



Chapter One

Damn, this fabric was soft. Lieutenant Lara Traynor ran her hand down the cloak she wore. The material was a silky gray, repelled water, and was super-warm against the incoming chill of night. It also hid her weapons perfectly.

The Eon sure knew how to make high-tech accessories.

She flicked the large hood up over her head, and then turned a corner. She slipped into the small crowd walking through the stone-lined street.

God, she was on an Eon moon. In Eon territory. Her pulse jumped slightly. After joining the Earth Space Corps as a teenager, she'd dreamed of seeing parts of the Eon Empire. Of course, the alien species had made first contact with Earth decades before...and promptly wanted nothing to do with Earth's brand of messy, chaotic disorder. First contact had *not* gone well, and the warriors had banned any Terran from entering Eon space.

And that was a shame, because the Eon had all kinds of high-tech goodness.

Now, Lara had her boots on the tiny moon called Tholla. It orbited one of the Eon homeworlds, Ath. The other three homeworlds—Eon, Jad, and Felis—were far away. She ran a gloved hand along the stone wall beside her. Beautiful buildings rose on all sides—structures made of glossy stones of various natural shades, with veins of gold running through them. The

doorways were all elegant arches and the windows were large. In the distance, beautiful mountains rose up, high above the small town, and several narrow waterfalls spilled off the sides of the peaks. When she'd landed her small stealth ship outside of the town, she'd made note of lots of rivers and lush meadows.

Lara pulled in a deep breath. The air was crisp and chill. Winter was coming on Tholla.

As excited as she was to see the inside of Eon territory, the small knot in her gut reminded her why she was here.

Tholla was home to the Temple of Eschar—one of the first warriors who'd created the Eon Empire. And in that temple was a very valuable, sacred gem.

A gem she was here to steal.

She'd been blackmailed into carrying out this mission. She blew out a breath. Steal three sacred Eon gems. *No sweat.* She swallowed a groan. She absolutely couldn't fail, because her sister's freedom depended on Lara's success.

Oh, and she couldn't forget that this mission would also help save Earth from a deadly invasion. *No pressure at all.*

Fucking Space Corps. Lara still couldn't believe they thought they could steal from the Eon in order to convince the warriors to help Earth repel the Kantos. It sounded like a dumb plan to her.

She shoved her anger down. She had no choice, so there was no point moaning about Space Corps doing this shit to her. Lara knew better than anyone how dangerous the insectoid Kantos were.

She was a special forces space marine. She'd had bloody confrontations with them too many times to count. The ravenous aliens had been poking at Earth for years, gearing up to swarm in and invade. Eating up Earth's resources and killing humans for food.

Lara's nose wrinkled. Yep, she hated the Kantos.

The Kantos had killed Lara's dad. The old, faded pain still stung. Lara had adored her father, who had also been a space marine. He and his death were the reasons she'd joined the Corps. That, and her mother's downward spiral into a bottle after his death. Lara's mother had essentially ignored her young daughters, and most of the responsibility for raising her sisters had fallen to Lara.

Romantic love. It was the galaxy's biggest con.

Lara had trained and worked hard to make the special forces team...which guaranteed her a chance to kick some scaly Kantos ass.

But then, five months ago, everything had gone to hell. Her younger sister, Eve, an experienced Space Corps sub-captain, had been framed for a crime she hadn't committed. Her ship had faced off with the Kantos, and people had died. Eve had been forced to take the fall for an incompetent captain, who also happened to be the son of an admiral.

Lara's anger was an ugly burn. While Eve had spent the last few months rotting in a cell on a low-orbit prison, Lara and their youngest sister, Wren, had been making a lot of noise about the whole situation.

Lara would do *anything* to secure Eve's freedom.

Of course, when they'd offered her this thieving mission, they'd also sent Eve off on a fucking suicide operation. Earth really needed an alliance with the Eon—and their technology and superior military—and the Space Corps was going all-out to get the warriors' attention.

So, Eve was sent to abduct a formidable Eon war commander, and Lara was sent to steal the three jewels the Eon held most sacred.

Such a stupid idea. God, Lara didn't even know if Eve was still alive.

She paused, pressing a palm to the stone wall. *Please be okay, Eve.*

Lara straightened and turned on to another street, keeping her head lowered. The Eon were all taller than her, but by Earth standards, she was tall for a woman, so she thankfully didn't look completely out of place. She'd made sure to wear platform-style boots as well, which gave her a few extra inches.

But she did keep her face down. The Eon all looked quite similar, so she knew her features would stand out. She didn't have the distinct Eon eyes, which were black, with different colored filaments glowing through them—blue, silver, green, purple, gold. And Eon hair was brown—ranging from tawny brown threaded with gold, to deep mahogany. There were no Eon with blonde or black hair. And Lara's hair, inherited from her Japanese grandmother, was as black as night.

Ahead, a larger crowd had gathered in an elegant square. Several beautifully carved statues decorated the space, and a number of food stalls had been erected on the far side of the gathering. She knew there was a festival happening to celebrate Eschar.

Lara had already stolen two of the jewels—the gems of Ston and Alqin. The experimental stealth ship that the Space Corps had given her had worked like a charm. She'd slipped into Eon space, snuck right under Eon patrols, and landed on several planets, all without being detected.

Two gems down, one to go. She crossed the street to blend into the crowd. It wasn't far to the temple. Hopefully, everyone would be too busy out here with the party to notice her sneaking in.

Then she felt a prickle along the back of her neck.

Fuck. She dropped her head further and ducked into an arched doorway. Stepping back into the shadows, she peered around the edge of her hood and scanned the crowd.

He was here somewhere.

At the last temple, she'd been sneaking in when she'd run into an Eon warrior sent to hunt her down.

Lara smiled. She'd left him shaking from the electric shock of her StrikeBolt. But as she'd left, he'd promised that she'd feel his breath on the back of her neck.

He wasn't wrong.

The entire journey to Tholla, she knew he was coming for her. She'd felt it in her bones.

She looked around the square again. No sign of the huge, muscled warrior.

Pushing out of the doorway, she picked up her pace, winding her way through the crowd. The prickles kept increasing.

There. The spires of the temple rose up above the other buildings. Not far now.

Then the crowd parted.

And there he was, striding toward her.

Shit. Damn. Fuck. He wore all black. Not his black-scale armor—which the alien symbiont circling his thick wrist could generate for him. Instead, he wore a uniform of tight, black pants, and a sleeveless shirt that bared his huge biceps. Like most Eon men, he wore his hair long, brushing his square jaw, and it was a rich, chestnut brown.

He was too far away for her to see his eyes, but she knew they were black with strands of bright silver.

He stared at her across the square. The air charged. She felt his fury wash over her like a wave. She'd learned that the helian symbionts that Eon warriors were bonded to as a child amplified their emotions so that people around them could feel it.

Okay, Plan B.

Run.

Lara spun and broke into a sprint.

She darted through the square, bumping into a few people, her cloak flaring out behind her. Startled cries echoed behind her, and she knew he was coming.

She turned a corner, arms pumping, and raced down the street. There were fewer people here, so she was able to easily dodge them.

Risking a glance back, she saw he was closing in. Her pulse spiked. His face was set like stone.

She watched a group milling on the path, blocking his way. He didn't slow down. Hell, he was going to mow right into them.

In a brilliant show of strength, the warrior leaped over the peoples' heads, landing on the other side without pause. He kept coming after Lara, not even breaking his stride.

Shit. Jerking sideways, she turned down a narrow alleyway. Like the rest of the town, the alley was clean and tidy, the stones beneath her feet shiny. She turned again.

Her chest expanded. The temple sat at the end of this street. A grand set of sweeping steps leading up to the huge, carved, double doors.

There were also a number of guards standing outside the doors. Way more than at the last two temples. Hmm, it looked like the warrior chasing her wasn't all brawn, after all. He'd clearly ramped up patrols, knowing that she was coming for the gem.

Lara smiled grimly. *It won't stop me, warrior.*

She heard the thunder of his boots behind her. Time to do what he wouldn't expect. She turned into another street, leading away from the temple. Pushing hard for speed, her lungs started to burn. But Lara ran to keep fit and enjoyed stretching herself. She pushed through the pain.

Lifting her head, she scanned the rooftops. She had an idea. She stopped, then leaped up and caught a window frame. Then she climbed.

Faster, Lara. She jumped across to the next window and climbed higher, her cloak tangling around her legs. Another leap, and she was at the uppermost set of windows.

Move it. Her hunter was coming, and she couldn't let him see where she'd gone.

She ascended smoothly. She went climbing with her sister Eve whenever their vacations aligned. Her sister loved it, and could climb like a damn monkey.

Lara curled her fingers over the edge of the roof and heaved herself up. She lowered to her belly, laying flat and staying low.

Now she just had to calm her racing heart. She knew the helian symbiont enhanced an Eon warrior's senses. She wasn't sure what the range was, but she didn't want her hunter tracking her down because her heart was thumping like a drum.

She breathed slowly in and out. *In. Out.*

Footsteps. She stilled. They slowed, and carefully Lara pulled a small device off her belt. She edged the tiny flexible camera over the lip of the roof. She looked at the small screen to see what was happening below.

The warrior stood in the empty street, his hands on his hips.

He was right below her hiding place.

He looked around and cursed. Thanks to the Space Corps, Lara had a translator implanted behind her ear. She knew *Cren* was an Eon curse word.

The hunter circled around the street, then shook his head. He spun, striding away. Damn, the man could move. His long legs ate up the ground. He was like a big cat on the prowl. And she had a damn good view of a mighty delicious ass.

Shame he wanted to wring her neck.

Lara waited until she was sure he was gone. The sun had set, and night was well and truly settling over Tholla. She rose and walked along the roof. On the opposite side of the building, she dropped down to the street with a soft thump.

Then she turned and headed for the temple. She wasn't going to let extra guards stop her. She *always* achieved her mission.

Especially when the stakes were personal and so high.

She moved slowly and cautiously. She didn't want to stick out in any way. Ruling out an approach via the front door, she circled around one of the temple's protective outer courtyard walls.

Nearby, she heard talking and laughter. More people had come out to celebrate the goddess. No, not a goddess. Eschar had been a warrior.

Pausing, Lara looked up at the temple tower spearing into the night sky. It was part of the temple's defensive outer wall. It spiraled upward, and was made of a dark rock, veined with red. The tower looked pretty, almost delicate.

She pulled her HookWinch grappling device off her belt, and aimed it upward. She fired.

The line whizzed into the night and hit stone. She tested the rope, touched the device, and then she zoomed upward. The wind blew in her face, trying to pull her hair from its ponytail.

When her palms hit the stone wall of the tower, she climbed over the railing and onto the top of the structure. She turned and paused, her lips parting in awe.

A giant moon was rising over the horizon, bathing the town in silver light. It looked like something out of a fantasy movie. In the distance, the mountain range continued on as far as she

could see, the many peaks glimmering as they were touched with moonlight. The view was gorgeous. It really was a beautiful moon, and she wished she was here for a different reason.

Then she tore her gaze away from the scenery and looked down. The temple courtyard was laid out below her, leading up to the main structure. A fountain bubbled musically, somewhere close by. Green vines grew all over the stone walls and were covered in large, blood-red flowers. Red was Eschar's color.

The same color as the gem she was here to steal.

Lara drew in a breath of crisp, night air. *Okay, an angry warrior to evade, and a sacred gem to steal. Time to go.*

She started climbing down into the courtyard.

Caze Vann-Jad locked down his anger.

His helian pulsed. *I know. I know.* The Terran had escaped him. *Again.*

If Caze's father—a highly decorated Eon warrior—ever heard of this, he wouldn't be happy. *Cren*, Caze wasn't happy. He'd been raised to believe in the might of the Eon Empire and its warriors. And he'd been led to believe that Terrans were weak and inferior.

This invader was forcing him to rethink his beliefs.

As he strode down the street of Tholla's main town, he breathed deep, trying to pick up the woman's scent. She had a unique smell, richer and sweeter than he would have guessed. A picture of her formed in his mind—a long, athletic body that possessed curves as well. He'd definitely noticed the rounded hips and full breasts. Eon women were not curvy, so he found the difference intriguing.

Annoyed at himself for thinking of her body, he thought of her face. She looked like her sister, with a straight nose, stubborn jaw, and pointed chin. Eve Traynor was now mated to Caze's war commander, Davion. Like Eve, Lara Traynor had blue eyes, although hers were shades lighter than Eve's, with a dark ring around the outside.

Caze reached the front of the Temple of Eschar and strode up the steps. He nodded at the guards that he'd assigned there earlier. They opened the doors to let him in.

Right now, he needed to focus on protecting the gem. She'd come for it. Then he needed to capture her and retrieve the other two gems she'd already stolen.

And try not to kill her. He'd promised Eve that he wouldn't hurt her sister.

By Ston's sword, Caze could not believe that Davion—the fiercest war commander in the Eon fleet—had mated with a Terran.

Stepping into the temple courtyard, the lush scent of flowering blooms hit him. He scowled. The scent clogged his senses. As he strode across the inner courtyard, chimes danced in the wind somewhere nearby, making a pretty noise.

He strode through a huge, arched doorway and into the inner sanctum. Here, large, blood-red banners draped the stone walls, depicting images of Eschar in battle. Oval-shaped lights on the walls emitted a low, golden glow.

In the center of the space was a statue of the warrior herself, and the red gem that carried her name.

Eschar's Heart rested on the statue's chest.

Lara already had the gems of Ston and Alqin. She couldn't have this one.

As Caze stared at the red jewel, something dark moved within it. A symbiont. A helian, like the one that lived, attached to his wrist.

He took a step closer, then froze.

A scent reached him. A crisp, floral fragrance that wasn't lush and overpowering like the flowers. This one was sharper and sweeter.

She was here.

Caze turned his head, spotting no sign of her in the shadows. "Come out, Terran," he murmured.

There was only the sound of the distant wind chimes in response.

He moved closer to the statue. He'd find her and—

She hit him from behind.

Caze bent his legs, reaching back to grab her. But she shoved him and spun out of his reach.

She wore a long Eon cloak of deep gray over her sleek black-and-white space suit. He saw her pull something out of one of her many pouches and pockets. She shook it, and it extended into a sturdy-looking staff. A weapon.

With merely a thought, he called on his symbiont. Black scales spilled from his wrist, flowing up his arm. The armor rolled down his chest, covering his body. Then a glowing, silver staff formed on his arm. He closed his fingers around the smooth surface and lifted it.

He launched himself at his prey, and she sprinted to meet him.

Their staffs hit with a sharp *crack*. He shifted back and she came at him hard, staff whirling.

Cren, she was good. Caze had thought Terrans were incapable of discipline and strategy, let alone being able to meet an Eon warrior blow for blow.

Thwack. The staff hit his chest and he spun, dancing with her across the stones.

She raced toward a wall, put a foot to it, and flipped over his head. She landed close to the statue of Eschar.

He cursed. She reached out and plucked the gem off the statue.

“You aren’t leaving with that,” he growled.

She glanced over her shoulder. “Watch me.”

Suddenly, she threw a small, metallic device at him. It sailed through the air and he recognized it instantly.

It hit his chest, prongs digging into him. Electricity skated over his body.

The Terran grinned at him. Caze stared back.

This time, he didn’t drop, nor was he in pain and frozen by the electric shock.

Her grin faded and Caze felt the corner of his mouth quirk up.

“How?” she demanded.

“I came prepared. I have a device that nullifies the electric field of yours. I learn from my mistakes, Terran.”

“My name is Lara.”

“I know.”

She tilted her head, considering him. “So, you aren’t just a big, unintelligent beefcake.”

“Beefcake?”

“Stud muffin. Muscleman. Hot stuff.”

Caze growled. He didn’t understand the Terran words, but he knew she was insulting him.

“My name is Caze Vann-Jad.”

She tilted her head. “I kinda like stud muffin.”

Anger swept through him. She ignited his temper faster than anyone he knew. He wasn’t used to feeling all his emotions storming out of his control. He was known for being ice-cold at work and on a mission. He’d been one of the best stealth operatives in the Eon fleet.

This rude, bold woman infuriated him.

She smiled at him.

And she was beautiful.

What? No. Where the *cren* did that come from? Fighting off the strange thoughts, Caze launched at her again.

They fought their way across the room, and when his staff hit across her stomach, he heard the air rush out of her. She bent over and he reached out and snatched the jewel from her hand.

She straightened, lifting her staff, and scowled at him.

Then she moved fast, that deadly staff swinging. He swung his to meet it, the sounds of the two weapons smacking together filling the space.

She kicked out, and her boot slammed into Caze's knee. He grunted, his leg going out from under him. He felt the brush of her body and she snatched the jewel back.

"How do you like that?" She laughed.

The sound should have been grating, but her laugh was deep and melodious, and it hit him low in his gut.

Again, the reaction annoyed him. With a growl, Caze threw himself upward, charging at her.

She stumbled back, her boot catching on an uneven paver. When he knocked the staff from her hands, her eyes widened. The weapon clattered onto the stones.

Caze advanced on her. When her back hit the wall, he saw her face harden. She reached out and gripped one of the wall banners in her hand.

Before he knew what she had planned, she leaped into the air. Right at Caze.

By Alqin's axe. She spun her body, slamming into his chest, and whipped the banner around his neck. She pulled it tight, and as they both crashed to the ground, the fabric cut off his air.

She scrambled behind him, pulling hard.

Cren. Caze coughed, fighting to rip the banner away and breathe.

He tugged hard, finding a little slack. But she grunted, yanking back on it harder.

“Don’t worry, warrior.” Her voice was strained. She was putting all her effort into holding the banner in place. “I won’t kill you. But once you’re out cold, I’m out of here.”

“Eve...*Desteron*,” Caze forced out.

He sensed the woman choking him thinking. Then she snorted. “Right. If my sister is on your warship, she’s probably in a cell, being tortured.”

“No. Ambassa...dor.”

Lara snorted again. “No way. Now I know you’re lying. My sister is *not* diplomatic material. She’s more likely to punch someone in the face.”

“Mated... War commander.” Caze coughed. His lungs were hurting and his vision was blurring.

Lara let out a wild laugh. “No way. An Eon warrior and a Terran? Yeah, right. Besides, just like me, Eve doesn’t believe in love.”

“Me...either.”

He felt her lips brush his ear. “Then we do have something in common after all, Caze Vann-Jad.”

Caze couldn’t breathe. His body sagged and he crashed to the ground. The Terran was a warm weight at his back. He reached out clumsily and managed to get a hand on her ankle.

The lack of oxygen was making him punchy and, instead of yanking on her, he stroked her leg.

“Pretty. Strong.” His voice was a husky whisper.

She stilled. He stroked her again.

“You aren’t too shabby yourself, hot stuff.”

But then she gave another tug on the banner around his throat and his vision blurred. Caze felt fingers brush his jaw, like a caress. *No. That couldn’t be right.*

Boots stepped in front of him, and under the gray cloak, he saw the form-fitting black-and-white spacesuit slicked over her body. He looked up and their gazes met.

They stared at each other for a humming second.

Then she swiveled and, with a flap of her cloak, she was gone.

With the gem of Eschar.

By Ston’s sword. Caze fought to draw in air. She might have won this fight, but he was *not* letting her get away.