



Chapter One

An enraged roar woke her.

Mia Ross rolled, almost falling out of her bed. *Where was she?* It took her a second, scanning the shadowed room. *Bedroom. House of Galen. Planet of Carthago.*

Nowadays, it always took a moment for her to remember where she was when she first woke up. At least she wasn't in a cell.

Mia scrambled up and crossed to a chair. She grabbed the tangle of clothes, separating them. Being abducted off her supply ship from Earth by alien slavers probably accounted for the confusion. She pulled her trousers on, hopping on one foot. Being forced into an underground fight ring on a lawless desert planet, then rescued by alien gladiators, then snatched again by a crazy tech guru who wanted to use her for her brainpower, then rescued again, probably had a little to do with it as well.

She pulled her shirt over her head. No one could blame a girl for waking up confused after everything she'd been through.

Another roar echoed through the hallway outside her room.

Mia raced out of her bedroom. It was the middle of the night, so the corridor was only lit by low lights set into the stone walls. As she hurried down the hallway, a door opened.

"Mia?"

She looked up and saw her friend and fellow human, Harper, standing in a doorway. "It's okay, Harper. I've got it. Go back to bed."

The former security specialist looked worried, her dark hair mussed by sleep. Suddenly, a big, tattooed gladiator appeared behind her.

“The guards can handle it, Mia,” Raiden said.

A big, *naked*, tattooed alien gladiator. Mia averted her gaze, and was glad that Harper was blocking most of her man’s body. The woman was one lucky lady. You didn’t have to spend much time with Harper and Raiden to see that they were perfect for each other.

“No, I can calm him down,” Mia said. “It’ll be fine.”

She hurried off before they tried to stop her. She jogged through the twists and turns of the House of Galen. The beautiful, warm stone walls were dotted with striking wall hangings made of red and gray fabric, all of them depicting gladiators fighting in the Kor Magna Arena.

Kor Magna was the largest city on the desert world of Carthago. It was famous for its gladiatorial arena, and for the human survivors from Fortuna Station, it was now home.

Reaching a set of stairs, she hurried down to the cells, giving her head an incredulous shake. God, her home was a gladiatorial house on an alien world. Earth and her life before felt very, very far away.

Her family would be equal parts horrified and curious. Mia smiled, a sweet pain piercing her chest. She missed them like crazy. She’d always been the odd one out in her big, overachieving family, but she’d never doubted that they’d loved her.

She knew they all missed her. Her renowned human-rights lawyer mother, her billionaire construction company CEO father, and her three siblings. Her two sisters were doctors, and her brother was a hotshot entrepreneur. And then there’d been Mia, the baby. She’d had so many careers that she’d always left her family baffled and confused.

She jumped down the last few steps, and the sound of a crash and the splintering of wood ahead made her pick up speed. Mia had never found her perfect career. Her last job had been as a spaceship pilot, and she'd liked it, and was good at it. She might have even stuck at it this time...if she hadn't been snatched by the Thraxian slavers

For a second, her stomach did a slow, jittering roll. She remembered the terrible moment the alien ship had filled her viewscreen—the screams, the horrible crunch of metal, the desperate whine of failing engines.

She shook her head, shaking the images away. At the end of the hall, two guards stood near a cell. Both were dressed in fighting leathers, muscled chests bare, and gray cloaks falling down their backs. Swords were sheathed at their sides. The younger guard had a concerned look on his face, but the older one was stone-faced, his hard gaze on the cell.

From inside came another wild roar, followed by a crash.

The young guard looked up, relief crossing his face. "Hi, Mia."

"Open the door," she asked.

The older guard frowned at her. "He's bad tonight. He's not responding at all. I don't think you should go in there."

"Open the door, please," she said calmly.

The man hesitated, before he reluctantly unlocked the door. Mia stepped into the cell.

It was a large, simple space, but comfortable. There was a doorway into the adjoining bathroom, a bunk pressed against the back wall, and a table and chairs—or the remains of them, at least. They were now mostly splintered shards.

And in the center of the room, was one wild, out-of-control, blue-skinned alien.

God, he was something to look at. He towered over her, although that wasn't unusual on this planet. Most people around here were way over her own five foot, one-and-a-half inches. He had dark-blue skin, and his muscled chest and arms were covered in what looked like black, swirling tattoos. But Mia knew he'd been born with the markings, and they were as much a part of him as his skin. And fascinatingly enough, the designs changed with his mood.

Like right now. The marks were turning dark black, the way they always did when he was in a rage.

And muscles. He had so many muscles. At the moment, they were huge and bulging. His long, black hair was in a tangle, and a dark beard covered his face.

There was no doubting he was scary and dangerous, but she couldn't pull her gaze off him.

"Vek."

He spun. His face was contorted, his chest heaving. His golden eyes glowed with a fierce light.

"It's Mia." She kept her voice low, calm. "You're safe."

He showed no hint of recognition. He growled, then spun, and slammed his fist into the stone wall. A dusty cloud of pulverized rock filled the air.

Sympathy flooded her. He'd been captured as a boy, and forced into the underground fight rings. He'd had a lifetime of being pumped full of drugs to increase his aggression, and being forced to participate in fights to the death.

There had been no hugs, no loving touches, no simple decency for Vek.

But he'd survived. Just like she had.

Despite an upbringing that would turn the gentlest soul into a murderous killer, he'd saved her. Twice.

Now Mia was returning the favor. She took a step closer. “You’re in the House of Galen, and—”

He charged.

Mia knew the intimidation tactic, and held her ground. His big body pressed against her, and he loomed over her, his hot breath ruffling her short hair. He was over a foot taller than her, and he always made her feel so tiny. He lowered his head, making a low growl again in his throat. Involuntarily, she took one step back, and felt the stone wall hit her shoulder blades.

Vek pressed his face to the side of her neck and drew in a long breath.

“It’s me,” she murmured. “You’re okay, Vek.”

Another growl, but it was quieter, less furious.

He pressed his arms to the wall above her head, caging her in. She forced herself to stay calm, but she was always conscious of the fact that with one simple swipe of his huge hand, he could snap her like a twig.

Vek breathed deep, and she felt the brush of his warm lips on her skin. She shivered.

God, now was not the time for her body to remind her that she was insanely attracted to a wild, alien man with blue skin.

“Vek?”

His big body shuddered. “Mia.”

His voice was deep and guttural, still rusty from the fact that he hadn’t talked much in years.

“That’s right.” She raised her hand, and slowly stroked one huge bicep.

Suddenly, he moved, and his huge arms engulfed her. He pulled her close. “Mia.”

Anger. Molten-hot fury stormed through him. It was huge and unstoppable.

Vek'ker growled. He strained for some control, grinding his teeth. He hated when his body didn't feel like his.

His body still craved the drugs it no longer received. The urges inside him never went away. He wanted to fight.

He wanted to kill.

He sucked in a deep breath, and inhaled a scent that flowed through him like water.

Her.

He registered the small weight in his arms. *Mia.*

He took a second to acknowledge her slight curves, and look at the shining cap of golden hair on her head. She smelled so good. Just her scent alone quieted the writhing, horrid mass of emotions inside him.

She lifted her face up to him and smiled. "Feeling better?"

Vek pressed his face against her hair.

"Mia," a deep, male voice said.

Vek tensed and spun. He pulled her closer to his chest.

"I'm fine, Galen," Mia said.

The man standing on the other side of the bars was tall and muscled. He wore leather trousers, and a sleek, black shirt that molded over every ridge and rope of muscle in his chest. A black cloak fell from his shoulders, and a black patch covered his left eye. He had a rugged, scarred face.

Vek was used to assessing opponents in an instant. His survival had depended on it. In the ring, he knew that a missing eye could be used as a weakness. Take out the other eye, and it would leave this man blind and vulnerable. A red haze covered Vek's vision. *Kill or be killed.*

But the man had a powerful body, and the hilt of a large sword was visible over his shoulder, sheathed on his back. He also had a calm, icy gaze that was calculating, cunning.

He was a fighter, and he would not be easy prey.

"I'm not sure I agree with you," the man said. "Maybe step out for a bit."

Galen. Vek remembered through the haze that the man's name was Galen.

He was trying to take Mia away.

"Mine." Vek spun and heard Mia gasp. He pulled her closer and moved to the back wall of his cell, sliding down to sit on the floor. He pulled her onto his lap, and buried his face in her hair.

"I'm okay. I'm okay," she called out. "Just give us a minute."

"A minute," Galen growled. "If you get hurt, I have a house full of Earth women who'll want my blood." In a whirl of his cloak, he was gone.

"Calm down, Vek. We're okay." Mia shifted against him.

Vek lifted his head and saw she was staring into his face. She had blue eyes the color of his skin.

She was so small. All the women of Earth were. He remembered that she'd been abducted, as well. Like him, she'd had her freedom stolen, lost any chance to return to her homeworld, and she'd been hurt. He growled.

She cupped his cheek, running her fingers through his beard. "This is getting even longer. I will get you to agree to shave it off, one of these days."

He tilted his head, absorbing the feel of her caress. She didn't look at him like he was a monster. She looked at him like she enjoyed what she saw. He felt his cock stir, and confusion hit him. Deep in the center of him, every cell of his being was screaming for more of Mia.

Vek had never been with a woman. For years, all his sexual need had been channeled by the drugs into a fighting rage. Sometimes, he'd listen to prisoners coupling in the dark of night, and sometimes he'd stroked himself. But mostly, when need had ridden him hard, he'd just fought and spilled blood, not seed.

Until he'd been led out into the ring and he'd seen this tiny woman on the sand.

He frowned. He had no idea what to do about it.

"I have something for you." Mia pulled something from her pocket and held it up. "*Grezzo*. It's *almost* like chocolate from Earth. It's delicious."

Vek was still wary about eating. In the past, his food had often been spiked with drugs. But he trusted Mia.

She pressed the small brown square to his lips, and he opened his mouth. He chewed, and flavor exploded across his tongue. It tasted so good. Better than the rotten meat he'd been fed in the fight rings. Even better than the meals here at the House of Galen.

They sat quietly for a while.

"Bad night?" she asked quietly. "Did you have nightmares?"

His sleep was hardly ever restful. For so many years, he couldn't sleep deeply, for fear of someone attacking him. And when he did sleep, he saw the faces of all the people he'd been forced to kill. Saw their blood spraying on the sand. He shrugged a shoulder.

"The nightmares will pass in time," she said. "Mine are much better."

"I would take your nightmares, if I could."

"You have enough of your own." She leaned into him. "The House of Galen has an arena fight tomorrow—or probably today, now. I asked Galen if you could come and watch, and he

approved it.” She glanced at the bars. “If you’d like to come, I’ll convince him not to change his mind.”

A chance to watch a fair fight intrigued Vek. He knew that Kor Magna’s arena was famous, and that spectators came from many different planets. It was also a chance to breathe fresh air.

“They aren’t fights to the death,” she reassured him. “Just House versus House, in a display of strength and prowess. You have to try and stay calm, and I’ll be right beside you.”

Most of all, it would be a chance to be with Mia.

Vek pushed down the aggression churning through him and nodded.

She rewarded him with a brilliant smile. “Good. We’ll have fun. Now...how about I sing for you?”

His chest tightened. He loved when Mia sang.

She started singing, her voice rising and falling. The words didn’t always make sense to him, but really, he just liked the sound of her pretty voice.

Vek shifted her onto the floor beside him, and then lay down to rest his head in her lap. He gripped one of her calves, liking the feel of her skin under his hand. She stroked his hair, and started another song.

One by one, his muscles relaxed, and his breathing evened out. He fell asleep to the sound of her voice. And there were no more nightmares.