



Chapter One

She desperately wanted to be anywhere else but here.

Madeline Cochran turned slowly, studying all the party guests around her. They were laughing, sipping drinks, and having a good time. And they were all aliens.

She picked at the plate of food in her hand. She was still adjusting to the different foods and strange flavors on the world of Carthago. Nothing looked even remotely familiar. Her stomach lurched, and she set the plate down.

As she moved, her dress swished around her. Madeline had rarely worn long dresses—she preferred her suits—so the sensation of the soft fabric on her legs, and the air gently brushing the shoulders the dress left bare, heightened the feeling of not belonging.

Here she was, at a post-gladiatorial fight party on a planet thousands of light-years away from home, struggling to accept the fact that she had no way back to Earth.

A passing server held out a tray and she grabbed a tall glass. Her fingers tightened on the drink, which was filled with some blue liquid that tasted a lot like wine. All around her, the room was filled with people who towered over her. Alien gladiators, of all things. Everywhere she turned, she saw muscled, bare chests, leather, and metal. And scattered among the giant men were scantily-dressed women, laughing loudly.

A giant alien with thick, brown skin walked past Madeline. Instantly, memories hammered into her. Her pulse tripped, her heart beating hard in her chest. That alien's color, its skin, reminded her of the Thraxians who'd abducted her from her space station that had been orbiting Jupiter.

She'd been a prisoner, drugged for most of her captivity, and torn from her home. From her son.

Madeline quickly gulped some of her drink. It burned all the way down, and settled uncomfortably in her stomach. She'd been rescued by some other human women from her station who'd survived the attack, and by the big, tough gladiators from the House of Galen.

She turned again, her gaze raking the room and all the different kinds of aliens in it. The sound seemed to get louder, the lights brighter. Suddenly, her chest went tight. She couldn't breathe. She needed to get out of here.

Stumbling through the crowd, she set her glass down blindly and made her way toward the glass door leading to the balcony. Her breathing turned raspy. She shoved her way out into the warm night.

She hurried into the shadows and leaned against the railing. As her hands curled on the stone, she tried to slow her panicked breathing.

She was Madeline Cochran. She did *not* panic.

Down below her lay the now-empty arena, wreathed in darkness. Earlier today, she'd watched the gladiators fighting each other on the sand. It had been a mind-blowing display of power, skill, and brutality. She still wasn't sure how she felt about it.

Her gaze moved upward to the large moon that hung in the sky. Another reminder that she was on an alien planet, far from Earth. She pressed a hand to her churning stomach. Nothing reminded her of home.

Sadness clogged her throat as she thought of Jack. Her son was sixteen years old and on the verge of becoming a man. Her stomach started to churn harder.

Madeline had come from nothing, grown up dirt poor with an alcoholic mother, and she'd been going nowhere, fast. Then, at eighteen, she'd fallen pregnant.

At first, Madeline had thought her life was over, until that baby had been placed in her arms. Jack had been all chubby rolls, with an angry, red face. He'd changed everything. She'd gone from a directionless teenager to a focused woman.

She imagined his face, the strong lines of it hinting at the man he'd become. Tears pricked her eyes, but she fought them back. She'd broken down and sobbed once after her rescue from the Thraxians, but never again. Tears never solved anything, and she hated the show of weakness.

But the thought of never seeing her son again...

No. Madeline straightened her shoulders. One way or another, she'd hear Jack's voice again.

"Hiding?"

The liquid-smooth voice held the hint of a smile. Madeline recognized it instantly. She stiffened, and slowly turned her head.

Lore Uma-Xilene stood just inches away. Like all gladiators, he was tall and strong. A little leaner than the others from the House of Galen, with long, tawny hair that brushed his shoulders, and a distracting bare chest. She tried to calm her nerves, but something about this alien gladiator made her nervous. Madeline didn't do nervous.

Okay, maybe she was just embarrassed that he'd seen her at her worst: drugged out of her mind and weak. He'd been the one to carry her out of the underground fight rings where the Thraxians and their allies, the Srinar, had kept her. She'd clung to him like some crushed damsel.

She'd watched him battle this evening. He was a flashy fighter, who loved to wow the crowd with illusions and tricks. The spectators loved him for it, and women threw themselves at him.

Looking up, her gaze snagged on his long-boned face and silver eyes that gleamed in the darkness.

"Don't you have women to charm?" She'd seen him surrounded by a gaggle of women—arena flutterers the others called them—at the party.

He gave her a slow smile, his teeth white in the darkness. "Yes, I do." His gaze was heavy on her.

Silence hung between them, and Madeline hunched her shoulders. "It's wasted on me."

He rested his elbows on the railing, looking down toward the tiers of empty seats in the arena. "Beautiful woman. Beautiful night. That's not wasted to me."

As he leaned farther forward, she watched the flex of muscles in his strong arms. She couldn't deny that the man had a gorgeous body and was very easy to look at.

Madeline forced herself to glance away. "Look, I'm not the weak, malleable woman you rescued. I'm sorry if you're confused, because I clung to you—"

"Because you needed to be held and comforted after a bad situation."

She huffed out a breath and looked at him again. "I'm not your type, Lore, and you're certainly not mine."

Lore arched a brow. "You looked like you needed a friend. That's why I followed you out here."

He reached out, and Madeline forced herself to stay still. His fingers brushed the shell of her ear, and with a flourish, he held out his hand. He was holding a beautiful, white flower that he'd conjured out of thin air.

The blossom was stunning, giving off a fragrant perfume. She itched to touch it.

Instead, she clenched her fingers in the folds of her dress. “I don’t have friends. I have work.” Or at least, she used to have work. That was all gone now. Her gut cramped. God, she hoped those who hadn’t made it off the space station hadn’t suffered.

She’d been the station commander, and in charge of their well-being. And she’d failed them.

Her thoughts snapped back to her son. *Please be okay, Jack.*

A sharp pain stabbed through her stomach, and she gasped, pressing her hand to the railing to steady herself.

Lore frowned, his silver gaze like a laser on her face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m not your concern. Or your friend.”

She put on her best bitch voice. She’d honed it to perfection during her career in a male-dominated company.

Lore shook his head. “Such sadness in your eyes, Madeline. I know the situation isn’t what you wanted, but real strength is how you cope with the things you didn’t want or plan for.”

His words made the hot press of tears sting her eyes again. No, strength was standing on your own two feet and not breaking. She’d never let herself lean on somebody else.

When you depended on another person, they always let you down.

No, she wouldn’t let herself weaken, even for this tempting man.

So prickly. Lore had been raised by women, among women. He’d been brought up to love them, respect them, and protect them. It didn’t matter their shapes or sizes—or temperament—he found them all fascinating.

He smiled a little to himself. As one of the few males born into a matriarchal family, he’d been spoiled and indulged. He remembered when he’d wanted a pet *dragmata* lizard. He’d pleaded with his mother over and over until she’d finally relented. He’d petted that thorny-skinned, bad-tempered creature until his fingers bled and his arms were covered in bites.

Until it had loved him back.

He'd always loved a challenge. Now, he looked into sad blue eyes. Those eyes tempted him, too. He knew what it was like to be ripped from your life and lose those you loved. He knew what it was to lose everything.

He wanted to tell Madeline that the hole in her heart would never go away, but that time would fill around it with other things...if she let it.

But he knew she wasn't ready yet. She'd only been here two weeks, and before that had suffered for months at the hands of the Thraxians.

Lore had watched her inside at the party. She hadn't eaten much, and was edgy and tense. He knew that wouldn't help with her recovery.

"Any word on Blaine?" she asked. "Or the underground fight rings?"

He saw her desperate need to change the subject, although he wished she'd picked a better one. The thoughts of the underground fight rings run by the Srinar left a bad taste in his mouth. He had tried his best to forget everything about that rotten place, where he and the other gladiators of the House of Galen had rescued Madeline.

Unfortunately, on the same mission, they'd spotted another human from Earth, Blaine Strong, but hadn't been able to rescue him. He was still down there, somewhere, fighting for his life in the vicious fight rings. If he was still alive, that was...

Up here, the gladiatorial fights in the arena were a wild, brutal show for the masses. People came from all over the occupied systems, and paid a lot of money to watch the gladiators fight. Many stayed on to spend more on all the delights offered in the hedonistic District—casinos, brothels, restaurants, and shows.

The gladiators were a strange mix. Some were sold into slavery to the Kor Magna Arena and fought to earn their freedom; some came willingly to hone their fighting skills. Most left as fast as starships could carry them, but some, like him, earned their freedom and made a home here, instead.

However, the arena battles were never fights to the death. Gladiators were big investments for the Houses who fed them, trained them, and healed them. It was a different story in the hidden, underground world in the bowels under the arena. There, in the illegal fight rings, stolen fighters were forced to fight to the death.

“Galen says all known entrances to the fight rings have been closed down. They’ve been blocked off, or filled up. No invites are being issued to spectators, either.”

He saw a muscle tick in the side of Madeline’s face.

Lore continued. “Our contact, Zhim—”

She straightened. “The information merchant.”

“Yes. Anything worth knowing on Carthago, Zhim knows. And he’ll sell it, for a price.”

“You think that the Srinar have closed the fight rings?”

Lore considered lying, and making it easier for her. But something told him that a woman like Madeline Cochran wouldn’t appreciate lies, no matter how pretty they were.

“No. They’ve just gone deeper. The Srinar have gotten more careful and better at hiding. The underground fight rings are too profitable for them to shut down.”

She let out a breath. “So, Blaine is still fighting for his life.”

Lore felt a stab of pity for the man. Fighting to the death just to survive. What would that do to a man’s soul?

“I have to find him.” Fire ignited in Madeline’s eyes, mixed with a healthy dose of stubbornness.

Lore liked seeing it. He’d take anger over the sadness that had been drowning in her eyes before.

He turned his head a little and looked back through the doorway into the party. His fellow gladiators were having a great time. He saw tattoo-covered Raiden with his trademark red cloak, and by his side another woman of Earth, Harper. Her friend Rory was beside her, laughing, her unique, flame-colored hair a riot around her face. Behind Rory, her lover Kace stood tall and alert.

When the women spotted Lore and Madeline, they waved madly, gesturing for them to come inside.

“Your friends are calling you,” he said.

Indecision flitted over Madeline’s face. “They’re not my friends. They weren’t before.”

Lore smiled and offered her his arm. “I think they are now, whether you like it or not.”

She reluctantly put her arm in his and he led her toward the door. Their bodies brushed together and he felt a lick of heat. He wondered why she appealed to him so much, but he

decided to just enjoy it. Feeling mischievous, he purposely brushed against her again, slipping the bloom he'd gotten for her into tiny rope belted around her waist.

She instantly put some space between them. "Back off."

"I seem to have trouble doing that. A minute with you is far more interesting than an hour in that party, especially when I seem to irritate you so easily."

She scowled. "I don't like you."

"Fair enough, but you don't really know me. And I'm not entirely sure I like you, either."

"Are you always this reasonable?" she muttered.

"Mostly."

They took another step and as Lore reached for the door, she hissed and stumbled. She pressed a hand to her stomach.

He frowned. "What is it?"

She straightened. "Nothing. Just something I ate." She pushed past him to head inside.

She'd barely eaten anything. Lore followed more slowly. He loved women, and more than anything, he was a sucker for a damsel in distress.

He watched the sway of Madeline's hips under her white dress as she walked away. Yes, a complete pushover for a sexy, beautiful damsel. Not that Madeline would appreciate the title.