



## Chapter One

She pushed for more speed.

Dayna Caplan's feet slapped on the fancy alien version of a treadmill. Her lungs were burning as she ran, her arms pumping, and sweat sheened her face. She touched the controls, unable to read most of the strange alien text, but the treadmill incline rose another degree and the speed increased.

*Perfect.* She ran harder, pushing herself to the limit. She loved feeling her muscles warm and limber. Most of all, she liked being free.

No more cells. No more screams. No more fights to the death. No more pain.

She kept running, sweat pouring into her eyes. When her legs threatened to give out, she finally touched the button to end the program. When she stepped off, her legs rubbery, she pulled in some deep breaths. Her gaze moved to the floor-to-ceiling windows that ringed the gym, located on the uppermost level of the Dark Nebula Casino.

A hell of a view. The city spread out as far as she could see, until it met the desert in the distance. Two large suns sat high in the sky, like large orange balloons.

Not New York. Her throat tightened. Not even her planet. This was Kor Magna. An alien city on the wild desert planet of Carthago, half a galaxy away from Earth. Her gaze fell on the

circular stone shape of the Kor Magna Arena—home to the gladiatorial houses and the fights that the city was famous for.

Her hands clenched into painful balls. She'd been abducted by Thraxian slavers, and subjected to captivity on this lawless desert planet on the galaxy's outer rim. Two other women were still trapped at the vicious desert arena of Zaabha—Ever and Sam. Dayna didn't know them, but she knew exactly what they were suffering.

With a bad taste filling her throat, she strode across the high-tech gym. She grabbed the ropes on a machine and started bicep curls. The machine calibrated to her strength automatically, increasing the resistance.

She wasn't at Zaabha anymore. Her captivity at the desert arena had ended when she'd been sold to a desert witch who'd thrived on pain. Still lifting, Dayna looked down at her leggings and fitted top. She couldn't see through the black fabric, but she knew what she'd find. She swallowed. She'd been at the Dark Nebula for two weeks, and she'd spent it working her butt off to get her strength and health back.

Because she couldn't help free Sam and Ever if she was weak.

Releasing the ropes, she gripped the hem of her workout shirt and lifted it up. Her belly looked as it always had—not flat, but toned from her regular workouts. But as she lifted the fabric higher, the horrible taste in her throat increased. There, resting in the center of her chest, just below her breasts, she saw what looked like an amber stone embedded in her skin.

She closed her eyes and her stomach rolled. She stared the truth in the face. An alien symbiont was living inside her.

Dayna sucked in some deep breaths. As a New York City police detective, she'd been known for being level-headed, okay, and sometimes hard-headed, but she was always a problem solver. She *would* find a way to deal with this.

Dropping her shirt, she faced the windows again. She pressed a hand to the glass, looking past the city of Kor Magna and to the desert beyond.

There was no way home. No way back to Earth. And there was no way to remove the *thing* living inside her.

Pain sliced at her. Pain for the familiar home she'd known, for her grief-stricken father who'd lost the last member of his family.

The stone flashed through her shirt, as if the creature inside her was responding to her emotions.

Gritting her teeth, Dayna forced herself to relax. *Calm down. Focus on the facts.* Even if there were a ship fast enough, she and the other people who'd been abducted from a space station orbiting Jupiter couldn't leave Carthago. Earth was too far away and the wormhole the Thraxians had used was gone. There was no way home, and even if a wormhole appeared tomorrow, there was no going home for her. She gingerly touched the stone under her shirt and knew that she would never be the same again. Forever, she'd be linked to a creature about the size of her hand nestled in her chest.

Panic skittered up her spine and she ruthlessly shoved it away. She'd felt this same drowning helplessness once before...when her sister had been kidnapped as a child.

*No.* She straightened. She wasn't a whiner or a quitter. They hadn't called her Bulldog Caplan at the precinct because she sat around wallowing. Dayna Katherine Caplan was made of stronger stuff.

She started some lunges, working out until her thighs burned. She was back to her pre-abduction weight and she was even stronger than she had been before. It was time. She couldn't just sit around working out, lazing in the giant tub in the bathroom off the gorgeous bedroom she'd been given, or even wandering the casino, as had become her habit since she'd been able to get out of bed.

She needed to help find Zaabha. She *needed* to help rescue Sam and Ever.

Taking a moment to blot her face with a towel, she then retied her hair, pulling the thick brown mass back in a ponytail. Then she headed out of the gym, purpose riding her.

As she walked down the corridor, her workout shoes squeaking on the polished floor, she heard his voice.

Her steps slowed and she let the deep, masculine drawl wash over her.

The man had a hell of a voice. It was one that made a woman think of dark nights, silken sheets, and decadent pleasure.

She snorted to herself. *Get a grip, Caplan.* The man was clearly on a business call, and the last thing she needed was to be thinking anything sexual about the man who'd given her sanctuary.

The glossy double doors at the end of the hall were open and she paused in the doorway.

Okay, she took back her last thought. Any woman, from any planet, couldn't look at Rillian—owner of the most profitable casino in Kor Magna, and who knew what else—and not think of sex.

He was standing at the windows, his back to her, and his long, lean form silhouetted by the light. Dark trousers made of a fine fabric encased narrow hips and long legs. His jacket was

tossed over a chair by his huge desk and his snowy white shirt contrasted against bronze skin.

Black, silky hair fell to his shoulders.

She hadn't made a sound, but he sensed her and turned. God, that face. Too dangerous for a movie star, too sexy for even a fallen angel. The top few buttons of his white shirt were undone, baring his throat and a triangle of delectable skin. He wore some sort of earpiece in his right ear.

"I want you to put pressure on the investors of the Dark Oasis Project to make their commitments. I've given them plenty of time to think about it. I want to break ground on this development next week." He paused, waving Dayna inside. "Yes, next week, Londo. Make it happen."

As she moved across his palatial office, she tried to ignore the way his silver gaze stayed on her. After two weeks of living with him, she was well aware that Rillian didn't miss a thing.

Since her rescue from the desert witch who'd shoved the symbiont in Dayna, Mr. Wealthy-and-Mysterious had become her guardian. Or perhaps prison warden was a better description.

"Hi." Damn, she wished she'd showered and changed before coming to see him. She felt like she'd dragged herself out of a gutter while he was all polished and tailored.

"Good afternoon." He walked over to a long built-in cabinet. His body blocked her view, but when he turned back to her, he held out an icy glass of water. "Drink."

Damn man was always feeding her or getting her to drink something. She took the glass with a roll of her eyes.

"You've been in the gym again." His gaze swept over her workout gear.

His eyes were a strange mix of silver and black, and were constantly changing. Sometimes they were all silver, sometimes black with sparks of silver in them like lightning, and always fascinating.

“Not overdoing it, I hope.”

“No, mom. I’m following all the healer’s orders.” She drank some of the cool water, then set the glass on his desk. “I’m feeling really good, Rillian. I…” She straightened. “I’m going crazy.”

He cocked his head. “You’re bored? I’ve provided you with everything I thought you might need. A well-appointed room, adjoining gym, entertainment screens, full run of the casino—”

“I’m not saying my room isn’t the most opulent, gorgeous room I’ve ever stayed in.” She shoved her hair back over her shoulder. “But I can’t laze around when I know Ever and Sam are out there. Suffering.”

Rillian slid his hands into his pockets. “The House of Galen is doing everything they can to find the women.”

She knew that the gladiators who’d taken in the rest of the human survivors were working hard and were just as worried as she was. She’d spoken a few times with some of the other women, mostly her closest friends, Mia and Winter. Or rather, the pair constantly called her, demanding to know how she was doing.

“I know the gladiators and the other women from Earth are doing everything possible,” Dayna said. “But… I have to do something. I *need* to do something.”

“You need to recover—”

She threw her arms out. “I’m recovered.”

That silver gaze ran over her again and Dayna felt it, like a visceral punch to her belly. She forced herself to stay still. She needed sexual attraction in her chaotic life right now as much as she needed a hole in the head.

“And your symbiont?” he asked silkily. “How are you doing with that?”

Her jaw locked and her chest tightened. “Fine.”

“You haven’t fed it yet.”

“I’m not a *parasite*,” she hissed.

He sighed. “Until you come to terms with—”

She spun away. “I read the information you gave me on the symbiont, about it requiring biological energy, but I don’t want to talk about it. Right now, Ever and Sam are what matter. I need to help them.”

Silence stretched in the room. God, how could she make him see how important this was to her without showing him all her weaknesses? The man was all cool, suave control, and he’d already seen her at her worst so many times. Wasn’t she allowed to keep a scrap of her pride?

“I’ll have Tannon provide you with all the data we have on the search for Zaabha.”

At Rillian’s words, she spun, her shoulders relaxing. “Thank you.” She cleared her throat. “You probably already know this, but your head of security doesn’t like me.”

Rillian smiled. “I pay Tannon very well to be paranoid and suspicious.”

She pulled a face. “Well, he’s good at it. I mean it, thank you for helping me do this.”

That gaze was on her again, like he could see right into her. She felt a tug in her belly and squelched it. Okay, tried to squelch it. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had sex and Rillian was just far too potent to ignore.

“You’re welcome, Dayna. Anything you need, I’ll get it for you.”

Instantly, the image of Rillian’s long-fingered hands moving over her heated skin popped into her head. *Dammit*.

He stepped in front of her, his scent hitting her. Something dark and spicy.

“I’ll let you know when Tannon’s put together the data.”



She nodded. Dayna wasn't too proud to admit that she needed to escape Rillian's presence and regroup. "Thanks again." She headed for the door.

"Dayna, one more thing."

She looked back over her shoulder.

"You can't ignore your symbiont. When you're ready, I'm here to help." Silver flashed in his eyes. "But I won't let you ignore it forever."

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After several business meetings, followed by a multitude of calls, Rillian finally went in search of Dayna. The suns were setting, sending a purple haze over Kor Magna.

In a few more hours, the Dark Nebula would be bursting at the seams—his restaurants full, his clubs pumping, and his gaming tables packed.

For Rillian, success at all costs wasn't just a desire, it was a primal need. When you came from nothing, worse than nothing, then all you dreamed about was holding the world in your palm.

He entered the gym, only to find it empty. But he spotted a towel, water bottle, and sweater left on a bench. Even from across the room, he scented Dayna on the fabric.

The penthouse floor of the Dark Nebula Casino was his own private domain—his office, bedroom, and gym. He'd never shared it with anyone before and had always hated people in his private space. Tannon, his head of security, had nearly had a fit when Rillian had brought Dayna to the Dark Nebula. He'd called her and her new symbiont a risk.

Rillian picked up her sweater and pulled in a deep breath. Funny that he liked seeing Dayna's things around, or hearing her walk past his door, sensing the strong pulse of her energy in the air.

The whine of a laser weapon made him raise his head. His gaze moved to the adjoining doorway and he smiled.

Of course she'd be in his weapons room.

When he entered the windowless space, the scent of metal and smoke met his enhanced senses. The walls were lined with all kinds of weapons—from swords and staffs like those used by the gladiators in the arena to his collection of projectile and laser weapons.

Dayna stood in the center of the space, a laser pistol held with both hands, firing at an electronic target at the far end of the room. The program was a challenging one. The target moved and shifted, lights strobing to confuse her.

Her feet were apart, her body relaxed, her gaze narrowed with concentration. She twisted a little each time she fired, easy and controlled. He could easily see her training. He was well aware of her past job as a law enforcement officer on Earth. Rillian usually avoided law enforcement—a deep-seated habit from his childhood. But law enforcement on Carthago was rather ineffectual. On this wild desert world, people made their own rules. Besides, his wealth and power now meant they bowed to his every whim. He was a law unto himself.

Just how he liked it.

He continued to watch Dayna. She commanded attention. She was tall for a woman from Earth, and held herself in a way that said she was comfortable in her body and had full confidence in her abilities.

Yes, this human woman was...compelling. Long legs and thick, brown hair, with light brown eyes circled by a darker rim. A strong face and an even stronger will.

In his time, Rillian had seen physically stronger people than Dayna buckle under the burden of hosting a symbiont. She'd arrived here, half-dead and feverish. Her skin had been sallow and her hair lank. She'd lost weight during her captivity and ordeal with the desert witch.

But within days of coming to the Dark Nebula Casino, she'd pushed herself. She'd eaten, regained her strength, and gotten herself into his gym. She worked out every day, pushing herself to exhaustion. When she wasn't in the gym, she was in his casino, talking to people and familiarizing herself with life on Carthago.

What she wouldn't do was feed.

That was a challenge Dayna would have to face before too long.

Finally, the program finished and Dayna lowered her weapon.

"You only missed one target," Rillian said. "Impressive."

Her head whipped around. "I'll get it next time."

He strode closer, nodding at the weapon in her hand. "The EX-1020 is too large for you."

She shrugged a shoulder. "I'm trying them all. They're not mine anyway." She set the weapon back onto the rack. "I kind of miss my Glock." She sighed. "And the cops I used to work with. A few of us used to meet weekly at the firing range."

Rillian leaned against the wall. "Yet you'd left your law enforcement job." He knew she'd been on a transport headed to join the security team at Fortuna Space Station when she'd been abducted.

Her mouth tightened. "I needed a change."

He detected a story, but he didn't push her. Right now, he felt the need to put a smile on her face, not a frown. "Come with me."

She shot him a suspicious look.

“I promise I don’t have anything nefarious planned. I had Tannon copy all the data on the search for Zaabha. I have it ready for you.”

Her eyes lit. “Excellent. I want to see the map that Neve and Corsair recovered from the desert witch.”

Neve Haynes, another Earth woman, and her lover, the caravan master Corsair, had rescued Dayna from the witch on a hunt for a map to Zaabha. Neve was determined to find the desert arena because Ever Haynes was her sister.

When he strode into his office, Dayna was right behind him. He waved her toward an adjoining door. “I had Tannon set you up in the conference room off my office.”

“Bet he loved that.”

She stepped inside and pulled up short. A brand-new comp rested on the table, along with several files. The windows in this room weren’t floor-to-ceiling, but the long bank of glass still afforded a good view of the city. Rillian liked looking out on Kor Magna from high above. He’d seen the backstreets up close and personal as a child, he had no desire to get too close to them again.

For a second, he remembered the other hardened, tough people he’d run with before he’d clawed his way out and made his fortune. People he’d once called friends. He shook his head. The past was always best left in the past.

“This is great, Rillian.” Dayna picked up a stack of images off the table. “Thank you.”

He’d given lovers rare flowers and expensive trinkets...but none of them had looked at him how Dayna looked at him now.

“Aerial images of the desert.” She fanned them across the glossy table. “Is there a copy of the map that was inscribed on the rock?”

“Yes. On the comp and—” He touched the screen.

Light projected into the air around them. Dayna’s mouth opened, and she twirled through the map projection. “Amazing.”

Rillian took in the display of the map symbols and text. “Unfortunately, no one has been able to make sense of it yet.”

Her mouth tightened. “Not even Zhim and Ryan?”

He shook his head. Even Carthago’s premier information merchant and his human lover hadn’t been able to decode it. “I have a team working day and night on it.”

Dayna’s shoulders slumped.

Rillian wanted to touch her, needed to touch her. Instead, he curled his fingers into his palm. “We *will* decode it.”

“I want Ever and Sam safe.” Determination filled her tone.

“We won’t stop until we find them.”

She made a shooing motion with her hand. “Now go. I’m sure you have gazillions to make and I want to get to work.”

“Gazillions?”

Her lips twitched. “Obscene amounts of money.”

He arched a brow. “Why bother making small amounts of money?”

She shook her head, shooing him again.

“I think you’re forgetting whose casino this is,” he said.

She smiled at him. “No. I just think you are far too used to bowing and scraping from all your minions. I just want to mix things up for you a bit.”

With a shake of his head and a reluctant smile, Rillian headed for the door. “I’ve arranged for the kitchen to deliver you some dinner shortly.”

A gusty sigh. “You’re always feeding me.”

“I like looking after you, Dayna.” He saw surprise widen her eyes before he slipped out of the door. “Don’t stay up too late.”

“Yes, mom,” she called back.