She - Shipping Out

An alternate development, starting with an Earthborn protagonist in the expeditionary fleet that discovered Ajea who is the Terrestrial ancestor referred to in a later revision.

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Annaiv let her duffel slide down to the deck sole and stepped up to the observation screen. All that stood between her and the void was a vast pane of force glass stretching the width of the docking slip. Glass that was not glass. Not in any material sense. It was a shaped force. An object constructed to encompass a higher spatial dimension. The product of technological advances she could not comprehend. For all her understanding of the underlying theories and physics, no one had ever revealed how humanity had acquired the means to shape and harness it in the first place. Someone like her couldn’t even ask how it was done. The technology was the religion of the Fleet, inevitably taken on faith. A state of affairs not wholly unsatisfying, being that one could touch it. Almost reverently, she opened her hand and pressed it flat against the screen. Instead of flinching, she welcomed the sharp bite of hot/cold confusion along her nerve endings.

It was closer to the void than most people ever wanted to get. It wasn’t close enough for her, having lain awake possessed by a vision of infinite space since she was seven. When space became a part of her reality.

She had been young, but sensitive to the shock and horror of her elders when the news had come.

The memory came unbidden. A deep space explorer had encountered a strange vessel in the Deep. It should have been the realization of one of man’s oldest dreams. It was instead a nightmare. When the men aboard had attempted to make contact their ship was destroyed. Suddenly. Inexplicably. Shattered with a power unexplained in the recordings made by remote drones the ship had dispatched to document this historic first contact. For whatever reason, the devices had been ignored in the attack; allowed to return to Earth carrying their grisly warning to humanity.

Within days, similar records arrived at Earth from nine other ships. Each told the Same tale. Frantic efforts were made to recall the six ships still surviving. Three of these attempts succeeded. Millions had died. People all over the world panicked. Av, unable to comprehend everything, had absorbed the fear of invasion trafficked on the media nets. Her parents had labored to make her understand the vast distances separating Earth from where those ships and their crews had died, to convince her that the danger was very far away.

In time, the pattern of attacks was analyzed, with the other data. Human ships had been taken out by two different groups of hostiles moving across their survey areas, hitting them in succession. The compiled record clearly identified specific ships and confirmed a terrible theory. In particular, it revealed the course of the hostile forces. They had known where Earth’s ships would be. They had sought them out. But, the most alarming conclusion: None of the ships had been molested until it attempted to make contact with the aliens. Facts Av had not learned until much later at the Academy. At the time, while the crisis unfolded, she had become confident in her parents assertion that they were not in any immediate danger, because she had learned that space was big. Terrifyingly big. And it had taken up residence in her mind, overwhelming her whenever she closed her eyes.

When the concept of infinity had not tormented her, it had inspired her. She adapted over time to the abyss within her. The horizons of Earth inevitably became too narrow for her. So she turned to the sky above and began to dream.

She had dreamed of the deep for so long, it had become an ache of physical longing lodged in her bones. It became a need, driving her from the safety of the Earth into the Academy. It had sustained her through the pain of augmentations, and the disappointment of being kept too long in the Home Fleet. It had given her patience to wait for the orders that never came. The determination to push and keep pushing until the Fleet accepted her applications for transfer.

But it did nothing for the angst.

She closed her fist around the film like substance of the screen. The pseudo material would give for as long as she had the leverage to assault it. She could shoot at it, throw objects, or people at it and it would give and give and give, and then when no more force could be exerted, it would contract and quietly deposit the offending body on the decksole. Like always, it absorbed the venting of her temper. Whatever the designers had intended, it was the perfect punching bag.

Now, however, the gentle torment of simple contact was enough to dispell the memory of her frustration. Her hand relaxed, but did not stray. In a way, force glass had served her as a kind of mentor. It gave focus to her thoughts to stand here and suffer the unnatural caress of what protected her from the void. After all, it had taught her a secret about herself. How many times had she thrown herself out a window just like this one? How often before she realized why she did it?

Not, she had realized, because it could take whatever she could dish out, but because if it had ever failed, space lay beyond. More than anything else, that had taught her to respect the technology. To count on it for the salvation of a small part of her soul. Respecting it, she had come to appreciate the touch of it and its relatives. Following that, the change had been inevitable. For most a sensation that would be disturbing, perhaps even painful, she found sensual. Arousing.

Kinky. Maybe even weird, but it had replaced a self destructive impulse with something a little more survival oriented. She gazed past the waxing light of the Earth for a time. A female voice broke in over the com to announce an incoming ship. At last, the end of the waiting. A kind of stillness held her as the Allied Earth Ship *Alexander* prowled towards the station’s embrace. Her eyes locked on the closing vessel, devouring the vast sweeping lines of a deep space carrier.

A small grin lit up her face. The only outward sign she allowed of her excitement. The *Alexander* slowly grew to eclipse the distant Earth and fill the emptiness of the docking slip. She was huge. Fast and lethal. So different from the first ships, the Explorers. This ship was a Conqueror, because what humans had discovered had made space a military concern. And ships like this needed people like Av, who would not be deterred from pursuing their dreams of space.

Reluctantly, she stepped back a pace. The waiting had come down to minutes. There was still some distance to cover on her part before it could be over. She reflexively tugged on the tapered waist of her duty jacket, hoping her appearance was in order. Force glass did not reflect light, but she could picture herself easily enough.

She was, in all, a striking collection of exotic compromises. She had to admit she had more than one strange inheritance from her Japanese-Irish mother and Scottish father. Dominant and most shocking, was the distinctive blood red tint of her hair. Celtic in coloring, temper and height, but Asian in bone structure, complexion and body tone. Her face was an enigma to her, but her body was her pride. Long of limb, firm of muscle. She had her doubts whether the total effect was what she would call attractive, but she had to admit it was unique. A high tech bodyglove covering her to the tips of her fingers and toes was molded to her body’s contour. Military fashion had adapted to space. The black and dark gray single-suit was more than a uniform. The material was a specially engineered, active force matrix that acted as level one armor—a very specialized cousin of force glass. It left little to the imagination, but on the bright side it was impossible to wrinkle and allowed an athletic freedom of movement.

The *Alexander,* having finally come to rest, utterly filled the huge observation window. As much as she would have liked to have lingered and examined her hull in detail, she had idled here too long. Av stepped over to retrieve her duffel, checked her inside pocket to be sure her orders were still there, and headed down to the announced boarding gate.

There were already half a dozen transfers waiting in the receiving area off to the side of the sealed ship’s access when she arrived. One of them looked up as she dumped her bag on the pile the others had made. “Sinclair,” he greeted her with a nod, “Lieutenant, now, is it? Looks good on you.” He flicked the single silver bar on her collar.

“Junior grade,” she admitted redundantly, she couldn’t help but scowl back at his open smile, “Dammit, Parks, I can’t believe you’re already getting your ride.” Here she was, beached with the home fleet since graduation and Michael Parks was going out to the frontier after just one year.

Ensign Parks just grinned and shook his head, “It was the only way Admiral Parks could think of to get rid of me,” he joked. Av called to mind Michael’s uncle. It wasn’t too hard to envision him saying that as he pulled strings to keep his nephew out of his hair. Not that she believed for a minute that the Admiral actually had. She already knew why both of them were getting this chance right now.

She gave up the scowl and asked, “So, how is the old dog, anyway?”

“Chewing at the bit again,” he answered, “He’s worried. He broke Vice Admiral too young and has grown old waiting to move up. He turned down an Academy posting again this quarter holding out for one of the slots on the new Avatars they’re building.”

Av grinned sympathetically. There was a reason that Old Parks had stood on her side throughout her campaign to transfer out of Home Fleet. Her chance had come, it would be nice if it his did too. “Hell,” she thought, voicing her conclusions aloud, “he’s not the only one throwing weight around to get those ships. Look at *Alexander*. You just know the only reason fleet command is giving you and me this ride is because her officers are calling in all their debts to get in those slots. You bet your ass I’d be right beside them if I had any pull.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but somehow I think you’re happy enough getting a tour on one of these old Conquerors.”

She wrinkled her nose, “After this long, I was starting to think I’d be happy to be strapped into a probe and fired off blind. At least I’d have the satisfaction of knowing I was finally going where no one had ever gone before.”

Michael cocked his head to the side, “That has got to be a quote from somewhere. “

Av turned and stared at him incredulously for a moment before shaking her head and walking away.

“What?” he called after her.

She almost turned back to explain, when her stomach decided to remind her of its existence. *Should’ve taken care of that,* she thought. She glanced up at the docking display to get an idea how long she had to kill before the ship access was secure for boarding. Time enough, she guessed. She crossed the reception area and headed across the bare deck plate toward a vending machine. She ordered a breakfast roll and flask of hot tea. Her stomach had settled enough to eat yet, but the reality was sinking in and she didn’t want to faint when she reported in to the captain. She stood and surveyed the activity on the docks while her thoughts ran off in other directions.

In typical military fashion, the order of the day seemed to be hurry up and wait. She wandered astray a bit and perched on a railing while she chewed her way through breakfast. The food seemed to help. She hadn’t been aware how tense she was until it started to ease off. Boarding nerves. Naturally, just as she was finally relaxed, she looked up to discover that *Alexander’s* dock status lights had somehow skipped to green across the board. She stuffed the end of the roll in her mouth and hopped to her feet. Thankfully, she didn’t choke on the last of her tea while running back to her group—which had grown to a full dozen in her absence.

She silently cursed herself as the seals popped and the gate split open. There wasn’t enough time to fall in. Sure enough, bodies began pouring out of the gangway as she tried to close the distance. She lost a precious few seconds disposing of her trash at the waste receptacle on the edge of the boarding area. She felt eyes on her as she slipped into formation and came to attention.

The group off the *Alexander* had gathered off at the very edge of her vision. Some of them came past in front of her to collect their duffels off the pile and began to carry them aboard. The rest she could hear taking their leave, having been cleared to transfer off the ship. One remained, and she had little doubt who that would have to be. She was of the Same height as Av. Identifiable by her pride, a sheer length of raven black hair. Officially, unusually long hair was not smiled on, but hers was so obedient that a simple clasp at the small of her back was all she needed to rule it. Angelica Lynn Thompson. Once an Academy upperclassman who had befriended a zealous young cadet and taught her how to toe the line. Now, the ship’s executive officer. The one who had held a fixed stare on her since she had dashed pell mell across the dock.

Alt’s last act as a friend had been to inform her that she could expect no favors if she ever ended up under her command. Av glanced directly into that glare for an instant in which it occurred to her that her heritage gave her the right to commit seppuku. When Alt stepped up to her shoulder and spoke, it almost seemed like an attractive proposition.

“Lieutenant Sinclair,” Alt snapped, while Av cringed inwardly. “Nice of you to join us.” Between them, it was a slap. But Alt didn’t add anything else. She just turned and paced down the line behind the transfers.

“Goodmorning gentlemen, I am your new XO, Commander Angelica Lynn Thompson.

“Many of you are probably aware,” she continued after a pause, “that the Fleet is going through a period of reorganization. As a result, *Alexander* lost a lot of fine people today.” Alt came around the other end of the line and swept them up in a glance, “In exchange, the Fleet gave us you. I have assured the Captain that he won’t have to notice any difference in the crew’s performance. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what that means.

“Some of you,” and at this, she looked directly at Av, “have already picked up a lot of experience here at Sol. I’m sorry to say you’ve still got a lot to learn in a short space of time.

“Advanced Reconnaissance is the most vital and dangerous part of our space effort. We are not alone out there, and we know absolutely nothing about the competition—except, that they want us to leave them alone. Our mission, broadly put, it to make sure that they understand that we will not be intimidated or turned from our objectives in space. Since we can’t talk to them, we have to accomplish this through our actions. So, it can get hairy out there on occasions.

“If, when we redeploy, we come across hostiles—and trust me, it likely enough to happen—you don’t want to have any questions what the right thing to do is. If you got a question, don’t wait for me or your direct superiors to come around before asking. The minute you got doubts, you grab the nearest scut or officer and get it of your chest. Don’t be picky, the Fringe is no place to be shy or political.

“Now,” she stopped in front of the line and paused for emphasis, “if you’ve all got your papers, you know who you need to report to. Your section leaders have already been informed of your assignments. As soon as they have released you to general access, you should report to the quartermaster for your bunking arrangements. If you have or develop any preferences for bunkmates you can apply at any time for reaccommodation.”

As the group pulled out their orders, Alt smiled wryly and added, “One more thing, gentlemen. You are going to be a long way from home on this tour. Neither the Captain, nor I have any particular interest in what you do with your free time, but I remind you that where you’re going is no place for pregnancies. You get a situation started, you take it to medical and get it transferred into storage. You will not like the alternative,” she reminded them soberingly.

One by one, she took each person’s papers and checked them. Everything was in order, so she wrapped it up. “Very good, gentlemen. I have, of course, already reviewed your jackets, and I just want to say I have every confidence in your abilities. Some of you should expect to be summoned to the Captain’s Mess this evening at which time you will meet the Captain. Carry on.

“Sinclair,” she added, holding out an arm to block her way, “you’re with me.” Parks and a few others looked back at this and then discreetly followed the rest up the gangway. Av raised an eyebrow when they were alone on the dock. Alt smiled and pointed out, “You’ve got orders to report to the Captain. Don’t want you getting lost on the way.”

“Thanks,” Av said wryly, following Alt up through the ship’s access. At the top of the gangway, she turned to the Chief Petty Officer, “Lieutenant Sinclair reporting, permission to come aboard.”

The CPO glanced at her, opening his mouth to respond, and froze. He scanned down her body and then back to her face. After a quick glance at Alt, he reclaimed his voice. “Permission granted.” His eyes snapped back to Alt, “This some kind of joke, XO?”

“Mind your manners Mr. Grant,” Alt countered taking Av’s arm guiding her past. Aside, she murmured, “Lieutenant, please disregard that remark.” She pushed Av into the cross corridor ahead of her and turned a sharp eye on Grant. Av stood there in confusion. Grant was looking between the two women with much the Same expression. Alt waved her on with, “Go on Lieutenant, I’ll catch up with you at the lift.” She hesitated for a second, not sure what was going on. Turning on her heel, she headed alone down the corridor. It was not as if she could get lost. She had memorized the layout of every ship in service her first year in the Academy.

She heard the XO talking quietly to Grant behind her as she moved further away. She made a note to look up CPO Grant later and find out what that had been about. She was engaged in thought, not really looking where she was going when she bumped into a man at the next corner.

He caught her, absorbing the impact; she ended up held in a loose embrace. His hands rested familiarly on her hips; his eyes locked warmly on her own. “Sorry, Red. Wasn’t watching where I was going,” he said innocently. Before she could say a word, he had disengaged and was off around the corner.

She turned, completely off balance. She looked after him, but he had vanished. She shook her head, vaguely alarmed. The man had hands that knew just where to go to disarm her, and she didn’t have a clue who he was. She tried to shrug it off and continued on. To add to her confusion, a man in a small group that passed brightened as he saw her. “Good morning, Red,” he in much the Same intimate but innocent manner. He grinned at her blank look and passed on with no other comment. She walked on in deeper confusion. The last ship she had served on, it had taken months before she had gotten that casual and familiar a greeting from a member of the crew. And that only after having spent a lot of time at close quarters.

The mystery only grew as she walked. By the time she had reached the lift, half of the men and a few of the women she encountered had marked her passing with some small, personal exchange. She didn’t know what to make of it. She waited beside the lift controls, turning the matter over in her mind. Another man, coming up behind her, greeted her with a pat on the back, that slid down to rest at the small of her back as he asked courteously, “Going up?” This time she made sure to glance at the name embossed over his heart. Carlson. Her eyes then lighted on his collar insignia.

She managed not to show her dismay.

She felt way out of her element, and she wasn’t about to take the matter up with a Lieutenant Commander. She just turned about, breaking the contact and said, all professionalism, “No, Mr. Grant, I’m waiting here for the XO.”

He didn’t react to the brush off. “Alt is finished on the dock, then?” he asked, pressing the call button. She nodded and turned her shoulder toward him and stared down the way Alt would have to come. His car came, and he parted with, “Catch you later, Red.”

Shortly, Alt came up and punched the call button. Av waited until they were alone in the lift to inquire, “Discipline gets a little relaxed out in the Deep, does it?” She didn’t know how else to air her thoughts. She didn’t want to make the wrong call. It seemed perfectly reasonable that a relatively small group of people confined together for long periods of time would be a little more casual with one another, if one thought about the right way. After all, there had been nothing hostile in the attention she had gotten.

Alt shrugged slightly. “There’s discipline and there is discipline. I don’t tolerate any slacking, but like I said, the Captain and I do not object healthy and responsible socializing. You can’t order people to turn off parts of themselves without creating worse problems. In all, it is good for morale, and it knits the crew together. The Spartans had the right idea, if in a more limited scope.”

Av nodded, and resolved not to make an issue out of her first experience of the crew. There were probably respectable limits. It was just one of those things Alt had warned the group they would have to learn. When they reached their level and got off, she took the nods of greeting and the occasional familiar gaze in stride. She even smiled at the sense of welcome those gestures inspired. She had not been aboard for more than twenty minutes and she already felt like she belonged. In due course, she and Alt arrived at the bridge.

She looked slowly over the bridge, taking in the multitude of work stations and the quiet murmur of a busy third watch crew. The helm section was opened up under the ministrations of ship’s technicians. The com section was busy dealing with the station and Fleet transmissions. Carlson was there, the officer of the watch. Whatever had called him away from the bridge she couldn’t guess, but he had gotten here ahead of them. She glanced over at tactical and was pleased to see another familiar face from her academy days. A tall woman with short, dirty blond hair and a Lieutenant Commander's insignia. She excused herself from Alt’s side with a small gesture and walked over to Daron Medea. Daron looked up as she approached. “Hey, Daron,” she smiled against the other’s expressionless greeting, “it’s me, Av. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten me.”

Daron’s face brightened, “Hey kid, been a long time. Welcome aboard.” They shook hands and embraced. Alt had introduced them almost a decade ago, having talked Daron into tutoring Av in tactics. A look passed between Daron and Alt, but Av could not read it. Alt shook her head lightly and Daron shrugged, turning back to Av. “Been letting your hair grow out, I see,” she grinned.

Av returned a small smile. “For a while I worried that it wouldn’t recover from the butchering it got in the Academy. I don’t know how Alt ever escaped the knife,” she declared with a mock jealous glare.

The XO just smiled enigmatically, not offering to explain. With a tap on Av’s flank, she reminded her of her business on the bridge and pointed her chin at the hatch leading to the Captain’s ready room. “You two can catch up on old times later, Av has an appointment to keep.”

Av turned to face that access and squared her shoulders. As she accompanied Alt to the hatch, its sensors announced their presence to the man within. Like all interior hatches, it was a secondary pressure seal. It hissed back a few inches and then slid to the side to clear the way. Alt stepped in and announced, “Captain, I’ve got Lieutenant Sinclair for you.”

Captain Richard Stewart glanced up at them from his desk as Av saluted and waved them in to a couple of awaiting chairs. He was an average looking man with hard features and a sharp eye. He had taken Av’s measure while she came in and sat down. They exchanged formalities quickly as he fished a data jacket out of the rack on his desk and fed it into the reader. While he scanned her file through the polarized surface of the desk top, he asked casually, “Thompson tells me you have been requesting AR posting since you came out of the Academy. You must be very excited right now.”

“Aye, Captain,” she responded, “This is the duty I signed up for, Sir.”

He nodded, still looking at the display which was opaque from her side of the desk. “I’m sure many officers have told you that there is no significant difference between recon and patrol operations. There some specific reason why you’re so hot to be out on the Fringe, Lieutenant?”

“Sir,” she began, paused to think it through, “Begging your pardon, but patrol routes don’t actually go anywhere Sir.” He looked up at her, then back to the report, not totally satisfied by her answer.

“You have an excellent record, Lieutenant. I would expect an officer of your caliber to be more interested in moving up in the Home Fleet. Working for her own command.” Av didn’t comment in the pause he gave her. He went on, “Everyone who serves on a Conqueror knows that they’re taking a big risk. Not too many people look forward to getting posted out there. So what makes you so different, Lieutenant? Do you like taking risks? Do you hope to see some action out in the Deep? Maybe move up the ladder a little faster under fire?”

Av frowned, “No, Sir. I’m no more anxious to see hostiles than Fleet Command. I just believe that man has a right to be out there, and I want to be out there exercising that right.”

He rubbed a finger over his lower lip, and rested his chin on his braced fist. She didn’t like the tone of this interview, but she had expected no less given the facts. When a person who asked for something was told no for six years, but still kept asking, people got the idea that there must be a good reason for saying no to her. Even if she herself never knew what that reason might be. He tried another angle, “According to your psyche evaluation, you’re something of a loner. Keep to yourself a lot of the time, leave it to other people to draw you out before making friends. Solo’s don’t work very well on a ship this big operating so far away from civilization. I know you have a few old Academy buddies here on the ship, but being tight with a few people at the top... you’re real likely to be shut out by the crew and create trouble between people who have worked together for a long time.”

Av shook her head and said bluntly, “I’m sorry, Sir, but I don’t buy that. There’s a difference between minding my own business and being anti-social. Besides, I’ve already met some of the crew on my way in here,” she recalled the feeling she had walking onto the bridge, “you have a, ah, real friendly crew. I am confident enough that I’ll be able to fit in, Captain.”

He smiled then and keyed off the display. Av glanced down as he and the XO exchanged a look. “Maybe so,” he allowed, “maybe so.” She looked back at him as he commented, “I hear you’re a real good pilot, Lieutenant. Made the top ten in performance ratings each time you’ve had the helm during engagements in fleet maneuvers.”

Av shrugged, “Flying’s in my blood, Sir.”

“So it would seem,” he replied. “Do you mind if I ask, why did you go in for command training and not fighter training at the Academy? I mean, I am aware that Fleet Command is leery about putting civs on the flight deck, but for someone with your aptitude, they would have made an exception.”

“Well, part of it was Commander Thompson’s influence,” she explained. “She believed that my spatial awareness would be an asset on the bridge. She drafted me onto her command training team, at first to fly the simulator.”

Alt interrupted, “She was two years behind me at the Academy. I picked her up out of fighter training. I thought it would be a good idea to get a hot pilot on the team, and I paid the price. In combat sims she tended to ignore my commands taking her own initiative to achieve a superior tactical position. At some point I stopped giving the orders and I started paying more attention. The girl flew a ship as if it were her own personal fighter. By herself, backed up by the ship’s mind, she could run an engagement by herself against a full crew and come up even at least half the time. Purely on gut instinct.”

“Unaugmented and over a sensor web?” the Captain asked in disbelief.

Alt nodded. “I never got to see her fly after augmentation, though,” she said and turned to Av, “I told him about all of that years ago, but he didn’t believe me. When he put in his request for a helm transfer, I picked your name off the list and told him to request you specifically.”

Av turned to her and raised an eyebrow, “What ever happened to, ‘Don’t expect any favors’?”

Alt laughed. “Kid, I didn’t do it as a favor to you. I picked up a damn fine officer for the price of an ensign or even an enlisted man.” She turned to the captain, “The other part she mentioned: This knack she has extends to field theory. No one believed her talent could extend to operating in the Fold, until she exploited a bug in the simulator program to banish an opponentís ship in a loop paradox. That’s the reason why she’s held a helm position for so long. But I have to tell you, that’s not all she’s good at.”

Stewart chucked at that. “Sinclair, I’ve worked with a lot of alleged geniuses in my time. Every damn one was a crack pot, or a wild card and a self centered son of a bitch. To be frank, when my XO came on singing your praises, my first impulse was to cross your name off the list and forget I ever heard of you. However, your record is solid, and you’ve shown a persistence for getting your way that probably can’t be rivaled in the fleet. I have already taken you on, but don’t think you’re home free. There is only one way on this ship, and that’s my way. If you can wrap that stubborn little mind of yours around that you have a real future on this ship. However, you’re only getting one chance with me, and that only because it seems you haven’t gotten that much from anyone else in the navy.

“You’re on my watch, Lieutenant, starting today,” he announced finally. “I’m gonna have my eye on you every minute. Before we break dock, were going to have you checked out and fully rated on every post on the bridge. You are an officer, and you are going to be carrying an officer’s duties on this run, and the first rule of operations on my ship is that if you’re on the bridge, you are on duty and you better be able to run whatever station is under your nose when I give an order. If you can’t hack it, or if you screw up, just once, you’re beached the minute we get back. Do you have any problems with any of that, Lieutenant?”

“No sir!” she answered crisply, sitting straighter in her chair.

“Good. I’ll give you the full speech with the others at dinner. You’ve got about forty minutes before first watch. That’s just enough to swing by the quartermaster and get your accommodations.” The three of them stood up. The Captain held out his hand over the desk, “Welcome aboard, Sinclair”

“Thank you sir.”

“Dismissed, Lieutenant.”

Av turned on her heel, stepped around the chair and marched to the hatch. It opened to let her out, then closed behind her leaving the Captain and the XO alone. Alt turned to the captain and asked while they both sat down again, “What was with the third degree, Rick?”

He shrugged, “Somebody high up in Fleet Command has it in for that girl, Meggan. Her jacket is crammed with more trumped up excuses and objections to front line service than I’ve ever seen in my life. The first time I read it I expected to meet a bitter and defensive woman. Or a dangerous and unstable one. That’s not what I just saw, Meggan.”

“So. What’s your point?”

“I looked at her sealed records, while she was here. Did you know why she was held back in her senior year at the Academy?”

“The way I heard it, she had a severe reaction to the augmentation process. It took her months to recover. What does that have to do with this?”

Stewart looked at her. “I can’t explain it to you in detail, but what it comes down to, there was a flaw in her recovery. All of the obstacles in her way, all of these years...” he shook his head, “it wasn’t people trying to get in her way. It was people trying to protect her.” Alt gave him a puzzled look.

“I don’t understand, if her aug went off why did they return her to duty?”

“Augmentation is one of the most dangerous medical procedures there are, because it is impossible to predict how the adaptive virus will interact with the host’s genetics. Occasionally, a person’s body over adapts to the treatment. Interface links become hyper-sensitive, the aging process gets suspended or reversed. Sinclair is one of the few cases I’ve heard of that stabilized within the optimal interface range, if at the highest end of the scale. There remains, even in her case, a risk of Exposure Syndrome.”

Alt’s eyes went wide. Exposure Syndrome was on the list of restricted subjects. Top secret exclusive access. The captain could not tell her anything more about what had him worried about her friend. She thought for a moment, “You said, somebody in Fleet Command has it in for her, Rick. Just what did you mean by that?”

He frowned, not sure if he wanted to answer that. After a moment he said, “They never tell high risk graduates about the danger they may face. they just jerk them around on a short leash until they can be safely retired or it becomes necessary for them to disappear. They stalled her off for six years, Meggan, and now, just when things are getting touchy out there, somebody approved her request. In a case like hers, that just isn’t supposed to happen. So, all I can think is that somebody wants her tipped off the edge and it scares the hell out of me that they put her on my ship.”

“There has to be something you can tell me, Rick, because this just doesn’t make sense.” Alt crossed her arms and stared at him. “I won’t ask what ES is, but I refuse to believe she’s at that great a risk to get it this late in the game. She has a stable personality, a cool head in combat situations, and seven damn years on her interface. If her aug was a danger to her, it would have shown up by now.” Some of the outrage she had always felt about the handling of her friend’s career boiled over, “If you ask me, she has been screwed over by incompetent medical evaluation, and buried in a pile of self righteous bullshit to cover it.”

“Meggan,” he answered with a tired smile, “you’re a damn fine officer and a loyal friend, but in this case, you don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. But between you and me,” he added with a hard look, “I hope you’re right.”

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Aes, like the rest of the transfered officers and ratings, had worked like a demon the past three days getting her performance up to ship’s standard. As she sat at her station this morning, she was still massaging the stiffness out of her lower back and neck. The captain had not been joking about checking her out thoroughly on her cross discipline competence. He had had full shifts on duty running combat sims while they were tied to the station, until her body had gone numb and her thoughts had buzzed with sensory overload from the neural interface. The sims started without warning, and she had to assume control over whatever station she was closest to. Once, she had been standing on the con when he announced himself and the other high ranking officers casualties. That left her in charge of a bridge of technicians and ensigns.

She found out only at the end of her watch yesterday that they had been running their exercises against an experienced crew off the secondary bridge.

The muscles in her back complained but would not relax with the captain hovering out of sight behind her. She tried to ignore him as she sat at the helm completing her pre-launch checklist while the ship counted down for undock, thankful that things had settled down to routine operations, finally. When she had run down the list without fault, she patched into navigation and laid in a smart coarse for system egress. She checked the

but he had arranged to include the ship as the hunter hunted in an unscheduled fleet maneuver

immediate sim conditions posed an ambush by some of the Home Fleet ships that began without warning while they were in countdown for undock

To make matters worse, while she was desperately maneuvering to clear station after their emergency undock, they were set on by the *Avatar* which had arrived unannounced for her trials

Like most of the crew, Aes didn’t have a clue of her capabilities

Avatar descended on them like the angel of death, faster and more maneuverable than the *Alexander* had been designed to be

It took everything she had and a few dangerous improvisations on top of that to establish that fact without doubt

And then the captain had ordered the crew to take her out

She had turned around and stared at the captain for one long second, and he had stared implacibly back at her, offering no comment

She turned back to her post and quietly hacked past the safety interlocks on the fold drive

There were few things as dangerous as diving in such close proximity to a mass point

She punched in a seven degree dive angle and whipped along the curve of the planetary gravity well, like a pad of butter flicked into a hot griddle

At that speed, the heavy traffic patterns of near Earth space became a suicidal slalom course where moves were timed in nanoseconds

Realizing that she couldn’t pit *Alexander* against *Avatar* and hope to win, her only choice was to pit *Avatar* against herself

When the computer couldn’t keep up with the system plot, she started running the calculations by gut instinct and the raw data feed

Their attacker tried valiently to keep on her, but inevitably fell out of position

She juggled the figures in her head until the right pattern started to form

She wrenched a violent command through the fold drive and pulled a reversal that rolled them out of the interface back into real space aimed point-blank at the *Avatar’s* spine

It wasn’t possible to get better position on a ship that much their superior

The rest was in the hands of the gunners

During the devestating exchange, she did her best to jilt incoming fire with erratic adjustments on their reletive position

When the two ships limped apart, it was pure luck that *Alexander* was under partial helm control and impulse power

It wasn’t enough to escape the wrath of their original attackers

Alexander had to fight her way out of the system, making repairs on the fly to crippled systems

Fourteen hours later at the system fringe, the overminds of the participating ships evaluated the exercise and restored controls locked out to simulate damages

Stewart blythely remarked as the results came in that that would show Fleet Command that a Conqueror was still a ship to reckon with

Right after that he had called her into his ready room

When he had finished chewing her head off for her recklessness, she had asked him calmly if she had made a mistake

He had stared at her for a full minute before admitting that in fact she hadn’t, technically speaking

She had, however, scared the hell out of everyone, himself included

On the other hand, he confided, the exercise had been a satisfying test of the crew’s ability to deal with an unknown threat, however much his helmsman had upstaged the engagement

Aes wandered through the lower corridors in the silence of third watch. She had a head of ire built up. After all the years of waiting, she was finally headed out into the deep and she still couldn’t get any sleep. When would it end? She worked until she was falling down tired, but the minute her head hit the pillow, her mind started raveling out toward infinite reaches. Try as she might, there was no easy way to fall asleep with that growing abyss crammed into her skull, swallowing her down like some helpless mote of dust.

...

She mulled these things over in her head as she wandered aimlessly. As busy as she had been since boarding, she really hadn’t had much time to deal with the other strange aspect of being broken in to the crew. She suddenly confronted that now.

A man came up behind her and caught her up in his arms. One hand slipped over her hip to hug her belly and the other snaked under her arm to cup firmly over her left breast. She caught sight of dark hair out of the corner of her eye as he bent to kiss her on the side of her neck. She stiffened reflexively and he whispered thickly, “Hey, Red, you in the mood tonight?”

She slid her left hand over his where it rested over her heart, gripped it and turned about to face him. It was a simple thing to shift his hand into her right, lock his arm up in a painful bind and push him back, hard, into the wall. A quick look confirmed her first suspicion. It was him, the guy with the hands! Unfortunately, dressed down for off hours, his clothes gave no clue who he was. She had missed her first chance to pick his name up off his uniform when they had “met” earlier, she chided herself.

He winced in pain at the bind she held on his arm. She let go and stepped back. On the verge of asking his name, something stopped her. He was good to look at, and she hastily revised her first inclination to brush him off. It wasn’t like she expected to get any sleep, and reckless at is was, the thought occurred to her that there were better alternatives to haunting the halls. Some queer feeling told her that if she asked his name he would back off and she would lose this opportunity to drownd out the emptiness in her mind. He massaged his wrist as she measured him thoughtfully. Before he could speak, she smiled. “I didn’t think so, but you’ve changed my mind,” she answered, finally. “Lead on.”

He shook his head and more carefully pulled her close again. She let him kiss her; his mouth was as gifted as his hands, she decided. Which boded well for the immediate future. He guided her around until they were at his room. He told her to wait, while he went in to drive out his roommate. A few moments later, a stranger came out and winked at her slyly before he wandered away. She smiled at him, grateful of the name displayed on his uniform. Now she knew which of the two names on the hatch belonged to the officer who had inspired this maddness in her. The same instinct which had warned her not to ask assured her that *knowing* his name would be important in the moments ahead.

A few hours later, she emerged in a much better mood and wandered on. She didn’t bother to head for her own quarters, knowing she was still not liable to fall asleep, if for a more pleasant reason. It had been an uncanny encounter. He had handled her like he already knew her inside and out. She couldn’t remember the last time she had lost control so completely. It went against her *mna* training. Almost. He had finally had to beg her off and drive her out, she had been so lit up. She didn’t think they had shared ten words between them that were coherent, and it hadn’t even phased her.

Her perspective on things changed radically from twenty-four hours ago. Since she had come aboard, she had been propositioned by half a dozen men she had passed in the corridor. She had grown more and more uncertain, however tastefully phrased the offers had been. None of them had taken her careful rejections amiss. However, the unwarranted popularity she seemed to have with the crew had begun to seem like some kind of awful joke. An entire ship’s complement couldn’t possibly be that amorous, she had thought incredulously. As an exotic she had always inspired curiosity, and even veiled interest, but this went beyond her experiences with other crews. Especially since her professional training picked up the stigma attached to prostitution among individuals of terran extraction.

The mystery of it still plagued her though this last encounter had disarmed part of her suspicions. Whatever the attraction was, she was becoming positive it would continue to ellude her. She had accepted that thought and allowed her mind to wander when a hand tentatively seized her shoulder. She stopped and thought wildly that she couldn’t possible dare a second encounter in the same night. There was an excuse on her lips as she turned around. The words died in shock as soon as she came fully about.

Her eyes had to be lying to her.

Aes swallowed, unable to gather words. For a moment, she could not get her mind to comprehend who and what confronted her. A young woman, about five nine, with grey eyes and hair the color of blood. Altogether, she was quite familiar with the discription, but the fact that she wasn’t looking in a mirror threw her completely off. She was a perfect twin, right down to the scowl of irritation and the silver bar of her rank and grade.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, slip, playing on my name,” the stranger declared without preamble, “It doesn’t come with the genes, sis! Sure as hell don’t give you the right to home in on my turf!”

Aes stared at this aghast as the pieces tried to fall together. The other woman paused, reading the confusion on Aes’s face and some of the fire and brimstone went out of her. She looked at her carefully, “Didn’t know you were on the transfer. I guess it’s fair not to assume you knew I was here. Damn. No doubt what they called you where you came from, she added reaching out to touch Aes’s braid. “Well, obvious as it is, I already earned it here. Hard luck way to lose your name. Sorry for that. Still, I can’t believe you didn’t figure it out yourself. Whatever. I’m getting it straight now, on this ship *I*  am...”

“Red,” Aes interrupted, having finally figured it all out. “I... got that now. Sorry.” The answer was so obvious she hadn’t even thought of it. How long had it been, anyway? She had been a child when she had gone in for the draft. That was the price for freedom and rights in the Aegis. In exchange for a genetic sample, a person got citizenship. The sample went to the military labs. She held out her hand, in fascination, “Nice to meet you.”

Red, looked at her hand. At her. Then she clasped it and shook, forgiving Aes that far. “A pleasure.” Red folded her hands and took a deep breath to calm herself down. “So, uh,” she glanced back up, “which of us are you? I’m twenty-one.”

Aes reeled. Twenty-one! *How many copies do they make of us!?* she wondered. Aes leaned back against the wall and managed to croak, “Congratulations, Red, you just met the original.”

Red’s eyes went wide. “You can’t be serious,” she gasped. “Turn around,” she ordered. Aes knew what she was after, and turned to face the wall as Red pulled back her collar and flipped her braid over her shoulder. A coded number on the back of her neck gave Red her answer.

Red let go of her collar and was staring at her incredulously as she turned to face her again. “It’s true,” she breathed. Aes nodded slightly. Her duplicate stared at her a moment, then her eyes narrowed. “You’re a template... that makes you a full civ,” she pointed out. Aes nodded again. Red shook her head in thought, “you can vote, you’re free to move about and live anywhere in the Aegis, invest in or own a business...” Aes nodded to each of these allegations. “If you want you can own land. You might even be able to inherit land and property from your... that’s right, you had parents. You had a childhood. You’re allowed to have kids of your own.

“Are you insane?” Red turned on her at last, “To give that all up to risk dying out here!?” Aes’s mouth opened at this attack. Quickly, she bit her tongue as she suddenly saw things from her government sponsered sibling’s perspective. Two different worlds, civs and slips. She got born the hard way and suffered the slings and arrows of growing up, while Red had been born from an accellerated dream with the body of a pre-adolescent. She had been programmed with facts in an assembly line factory for human beings. Her youth had been a woefully bare experience linked into the world through virtual reality, thanks to the modifications that had been spliced into her genes before she had been grown.

To a slip, the trappings of normal life was a great and rare reward for those who excelled best. To be recognized as a real person. To have a place on some colony, or even Earth. Like all rewards, it was an illusion. Except for one thing. Depth of experience. The one thing that justified civs like her entering the Academy. A lifetime of rich human experience made them better raw material for positions of rank.

“I’m not the only one taking that risk,” Aes said with a shrug.

“But why?” Red asked.

Aes waved it off. “I can’t explain it. I didn’t have a choice, really. Space got into my head a long time ago. I spent my life trying to catch a ride far enough to get it back out there, where it belongs.”

Aes looked up and met a gaze full of pained empathy. Without a word, Red wrapped her up in a hard embrace. A moment of wordless understanding passed between them and a thread of fear wove its way into Aes’s soul. When Aes started shaking Red whispered, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. you would have found out eventually, but I wish it hadn’t been because of me.”

After a few moments, Aes wrapped her arms around her double. “How long?” she asked simply.

“Thirteen years in the deep, and I still can’t sleep,” the other answered. “That’s why...” she struggled with it. “That’s why I don’t sleep alone,” she finally allowed. “Not if I can help it.” The rest of the picture filled itself in, and sovled the mystery of the almost endless advances that quickened at the sight of her face. She flashed suddenly on Lieutennant O’Hallan tangled in her embrace, making love to another woman in his mind and not even realizing it.

“Does he know?” she asked guiltily, not sure who it would wound most. Red shook her head but said nothing. “We have to tell him,” she said after a moment. A wordless nod this time.

While they stood there leaning in each other’s arms, a pair of footsteps intruded. They disengaged slowly and looked up when they noticed the person had pulled up short beside them. “Hii Rick,” Red said shamelessly. “Captain,” from Aes.

“Family reunion, ladies?” he asked dryly. Red wrinkled her nose at him in response. He grinned and leaned against the bulkhead. “I’m sorry, things were so busy I neglected to introduce the two of you,” he apologised with a devilish smile.

“Alt put you up to it, didn’t she?” Aes crossed her arms and challenged. He merely chuckled under her glare. “I thought so. Mind if I ask what you’re doing wandering out at this hour?” she asked, suddenly aware how late it was.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he admitted. “I thought I’d go down to the gym and use the pool. At this hour it ought to be empty.” Aes and Red exchanged a glance, and premptorily invited themselves along.