



Chapter One

“Open your eyes, Winter.”

Winter Ashworth kept her eyes closed, her stomach caught between churning and fluttering. The narrow bunk in Medical felt cold under her body.

“Winter?” the voice came again, modulated and calm.

She opened her eyes.

The black turned to a mottled gray. Her bottom lip quivered, before she bit down on it. “There’s a little improvement.” Her stomach felt like a rock was sitting in it. “But I can’t see.”

A soft touch on her arm. The Hermia healers at the House of Galen had been trying for weeks to heal her damaged eyes. And in the meantime, she’d started working with them here in Medical. Sure, with her lack of sight things weren’t easy, but she was doing what she could.

The healer, whose name was Garda, had long, slim fingers. The Hermia were a genderless species and were all very tall and slender, wore simple robes, and from what the others had told her, had rounded heads with no hair and large green eyes. They also had incredible healing abilities.

Winter swallowed. She’d been a celebrated surgeon on Earth, and headed out to work on the Fortuna Space Station orbiting Jupiter. Instead, she’d been abducted by alien slavers. The Thraxians had transported her to the other side of the galaxy via a now-closed wormhole, blinded her in terrible experiments, and then tossed her in the Srinar fight rings.

She sucked in a shuddering breath. She was safe now. She was at the House of Galen, rescued by the gladiators, and now living with a handful of fellow humans who’d also been rescued.

“Can we see her?” a voice asked.

Winter recognized Harper’s voice and, as she drew in another breath, she smelled her friends. Harper, the former security officer from the Fortuna Space Station always smelled like leather and wood. Now she was a badass gladiator and it suited her. Regan Forrest, a scientist from the space station, smelled like flowers, despite spending most of her days tinkering in the small lab that she’d claimed for herself.

Rory, an engineer from Fortuna, smelled like the faint scent of oil, probably because she worked with the House of Galen maintenance team. The fourth woman was standing at the back

of the group, her fragrance lighter. Madeline, the former space station commander, had a cooler scent that made Winter think of the ocean.

“Hey, Winter.” Rory’s energetic voice. “How are you doing?”

A hand gripped Winter’s hand and she knew it was Regan. She squeezed it. “The latest procedure didn’t work.”

“I’m sorry,” Regan murmured.

“I have one more device I would like you to test,” the healer said. “Galen authorized me to procure it.”

Winter’s chest hitched. She wasn’t sure she could handle another disappointment. Then she stiffened her spine. When she’d first been rescued by the House of Galen gladiators, she’d been dazed and in shock. Flashes of memories hit her and her hands curled into her palms. Images of the Thraxian lab, of being tied down, of pain.

But that was her past. And now she had to deal with a new future.

They could never get back to Earth. Even with the current spaceship technology available to them out here in the far reaches of the galaxy, Earth was hundreds of years away. Thinking of her mother and brother, Winter felt a sting of sadness. She hadn’t lived near her family for a long time, but she’d talked with her mother frequently. Pushing the sad memories aside, Winter focused on the women in front of her. These women were making a new life here on the desert world of Carthago.

Winter was determined to do the same. At least she had the chance, unlike poor Dayna and Mia. Two more humans who’d been abducted. Those women had been her lifeline and while Winter had been rescued—again—her friends were still missing.

Being a doctor had suited Winter’s practical, no-nonsense nature, and she was using that now to survive. So the Thraxians had tortured her and she often woke up screaming in the middle of the night. So she’d lost her vision. She couldn’t change any of that. All she could do was pick herself up and keep moving forward.

She sure as hell wasn’t going to curl up in a ball and be the useless burden some people might see her as. She instantly thought of one big, obnoxious barbarian gladiator. *Pfft*, she was so not going there. She wasn’t giving Nero the satisfaction.

“Do it,” she told the healer.

She felt the press of cool metal at her temple.

“The device is circular and metallic,” Garda said. “It adheres to your skin but can be removed with slight pressure.”

“How’s it work?” Winter asked.

“The vision device transmits visual input through your optic nerves to your brain. I must warn you...the device cannot fully restore your sight. It cannot provide images in color nor will your vision be as detailed.”

“Okay.” Whatever happened, she’d deal with it.

“Open your eyes now, Winter.”

She swallowed to wet her dry throat, and opened her eyes. Her vision resolved and she saw a wide plane of blue.

“Allow yourself to adjust,” the healer added, helping Winter up to a sitting position.

The blue changed and resolved into the forms of four women. Winter gasped. It was like looking at everything through night vision goggles that tinted everything blue. There were a lot of shadows, but she could see.

Delighted, she pushed off the bed. She misjudged and almost tumbled. Her friends all stepped forward, but she caught herself. It would take her a little time to adjust to the difference in her vision and her depth perception.

Winter took a step forward. “Oh, my God, I can see you guys!”

The women surrounded her, all laughing. Harper was tall and muscular, Regan was short and curvy, Rory had a slender but wiry frame with a small pregnant belly, and Madeline was trim and compact.

“Oh, God.” Delighted and overwhelmed, she grabbed each woman, hugging them. She spun and saw Garda for the first time. The healer was very tall and very slim, and wearing pale-colored robes. Garda’s face was serene and composed. “Thank you, Garda.”

“It is my pleasure, Winter. You will be able to take on more duties in Medical, now.”

Winter laughed. “So, you just healed me so you’d have someone to do your dirty work?”

Garda’s lips moved into a slight smile. “Perhaps.”

Winter did a lap of Medical, bumping a hip against a bunk once, and almost knocking over a tray of medical tools. She just needed to adjust to the device. She paused to study the amazing regen tanks at the back of the room. They were filled with healing fluid.

She turned back to the others. "I want to test this out some more." She headed for the doors. "We'll come with you," Regan said.

Winter paused. "No. I...need to do this myself. But thank you."

Regan smiled. "I understand."

"We'll meet you later in the living area," Rory said. "Remember, we're watching the fight tonight."

Excitement shot through Winter. She'd been to a few gladiatorial fights in the arena, and absorbed the smells, the overwhelming sounds, and sensations.

But tonight, she'd actually get to see the gladiators fight.

Her thoughts turned to Dayna and Mia, guilt flooding in. She pressed her lips together and waved to the others as she stepped out of Medical.

Having some vision restored meant she could play an even greater part in the search for her friends. Sight or no sight, she was going to find them.

Frustration bit at him like the stab of a sharp blade.

Nero Krahn had spent the entire day out hunting—following leads, looking for clues, and trying to follow a trail that had long gone cold.

He scowled. He hated failure. He hated the thought of having to go back to his imperator and tell him there was no sign of the women.

Nero skirted the people clogging the sidewalks, and thankfully, due to his size and scowl, most people hurried out of his way. Some days, he missed the clean air and dense jungles of his home world. He looked up as he approached the Kor Magna Arena. The cream stone walls rose up high into the sky, multicolored flags fluttering above the arches.

This was his home now. Nero had left his failures behind on his home world. He'd been ripped away from Symeria by alien slavers, but now the House of Galen—one of the best gladiator houses in the arena—had his loyalty, as did the gladiators he called brothers.

But today, instead of fighting on the arena sand, he'd put his hunting skills to use for his emperor. He was searching for the two women who'd been stolen from the House of Galen.

And he'd come back with nothing.

"That scowl is going to make small children cry," a smooth voice said.

Nero looked over at his fight partner, Lore.

The man was tall, but leaner than Nero, with a leather harness crisscrossing his chest, and long hair brushing his shoulders. When Nero had first been paired with Lore, he'd thought their emperor, Galen, had been crazy. Nero was the son of a barbarian warlord, and Galen had matched him with a showman who always had a bagful of tricks.

But after years of fighting together, he and Lore had become as close as brothers. Nero had learned that there was much more to Lore than he'd first thought. Their fighting styles complemented each other, and what one lacked, the other could offer. It made them formidable in the arena, and Nero trusted Lore with his very last breath.

"You should lighten up on the scowling, glaring, and glowering." Lore's grin was wide. "You might have fewer people scurry out of your way in fear."

Nero glared at his friend.

Lore gave a gusty sigh. "I know you're frustrated we didn't find any hint of Dayna and Mia. So am I." Lore slapped Nero on the shoulder. "But you know we won't give up."

"With every day, the trail grows colder," Nero said.

Several months before, the House of Galen had been turned upside-down with the arrival of one small, female fighter. Harper Adams had been abducted from Earth, on the far side of the galaxy, by the cowardly Thraxians. The alien slavers had sold her to the arena, and Galen and his champion gladiator, Raiden, had taken her in.

Now, the House of Galen was busy rescuing the remaining humans of Earth who'd been taken. Nero shook his head. As a result, gladiators were falling like desert sandflies. Raiden had fallen in love with Harper. Big, wild Thorin had claimed small Regan. Kace had managed to impregnate the sharp-tongued Rory. Lore had bonded with Madeline. By the blade, even Saff—the fiercest female gladiator in Kor Magna—had fallen for the lone male among the humans, Blaine.

Now, the House of Galen was at war with the House of Thrax, and their sand-sucking allies, the Srinar. Galen had managed to shut down their secret underground fight rings, but in retaliation, they'd abducted several rescued Earth women right from the heart of the House of Galen.

Thraxians and the Srinar...they were all scum. Nero had been raised to fight and protect, and everything in him was driven to defeat dishonorable, cowardly abusers. These slavers delighted in hurting those far weaker and smaller than themselves.

After a wild mission into the desert, they'd rescued one of the stolen women—the small, blind healer...no, doctor. That's what she called herself. They'd rescued Winter, but the other two women—Dayna and Mia—were still out there, no doubt suffering at the hands of their captors.

Nero scowled. Winter might be small in stature and unable to see, but the woman specialized in sharp, cutting words. The woman's tongue was a weapon far sharper than his sword. And she liked to lash him with it whenever she got the chance.

“Nero! Lore!”

Three pretty women rushed up to them in a swirl of perfume that clogged Nero's senses. A hand pressed against his chest.

“Nero, you're my favorite gladiator.” The woman blinked big, brown eyes, topped with unnaturally long eyelashes, at him. Her face was covered in enhancements—glittering red lips, bright-blue color around her eyes, pink on her cheeks. She lowered her voice. “I'd love to spend some time with you. I'll do *anything*.” The eyelashes fluttered.

Nero felt a surge of annoyance. He had no time for glittery, silly women. He looked at Lore, who was gently disconnecting the other two women from his body.

“I am not interested.” Nero shot a look at the other women. They both backed up a step. “And Lore has a woman. Go.” They hesitated, all looking like new fighters caught in the arena spotlights for the first time. “I said go.”

The women all hurried away, their dresses fluttering.

“You sure charmed them.” Lore looked like he was fighting a laugh.

Nero just grunted.

They entered the tunnels beneath the arena and headed for the House of Galen.

“Well, I plan to find my woman before we have to prepare for tonight’s fight.” Lore smiled, his gaze warming.

At first, Nero had thought Madeline Cochran broken and cold, but ever since she’d been rescued and Lore had swept her into his arms, the woman sure smiled a lot more.

Nero didn’t understand the attraction of having a woman underfoot. “I’ll see you at the fight.”

“It’s with the House of Aviar. You’ll be able to flex those barbarian hunting skills of yours.”

The House of Aviar fought with giant avian beasts. Nero felt a spike in his blood, the hunter rising. “Good.”

He’d be able to work off his frustration in the fight. But he still promised that he would find those women. He vowed it.

They rounded a corner, and came to the double doors of the House of Galen. The image of a helmeted gladiator in profile was emblazoned on the wood. A guard nodded at them and opened the doors.

“See you later, Nero,” Lore said, as he hurried off.

Nero strode toward the living quarters reserved for the high-level gladiators. He turned a corner and crashed into a small figure heading in the opposite direction.

“*Oof.*” The woman toppled backward and he grabbed her before she hit the ground.

Nero felt a warning prickle run up his arms. As the woman lifted her head, his gaze went straight to her milky white eyes. *Winter.*

He knew the Thraxians had tortured her while she’d been in captivity and performed experiments on her. In the process, they’d blinded her. Anger spiked like burning poison in his blood.

“Nero.” She stepped back. “Sorry. For a big man, you don’t make any noise when you walk. Must be all those barbarian skulking skills of yours.” She was staring straight at him. “Wow, you really are big.”

He dragged in a deep breath and instantly regretted it. He smelled her. He could detect the antiseptic scent of Medical, where he knew she was working with the House of Galen healers, but he also smelled *her*. A sweet, teasing scent of fresh water, soap, and warm skin.

“*Winter.*” She was so small compared to him. She had long, black hair that she had pulled back in a tail. “What are you doing, wandering the halls without someone to help you around?”

He didn't like the idea of her roaming on her own, unable to see if someone was sneaking up on her. Just over a week ago, she'd been snatched out of these very walls.

He watched that pointed chin of hers lift. "I'm perfectly capable of getting around the House of Galen. Besides, the healers gave me this." She tapped her temple.

That's when he saw a tiny, metallic circle pressed against the skin of her temple. "What is it?"

"It's a vision device. I can see." Excitement leaked into her voice. "Well, sort of. I can't see colors, everything is in shades of blue. And the bruises I've collected from running into things are proof I'll need to adjust. I can miss some detail, especially in the distance, but otherwise, I can see quite well."

Her gaze moved over his face before sliding down his body. Nero resisted the urge to shift under the scrutiny.

"Wow...you have excellent musculature."

As her gaze lingered on his abdomen, Nero drew in a sharp breath.

Her head jerked up, her cheeks turning pink. She fingered the device, then waved a hand. "I'm sure you're not interested in any of this. It is still a weakness, right?"

Nero felt a muscle tick in his jaw. On the mission to rescue her in the desert, he'd been concerned for her safety. She was blind and the desert was dangerous. He'd made a mistake in telling her that on his home world, she would be considered a weakness. His words had come out very wrong.

"I realize that without perfect vision you think I'm—" she tapped her chin "—what did you call me before? A burden?"

"I was explaining about my planet, Symeria, and about the fact that it puts you at a disadvantage—"

She gave him a sharp smile. "Well, now I'm not so useless."

He heard the sarcastic edge to her voice. "I never said you were useless. You did."

She froze, her white gaze lifting to his face. "I guess you never actually used the word."

"No, I didn't. I simply wanted to protect you. As you discovered, the desert beasts are vicious, and being unable to see them coming put you at great risk."

She swallowed and didn't say anything. No doubt she was remembering the beast that had attacked them.

Nero straightened. "I will not apologize for wanting to keep you safe, but perhaps what I said was also colored by your own thoughts."

She expelled a breath. "Maybe...I jumped to conclusions. But you do have a gruff, short and opinionated demeanor."

"I am a gladiator. I do not pander to people."

She hissed and shook her head. "Do you have to be so gruff all the time?"

"Yes."

Winter rolled her eyes. "Well, you are good at it."

"I've had lots of practice."

She studied his face carefully for a moment. "Did you just make a joke?"

He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Right. You have no sense of humor. How could I forget?" Her gaze drifted over his body again, and she straightened. "Wait. You were out looking for Dayna and Mia."

"Yes." He watched as her face lit up, and bit back a growl of anger that he'd have to disappoint her. "There was no sign of them."

Winter's shoulders sagged, her face falling. "It's been over a week." There was desolation in her tone.

"We *will* find them." Nero's hand itched to reach out and cup her slim shoulder. He stiffened his spine. Why the hell did he feel the need to comfort her? He'd never comforted anyone.

She gave a small nod. "You have a fight tonight."

"Yes. Against the House of Aviar."

"I'll be there."

He thought of her in amongst the crowded stands, surrounded by strangers, the noise swamping her. "Will you be able to see well enough?"

That chin lifted again, and he was certain she was grinding her teeth together. "I want to test the device out, and I can smell and hear perfectly fine. I can eat the food, and talk with my friends. Regardless of what barbarian gladiators think, I'm still a fully functioning woman."

Against his will, his gaze ran down her small form. She was tiny compared to him, but under her cream-colored dress were curves that were perfectly in proportion to her form.

He jerked his gaze away. He had no interest in Winter's form, or her sharp tongue. He felt furious at the unwelcome rush of desire.

"If you get injured tonight, I can patch you up in Medical now," she said sweetly. "But I can't guarantee a pleasant bedside manner." She strode off down the corridor. "Goodbye, barbarian."

There was no hesitation in her step, and anyone looking at her from a distance wouldn't be able to guess that her vision was impaired in any way.

Her words echoed in his head. She'd said goodbye like she meant to say, "Eat sand and die."

Nero shook his head. He needed to report in with Galen, and not worry about a stubborn, smart-mouthed Earth woman.