



Chapter One

Her fingers flew across the screen in a dance more complicated than any piano concerto.

Ryan Nagano hunched over her comp. “Come on, baby. Come on.”

It wouldn’t be long before he caught her hacking his system. She *had* to get this done. *Fast*.

She touched the screen again. *There*. Cute pictures of cats from Earth filled the screen. They started multiplying, over and over.

She sat back in her chair, grinning. The premier information merchant on the desert planet of Carthago would be seeing nothing but fluffy kittens on his screens for a while. *Take that, info-boy*.

A second later, a message popped up on the screen.

You desert witch. There were several curses that followed. *I will get revenge*.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ryan muttered. “Yadda, yadda.” She touched the screen again. If she wasn’t careful, he’d double-back on her hack and break into her system. He had some pretty slick skills. She touched the screen one last time. A picture of Zhim cuddling a gray kitten appeared. She laughed and disconnected the link. She’d spent far too much time doctoring that image, but it was so worth it.

Ryan pictured Zhim’s hawkish face as he stared at the image. She laughed again. God, it felt so good to laugh.

The sound died away, and she twisted her hands together in her lap. She looked around the darkened room, at the strangeness of her surroundings. It was suddenly all-too-easy to remember that she was light years away from Earth. One day, she'd been running the computer systems on a scientific space station orbiting Jupiter, and the next, she'd been abducted by demon-like alien slavers called the Thraxians.

She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. *You're safe now, Ryan. You were rescued. You're in the House of Galen. You're in your...office.*

Okay, it wasn't really an office. It was just a corner of the maintenance area in the basement of the gladiatorial house, but it was her space, and she relished it.

After her abduction, she'd been sold to the horrid desert fight arena, Zaabha. Her chest tightened, her breaths coming in sharp pants. When they'd realized her computer skills, they'd put her to work on their computer system. On those screens, she'd seen so much violence and brutality that she couldn't take it anymore. Ryan smiled darkly, thinking of her various sabotage efforts. She'd not been the most...compliant prisoner. As a result, she'd been sold again, to an even worse species, before finally being rescued by the other human survivors and the gladiators who'd taken them in.

Her fellow humans were all she had left. And the gladiators, of course. Strong and powerful men and women, who would do anything to keep the humans safe. Some of the women from Earth had even fallen in love with alien gladiators.

That thought made Ryan smile. Happiness could be found, even far, far away from home. And, Ryan reminded herself, she was safe. She took a few deep breaths, like the healers had taught her. The House of Galen Hermia healers were amazing. A species of tall, slender, genderless aliens who could manipulate biological energy, and who were essentially this planet's

doctors. They'd also given her some gentle, soothing medications, to help her deal with her anxiety. She didn't like taking them, but she had to admit that they did make her feel better.

Most of all, she'd kill for a good night's sleep, with no nightmares, followed by an anxiety-free day.

The only time she felt good was when she was on her comp, messing with an insanely intelligent and arrogant information merchant.

"It's so dark in here," a female voice complained. The lights flicked on.

Ryan blinked at the influx of light. Her new friend, Rory, stood in the doorway, the light illuminating her red hair and pregnant belly.

"Hi, Rory."

"I'm here to spring you." The former space-station engineer strode forward. "Fresh air and sunshine, and watching hot, sweaty male bodies in the training arena, are just the prescription you need."

"I can't leave," Ryan said. "I'm still trying to get through all the data we stole from the Srinar."

Rory looked over at the screen and her mouth twitched. "Really?"

The image of Zhim with the cat was still up. Ryan reached out and tapped the screen, heat burning in her cheeks. The image disappeared, and instead, a glowing, blue ball of knotted data appeared in the center of the screen.

Now, Rory frowned. "What is that?"

"That's the data. It's encrypted in a way I've never seen before. I easily got through the first few layers of data, but then I hit this. It's tangled, and keeps shifting, and I haven't found a way to get into it, yet."

When she'd been sold the last time, she'd ended up in a Srinar hunting ground, out in the desert. She shivered at the thought of the deadly plants and animals she'd been forced to evade. The Srinar were allies of the Thraxians, and just as evil. The plague-ravaged aliens thought nothing of enslaving people, and forcing them to hunt and fight for their fucking pleasure and profit.

Ryan drew in a deep breath.

The House of Galen gladiators had freed her from some gross tree pod. She shivered again. During her rescue, she'd hacked the Srinar's comp system, taking their little hunting games offline, and at the same time, stolen their data. Ryan was now combing through it, trying to find information on any more humans who might be out there.

"I can't leave. I can't go out and have a good time, not when I know Dayna is still out there."

Poor Dayna had been through just as much as Ryan. Snatched from the very walls of the House of Galen, the former police detective was lost somewhere on the planet.

"And we have to track down Neve, as well." The other woman had helped them escape the hunting grounds, but had refused to leave with them, and simply snuck off afterward. Ryan was still perplexed as to why Neve hadn't come with them.

Rory's face softened. "I want to find Dayna and Neve just as much as you do, but you need to rest, Ryan. You've been through a tough time, and you need to recuperate. You need to laugh a little."

Ryan shifted on her chair. Everyone in the House of Galen was painfully aware of her nighttime screams, and she'd had a few panic attacks during the day. "And half-naked, sweaty gladiators will help?"

Rory's lips twitched. "They're a good start." She gripped Ryan's shoulder. "You need to live a little. Find some good things, things just for you, among all the strange and overwhelming stuff."

Well, Ryan had done some laughing at Zhim's expense.

"Have you called home to Earth?" Rory asked.

Ryan nodded. Zhim had created tech that allowed them to use micro-wormholes to contact Earth. The technology was incredible. She'd had a brief, teary call with her parents. "I spoke with my mom and dad."

"What about your sort-of fiancé?" Rory raised a brow.

God, Ryan regretted mentioning Charlie at all. "Not yet. Soon." There was no way back to Earth, so she knew she needed to make their break official.

"In the meantime, you should make a list of all the things you want to try. You need to embrace your new life."

Ryan nodded. Rory was right. She tapped the screen and opened up a list. "That's an excellent idea. I want to hold a sword." Her fingers tapped. "I want to watch every kind of fight in the Kor Magna Arena." Everything on Carthago centered around the ancient Arena. The gladiators fought spectacular fights, and spectators came from all over this corner of the galaxy to watch. "I want to go to one of the casinos in the District." The District was filled with tall, glittering skyscrapers, casinos, and you name the vice, you could find it there. It was Carthago's answer to Las Vegas.

"Good." Rory leaned a hip against the desk. "You have anything to eat down here?"

Ryan shook her head. The woman was always eating.

Rory waved her hand. "What else are you adding to your list?"

“I’m not sure yet.”

The redhead’s eyes gleamed. “What about if you make a second list?”

Ryan frowned. “For what?”

“For things you’d like to try in the future. Things that I bet you’ve never done with your sort-of fiancé.”

Heat made Ryan’s cheeks glow. “A *sex* list?”

“Yep. Trust me. There is nothing like amazing sex with a gorgeous man, and lots of orgasms, to help you feel better.” Rory winked. “I’m talking from experience.”

“I can’t—” Ryan broke off.

She and Charlie had sort-of fallen into their relationship. The sex had been, well, lackluster was the word that came to mind. They’d both had busy jobs, and sex hadn’t been often, and that was before Ryan had left for a stint in space. It had always been a dinner date, followed by sex in the same position at Charlie’s place. He’d even always put the same music on.

A sex list. Just because she wrote a few things down, didn’t mean she had to rush into anything. She saw the gleam in Rory’s eye, and a cheeky sort of excitement filled her.

“Hot sex with a hot alien.” Ryan typed the words.

“There you go.”

“Sex outside.”

Rory let out a laugh. “I like your way of thinking.”

Ryan let her mind go wild, tapping into some of her most secret fantasies.

Spanking.

Role play (maybe the stern professor and naïve college student?)

Sex in a position called the Butter Churner.

She'd read about that in a magazine and had been intrigued. She laughed, half out of embarrassment, and half out of amused freedom.

"Good." Rory gave a nod, her hand rubbing her belly. "Now, it's time for that sunshine and fresh air."

Ryan saved her new lists, storing them securely with the online journals she'd been writing. It was another suggestion from the Hermia healers, for helping her get over her abduction.

The knot of data appeared on the screen and her gut cramped. She felt guilty taking the time to make a stupid sex list when Dayna and Neve were out there, somewhere, suffering and maybe even in pain. "I can't leave. There's more work—"

"No excuses." Rory grabbed her hand and yanked her out of her seat.

Reluctantly, Ryan let Rory lead her out of the systems room, and they moved through the stone corridors of the House of Galen. She loved the cream stone and the ancient feel of the place. While there was amazing tech here, the Kor Magna Arena had this old-world feel to it that made her think of ancient Rome. She looked up at the huge, red-and-gray wall hangings they passed. They all depicted scenes of gladiators fighting in the arena, holding swords, axes, and nets.

They passed several house workers, and then a few gladiator recruits, all wearing leather harnesses and fighting leathers.

Soon, Rory dragged Ryan outside to the training arena. The small oval of sand was ringed by arched corridors.

"Behold." Rory grinned. "This isn't bad compensation for having no way back to Earth."

She had a point. Ryan took in the bare, muscled chests of the gladiators fighting on the sand. They were slicked with sweat, muscles bulging as they swung their weapons.

She heard a sharp clash of swords, followed by some distinctly feminine grunts. Her gaze fell on two women close by, fighting fiercely. Saff was a gorgeous alien gladiator, with dark, glossy skin, and black hair in a mass of braids. She lunged, tossing an egg-shaped device. It flew through the air toward her opponent, exploding outward into a net. The other woman dived, rolling across the sand, and came up on her feet. She swung her twin swords at Saff.

Although she looked every inch the gladiator, Harper was human. A former member of the security team on the Fortuna Space Station, she'd been the first human to be rescued by the House of Galen.

And the first woman from Earth to tumble headfirst in love with an alien gladiator.

Two men came into view, moving swiftly across the sand. One held a sword, while the other carried a metallic staff. Raiden was Harper's man, and with his big body, intricate tattoos covering his skin, and his red cloak flaring behind him, he was an impressive sight. His fight partner, Kace, on the other hand, was tall, with a straight bearing and clean-cut face, set in lines of concentration.

"Go, baby," Rory yelled out.

Kace was Rory's lover, and the father of her unborn child.

A flash of blue captured Ryan's attention. A blue-skinned alien was fighting in the center of the arena. Vek had been rescued from the terrible, underground fight rings. He'd been forced to compete in fights to the death for years.

His muscular body was covered in dark tattoo-like markings and he was fighting with two wicked-looking forks. He let out a roar and launched at his attacker. But as he fought, Ryan could see he was in full control, and there was no sign of the terrible rages he'd suffered after

he'd first been freed. That was largely due to the fact that he'd recently mated with Mia, another human survivor. She'd helped heal and save him.

Ryan exhaled a deep breath. She definitely wasn't on Earth anymore. She held her arms out, enjoying the feel of the sunlight on her skin. Maybe Rory was right. Ryan needed to get out more. She'd been locked in a back room at Zaabha for far too long. Not to mention the beatings, and the days without food.

Her pulse tripping, she forced the ugly memories away. The last thing she needed right now was a panic attack. She looked up at the two hot suns, hanging in the pale-blue sky. The light was brighter here. She gazed at the horizon, and spotted the glittering glass spires of the District, beyond the ancient stone walls of the massive Kor Magna Arena.

"Good morning."

The deep voice made her turn, and the man in charge came into view. Galen's rugged face was dominated by a heavy scar and black eye patch over his left eye. He wore a skintight black shirt that clung to the tight abs beneath, and a black cloak fell down from his shoulders. As always, he cut an imposing figure, and made her want to salute.

"Morning," she replied.

"How's the data coming along?"

Rory threw out an arm. "She's taking a break, G."

"It's okay," Ryan said. "It's slow going. I hit some encryption that's unlike anything I've seen before."

Galen gave a small nod, his single, icy eye narrowing. There was something so aloof about the man, like he held himself separate from everything around him.

Suddenly, a door at the end of the corridor banged open and Ryan jumped.

She turned her head and saw Zhim storming in.

Uh-oh.

The information merchant was dressed all in black, and his black hair was loose today, brushing his shoulders. With his hawkish face, he looked like a space-pirate marauder, striding across the cockpit of his ship.

Galen sighed. “What did you do to rile him this time?”

Ryan crossed her arms over her chest. “He deserved it. He tried to *steal* data from the House of Galen system.”

“Data you originally stole from him, I assume.”

She cleared her throat. “That’s beside the point. Anyway, it was only kitten pictures.”

“Galen, this woman is a menace.” Zhim’s voice was a low drawl. He came to a stop in front of them, his unique nebula eyes sparking as he glared at Ryan. They were a stunning blue-green, sprinkled on black.

Man, the guy had gorgeous eyes. And a long, lean swimmer’s body that she’d noticed once or twice. Ryan stiffened, and forcefully shoved those thoughts away. It didn’t matter what he looked like, because it was a real shame about his personality.

“It was only a few funny pics, info-boy,” Ryan said. “Take a chill pill.”

His brow creased. “Take a what?”

Rory grinned. “She means relax.”

Then, all of a sudden, he did relax. His tense shoulders loosened, and a wide smile turned his face from edgy to handsome. A warning bell rang in Ryan’s head. She didn’t trust that smile.

Zhim lowered his voice, his gaze zeroed in on her. “I warned you that I’d get my revenge.”

Her eyes widened. “What did you do?”

He shrugged.

Damn the man. She spun, and raced off toward her computer.