



Chapter One

She moved her arm in the moonlight, first left, then right.

Her brown skin still looked the same, and the moonlight still looked silver. It just wasn't from the small moon that orbited her world of Rella.

Sighing, Calla Ryss lowered her arm and pulled her knees to her chest. Her gaze moved up to the dark sky above her, and the two huge moons hanging there.

The orbs draped the city in soft silver. From her perch on the balcony, she had a great view of Kor Magna—the capital city of the desert planet of Carthago. Here in the pretty moonlight, it reminded her of the ancient cities of Rella's past. Most of the buildings were made of old stone that practically throbbed with a sense of history. Nearby, the imposing walls of the arena rose up. Lights shone from the stadium, and she heard a sound like distant thunder. It was the crowd, watching one of the gladiator fights.

Her belly clenched. She was so far from home.

She glanced at the few stars she could see in the sky. Up there, somewhere, was Rella. She had no idea where, since she was only a chef, not an astronomer or navigator. She, Calla Ryss, was nobody special.

She'd been so excited when she'd gotten the offer to join the crew of one of her planet's first starships. Space travel was still a burgeoning area for Rella, much like she'd learned it was for the planet Earth.

Her parents had been upset at first, not wanting their daughter so far from home. Calla was pretty sure her mother just wanted to continue her attempts to find Calla a suitable mate.

Calla had been so proud that she'd been offered a position on the ship. Sure, she'd just been working in the kitchen, feeding the ship's crew of scientists, pilots, and security staff. But that didn't make it any less of an adventure.

Her family were all smart, dedicated workaholics. Her father was a healer, her mother ran her own successful business, and her brother was a renowned professor at the Rellan Academies. Calla had never felt like she fit in. She'd moved from job to job, never finding what she loved or was good at...until she'd started to cook.

A Ryss can be more than a cook, Calla.

The echo of her father's voice made her hunch her shoulders. Another reminder that Calla never quite felt like she belonged with her family.

And she certainly didn't belong here on Carthago.

She pressed her cheek to her knee. It had been exciting, at first, traveling among the stars. But then, everything had gone very wrong when her starship had been attacked by alien slavers.

Calla's throat tightened. In her head were echoes of the screams, the sirens, and the huge, demon-like aliens who'd boarded the ship. She'd been so afraid. She'd been dragged by clawed hands onto a small, alien ship and thrown into a cell.

Swallowing, she tried to calm herself, but her heart beat like a trapped thing in her chest.

You're safe now, Calla.

The Thraxians had abducted others as well. They'd also attacked an exploration ship from Earth, and they'd brought their captives through a wormhole to the other side of the galaxy. To this lawless, desert planet.

She shivered. It had been explained to her that the wormhole had been transient and had since collapsed. There was no way home since Rella and Earth were on the other side of the galaxy.

Calla had been sold to the Edull—metal scavengers who lived in the depths of the desert. Somehow, even though there had been so many days when she was sure she'd die, she'd managed to survive the cells, the experiments, and rough treatment.

Mostly, it was all thanks to a woman from Earth—a fellow abductee—called Sage. The woman's sweet nature and unrelenting optimism had kept Calla alive, even on the darkest days.

Then they'd been rescued by dangerous cyborg gladiators who'd brought them here to the House of Rone.

Calla still couldn't quite believe she was safe. Suddenly, a high-pitched cry broke the quiet of the night. She lifted her head and glanced along the balcony, with its gentle arches of stone. It sounded like a cat...or a baby.

She looked over the railing. Down below lay the training arena. By day, it was packed with bare-chested gladiators and cyborgs, but tonight, it was empty. When she'd first seen the cyborgs, she'd been terrified. They were all fierce, and cold, and scary.

But they'd saved her and Sage from the Edull. And they'd already freed two others from Sage's ship, the *Helios*—Quinn and Jayna.

Calla heard the plaintive sound again and scanned around once more. She couldn't tell where the noise was coming from.

She sat back, her gaze moving to the night sky again. She was well aware that there were still more humans out there. She'd been the only Rellan taken—pain carved up her insides at the thought. Her ship had broken apart too fast for the Thraxians to nab any others.

Unfortunately, Calla and Sage had no idea how many other humans were being held prisoner. The Edull had kept them all separated, but they were out there, somewhere.

I hope you're free soon.

She knew that the House of Rone cyborgs, and Quinn, the *Helios*' security chief, were busy looking for them. Calla couldn't really contribute anything to the search. Baking a perfect dessert, or making heavily frosted sweet treats, didn't really help when you needed to find stolen slaves.

She sighed. She hadn't cooked since her abduction, but just lately, she was starting to feel the urge again. To sink her hands into dough and create something delicious. Not that it mattered. The House of Rone had an entire kitchen of cooks to keep everyone who worked there fed.

The sharp, high-pitched cry came again and Calla frowned. This time, it sounded more like a baby. Perhaps it was Ever's daughter. The human survivor from Fortuna Space Station had been here far longer than Calla and the *Helios* survivors. Since her rescue, the woman had given birth and now had Asha, a sweet-faced baby girl. Ever was also in love with the Emperor of the House of Rone, Magnus Rone.

Calla shivered. That cyborg was beyond scary. She had no idea how Ever had ended up with the man.

Now, Calla heard laughter—sexy and lush.

She glanced over her shoulder to the room neighboring hers. It belonged to Jaxer Rone and Quinn Bennett.

Another human woman and cyborg who were very much in love. Oh, the pair were probably getting naked. Warmth filled Calla's cheeks. Jax and Quinn always looked at each other with heat in their eyes.

Calla heard that mournful cry *again* and frowned. Now, it sounded feline, and it had definitely come from below. She shifted onto her knees and leaned out over the balcony. Her heart thumped.

There was a ledge just below her balcony, and it was covered with vines. The noise had come from there. Her heart thumped again and she pressed a palm to it. It was a shock to feel the smooth metal under her shirt. A reminder that her heart wasn't actually her heart anymore.

Calla had been injured during her rescue. Her fingers flexed. Vague, blood-splattered memories hit her. *A brutal fight. A hard hit to her chest. Firm arms catching her. A coldly handsome face and metallic silver eyes.*

Her brand-new, cybernetic heart pounded. She still wasn't quite sure how she felt about the fact that she had a lump of metal under her ribs. Beneath her fingertips, she felt the flexible metal skin that covered the hole in her chest.

She was alive. That was all she had to remember.

The cry came again. This time, it sounded demanding.

"Okay, okay." Calla threw a leg over the railing. She wasn't going to let some poor animal stay stuck out there.

Her feet tangled in the vines growing on the ledge. She realized, belatedly, that her soft slippers weren't exactly the best for climbing. Once her feet were firmly on the ledge—the very narrow ledge—she started moving along it. When her shirt snagged on a vine, she cursed and tugged it free.

She shuffled along, and a moment later, she spotted the cat.

Calla froze, staring at the creature. It was across a small gap, nestled on the ledge under the balcony of the room beside hers.

It was no ordinary cat. She'd glimpsed this animal around the House of Rone once or twice. The cat was a cyborg.

It looked like it had started life as a small hunting cat. Its strong body was built to stalk prey. It had dark, patterned fur, a cybernetic leg, several metal joints, and a metallic implant for one eye.

It stared at her, its cybernetic eye glowing neon green.

"Hi, there," Calla said.

The cat cried again.

"Are you stuck?" She edged closer to the gap between them. It wasn't too wide, and she reached over, moving her hand slowly. The cat let her pat it. "Wow, you're soft, and so unique."

Without warning, the animal backed up, just out of reach.

"You don't like it here, do you? Let's get you off this ledge."

Calla leaned farther over the gap, stretching out to try and get her hands around the animal. He gave another feline cry and backed up again.

"Come on, *dara*. I'm not going to hurt you."

Her toes were at the very edge of the ledge, her fingers brushed fur. Just a little more—

Calla swore the cat smiled at her. Then it shifted out from under her hand.

She overbalanced and cried out. She fell off the balcony ledge and plummeted.

By the Goddess, any second, she was going to hit the ground and break some bones. She squeezed her eyes closed.

But she didn't hit the ground. Instead, she was caught in a pair of strong arms.

Her eyes popped open, and she stared into the silver eyes that haunted her dreams.

Zaden wasn't quite sure how he found himself with an armful of curvy female. He heard the woman's breath hitch.

"Thank you," she whispered.

She had a mesmerizing cadence to her voice. Her accent from the planet she'd come from.

He set her down on her feet. "You should not hang off the balcony. You could have been hurt."

And she'd already been hurt by the Edull and the Thraxians.

Zaden remembered every second of Calla's rescue. He felt a spike against his emotional dampeners. She'd been hit by a high-velocity, ballistic projectile. It had shredded her heart and left her dying, her blood pumping out everywhere.

She had landed in his arms then too, her brown gaze locked with his. He'd held her, put pressure on her wound. Then he'd used his telekinetic abilities to staunch the blood loss and keep blood pumping around her body until they'd been able to get her to the healers.

Since returning to the House of Rone, the healers had replaced her heart. Zaden had sat beside her bed in Medical, still stained by her blood, until he'd known she was going to be okay. He'd watched her as she'd slept.

Until Jax, the second of the House of Rone, had forced him to rest.

She was so small. She barely reached his breastbone, and had a thick mass of black hair, with just a hint of curl. The wind liked to catch strands of her hair and dance it around her pretty face.

Her skin was a bronze-brown, and she had a gold pattern that circled her face, from her forehead, down the sides of her face, to her chin.

“The cat was stuck on the ledge and afraid.” Calla pointed upward. “I was trying to help him in case he fell.”

Zaden narrowed his gaze. “What?”

“The cyborg cat. It was stuck—”

There was a quiet *thump*, and the cat in question landed beside them on the ground with perfect dexterity. The animal lifted one paw and delicately licked it.

Calla gasped. “He jumped off just fine!”

Zaden frowned at the creature. He was well aware it was highly intelligent, especially with all its enhancements, and fully capable of playing games. “*She*. This animal is a she, and she can scale these walls perfectly fine.”

The cat lifted its head, looking the epitome of innocence. It had been the bane of his existence since he’d saved it from an accident and nursed it back to health.

He mentally cursed Jax for forcing the animal on him. Zaden remembered exactly what the cyborg had said. *It will teach you how to deal with the emotions you like to pretend you don’t feel.*

“Is it your cat?” Big, brown eyes looked up at him.

“I feed her.” Zaden didn’t mention that, despite a perfectly good bed, the cat crawled into his bed every night.

“So, she *is* yours.”

He stared at the cat. “No.”

Calla’s lips twitched. “Fine. What’s her name?”

“Cat,” he answered.

The woman gave a slow blink. “You called your cat, Cat?”

He felt the unfamiliar urge to shift his feet, but stifled it. “It appeared to be an appropriate moniker.”

Calla’s lips were definitely twitching. “Okay, Zaden.”

He stilled. “You know my name.”

Some emotion he couldn’t recognize moved over her face. “Yes. You saved me, Zaden. You kept me alive in the desert, and I won’t ever forget that. So yes, I know your name.”

He felt some sort of muscle stretching in his chest. He knew what it was—emotion. And feeling emotions was dangerous for him.

Unlike the other cyborgs at the House of Rone, who had implants to enhance and increase their abilities, Zaden had them to curb his lethal skills.

He stepped back from Calla. “I am glad that you are okay.”

“Calla,” she said. “Please, call me Calla.”

Another stretch in his chest. “Calla.”

She smiled. “Will you walk with me?”

He needed to get away from her. “I’m on security duty, and you should return to your room. I will walk you to the stairs.”

“All right.” As they fell into step, she glanced at him. “You’re on duty all night?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you need to sleep?”

“Yes, but I do not require much of it.” He kept some distance between them.

A second later, Cat wound through Calla's feet, almost tripping her. She laughed and caught herself, her arm brushing his. They were standing much closer now.

This small female made him...uncomfortable. Being around her left him unsettled. Still, he allowed himself to soak up her presence as they walked.

She peppered him with questions about the training arena and security duty. Then she looked upward. "The moons are so beautiful. Oh, look, a nebula." She pointed.

"It's called the A'Taro Nebula. My homeworld is very close to it."

"Oh?" She tilted her head, interest on her face.

Why had he told her that? He hadn't thought of his homeworld for a very long time.

"It's called Zaldi."

"A pretty name."

But in reality, the planet of Zaldi was far from pretty.

"How did you end up here, on Carthago?" she asked.

"My species is telekinetic. I was too...powerful." For a second, memories of screams and blood drowned his mind.

"Zaden?" A brush of fingers on his arm.

He shook himself. "I needed implants to leash my strength. The ones that my people gave me were not successful, and eventually I was exiled."

She gasped. "What?"

"Exile is a common practice for Zaldi's criminals, and other people deemed too dangerous." Like the small percentage of the population whose telekinesis reached exponential and uncontrollable levels.

"That's horrible."

Calla pressed a hand to his arm, and Zaden looked down at the slender fingers resting on his black shirt.

“It was a long time ago.”

Then she pulled back, and he realized they’d reached the bottom of the stairs.

“You should get back to your bedroom. Please do not fall off the balcony again.”

Calla smiled. “I’ll try my hardest. Good night, Zaden. Thanks for the catch.” She looked down. “And good night to you, Cat.”

Zaden watched her run up the stairs. Then he turned and saw that Cat was staring at him with a reproachful look.

“You are problematic,” he told the animal. “Be careful, or I’ll shut you down and run a full system reboot on you.”

Cat licked her paw, clearly unconcerned by the threat.