

Chapter One

“How much longer?”

“One hour until we reach orbit around Oron, Sub-Captain.”

“Thanks, Ensign.” Sub-Captain Kennedy Black nodded at the young man. Then she leaned in and pulled a small candy out of her pocket. “Here’s that Eon candy I promised that you’d love. I loaded the recipe into the ship’s food printers.”

“Oh.” The ensign’s eyes lit up. “Thanks, Kennedy.” He quickly pocketed the small treat.

Kennedy straightened with a wink, then turned to stare out the wide viewscreen into the blackness of space. The *Helios* was the pride of the Space Corps’ fleet. It was the latest design, containing new-generation tech, with some very experimental alien technology built into it.

It made her fast and dangerous. Plus, it had a new stealth mode that was being tested on this trip. So, the *Helios* could be sneaky, as well. Kennedy was pretty pleased she’d been able to hitch a ride on her.

The rock-solid alliance that Earth had formed with the Eon warriors over the last year and a half had really paid off. Eon and Earth scientists now worked together, sharing information, learning from each other.

God, it had been a dream come true for a xenanthropologist like Kennedy and the other members of Space Corps Exploration Division. They’d spent endless hours poring over the information on the Eon Empire, plus other planets and species the Eon had documented.

There were a few times she hadn't slept for a day or two because she'd been so lost in absorbing everything she could. She'd taken several stim shots just so she could stay awake.

Earth had definitely benefited from the new alliance. It helped immensely that the Eon King had fallen head over heels for a woman from Earth. Kennedy shook her head. It was hard to believe that Captain Alea Rodriguez was now a *queen*. Kennedy was friendly with the sharp, dedicated woman.

For a second, Kennedy just stared into the void through the view screen. She knew some people hated the emptiness.

She didn't.

She saw the adventure, the endless possibilities.

Her pulse did a little skitter. Shaking her head again, she swiveled and straightened her navy-blue Space Corps uniform. Around her, the bridge of the ship was busy, but calm. The *Helios*' crew was excellent, and each member was focused on their jobs. Captain Margo Attaway ran a tight ship, and it helped that she'd gotten to choose the best of the best to man the *Helios*.

Kennedy headed off the bridge, on her way to inform her charges that they were almost at their destination.

She found them on the observation deck. Ambassador Douglas James was a tall, stately man, with steel-gray hair, and a long, patrician face. He was to be Earth's new ambassador to the Oronis. His small, curvy, blonde wife stood beside him. The Frenchwoman was the opposite of her husband. Claudine was bubbly, a little raunchy, and had a hell of a sense of humor. Kennedy liked her immensely.

But it was the couple standing beside them that caught Kennedy's full attention.

The man was hard to ignore. War Commander Davion Thann-Eon was big, muscular, and in Kennedy's opinion, total eye candy. His sleeveless, black outfit showed off his brawny

arms. The man was outrageously fit. He had a rugged face, framed by longish brown hair that curled at his collar.

But it was the fact that he was clearly besotted with his wife that made him even more attractive.

Eve Thann-Eon, formally Sub-Captain Eve Traynor, was something of a legend at Space Corps. She'd had a colorful career, and was a tough woman with a reputation for taking risks and never backing down from a fight.

One risk—abducting an alien war commander—had clearly paid off.

The woman's two sisters were also now mated to Eon warriors, as well. Yep, the Traynor sisters were all legends. The women who'd dared to abduct an Eon warrior, steal from the Eon, and hijack one of their warships.

The fit brunette grinned at her husband, then smiled down at the small, seven-month-old boy currently tucked securely in his father's strong arms and fast asleep.

Jeez, just another thing to add to the man's hotness factor.

Not that Kennedy needed a man. Her focus was solely on her career for about a hundred different reasons, the top of the list being her thirst to see beyond the borders of Earth's solar system.

There was *so* much out there to see and discover.

Eve spotted her. "Kennedy. Are we almost there?"

"We are." Kennedy crossed the room. "We have one hour until we enter orbit around Oron."

"Excellent." Eve's eyes twinkled. "I cannot wait to see the Oronis homeworld."

Kennedy was vibrating with excitement. The Oronis were *knights*. Fierce fighters dedicated to their queen, and a creed of honor and duty.

"I'm intrigued as well," Douglas said. "We know so little about them."

“They’re excellent fighters, good allies, and honorable,” Davion said, keeping his deep voice low so he didn’t wake his sleeping son.

Eve rolled her eyes. “Spoken like a warrior.”

Kennedy smiled. “Douglas, I dug up some notes on Oronis politics for you from our Eon archives. I sent it to your communicator.”

The ambassador straightened. “Wonderful. Thanks, Kennedy.”

Claudine cocked a hip. “Kennedy, you are a wonder. This entire trip, whatever we’ve needed, you’ve found it.”

“That’s my job.”

“*Non*, I think it is you. Your special superpower.” The woman twirled a finger. “So, what do you have for me today?”

Kennedy grinned. “How about some lavender-infused lotion? I made it up last night when you said the air recyclers were drying out your hands.”

Claudine’s eyes widened. “French lavender?”

“*Mais oui*. I’ll drop it by your cabin later.”

Claudine turned to the others. “It’s a superpower, I tell you.”

“Let’s hope it helps convince the Oronis to sign an alliance with Earth.” Eve met Kennedy’s gaze. “It really is an honor to be invited to attend the knightqueen’s ball. I know they weren’t certain about including Earth.”

No, the Oronis tended to stick to themselves, protecting their quadrant of space fiercely. But Eve, Alea, and some other Space Corps members—who’d worked with the Eon warriors to help Earth repel an attack from a nasty insectoid species, the Kantos—had made a good impression on the Oronis.

Hence the invite to the planet Oron for the knightqueen’s ball.

And for Douglas to possibly become the new ambassador between Earth and Oron.

Kennedy was here to make sure it all ran smoothly. She was acting as chief liaison for the group, in addition to documenting everything she could about the Oronis culture.

Her boss in the Exploration Division at Space Corps had told her not to screw it up. She was part manager, part xenanthropologist, part assistant, part security. Excitement licked at her. She wanted to be part of the new exploration teams being put together by Space Corps. With the new tech they'd gained from the Eon, they could go farther, explore new worlds, document new species. Her chest filled with a bubble of excitement.

God, if only her parents could see her now.

But, as her boss liked to tell her, tact and diplomacy were not always Kennedy's strongest skills.

No, often she became rather focused on her work, and she wasn't afraid to sometimes bend the rules. Just a teeny bit. When it made sense, of course.

Her parents had been renowned archeologists, and had taught her that adventuring into new places meant being adaptable, pivoting when needed, and that sometimes, old rules no longer applied to strange, new situations.

She felt a pang in her chest. They'd been so passionate about their work, and each other. Sometimes, she'd felt she was at the bottom of their list of priorities, but she'd always loved hearing about their digs and adventures. She still had the collection of letters and cards they used to send her from wherever they were in the world. As a little girl at home with her nanny, she'd cherished every exciting word and picture.

It had been a sign that they were at least thinking about her.

They'd died years ago in a terrible sandstorm on a desert expedition. She still missed them, but was grateful they'd died together.

"Do you have a dress to wear to the ball, Kennedy?" Eve wrinkled her nose. "I don't love dressing up, but I'm told it's a bit of a thing on Oronis. The theme is all black and white."

“Ball gowns are *not* my thing,” Kennedy replied. “Give me a Space Corps uniform and a pair of boots any day.”

Evie smiled. “Comfy boots.”

The women laughed and Kennedy enjoyed the camaraderie. She liked Eve a lot.

“I was told a suitable dress was included for me.” Kennedy waved a hand. “I’m certain it’ll be fine.” And hopefully plain enough for her to fade into the background. She wanted *to* observe, not *be* observed. Plus, she was there to keep her charges safe and happy.

It was important to make a good impression on the Oronis. To forge an alliance that would give Earth access to more technology, knowledge, and allies. She was very keen to see the Oronis knights up close. They were all highly trained, and dedicated to the knightqueen.

Kennedy found the whole thing fascinating.

The doors to the observation deck opened, and a small, metallic ball—just a little larger than a baseball—zoomed inside. Kennedy’s lips twitched. The small drone whirled around them, then hovered behind her head, near her left ear.

Eve smiled. “I was about to ask you where your shadow was.”

“Beep was no doubt exploring the ship, and flirting with the main computer.” Kennedy held up her hand and the drone nuzzled her palm. He made a few loud beeps. He wasn’t really a *he*, but that was how she thought of her drone. He was part communicator, part computer, part weapon.

He was part of a now-obsolete program—all the other drones of his type had been decommissioned—but Beep was...different. And he’d claimed Kennedy as his.

Suddenly, baby Kane’s eyes popped open. He saw his father and grinned with four white teeth. Kennedy watched the big warrior’s face soften. The little boy had the same blue-black eyes as his father.

“There’s my boy,” Davion murmured.

Kane made a sound, then saw his mother. His grin widened.

“Such a happy child,” Claudine murmured.

“Because mommy and daddy are always taking you exciting places.” Eve took her son and nuzzled his chubby cheek.

Kennedy wondered what it would have been like to travel with her parents. They’d always told her it was too dangerous.

Kane spotted Beep, who he was fascinated with, and waved a hand. Beep backed up and slipped behind Kennedy’s back.

“Coward,” she murmured. Poor Beep had gotten close to baby Kane once on the trip. Once had been enough for the drone. Kane had a surprisingly strong grip.

Kennedy pulled a small toy from her pocket. The rattle was made to look like an Eon sword.

“Oh, that’s so cute,” Eve said.

Kane snatched the toy and shook it. Delight crossed his face.

“Look, there’s Oron,” Davion said.

Kennedy swiveled and sucked in a breath.

Wow. Just...wow.

The planet was mostly green, covered in bands of cloud, with large bodies of water visible. They were all a deep blue with a tinge of purple.

“Take a few pictures for me, Beep.”

The drone whirred, capturing images that would download straight to Kennedy’s database. Then Beep made a noise and bumped gently against her head.

“Me too, Beep. I’m very excited to see Oron.”

Her chest expanded with that feeling she got whenever she was going somewhere new. Excitement, anticipation, but this time, it was mixed with a sense of something big.

Like something important was on the horizon.

“I want extra patrols on the eastern wall.”

“Yes, Knightmaster.”

“And tell the knightguards we’ll need more guards at the ballroom entrances for the Grand Hall,” Knightmaster Ashtin Caydor ordered.

“I’ll coordinate with the Captain of the Queen’s Knightguards.”

“Thank you, Meric.”

The young knight straightened, bowed his head, and strode off.

Ashtin turned, standing at the balcony railing on the lower levels of the palace. The city of Aravena—the capital of Oron—spread out before him.

The Castle Aravena was the center of the city, perched on the wide, purple waters of the River Camlann. He always felt an immense sense of pride looking at the shining city.

The castle had several spires of different heights, all in gleaming-white stone and blue glass. The main tower was a blade shape, covered in sparkling windows. The lower levels were wide tiers, filled with greenery and gardens.

There were other tall buildings in the city, spearing high into the sky, but most of the city was filled with smaller buildings, homes, and structures, along with the graceful arches of the many bridges that crossed the river.

He’d grown up here. He lived a life dedicated to his planet, his people, and his knightqueen.

He’d come from nothing, become a knight, and he held the code of knighthood as the cornerstone of his being.

He’d die for Oronis, die for his queen.

And he didn’t like the idea of this ball.

Ashtin scowled. The Eon were coming, which he didn't mind. They were the strongest allies of the Oronis.

But there were also delegates from Phidea V, Borus, Xerus, and...Earth.

Ashtin glanced over toward the spaceport at the edge of the city. He didn't know these other species well, especially the Terrans from Earth. He'd fought alongside several fighters from Earth with the Eon. The King of the Eon had married one.

But what Ashtin had since learned of Earth made him wary. It was a messy, chaotic world that was still finding its place in the universe. And not all of the planet's people had honor.

He wasn't certain he could trust them.

He definitely wasn't sure about inviting them into the heart of Oron.

Especially when the worst enemy of the Oronis were rumbling.

The Gek'Dragar.

He gripped the stone railing under his hands and squeezed.

The Gek'Dragar and the Oronis had been enemies for centuries. The brutal wars of Gammis III had seen many knights die in battle to stop the enemy species overrunning Oronis space.

The Oronis still sang of the victories and losses to this day.

Defeated, the Gek'Dragar had retreated well past Oronis' distant borders. For centuries, they'd heard nothing of the other species.

But now, they were surfacing again.

There were reports of disturbing attacks along the border. Attacks on Oronis ships and small outposts.

Ashtin swiveled and walked inside the castle, his boots clicking on the shiny floor made from rich, Camlann marble in the purest white.

He would *not* let the Gek'Dragar hurt his people. He and the other knights would use all of

their abilities to fight, serve, and protect the knightqueen and the Oronis.

He strode up a wide sweep of stairs, and then down a long corridor.

Ahead, two of the queen's personal knightguards flanked an ornate door. They nodded to him, and then the door slid open.

He was met by the queen's captain of the guards, Knightguard Sten Carahan. The big man nodded.

Sten was older than Ashtin by about ten years, and had been with the queen's guards since she was a teenager. He was battle hardened, and would die for her.

Just as Ashtin would. The knightqueen was the beating heart of the Oronis.

Most Oronis were tall and lean, with pure-black hair like Ashtin's, or pure blonde like the knightqueen, and had blue eyes. Sten was different. He was tall, but broad, and had rugged features and brown hair he cut ruthlessly short. His eyes were a dark green. One cheek was covered in scars he'd gotten when protecting the queen from an attack, years ago. He'd been injured keeping her safe from an alien *nelok*. The vicious creatures had long claws, and one had slashed him badly. Sten had protected the queen for two days, and his wounds had become infected. By the time they'd been rescued, his wounds hadn't been able to be fully healed by the knighthealers.

Sten didn't care. He'd once told Ashtin that they made him scarier, and helped him keep the knightqueen safer.

"Ashtin." The man's voice was a low, deep growl.

"Sten."

"How does security look for this *gul*-vexed ball?"

Clearly Sten was even less happy about the ball than Ashtin. "Good. We'll increase patrols and guards."

The knightguard nodded and paced away. "We have too many unknown people from

planets we don't know anything about." The man scowled and crossed his brawny arms. He looked like he could've had some Eon blood in him. "I don't like it."

"I don't either, but Knightqueen Carys wouldn't budge. She wants to forge new alliances." Ashtin put his hands on his hips. "Perhaps that's not a bad thing with the rumbles coming from the Gek'Dragar."

Now, Sten's scowl turned fierce. "If the Gek'Dragar step one foot on Oron, or go anywhere near the queen, I'll slaughter the lot of them. They are *not* getting close to her. Never again."

There was death in the man's voice.

It had been a Gek'Dragar assassin, who'd killed the previous knightqueen and her consort. The assassin had almost killed the then-Princess Carys.

Ashtin knew just how dedicated Sten was.

The click of heels on the floor had them both turning.

Knightqueen Carys smiled. "Hello, Ashtin."

"Your Highness." He bowed his head.

She was tall and slim, with long, platinum-colored hair. She had a stunningly beautiful face, but he'd seen her fight—she was skilled and powerful. Today, she wore a black, sleeveless dress that emphasized her tiny waist, and had two long slits in the skirt. Beneath, she wore black boots that reached to her mid-thighs.

"How are preparations for the ball?" she asked.

"Progressing," Ashtin replied. "I've suggested some increased security measures—"

She rolled her gold eyes—a sign of her royal lineage. "You sound like Sten."

Her knightguard grunted.

"I do not think the delegations from our allied planets will cause any problems. Good relations take trust."

“And trust takes time,” Sten countered.

She touched the guard’s arm. “Yes, but we must take the first steps some time.”

“The people from Earth...” Ashtin frowned. “They aren’t as technologically advanced as us.”

“Their level of advancement is only one fact,” Carys said. “There are always things we can learn from others that don’t involve technology. The Terrans appear to be smart and resourceful.”

“That describes the ones who worked with the Eon,” Ashtin said, “but I’ve read more about the planet Earth. There are a discordant number of countries, all with different creeds, and sometimes, they fight amongst themselves.”

Carys raised a brow. “There can be much to learn from differences, as well, Ashtin.”

Sten grunted.

Ashtin’s comms implant chimed in his ear. He touched his ear. “Go ahead.”

“Knightmaster, the ship from Earth is in orbit,” a comms officer said.

Across from him, Knightqueen Carys smiled. She’d clearly received the same message.

“The Terran delegation will take a shuttle to the surface shortly,” the comms officer continued.

“Thank you,” Ashtin said. “Escort them to the castle.”

Carys pressed her hands together. “Excellent. Let’s go and prepare to greet our guests.”

Ashtin fell into step with Sten behind the queen. They traded a look.

It was obvious neither was as excited as their queen. Ashtin couldn’t help but feel something was coming. And he had no idea if that *something* was good or bad.