



Chapter One

He sprinted down the tunnel, using every bit of his enhanced speed.

At a junction, Acton Vonn stopped. He was in the old, rock-cut tunnels of the abandoned fight rings, deep beneath the city of Kor Magna.

He tilted his head and used his cyborg hearing. *There.* He detected harsh breathing and running footsteps. Breaking into a sprint again, he followed the sound.

He turned a corner and came out in an open area where tiered seating was cut into the rock walls. This training arena had once been used by the Thraxians. The aliens had abducted people from all around the galaxy and forced them to fight to the death in these rings for the amusement of anyone who paid the price for entry.

Thankfully, the House of Galen put a stop to that.

“Acton, the target took another side tunnel. East of your current location.”

The smooth voice of Jaxer Rone—second of the House of Rone—echoed through Acton’s built-in comm system.

“Acknowledged.” Acton turned, pumping his cybernetic arms and using more of his enhanced speed. Soon, he sensed the man—his racing pulse, his labored breathing, his stumbled steps.

Stats flickered up in front of Acton's left eye. With another burst of speed, he darted down the tunnel and spotted his prey.

In a rush of power, Acton pinned the man to the wall.

"Don't kill me!"

The man's robes were dirty and disheveled. Unfortunately, Acton's enhanced senses got a full hit of the man's awful, unwashed smell. "I won't need to kill you if you answer my questions."

At Acton's cold tone, the man whimpered. "P-please."

"I'm a cyborg. I don't feel anything, so pleading is useless."

The man ran his shaking hand across his mouth. "You're a monster."

Acton had heard variations of that before. Half his face was made of metal, both his arms were cybernetic. People preferred to be afraid and see monster instead of man. Since his emotional dampeners kept him from feeling, he didn't care.

"Now, Darga—"

"You know my name." The man trembled.

"We know everything about you." A man who stole and sold anything and everything. "The humans who were taken by the Edull. Tell us what you know of them."

Darga's eyelids flickered. "I-I don't know anything."

Acton put more pressure on the man's neck.

"Nothing!" The terrified man's voice rose. "I know nothing."

Acton kept up the pressure until Darga started to choke.

"Acton," a deep voice said.

He'd already heard the scrape of boots behind him. Jax stepped forward, his red cloak resting down his back. The other cyborg was as tall as Acton, with a muscled body and a dash of silver

along one cheekbone. His bare chest and arms showed off the intricate tattoo on his right arm, which was also a deadly weapon. His cybernetic leg was hidden under his fighting leathers.

Two more shadows appeared out of the gloom of the tunnels. One was larger, with a huge, muscled chest and wide shoulders. Mace. The other cyborg was leaner, a weapon rising up out of the implant on his shoulder, and his blonde hair loose around his face. Toren. They were all part of the House of Rone's elite fighters.

"This man is lying," Acton said coolly.

"I know," Jax replied. "But don't kill him yet."

Darga whimpered again.

Acton thought of Quinn, Jayna, Calla, and Sage. Three women from Earth, and one from the planet Rella. They'd all been abducted by alien slavers and sold to the Edull. Ripped from their lives and locked in cages and labs. The metal-scavenging Edull had kept the women in the desert, imprisoned them, tortured them.

Detailed memories of when he'd rescued Sage moved through his head. When he'd first seen her, she'd been floating in a lab tank, her copper-colored hair like a cloud around her small body. The Edull had been experimenting on her.

His gaze sharpened on the man in front of him. When his cybernetic eye glowed, he saw Darga swallow. From intel the House of Rone had gathered, they knew that this rat worked for the Edull. Those women had been innocent, and the Edull had had no right to prey on them.

Sage was free of the lab now, and she and Acton had become friends. She smiled a lot, but even Acton, with his limited understanding of emotions, wondered if she was really okay.

"The Edull are beyond angry at the House of Rone," Darga burst out angrily. "You tin heads better be ready. They're planning their revenge."

“How?” Acton demanded.

“I don’t know.” An ugly smile crossed his lips, showcasing rotting teeth that had been sharpened to points. “But there’s trouble coming.”

Acton released the man and stepped back. As he stepped away from the wall, Darga rubbed his neck. Acton raised his hands. Then the man’s body rose up into the air, his feet lifting off the ground. Energy throbbed along Acton’s cybernetic arms as he used his abilities. He could manipulate energy to lift and move objects.

Darga kicked his arms and legs. “Let me go!”

“The humans,” Acton said again.

“I don’t *know*. They have some at Bari Batu. That’s all I know.”

The Edull’s hidden city in the desert.

“And where is Bari Batu?” Jax asked.

“I’ve never been there. I don’t know!”

Acton increased his kinetic power and lifted Darga higher. Then the man started to choke.

“Acton,” Jax said in a warning tone.

Acton dropped the man and Darga hit the rock floor. As the rat continued to gasp and wheeze, Acton frowned. “It’s not me causing him to choke.”

The man started convulsing, blood pouring out of his nose.

“*Drak*.” Jax gripped Darga’s head, touching the man’s face. A small implant was visible up one nostril. “An Edull implant.”

“*Drakking* sandsuckers,” Mace muttered.

An implant to ensure the man didn’t share any secrets. Acton eyed the dying man dispassionately. He was no great loss.

Finally, Darga stopped moving, and Acton no longer detected any life signs.

Mace let out an angry growl, and Toren shook his head.

Jax cursed and kicked the wall in a display of emotion. Jax had always felt more than the rest of them, and now that he was mated to Quinn, the man was more prone to smiling, and other emotional responses.

“What?” Acton asked.

“Now I have to tell Quinn that we have no leads.” Jax set his hands on his hips. “I hate upsetting her and the others. They really want to find the other captive humans.”

Jax and Quinn had fallen in love. Although, it all started with their emperor, Magnus Rone. The powerful cyborg had fallen in love with Ever, one of the human survivors from the Fortuna Space Station. Jax had followed after he’d rescued the fierce Quinn from the desert. And now, even Mace shared his quarters with Jayna.

His fellow cyborgs were falling in love all around him, and Acton still didn’t quite understand any of it. Particularly, all these emotions.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jax said.

The cyborgs headed out of the maze of dark tunnels. Acton could tell Jax and Mace were eager to get back to their women, and he shook his head.

He didn’t feel anything. Once, as a boy, he had, but that time was such a vague, distant memory it was almost forgotten.

The Metathim military had altered him, changed him. And now there was no man left to feel.

She was surrounded by smiling, laughing women.

And she’d never felt more alone in her life.

Sage McAlister watched Ever Haynes pick up her baby. The little girl, Asha, giggled, her chubby fingers gripping her mother's dark hair.

Quinn, the former security chief of the *Helios*, was standing nearby, nodding at Jayna. The athletic woman stood straight, wearing fitted, leather trousers and a tank top. Her blonde-brown hair was braided. Jayna was smiling, her dark hair loose, as she ate a dessert from the tray of delicious things on the table. They'd all been made by Calla, their alien friend, who was currently busy in the kitchen, crafting more tasty creations.

Sage felt like an island of quiet—disconnected and remote.

"Sage? Sage?"

She blinked and looked up to find all the women staring at her.

"Sorry." She pasted on a wide smile. "My mind wandered. What did I miss?"

Concern crossed Ever's face, and she hitched her baby higher on her hip. "Are you okay?"

"Fabulous." Sage was free, alive. She *should* be on top of the world. But inside she felt the heavy beat of dark memories. Just thinking of her time with the Edull made her shiver.

You're free, you should be happy and grateful.

It certainly didn't help that they could never return home to Earth. Ever. When the Thraxian slavers had attacked the *Helios* exploration ship, they'd used a transient wormhole to reach Earth's solar system. That wormhole was long gone. Now, for better or worse, the desert world of Carthago was home.

Then, there were her memories of enslavement under the Edull. Her fingers flexed. Horrifying, nightmarish memories. She refused to think of those right now.

After a beat, the women started talking again. Quinn was discussing training with the cyborgs and gladiators who called the House of Rone home. Ever and Jayna were comparing notes about their work in Ever's lab.

They had a good place here, Sage reminded herself. They'd been rescued by the House of Rone, and offered sanctuary. It was more than most would get.

So why did Sage still feel chilled?

She rubbed her cold hands together. She didn't want to tell the other women. They'd all done so much to make her feel welcome here, to feel safe.

There was an echo of noise and deep voices outside in the hall.

Quinn jumped up. "The boys are back."

Sage stifled a brief chuckle. The *boys* were actually a group of lethal cyborgs, the elite of the House of Rone. They were the least boy-like men Sage had ever seen.

The women moved out the door into the hall, and Sage followed. She watched Quinn move straight to Jax, the man's cloak snapping as he wrapped an arm around his woman and hugged her close.

Mace followed suit, engulfing Jayna in his brawny arms. Toren and Acton were standing nearby. Toren nodded, but her gaze snagged on Acton.

His ice-blue eyes lifted to meet hers, and he gave her a small nod. The light in the corridor glinted off the metal on his arms and face. Both his arms were cybernetic, and she knew they housed deadly weapons. Half his face was metal as well, and it kept people from noticing the other side of his face. He was really quite handsome, with a strong jaw and straight nose. His hair was deep brown and cut short. His skin was a gorgeous, golden shade.

But no emotion showed on that attractive face.

So emotionless, so cold, so powerful. She'd spent a fair bit of time with him during her recovery. She found it easy to be with Acton. With him, she didn't have to pretend to be happy all the time.

But she had to remind herself, Acton was a weapon—honed to the most lethal edge.

"How did it go?" Quinn asked.

Jax heaved out a breath, his handsome face troubled. "Badly. The informant didn't know anything, and then the Edull implant he had killed him."

Ever drew in a sharp breath, pulling Asha closer.

Mace scowled. "He did tell us that the Edull are planning to cause trouble for the House of Rone."

The women all gasped.

"Fuckers," Quinn muttered, her face fierce.

The thud of heavy footsteps sounded. They all swiveled as a large figure headed toward them down the corridor.

Imperator Magnus Rone sure made an impact.

Sage took in the man's hard face, big, strong body, and foreboding features. But as his gaze hit his mate and daughter, something crossed his expression, softening it.

This was the cyborg who'd escaped a harsh military cyborg program, and started the House of Rone. Now, the house was known for some of the best gladiators to fight in the Kor Magna Arena, the best weapons, and their skill with cybernetic enhancements.

"We'll keep searching for your fellow humans," Magnus said. "We *will* find Bari Batu, and put a stop to the Edull's slavery."

Sage's throat closed. There were other humans out there. Other crew members from the *Helios* who were trapped, afraid, in pain.

She sensed someone move closer. When she looked up, she saw Acton watching her carefully. She'd been teaching him to read small cues as to how people were feeling. Right now, she wished she was invisible.

"The informant didn't give us any leads," Jax told Magnus. "Except to let us know that the Edull are planning to cause us trouble."

Magnus' face didn't change, but Sage felt a chill go down her spine.

"They can try," Magnus said.

"We'll make them regret it," Mace added.

"Sage," Magnus said. "Avarn tells me that you've been helping in Medical, but that you haven't officially joined the healers."

She felt everyone look at her and her chest tightened. "Yes."

"He was impressed by your skills."

It felt like Magnus' gaze could see right through her skin. Her stomach churned. "Avarn's been great, but I'm not...ready yet."

There were sympathetic nods all around, and Ever touched Sage's arm. "There's no rush. Take your time. You're still recovering and settling in."

Finally, everyone's attention shifted elsewhere, and Sage let out a shaky breath.

As they all started talking, making plans for the next steps on what to do to find Bari Batu, Acton stepped closer to her.

"Sage, you're well?"

That cool, controlled voice made her want to smile. "I'm fine, Acton."

“Ever is correct. There is no need for you to rush into work.”

“I know.” She slid a strand of hair behind her ear. The thing was, she wanted to be productive and useful. She wanted to contribute to her new home. Still, the thought of doing her paramedic work paralyzed her, for some reason. She’d loved being a paramedic aboard the *Helios*, but now...she felt adrift.

She hadn’t been able to help anyone during the attack or while she’d been imprisoned by the Edull. She hadn’t even been able to help herself.

The faintest frown touched Acton’s face. “You are not fine.”

“How can you tell?” she asked.

“Your downcast mouth and eyes. Your tense shoulders.”

She took a deep breath. “You’ve been listening to me.”

When she’d first arrived, they’d agreed to be friends. Over the last few weeks, he’d taught her about the city of Kor Magna, and life on the desert world of Carthago. In return, she’d been teaching him about emotions.

“What’s wrong?” he asked quietly.

She glanced at the others to make sure no one was listening. She kept her voice low. “I don’t know. Sometimes I just want to scream.” She shrugged. “Everything just closes in on me, sometimes. I...”

She *should* be grateful. She *should* be happy. Suddenly, she needed some space.

“I need to go.”

“Sage—”

She shook her head, and before anyone else noticed her, she hurried off down the corridor. She wasn’t sure where she was going, but she needed air.