



## Chapter One

The cart jolted roughly beneath her, and Quinn Bennett shifted, trying to get comfortable. Her left butt cheek had gone numb several hours ago. The chain around her wrist clanked.

She lifted her head and scanned the desert sands around them. Hot sunlight poured down from not one, but two suns. She peered toward the distant horizon, the sky overhead a pale, faded blue, so different from Earth.

This desert planet was hot, harsh, and unforgiving. And Earth was a very long way away. So far away that there was no way to ever go home.

Quinn's throat tightened, as she thought of her family and how much she missed them. One day, she'd been doing her job as security chief on a space exploration ship, exploring the solar system. The next, alien slavers had blown her ship apart, and abducted her and some of her crew.

She dragged in a breath, the echoes of that long-ago attack burning through her head. The Thraxian ship had appeared in front of them, huge and black and menacing. The aliens had been way more advanced, and had used a wormhole to reach Earth's solar system, searching for fresh blood.

Quinn had fought. She'd even taken down a couple of the big assholes. She'd fought to protect the explorers and scientists on her ship. But the Thraxians were huge, with dark skin that looked like parched, cracked soil, and horns. They'd looked like demons from hell.

Guilt, slick and oily, worked through her veins, and she swallowed hard. Her ship had been overrun, most of the people cut down, and the few remaining survivors had been taken aboard a Thraxian scout ship. From her cell, she'd also watched the Thraxians' larger slave ship attack the Fortuna Space Station orbiting Jupiter. She'd watched in helpless horror as the station had been torn apart.

Quinn dropped her head to her knees. So many must have died that long-ago day—both on her ship, the *Helios*, and on the space station. She was the security chief of the *Helios*, the one responsible for everyone's safety, and she'd saved no one.

*I'm so sorry.* The words were carved in her damn soul.

And now here she was. A slave. The cart jerked again as it bumped over the sand. She was the prisoner of a desert junker named Sleeja. He was a scavenger who traversed the desert sands, helping himself to any metal he could scrounge, trade, or steal.

Sleeja, aka the asshole, sat on the bench seat at the front of the long cart that was loaded with boxes and scrap. He was wrapped in black robes, holding the reins of the *tandu* that pulled the cart. The beast was massive, round, and strong, with a fine layer of pale-beige fur. It reminded her of an elephant crossed with a camel. A small mask dangled around Sleeja's neck. Every now and then, he'd pick the mask up with one of his four hands and take a deep breath. He was a mixture of alien species, but one of his parents had clearly been Edull. The Edull couldn't breathe Carthago's air.

Her lip curled. The Edull had purchased all the human survivors from the *Helios*. She hated them as much as she hated Sleeja.

Whatever it took, she'd rescue every single surviving member of the *Helios* crew, and she'd make the people who hurt them pay.

In the distance, Quinn watched another cart appear, being towed by four *tarnids*. *Tarnids* were smaller and swifter, with six legs and scaly hides. They made her think of reptilian horses.

Kids waved at them from the back of the other cart.

Sleeja didn't wave back. If he was in the mood, he'd trade with the travelers. She'd be forced to cart hunks of metal around for him, and endure the pitying looks of the travelers.

Well, the lifting and carting wasn't going to go on for much longer. She sure as hell wasn't going to be Sleeja's slave forever. Quinn was biding her time, waiting for the moment when she could escape and get back to the Edull scrap city where the other people from her ship were being held prisoner.

First, she had to escape Sleeja.

Or rather, *they* had to escape.

She glanced at the young alien man huddled in the dirty robes beside her. Nebu was tall and slender, with pale-gray skin and a pretty face. His dark hair was tangled around his wan features. Sleeja had purchased them both at the same time, and Nebu wasn't holding up well under Sleeja's not-so-tender loving care.

Quinn knew she needed to get them free soon, or Nebu wouldn't make it.

In her hand, she held a small strip of wire. She'd pilfered it from one of the crates. It was handy if she got the chance to stab Sleeja in the eye, but it was also for stress relief. She worked it through her fingers before she twisted it into shape, just like her father had taught her.

“Nebu.” She held it out to him.

The alien took the wire creation and a faint smile crossed his face. It was a tiny bird, flying with wings outstretched. Free.

“I’ll add it to my collection,” he said.

She made the little trinkets to keep his spirits up, and doing something she’d always done with her metal-artist father reminded her of who she was. It was also something she did just for herself, so she wouldn’t forget that she was Quinn Bennett—daughter, sister, friend, security chief.

A wild war cry pierced the air. She stiffened, recognizing the feral, undulating sounds.

*Desert pirates.*

Her gut went rock hard. A line of raggedly dressed people appeared on the crest of the large sand dune ahead. They were all clutching weapons.

She’d encountered pirates before—they were vicious and brutal.

*Fuck.* She yanked on the chain, but she knew from bitter experience that it would hold.

“Sleeja, let me loose!”

The junker ignored her, pulling the giant *tandu* beast to a halt. The cart rocked to a stop.

“Sleeja, you mangy fuck,” Quinn yelled. “Unchain me.”

The man rose, his robes flapping around him. Ahead, the pirates engulfed the other travelers. Screams filled the desert air.

She saw several of the travelers swinging swords, fighting the pirates. One man was cut down by an axe-wielding pirate.

Oh, God, there were kids over there. She gave another frustrated tug on the chain, helplessness rising to choke her. Just like it had when the Thraxians had attacked, just like when the Edull had thrown her in a cell.

Sleeja walked along the cart toward her. He stopped by a large, canvas-covered object. He whipped the cover off.

“Activate.” His voice was a breathy rasp.

There was a rumble and a clank.

Sleeja’s huge, cat-like robot rose up on its metal legs. It was constructed of silver metal and rusted junk, held together by strong magnets. The robotic cat leaped off the cart and landed on the sand.

Then it swiveled its large metal head, its eyes glowing a deep orange.

“Attack,” Sleeja barked.

The robo-cat’s gaze zeroed in on the pirates. Then it bounded toward the attackers.

Quinn hated the damn robot. Every time she’d managed to escape, the fucking thing had found her and dragged her back to Sleeja.

She watched the machine charge into the pirates, tearing at them with its strong jaws and sharp claws.

The travelers who were still standing kept fighting. Some of the pirates noticed Sleeja’s cart, and rushed toward them with wild cries.

Sleeja grunted, and lifted his mask with one hand to pull in a breath, while two of his other hands pulled out a large laser weapon. He started firing.

Quinn heard a whimper. Nebu was curled in a ball, shaking. The man hated any confrontation.

“It’ll be okay, Nebu.”

Suddenly, a pirate leaped onto the cart right in front of her.

*Shit.* She edged in front of Nebu. The pirate kicked a chunk of scrap metal off onto the sand, then he spotted her. The man shot her a gap-toothed grin.

He started toward her.

Quinn stilled and lifted her chin. *Bring it, asshole.*

The pirate lifted a jagged sword made of rusted metal. He swung at her, and she rolled to the side, her chain clanking.

The pirate lifted the weapon again, and Quinn quickly calculated in her head. She moved, tugging on her chain, her muscles bunching as she waited.

The sword came down. She rolled, pulling the chain tight. The blade hit the metal links, the sword flew out of the pirate's hand, and the chain broke.

She leaped up and kicked the pirate.

He screamed, fighting to stop from toppling off the cart. He righted himself and charged at her.

Quinn dodged the man's swinging arm, then aimed a hard side kick into his gut. This time he flew off the side of the cart and onto the sand.

*Yes.* She smiled. Sleeja was stingy with the food, so she'd lost weight and strength, but she could still take a filthy pirate any day.

A childish, high-pitched scream of terror rang out.

She looked over and saw a slip of a girl struggling on the shoulder of a pirate. The man was marching away from the carnage.

Quinn's body locked. *No way.* She leaped onto the sand and snatched up the pirate's rusty sword. She took off at a run.

The pirate had his back to her and never saw her coming. She swung the sword, raking it across his lower back. It cut through the patched leather of his tunic like butter.

With a shout, he fell onto his knees. He dropped the young girl, and Quinn swung again, hacking into his shoulder.

Blood splattered on the sand. The man curled into a ball and moaned.

The girl stood there, trembling.

Quinn went down on one knee. “It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you.” When she’d first arrived on Carthago, the Edull had implanted her with a translation device. She had no trouble understanding the various alien languages spoken on the planet.

Brown hair hung over the girl’s face and she nodded. Then her gaze went over Quinn’s shoulder, fear blooming in her eyes.

Quinn saw the large shadow on the sand. She spun on her knees and swung her sword up to meet the large axe coming at her.

The blow hit her sword and the strength of it rattled through her bones. She gritted her teeth, and let her training take over.

She surged up, whirling out of the path of the axe. The big pirate reeked of sweat and unwashed clothes. He swung again, and she ducked to avoid the huge axe. She changed her grip on her sword, then rammed it forward. It sliced into the pirate’s gut.

He made a gurgling sound and started to topple.

Turning, Quinn snatched up the child. Someone on the travelers’ cart had activated a small canon. They were firing on the pirates, forcing some to retreat.

*Thank God.*

“It’s okay.” She squeezed the girl tight. The child was sobbing quietly. “The pirates are leaving.” Quinn started back toward the travelers.

“My baby!” A woman hiding beneath the cart launched herself toward them. The woman’s gaze latched on to the girl.

Quinn set the girl down, and the child raced toward the woman.

“Mama!”

The girl clamped her arms around the woman’s waist and the woman hugged the child hard.

“Thank you.” The female traveler’s face was streaked with tears. “Thank you.”

A man arrived, his desert clothes soaked in sweat and his chest heaving. He wrapped an arm around the woman and child. Relief was etched on his tanned face.

He gave Quinn a nod. “Our thanks.”

Quinn felt a burst of warmth, watching the family. She’d almost forgotten that happiness still existed. She nodded back. She hadn’t saved her crew, but she’d saved this little girl at least.

Then, before she could do anything else, a vicious blow hit her on the back of the head.

Pain exploded through her and she fell to her knees on the sand. Her vision blurred.

A hand sank into her hair, painfully yanking her around. She looked up into Sleeja’s angry face. He had small, beady, black eyes, brown skin with a faint scale pattern, and a wide mouth with no lips.

Without a word, the scavenger dragged her back toward the cart.

“Leave her.”

Quinn realized it was the male traveler.

“Don’t interfere, desert scum,” Sleeja rasped.

Quinn lifted her head and saw the mother staring at her, clearly conflicted. The man took one step toward them.

Sighing, Quinn gave one small shake of her head. There was nothing these people could do. Sleeja would never let anyone best him. He haggled endlessly when he traded, and raved about never letting anyone get the better of him.

Even if she wasn't worth it, he'd fight to keep her. He'd send his robo-cat to slaughter these people.

The traveler's hands curled into fists, and his woman and child pressed into his side.

Sleeja threw her onto the cart. Her hip hit some scrap and pain rocketed through her. *Asshole.*

He lifted his mask and sucked in air. Any exertion left him out of breath. That's why he liked to have slaves to do his heavy lifting.

Sleeja grabbed a new length of chain in one of his hands. He locked it around her wrist.

"You belong to me, slave. I *own* you." He kicked her. Then he kicked her again.

She felt like her brain rattled in her head. She lifted her arm to protect herself, trying not to be sick.

"You'll never be free," Sleeja rasped.

A crying voice inside whispered that maybe he was right. It had been a long time since Quinn had been free. First, the Thraxians had kept her in a cell on their ship. She'd been so alone, and had never seen any of the other *Helios* captives. Then, they'd sold her to the Edull. Her skin crawled as she thought of the metal scavengers who lived in their scrap city deep in the desert.

She'd been determined to escape. Again and again, with the help of one of her other abductees—one of her security officers from the *Helios*—they'd made numerous escape attempts from the Edull's dirty cells.

Mina had been just as determined to get out. They hadn't been allowed to see the other human survivors, but Quinn had talked to one of the *Helios* scientists through the wall, and heard others who were stuck in the Edull hellhole. Heard their cries and screams.

The Edull had gotten tired of Quinn's repeated escape attempts and had finally sold her to Sleeja.

She thought of Mina and the others, and her heart ached.

*I won't let you down again. I'm coming for you.*

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Jaxer Rone slammed through the doors of the House of Rone, sending the familiar, dark-blue wall hangings swinging.

He stood for a moment, watching the fabric sway, before continuing on through the corridor. The House of Rone had been his home for a long time. Forged from blood, sweat, and tears, this gladiatorial house in the city of Kor Magna had become his haven.

But today, he didn't feel any sense of comfort or peace. Frustration was eating at him with sharp fangs. He was hot, dusty, and he had nothing to show for his trip to the desert.

Not a single *drakking* thing.

A slender figure came out of one doorway, holding a tiny baby in her arms.

"Anything?" Ever's pretty face was hopeful.

Jax looked at the human woman and shook his head regretfully. "Nothing. The lead about the other human abductees was false."

Ever's face dropped. In her arms, baby Asha fussed, and Ever jiggled her. The woman was the mate of the man who Jax considered a brother, a father, and a best friend all rolled into one. And

Asha was Magnus' and Ever's child. This woman and baby had brought the cold, emotionless cyborg Magnus had once been to life. They loved him completely, just as Jax did.

Jax would give his life for Magnus. He'd give everything to protect the House of Rone. And he'd die to protect Ever and Asha. He owed that to Magnus.

"We won't give up," Ever said.

He gave a firm nod. "We won't give up." He lifted a hand and stroked Asha's nose with a fingertip. The baby's lips puckered, and he felt a rush of warmth in his chest. "I need to clean up."

"Jax, you need to stop pushing yourself so hard."

He met Ever's eyes. "There are other human women out there. Trapped, enslaved, hurting."

Like he'd once been. Different circumstances, but the same ugly results.

Ever went up on her toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Fine, then Magnus and I will have to make sure you take care of yourself."

She had it wrong. Magnus had already taken care of Jax when he'd rescued him from termination. Now, it was Jax's turn to return the favor.

In his rooms, Jax stripped off his cloak and harness. His fingers brushed the metal enhancements embedded into the skin of his left shoulder. He had plenty of cybernetic enhancements—all thanks to the cyborg military program that created both him and Magnus. His fingers curled. Once, they'd been little more than slaves to the military, weapons to be used. Disposable and replaceable.

Not anymore.

He shucked his trousers, then naked, he crossed his room, looking out the wide, arched windows into the training arena below. He saw gladiators and cyborgs training side-by-side on the sand.

The House of Rone was known as a house of cyborgs. It was a refuge for the damaged, defective, and malfunctioning. Since cyborgs were banned from fighting in Kor Magna's famous arena, they also housed plenty of unenhanced gladiators.

Magnus had started the House of Rone to protect Jax. Like it was yesterday, he remembered the way Magnus had broken them out of the Orionix Military base. Jax looked at his high-tech, black, cybernetic leg. He'd been injured on the mission and slated for termination.

But the most dangerous cyborg in the program had objected. Magnus had grabbed Jax, stolen a ship, and they'd escaped.

That had been almost fifteen years ago. They'd come to Carthago to hide, and arrived here with nothing. Less than nothing. Jax had been injured, with a clunky temporary prosthetic that his body had been rejecting.

Since cyborgs were banned from the Kor Magna Arena, Magnus had found other illegal fights. They'd been very lucrative.

Jax's best friend had fought and saved, and purchased Jax a better leg. Then together, they'd both fought until Magnus had enough resources to form the House of Rone and start recruiting gladiators.

Magnus had built the House of Rone, stone by stone, and he'd done all of it for Jax. Jax's hands touched the cool glass. He owed the man so much. *Everything.*

He was going to find these lost human women.

It had all started when Magnus had collided with Ever Haynes. The strong, smart Earth woman had enthralled Magnus, brought out his emotions. She loved him as much as Jax did.

Ever had survived the *drakking* Thraxians. Jax looked down, but he no longer saw the fighting cyborgs and gladiators. The Thraxians were the worst of the worst. The slavers had tried to grind the humans to dust beneath their heels, and instead, these plucky humans from Fortuna Station had fought back.

Now, they were thriving.

After the first few had been rescued by the House of Galen, Emperor Galen had thrown all his resources and gladiators into saving every single human they could find that had been abducted. And then, they'd ended the Thraxians.

The survivors from Earth were now all happily paired up and mated with gladiators and other Kor Magna residents. Some, like Magnus and Ever, now had children.

But they'd recently learned that there were more stolen humans. The Thraxians had imprisoned more humans aboard one of their scout ships.

One of the women had been found. Despite having her memories tampered with, Mina had survived, and was now living at the Dark Nebula Casino in Kor Magna's busy entertainment hub called the District. She was happily in love with the casino's head of security.

But now, they knew that there were more women out there.

Jax looked over the training arena, past the larger stone walls of the Kor Magna Arena, past the sprawl of city. In the distance, his enhanced cyborg vision caught a glimpse of Carthago's wild deserts.

The glass under his palms cracked in a web of fractures.

*Drak.* He sucked in a breath and strengthened his emotional dampeners to weaken the rush of rage.

But his dampeners had never worked as well as the other cyborgs'. Jax had always felt, even when he'd had to hide those emotions.

*I will find you.* He was leading the search for the other women from Earth. He'd vowed to do it for Magnus and Ever. A way to pay back the man who had given Jax a life.

Once, Jax had been trapped, a slave to the cyborg program that had used him. He knew exactly what that felt like, and he wouldn't let these other women stay in their prisons.

"I'll find you. I swear it."