



Chapter One

“This the place?” Mace turned to look at Jaxer Rone.

The handsome cyborg nodded his head. “This is it.”

Good. Mace eyed the entry to the simple, stone building. He lifted his booted foot and kicked the door down.

Screams echoed from inside the apartment, followed by the sound of people running. Mace ducked through the doorway, followed by Jax and their fellow cyborg Acton.

Acton’s cybernetic eye glowed in the dim light. Half of the man’s face was metal, and he was the most cyborg-looking of the three of them. His cybernetic arms and metal face tended to intimidate people.

Jax was a little less intimidating, the charming second of the House of Rone, but piss him off or threaten anyone belonging to him, and the man would cut you down lethally.

Mace intimidated people simply because he was big and liked to fight.

Turning his head, he flexed his hand and let his enhanced vision adjust to the gloom inside the cramped quarters. Instantly, he zeroed in on the man cowering behind a table.

“Where are they?” Mace’s rumble echoed through the room.

The man—a sandsucker by the name of Gosht—quivered, as did the small set of antennae on top of his head. “You can’t just barge in here—”

“Just did.” Mace felt his anger stirring. This was Kor Magna, the capital of the lawless desert planet of Carthago. There was no formal law enforcement in the city, but instead, the gladiatorial houses of the Kor Magna Arena and some of the other powerful players in the city tended to take care of things.

And that included the House of Rone.

“Where. Are. They?” Mace let menace leak into his tone.

Gosht swallowed and made a choked sound.

Jax stepped forward. “We heard you’ve been keeping slaves, Gosht.”

The man shook his head. “They’re workers—”

“They aren’t here by choice, and you’re not paying them.” Acton’s voice was cold, like the sharpest blade. “And we heard you modified them.”

Mace’s lip curled. *Drakking crudspawn.*

“Enhanced.” Gosht licked his lips. “They’re cyborgs, like you.”

Mace growled and Gosht blanched. The man looked like he was about to wet himself. Gosht was a bug. One of those people who liked hiding in the small, dark corners of Kor Magna, doing dark things. While the city was known for the spectacular fights in the arena and attracted tourists from all around the quadrant, there were also plenty of dark alleys that hid scum like Gosht.

The man reminded Mace of the gang leaders who ruled his homeworld. A muscle ticked in his jaw, his anger catching fire.

Krenor was all dark alleys and fight rings. The entire planet revolved around the vicious bouts that the fight masters scheduled. Mace sucked in a deep breath, refusing to think of the sand-sucking hellhole. He'd left it behind a long time ago.

And he'd had enough of Gosht and his stalling.

Mace strode across the room, kicked a chair out of his way, and yanked a second door off its hinges. Inside the adjacent room, several people cowered. A man, a woman, a boy who looked to be in his teens, and a small girl who was clutching the boy's leg.

They all had crude attachments on their arms and legs, for working in the factories.

Anger riding him, Mace stepped aside so Jax could see in. The other cyborg cursed.

The man pulled his family closer, stepping in front of the children. From the look of the perspiration on his face and the glint in his eyes, he was feverish. Mace glanced down and saw the man's skin was red and swollen around the implant that had been crudely shoved into the skin of his arm.

The boy stepped forward. "Leave us alone."

"We're here to help you," Mace said.

The boy looked at Mace, then at Jax, and back again. Uncertainty was stamped on his features.

Mace got it. He was a big, muscled bruiser. He'd been born a fighter, had his skills honed in illegal fights he'd been forced to survive, and he was still a fighter. He didn't look like he was here to save anyone. Pound them to dust, sure. Save them, no.

Once, Mace had been this kid. Beaten, hurting, with no hope left. He'd been brought to Kor Magna and forced to fight in the underground fight rings. He'd been injured from weeks of fighting, and had been dying from severe internal damage.

Until the scariest cyborg he'd ever seen, Emperor Magnus Rone, had saved him.

Jax moved closer. He smiled more easily and could put people at ease. "We're from the House of Rone, and you're safe now."

Hearing the name, the family gasped almost in unison. The father closed his eyes.

"We're getting you out of here," Mace added.

The little girl sobbed.

Mace felt emotion. His cyborg enhancements were all internal, and he didn't have the emotional dampeners that Jax, Acton, and the others possessed. But Mace was also good at blocking his feelings. Krenor had taught him not to show any weakness. In the gangs, any whiff of vulnerability would be used against you. The predators were always good at scenting blood.

The only emotions Mace let himself feel were anger and annoyance.

He waved the family forward and they shuffled out of the room. They spotted Acton, and both the boy's and the girl's eyes went wide. They gave the cyborg a wide berth.

"Let's go." Jax ushered the people out of the apartment.

Mace turned back, looking at the sobbing Gosht. "We find out you have more slaves, you'll regret it."

"And you'll face Magnus next," Jax added.

Gosht's head bobbed up and down.

They stepped back onto the street. Like most of Kor Magna, it was lined with two and three-story buildings made out of cream stone. The same stone made up the walls of the arena.

As they started down the sidewalk, Jax slid an arm around the feverish man, helping him walk. They hadn't gone far when Mace realized the little girl was falling behind. Mace scooped her up in his arms.

Her little body went tense for a second, then she relaxed.

“Okay?” he asked.

She shot him a shy smile and nodded.

He was reminded of another female he’d recently rescued. Jayna, a human female who’d been abducted off her exploration ship near her planet of Earth. The *drakking* Thraxian slavers had brought her, and others from her crew, across the galaxy and sold them into servitude on Carthago.

The House of Rone was still trying to track down the rest of the human survivors. The Thraxians had attacked a space station and the ship, the *Helios*. All the space-station survivors had been rescued by the House of Galen. So far, a few *Helios* survivors were safe here in Kor Magna—Mina, Quinn, and Jayna.

But there were more out there, and right now, they were short on leads to find them.

Meanwhile, Jayna was still recovering. Still hiding in her own mind from whatever she’d suffered at the hands of the Edull who’d purchased her.

Mace’s jaw tightened. The Edull were metal scavengers who lived deep in the desert. They were also notorious for buying and mistreating slaves.

Everyone was waiting for Jayna to recover and start talking. He blew out a breath. He was aware that he thought about the small, Earth woman far too much.

He shook his head. He had no room in his world for females. His loyalty was to the House of Rone and that was it.

He had no softness in him, no give, and he was absolutely fine with that.

An hour later, Mace entered his bedroom, and unclipped his sword from the sheath on his belt.

The family they'd rescued were with the House of Rone healers. Magnus spent a fortune ensuring they had the best healers and equipment on Carthago. He did this to ensure their gladiators stayed fit and healthy for the arena, and also, because the House of Rone specialized in cybernetic enhancements. Their head healer, Avarn, ran Medical with fierce dedication.

Mace set his sword aside. The family would need time to recover. Avarn and his team would remove the crude prosthetics, and replace them with new cybernetic limbs. Then, the family would need to heal and make a new life for themselves.

Something skittered across Mace's enhanced senses. He stiffened and raised his head.

There was someone in his room.

He yanked his dagger off his belt. Then he moved with his cyborg speed across the chamber, immediately spotting the figure huddled down between the wall and his bed.

Jayna.

Relaxing, he took her in. Her long, brown hair was a tangled mess over her face, and she was looking at him through it.

"Jayna."

She curled in on herself. He could see the intelligence in her eyes, but she still wasn't talking. A few words here and there to Quinn, but that was it. Anger surged through him. The *drakking* Edull had hurt her. She'd been tortured, then sold to another Edull inventor called Gaarl.

Gaarl was dead, but Jayna still didn't feel safe enough to find her way back. Avarn had cleared her medically. She had a new cybernetic hand—one she was currently clutching to her chest—but the healer was still concerned about her mental and emotional trauma.

Mace sat on the edge of his bed. She'd gained some weight in the week she'd been at the House of Rone. She was getting physically stronger each day.

She'd get better. He'd make sure of it.

She'd been some sort of a scientist on the *Helios*, but she hadn't shown any interest in getting back to her work.

She shifted closer to the bed and he saw the pulse fluttering in her neck.

"You're safe," he told her.

"Nightmare." It was the faintest whisper.

"The Edull can't get you here."

When he spoke the name of the aliens, she flinched. But Mace refused to baby her. She needed to confront what happened to her, and he knew she was strong. She'd survived, that was proof enough.

All these women from Earth were surprisingly tough, despite their small size.

"I won't let them hurt you again," he promised.

Suddenly, she rushed him. Mace caught her, pulling her against his chest. She pressed her face to his neck and held on.

Unfamiliar sensations cascaded through him, but, gritting his teeth, he shoved them back and simply held her. He didn't really like people touching him. If he had physical contact with other people, it was generally to hit them. Sometimes he carried an injured person, but he didn't hug or snuggle or hold people close. Still, he kept his arms around Jayna's body.

Her hair was still snarled, but it smelled good. She burrowed against his chest and he pressed a palm to the back of her head.

"Don't let them win."

She stiffened.

“From what I’ve been told, you’re a smart woman. And I know you’re tough. But by hiding, you’re letting the Edull win.”

She pulled back, large, bronze eyes looking up at him.

“You’re a mess, not taking care of yourself. You need to get back to yourself.”

She made a hissing noise and something flared in her eyes.

Good. If he had to piss her off to get her to fight, he’d do it. It was harsh, but Mace didn’t know how to do kindness and gentleness.

In the fight ring, you stood up and swung. If someone beat you down, you fought the pain and got back up. If you cowered, you died.

Besides, he didn’t think Jayna needed gentleness. She got enough of that from the healers, and from Quinn, and Magnus’ mate, Ever.

“Stop acting like a wounded animal, and show the Edull that you can’t be ground under their boots.”

Jayna pulled away from him. Standing in front of him, her glare turned molten.

“Good,” he said. “Be angry. It’s better than being weak.”

She slapped him. For a second, the sound echoed in the room and neither of them moved.

Mace barely felt the blow. It was a tap. For him, it was nothing.

Jayna stared at him, then her hand, shock on her face. Then she spun and stormed out of his room.

Mace fingered his cheek. Yeah, he’d been a sandsucker, but if it helped her, it was worth it.