

“Quantum Fracture”

by Lauren Rivers

Searchlights scanned the ocean floor as the Guardian Class submarine cruised through the water. Moving in various patterns they attempted to highlight the normally dark depths of rock and sand. Designed for the purpose of transporting the specialized unit of six anywhere they needed to go below the surface of the water, it was one of many craft allocated to allow the Guardians to carry out missions.

Six hours had passed since they had first descended from the ocean surface and descended several thousand feet to the deep ocean. They had begun a search pattern five miles west of their current position. Doctor Lyndon Brennan and Quinn Allen were up front in the two seats. The quoll turned to the elephant in some irritation and swiveled his chair to his co-pilot.

"I thought you said you knew this thing's coordinates." Quinn was a thin quoll but it did not mean the marsupial was lacking in physical strength. In fact, all six members of the Guardians other than the doctor had been top rated soldiers before they joined.

"I said approximate coordinates, Mister Allen. The *Vesta* went down sometime after its last contact and before its checkpoint at 1400 hours two weeks ago. That means it's somewhere along this stretch of the ocean floor, but we don't know exactly where. Since one of the first things to go out was the ship's transponder we have no idea where the submarine hit the bottom," Lyndon said with some irritation. He manipulated some of the controls with his trunk while using his hands to enter data into his tablet. The gray appendage seemed remarkably deft at flipping the switches and pressing buttons.

Sir Walter Mathis stepped into the doorway to the cockpit. "Patience, Quinn. We're here specifically to find the *Vesta*. Until we locate her and find out what happened to the crew and cargo, we're not going anywhere. If you need someone to take over for you I can send Mister Reinhardt up here."

The quoll shrank visibly at the statement. "No, sir. That won't be necessary. I'm fine."

"Are you sure? I can't have a Guardian up here that isn't fully committed to the mission at hand. After all, this mission was specifically flagged for our attention. This is the first time enemy sea traffic has cleared up enough for us to take a look without risk of interception." The striped giraffe craned his long neck forward to get a good look at the quoll's eyes.

"Yes, sir. In fact I was just getting ready to start searching another sector of the grid."

Sir Walter nodded. "Fine. Keep me informed if you find anything." He turned away from the two and walked back into the main compartment where the other four members of his team sat discussing the mission.

Leading the talk was Kathris Reinhardt, his second in command. The tiger was his first recruit and the most capable of his team members. If anything were to happen to him Kathris would be the one to assume command. "When we find the ship, assuming it's intact we'll make hard dock and enter through the port hatch." He held out a tablet that displayed a diagram of the large submarine. Unlike most underwater craft designed for military purposes, this one was designed for salvage and recovery efforts. The hallways were wide and the submarine large enough to accommodate several cargo areas. It was one of their most advanced boats of this type, and something had caused it to go

down a few hours after retrieving the debris from a sunken Talwyn battleship. “We don’t know the condition of the ship as of yet, but regardless we need to retrieve its cargo.”

“What sort of cargo?” Kevin Bell asked. The zebra/fox hybrid was the most unusual member of their team, possessing mostly an equine appearance with a fox like tail.

Kathris consulted the manifest. “A number of Talwyn crystals, some weapons, miscellaneous items of interest, and some classified containers.” The tiger flipped the tablet and leaned it against his thigh so the others could see. “Most of the cargo is stored here, in the aft bay. The submarine consists of four decks and a wider than usual hull to accommodate it’s various mission profiles.”

“Do we think the Talwyn shot it down in an attempt to retrieve their property?” Lilah asked.

“I don’t think so. Reports didn’t indicate any other ships in the region but we aren’t assuming anything. We go in hot and ready, and only stand down if we don’t find anything on board other than our own people.” Kathris resumed his briefing once no one had raised any other questions. “Once we find the ship our first priority is to assess the situation. If possible we are to assist in repairs, if not then we retrieve the cargo and scuttle the ship. That’s all for now. Get ready.” He stood up and joined the striped giraffe at the front of the ship.

Sir Walter leaned forward. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, sir.” Kathris kept his voice low so that the others would not overhear. “Why didn’t command furnish us with a complete list of the ship’s cargo?”

The striped giraffe hesitated for a moment before he responded. “I didn’t ask. All I know is that Senator Lynch is personally interested in this mission. Whatever the Talwyn were carrying definitely caught his attention.” He could sense the tiger’s unease. “Mister Reinhardt, as a soldier you know we aren’t always given the luxury of being told everything. Regardless, we must do our duty.”

“Yes, sir,” he said.

“I don’t pretend to understand the senator, but he seems to have the president’s ear. For now, we carry out our orders unless we’re given reason to question them.” His answer seemed to satisfy the tiger for the moment. He had to admit he was not pleased at being left out of some things, especially being the commander of the Guardians. Whatever it was the senator did not see fit to share it with anyone.

He was about to go take a seat when a call from the cockpit got both men’s attention. “Sir Mathis, we’ve got something.” The quoll gestured for him to come closer.

Sir Walter again ducked his head into the cockpit and looked at the quoll and elephant. “The *Vesta*?”

“I believe so, sir. No signs of life or activity but main power would appear to be partially functional. I believe we can dock with her.” The quoll took the submarine on a complete rotation around the large ship.

The elephant scanned the hull of the ship. “No breaches detected. The hull appears to be intact.”

“So then why did she go down?” Sir Mathis asked mostly to himself. He noticed many of the interior lights were still functional though some sections appeared to be dark. The long submarine was twice as wide as a battleship would be. It was not intended to be

a fast moving craft, but it regardless was capable of respectable speed. Ideally it would have been escorted by a more powerful craft but resources were stretched thin at the moment securing the Sedonan border. It was deemed a reasonable risk to send the ship in alone.

The smaller craft pulled up beside the other vessel and docked with an audible clunk. Once the ship had finished the process and pumped out the water between the two ships Kathris ordered the group to gather their gear. Sir Walter moved back to the main compartment and took the lead.

"All right, everyone, let's move. Keep your heads up and your eyes open." He waited until the inner door opened and pressed the button to open the airlock into the ship. The air from the *Vesta* was warm as it mixed with the air of the smaller craft. Emergency lights indicated a situation had indeed developed aboard the ship though no one could tell what it was from where they stood. There were no signs of any crew in the immediate area, and the airlock area was dead silent.

Sir Walter moved forward and entered the main hall of the third level. The first thing he noticed was a dead body in the hallway. He gestured for Doctor Brightpaw to examine it. He stood sentinel over the body while the others took up positions in the immediate area.

"He's been dead for a while. I won't know for certain without a more detailed analysis but I'm going to assume the cause of death is the forty or so stab wounds he's got in his chest." The mouse had a deadpan sense of humor, probably an occupational hazard. She recorded an image of the dead skunk for the mission record. "His rank indicates he's a crewman."

Kevin Bell shook his head. "That's just unnecessary. That many stab wounds indicates some serious rage." The zebra/fox hybrid sealed up the airlocks to the ship and returned to the group.

Sir Walter turned to Kathris. "Mister Reinhardt, what's on this deck?"

"Mostly engineering functions, supply closets, the ship's galley. I believe the medical bay is on this deck as well. The cargo bay should be the rear third of decks one and two, and the command level and crew quarters are on the top deck. The second deck should be various laboratories and other research functions." He held the tablet with the layout of the ship in his paws.

"Is the intercom working?" the striped giraffe asked.

Lilah pressed a few buttons on the panel before slamming the wall with her paw. "Negative, sir. The ship wide address system is offline. The panel doesn't appear to be the problem. Whatever's wrong happened somewhere else." The clouded leopard shook her head.

Sir Walter nodded. "All right. There are supposed to be over a hundred people on board this ship, let's start finding out what happened to them. Top priority right now is answers. Quinn, Doctor Brennan, Lilah, and Kathris, you're with me. Doctor Brightpaw, you take Bell and search the lower two decks for the crew. Keep in contact in case you find anything, understood?"

"Yes, sir." The mouse took the lead and headed down the hall to start checking individual rooms.

The remainder of the group approached the nearest set of stairs and headed up two levels towards the bridge. Sir Walter arrived in the hallway that led to the command area.

As they passed one of the storage closets the group came to a stop. Kathris pointed to his nose, indicating he had smelled someone inside of the closet. He motioned the elephant and quoll to step back while he and Lilah stood on either side of the doorway. He tapped the control panel as the door slid open to reveal a frightened crewmember inside.

“No!” he screamed.

“My name is Kathris Reinhardt, I’m a member of the Guardians. Can you tell me your name?” he asked.

The tree frog stood up and carefully peeked out of the closet. “Stein, sir. Navigator Stein.”

Sir Walter gestured towards his hiding place. “Why were you hiding in the closet?”

“Do you have a ship?” he asked.

“Yes, why?” Sir Walter asked in return.

Stein looked around everywhere at once as if he expected danger to appear without warning. Sir Walter found that somewhat alarming though aside from the single dead crewman they had found nothing to explain the ship’s current status.

“We have to take your ship and get away from here right away,” Stein said.

Quinn scoffed at the suggestion. “We have orders to retrieve the cargo and the ship’s logs.”

Stein gritted his teeth and pressed up against the wall closed to the closet. He rapped his fingers against the metal in a staccato rhythm that seemed to match his pulse. He looked from one member of the new arrivals to the next and then behind him again. “To hell with the ship’s logs. This ship is cursed. You don’t want to be on here a second longer!”

Doctor Brennan approached the tree frog. “Perhaps you want to sit down a moment.”

“No! He’ll find me!” As the elephant placed his hands on the young frog’s shoulders he broke free from the pachyderm’s grasp and hurried down the hall. Just as he was about to make it to the stairs he was pulled down a side hallway. Less than a second later a scream could be heard from the direction he had vanished.

Sir Walter Mathis exchanged looks with Kathris as the two men walked down towards the sound. When they got there neither could explain what they saw next. The tree frog, his face frozen in a moment of pure terror, with a knife stabbed through his back penetrating his chest. His right arm clasped as his throat as if he’d been grabbed around his neck. His left hand was covered in blood towards the waist.

“How in the hell did someone do this in less than five seconds?” Kathris asked. There were no doors down this hallway other than the one that led into a similar maintenance closet. An inspection of the interior showed no person hiding within or any way out of this short hallway than the way they had come. It was as if the murderer had simply vanished into thin air. “More importantly, where did the bastard go? How could anyone have killed this man and escaped without one of us seeing him?”

Sir Walter had no right answer for his second in command. All that was certain as the others arrived was that something had happened on this ship. Whatever it was had been enough to drive the crew to terror. He looked again at the face of the terrified tree frog and knew that look. He had known the person that did this to him. Whoever it was, it was a member of the crew.

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Kathris tapped the bridge access control though the only response was a negative tone indicating the bridge was sealed. “What the hell?”

“Report,” Sir Walter said.

“Sir, the bridge is locked.” The tiger pulled off the faceplate of the panel and started examining the guts of the circuitry.

The striped giraffe tapped his cane on the deck. “Can you get it open?”

“I think so. I’ll need a moment.” The tiger leaned in and tapped several controls not accessible from the outside. “It appears the bridge was sealed due to an emergency lockout being engaged. As soon as it was triggered the door sealed and all command functions were routed to here. On an emergency basis you can run the whole ship from here.”

Doctor Brennan’s trunk stroked his chin. “That protocol is only to be engaged in extreme emergency. For the captain to have engaged this system can only mean catastrophic mission failure.”

Lilah placed her paw on her gun. “Do you think there could be survivors in there?”

“There’s no point in speculation,” Sir Walter said.

“If everyone could just be quiet a moment, I’d be.... Done.” Kathris stood up as the doors slid open to the smell of stale air.

Silence greeted the Guardians as they entered the bridge of the submarine. Kathris kept his pistol drawn as he and Lilah cleared the perimeter of the room. “All clear, sir.”

Sir Walter Mathis spun the captain’s chair around to find a dead lion with a knife in his chest, similar to the tree frog. He shared the frog’s look of terror as if he had almost no warning of his attack.

Kathris found it unsettling. None of the dead crewmembers on the bridge looked like they had the time to fight back. It was one thing to meet your end when you knew it was coming, but to not even have the chance to face your attacker head on, it was no way to die. He examined the other crewmembers and found them all in similar condition.

“Sir, a number of them have knife wounds on their necks and other areas. Some of them have obvious claw attacks. I don’t see any signs that any of them put up more than the minimal resistance. Whatever happened here, it happened fast.”

“They didn’t even have time to get up from their stations,” Lilah said in observation. The clouded leopardess sat at the unoccupied helm controls and reviewed the data displayed on the screen.

“Anything, Lilah?” Kathris asked.

“No corrective action indicated. That rules out the likelihood of an attack by another boat. Given what we’re seeing here I strongly suspect the captain and the bridge crew were killed and the ship simply sank to the bottom with no one to direct it.” She ran several maintenance checks on the ship’s systems. “The engines are offline. I can’t tell if that happened before or after the ship hit the bottom, we’d need to get to engineering.”

Sir Walter Mathis nodded at the statement. “Quinn, get down there, now. Doctor Brennan, go with him.”

Doctor Brennan gestured at the consoles. "Are you certain I wouldn't be more helpful here?"

"Not at the moment, doctor. Kathris, Lilah, and I can handle it. I need to know the status of the ship's systems." As the elephant and quoll turned to leave the striped giraffe checked the list of the captain's logs from the panel on his chair. It appeared that he had stopped making logs approximately two weeks ago. He listened to the last log and found it contained no details to explain what had happened, simply mundane ship details after a normal mission.

Kathris found that even more disturbing. Whatever happened, at least at first, happened fast. He walked over to the main communications console and stopped. "Sir, take a look at this."

Sir Walter and Lilah joined him over at the console that had been smashed beyond repair. "That explains why we never received any sort of distress signal." He picked up a piece of the broken panel and tossed it on the floor.

"Someone obviously didn't want anyone talking to anyone else," Lilah said.

"I'm not sure this was strategy." The tiger looked at the pattern of blood. It started at the bridge with the captain and ended here. The communications officer was dead, her head smashed on the console. "This was rage. I don't know if whoever did this intended for the ship to crash, but a submarine this large can't be operated without at least twenty people." The gravity of what he was saying seemed to sink in with the others. They all now realized that a person or persons had killed almost everyone on board without warning and without much chance for them to fight back before they were trapped at the bottom of the ocean.

"There was over a hundred people on this ship," Lilah said.

Kathris nodded and took a seat at one of the unoccupied chairs. "So far we've only found one of them alive and he was scared out of his wits."

"Not to mention dead a few minutes later." Sir Walter again gestured to the captain's chair. "We still don't know who did it, though at this stage I think it's reasonable to assume they're still on board." The silence hung in the air for a long moment as the three recalled the tree frog's unfortunate death with no explainable cause. The striped giraffe touched the communication device on his wrist. "All personnel, heads up. We may have a hostile on board, abilities unknown. Watch your backs, people, and do not go anywhere alone on my order."

"Sir?" Lilah asked.

He stopped and turned around. "What is it, Terrance?"

"When we approached the bridge, we had to open the door," she said.

"Yes, what about it?" he asked.

Lilah looked at the captain's body for a moment. "These men were killed when the door was locked from the inside." She looked around at each of the corpses in turn. "Since they didn't lock themselves in with their killer, it's reasonable to assume that whoever attacked the crew and sabotaged the ship is not slowed by physical barriers."

Sir Walter considered her statement. Given what they had seen in the hallway a few short moments ago it was lining up with what they knew to be the case. They had witnessed a soldier murdered not twenty feet away from them just out of sight but with no obvious avenue of escape. While teleportation was known to be a Talwyn ability it seemed unlikely a common user with a single crystal could've done all this damage.

Though it was not impossible, if a Talwyn master had been taken captive he would be surprised if his superiors had not informed at least himself of the possibility. He tended to discount that as likely, but with that said it left more questions than answers. The savagery of the attacks seemed contradictory with what he had known of most soldiers on either side.

Again, the few clues they did have pointed to madness. It was a disturbing thought but the most likely possibility was one of the crew. With few other suspects given the nature of the ship's mission it was still far too broad of a potential range of suspects.

Kathris turned to his commanding officer. "Sir, do you suspect there may be a Talwyn soldier on the boat?"

"At this point I'm considering all possibilities. We don't know of any Talwyn prisoners aboard the *Vesta* as of the captain's last report, but there could've been a Talwyn soldier that snuck his way past security." The striped giraffe returned the cane to its holder on his belt and snapped it back into place. "At the moment who they are is less important than the fact that there is a dangerous individual on board who is more than willing to use deadly force."

Kathris nodded in agreement. "Regardless, knowing who we're looking for may give us information as to how he'll operate."

"True. With luck Doctor Brightpaw has located the remainder of the crew and we can start narrowing down our field of suspects. In the meantime we carry out our mission. We can't learn anything else here. We're going to head to the cargo bay and find out exactly what the crew retrieved from the Talwyn salvage operation." Sir Walter started towards the bridge doors that parted at his approach.

As the trio walked down the hallway on the command deck, they overheard their communication devices chime as the mouse's voice came through with an urgent tone. "*This is Doctor Brightpaw to Sir Mathis.*"

"Mathis here, go ahead," he said.

"*I need you to report to the mess hall immediately. You're going to want to see this.*"

"On our way." Sir Walter picked up the pace as the three hurried to the nearest stairwell and hurried down to the third deck. They saw Doctor Brightpaw and Kevin Bell standing outside of the doors to the mess hall. Both stood facing away from the door with somber expressions. "Doctor?"

"We found the rest of the crew, sir." She pressed the panel that opened the doors and it was then that the striped giraffe understood. The mess hall was filled with the dead bodies of the ship's personnel. They had been spread about the room in any number of ways, some casually thrown down as if they'd been moved there. Some were bloodless while others looked like they had suffered some serious violence in their final moments. Sir Walter stepped into the room and looked from one side to the other before he turned partway to address the doctor.

"How many?" he asked.

"Ninety or so." She held up a tablet. "I've accounted for most of the crew save for a few names."

Sir Walter took the tablet and examined the doctor's findings against the crew manifest. He made note of the four dead on the bridge and the one they had found in the

hallway. There was still a single crewman missing. He handed the tablet to Kathris. "There's our suspect."

"Commander Noah Baker." The tiger showed the file to Lilah. "He's got considerable military training."

"Enough to do all this?" Calais asked.

Lilah gave a contemplative look at her left paw as she extended her claws.

"Anything is possible if you can walk through walls."

The mouse tilted her head. "Excuse me?"

Sir Walter motioned for the group to exit the mess hall. "We have reason to believe that whoever did this has access to Talwyn abilities. We don't know any more than that."

Kathris stepped closer to his commander. "I should point out, sir, that Commander Baker would have the knowledge and expertise to disable the ship in short order."

"His psychological profile doesn't suggest this level of volatility." Sir Mathis had to admit he found it hard to accept even though it did make some degree of sense. He knew the layout of the ship like the back of his hand if he was any commander worth his salt. The corsac fox was skilled with the use of a knife as well. The wounds on the tree frog they had met when they first reached the command level seemed to support him as the suspect. "I wonder why he hadn't attempted to speak to any of us so far."

"He's obviously suffered a severe mental break," Doctor Brightpaw said. "Whether it was before or after all this, I can't say. All I can say for certain is that he's extremely dangerous in this state and not likely to respond to conventional methods of approach."

Sir Walter knew the size of the ship would make tracking the man down considerably difficult, especially with their limited number of personnel. Given that they could not even be certain that any given area was clear once they had searched it, he was left with the uncomfortable possibility that they may need to wait until he came to them. Based on his pattern of behavior to date it seemed likely that at some point one of their teams would encounter the fox directly.

"Mister Reinhardt, I'm assigning you and Lilah the task of tracking down Commander Baker and dealing with him in any way you can," the striped giraffe said.

"Yes, sir." The tiger motioned for Lilah to follow him as they started their search of the ship.

"The two of you can join me in the cargo bay. Let's get this mission done and then determine if a retrieval team can repair this ship at a later date. Stay close to me." Both the doctor and the zebra/fox hybrid nodded in understanding as the three walked back to the rear of the deck to the large doors that led to the cargo bay. There were scratches on the door as if a knife had been scraped against them repeatedly for some unknown reason.

The striped giraffe touched his hand to the scratch marks, wondering if they would find answers inside.

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Lyndon smelled burned electronics the moment he entered the engineering deck. The aroma was unpleasant, causing him to curl up his trunk in some disgust. He stepped into the compartment and looked at the doors to the engineering section. The normally perfectly aligned doors were stuck in a half open position and jammed. He looked at the status display outside of the section and noted the numerous alarms flashing on the screen indicating massive damage to the ship and it's systems.

"Ugh, do you smell that?" Quinn asked.

The elephant regarded him with a wry expression before turning away and sliding through the half open doors. The next time he looked at the quoll the younger man had a sheepish expression on his face.

"There is very little I don't smell, Mister Allen." The elephant looked at the master systems table. The panels flickered and several wires had been pulled out of its inner circuitry, some of which spilled out onto the floor. Wires and other debris hanging from the ceiling continued to spit out sparks at intermittent intervals, perhaps explaining the smell. The lights were in emergency mode and operating at half power on this deck making it difficult to see.

"Yeah, I guess not." The quoll moved deeper into the engineering section looking at some of the massive engine components that filled the rear section of the ship. "This thing was a behemoth."

"It had to be, to move this much mass through the water. She's no stealth submarine by any means, but she can carry a lot of personnel and equipment. They use a modified version of the frame to transport some soldiers now and then." Lyndon examined the engines themselves. "It looks like they've overheated and blown several components that will require a full scale repair facility to replace."

Quinn leaned against a railing. "So in other words, we're not going anywhere."

"That would be correct." Lyndon conducted a careful survey of the large engine room and concluded that initial sabotage in some almost unnoticeable places had led to massive engine damage and ultimately the crashing of the ship. Once the ship had come to rest on the ocean floor, a number of components had shorted out from the subsequent impact and attempts to restart the engines. Afterwards he supposed most of the crew had been killed, or enough that repair was impossible anyway.

The quoll attempted to bring up the diagnostic report on the most intact console they had seen so far. He frowned at what the display was indicating. It mostly matched the litany of alarms on display outside of the section. Nearly every system on the boat was either damaged or in desperate need of some sort of engineer attention. It would never get it, however.

Lyndon raised an eyebrow as he heard the sound of clinking metal. "Hello? Is anyone in here?"

Quinn pulled a flashlight from the wall and activated it. It illuminated the darkened section enough that Lyndon could identify the source of the sound. A tool had fallen off of a console onto the deck. He walked over to it and picked it up. "The ship didn't shift position, so why did this fall?"

"What?" the quoll asked.

"Tools don't just fall to the ground for no reason." He was about to walk over towards Quinn when he suddenly felt a knife at his throat. He held up his hands and tried to turn around.

“Don’t move!”

Lyndon stopped and looked at Quinn Allen. The quoll remained motionless with his hand on his weapon. The elephant froze in place, his trunk the only thing that moved against his chest. “Who are you?”

“That’s my question. Who the hell are you people? How did you get on this ship?” the male voice asked.

“My name is Quinn Allen, that’s Doctor Lyndon Brennan. We’re Ashurian military. A special unit designated the Guardians. We were sent to find you.” He didn’t mention that the orders were more concerned about the cargo than the crew, though the elephant was certain that Sir Walter Mathis had hoped to find both intact.

“So you must have a submarine, then.” He kept the blade still centimeters from Lyndon’s neck. He had to admit at moments like this he preferred to be in the laboratory rather than the field. “Get me the hell off this boat.”

Lyndon held up one hand a little higher. “If you would be so kind as to remove the weapon from my neck I’d be more than happy to escort you to our commanding officer.”

“I don’t care to meet your CO. I want off this ship now.” He pushed the elephant ahead of him a few steps. “Take me to whatever you got here on, and do it before I get the urge to use this. Don’t think you can get your hands on me either. I guarantee you it won’t work.” He removed the knife from Lyndon’s neck and pushed him forward. Both men walked towards the entrance to the engineering section and back up the stairs that led to the third deck where their ship waited. They had almost made it to the airlock when Lyndon leaned against the wall. “Keep moving, elephant!”

“I need a moment,” Lyndon said. He breathed heavily and held up a hand.

“I will bleed you if you force me.” The corsac fox, now visible to him for the first time, was in a dirty uniform with obvious cuts and tears in the fabric. He appeared ragged and sweaty, as if he had been through hell and back. The fox growled and walked towards him when Lyndon grabbed his wrists and struggled with him. He pushed him back against the wall but he found the smaller fox was surprisingly strong for his size. The corsac fox growled with a surge of adrenaline as he pushed the much larger male elephant back several steps.

Lyndon was larger, but the fox had military combat training. Quinn grabbed onto the fox’s right arm and slammed his wrist against his knee forcing him to drop the blade. It clattered down onto the deck as Quinn kicked it away.

The corsac fox struck the quoll across the face and kicked him in the chest, slamming him against the panel. It shorted and sparks rained down over Quinn, followed by a large metal clunk and the sudden sound of water. Lyndon drove his fist into the fox’s chin before slamming his body to the wall and giving him a strong kick in his back. The fox screamed and staggered down the hall as he threw out his hand and opened a portal, disappearing through it.

“Damn,” Lyndon said.

“I know; he got away.” Quinn growled.

“Not that.” Lyndon looked out the airlock. “The airlock just disengaged the connection to the submarine. We’re stuck here.”

Quinn threw his head back and sighed. “Shit.”

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The cargo bay doors opened with a loud scraping sound. Once the doors exposed the interior of the cargo bay Sir Walter noticed right away that half of the lights were damaged or disabled. There was still enough illumination that he could see the general disarray of the cargo. Many of the crates were torn open and scattered throughout the room.

“Someone had fun in here,” Kevin remarked.

“See if you can find a manifest somewhere,” Sir Walter said. He moved to examine one of the open crates. It was full of Talwyn crystals. “Doctor, take a look at this.”

“Talwyn crystals,” she said.

“Yes, but they’re all exhausted,” he said, holding one up for her to see. It was dark and lacked any indication of internal energy.

Calais picked one up. “Could it have just drained on it’s own?”

“Not according to the research briefs I’ve seen from Doctor Brennan. At least, not in the amount of time since the *Vesta* was reported missing. All of his research suggests that even if the crystals are completely cut off from sunlight they should retain their internal energy for up to two months before they start to loose energy in any significant amount.” The striped giraffe regarded the massive cargo bay and counted two dozen crates full of Talwyn crystals.

Kevin returned with a tablet in his hand. “The manifest, sir.”

Sir Walter Mathis examined the contents of the cargo bay. He looked at the data with chagrin as he took in the information. “Damn.”

“What is it?” Calais asked.

“The cargo manifest reports twenty four crates of fully charged Talwyn crystals, all of the teleportation type.” He gestured towards the boxes again. “All of these are drained now. That can only mean one thing. Commander Baker has been using them.”

Kevin looked at the massive scattered crystals on the floor. “He used them to murder his own crew? Why in the hell would he do that? Why wouldn’t he just use the crystals to escape?”

“You don’t think I tried?” the voice asked.

The three whirled around to see the corsac fox standing in front of the doorway with the knife in his hand. He stepped closer by a few steps and brandished the weapon at Sir Walter.

“Commander Baker.” Sir Walter did not know what else to say at first. He knew from what he had seen that the fox was insane. He had been driven to madness by whatever had happened here. “We’ve been looking for you and your crew.”

“We’ve been right here the whole time,” he said.

“I know. What happened to your ship, Commander?” he asked.

Commander Baker put his knife into the scabbard and flexed his paws for a moment. He seemed like he was considering what to say next. No one moved while Sir Walter Mathis made certain he was between the fox and the others. He turned towards him as if he had gotten a sudden idea. “We found something that the Talwyn had in their custody. We didn’t know what it was, but we took it from the ship we disabled.”

Sir Walter Mathis moved to stand in front of him. "Are you saying it caused this?"

"No, at least, not directly," the fox said. "It was the reason we were there, though." He paced some distance away from the group. "We found it and we didn't know what it was. We performed some test on it in the lab. The next thing we knew, the ship was stuck. It wouldn't move."

The striped giraffe looked at him. "Are you saying that's when the ship crashed?"

"No, you don't get it at all, do you? Time outside the ship stopped. We couldn't get the ship moving because time had stopped outside. The water wouldn't move and we couldn't get the ship to go forward. I guess the effect wore off after a while, but that's when the captain ordered the cargo bay sealed. Some of the crew started complaining, saying the object was making them uncomfortable."

Calais stepped a little closer. "Was it having an effect on the crew?" The mouse physician remained at the same distance away from him.

"I suppose you could say that. Some of the crew wanted it off the ship. They didn't want to be stuck here so they tried to get rid of it. I stopped them, idiot that I was. I should've helped them." He paused and pulled out his knife again. "A short time later, one of them took a teleportation crystal and tried again. When we caught him, he stabbed one of my men. Thing is, he'd planned to take it off the ship and sabotaged the engines. By the time we realized what he'd done it was too late. The ship hit bottom and we were stuck. That was two weeks ago and we've been here since."

"So he killed the crew?" Kevin asked.

"No, you idiot, I did that. It was supposed to be an act of mercy. We were never going to be found here. We couldn't get a signal out. Some of us tried to teleport out of here but all it did was bring us right back with a lungful of water. Eventually I knew what I had to do. So I killed them. One by one they fell to my blade, and despite having a boat full of Talwyn teleporting crystals I couldn't go anywhere. Ironical, isn't it? I thought I could escape on your submarine but that's a wash now." He pointed his knife at the striped giraffe. "If I'm not leaving here, then you won't either." He opened a portal and jumped into it, appearing behind Calais.

He grabbed her by the muzzle and attempted to cut her throat, but Kevin kicked him in the ribs and sent him sliding back a few feet. He opened another and dropped into it, appearing above Sir Walter.

The striped giraffe rolled to one side and avoided the blade tip by a few inches. He reached to his side and drew his cane, pulling out the hidden blade inside. "Careful, both of you!"

The corsac fox teleported away again though his laughter could still be heard in the room. "Can you tell where I am?"

"He's still here!" Kevin said.

Sir Walter knew that now that he had been engaged he would not leave until the three of them were dead. "Stay sharp, both of you. Doctor, stay close to Mister Bell. I'll handle Commander Baker."

"Sir?" Kevin asked.

"You heard my order! Keep the doctor safe, you got me?" he waited for a nod before moving on to search for the sound of the voice. There were many tall stacks of boxes and supplies in the cargo bay, and he could be behind or above any of them. He

swore as he wished he had Kathris and Lilah to back him up. Keeping his hoof steps as quiet as possible he moved between the stacks of cargo with his blade kept at his side. He listened for any signs of sound, looking up to be certain he would not be taken by surprise.

He watched as Kevin and Doctor Brightpaw hurried to press their backs against a wall and stayed close together so that neither of them could be surprised. They kept a careful watch until Kevin pointed behind him. "Watch out!"

Sir Walter kicked behind himself and contacted a body. The corsac fox flew backwards into his portal and landed with a thud somewhere on top of one of the stacks. He leapt through the portal after him and picked him up off the top of the stack. The portal closed behind him and Sir Walter struck him across the face. He pushed him back with one hand, sending him toppling to the ground. Though he jumped down the corsac fox rolled out of the way and leapt through another portal.

The fox was cunning. He kept his ears open for the sound of any movement. Other than his own breathing he could hear nothing. He knew that the fox had to still be here, he was just waiting for his moment.

A portal opened underneath him and he fell into it, dropping onto his back on the far end of the cargo bay from where he had been a moment earlier. The corsac fox stood over him with his knife in his paw.

"Don't you get it? There's no way off this ship. You can't leave. I won't let you!" He moved to stab the striped giraffe, but he kicked him in the stomach with a hoof and rolled to his side. Once Walter had jumped to his hooves, the fox used his crystal to teleport away, but this time he only traveled a few feet. His power was fading. Soon the crystal he used would be as drained as the others that littered the floor. Recalling that the more one used a crystal the shorter distances one could teleport a single person, he guessed that the crystal had at best one use left. He just had to make him use it.

Sir Walter slashed at him and cut his uniform jacket across the chest, making a line of blood appear. He kicked at him and spotted the telltale signs of a Talwyn portal opening. The corsac fox leapt through it, and Sir Walter whirled around to see the exit opening behind him. He held his blade out as the fox leapt onto it and impaled himself. The wide-eyed expression of shock on his face showed that he had not anticipated the striped giraffe would beat him, but the Guardians were trained to fight Talwyn tactics. He had seen it coming, and as the fox looked down at his wound, he opened his mouth as if to speak but said nothing.

His body slumped to the deck while the last breath of air escaped his lungs. Blood pooled around the body in an ever-growing puddle.

"At least that's over," Calais said.

"Now we can get the cargo and get the hell off of this boat. Mister Bell, go find Mister Allen and find a way to get a signal out. Once you do, contact Vantage International and get a submarine out here. I don't want to be on this ship a moment longer than we need to be."

"Yes, sir." Kevin saluted and hurried off to find the rest of the team, now that there was no further danger.

Sir Walter leaned down over the body of Commander Baker and removed his dog tags. He closed the fox's eyes and remained there for a while longer, thinking.

* * *

Sir Walter stood on the bridge of the *Vesta*. He looked out the windows towards the seemingly endless ocean before him. He collected the dog tags from all of the officers on the bridge before he noticed someone standing in the doorway. He looked up to see that it was the quoll. "Report, Mister Allen."

"I was able to get the emergency communications system online long enough to send out a message including our present coordinates and situation," the quoll said.

"What was the reply?" Walter asked.

Quinn entered the bridge and rested his hands on his hips. "They dispatched their fastest submarine to retrieve us. It should arrive shortly."

"I see. No other message?" The striped giraffe raised an eyebrow.

"No, sir. Should there be?"

Sir Walter gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "No, not at all. Thank you. Has the doctor collected all the information she needs from the mess hall?"

"I believe so, sir. She has a complete log of the crew's status as well as scans and photographs of their present condition. She and Mister Bell have been using the office in the infirmary to organize their data. Doctor Brennan has been working on preparing the cargo for transport. He believes most of the Talwyn crystals will function properly when charged though he cautions that extensive testing will be recommended before he authorizes their use."

The striped giraffe gave a half smirk. "You'll get no argument from me on that point."

"The doctor recommended retaining strict security protocols on them until they are safely transported to his laboratory. He gave me explicit instructions not to include specifics on them in the manifest," Quinn said.

"A wise idea," Sir Walter said.

"I'm not sure I understand, sir."

"He knows that if certain people in our command structure become aware of how many of these teleportation crystals we have they'll get the idea into their heads to try and use them before we're ready. Given what happened with Commander Baker I tend to agree," the striped giraffe said. "Please find Mister Reinhardt and Doctor Brennan and send them up here. You're dismissed."

Sir Walter already had his suspicions about some of their leaders but so far they had done nothing to make him question their orders. It was only enough to make him wonder what they were up to and how much of it they were willing to tell him.

He had never been aware of what it was that had driven Senator Lynch to target the Talwyn. He had been the driving force to go to war against them as well as the one who had suggested using their crystals as a solution to their energy crisis. The president had gone along with it since the suggestion rapidly gained popularity in the face of a potentially crippling situation to their nation. While it was clear that Senator Lynch had an agenda, he had not been able to ascertain exactly what it was the okapi ultimately sought to accomplish.

The few times he had met the okapi he had not been certain his motivations were the benefit of his own people. While on the surface he appeared to be the perfect

politician the senator always played his cards close to the chest. Sir Walter did not know if even his assistants knew his true thoughts.

The elephant and tiger entered the room a moment later. The striped giraffe gestured for Kathris to close the door behind him. Once the doors had slid shut he looked at each of them in turn. "Mister Reinhardt. Doctor Brennan." After he had acknowledged both he rested his hands on the edge of a console. "I find myself with a number of questions and I would like to know if I have your support."

"Always, sir. You know I'm at your side," Kathris said. He acknowledged the tiger with a nod and turned to the elephant.

"We've worked together enough times that I can say I trust you." The elephant offered a respectful nod to the taller male.

"I suppose that will have to do. Doctor Brennan, did you find it somewhat irregular that we were dispatched on this mission?" he asked.

Doctor Brennan rubbed his chin with his gray skinned hands and gestured with his palm facing upwards. "I'm not certain why I'm here, to be honest. The mission brief led me to believe that there would be something my expertise would be required to address. So far, I haven't seen anything that necessitated my leaving the lab and going into the field."

"I found it somewhat odd that the entire Guardian team would be sent on this mission when it rightly should've been handled by a salvage team." Kathris shrugged to himself.

Sir Walter nodded. "You're correct, the team was not necessarily required here. The orders were not from the usual channels."

"Arandis didn't send us here?" Kathris asked. They were technically not military but a private military force employed on their governments behalf. Traditionally orders came from Arandis Scott, who would accept missions from the government that needed a team specifically trained to fight and deal with Talwyn threats. "Then who did?"

"The orders were cut from the office of Senator Lynch directly." He indicated the captain's corpse. "While it is true that a salvage team would not have been prepared for Commander Baker's condition, I am forced to note that there is no way that Senator Lynch could've anticipated that. The fact that he sent us instead of a standard salvage operation makes me question his motives."

The elephant's trunk raised in surprise. "You think he sent us here because of something he didn't want the salvage team to see?"

"Perhaps. Moreover I'm inclined to realize that if he did not anticipate Commander Baker, he would've sent a standard salvage team first. The fact that he did not indicates to me that he had foreknowledge that we would be meeting the kind of resistance we did, specifically Talwyn crystals," Sir Walter said.

The elephant raised his head. "If he knew we'd run into a situation like Commander Baker, why wouldn't he have warned us?"

"He may not have anticipated Commander Baker specifically," Kathris said.

"Regardless, I'm inclined to agree that if he was aware of the possibility as well as the full manifest of the ship's cargo, we should've been informed. A significant amount of information was left out as to why we were sent here."

Kathris glanced from the elephant to the striped giraffe and back again. "Sir, do you think that we were deliberately misled?"

“I believe that Senator Lynch knew more than he told us. I’m convinced that he knew full well what we would find on board.” He gestured towards a silver case that rested on the side console. “This was undisclosed on the manifest. It’s the item that Commander Baker talked about in the cargo bay. He told us that time outside of the ship had stopped.” He opened the case to show the men what was inside of it. Inset into foam cut to contain its shape was a golden ring five inches in diameter with some writing on it that Walter did not recognize.

The elephant leaned in for a closer look at the mysterious object. “I recognize the writing.”

“Can you read it?” Sir Walter asked.

“I didn’t say that. I just said I recognize it. It’s an ancient version of the Talwyn written language. Whatever this is, it’s clearly old. Perhaps before the Talwyn as we know them now.” The elephant reached out to touch it, but the striped giraffe’s hand stopped him. “We don’t know what caused time outside of this ship to freeze the first time, doc. I’d rather not find out just yet.” He closed the case. “While I don’t have any evidence to suggest the Senator is doing anything he shouldn’t, it gives me pause. Until I know what he’s got planned, I’m not certain I want him to put his hands on this thing.”

Kathris gestured towards the object. “I’m not certain if anyone should be putting their hands on that thing.”

“At the moment, I tend to agree,” the elephant said.

“Doctor, you’re going to be in charge of most of what we’ve found here. Do you think you could keep this particular item off the books until we know more about what we have?” the striped giraffe asked.

The elephant pointed towards the box. “If what you say is true, how do we know Senator Lynch doesn’t already know about that?”

“I’m not entirely certain he does.” Sir Walter stepped towards the front of the bridge for a moment. “At the moment all we have is a suspicion that we were sent here because he knew our talents and skills would be needed. We don’t know for certain if he is aware of the full manifest of what was recovered. With no survivors from the crew to tell him, I think it’s best we keep this information to ourselves for the time being. I intend to speak to the others and recommend the same. As far as anyone outside this ship is concerned, all we found is a large amount of Talwyn crystals and some weapons and equipment.”

“It seems unusual to keep information from the senator.” The tiger appeared conflicted. It was something he could understand all too well.

“This entire mission is unusual. I don’t like being kept out of the loop, and until I know what’s going on I’d rather not introduce more variables that we can’t possibly predict. I don’t know who’s pulling the strings but I do know that the senator has his eyes on the presidency.” The striped giraffe folded his arms as he turned to face the front of the bridge. “You two need to keep both eyes open. The only way we’re going to survive is if we watch each other’s backs.” He paused a moment. “Kathris, prepare the team for the submarine’s arrival. They don’t know about the case. Let them know they are not to discuss this mission with anyone without my authorization.”

“Aye, sir,” Kathris said as he left the bridge, leaving the door open.

“Do you think the senator is dangerous?” the elephant asked.

“Perhaps more than we know.” Sir Walter Mathis thought back to every time he had ever met the okapi. Before Senator Lynch had chosen to go after the Talwyn he had never shown much interest in them. It was possible he had simply never been vocal on the subject, but something had changed the okapi. Whatever it was, it had driven him on a different path, one that may even lead to the Ashurian presidency.