

"Is everyone okay?" Mace asked.

"Minor injuries. Xias took great pleasure in stomping the Edull's bots into scrap metal."

The Edull specialized in crude robotic creations made of scavenged metal. Toren dragged in a breath. He'd seen the giant robots they'd made out in the desert.

"We will put any Edull attacks down swiftly," Magnus said. "I will not let anything stop us from finding Bari Batu and Bellamy Walsh."

Magnus was spending a small fortune on the search for the Edull's city in the desert. They all knew about the aliens' huge battle arena, of the innocent people forced to fight in it, and of Bellamy, another woman from Earth who was trapped there.

*The drakking Edull.* Toren's hands flexed, his heartbeat a roar in his ears. The others kept talking, but the sound was all just a drone to him. There was nothing he could do to help stop the aliens, not when he was useless like this.

He stood so fast that his chair tipped over, hitting the ground with a clatter.

All the cyborgs in the room looked at him again. They were all working, fighting, useful to the house. Most of them even felt now. In addition to Magnus, some of the others—Jax, Mace, Acton—had all fallen in love with women from Earth. Even young Zaden was now mated to a rescued alien woman.

But his fellow cyborgs had come to their feelings gradually, not like him. Not in a wild, drowning rush he couldn't control.

"I have to go."

"Toren—"

He held up a hand to Magnus and walked out.

He hurried down the hall, his boots echoing on the stone floor. He *had* to get out. He had to make the feelings stop. At least for a little while.

He just wanted a minute of *drakking* silence in his head.

And he'd found one way to achieve that.

He ignored the rich wall hangings, all depicting legendary battle scenes from the arena. He ignored the few house workers he passed. Near the front entrance, he grabbed a cloak from the rack. It was black, which suited his mood. He wouldn't let himself wear blue—the color of the House of Rone. Not where he was going.

The large double doors—embossed with the House of Rone symbol of a helmeted gladiator over crossed swords—was flanked by two cyborg guards. He'd almost reached them when a voice stopped him.

"Where are you going?"

Toren jerked to a stop. This was the one voice he couldn't ignore.

He turned.

The young girl was leaning against the wall, watching him with dark eyes that were all-too-perceptive.

“Out,” he answered.

Grace tilted her head. She looked like her mother—hair as black as the night sky, and as straight as a staff. Grace’s hair was shorter than her mother’s. Simone wore hers long, in a sheet of silky black.

Dark, intelligent eyes studied him. “You should stay here. We can play some games, or make some grenades—”

He frowned. “Your mother said no more bomb making.”

Grace’s bottom lip stuck out.

He was well aware that the girl had a genius-level intelligence. She could make explosives out of just about anything.

But she was unfamiliar with things on Carthago. One small mistake... The thought of her hurt made his stomach turn over.

“No grenades,” he said.

She sighed. “O-kay. Can I come with you?”

*Drak, no.* “Not now. I’ll take you to the market tomorrow.”

Something moved through her eyes. “All right.”

He turned, nodding at the guards who opened the doors for him.

“Toren?” Grace said.

He glanced back over his shoulder. “Yes?”

“Don’t come back too hurt.”

He sucked in a breath and watched as she disappeared through a doorway.

Gritting his teeth, he stepped out of the House of Rone and into the tunnels under the Kor Magna Arena. All the houses were located here, each with their own small training arenas. He hurried through the tunnel, dodging around workers who were going about their duties.

Soon, he exited the tunnels onto the streets of Kor Magna. The planet's two suns were setting, filling the stone-lined laneways with shadows.

He didn't need to go too far. Ahead, the tall, brightly-lit skyscrapers of the District speared into the sky. It was an area filled with casinos, theatres, and all other types of entertainment that the tourists liked to spend their money on.

He turned down a side street. The rest of the city's buildings were plainer, three-story affairs made from the local, cream-colored stone. Soon, the streets got a little dirtier, the buildings less well-kept.

He reached an unmarked door and knocked his fist against it.

An eye slit opened and the guard studied him for a second. The door creaked on its hinges and the broad-shouldered man waved him in, pointing to a set of stairs.

Without a word, Toren headed down.

Noises grew. Shouts and cheers. Boos and the thud of flesh hitting flesh.

Adrenaline spiked in Toren's system.

"Thought we'd see you again," a voice drawled.

He turned to see a large man grinning at him, his soft belly oozing over his belt. His smile displayed a row of gold, shiny teeth.

Toren didn't respond.

"I know with one look the fighters who'll never be back, the ones who just need money, and the ones who need to fight like it's an addiction."



Toren just stared at the man.

The man grunted and jerked his thumb. “You’re up, cyborg.”

Swiveling, Toren marched toward the fight cage that dominated the center of the space.

The crowd milled around, shouting and drinking. Toren walked through a cloud of *taint*—a popular, illegal drug. The smoke hung in the air—thick and cloying.

He ducked through the entrance into the cage and saw his opponent—a big alien with a huge set of horns.

The scarred floor was splattered with old and new blood. There were other stains that Toren probably didn’t want to identify.

He unclipped his cloak, shoving it through the mesh.

He was ready not to feel.

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Simone Li paced the dark corridor.

It was late, and most of the House of Rone was sleeping.

Gracie had been fidgety at bedtime. Simone sighed. It wasn’t unusual for her smart, gorgeous girl—she had trouble sitting still. But she’d taken longer than usual to settle, and Simone had finally pried the reason out of her.

Grace had confessed that she’d seen Toren go out.

A fluttering filled Simone’s belly.

She’d seen the results of these nocturnal visits he made and she hated it.

He’d been hurt rescuing her and Grace a few weeks before. She felt so damn guilty, even though the Edull were to blame. She twisted her hands together.

Toren's entire life, his whole sense of self, had been upended all because of her. Simone understood that feeling very well.

She'd had it happen to her twice. Once, when her ex-husband had tossed her and Grace away like used rags, and again, when the Thraxian slavers had attacked their exploration ship, abducted them, and sold them to the Edull.

Wrapping her arms around her middle, she turned to look out of the window, pulling in some deep, calming breaths.

The door nearby opened.

She straightened. This wasn't the front door. He always snuck back in through this side entrance.

He came in, smelling of sweat and blood.

Toren took two steps and she stepped out of the shadows. He jerked to a halt.

She scanned him in the low illumination from the lights embedded in the walls. She saw the damage and hissed out a sharp breath.

"You have to stop this, Toren." She moved toward him.

One of his eyes was swollen shut and his lip was split. Blood stained his hands and arms.

Like most of the gladiators of the other houses, he left his chest bare, and wore only a leather harness across it. She could see bruises forming on his abdomen.

He stayed silent.

"Why?" she demanded.

His face twisted. "It's the only way to make all the emotions stop."

Sympathy hit her. He was struggling, and she desperately wanted to help him.

She held out a hand. "Come on."

When he didn't take her hand, she reached for his and tugged him along. She moved down the hall, marching toward her rooms.

As she opened the door, he stirred.

“Grace—”

“Asleep in the adjoining room.” She pulled him in and nodded toward the internal door. “My girl could sleep through a bomb blast. Sit.”

She'd left a lamp on. She loved the quarters she'd been assigned. A spacious, breezy living area, adjoining bedroom and bathroom, and an extra bedroom for Grace. A space that was theirs, and furnished in lush, comfortable furniture.

A far cry from the cells the Edull had kept them in for months and months.

Toren dropped into an armchair and it creaked under his weight. She knew that cyborgs were heavier than they looked because of their enhancements and implants. Toren was leaner than the other cyborgs, but no less enhanced.

She went into her bathroom, wet a cloth in the sink, and found her small med kit. Then she moved back to him, knelt, and started cleaning his wounds.

“You have to stop this,” she said.

He grunted. “I can't.”

She wiped the blood off his hands. His knuckles were torn and scraped. “You could if you wanted to.”

He stayed frustratingly silent.

She pulled out a tube of med gel and squeezed some of the blue fluid onto the worst of his injuries. She knew that in the morning, most of the scratches and bruises would be healed. There would be no sign that he let someone beat the hell out of him.

Squeezing some more gel onto her fingers, she gently smoothed it around his swollen eye. “You can’t drown out the emotions or ignore them.” She’d tried that when her marriage imploded.

Her husband had decided Simone was boring, and that being a father was also boring. He might have been a genius scientist, but he’d partied, cheated, and put Simone down daily until he’d destroyed any semblance of love she’d had for him. She’d finally conceded defeat and divorced him.

She swallowed the bad taste away. She’d tried to save her marriage, but it had only made her feel worse. She’d wanted to escape her feelings, just like Toren.

It was a foolish dream.

“You have to learn to deal with the emotions, Toren.”

He turned to look at the wall, stone-faced.

“I can help you.” She pressed a hand to his knee. “If you’ll let me.”

He stood abruptly. “No one can help me.”

He strode out.

Simone’s chin dropped to her chest. *Damn*. The sense of helplessness reminded her of being in the hands of the Edull.

She closed her eyes. She had no idea what to do next.