

KINFERRA DOWN

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Pill Hill Press
Chadron, Nebraska

One

The Naval starship, *Kinberra*, dropped back into normal space as alarm klaxons blared throughout the ship. “Damage report!” Captain Ozias Roberts screamed at the other five officers, with whom he shared the warship’s tiny bridge. Lieutenant Justin Weber had his hands full fighting with the controls at the ship’s helm and Ensign Hooper was still sending out desperate distress calls, hoping to reach another Earth vessel before the system completely shorted out and fell dead.

Commander Rebecca Stephens answered the captain. “Defense screens holding at thirty five percent! Main weapons are offline. Communications could go at any second. The array took a lot of damage from that last hit!”

Captain Roberts glared at Rebecca as if the strength of his anger could change the bleakness of their situation. The ambush had caught everyone off guard. No one in the fleet had imagined that Alpha Centuri Prime could have fallen to the Darrians so quickly—yet it had.

When the fleet left void space and entered the system, the Darrians were lying in wait for them. The strike force the *Kinberra* had been part of consisted of another heavy destroyer, *The Blackwood*, five cruisers and a troop carrier. The two destroyers alone held the firepower to do a massive amount of damage to any Darian force gathered against them, but the enemy fleet outnumbered them over three to one. Among the Darian vessels were a battleship, five destroyers, eight cruisers, and worst of all, two carrier ships.

BROWN AND ROBERTS

The Darrians opened fire as soon as the strike force hit normal space. The carriers launched wave after wave of the sleek, well-armored fighter ships the cat-like aliens favored in combat. *The Blackwood* took the brunt of the initial round of fire, and was almost instantly crippled before it could return fire.

The strike force's cruisers sped forward to engage the enemy fleet as the *Kinberra* moved to protect the troop transport. It was a futile effort; for every four fighters the *Kinberra's* railguns blew into flaming balls of fire that lit the darkness between the stars, one got through. The surviving smaller attack crafts roared into the troop ship at ramming speed.

In less than one minute, *Kinberra's* hull gave way to the relentless barrage of suicide runs. The shockwaves of its explosion hammered into the *Kinberra's* aft shields as its bow was pelted by fire from the Darian vessels. The crew's only hope of survival was to risk a random—and dangerous—void space jump.

Captain Roberts shouted the order as the *Kinberra* shuddered from a burst of Darian nukes catching it on its port side. The *Kinberra's* engines strained and shrieked in protest as the warship blinked away from the chaos of the battle.

They were safe from the enemy, but far from out of danger.

Captain Roberts glanced at the view screen. Not a single familiar star cluster or constellation stared back at him. "Where in Hades are we?" he yelled at Weber.

The helmsman had regained control of the ship from its rough entry into the unknown system. "No idea, sir. We're beyond the boundaries of charted space."

"Great," Captain Roberts muttered.

"Sir!" A big man named Griffin, *Kinberra's* chief engineer, bellowed at the captain. His face was full of panic and the mop of red hair atop his head was wet with sweat. "Whatever we do, I suggest we do it quickly. That jump fried the main drive. We've got systems flat lining all over the ship!"

"Options!" Captain Roberts barked.

KINBERRA DOWN

Commander Stephens looked up from her station. “This system contains one planet close to Earth class. I suggest we pour on the speed and touchdown there for repairs before we lose all power.”

Captain Roberts nodded. “Do it!” he ordered Weber. “If life-support goes down, we’re going to need an atmosphere around us.”

Weber punched the *Kinberra*’s sub-void thrusters to their max, and the warship limped towards the system’s fourth planet away from its twin suns. Weber clicked on the ship’s internal comm. without waiting for the order. “Everybody hold on to something! We’re going down fast and hard!”

The *Kinberra*’s hull lit up with flames as it howled into the planet’s atmosphere, towards the cold and barren world below. Captain Roberts said a silent prayer that the warship’s defense screens and inertial dampers would hold on long enough for them to survive the impact with the frozen rocks that grew larger on the view screen with each passing second.

Colonel Brant Hagan loosed a litany of curses as Weber’s warning came over the comm. He and his men had been in the process of preparing to launch the battle dropships designed to carry them to the surface of Alpha Centuri Prime before Earth Command’s plans for the strike force were sent screaming to Hell in a hand basket by the Darian ambush. Private John Hall succumbed to a look of total terror as Sergeant Taylor just shook his head and laughed. “Just another fragged up day in the service,” the hardened veteran snarled. “Get used to them.”

The marines hunkered down and held fast to anything solid they could reach as the *Kinberra*’s hull screeched and cried out from the strain of holding together as the warship dropped from the sky like a brick.

The *Kinberra* slammed into the glacier like an atom bomb, filling the air with a cloud of shrapnel. Ice and rock fragments were hurled through the air like bullets. The sound of its crash was carried by the planet’s winds for miles upon miles as the inhabitants of the world raised their mandibles skywards and loosed a chorus of hungry and angry chattering

BROWN AND ROBERTS

that overpowered the echoes of the *Kinberra's* impact. As one, they turned, wherever they were, and scrambled towards where the broken warship lay half buried in the ice.

Two

Mommy, can we go to the beach today?” Brian asked, tugging on the bottom of Rebecca’s knee-length nightshirt. His pleading blue eyes were filled with hope and excitement. Rebecca placed the plates of eggs and pancakes she was in the process of carrying to the kitchen table on the counter and bent over, sweeping her son up into her arms. Brian hugged her and giggled as she nuzzled his neck with her nose. At four years old, he was full of life and energy.

Often, Rebecca was jealous of the purity of joy she saw in him at times like this. There was a time, in the not so distant past, that she, too, had been carefree and happy. “The beach, huh?” Rebecca chuckled, sitting Brian in his chair.

He nodded, his blonde hair swaying with the exuberant movement. “I want to go swimming!” he stated as he beamed at her.

“All right,” she nodded, “but after breakfast, okay?”

Rebecca felt a rough hand grip her shoulder, shaking her so hard she had no choice but to wake up from her dream. She resented being torn away from Brian again, even if their interaction was only in her imagination.

As she reluctantly opened her eyes, Weber stood over her at her station on the *Kinberra*’s bridge. His uniform was smeared with blood, but she did not see any injuries. She assumed the blood was not his.

“Commander!” he shouted as she groggily shook her head, shaking away the last vestiges of her dream of Brian. The movement hurt, like someone had tried to smash in her

BROWN AND ROBERTS

forehead with a sledgehammer. She reached up and rubbed at her temple, wincing at the lightning hot pain shooting through her head. Her hand came away covered in something red, warm and sticky. The blood on her fingertips snapped her back into the present and she became instantly alert. Recent events flooded through her mind, and she grew dizzy as she took it all in—the battle for Alpha Centuri Prime was lost. The *Kinberra* had fled in a desperate and haphazard retreat.

“Commander!” Weber said again, his booming voice verging on desperation. “The Captain is dead. You’re in command now. We’ve crash landed and there’s been a lot of casualties.”

The words slammed into her like a slap in the face. She sat straighter in her chair. “Calm down, Weber, and give me a status report. How bad is it?” she asked, keeping her voice level. She could tell Weber was close to panicking, and the crew of *Kinberra* needed to be rational in order to repair the ship and get off of this unchartered, alien planet.

Weber took a deep breath, steadying his nerves. He seemed relieved that the hard choices and responsibility wouldn’t be resting on his shoulders anymore. “The defense screens and inertial dampers held on long enough to keep us alive during our descent, but that’s about it. This ship was already in pretty bad shape before, from the battle against the Darrians.” Weber shook his head, looking exhausted. Rebecca wondered if he would pass out once the adrenaline worked its way out of his system. “Combine that with the crash, and we’re totally fragged. We don’t even know where we are,” he added, running trembling fingers through his thick red hair.

“No,” Rebecca corrected him sharply as she pushed herself to her feet. With Captain Roberts’ death, it was her responsibility to keep the crew of *Kinberra* alive and functional, and she wasn’t one to shirk her duties. “As long as we’re alive, there’s hope. Remember that. If we’re going to pull things together and stay alive, I can’t have my senior staff falling apart on me.”

Weber stood taller and nodded. “Yes, ma’am.” While the helmsman’s shaking knees suggested he was still anxious

KINBERRA DOWN

over their predicament, some color had returned to his ashen cheeks. Rebecca was grateful Weber was regaining some of his composure.

Rebecca looked over at what was left of the ship's bridge. Part of the ceiling had collapsed above the captain's chair and Captain Roberts' bloodied hand was sticking out of the debris. A few small fires burned on scattered consoles, and here and there sparks leapt into the air from exposed electrical wiring. "How long have I been out?" Rebecca asked.

"Almost half an hour. I tried a couple of times before to wake you, but I couldn't. I have every able-bodied crew member on damage control, putting out fires throughout the ship and surveying the extent of the damage. So far, the death toll stands at five, but almost everyone took some bruises."

"Five," Rebecca repeated, the word bitter on her tongue. They were extremely lucky the body count wasn't much higher but, even so, she saw the loss of life as a failure. There were close to forty people aboard the frigate, most of which were Colonel Hagan's marines. The soldiers were supposed to have been deployed to the embattled world of Alpha Centuri Prime, but they never made it to their destination. She wondered what use a bunch of marines were going to be on a deserted planet, and wished, for a brief moment, they had been stranded with forty mechanical engineers, instead.

Rebecca sighed. There was no use in wasting her time on whimsical wishes that would never come true. She had a starship to repair. Her eyes flitted around the damaged room, and she noticed the dim glow of the red lightening that filled the bridge for the first time. "Power?"

"The void drive is offline and beyond repair, according to Griffin. We're running on reserves at the moment."

Griffin, hearing his name, came walking towards them, cradling a broken arm to his chest. "Don't you worry about power, ma'am. In addition to the reserves, the sub-void engines are in decent shape, all things considered. I can have them back online in a couple of days, if not sooner. My arm might slow me down a bit," he said, grimacing as he gestured to the swollen limb held tight against his middle, "but the reserves

BROWN AND ROBERTS

will last long past that, so we should be in good shape.” The big man forced a smile through his pain.

Rebecca glanced at the bridge around them, taking in the damage. “Is the rest of the ship this bad?”

“The front end of the ship took the worst of the impact,” Weber told her. “The aft sections are in much better shape overall, other than a few hull breaches on the port side.”

“And the marines?” she asked. She still resented their presence on her Naval starship, but orders were orders, and Captain Roberts’ had obeyed Earth Command’s dictates to deploy the soldiers to Alpha Centuri Prime.

Weber’s face took on a funny expression. “They’re fine. In fact, Colonel Hagan has been in constant communication with us, and has his men working double time on helping with the damage and seeing to the wounded.”

Rebecca nodded, pleased the marines were contributing to the rescue effort. Maybe they weren’t such a waste of space and resources, after all.

“Where’s Dr. Rathbone?” she asked. The ship’s chief medical officer’s studious presence was strangely absent from the bridge, despite Griffin’s condition and her own head injury.

“He’s dead,” Weber informed her, his voice cracking. Weber and Rathbone had been good friends, and Rebecca felt sorry for the Lieutenant’s loss. “He was trying to help one of the marines in the hangar and there was an accident. The marine was trapped with half his body under his battle dropship. The ice the *Kinberra* was half buried into shifted in the aftermath of the crash, and the ship slid further onto the marine, detonating one of the grenades he was carrying on his armor. Made a bloody mess. Killed both the soldier and the Rathbone.”

“That’s not good, not good at all,” Rebecca murmured, squeezing Weber’s shoulder in sympathy. Then she cocked her head to the side and asked, “Does Colonel Hagan know Captain Roberts is dead?”

“Are you worried about him trying to take your command?” Chief Jordan Hewitt asked as he strolled onto the

KINBERRA DOWN

bridge from the lift. Even in their current dire predicament, a devilish grin stretched across his full lips. Disarmingly handsome, he leaned against a stable portion of the bridge wall, crossing his arms over his muscled chest. The archaic, leather flight jacket he wore made him look both roguish and ridiculous at the same time. He was attractive, but in a bad boy, James Dean kind of way. His black hair was ruffled and out of place, but the unkempt style was nothing new. He always looked like he'd just crawled out of bed. Rebecca blushed, forcing away any and all thoughts that put Jordan and a bed in the same vicinity. Her eyes drifted down the length of his body until they rested on the customized auto-pistol holstered on his lean hip.

Tightening her jaw, Rebecca ignored his question. Acknowledging her worries of Colonel Hagan usurping her authority would only lend credence to his claim, if he were actually trying to take over as commanding officer of *Kinberra's* stranded crew. "Chief Hewitt," she said to him, relying on formality to ease the tension between them, "is there a reason you're on my bridge?"

"I just came up to tell you that the prisoner is still secure in his cell and to ask if you needed any help," he replied with a knowing grin, as if he knew where her errant thoughts had strayed. The cocky smile stretched further across his face when she turned away without meeting his gaze.

"Thank you," Rebecca said curtly, trying not to let her ire show. She turned to Weber, effectively ending any communication with Jordan. "I want all the officers to report to the war room in half a hour. I expect an updated status report and a strategy for getting off of this planet."

"Yes, ma'am," Weber said, and then nodded as she walked to the lift and left the bridge, leaving Jordan staring after her with a bemused expression. She felt his eyes on her backside, but managed to refrain herself from ordering him thrown into his own brig alongside the Darian he was in charge of keeping imprisoned.

Three

Half an hour later, Rebecca sat at the head of the war room's single long table. Stainless steel and cold, the sturdy furniture's cold metallic surface matched her mood. To her right sat Weber, Griffin, Cooper and Hewitt. To her left were Dr. Mcfalls, Colonel Hagan, and his second-in-command, Sergeant Ross.

Dr. Mcfalls appeared uncomfortable and out of place, her anxiety manifesting as the young woman shifted nervously in her chair. Like Rebecca herself, she'd been booted up the chain-of-command. With Dr. Rathbone's demise, Dr. McFalls inherited all of his responsibilities and administrative duties. Rebecca could clearly see that the inexperienced doctor, however skilled she may be at saving lives, wasn't cut out for command. Rebecca didn't have time to hold the lead medic's hand and guide her along. Dr. Mcfalls would either learn fast, or they might all pay the ultimate price for her incompetence.

"All right," Rebecca began, switching her attention back to the group, "at this point, we only have two concerns—survival and finding a way off this ball of ice. Right now, the entire ship is running on reserve power. Chief Griffin assures me that the secondary, sub-void engines are salvageable. But if they're not, we're looking at a week's worth of power, tops—and that's with shutting down all the non-essential systems. Food and water won't be a concern if we lose power, heat will be. We'll freeze long before we'll starve."

"You're talking like we're staying here for a while already, Commander." Colonel Hagan leaned forward,