



Chapter One

She shifted on the chair, causing the chains binding her hands to clank together. Eve Traynor snorted. The wrist and ankle restraints were overkill. She was on a low-orbit prison circling Earth. Where the fuck did they think she was going to go?

Eve shifted her shoulders to try to ease the tension from having her hands tied behind her back. For the millionth time, she studied her surroundings. The medium-sized room was empty, except for her chair. Everything from the floor to the ceiling was dull-gray metal. All of the Citadel Prison was drab and sparse. She'd learned every boring inch of it the last few months.

One wide window provided the only break in the otherwise uniform space. Outside, she caught a tantalizing glimpse of the blue-green orb of Earth below.

Her gut clenched and she drank in the sight of her home. Five months she'd been locked away in this prison. Five months since her life had imploded.

She automatically thought of her sisters. She sucked in a deep breath. She hated everything they'd had to go through because of what had happened. Hell, she thought of her mom as well, even though their last contact had been the day after Eve had been imprisoned. Her mom had left Eve a drunken, scathing message.

The door to the room opened, and Eve lifted her chin and braced.

When she saw the dark-blue Space Corps uniform, she stiffened. When she saw the row of stars on the lapel, she gritted her teeth.

Admiral Linda Barber stepped into the room, accompanied by a female prison guard. The admiral's hair was its usual sleek bob of highlighted, ash-blonde hair. Her brown eyes were steady.

Eve looked at the guard. "Take me back to my cell."

The admiral lifted a hand. "Please leave us."

The guard hesitated. "That's against protocol, ma'am—"

"It'll be fine." The admiral's stern voice said she was giving an order, not making a request.

The guard hesitated again, then ducked through the door. It clicked closed behind her.

Eve sniffed. "Say what you have to say and leave."

Admiral Barber sighed, taking a few steps closer. "I know you're angry. You have a right to be—"

"You think?" Eve sucked back the rush of molten anger. "I got tossed under the fucking starship to save a mama's boy. A mama's boy who had no right to be in command of one of Space Corps' vessels."

Shit. Eve wanted to pummel something. Preferably the face of Robert J. Hathaway—golden son of Rear-Admiral Elisabeth Hathaway. A man who, because of family connections, was given captaincy of the *Orion*, even though he lacked the intelligence and experience needed to lead it.

Meanwhile, Eve—a Space Corps veteran—had worked her ass off during her career in the Corps, and had been promised her own ship, only to be denied her chance. Instead, she'd been assigned as Hathaway's second-in-command. To be a glorified babysitter, and to actually run the ship, just without the title and the pay raise.

She'd swallowed it. Swallowed Hathaway's incompetence and blowhard bullshit. Until he'd fucked up. Big-time.

“The Haumea Incident was regrettable,” Barber said.

Eve snorted. “Mostly for the people who died. And definitely for me, since I’m the one shackled to a chair in the Citadel. Meanwhile, I assume Bobby Hathaway is still a dedicated Space Corps employee.”

“He’s no longer a captain of a ship. And he never will be again.”

“Right. Mommy got him a cushy desk job back at Space Corps Headquarters.”

The silence was deafening and it made Eve want to kick something.

“I’m sorry, Eve. We all know what happened wasn’t right.”

Eve jerked on her chains and they clanked against the chair. “And you let it happen. All of Space Corps leadership did, to appease Mommy Hathaway. I dedicated my life to the Corps, and you all screwed me over for an admiral’s incompetent son. I got sentenced to prison for *his* mistakes.” Stomach turning in vicious circles, Eve looked at the floor, sucking in air. She stared at the soft booties on her feet. Damned inmate footwear. She wasn’t even allowed proper fucking shoes.

Admiral Barber moved to her side. “I’m here to offer you a chance at freedom.”

Gaze narrowing, Eve looked up. Barber looked...nervous. Eve had never seen the self-assured woman nervous before.

“There’s a mission. If you complete it, you’ll be released from prison.”

Interesting. “And reinstated? With a full pardon?”

Barber’s lips pursed and her face looked pinched. “We can negotiate.”

So, no. “Screw your offer.” Eve would prefer to rot in her cell, rather than help the Space Corps.

The admiral moved in front of her, her low-heeled pumps echoing on the floor. “Eve, the fate of the world depends on this mission.”

Barber’s serious tone sent a shiver skating down Eve’s spine. She met the woman’s brown eyes.

“The Kantos are gathering their forces just beyond the boundary at Station Omega V.”

Fuck. The Kantos. The insectoid alien race had been nipping at Earth for years. Their humanoid-insectoid soldiers were the brains of the operation, but they encompassed all manner of ugly, insect-like beasts as well.

With the invention of zero-point drives several decades ago, Earth’s abilities for space exploration had exploded. Then, thirty years ago, they’d made first contact with an alien species—the Eon.

The Eon shared a common ancestor with the humans of Earth. They were bigger and broader, with a few differing organs, but generally human-looking. They had larger lungs, a stronger, bigger heart, and a more efficiently-designed digestion system. This gave them increased strength and stamina, which in turn made them excellent warriors. Unfortunately, they also wanted nothing to do with Earth and its inferior Terrans.

The Eon, and their fearsome warriors and warships, stayed inside their own space and had banned Terrans from crossing their boundaries.

Then, twenty years ago, the first unfortunate and bloody meeting with the Kantos had occurred.

Since then, the Kantos had returned repeatedly to nip at the Terran borders—attacking ships, space stations, and colonies.

But it had become obvious in the last year or so that the Kantos had something bigger planned. The Haumea Incident had made that crystal clear.

The Kantos wanted Earth. There were to be no treaties, alliances, or negotiations. They wanted to descend like locusts and decimate everything—all the planet’s resources, and most of all, the humans.

Yes, the Kantos wanted to freaking use humans as a food source. Eve suppressed a shudder.

“And?” she said.

“We have to do whatever it takes to save our planet.”

Eve tilted her head. “The Eon.”

Admiral Barber smiled. “You were always sharp, Eve. Yes, the Eon are the only ones with the numbers, the technology, and the capability to help us repel the Kantos.”

“Except they want nothing to do with us.” No one had seen or spoken with an Eon for three decades.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Okay, Eve felt that shiver again. She felt like she was standing on the edge of a platform, about to be shoved under the starship again.

“What’s the mission?” she asked carefully.

“We want you to abduct War Commander Davion Thann-Eon.”

Holy fuck. Eve’s chest clenched so tight she couldn’t even draw a breath. Then the air rushed into her lungs, and she threw her head back and laughed. Tears ran down her face.

“You’re kidding.”

But the admiral wasn’t laughing.

Eve shook her head. “That’s a fucking suicide mission. You want me to abduct the deadliest, most decorated Eon war commander who controls the largest, most destructive Eon warship in their fleet?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Eve, you have a record of making...risky decisions.”

Eve shook her head. “I always calculate the risks.”

“Yes, but you use a higher margin of error than the rest of us.”

“I’ve always completed my missions successfully.” The Haumea Incident excluded, since that was Bobby’s brilliant screw-up.

“Yes. That’s why we know if anyone has a chance of making this mission a success, it’s you.”

“I may as well take out a blaster and shoot myself right now. One, I’ll never make it into Eon space, let alone aboard the *Desteron*.”

Since the initial encounter, they’d collected whatever intel they could on the Eon. Eve had seen secret schematics of that warship. And she had to admit, the thought of being aboard that ship left her a little damp between her thighs. She loved space and flying, and the big, sleek warship was something straight out of her fantasies.

“We have an experimental, top-of-the-line stealth ship for you to use,” the admiral said.

Eve carried on like the woman hadn’t spoken. “And two, even if I got close to the war commander, he’s bigger and stronger than me, not to mention bonded to a fucking deadly alien symbiont that gives him added strength and the ability to create organic armor and weapons with a single thought. I’d be dead in seconds.”

“We recovered a...substance that is able to contain the symbiont the Eon use.”

Eve narrowed her eyes. “Recovered from where?”

Admiral Barber cleared her throat. “From the wreck of a Kantos ship. It was clearly tech they were developing to use against the Eon.”

Shit. “So I’m to abduct the war commander, and then further enrage him by neutralizing his symbiont.”

“We believe the containment is temporary, and there is an antidote.”

Eve shook her head. “This is beyond insane.”

“For the fate of humanity, we have to try.”

“*Talk* to them,” Eve said. “Use some diplomacy.”

“We tried. They refused all contact.”

Because humans were simply ants to the Eon. Small, insignificant, an annoyance.

Although, truth be told, humanity only had itself to blame. By all accounts, Terrans hadn’t behaved very well at first contact. The meetings with the Eon had turned into blustering threats, different countries trying to make alliances with the aliens while happily stabbing each other in the back.

Now Earth wanted to abduct an Eon war commander. No, not a war commander, *the* war commander. So dumb. She wished she had a hand free so she could slap it over her eyes.

“Find another sacrificial lamb.”

The admiral was silent for a long moment. “If you won’t do it for yourself or for humanity, then do it for your sisters.”

Eve’s blood chilled and she cocked her head. “What’s this got to do with my sisters?”

“They’ve made a lot of noise about your imprisonment. Agitating for your freedom.”

Eve breathed through her nose. God, she loved her sisters. Still, she didn't know whether to be pleased or pissed. "And?"

"Your sister has shared some classified information with the press about the Haumea Incident."

Eve fought back a laugh. Lara wasn't shy about sharing her thoughts about this entire screwed-up situation. Eve's older sister was a badass Space Corps special forces marine. Lara wouldn't hesitate to take down anyone who pissed her off, the Space Corps included.

"And she had access to information she should not have had access to, meaning your other sister has done some...creative hacking."

Dammit. The rush of love was mixed with some annoyance. Sweet, geeky Wren had a giant, super-smart brain. She was a computer-systems engineer for some company with cutting-edge technology in Japan. It helped keep her baby sister's big brain busy, because Wren hadn't found a computer she couldn't hack.

"Plenty of people are unhappy with what your sisters have been stirring up," Barber continued.

Eve stiffened. She didn't like where this was going.

"I've tried to run interference—"

"Admiral—"

Barber held up a hand. "I can't keep protecting them, Eve. I've been trying, but some of this is even above my pay grade. If you don't do this mission, powers outside of my control will go after them. They'll both end up in a cell right alongside yours until the Kantos arrive and blow this prison out of the sky."

Her jaw tight, Eve's brain turned all the information over. *Fucking fuck.*

“Eve, if there is anyone who has a chance of succeeding on this mission, it’s you.”

Eve stayed silent.

Barber stepped closer. “I don’t care if you do it for yourself, the billions of people of Earth, or your sisters—”

“I’ll do it.” The words shot out of Eve, harsh and angry.

She’d do it—abduct the scariest alien war commander in the galaxy—for all the reasons the admiral listed—to clear her name, for her freedom, to save the world, and for the sisters she loved.

Honestly, it didn’t matter anyway, because the odds of her succeeding and coming back alive were zero.

Eve left the starship gym, towel around her neck, and her muscles warm and limber from her workout.

God, it was nice to work out when it suited her. On the Citadel Prison, exercise time was strictly scheduled, monitored, and timed.

Two crew members came into view, heading down the hall toward her. As soon as the uniformed men spotted her, they looked at the floor and passed her quickly.

Eve rolled her eyes. Well, she wasn’t aboard the *Polaris* to make friends, and she had to admit, she had a pretty notorious reputation. She’d never been one to blindly follow the rules, plus there was the Haumea Incident and her imprisonment. And her family were infamous in the Space Corps. Her father had been a space marine, killed in action in one of the early Kantos encounters. Her mom had been a decorated Space Corps member, but after Eve’s dad had died, her mom had started drinking. It had deteriorated until she’d gone off the rails. She’d done it

quite publicly, blaming the Space Corps for her husband's death. In the process, she'd forgotten she had three young, grieving girls.

Yep, Eve was well aware that the people you cared for most either left you, or let you down. The employer you worked your ass off for treated you like shit. The only two people in the galaxy that didn't apply to were her sisters.

Eve pushed thoughts of her parents away. Instead, she scanned the starship. The *Polaris* was a good ship. A mid-size cruiser, she was designed for exploration, but well-armed as well. Eve guessed they'd be heading out beyond Neptune about now.

The plan was for the *Polaris* to take her to the edge of Eon space, where she'd take a tiny, two-person stealth ship, sneak up to the *Desteron*, then steal onboard.

Piece of cake. She rolled her eyes.

Back in her small cabin, she took a quick shower, dressed, and then headed to the ops room. It was a small room close to the bridge that the ship's captain had made available to her.

She stepped inside, and all the screens flickered to life. A light table stood in the center of the room, and everything was filled with every scrap of intel that the Space Corps had on the Eon Empire, their warriors, the *Desteron*, and War Commander Thann-Eon.

It was more than she'd guessed. A lot of it had been classified. There was fascinating intel on the four Eon homeworld planets—Eon, Jad, Felis, and Ath. Each Eon warrior carried their homeworld in their name, along with their clan names. The war commander hailed from the planet Eon, and Thann was a clan known as a warrior clan.

Eve swiped her fingers across the light table and studied pictures of the *Desteron*. They were a few years old and taken from a great distance, but that didn't hide the warship's power.

It was fearsome. Black, sleek, and impressive. It was built for speed and stealth, but also power. It had to be packed with weapons beyond their imagination.

She touched the screen again and slid the image to the side. Another image appeared—the only known picture of War Commander Thann-Eon.

Jesus. The man packed a punch. All Eon warriors looked alike—big, broad-shouldered, muscular. They all had longish hair—not quite reaching the shoulders, but not cut short, either. Their hair usually ranged from dark brown to a tawny, golden-brown. There was no black or blond hair among the Eon. Their skin color ranged from dark-brown to light-brown, as well.

Before first contact had gone sour, both sides had done some DNA testing, and confirmed the Eon and Terrans shared an ancestor.

The war commander was wearing a pitch-black, sleeveless uniform. He was tall, built, with long legs and powerful thighs. He was exactly the kind of man you expected to stride onto a battlefield, pull a sword, and slaughter everyone. He had a strong face, one that shouted power. Eve stroked a finger over the image. He had a square jaw, a straight, almost aggressive nose, and a well-formed brow. His eyes were as dark as space, but shot through with intriguing threads of blue.

“It’s you and me, War Commander.” If he didn’t kill her, first.

Suddenly, sirens blared.

Eve didn’t stop to think. She slammed out of the ops room and sprinted onto the bridge.

Inside, the large room was a flurry of activity.

Captain Chen stood in the center of the space, barking orders at his crew.

Her heart contracted. God, she’d missed this so much. The vibration of the ship beneath her feet, her team around her, even the scent of recycled starship air.

“You shouldn’t be in here,” a sharp voice snapped.

Eve turned, locking gazes with the stocky, bearded XO. Sub-Captain Porter wasn’t a fan of hers.

“Leave her,” Captain Chen told his second-in-command. “She’s seen more Kantos ships than all of us combined.”

The captain looked back at his team. “Shields up.”

Eve studied the screen and the Kantos ship approaching.

It looked like a bug. It had large, outstretched legs, and a bulky, segmented, central fuselage. It wasn’t the biggest ship she’d seen, but it wasn’t small, either. It was probably out on some intel mission.

“Sir,” a female voice called out. “We’re getting a distress call from the *Panama*, a cargo ship en route to Nightingale Space Station. They’re under attack from a swarm of small Kantos ships.”

Eve sucked in a breath, her hand curling into a fist. This was a usual Kantos tactic. They would overwhelm a ship with their small swarm ships. It had ugly memories of the Haumea Incident stabbing at her.

“Open the comms channel,” the captain ordered.

“Please...help us.” A harried man’s voice came over the distorted comm line. “...can’t hold out much...thirty-seven crew onboard...we are...”

Suddenly, a huge explosion of light flared in the distance.

Eve’s shoulders sagged. The cargo ship was gone.

“Goddammit,” the XO bit out.

The front legs of the larger Kantos ship in front of them started to glow orange.

“They’re going to fire,” Eve said.

The captain straightened. “Evasive maneuvers.”

His crew raced to obey the orders, the *Polaris* veering suddenly to the right.

“The swarm ships will be on their way back.” Eve knew the Kantos loved to swarm like locusts.

“Release the tridents,” the captain said.

Good. Eve watched the small, triple-pronged space mines rain out the side of the ship. They’d be a dangerous minefield for the Kantos swarm.

The main Kantos ship swung around.

“They’re locking weapons,” someone shouted.

Eve fought the need to shout out orders and offer the captain advice. Last time she’d done that, she’d ended up in shackles.

The blast hit the *Polaris*, the shields lighting up from the impact. The ship shuddered.

“Shields holding, but depleting,” another crew member called out.

“Sub-Captain Traynor?” The captain’s dark gaze met hers.

Something loosened in her chest. “It’s a raider-class cruiser, Captain. You’re smaller and more maneuverable. You need to circle around it, spray it with laser fire. Its weak spots are on the sides. Sustained laser fire will eventually tear it open. You also need to avoid the legs.”

“Fly circles around it?” a young man at a console said. “That’s crazy.”

Eve eyed the lead pilot. “You up for this?”

The man swallowed. “I don’t think I can...”

“Sure you can, if you want us to survive this.”

“Walker, do it,” the captain barked.

The pilot pulled in a breath and the *Polaris* surged forward. They rounded the Kantos ship. Up close, the bronze-brown hull looked just like the carapace of an insect. One of the legs swung up, but Walker had quick reflexes.

“Fire,” Eve said.

The weapons officer started firing. Laser fire hit the Kantos ship in a pretty row of orange.

“Keep going,” Eve urged.

They circled the ship, firing non-stop.

Eve crossed her arms over her chest. Everything in her was still, but alive, filled with energy. She’d always known she was born to stand on the bridge of a starship.

“More,” she urged. “Keep firing.”

“Swarm ships incoming,” a crew member yelled.

“Hold,” Eve said calmly. “Trust the mines.” She eyed the perspiring weapons officer. “What’s your name, Lieutenant?”

“Law, ma’am. Lieutenant Miriam Law.”

“You’re doing fine, Law. Ignore the swarm ships and keep firing on the cruiser.”

The swarm ships rushed closer, then hit the field of mines. Eve saw the explosions, like brightly colored pops of fireworks.

The lasers kept cutting into the hull of the larger Kantos ship. She watched the ship’s engines fire. They were going to try and make a run for it.

“Bring us around, Walker. Fire everything you have, Law.”

They swung around to face the side of the Kantos ship straight on. The laser ripped into the hull.

There was a blinding flash of light, and startled exclamations filled the bridge. She squinted until the light faded away.

On the screen, the Kantos ship broke up into pieces.

Captain Chen released a breath. “Thank you, Sub-Captain.”

Eve inclined her head. She glanced at the silent crew. “Good flying, Walker. And excellent shooting, Law.”

But she looked back at the screen, at the debris hanging in space and the last of the swarm ships retreating.

They’d keep coming. No matter what. It was ingrained in the Kantos to destroy.

They had to be stopped.