



## Chapter One

Her bare feet were quiet on the stone floor.

Ever Haynes walked down the darkened corridor, surprised to find the stone was warm. When you thought of gladiatorial houses in the bowels of an alien arena, you didn't expect underfloor heating.

She pushed her dark hair back from her face. It was getting late and she should be asleep. Strangely, the reason she couldn't sleep was because her bed was too soft. She fought back a bitter laugh. For months, she'd dreamed of having a soft bed instead of a hard, cold floor in a cell. Now she had one, and she couldn't sleep.

Memories crashed over her, and even as her pulse sped up, she let them come in. She stopped, breathing deeply. Broken images of the alien attack on the Fortuna Space Station, where she'd worked as a scientist, her abduction by horrifying aliens, the fear, the pain, the fighting, having no idea if her sister was still alive.

Ever blew out a shaky breath. She'd been through so much over the last few months, culminating in being dragged across the galaxy by Thraxian slavers and sold to a wild desert arena. She'd been forced to fight for the sick pleasure of bloodthirsty spectators...until she'd been rescued.

Her throat tightened, one of her hands curling into a fist, and she struggled not to fight against the memories. She knew blocking them or ignoring them would only make things worse. She had to confront what happened and find a way to move on. Ever itched for her notebook and pen. She was a scientist at heart and jotted everything down in her notebooks. Hell, it had started long before that...as a young girl pouring out her broken heart in her diary.

She pulled in a deep, steadying breath. She was alive. Her sister, Neve, was alive, and that was what mattered.

Ever felt a soft kick in her belly and she smiled, the now-familiar mix of shock, wonder, and nerves filling her chest. She rubbed her palm over the small mound of her stomach. This was one other thing that had definitely changed. She was now pregnant with a half-alien baby. A sense of love unfurled. Oh, she still felt the trickle of *holy shit* panic, but this baby was *hers*, no matter what happened in the future.

Ever had always wanted children. Her own happy family had imploded when her parents died, leaving her and Neve in the hands of their bitter, old aunt, and Ever had vowed that she'd one day fall in love. One day, she'd look at a man the same way her mother had looked at her father. One day, she'd be surrounded by beautiful babies.

Okay, so she'd thought it would happen after love and marriage, and without the alien bit, but dammit, she was going to rock the hell out of being a mommy to her peanut.

She heard a door slam nearby, followed by the sound of deep voices echoing off the stone walls. She looked up at the stunning blue wall hangings lining the corridor. They all depicted gladiators fighting in a huge arena made of cream stone. House of Rone gladiators, fighting in the Kor Magna Arena. She hadn't seen these particular ones before. She'd only been here for three days and was still busy learning her way around.

Following the sound of the voices, she paused, taking in several muscled gladiators wearing simple leather harnesses across bare chests, and leather trousers. There was one tall female as well, also dressed in fighting leathers. They'd just entered through the large double doors, the four of them carrying a twisting, screaming man between them.

Ever gasped. The man was covered in blood and had numerous terrible wounds on his arms and chest.

Then another big man stepped into the corridor and blocked her view. "Take him to Medical. Now."

That deep voice whispered through her. So cool, so emotionless. A shiver worked up her spine.

She lifted her gaze and saw the man staring at her, even though she was hidden in the shadows.

Magnus Rone. Imperator of the House of Rone.

Well over six feet tall, with wide shoulders, and one arm made entirely of silver-gray metal. It wasn't bulky, but sleek and fascinating. Especially to Ever, who specialized in research projects for military armor and enhancements.

When he was in the House of Rone, he went bare-chested with only a simple leather harness. Outside, he tended to cover up more. Not that she thought he was hiding his enhancements, it was more to keep a lower profile until he was ready to show exactly what he was.

Her gaze shifted to his face. Rugged features, just shy of handsome, dark hair he kept clipped short, and a silver metal implant that circled his left eye. She saw that eye flash now, a neon-blue glow through the shadows.

Magnus Rone was a cyborg.

“On our way,” one of the gladiators called out.

She watched the way the gladiators deferred to him. She knew he ruled his house in a tough, but fair, manner. He kept staring at her, his face not showing a flicker of emotion. Her hand dropped to her belly again.

He was also the father of her child.

It was mind-bogglingly strange that she went from a practical, Army-trained scientist to victim of alien slavers, and then in the blink of an eye, she was now pregnant with a cyborg’s baby and living on a far-flung desert world.

As the gladiators and the injured man disappeared down the hall, Magnus strode toward her. “You should be sleeping.” His voice was cold, almost hard.

It hadn’t been, that long-ago night in the darkness of a cell.

Ever cleared her throat. “I couldn’t sleep. The bed is too soft.” And there was something else that she wasn’t going to admit to Magnus. Pregnancy was playing havoc with her hormones. She shifted, her thighs rubbing together, and her gaze dropped to Magnus’s unaltered hand. It was big, wide, and long-fingered. Fully capable of holding a sword...or stroking a woman.

*Jeez, Ever. Cool it.* She switched to look at his cybernetic hand and its silver-gray skin. She knew it would feel cooler against her...

Okay, the pregnancy hormones were seriously a pain in her ass, and a few other places.

She was well aware that Magnus didn’t remember that night in the desert. He didn’t remember their connection in the darkness, didn’t remember touching her. Her stomach jittered with something she was loath to call disappointment. He’d been captured in the desert and his cyborg systems had been damaged. The side effect was a loss of memory afterward.

But she remembered. Every hot moment of it. Desire flooded through her, stronger than anything she'd ever felt before. *Damn pregnancy.*

The unfortunate fact was that since she'd come to the House of Rone, he'd been cool toward her. There was no sign of interest in his eyes, no indication he felt anything for her. He'd vowed to protect her and the baby, but other than that, nothing.

Her belly clenched.

"Who was the injured man?" she asked.

A faint narrowing of Magnus' eyes. "Someone who now has the protection of the House of Rone."

"So, someone you rescued?" Like he'd rescued her. And from her daily wandering around the House of Rone, like he'd rescued and helped most of the people who lived and worked here.

Magnus stepped closer, or rather flowed. He moved so silently, like liquid. He touched his cybernetic fingers to the implant at her temple.

God, she could smell him. Somehow, he smelled like a rainstorm. Everything inside her yearned for him, and pain cut through her. To him, she was a stranger. "My implant is fine. You checked it earlier, remember?"

He nodded. "But it is malfunctioning and I won't risk your life. My healers tell me they should soon have the procedure ready to remove it."

She licked her lips. "It won't hurt the baby?"

His gaze dropped to her stomach. His face didn't show a flicker of any emotion about the mention of his child. "I will ensure you and the child are protected."

"Magnus?" a voice called from down the hall.

Magnus took a step back, then paused to look at her again, hesitating. "I have to go."

She nodded, tucking an unruly curl behind her ear. Magnus didn't move.

"Magnus," the voice said again, edged with impatience. It was Jaxer, Magnus' second-in-command. "Draynor is here for the business meeting."

"On my way." Magnus gave her a nod. "Get some sleep." He swiveled and strode silently down the corridor with a powerful stride she never failed to notice.

She watched him follow Jaxer's tall form through another set of double doors, into a space she knew doubled as a meeting room. Ever stayed where she was, telling herself to turn and head back to the well-appointed room she'd been given when she'd first arrived at the House of Rone.

Right, and toss and turn in her sheets. Or stroke herself because this damn horniness wouldn't go away.

Instead of heading for her room, she followed Magnus. Damn, she was so weak. But she was irrevocably linked to the man and she was desperate to know more about him.

Because the first moment she'd seen him in that desert cell, she'd *known*. Something inside her had known this man was hers.

Now, for her and her baby, she had to know if the emotions he'd shown her in the desert were real. To know if he *could* really feel.

"Ahh, Emperor Rone," a low voice drawled. "It is a pleasure to see you. I've been looking forward to concluding our deal."

Ever paused in the doorway. She had a clear view of Magnus in profile, as well as the man he was talking to. They stood in front of several large crates. The man was dwarfed by Magnus. He had a long, slim form, and was only wearing leather trousers. His sunken chest, covered in gray skin, was bare. He had large eyes, no nose, and a wide mouth. He reminded her a little of the

gray aliens people on Earth claimed abducted them. She made a mental note to find out if those abductions were actually real.

“Let’s get down to business,” Magnus said, his voice clipped.

The alien cocked his head. “I want a discount.”

“No.”

The man opened his arms, displaying three-fingered hands, a wide smile on his face. “I’m one of your best customers, Rone.”

“And you get a good deal, Draynor.”

Magnus’ voice made Ever shiver.

Draynor’s smile slipped. “I’m outfitting four new desert mining camps. I deserve a better price.”

“You got a good deal,” Magnus repeated. “You won’t find better quality anywhere else.”

Draynor scowled now. Ever was thinking the guy was an idiot for not heeding the warning in the sharp edge of Magnus’ voice.

Suddenly, Magnus turned his head and looked her way. She saw a slight tightening around his eyes, which she’d already learned over the last three days meant he wasn’t happy.

Ah, well, she was already busted. No point in hiding. She entered, walking over to him.

The customer’s eyes widened. “A human woman.” His wide eyes narrowed, skimming her body. “There’s been a lot of fuss of late over these humans.” His tone said that he was unimpressed.

She inclined her head. “Sorry to interrupt.” Okay, not really.

Magnus stepped closer to her.

“Powerful people are at war because of you,” Draynor said. “And your kind.”

Ever shot the man a tight smile. “Because we refuse to roll over and be slaves.”

The man shrugged. “Slavery is a fact of life.”

She took a step forward. “Only for assholes.”

All of a sudden, Draynor moved. His hand shot out, wrapping around her neck. Magnus went stiff and was already moving.

But Ever had been protecting herself for a very long time. The Army had trained her well. She moved fast, gripping Draynor’s arm. She shifted her weight, tugged him closer, and then flipped him over her shoulder. He landed flat on his back with an *oof*.

“Like I said. Assholes.” She leaned down. “People from Earth will never lie down and let other species run over us, or others. Nor will the people helping us. None of us get off on taking advantage of others.”

A flash of silver shot past her. Magnus grabbed Draynor by the neck and yanked him up into the air. He held the man several inches off the floor.

Draynor’s face turned green. “Magnus, I—”

“Touched a woman under the protection of the House of Rone. Under my personal protection.” Magnus slammed his fist into the man’s face. “A woman who is carrying a child.”

“Ow!” Blood ran down Draynor’s chin.

“Get out. You have no more business with the House of Rone.” Magnus dropped him.

The alien man scrambled across the floor. “No! I need the weapons. Your House makes the best.”

Two cyborg guards appeared. They were big, muscled, faces set like stone. Part of Magnus’ elite guard. One had two silver, cybernetic arms, and the other was wearing black clothes, hiding whatever enhancements he might have. Half of his face was entirely silver, his eye glowing

green. Without batting an eye, the two men scooped a protesting Draynor off the floor and carried him out.

The House of Rone had quite a few cyborgs. During her explorations, she'd seen both men and women with enhancements and biomechanical limbs. Magnus also had a team of big, well-trained gladiators who had no enhancements. Cyborgs were banned from the Kor Magna Arena, so the House of Rone gladiators weren't enhanced.

"You should not have come in here," Magnus said.

Ouch, his voice was as cold as ice. "I know. I'm sorry—"

All of a sudden, a wave of dizziness hit her. *Not now*. The room spun in front of her.

"Ever?" His face loomed in front of her, his expression intense.

"I..." She felt a wash of prickly heat on her skin and pressed a hand to her mouth. She was going to be sick.

Frantically, she glanced around. She needed somewhere to toss up everything in her stomach without losing the last shred of her dignity. She made a choked sound.

Magnus' arms wrapped around her and he lifted her off her feet. Seconds later, he rushed her into an adjoining room. A bathroom, thank God.

As soon as her feet touched the tiles, she hurried toward the rectangular toilet, leaned over, and emptied her belly.

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Magnus kept one arm around Ever as she was violently sick.

He felt a very unfamiliar sense of helplessness and frowned. He was a man who liked solving problems and Ever's nausea wasn't something he could fix. It was even worse that he was the cause of it.

When she was finished, she sagged against him, exhausted. He held her tightly, wanting to make her feel better. His frown deepened. Wanting to make someone feel better had never been a priority for him.

The feel of her was...familiar.

She'd mentioned how they'd met in the desert. His jaw tightened. He'd been ambushed by a former client while he was delivering weapons. He didn't remember much of the attack or his imprisonment, just a few flashes. The so-called client had sold him out to drakking desert slavers.

Slavers working for the Thraxians, no less. They'd been moving Ever out to the Zaabha desert arena.

His gaze drifted down her body and snagged on the rounded mound of her belly. A child rested there. *His* child.

Everything in Magnus stilled as he tried to process that thought.

He had been created in a lab and bred in an unforgiving military program. He'd been told that he could never procreate. Yet, somehow, he and this woman from Earth had made a child. It was an idea to which he was still adjusting. His healers still didn't have any answers for him.

What he hadn't told them was that somehow, Ever Haynes made his emotional dampeners short circuit. Usually, he could easily block out emotion. It was what had made him the perfect soldier and assassin in the Oronix Military.

He realized that she was watching his face. She watched his face a lot, making him feel like some experiment she was keeping an eye on. He shifted, and his advanced systems detected a spike in her pulse rate.

“Sorry about that.” She shot him a weak smile. “Bet you don’t have too many women vomiting all over you.”

“Feel better?” he asked.

She nodded. “Thirsty.” He lifted her, carrying her out of the bathroom and back into the main hall. He set her on one of the couches lining the wall. “Stay here.”

He moved quickly to the adjoining kitchens, ignoring the shocked looks from his night staff. Magnus took his meals in his room at set times. Food was sustenance for him, nothing else.

“Imperator.” A chef bowed low. “What can we do for you?”

“I need a drink.” What would be best for her? “Something tart and refreshing.”

The chef blinked. “Oh. Would you like some *govran* juice?”

“It isn’t for me.” He accessed the records on his system. *Govran* juice was slightly aerated, considered refreshing, and a good source of nutrients. “*Govran* juice should suffice.”

When he returned to the hall, Ever was still sitting on the couch, her legs tucked up beneath her. He handed her the juice and she took it quickly. She tipped her head back and gulped it down. Magnus watched her throat work as she drank. Her consumption was so urgent, her need clearly overwhelming her.

Something rose in him, hot and hard. He felt it in his cock, where he usually felt little, unless he wanted to. But he recognized desire.

He tried to strengthen his emotional dampeners. All his life, he’d been programmed and trained to suppress his emotions and do his job. Normally, he had no problem utilizing his systems to keep his emotions at a minimal level. He was more effective and efficient that way. It was far easier to save lives and run a gladiatorial house on a dangerous planet without emotions interfering. He’d never had any problem controlling them in the past.

But for some reason, being with this woman cut through his dampeners like an electroblade through metal.

Suddenly, a flash of images flickered in his head. He remembered her drinking water in the darkness of a cell, hungry to relieve her intense thirst.

“Magnus?” She lowered the glass, her perceptive green gaze on him.

“I remembered you drinking. In the desert.”

She blinked, shifting to face him. “Oh. Do you remember anything else?”

He tried, attempting to hold onto the image, but it slipped away. He shook his head.

Disappointment crossed her face.

“You shouldn’t have entered the main hall. Many of my clients are not people I want you around.”

She tilted her head. “So they aren’t the nicest people, yet you sell weapons to them anyway?”

“They employ hard-working people who need protection. Draynor has several mines, and the desert is a dangerous place.”

She nodded. “I’m sorry. I was just looking around and I was curious.” She smiled. “Not that Draynor will be bothering me again.”

Magnus felt another strange flash of emotion. Amusement? “You should rest.”

She wrinkled her nose.

“You’re tired. The baby needs rest too.”

“I’d...I’d like to keep talking. I want to get to know you, Magnus.”

Her quiet voice moved through him, leaving sensations that pricked at him like desert fire ants. He strengthened his dampeners. He could not let this woman close.

In his logical mind, he ticked off all his reasons. She affected him in ways he didn't like. He'd already taken advantage of her and made her situation harder. He knew nothing about relationships. She needed things he wasn't capable of giving her.

"That is unnecessary." He pulled her to her feet and ushered her out of the hall.

But he saw a flash of pain on her face, then her face went blank. She pulled away from his hold. "I know the way to my room. Good night, Magnus."

He took two involuntary steps toward her, before he forced himself to stay still and watch her walk away. Magnus always took the best, most efficient course of action. But for the first time, it felt very wrong.