



Chapter One

Everything was just right aboard Captain Allie Borden's starship. Well, at least for the next hour, it would be.

She stood with her feet spread, her hands clasped at the small of her back. Around her, the bridge hummed with activity, her crew busy at their stations.

On the viewscreen, stars streamed by as her ship, the *Divergent*, traveled at top speed toward their destination.

"Time to arrival, Dempsey?" she asked.

"On schedule, Captain. One ship hour until we arrive."

"Thank you, Ensign."

Allie had mixed feelings about their next assignment. Space Corps had ordered them to take part in several weeks of training exercises with the Eon. They'd be playing wargames with the pride of the Eon fleet, the *Desteron*.

She pulled in a deep breath. The warship's commander, War Commander Thann-Eon, was one of the most renowned Eon warriors in existence.

And he was now mated to a Terran.

Allie gave a slight shake of her head. For decades, the Eon Empire believed Earth inferior and beneath their notice. She couldn't really blame the technologically advanced species. Earth hadn't put on a convincing display at first contact. Terrans and the Eon shared a common ancestor, but the Eon were more advanced, had amazing technology, and possessed bigger, more

powerful bodies. Their warriors were also disciplined, well-trained, and bonded to alien symbionts called helians, which gave the warriors all kinds of amazing abilities.

So, for a really long time, the Eon had believed Terrans to be wild, unruly, and not worth their time.

A small ping echoed from Ensign Dempsey's console and the woman leaned over it, her fingers sliding over the control screens. No doubt something hitting the *Divergent's* long-range scanners.

As long as it wasn't the Kantos.

Even thinking about the dangerous, insectoid aliens made Allie's lip curl.

The Kantos had set their beady eyes on Earth. The aliens had swarms of fighters, and while the *Divergent* was filled with experimental tech, it wasn't enough to stop an invasion. That had forced Space Corps into taking some pretty fucked-up risks.

Those risks had centered on the Traynor sisters of Earth.

Sending the Traynor sisters to convince the Eon to help Earth had been a desperate move. Space Corps had wanted the Eon's attention so badly, that they'd sent each of the sisters on dangerous, ill-conceived missions.

Allie slipped her hands into her pockets. She felt some folded paper, one of her origami designs, and stroked the sleek paper. Sub-Captain Eve Traynor—one of Space Corps' best—had been sent to abduct War Commander Thann-Eon. *Jeez*. The woman was lucky to be alive. Allie had read the reports. Eve and Thann-Eon had been attacked by the Kantos, and ended up on a wild adventure. They'd barely survived, and somehow, they'd also fallen in love.

One after another, Eve's other sisters had also fallen for the warriors sent to hunt them down. Luckily for everyone, it had ended with all three sisters happily mated to warriors.

Allie shook her head again. Tying yourself to any man—especially a big, bossy alien one—sounded like a really bad idea to her. *Nope*. She valued her freedom and independence far too much to make room for a man in her life. She didn't need or want her world to revolve around one single person.

She loved commanding her ship and that was all she needed. The *Divergent* was experimental, and was the best ship she'd ever had under her command. Her crew was top-notch.

She thought about the Eon again. No way Allie would fall for one of them. In fact, there was one Eon warrior in particular who she frequently fantasized about killing. She blew out a breath. In her head, she pictured him—dark hair, bronze skin, blue-black eyes. He was arrogant and irritating, but there was no avoiding the fact that the man was delicious eye-candy for any woman with a pulse.

She ruthlessly shoved the image of the warrior out of her head. She was going to see Second Commander Brack Thann-Felis soon enough. Too soon.

What she needed to do was to stop planning the annoying warrior's demise, and focus on her mission. She was expected to work together with the Eon to strengthen the alliance between their species, not try to kill them.

Ugh. Diplomacy was not Allie's strongest skill.

"Looking a bit fierce there, Captain. Might want to practice smiling."

The deep rumble came from her sub-captain. She glanced sideways at Sub-Captain Donovan Lennox. His muscular arms were crossed over his chest as he looked at the viewscreen. He had gorgeous dark skin and kept his hair shaved short showcasing a well-shaped skull. She was well aware far too many of her female crew members had secret fantasies about her second.

Allie was grateful to have a strong friendship with him. She'd been a year ahead of him at the academy, and she knew she'd be gutted the day he was promoted to captain. The man was just so steady and damn good at his job.

"Playing war games with arrogant warriors doesn't make me feel like smiling, D."

He grinned. The man had a hell of a smile. "You can pull your big girl panties up and play nice for a few weeks."

She sniffed. "I'm sure talking about a captain's panties on the bridge is against the Space Corps Code of Conduct."

Donovan snorted. "Not me and your panties you should be worried about."

She stiffened, her eyes narrowing. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He didn't respond, just lifted one dark brow. Damn, she hated when he did that. She'd tried to mimic it, but both hers moved. Who the hell could only raise one eyebrow?

"Captain?"

Shooting Donovan a "you're a pain in my ass" look, she swiveled to face Dempsey. "Yes, Ensign."

The woman frowned. "I have some anomalies on scanners. It looks like some sort of debris, but it's not asteroids or ship debris, and our scanners can't detect exactly what it is."

Allie frowned and traded a look with Donovan. Now, his dark brows drew together.

"On screen," Allie said.

The viewscreen flickered and zoomed in. Taking a step forward, she stared at the small field of brown objects.

"They look like small asteroids," she mused.

“They don’t read as any kind of rock or mineral in our database. And their behavior...it’s strange.”

“Strange?” Allie prompted.

“They’re moving. Small movements, almost like they’re vibrating.”

“They’re right in our path, Captain,” Lieutenant Li, her security specialist said. The lean man was scowling at his screens.

“Look for an alternate route—”

“Captain!” Dempsey cried. “Some of the objects are moving toward us and picking up speed.”

Allie straightened. On the screen, a group of the small objects broke off from the larger field, zooming straight toward the *Divergent*.

As they got closer, she saw that they definitely didn’t look like simple space debris. She didn’t like this.

“Donovan, put us on alert.” Her second was already moving to his console. “Li, weapons ready, and shields at full capacity.”

The man’s hands danced over his console screen. “Yes, Captain.”

A second later, they hit the objects.

Allie watched flashes of brown stream past the viewscreen. She heard distant thudding sounds, and an alarm started to blare. On the screen, she saw the small impacts on the ship’s hull.

“Report?” she barked.

“I still can’t get a reading on the objects.” Dempsey’s voice was tight and stressed.

“Shields are holding,” Li responded.

Donovan made a sound. “Some of the objects are...sticking to us.”

Yeah, really not liking this. “Harris, get us out of this debris.”

“Increasing speed.” Her lead pilot’s voice was calm. The woman was a Space Corps veteran, and a hell of a pilot. The engines vibrated beneath Allie’s boots.

“Captain.” Li looked up, his mouth pressed into a flat line. “The objects on the hull appear to be...burrowing in.”

What the fuck? Surely their shields would hold.

More alarms.

“Shields have failed in areas where the objects are attached to us,” Li yelled.

“I need options,” Allie said.

“Captain,” her science officer called out. “The objects appear to be eating through the metal of our hull.”

“What?” Allie spun.

“I’m getting some readings on them now. The objects appear to be organic. They’re some sort of a lifeform.”

Dammit. Trust them to run into an alien lifeform that liked to eat metal. “Li, reroute weapons power to the shields and give us a pulse across the hull. Let’s see if we can nudge these things off us.”

Her crew refocused and Li nodded. A second later, a pulse of light pumped over the *Divergent’s* hull.

“Yes.” Li looked up and smiled. “They’ve been repelled!”

Cheers broke out across the bridge. Allie drew in a deep breath, and saw Donovan do the same.

Allie kept her gaze on the screen. She wasn’t celebrating yet. She eyed the now-still blobs floating off into space. “Can you confirm they’re all off the hull?”

“No,” Li replied. “We’ll have to run more detailed scans.”

“Do it. Hull integrity?”

“At eighty-three percent.”

Dempsey nodded. “There are a few small places where the hull has been breached.”

“Containment fields are holding,” Donovan said. “I’ve already alerted maintenance and engineering. They’re responding.”

“It appears the worst breach is near crew quarters,” Dempsey added.

“I’m going to take a look,” Allie said.

This was *not* what she needed right now. To turn up to these Eon exercises with holes in her ship. Not happening. She wouldn’t give Brack Thann-Felis the pleasure.

“Sub-Captain, you have the bridge.”

“Yes, Captain,” Donovan replied.

Allie strode out the doors. She’d make sure her engineers could patch things up as soon as possible. No one messed with her damn ship.

She wound her way through the *Divergent’s* corridors, nodding at crew members as she passed. As she hit E deck, she tugged at the hem of her navy-blue uniform. It gave her a sense of pride to wear the uniform and captain her ship.

It was a dream come true. Both hers and Drew’s dream. Growing up, she and her twin had done everything together. They’d spent endless hours dreaming of space, of starships and aliens, of space battles.

Grief hit her, as it always did when she thought of her brother. Over ten years had passed, but missing him still made her throat tight and left behind bittersweet love mixed with a sense of helplessness. She never forgot that there was nothing she could ever do to bring him back.

Her twin's death had left a hole inside her from the very first moment she'd learned that he'd taken his life.

Allie turned another corner. She was now living the dream for both of them. For the handsome young man, the promising Space Corps cadet, who'd never grown up.

Ahead, she heard voices and spotted her engineering team clustered in the hall. Above them was a ragged hole that was covered by the shimmer of a containment field. Beyond it, lay the blackness of space.

Shit, it was bigger than she'd thought.

Allie paused, setting her hands on her hips. Whatever it was that had burned through their hull, it hadn't mucked around. There were several burn marks on the floor as well.

"Hi, Captain." Her burly, no-necked, ginger-haired chief engineer rose and moved to meet her. His broad shoulders strained against his uniform.

McNamara was the best engineer in the Space Corps fleet. He kept threatening to retire, and Allie kept bribing him with bottles of his favorite whiskey.

"Can you fix it fast?" she asked.

He raised a bushy brow.

"Right. Of course, you can. How long?"

"I can have a decent patch up in an hour."

"Do it. We have to play nice with the Eon shortly. I'd prefer for them not to see our bare asses through our spotty hull."

McNamara snorted. "I'll get—"

A thud and an echoing noise vibrated in the air vent above their heads. They both froze, and McNamara's engineers did the same.

“What the hell?” McNamara barked.

The sound moved down the vent, away from them.

Allie broke into a jog, following the sound. Something was moving through the vent.

She touched her comm badge. “Dempsey, do you have anything on internal scans? Anything that’s not human?”

“No,” came the woman’s reply. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure...”

The noise came again, right above Allie’s head. Then she saw the metal start to turn red, like it was heating up.

Fuck a duck. The engineers behind her started shouting and backing up.

The metal burned away, and a large, brown blob of goo dripped down and dropped onto the floor right in front of Allie.

The blob swiveled, looking a lot like brown Jell-O. Then it moved. *Fast.* It flew off the floor, past Allie, and hit one of the young engineers in the face.

“Fuck,” Allie yelled.

The other engineers shouted. McNamara took a step toward the man. “Sharma!”

“Back up.” Allie threw out her arm, stopping the older man.

She studied the alien creature. It was covering Sharma’s face, and the man was struggling, his legs kicking.

Allie spotted a heavy-duty glove on top of the one of the engineer’s tool kits. She snatched it up, slipped it on, and charged in. She grabbed at the lifeform.

The thing stuck to the glove and she clenched her hand. The blob detached from Sharma, and she staggered backward.

The thing in her hand wriggled, trying to break free of her hold. It was twisting and jerking, like it wanted to jump onto her face.

Not today. But as she turned, the thing slipped free. It spun and leaped at her.

Allie dodged to the side. The blob hit the floor with a squelch, turned and leaped up again. She ducked and it hit the wall.

Fuck. This thing *wasn't* going to hurt her people. She snatched up a tool that one of the engineers had dropped. It was a sonic driver.

Then she lunged forward and went after the lifeform. It leaped off the wall, hit the floor, and slithered over her boot. The leather where the creature had touched began to bubble and burn.

When the creature leaped at her face again, Allie was ready. She swung the sonic driver and stabbed the creature. With a shout, she ran forward and pinned it to the wall.

It writhed, jerking against the tool. Rust-colored blood sprayed, hitting Allie in the face and chest.

Oh, gross. She grimaced, but held on until the thing shriveled. Then she dropped the tool.

“McNamara, containment box.” Lifting her arm, she wiped her face on her sleeve.

“On it, Captain.”

“Somebody get Sharma to Sick Bay.”

“Yes, Captain,” another engineer replied.

The brown-skinned, dark-eyed Sharma was sobbing, but alive. All in all, he looked fine. His fellow engineer led him down the corridor.

“Here.” Her chief engineer handed her a rag.

Allie wiped the rest of the blood off her face, as McNamara ordered the rest of his team to set the containment box down and load up the remains of the alien.

She was going to need a long, hot shower.

Her comm badge chimed. “Captain.” The voice of Abara, her comms officer. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but there’s an incoming call from the *Desteron*.”

Allie screwed up her nose. *Just freaking great.*

Her cabin was closer than the bridge. “Patch it through to my cabin.” She looked at her chief engineer. “Get my ship fixed, McNamara.”

“You’ll owe me more whiskey.” He eyed her. “I might even share it with you.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” She powered down the corridor and made it to her cabin. She didn’t have enough time to clean more of the gunk off her face. *Oh, well.*

She sank into the chair behind her small desk. Her pile of colored origami paper was stacked neatly in one corner. She and Drew had taken up paper folding one summer vacation in their early teens. He’d lost interest, but Allie had continued on. It was the thing she did when she needed to relax and clear her mind. Folding the paper and making a pretty, cheerful design never failed to ease her stress.

But she didn’t have time for it now. She pressed her fingers—still sticky with alien blood—to the screen.

A rugged face appeared. Brack Thann-Felis, annoyer of Terran captains.

Allie swallowed an internal groan.

The man’s black eyes, threaded with strands of electric blue, narrowed, taking her in.

“Captain Borden, you appear to be...smearred with blood.”

“I dressed up for you, Second Commander.”

The man’s face didn’t change. “The *Divergent* was running on time, but my warriors informed me that your speed has slowed, and you altered course.”

Damn, this man made her blood boil for no good reason. “We decided to take the scenic route.”

His head tilted. “I thought you might have a problem and require assistance.”

“And you’d rush in to save the inferior Terrans with your brawny strength and big, bad warship.” *Shit. You’re supposed to be diplomatic, Allie.*

Brack smiled, which of course, made his rugged face look even more handsome. “Your words, Captain. I *am* happy to offer you any and all assistance I can.”

And then he’d toss her into a black hole when he got the first chance.

“We’re fine. Nothing we can’t handle.” She wiped more blood off her cheek.

He stared at her for a long moment. “Then I’ll see you soon, Captain Borden.”

“I *can’t* wait, Second Commander.”

The screen went black.

Ahh. Allie sank back in her chair. She had weeks ahead of spending hours and hours with the man. Just her luck.