



## Chapter One

The roar of the crowd was electrifying.

Regan Forrest felt the hairs on her arms rise. She could feel the excitement and energy pumping off the crowd sitting in the stands around her. Some people were chanting, others were shouting out the names of their favorite gladiators, waiting for the fight to begin.

As she scanned the huge, old stone arena, she could almost imagine she was sitting back in the Colosseum in Ancient Rome. But then she blinked, and saw the different alien species sitting on the tiered seats. She heard the roar of engines, as a giant starship shot overhead, taking off from the nearby spaceport.

No, she was nowhere near Earth.

Instead, she'd been abducted by alien slavers and transported to the other side of the galaxy.

The warm cream stone of the Kor Magna Arena might be old and worn through hundreds of years of gladiatorial fights, but around her, people were holding high-tech devices: communicators, binoculars, and who knew what else. Most of the technology wouldn't have looked out of place on the space station where she worked.

*Correction.* Where she *had* worked. She swallowed, her throat tightening. The Fortuna Space Station orbiting Jupiter probably didn't even exist anymore after the Thraxians had attacked it. Regan still couldn't believe that she'd gone from botanist to slave in the blink of an eye.

*You're free now, Regan.* She stared up. Free, but still light years from Earth, with no way to get home. She blinked as bright strobe lights hit her eyes. The arena's lights were coming on, even though the sun hadn't quite set. *Correction.* Suns. She watched the huge dual suns of Kor Magna sinking over the walls of the arena, heading toward the horizon of the desert planet.

Everything closed in on her. The noise thundered in her head, disorienting her. Her heart raced, and she shifted in her seat, trying to find some calm. The Thraxians had kept her locked up in a cell on their ship for so long, that now, sitting here surrounded by thousands of screaming people was too much. She felt a trickle of sweat roll down her spine, and once again, she looked

up at the sky. But the two giant suns just reminded her that she wasn't on Earth and never would be again.

“Are you okay, Regan?”

The voice beside her instantly made the pressure in her head ease. She smiled at her friend Harper and reminded herself that no matter how bad things seemed, she wasn't alone. “Getting there.” She nodded toward the stands. “This is pretty crazy, isn't it?”

Her friend smiled and bumped her shoulder against Regan's. “It's insane. But you'll get used to it.” Harper's eagle-eyed gaze moved back down to the sand-covered floor of the arena, anticipation on her face. “The fights can be brutal, but there is no doubt that they're also amazing.”

Regan managed a nod. Harper was her best friend, and the space marine had also been snatched off the space station. But while Regan was still trying to put on the weight she'd lost in captivity and negotiate this strange new world, Harper looked...great.

With her tall, athletic body and sleek, dark hair, Harper was glowing. She wore dark-leather pants and a leather vest that showed off her toned arms, as well as the gorgeous alien tattoos on her left one.

A symbol that one of the big, tough gladiators who was about to step into the arena had claimed her.

Regan still couldn't quite believe her friend had fallen in love with an alien gladiator, but she couldn't dispute the fact that Harper had found a place here in Kor Magna. She'd found a home, a place in the arena, and love. She wasn't just surviving, she was thriving.

And perhaps Regan could, as well.

She shifted in her seat again. Maybe. Galen, the Emperor of the House of Galen, had taken her in when Harper and his gladiators had rescued her. The intimidating man was in charge of everything to do with his House. He'd given her a room to stay in, and recently, another small space where she'd set up a small lab. She'd been going crazy doing nothing, and unlike Harper, who was trained in security and fighting, Regan couldn't even hold a sword, let alone fight in the arena.

Analyzing some of the fascinating alien substances she'd come across was keeping her sane. Her lab was her own little oasis in the midst of chaos.

For a brief second, she thought of her parents back on Earth. Did they miss her? Were they grieving for her? Pain seared her heart. No, probably not. Her parents had disowned her long before she'd been abducted.

The cries of the crowd rose to deafening levels. Around them, lots of people leaped to their feet, waving their hands in the air.

“Here they come,” Harper said.

They were sitting in the seats assigned to the House of Galen, right up close to the arena floor. Regan had a perfect view as the gladiators entered.

She felt a lick of excitement. She knew exactly who she was waiting to see.

Saff strode in first. The female gladiator had it all—muscled body, glossy dark skin, and black hair pulled back in an abundance of braids. She raised an arm above her head, waving at the crowd. In her other hand, she was holding something small. Regan knew Saff's weapon of choice was a special kind of net, as well as the short sword attached to her belt.

The House of Galen's gladiators all worked in pairs, and Saff's partner followed her in. Kace was about as clean-cut as a gladiator got, with bronze skin and a detailed, leather arm guard over his right shoulder and muscled bicep. He had a handsome, hard-planned face. He nodded to the crowd, his long metal staff held in one strong hand.

Another pair of gladiators stepped out onto the sand. Regan didn't know these two as well, but both were tall. Lore was far leaner, with a long fall of tawny hair, while his partner, Nero, was a huge mountain of a gladiator. Lore turned in a circle and threw something in the air. A small cloud of smoke rose up, before fireworks shot up into the sky.

The crowd cheered and Nero scowled.

Lore was an illusionist, and used his tricks to charm the crowd. He'd told Regan that everything that happened in the arena was just one big show.

Then, the final pair of House of Galen gladiators stepped out of the tunnel and entered the arena. The roar of the crowd exploded.

Beside Regan, Harper let out a sharp whistle. Regan looked at Raiden first. Every tattooed, hard inch of him. He wore simple leather straps across his chest, which were attached to a blood-red cloak that fell down his back. Tattoos in black ink covered his arms and chest. He was an

imposing sight, champion of the arena, and loved by all the spectators. He didn't even glance at the crowd. He was there to fight.

Then Regan saw *him*.

Raiden's partner was a huge warrior called Thorin.

Big, broad shoulders and a hard chest crisscrossed with dark leather. He was all corded muscle, and his rugged face was set off by his shaved head. He smiled for the crowd, lifting a huge axe up in one hand.

He had big hands. Rough hands. She'd studied those hands closely when he'd carried her off the Thraxian slave ship. And she'd studied them a lot over the last few weeks, as she'd settled in at the House of Galen.

Thorin played to the crowd, turning in a slow circle. She took in the back view of him. Dark-brown leather trousers clung to him. The man had a magnificent ass and legs like tree trunks. He was just so masculine, rugged, and a little wild. He fascinated her.

Regan shifted in her seat. After two weeks in the House of Galen, she knew she was safe. She was no longer stuck in a cell, starving, or being beaten. She felt like she was waking up from a nightmare, slowly coming back to life.

Looking at Thorin made something else inside her come back to life, too.

He finished his circle and stopped. That was when she realized he was looking at her.

As their gazes connected, Regan felt a zip of electricity race through her. She lifted a hand in greeting.

He gave her one short nod before he turned to join the other gladiators.

Regan let out a shaky breath. She was a sensible scientist, and she'd been raised by strict parents who were always concerned with what the neighbors thought. Never in her entire life had Regan felt the urge to climb a man's huge, muscled body and wrap her legs around his waist, but she did now. Boy, did she ever.

The voices of the announcers echoed through the arena, and thanks to the language translator device the Thraxians had implanted in her head, she had no trouble understanding their words.

The competitors had entered the arena.

As she saw the opposing gladiators come out of the tunnel on the opposite side of the arena, her muscles locked tight.

Tonight, the House of Galen were fighting their bitter rivals—the House of Thrax.

The same aliens who had abducted Regan and Harper, and however many others from Fortuna. Her hands twisted together. She knew her cousin Rory, an engineer on the space station, was here, somewhere. She'd been a prisoner of the Thraxians but had been moved before she could be rescued.

*We'll find you, Rory. I promise.* Harper had also seen the civilian commander of the space station, Madeline Cochran, get snatched too. But so far, despite the best efforts of the House of Galen gladiators, there had been no sign of the women.

Regan tried to pull a breath into her constricted lungs. Her gaze zeroed in on the gladiators below. Not all the gladiators for the House of Thrax were Thraxians, but a few were. She easily picked them out. They looked like the demons they were. Massive bodies covered in toughened, dark-brown skin, a set of sharp horns that protruded from the top of their heads, and small tusks on either side of their mouths. Even from this distance, she saw the faint glow of orange veins under their skin.

For a second, the arena swam, and Regan was back in her cell. Her stomach turned over, and she thought she might be sick. Then she blinked, and saw Thorin watching her again. As her gaze flicked to the Thraxian gladiators and then back to him, she saw his face harden.

The Thraxians worshipped strength and might above all else, and they saw nothing wrong with being cruel to those beneath them. As a small, puny woman from a backward planet like Earth, they'd seen her as no better than an ant. Completely worthless.

Harper leaned forward. "The fight's about to begin."

A siren sounded deafeningly—the long, mournful wail of a horn.

The House of Thrax gladiators charged forward, roaring battle cries. The House of Galen gladiators spread out a little, their feet shoulder width apart, holding their weapons easily, like natural extensions of their bodies.

Regan watched the gladiators clash together. Raiden, Thorin, and the others hit hard. There were no soft blows, just bone-rattling hit after hit, and soon, she saw gladiators stumbling, and blood splattering on the sand.

She pressed a hand to her tight stomach. She reminded herself that this wasn't a fight to the death. Here in Kor Magna, the gladiator houses spent a small fortune purchasing, training, and

caring for their gladiators. They made a lot of money in the arena and from corporate sponsorship, so losing a gladiator was bad all around.

But that didn't mean there weren't a lot of injuries—bad ones. Harper had told her that the houses also spent a lot of money on medical technology to ensure the gladiators could be patched up after each fight.

She watched as Thorin swung his axe. They'd be fine. All of them. She knew they'd been fighting in the arena for a very long time.

Thorin took down one of the Thraxians. He charged past the throng of fighters, and then spotted a smaller, frightened gladiator. The young man had a long, narrow build and was holding an axe that looked far too heavy for him. He was shaking in terror.

Thorin gripped the man's arm and pushed him toward Raiden. Raiden said something and then pushed the man back behind the House of Galen gladiators. The smaller man fell into the sand, crying.

This was another reason Regan felt so safe at the House of Galen. These big, tough fighters also had the need to protect in their bones. Harper had told her they made it their mission to clandestinely help weaker fighters who ended up in the arena.

Thorin charged a larger, taller gladiator. His axe slammed against the sword of the big fighter, shattering it. She watched, mesmerized, as he plowed through his opponents.

That's when she realized he was targeting only the gladiators who were of the Thraxian species. Her breath hitched. He was taking down each gladiator who was of the species who'd stolen and abused her. She pressed a fist to her chest, feeling her heart knocking against her ribs.

No one had ever fought for her before.

A second Thraxian came in from the side, out of Thorin's line of sight. She leaped to her feet without realizing, and when the crowd cried out, Regan did as well.

The sword had cut into Thorin's shoulder. She gripped the rail. Blood flowed down his chest and bicep.

"It's not bad," a deep voice said from behind her.

That low, gravelly voice made her glance over her shoulder. She hadn't noticed Galen arrive.

The Emperor of the House of Galen was a few years older than his gladiators, but still in fighting shape. He had a hard, muscled body, a scarred face, and an eye patch over one eye. His

remaining eye was a brilliant, icy blue. His dark hair was brushed back off his imposing face, and had a few strands of gray at the temples.

“It takes more than a cut to take Thorin down,” Harper said from beside her.

Regan nodded, but she gripped the railing so tightly her knuckles started to turn white. When she turned back to the fight, she saw that they were right. Thorin continued fighting like he hadn’t been hurt. It didn’t even slow him down.

He threw his axe, and she watched it slam into the large shield of one of his opponents. The shield cracked down the middle. The crowd went wild, and as she saw Thorin scoop up his axe and turn to attack again, she felt the energy of the fight fill her. A part of her was excited. By the cheering crowd, by the primal fighting, by Thorin’s focus and prowess.

She understood why places like the Kor Magna Arena existed. Why fights like this appealed to the crowd and drew spectators from all over the galaxy. For the duration of the fight, everyone in the stands could be connected to the wild, primal part of their nature. As a scientist, she knew it existed. The fight spoke to the parts of a person that had been honed in the past. The fight-or-flight instinct every creature had.

For the duration of the fight, every person could forget about the mundane and stressful parts of their lives, and just focus on the raw battle of survival.

With a final clash of metal on metal, the fight was over.

As the announcers cried out the name of the House of Galen, the crowd was on its feet, cheering. Regan watched as medical teams rushed forward to collect the injured and writhing Thraxian gladiators from the sand.

Harper leaned forward. “Maybe Thorin’s injury was worse than we thought.”

Regan saw Thorin was bleeding badly. His entire chest was covered with blood. Worried, she jumped up. “We need to help him.”

Harper shot her a look. “Galen’s got an entire medical team—”

But Regan was already hurrying to get to the entrance to the tunnels to meet the winning gladiators.

She’d been playing around with the fantastic med gel the Medical team used, trying to enhance its properties. It could help Thorin.



And, for some reason, she wouldn't believe Thorin was all right until she saw it with her own eyes.