

*Ross 154 System
18 April 2136*

Kalis Hansen's feet floated on air as she walked through Ross 154 Outpost's cavernous hallways from the medical center to her quarters. *I can't believe it*, she thought. *John's not going to believe it. I can't wait to see the look on his face when I tell him!*

She hadn't expected the surprise the doctor had given her. She'd been feeling odd the last week or so—ill in the stomach, usually for an hour or so every day, right after lunchtime. It had probably been the flu, she'd thought at the time; just a stomach bug, albeit a bug that hadn't gone away. Only when the doctor asked Kalis if he could administer a pregnancy test did the realization actually hit her; and then she knew, even before the results came back.

How is John going to react? she wondered suddenly. She and her husband hadn't tried to prevent pregnancy, but neither had they worked to have a child. *Will he want this? Hell, Kalis, you don't even know if you want this yet!*

Kalis and John had taken a couple months to settle back into their relationship after she'd received her orders to the Ross 154 Outpost. The small base served as a port-of-call for ships en route between Earth and its daughter colony in the Altair System. John had dreamt of acting, which required him to remain in the Sol System, if not on Earth itself. Kalis winced at the memory of the argument that had erupted after she told him the news.

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“John, you can come with me or not; but either way, I'm going!”

“Oh, that’s all fine and well for you, *Lieutenant!*” John snapped, his voice seething with barely-contained rage. “You get to go gallivanting around the God-damned galaxy ... but what about *me*?! What do you expect me to do out there? It’s not like there’s a damned movie studio within five light-years of that hellhole.”

“Maybe you could *grow up* while you’re out there!” Kalis shouted back. “Do you think I *asked* for this assignment?! Do you think I have a fucking choice in the matter?”

“You at least have the choice, John. You can stay here and pursue your acting career—maybe you’ll make it big, who the hell knows? Or you can come with me, the way you’ve always said you would *always* be with me!” She turned away so John wouldn’t see the tears that welled in her eyes.

She felt John’s arms around her a moment later. Her body shook with quiet sobs. “I love you, Kalis Vilneaux,” he whispered. “I’ll ...”

Kalis turned around and looked at John through tear-stained eyes. “No, John. Don’t tell me you’ll go unless you *want* to go. I don’t want you stuck light-years away from everyone and everything you’ve ever known unless you’re *positive* that’s what you want.” She gazed at him and saw that tears filled his eyes as well.

“Kalis, all I’ve ever wanted since the day I met you was to spend my life with you.” He smiled. “I have to say, I didn’t quite know at the time what I was getting myself into. But I’ll find something out there—who knows, maybe I *will* grow up. It could be good for me.”

“Oh, dammit, I didn’t mean to—I’m sorry, Love. I—“

“Hush,” John said and kissed her. Kalis sighed and leaned into him, melted into the kiss, and felt the tension in her body start to melt away.

“Well, when you put it that way ...” she said and gave him a small smile of her own.

“Maybe I can take up screenwriting, or bring a camera with me and do some independent filmmaking,” John mused. “And I guess we won’t be the *only* two people out there ...” His eyebrows knotted with momentary worry. “Will we?”

Kalis shook her head and laughed. “No, I’m sure we won’t.” Her hand cupped his cheek, and she drew his lips back to hers.

* * *

Phoenix Blue stood on the Tau Ceti Starship *Vigilant*’s observation deck and watched the star patterns shimmer and coalesce as the carrier and its escorts finished the transit through the Trans-D gate from Tau Ceti. The digital clock above the observation window updated to reflect the four and a half days which had passed while the ships had made transit.

A handful of seconds later, the lights dimmed and a klaxon sounded. Phoenix furled his blue-and-silver wings around his chest and ran down the observation deck’s stairs to the bridge. “All stations, situation report,” he said a moment later, before the bridge personnel could acknowledge his presence on deck.

“Engineering reports a harmonic resonance within the Trans-Dimensional drive, Sir,” said a green-and-yellow-feathered crewman who sat in front of the bridge engineering console. “We need to take the drives offline immediately!”

“Are all ships clear of the threshold?” Phoenix asked, referring to the threshold of the gate which had brought them to the Ross 154 system.

“Affirmative, sir,” came the response from navigation. “All ships are clear, and the gate has safely shut down.”

“Instruct engineering to shut down the drive. Communications, relay that order to our escorts.” The crew issued chirps of acknowledgment as they carried out Phoenix’s orders. Phoenix sat at his seat beside the unoccupied captain’s chair and used his chair’s control panel to activate the bridge’s central holodisplay. Instead of a tactical display, the holodisplay provided an image full of static. “Tactical, are our sensors offline?”

“Negative, Sir,” the crewman at the tactical station said. “But they’re receiving a tremendous amount of interference from. . . *something*. I can’t determine the source of the interference yet—”

“Colonel! Sir! I think you should see this!” Lieutenant Asgard’s exuberant rang through the bridge as the young officer practically flew through the elevator doors.

“Switch to passive sensors and see what we can get,” Phoenix said. He turned to the Lieutenant, who stood waiting at the entrance to the bridge as patiently as he could. “Lieutenant, I trust this is important for you to enter the bridge during an emergency?”

“Very important, Sir!” Asgard said. “The science teams started picking up the most fascinating thing as soon as we came into the system: a pulse wave of energy in trans-dimensional space that somehow has effects here in realspace!”

Phoenix’s head cocked to the side as he processed the Lieutenant’s news. “I commend you for bringing this to me. It *is* important. What more can you tell me about this ‘pulse wave’?”

“I can tell you that we missed the worst of it. Here, let me pull up what we have.” Asgard walked past Phoenix to the sensor controls, placed his datapad on top of it, and

allowed the datapad to synchronize with the control panel. The static on the holodisplay blinked out, replaced with a wire-frame model of the space surrounding the carrier group. Asgard made himself comfortable at the sensor console, much to the *discomfort* of the crewman who found Asgard's posterior uncomfortably close to his face. "Mmm, here we go!" Asgard said with a grin as an image of the Trans-D pulse superimposed itself over the existing image.

Phoenix walked next to the holodisplay to examine it more closely. "What would the effect of this pulse wave have been had we caught the brunt of it, Lieutenant?"

Asgard turned around, ignoring both the "fwap" sound his tail feathers made against the sensor crewman's beak and the muffled protest that followed. "That depends, Sir. The ships that didn't have their Trans-D drives on-line would only have had their sensor systems partially blinded. The ships that *did* have their Trans-D drives warmed up would have been totally annihilated. Ka-blooeey!" The lieutenant unfurled his wings with enough force to throw the unfortunate sensor crewman altogether out of his chair with a yelp.

Phoenix's chest feathers ruffled with amusement as the sensor crewman picked himself up and escaped to a safer distance. After a moment, he cleared his throat and settled himself. "Then the Gods have smiled upon us. But tell me, can you pinpoint the source of the anomaly?"

"Not with one-hundred-percent certainty," Asgard explained. "There's an asteroid field about three light-minutes from here with some localized *qualgra* crystal deposits that interfere with our scans. I can feed you the epicenter coordinates, but our margin for

error is around a hundred kilometers in any direction. I'm sorry I can't give you anything better than that."

"It will suffice," Phoenix said. His eyes narrowed to slits. "*Qualgra* crystals do not exist outside Kentauran space, but this weapon—if it is in fact a weapon—is too crude to be Kentauran in origin. This certainly bears investigation.

"Asgard, have our fighters prepare for launch. Inform the other ships in our task force to assume an inverse-V formation. Summon Stormhawk Grey and let him know he will be in command of the task force while I lead our scouts to find the source of this disturbance."

Asgard gave a curt nod and bow. "At once, Sir!" he said, and ran off the bridge as quickly as he had entered.

* * *

"Lightning Lead, this is Lightning One-Six. I have an unidentified object on my scanner, range two-zero kilometers."

"Acknowledged," Phoenix Blue replied. "Send me your telemetry." He maneuvered his fighter through a sixty-degree-port yaw, then fired his thrusters until his craft rested in the shadow of a ten-meter-by-four-meter asteroid. A small holodisplay on his comm. panel activated and displayed an image of the object Lightning Sixteen's sensors had spotted.

The object was unnaturally round and smooth. According to the sensor scan, its shell consisted of a carbon-titanium alloy, while its internal components contained traces of *qualgra* crystal, silicon, and copper. The sensor analysis indicated working electrical equipment, including slower-than-light sensors; and trans-dimensional communication

equipment that was non-functional. *The pulse wave must have knocked the device's communication equipment offline*, Phoenix thought.

His mission timer beeped to indicate another minute had passed, and that only three minutes remained. Phoenix and the other handful of scouts who had flown out with him had scanned the asteroid field near the predicted epicenter of the disturbance but had found nothing. *The qualgra crystals embedded in these devices interfere with our scans*, he thought, *and make it impossible to scan anything outside a range of twenty-five kilometers.*

In three minutes, we hit the no-return point. After that, the probability that these scanners will come back online shoots toward a hundred percent. We do not have the time we need to find such a well-concealed base of operations ...

Phoenix's eyes widened with an epiphany. *But maybe we can make them reveal themselves, if they think we know where they are already.* "All craft," he said into his comm. panel, "this is Lightning Lead. Return to base, repeat, return to base." He pitched his own fighter up 120 degrees and accelerated back to the *Vigilant*.

* * *

"Honey, I'm home!" Kalis exclaimed with a broad grin as she entered the quarters she and John called home.

"I'm in the study," John called out from another room.

As the front door closed behind her, Kalis joined John in the study, gave him a brief kiss, and plopped into her reclining chair. "How was your day, Love?" she asked.

"Really good!" John said. "I got a vid-mail from Mr. Ellison at Paramount. He told me that *Exodus to Europa* is in post-production and that it should hit theaters by

Thanksgiving. They think it's going to be a huge hit, especially among the Altered audiences. And he asked me if I was interested in writing a sequel."

"A sequel?" Kalis asked, the smile as evident in her voice as it was on her face. "Aren't they getting a little ahead of themselves?"

John shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe, but who am I to argue? I just have to think about what I would write for a sequel. But I'm thinking ... there's hardly anyone who knows anything about the Altered's departure from Europa. No one knows where they went; no one really knows why they left or even how. One day they were there; the next day, the whole colony goes quiet; and by the time anyone gets out there to find out what's going on, the entire colony has disappeared like it was never even carved out of the ice."

"Sounds like material for a good mystery holodrama."

"Maybe, but if the studio wants anything based in reality, they're going to have to wait a while for it—because I'd have to spend months of time in libraries and hunting down interviewees back on Earth just to get started."

Kalis gave John a gentle smile. "It's worth waiting for. You've always had a knack for finding out information like that anyway. And you're bound to get a good return on the time investment, if your contract for *Exodus to Europa* is any indication. I have some leave time ... we could spend a week or two next month back on Earth, enjoying the sunlight and the sea breeze ..."

John turned around, placed his writing tablet on his desk, and faced his chair toward Kalis. "Sounds like a nice getaway. Is there a special occasion, or is this just an impulse to see a *yellow* sun again?"

Kalis' smile turned mysterious. "Maybe a little of both. Anyway, you haven't asked me how my day went yet."

John adopted a mock-surprised look. "My God, you're right. How rude of me!" he teased. "So, how was your day?"

"Well, do you want the good news or the *really* good news?"

"Oh, let me think about that one." John rubbed his chin. "I guess I'll take the good news first."

"Remember what I was telling you about my research project, with the two groups of mice I'd irradiated about two weeks ago? Most of the mice in the both groups started developing tumorous areas in their brains, just as I'd expected they would. But *last* week, I introduced our retrovirus into the test group. I checked the results today ... John, they're completely clean."

John blinked. "Do you think they're cured? Do you think you've found it? Will it work on other types of tumors?"

Kalis shook her head. "I don't know yet. It's too early to tell. We'll have to perform a lot more tests, and at some point I'm going to have to send my results back to Earth for further analysis and study. But I'm hopeful, Love. I really think I'm onto something."

"You said there was *really* good news, too ...?"

Kalis' smile grew into a broad grin. "Are you sure you're ready? There aren't any gravitational anomalies under your chair, are there?"

John rolled his eyes and smirked. “I’ll show you a gravitational anomaly if you don’t tell me. Are you going to spill the beans, or do I have to tickle them out of you?”

He gave her a playful look and wiggled his fingers at her.

Kalis laughed, then took a deep breath and smiled softly back at John. “I’m pregnant.”

John’s fingers froze in mid-wiggle, and his jaw dropped. “Mon Dieu ...” the surprised look on his face transformed into a wide-eyed grin. “My God, Darling! That’s *terrific!*” He stood up, crossed the study to her armchair, and threw his arms around her. “When did you find out?”

“Just today.” Kalis wrapped her arms around John’s shoulders. “I’d been feeling ill right after lunch most of this last week, so I went to the doctor thinking I had a flu bug of some sort. Then he asked me when I’d had my last period, and I realized that it’d been at least six weeks, maybe two months. He gave me the pregnancy test, and ...”

“I guess we *do* have a special cause to celebrate. Did you have anyplace specific on Earth in mind?”

Kalis shrugged. “Not really. Want to brainstorm about it over dinner at the Officers’ Mess?”

“Sounds like a plan.” John smiled. “Let me know when you’re ready.”

* * *

Phoenix Blue, Stormhawk Gray, and Asgard sat in Phoenix’s office and watched the small holographic projection above the table around which they sat. “This is the image of the object we encountered while on our search,” Phoenix said. “Our people have

seen such devices before, so I need no explanation of what it is. But it does raise several new questions:

“How might one of the Interlopers’ listening devices be connected to the anomaly we experienced earlier? How long do we have before it or some other such device detects our presence? Most importantly, can we use this sensor analysis to devise a way to beat the *qualgra*-based interference?” Phoenix pulled a datapad from the table and passed it to the Lieutenant.

“Probably not, Sir, at least not on such short notice,” Asgard said with a shake of his head. “We have teams of researchers back on the home worlds devoted to answering that very question, and they haven’t made any headway, either. *Qualgra* crystal is pretty interesting stuff, from what we have determined—you give it a little electric current, and it gives off waves of energy that disrupt low-level Trans-D activity. It’s not powerful enough to disrupt thresholds unless you have a whole lot of the crystals working together to produce the effect; but it’s enough even at low levels to make any sensor information we receive totally useless.”

“That does not explain why the Interlopers can still use Trans-D communications and thresholds in the presence of these devices,” Phoenix said. “We have witnessed this, and there was no drop in the satellites’ activity when it occurred. How might you explain that, Asgard?”

“I don’t really know. I wish there’d been a way to tow that thing back here and *really* get a good look at it! Say. . . I don’t suppose we could send out a shuttle and recover one of those hatchlings? I’d *love* to dig my talons into one ...”

“I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Stormhawk Gray said. “We already know there is an Interloper presence in the system. I doubt that presence is limited to a handful of satellites. Lieutenant, hypothesize for me, how much energy would you need to duplicate such a pulse wave?”

Asgard turned to the gray-feathered captain of the *Vigilant*. “You would need a fixed installation, or else a capital ship larger than anything in our navy. Since the Interlopers don’t have more than a handful of capital ships, I’d bet three kilograms of *t’bikh* seed that whatever they have here was *built* here.”

Stormhawk nodded and turned back to Phoenix. “Then we’re dealing with a fixed outpost and its satellite grid. Since they have not reacted to our presence, we may assume either that they are defenseless or that they were blinded long enough that our entry into the system went unnoticed. I ordered all ships to rig for silent running as soon as your scouts were away: the only way they will be able to detect us at long range is if we power up high-energy systems such as Trans-D generators or our main weapons systems. Otherwise, we are practically invisible”

“True, though we have no way of knowing how much longer we might remain undetected,” Phoenix said.

“And the ‘practically’ part is worrisome,” Asgard added. Stormhawk glanced at the younger officer, and Phoenix nodded in agreement. “But we know where *they* are, and they don’t even know we’re here. I think we should kick ‘em while they’re down.”

“Duly noted.” Phoenix’s chest feathers ruffled. “Captain, do you concur with the Lieutenant’s concise, if enthusiastic, strategic assessment?”

“Our mission orders do not specify contact with the enemy,” Stormhawk said thoughtfully, “only that we determine the cause of the anomalous radiation that our home worlds’ research teams picked up from this system. Still ... one could make the case that we have not determined the cause of that radiation precisely enough to send Headquarters a meaningful report.

“But whatever we do, Sir, we should do it quickly. The Interlopers are not likely to blind themselves again the *next* time they test this device of theirs.”

“Indeed not,” Phoenix said. His chest feathers flattened, and his eyes gleamed with the same inspiration that had motivated him to recall his scouts early. “In fact, we can count on them taking measures to immunize themselves from the effects of the pulse wave, much as we did shortly after we entered the system ... and we can take advantage of it.

“I propose a division of our carrier group into two smaller task forces. You will lead the *Vigilant* and the larger of the two forces. Captain Gryphon Jade of the cruiser *Falcon’s Cry* will oversee the smaller group.” Phoenix replaced the sensor readout of the satellite with a tactical display of the carrier group and the asteroid field as the two other officers listened to his plan.

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Aboard the outpost’s Spartan command center, Captain Justin Aurelius looked over the sensor logs that had begin to flood in from the now-active IntelSat grid. His hand passed through his thin brown hair as his brown-eyed gaze turned toward his right.

“Doctor Reed, tell me you have something—some device, some bit of information—that might not cost us our sensor network next time you test-fire your little toy?”

“At present, Captain, I do not,” replied Sandra Reed, mission commander for the Riptide Device project. “Nonetheless, the temporary incapacitation proved an excellent demonstration of our device’s capabilities. Now we can begin looking at ways to prevent the Riptide Wave from affecting Terran trans-dimensional communications and propulsion systems. Try to understand, Captain: you have to build a foundation before you can install the kitchen sink.”

For not the first time in the last sixteen months, Justin cursed the luck of having his station and his crew subordinated to a civilian organization. The scientists were masters of their chosen fields of study: from nothing more than the basic theory behind trans-dimensional propulsion, they had built a weapon that could disrupt any Trans-D activity within two light-minutes, or about fifty million kilometers. But their skill and experience in tactical and strategic capabilities made Justin nervous about placing them in the chain of command. *It would be all well and good if they would admit their ignorance in military matters*, Justin thought, *but they insist that they know more about strategy than officers who’ve studied military doctrine for fifteen to twenty years. Yes, they know the ins and outs of the outpost’s defenses—but so do we. And, he added darkly, they don’t have any experience dealing with the Birds, who know military doctrine just as well as we do.*

The Birds had first appeared only a year or two ago, in the outskirts of the New Earth system. They’d received their name from the initial report, which noted that the design of their small craft was reminiscent of Terran birds of prey, with down-turned, long noses, and wide, extended wings. Whatever passed for a language among their race

sounded like music, unless it was a battle cry; and then, even through the filtering of comm. systems, it nearly made one's ears bleed.

Captain Aurelius had not been a part of that first encounter with the Birds. He had been part of the second as commander of the New Earth cutter *NES Harlequin*, assigned to escort gargantuan colony ships between the Altair Customs Station and New Earth. He had watched from the bridge of his ship as the Birds descended in fury from the halo of Altair's light, cracked the colony ship open like an egg, and disappeared as quickly as they had arrived. Both the surprise they had invoked and the damage they had wrought were total: the *Harlequin* had not even had the chance to fire a single shot.

Yet, oddly enough, the Birds had spared his ship. In fact, they had ignored the *Harlequin* almost as if it did not exist. The result had been a fact-finding trial for dereliction of duty charges against both Justin and his tactical officer at the time; the sensor logs, however, had demonstrated that enough ships had come out of Trans-D space at such short range that the *Harlequin's* crew could not have saved the colony ship, or its ten thousand occupants, under any circumstances.

The flow of colonists to New Earth slowed to a trickle after the incident—the few ships that still came through did so under much heavier escort. The Birds' presence had escalated, kicking off an arms race between the Terran Defense Force and the alien newcomers. Justin's career stalled after the incident and the summary inquiry: he had kept his rank, but he never again commanded anything that *mattered*. And here at the Ross 154 Outpost, he didn't have command at all.

To irritate the situation even further, Sandra Reed, a slender young woman whose cerulean eyes contrasted with her shoulder-length black hair and charcoal-gray uniform,

seemed willfully ignorant of the threat the Birds presented. They were dangerous in a way even Justin did not completely comprehend; and he knew that what little knowledge the woman had was entirely academic. Nonetheless, by order of the Terran Parliament, Office of the Minister of Defense, Dr. Reed held absolute authority except in cases of emergency ... and only Dr. Reed had the authority to declare an emergency.

“I’m pleased you have concrete evidence that your weapon works as advertised, Doctor. However—”

“*Our* weapon, dear Captain,” Sandra purred. “In another three months, we will have the Riptide Wave so finely tuned that our own ships will not even feel a whisper, while the Birds’ ships will burn in space.”

Justin gripped the armrest of his command chair. “If your researchers are not a bit more careful, Doctor, we may not *have* another three months! Each time you’ve fired that thing, you’ve brought down our sensor network and left us blind as bats. An enemy fleet could be right in front of us, but we wouldn’t know until the satellites’ self-repair mechanisms brought their comm. systems back online an hour or so later.

“And have you considered how far the effects of the Riptide Wave might be visible? Is it possible that the Birds can see these waves from their homeworld—wherever that may be?”

“It is possible,” Sandra conceded, “but irrelevant. Anyone who could detect it outside the Ross 154 System would have to find us once they arrived; and even you must admit, dear Captain, that we are very well-hidden. No—we would bring the Riptide Wave to bear upon them before they could find us, and we would pulverize them.”

“We are only invisible, Doctor, when the Riptide Wave doesn’t make us a beacon in trans-dimensional space for everyone between Old Earth and New Earth to see.”

Dr. Reed’s eyes flared, then hardened. “Captain Aurelius, do you *ever* tire of your ceaseless worrying and bellyaching? Our location is secure; and if the Birds *should* happen upon us, it will be a most interesting field test indeed.” A grin twisted her otherwise attractive features, and Justin suppressed a shiver. “Just make sure you do your job this time, dear Captain, and I will do mine.”

Justin’s blood boiled with rage and humiliation. *That woman will be the death of us yet*, he thought. *She’s beyond arrogant—she’s a God-damned lunatic!*

* * *

Kalis pushed her plate a couple inches away and rested her chopsticks on the table. “Okay, that’s it for me, I’m done,” she said around a contented sigh. “That was good!”

John smiled across the table at her and swallowed his last bite of teriyaki steak. “I’m glad you like it ... and I’m *very* glad we got a chance to enjoy Japanese food out here. I have to say, I’m surprised they have fresh fish and beef this far from Earth.”

“You have to pay a bit more for it, but it’s worth it,” Kalis said as she smiled back. “Besides, the fisheries on New Earth have really kicked into gear the last year or two. They’re actually *exporting* salmon to Terra, which means the outpost can purchase it from ships en route to Sol.”

John’s eyebrows rose in curiosity. “What else do they grow on New Earth?” he asked.

“I don’t know too much about it,” Kalis explained. “I’ve never been there, and the family doesn’t have much of a stake in New Earth’s agricultural industries. You know, though, maybe we could visit there and find out; or maybe I could get an assignment there after I’m done here?”

“One thing at a time, though,” John said with a shrug. “It’s something to think about, but I’d rather think about it after we’ve enjoyed our holiday back on Terra.” Their waiter stopped briefly to pick up their plates, then departed. John continued, “Old Earth is familiar, and I’d like to go someplace I’m at least a little familiar with. Besides, there is the matter of the research I’d like to get started ...”

“Oh, I know, Love,” Kalis said. “I agree, we’ll go to Earth this time. But we should get some information about New Earth, too—it’s a big universe after all.”

Outside the Officers’ Club, a siren began to wail in a short, warbling tone. Kalis’ and John’s eyebrows knotted in confusion for a brief moment, until Kalis’ military training kicked in, and she recognized the meaning behind the sound. “Come on,” she said as she grabbed John’s hand and practically dragged him out of his seat.

* * *

“Sensors report three starships, Sir,” Ensign Wyatt said from her station at tactical. “Friend-or-foe sensors read negative. Starship masses match intelligence profiles for one Bird light cruiser and two destroyers. Attempting to increase resolution ...”

“Range to enemy ships, Ensign?” Captain Aurelius asked, all frustration at Dr. Reed gone from his mind.

“Roughly four hundred kilometers, Sir ... they’re practically right on top of us!”

“Are they moving?”

“Negative, Sir, but their weapons systems are online. The threshold they entered through is closing.”

“They want us to fire the first shot ...” Justin whispered to himself.

Doctor Reed sat into her chair and tapped her seat’s comm. panel. “Status of Riptide Wave projector? Nominal? Excellent. Prepare to fire and give me a fifteen-second countdown.”

The doctor sprang right *back* into the forefront of Captain Aurelius’ mind. “Belay that! Doctor Reed, stand down your device! It’s a trap!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sandra barked. “In a moment, they will all be dust!” Power flickered throughout the command center as the Riptide pulse wave shot from the outpost in all directions at the speed of light.

* * *

“They took the bait!” Asgard exclaimed as the expanding ring of trans-dimensional energy appeared on the sensor display and expanded toward the *Vigilant* and her escorts. “We have their coordinates! Sending data to navigation.”

“Coordinates received,” reported the navigation officer. “Standing by to open second threshold on your command, Captain.”

Phoenix’s eyes met Stormhawk’s. “Captain, take us in,” Phoenix said. “Communications, signal the other ships to follow us through the second threshold as soon as it’s open.”

“Navigation, open second threshold,” Stormhawk said. “Give us best speed to the gate, then slow us to twenty meters per second for threshold passage.” The navigator

brought the carrier into motion as the Trans-D gate shimmered and cracked into being before them.

* * *

“No effect on enemy starships!” Ensign Wyatt said, her voice tinged with fear. “Repeat, Bird ships are intact!”

“That’s impossible!” Sandra stammered. “The only way they could have survived our weapon is if they somehow knew—”

“They *did* know, *dear* Doctor,” Justin spat. Despite the gravity of the situation, gratification welled up within him as his verbal jab connected. “They knew we were somewhere in this system, they knew what your little toy was capable of, and they had a strategy to counter it. The only thing they didn’t know was our exact coordinates—which you just handed them on a silver platter.” He gestured to two security personnel who stood on either side of the command center’s entrance. “Per Terran Defense Force General Order Eighteen, no non-combatant shall occupy the command center of a military installation during a period of open hostilities. Security, escort this woman to the attack shelter.”

“*What?!*” Sandra asked, her jaw agape. The guards hefted her between them and carried her toward the exit doors, and her face twisted with rage. “I will have your *head* for this, Justin Aurelius!” The doors opened, then closed; and Sandra Reed, project leader and mission commander of the Riptide Wave project, was no longer Justin Aurelius’ concern.

“Get in line,” he muttered toward the now-closed doors, then turned back toward the sensor display. He still had the Birds to worry about. “Tactical, bring our turrets

online and target the nearest destroyer. Communications, send out a general distress call on all frequencies.”

“Communications is offline, Sir,” the comm. officer replied. “Interference from the Riptide Wave—we can’t punch a signal through it.”

“Damn that woman!” Justin hissed. “Very well. All turrets, open fire.” Justin mentally calculated the outpost’s firepower against the three Bird capital ships. The outpost’s defenses might still drive them off ... he could only hope.

“Sir, another threshold!” Ensign Wyatt said. “Range is less than fifty kilometers!”

“The cavalry?” Justin asked, even though he knew better.

“Resolving IFF scan ... negative, Sir.” Ensign Wyatt turned toward Justin, her face grim as she gave him the outpost’s death sentence. “One carrier and two more light cruisers ... all Bird ships, Sir.”

* * *

Phoenix turned to *Vigilant*’s tactical officer. “Target the source of the pulse wave and fire.”

* * *

The first impact resounded through the outpost with a rumble and rocked the asteroid hard enough to send Kalis and John staggering. Kalis lost her balance and threw her hands out in front of her to catch her fall. John turned around two meters away from her, the moment he noticed she wasn’t still beside him. “Kalis!” he shouted, and took a step toward her to help her back to her feet.

A second impact hit the outpost two seconds after the first. The ground shook even more violently than before, and the hallway lights died. An instant later, the hallway

in front of Kalis exploded in green-white fire as a jet of plasma erupted from the wall to John's left and enveloped him in six-thousand-degree heat. The flames seared the flesh from his skeleton in less than a second; by three seconds, even his skeleton had disintegrated. John Vilneaux was as gone as if he had never existed at all.

"John!" Kalis screamed. "*JOHN!!*" She crawled toward where John had been just a moment ago.

A third impact smote the outpost as hard as if Mjölnir itself had delivered the blow. The outpost's crumbling superstructure extinguished the plasma flames as quickly as they had appeared.

* * *

"Cease fire," Phoenix ordered. The rain of laser and particle beam fire from the carrier ceased. "Asgard, what is the status of the Interloper outpost?"

"Everything within a hundred meters of the pulse wave generator has been pulverized," Asgard said. "Their power system is down to emergency batteries, and their weapon systems are completely destroyed. They have minimal life support and artificial gravity ... and I still read a handful of life signs."

"And the status of our task forces?"

"FTL sensors are intermittent—we shut them down in time, but there must still be ambient interference in the area. The *Melatha* sustained damage to its starboard-side thrusters and its weapon systems. Otherwise, no ships are damaged."

Phoenix nodded. "Excellent work. Communications, send my compliments to all ships' crews on the fine execution of their mission, then have them move back into transit formation. Navigation, set a course for the home worlds and prepare to open a threshold."

“Belay that,” Stormhawk Gray interrupted. “Colonel, we are not done here.”

Phoenix cocked his head to the side, confusion mixed with indignation at having his order countermanded. “Captain Stormhawk, are you aware of something that I am not?”

“There are still living Interlopers within that asteroid ... they are witnesses. Our job is not finished.”

Phoenix’s confusion evaporated. “Captain, we are officers, not murderers. The few who are left on the Interlopers’ outpost may live, or they may not; but I will not reduce us to butchers.”

“Better we finish them while we hold the talons to their throats!” Stormhawk replied. “Colonel, some of the Interlopers responsible for creating that project may have survived. We should not allow them to finish their work elsewhere—we should destroy as much of their research as possible, including their scientists, while we have the chance.”

Phoenix shook his head. “They no doubt sent records of their research back to their homeworld on a regular basis, Captain. We gathered a great deal of information on what they are doing here, and we destroyed their prototype; but we have accomplished all we can here. They are incapacitated, but reinforcements may be on their way. We must depart.

“Navigation, resume my previous order. Prepare to engage Trans-D drive.”

The navigation officer acknowledged Phoenix’s order. Stormhawk glared at the holographic image of the asteroid and what little remained of the outpost built into it. “I

do not concur, Colonel, and I will make my disagreement known when we return to the home worlds.”

“I understand, Captain,” Phoenix said and turned to watch the Trans-D gate to the home worlds form.

* * *

Cold, Kalis thought. Why is it so cold?

She tried to move her legs, but found her right leg pinned under the rubble. A jolt of pain seared through her nerves, and she cried out. *Leg must have been broken in the collapse ...* The palms of her hands had cuts and scrapes from the fall she had taken; her stomach was tight with cramps; and her face and fingers were numb from the chill in the thin air. She curled herself into a fetal position around her immobile leg and tucked her hands against her stomach to shield them from the cold.

“John?” she tried to call out, but her voice came out as a coarse whisper. “John?”

A couple small rocks settled into niches between the larger pieces of rubble.

Why does it hurt to speak? she asked herself. *I feel like I've been screaming for hours. And where's John?*

A brief, vague memory flashed into her mind: John was there, then a fire blasted into him, and he was gone. Kalis shook her head as if to shake the memory out of her. *No, that was just a bad dream. There was no fire. It's too cold for fire. The ground knocked me out when I fell, and John had to keep going to the attack shelter, and he'll come back for me as soon as it's safe. I know he will.*

Maybe this is a dream, too ... She closed her eyes and drifted to sleep.

* * *

The light cruiser *TDS Avalon* surged into the Ross 154 System through a threshold that rippled with arcs of blue-white trans-dimensional energy. The gate gave one last burst of energy as it snapped shut and the space around it returned to its normal, pre-distorted state. The starship's sensors immediately began to collect data from its passive sensors and from the system's IntelSat network.

Aboard the command center, Lieutenant Commander Loren Damien stood with his hands clasped behind his back and watched the tactical display of the system update itself. Lieutenant Alexander Mackenzie, the *Avalon*'s first officer, stood at his senior officer's left side and folded his arms across his chest. His hazel eyes focused on a set of statistics on the bottom of the screen. "That's interesting ..." he said.

"'Interesting' is certainly one word for it," Damien said. "Though I think it would be a bit of an understatement. Lieutenant Corrington, am I reading this display correctly when it says roughly thirty percent of the IntelSat network is down?"

A young, brown-haired man turned around, and his gray eyes met the Commander's. "That's correct, Sir," Bruce Corrington answered. "I'm downloading telemetry logs and sensor data from the ones that are still operational, but it's going to take a while to analyze."

"Let's try to raise the outpost," Alex said and walked back to his chair. He sat down and opened the chair's comm. panel and opened a communications channel. "Ross 154 Outpost, this is *TDS Avalon*," he said. "Respond, please ... Ross 154 Outpost, this is *TDS Avalon*. Please, respond." He frowned when no response issued from the outpost, then placed the hail on auto-repeat. "Commander, there's no response from the outpost. They may have been attacked."

“Damn,” Damien muttered. “Sound general quarters and send a message back to Earth. Ensign Mitroi,” he said to the navigation officer, “bring us to within fifty kilometers of the outpost. Lieutenant Corrington, give me sensor readings on the outpost’s status: life signs, power readings, anything you can.”

Alex drew a hand through his sand-colored hair and composed a brief message to send back to Earth: “Ross 154 System compromised—sensor net at 70-percent reliability. Outpost fails to respond to hails. Request reinforcements and relief ships ASAP.” He hit the “transmit” button and let the message speed back to Earth through trans-dimensional space.

“Commander,” Bruce said, “I have an analysis on the outpost ... or what’s left of it.”

“Damn!” This time Damien issued the curse loudly enough that the rest of the bridge crew could hear him. “Okay, give me the bad news.”

“The outpost superstructure is almost completely destroyed,” Bruce said. “Life support is barely hanging on ... gravity generators are functioning at twenty percent, and heating and air circulation systems are at thirty percent. Both are functioning on emergency battery power, which has maybe a half hour of juice left.

“I’m picking up a small concentration of about a dozen life signs within the outpost’s attack shelter. And, Commander ... I’m picking up a single faint life sign *outside* the shelter as well.”

“Survivors ... thank God,” Alex said through a sigh of relief. “Sir, request permission to assemble a search and rescue team?”

Damien nodded. “Actually, we’re going to need two teams,” he said. “Lieutenant Corrington, lead a team to the attach shelter and rescue the occupants. Alex, I want your team to try to find that other survivor. Both of you should take extra EVA suits with you, as the landing bay is probably exposed to vacuum. Best of luck, gentlemen ... dismissed.”

* * *

Sounds of movement stirred Kalis from her dreamless sleep. The hallway had grown even colder, she realized: she could no longer feel the toes of her left foot, nor anything below her shin in her right leg. Her abdominal cramps had stopped, replaced by dull, steady pain and a wet sensation between her thighs.

Another sound: a voice? Was someone nearby? Had John come back for her after all? “John?” she croaked. “Is that you? John?” She heard the sound again—yes, it was definitely a voice! It didn’t sound like John’s voice, though, nor like any other voice she recognized.

The rubble in front of her shifted, then fell away from her as two people in exoskeletons cleared them from the hallway. “We found her, Commander,” one of them said in a gruff bass voice. “She’s in bad shape. We’re going to try to get her out of this mess and extract her. Have an emergency medical team standing by for us when we get back to the *Avalon*.”

Avalon ... Kalis tried to place the name, but couldn’t. From the context, she guessed that it was a ship of some sort. What had transpired while she’d been trapped? How long had she been here? Where was John?

The memory flashed back in her mind once more; and this time, she could not deny the harsh reality. “No! *Nooo!*!” she screamed and began to twist and scrape in a

mad attempt to free herself from the rubble. The cold had killed most of the feeling in her right leg; and in her hysteria, she ignored the pain that did register as her thrashing tore at muscle and pulverized bone. She barely recognized the feeling of an exoskeletal hand against her back, restraining her movements; then she felt a sharp prick against the back of her neck. The room began to spin and quickly faded to black.

* * *

Alex and Damien looked over Lieutenant Edward Sergas' left shoulder to the sickbay bed where the young woman whom Alex rescued now lay. The rubble had delivered a terrible beating to her ivory skin: a gash stretched along her jaw, and she bore dark purple bruises around her left eye and temple. Her arms bore scrapes and bruises along their length—and her right forearm carried a ten-centimeter long second degree burn. Her right leg was enclosed from the knee down in a cast and lay elevated from the bed.

“She looks like she’s seen better days.” Damien said with a slow shake of his head. “Alex, you and your team did a damn good job pulling her out of that mess; and Eddie, I’m impressed at how well you put her back together.”

Eddie knotted his brow and wrung his hands in concern. “Thank you, Sir, but I’m not sure she’s out of the woods yet. Between the broken leg, the frostbite, and the miscarriage, she’s lost a *lot* of blood. Now I managed to get the leg put back together temporarily, but she’s going to require another surgery and weeks, maybe months of physical therapy before it’s back to normal. Her toes will recover from the frostbite. I think we performed laposcopic surgery well enough to save her reproductive system, but it’ll take a couple more days and possibly some follow-up work to know for sure.”

“You did all you can, Eddie.” Alex nodded. “The rest of it is up to her. Do we know anything about her: who she is, family history, anything of that sort?”

Eddie nodded. “I queried the TDF personnel database with her DNA profile and found a match. She’s Kalis Hansen Vilneaux, a first lieutenant assigned to the Fifth Medical Group, Biochemical Research Squadron.”

“Any references to someone named ‘John’ in her profile?” Alex’s eyes were grim, and he explained further when Damien and Eddie gave him quizzical looks. “She was calling out his name when we found her. Given her state, I’m pretty sure she was delirious; she flew into hysterics a second later. We had to sedate her to keep her from tearing her leg off at the knee.”

“As a matter of fact,” Eddie mused, “there was a John Vilneaux, her husband.”

“There was no one else with her,” Alex said. “Was he in the group Bruce rescued from the attack shelter?”

“His name wasn’t on the list Bruce gave me when he came back aboard.” Damien replied.

“Then he’s probably dead. Damn, talk about rotten luck ... poor kid. Eddie, you’d better put her on suicide watch when she wakes up ... and call me, as well. I think I’d like to be here.”

Eddie nodded. “I will, Sir.”

Alex shared a look with Damien and the Commander nodded. “We’ve taken up enough of your time, Eddie. We’ll let you get back to your work.” The two senior officers turned and left the sickbay.

* * *

Alex had just come off duty and but hadn't yet gotten out of uniform when Eddie called his quarters. "Alex, she's stirring. If you hurry, you can make it down here before she's fully awake."

"I'm on my way," Alex said and rushed out the door. He covered the two hundred meters of corridors and stairways between his quarters and the sickbay at a brisk jog and arrived to see the young woman roll over onto her back, reaching out for someone only she could see. Eddie walked toward her bed but kept himself out of the immediate area as Alex walked to her bedside.

The young woman's hand met Alex's. "John?" she croaked.

"I'm afraid not," Alex said and gave her hand a light squeeze. The young woman's eyes opened, and her golden eyes stared up at him. "You all the way up for us?" he asked as he pulled a chair to the bed and sat down. "Do you know who you are?"

"Lieutenant Kalis Vilneaux, Sir," she said with some difficulty, her voice gravelly. "Serial number 25-dash-368-dash-22-dash-9664. I'm with the 5th Medical Group, assigned to medical research on the Ross 154 outpost." Her eyes cleared as she became more aware of her surroundings. "Where am I, Sir? Where's John?"

"Kalis, was he on-base with you?" When she nodded, he closed his eyes for a moment and gave a slow shake of his head. "I'm very sorry, but we don't think he survived." He watched her eyes cloud over with grief and wished he could say something that would ease her pain.

"My baby ..." she whispered, barely able to breathe through her grief.

Alex's heart sunk further under the weight of Kalis' grief. "I'm sorry. Doctor Sergas says there was too much trauma."

He motioned to Eddie to fetch an orderly, in case they had to sedate her again. This time, however, she showed none of the signs of the madness that had possessed her aboard the ruined outpost. Instead, her hand slipped from Alex's, and she turned away to stare unseeing at the bulkhead.

* * *

"I'm sorry to bother you, Alex." Eddie apologized when Alex came into his office. Two days had passed since Alex's initial visit with the young woman, but he'd asked Eddie to keep him up-to-date on her status. "I thought maybe you could help me with Lieutenant Vilneaux—it seems she'll respond to you, a little at least. I can't get her to eat anything. I finally had to hook her up to an IV just to keep her from starving." "Did she fight you on that?"

"No." Eddie shook his head. "She hasn't been violent or even argumentative. In fact ..." Eddie's brow furrowed as he glanced over at his patient's room. "It's like she's not even there. No one can get more than three words out of her. The most she's said was when the Commander debriefed her. And moreover, I know she's in a lot of pain, but she hasn't requested any extra pain control. I can barely get her to take enough to keep it at bay. It's like she *wants* to be in pain."

Alex cocked an eyebrow and smiled. "Aren't you the one in charge here, Eddie?"

The doctor sighed. "I know. She's just been through so much already, I hate to push her too hard."

"All right, you softy." Alex grinned. "Can I take her out of the sickbay?"

"She's well enough except for the leg, so you'll need a wheelchair. I'll go get you one." While Eddie hurried over to storage, Alex headed for Kalis' bed.

She lay on her side, face turned to the wall and hands pressed to her abdomen. She looked pale and fragile, like a porcelain doll. The obvious injuries, except for her leg, had nearly healed. Eddie had said it would take much longer for her to regain the use of her leg, and Alex wouldn't be surprised if she simply received a medical discharge for her injuries.

But it was the emotional wounds, he knew, which might never heal. He put on an easy smile, even as he silently cursed the Birds for their treachery, and entered the room.

“Hey, Kalis.” He kept his voice low in case she was sleeping, but she turned her head from the wall and regarded him neutrally.

“Afternoon, Sir.” Her voice was soft and empty of emotion, and her light-green eyes held no spark.

“Eddie tells me you've lost your appetite lately,” he said. “But since I'm a hopeless optimist, I thought I'd ask you if you'd like to catch dinner at the Officer's Mess anyway?”

Kalis shook her head. “Not really hungry,” she said.

“That's okay,” Alex said and shrugged. “I think the fresh air—or what passes for it on a starship—might do you some good. Besides, the view's better up there ... or at least it's different.”

“I'm not sure I want to see it again,” she said.

“I understand,” Alex said and nodded. He walked up to the bed and sat down on it next to her. “Can I bring you something, at least?”

“Commander, with all due—”

“Whoa,” Alex said. “This is too small a ship to be formal; besides, I’m off-duty and you’re not in my chain of command. Call me Alex.” Pause. “After all, it hasn’t been that long since I was a junior-grade lieutenant. Certainly hasn’t been long enough to let lieutenant senior-grade go to my head.”

Kalis laughed—it was a short bark of a laugh, but Alex still smiled at the sound of it. “Which class?”

“No class,” Alex said with a shake of his head. “Or at least, not an Academy class. I went through FCOT—field-commissioned officers’ training. It was either get a commission or retire as an NCO, and I decided I’d rather stay in.”

“How long *have* you been in?”

“How about I tell you over dinner,” he parried. The smile on his face adopted a sly twist.

“Cheater. Fine, I’ll play along.” Kalis gestured toward her hospital outfit. “If you can find me something to wear?”

“No problem,” Alex said. “I’ll go see what I can dig up. Hang on.” Alex went back into Eddie’s office while Kalis waited.

Eddie had returned from fetching the wheelchair and gave Alex an expectant look. “What’s the verdict?” he asked.

“We need to find a pair of pants and a shirt,” Alex said. “And they need to match.”

* * *

Alex finished his chicken breast as Kalis stabbed a cherry tomato in her garden salad. *She isn’t eating much*, Alex observed, *but at least she’s eating*. They had spent the

last hour eating, talking about various subjects—though Alex had done most of the talking—and trying not to think about the attack.

So Kalis caught Alex off-guard when she asked without warning, “Alex, tell me what happened?”

Alex blinked. “Are you sure you want to talk about it?”

“No,” Kalis said and stared at her salad, then popped the cherry tomato into her mouth.

Alex watched in painful sympathy. “It’s only been a couple of days,” he said. “There’s no rush. Take as much time as you need.”

They performed the same ritual the next four days as well, as if rehearsing for a play. On the fifth night, Alex broke from the script a moment or two after Kalis had again asked the question and changed her mind.

“In a couple of hours,” he said, “the heavy cruiser *Sekhmet* and her escort will arrive, and we will depart for Earth. It may be the last time you ever see the Ross 154 System—most of our ships now have enough power to open gates directly to and from New Earth. But whether you see the system again or not, it’s important that you give yourself the chance to say goodbye.

“It won’t be something that will make a difference today, but you’ll make the choice today whether you make it consciously or not. The choice you make will affect your military career and your entire future. If you choose to say goodbye, you can begin the healing process. It will hurt, a lot—that ‘goodbye’ isn’t some magical cure that will set everything right as soon as it’s uttered. No one can undergo what you have undergone and come out unscarred ... or, if they could, I would not think them human.

“Alternately, you can cling to what you had,” Alex continued as he gestured toward the asteroid field which had once housed the outpost. “It’s perfectly natural to try ... but the people who try too hard, for too long, lose themselves in their past and eventually self-destruct. I don’t want to see that happen to you.” He reached across the table and touched her left shoulder. “You’re a smart young woman and a damned *tough* woman, Kalis Vilneaux. You’re the only one who can keep yourself down; and in the end, you’re the only one who can pick yourself up and put yourself back together.

“Eddie’s given me permission to assign you to temporary quarters. He muttered something about it being against his better judgment, but I trust you won’t hurt yourself. Even if you decide to walk down that road ...” Alex shook his head. “It took a man in an exoskeleton to hold you down the first time we met. I don’t think we could stop you if you *truly* wanted to hurt yourself now.

“Anyway, I digress. I’ll help you get settled into your new quarters; but in exchange for what I’ve done, I’d like you to make me a promise.”

Kalis sniffled and looked up at Alex through tear-stained eyes.

“I want to meet with you again, five or ten years from now, on Liberty Station,” Alex said. “I want to know that you pulled through this, because I know you can.”

Kalis nodded.

“May I take that a yes?”

“Yes, Alex,” Kalis said, her voice unsure of itself. “As long as I’m still alive, I’ll meet you in ten years, on Liberty Station.”

Alex gave Kalis a stern glare. “If you’re *not* alive in ten years, I’ll have a Kentauran pull your spirit from the afterlife and give you a most severe reprimand for missing the meeting.”

Kalis gave a soft, dismissive laugh, then blinked when Alex’s expression remained firm. “You’re kidding. They can’t actually do that, can they?” she asked. A vision of a two-and-a-half meter lizard-like monster plucking her from the depths of Hell sent a shiver through the back of her mind, even as her conscious self realized the idea bordered on ludicrous.

Alex broke into a grin and shrugged. “Don’t know—but I wouldn’t put it past them.”

Kalis rolled her eyes and gave Alex a soft smile. “Have you met a Kentauran, Alex?” she asked.

“As a matter of fact, I have,” he said. “I was a member of the First Contact team in ’27.” He began to recall his first experience with the natives of Rigil Kentaurus as Kalis listened intently.