



# CHAPTER 1

FIRST CONTACT DIDN'T happen anything like expected. No giant ships came down and blew up the White House, no spindly limbed creatures slinked through cornfields, no ships crash landed in the desert. Destroying the Eiffel Tower was almost expected.

It was human hubris that aliens would target Earth. Instead, they were just a bystander in the wrong place during an intergalactic war. Two ships firing at each other dropped out of hyperspace just shy of Earth orbit.

One of them ran through the Russian space station, obliterating it on impact.

Cora was in the main lab of the joint U.N. station, *Shangris*, bored out of her mind watching blobs float around a petri dish through the eyepieces of a microscope. She'd been waiting on delivery of another petri dish swimming with similar blobs when the alarms sounded. A calm voice echoed through the halls.

"Evacuation protocols initiated. Please make your way to your designated emergency shuttle."

The blaring sirens cut off but the station lights pulsed red while the voice continued urging everyone to evacuate. Cora gathered her things, assuming it was another drill. Then came the first pings against the

hull. She skirted her work table to the large window at the back of the lab.

Two giant ships shot lasers at each other. One was sleek, like the body of a fish whose fins pulsed as they shot out laser fire. The other was rough, with angled faces and bristling guns. She stood transfixed until more pings sounded. Following the source of the sound back made her gasp in horror. Shrapnel from all that was left of the Russian station skipped along the hull. Bodies floated among the debris. She jumped when an arm hit the window, then spun and ran for the door.

Cora joined the rest of the crew sprinting toward the shuttles. An older gentleman she didn't recognize stumbled and fell. She stopped to help him back on his feet. Movement outside the window caught her eye and he kept going without her. A vaguely humanoid shape with a round, almost transparent body and tentacles instead of legs smacked into the station. It hung on, despite being slowly covered in ice crystals. Black eyes narrowed before it slammed its fist into the window, snapping Cora out of her trance.

The crowd had passed her by and the only people she saw as she raced to catch up were the station's marines running toward the command center. She flattened against the hull to let them pass. They had the largest contingent of marines aboard any of the stations, which had made her feel safe.

She entered the shuttle bay in time to see the last of them leave the hanger.

"Fuck."

Like all the crew, she was given basic weapons training before her tour began. She thought it was ridiculous at the time. The only threat was if Bob from accounting got too drunk and handsy. She certainly didn't think a bullet was the appropriate resolution for that problem. She made her way to the locker next to the hangar door and pulled out a rifle. She took a moment to check the magazine, panicked when she thought she'd forgotten how to put it back in, and then ran back the way she'd come.

The tentacled humanoid had fallen away as she went back past the window. She saw the shuttle making good time pulling away from the station. The tip of the nose had just begun to glow as they hit Earth's atmosphere when the sleek ship fired a solid beam. It cut through the shuttle like butter and the two halves fell away, burning and breaking apart as they skipped along the atmosphere.

Cora hiked the strap of the rifle on her shoulder and ran. The *Shangris* shuddered beneath her feet and she braced against the hull. The floor listed to one side. They'd lost the stabilizing thrusters.

She was almost to the command center when a hole in the hull opened in the next section. She turned back but not quick enough. Her feet shot out from under her and she landed hard on her knees. She hurtled toward the breach, scrabbling for purchase on the slick floor. A loud siren blared and she curled into a tight ball as the emergency breach door slammed down inches away. Her hands stung from being dragged along the deck and her knee twisted, but she hauled herself up and made her way back to her only remaining option—the lab.

Nine women huddled in the center of the room and looked up with wide, frightened eyes. "What's happening? Where did those ships come from?" In the middle, a tall woman's voice shook. It was clear she was struggling to stay calm.

"I don't know, but I think they're aliens."

A couple of them shook their heads at Cora, denying the evidence outside the window.

"The shuttles are gone." A pretty blonde said. Someone in the back started weeping.

"I know." Cora made her way to a stool and fell onto the seat. Her knee throbbed in protest, but she ignored it. "We're also cut off from the command center. A hull breach in section four triggered the emergency door."

"We're going to die." The tall woman whispered.

Cora knew she had to shut that shit down before it infected the others. "No. We're not. The marines are still here, which means there's still a transport somewhere. They designed this lab to contain dangerous biologicals and chemicals, which means it's reinforced and can be locked down. We'll shelter here, and wait for rescue."

"What if it doesn't come?"

Cora recognized the brunette standing at the window. They'd never formally met, but she was the lead botanical researcher and seemed smart and competent. She never sent samples to be analyzed without

proper documentation. "They'll come."

Not five minutes later the sound of gunfire echoed down the hall.

The brunette had moved to stand next to her, and Cora heard her whisper in wonder, "They're using live ammunition."

Cora didn't even realize live ammunition was on the station. They could only use dummy projectiles, bullets with rubber tips so they wouldn't puncture the hull. If the threat was bad enough for the marines to use real bullets, it was bad.

A small band of them came into sight, backing down the hallway in full tactical gear and firing at an unseen enemy. Lasers sizzled where they hit their bodies, going through armor like paper. The men screamed as they fell.

Cora jumped up and craned her neck down the hallway, pressing her cheek against the wall to keep from exposing herself. She couldn't see their attackers, but she heard them. Under the sizzle of burning flesh, there was a sound like someone dragging a wet rope mop down the hall. As the ominous sloshing grew closer and more marines fell, Cora slammed her hand against a red button on the wall.

A thick glass door slid out and sealed the lab. Internal air handlers kicked on along with quick cycle filters designed to remove any particulates. The women backed further away from the door. The sealed room blocked all sound from the outside. Only the women's hard breathing and frightened shuffling scored the silent movie playing on the other side of the door. They watched as three of the tentacled aliens slid past, saw the returning gunfire trickle and then stop.

One woman screamed when the aliens' attention turned to them. Their thin arms pounded on the door, testing it. One shot their weapon at it, but the door held. They began feeling the edge, looking for a way to open it. Cora braced herself against a support beam and shouldered her rifle. She took a deep breath and focused on the nearest target.



KIRAN DIDN'T THINK this small station was worth time better spent getting control of the main Scozid ship, but they had involved an unknown race in an inter-galactic war. Even if they weren't the ones to initiate the jump to this far-flung corner of space, they would clean up the Scozid mess.

"This vessel won't hold."

Kiran nodded at Turo, the lone Trelxak on his team. He trusted the cyborg with his analysis of the structure's stability. "We'll sweep for survivors. Take out any Scozid along the way."

They made their way through an airlock already hissing from small punctures. "Turo, how much time do we have?"

"Not long. Maybe five minutes."

"Right. Let's be quick about this then."

They moved efficiently through the station. There wasn't much left, and most of the rooms were sealed with blast doors. Kiran's helmet crackled with updates from the *Talia*. The Scozid were still fighting, but their tactics were becoming desperate.

Brak, his second in command, tapped his arm and then the side of his helmet. Kiran turned the main com feed off and stopped to listen. Weapons fire. The five team members jogged toward the sound, slowing as they reached a corner.

Kiran called Turo to take point. His cybernetics would allow him to get a complete picture with just a glance. His movement was quick, and he gave the team a rundown of what they'd be facing. "More than a dozen bodies are stacked in the hallway." He grimaced. "Looks like the Scozid grushnuge went right through their body armor. They didn't stand a chance. There are six Scozid. Three are examining a door, the rest appear to be watching the rear."

"All right." Kiran grinned. "Let's go pop some squid."

CORA KNEW HER rifle would be no more effective than those of the dead marines, but it made her feel better to keep it trained on the aliens still trying to get inside.

The alien centered in her scope exploded in a shower of fluid. The others spun, raising and firing their weapons. She couldn't see who was shooting, but the aliens retreated. The two she could still see popped like water balloons before they fell out of view. For several seconds all the women saw was weapon fire.

"Who's firing, and what are they firing at?" The brunette kept her voice low.

"I have no idea." Cora matched her tone, knowing if the others overheard them it might raise the panic levels in the room. "The juicy ones made mincemeat of the first marines. Maybe special forces?"

A man came into view. Large and covered head to toe in black tactical armor, he fired a rifle at the aliens. Each shot was an oblong disk of blue light. When the alien's weapons found their target his armor split and smoked, but still he advanced.

Cora ran to press her cheek on the wall and get a better look. Two crouched men and three standing fired without flinching despite being hit over and over by the alien lasers. The nearest man dripped blood from a gash in his thigh. The one standing in the middle had blood dripping from his glove. She shuffled to the other side of the door to see the retreating aliens. All she saw was a thick puddle of goo on the floor.

The weapons fire died out and the men stood. One disappeared down the hall before returning, nodding at the others. All five of them turned to look inside the lab, the faceless visors in their black helmets reflecting the frightened faces of the women.

One soldier stepped forward and put his hand on the door. Cora backed up, leveling her rifle at him. He shook his head and turned back to the rest of the squad. Their helmets bobbed and shook accompanied by big hand gestures making it obvious they argued. One held up his hand and the rest went still. He stepped up to the door, laid his weapon on the floor, then slowly removed his helmet.

Cora stared into bright green eyes. His skin was blue and he was big. Bigger than the largest marine she'd ever met. He had a square jaw, a straight nose, and the look of someone who knew how to win a fight. Cora checked the instinct to back up a step.

He tapped on the door and then motioned to open it. She shook her head. "Oh, hell no."

His lips moved and he again motioned to open the door.

Cora clearly enunciated, "No."

His lips thinned and his eyebrows slashed down. He pointed to the weapon on the floor and held his hands palm up.

She nodded at him. "Yeah, I get it. You come in peace. I'm still not opening the door."

A woman who had been silent separated from the group. "Shouldn't we let them in? They saved us!"

Cora snapped her head around and looked at her. "You're kidding, right? We don't know who these aliens are. They could be the bad guys and the squid things could have been the good guys. Hell, they could both be bad guys. We're not opening that door."

While she stared down the other woman, the one who'd been weeping darted past them both and smacked the release button. The door whooshed open and the acrid smell of burned flesh, plastic, and unidentifiable things flooded the room.

Cora's eyes stung and tears streamed down her face but she kept her gun trained on the blue alien in front of her.

She blinked her eyes, frustrated at her blurred vision. She imagined this is what tear gas felt like. Through the haze of tears, she watched a frown cloud his face, turning him from intimidating to downright terrifying in an instant.

She snugged the butt of her rifle into her shoulder.

He let out a string of foreign words accented with clicks and growls. Another opened a pocket on the thigh of his pants and pulled out thin metal cylinders. The alien in front of her grabbed one and bent it in half with a snap before shaking it like a glow stick. He twisted it open to reveal a small, thin sheet. He shook out the cloth, pantomimed wiping his eyes and then held it out to her.

She lowered her rifle and accepted it. She cut her eyes at him as she brought it to her face. It smelled of



clean air and she took a chance, rubbing one eye. It was cool and instantly her eye cleared. She wiped her other eye and saw the other alien handing out similar cloths to all the women.

"Thank you." She croaked before clearing her throat.

He nodded in acknowledgment.

*Can he understand me?*

He stepped back and waved down the hall, clearly wanting them to go that way. Several women dashed out and ran. Cora kept her finger on the trigger while her alien spoke in a guttural language. One of the other soldiers peeled off and followed them.

The brunette botanist stepped up next to her again. "I don't think we have much choice. We have to go with them."

Cora gave her a hard look but sighed in resignation. "I guess you're right. But I'm keeping the gun."

She smiled. "Please do."

The botanist stepped out and made her way down the hall, followed by the rest of the women. They picked their way around what remained of the squid-like aliens. Three of the remaining soldiers peeled off and walked behind, weapons pointed at the floor. Cora still stood inside the lab, staring at the alien in front of her. He backed up, angling his body to give her more room to leave and waited.

She sighed again and limped out.

They'd almost reached the hanger when a loud pop echoed through the hallway, heralding a concussive blast. She threw her hands over her ears and fell to her knees. The station shuddered under her, metal screamed as it twisted and threw her into the hull with a crunch she suspected was her arm breaking.

*Fucking space. If I get on the ground I'm never leaving it again.*

The solid body of the alien wrapped around her, protecting her from further harm as they slammed around the interior until she lost consciousness.

KIRAN BRACED while the station spun. He could see the group ahead of him, the rest of his team protecting the other women as well as possible. The centrifugal force stabilized and provided a gravity of sorts. He cradled the now unconscious woman in his arms and stood. They weren't far from their shuttle.

He called to the rest of the men. "Time to go!"

All of them started jogging. A couple of the women ran panicked, but his team directed them in the right direction. Along with the soft body he carried, one other had passed out when the final thruster failed. Another was severely injured when they found the small group of survivors. Craix carried the former and Turo, despite having a nasty gash in his thigh from a piece of shrapnel, had taken over care of the latter.

He glanced at his charge. She had been limping and there were abrasions on her shoulder. His hate for the Scozid increased, but as he looked at her the hate morphed into something else. His body tingled and his cock jerked to life.

He tamped the desire down, surprised at his lack of control. He needed to stay focused on the mission, not the way she fit perfectly against his body. He almost slipped on what remained of a Scozid and reprimanded himself for being so easily distracted. This was not the time or the place.

Kiran could see their shuttle clamped to the hull of the station over the heads of those in front of him. The airlock they had used to board had given way and was now just twisted metal. He caught up to Brak who had taken point and saw their shuttle had sustained damage when the airlock broke. Not enough to worry, but enough to make him want to be off the station even more than before.

"Options?"

"I can float across and send out the manual ladder, but it means opening the blast door. The women don't have any protective gear. I don't know how robust their bodies are, but if I had to guess they won't survive the exposure."

"Brak is correct. This race's lungs aren't strong enough to withstand a lack of atmosphere." Turo stared at the woman in his arms.

Kiran thought it was the most emotion he'd ever seen on the cyborg's face.

A woman with dark skin and close cropped hair stepped up. "Can you understand me?"

Kiran nodded.

She let out a breath. "Great. There's another airlock at the end of this section," she pointed. "But I don't know if we can still get there."

Kiran looked at Brak, who was scanning the faces of the scared women. He knew they were doing the same thing—weighing the odds. "Brak, fire up the shuttle. See if you can maneuver as close as possible to the station. If the gap is small enough, Rozal and Craix can use the extra helmets to get them safely across. Turo, you and I will take the injured to the other airlock. Meet us there."

Brak sprung into action. Craix tried to communicate the plan to the uninjured women while he and Turo took off at a jog carrying their unconscious survivors along with four others who had broken bones or lacerations severe enough to tax their bodies, but slight enough they'd kept their feet.

It wasn't a smooth trip. Broken supports, arcing electrical wires, and various other debris crowded the hall. They arrived at the airlock, the station shuddering and jerking as more of it fell apart. It seemed intact and their shuttle hovered just outside. Kiran shifted the woman in his arms and in a coordinated effort with Turo they managed a good enough seal.

The shuttle door opened and he let the others board before him. "Status."

Rozal answered. "We got all but one of them on board."

Kiran glanced around the cabin. "You didn't stay with her?"

He shook his head. "She refused to come." He nodded his head at a woman crying softly in the back. "She tried to explain to her that it was their only chance at survival. The woman just kept yelling no and then ran back the way we'd come."

Kiran frowned, but he'd seen such panic in stressful situations before. "Understood."

He stepped onto the shuttle and heard the door hiss closed behind him. "Let's get these survivors to the

surface."