

# **FIRST CONTACT**

**MIKE ADAMS**

# **First Contact**

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**Book 4 of Fierce Girls at War**

Other books by Mike Adams

**Fierce Girls at War series**

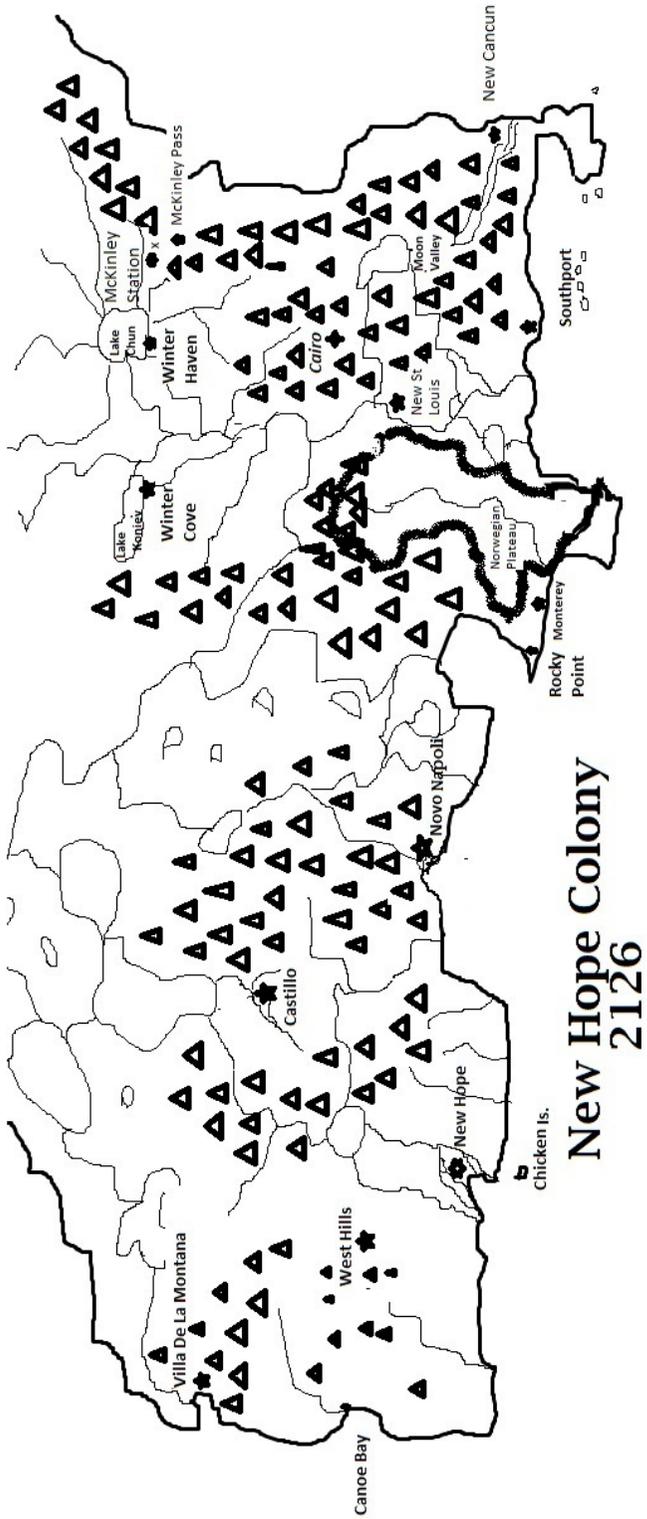
Book 1	Fierce Girls
Book 2	Threat on the Horizon
Book 3	Opening Shots
Book 4	First Contact
Book 5	Bad Day On The River
Book 6	The Fight For The Pass
Book 7	Deluge
Book 8	Enemy Found
Book 9	Recovery Mission
Book 10	Jacks Company
Book 11	Death By Water Death By Fire
Book 12	The Raid On Southport
Book 13	Hitting Back

# Contents

Prologue		Family Planning
Chapter	1	Captain Melissa Rossi
Chapter	2	The Rift Take Stock
Chapter	3	Losing Contact
Chapter	4	Southport is Burning
Chapter	5	Getting Ready to Fight
Chapter	6	First Contact
Chapter	7	The First Bridge
Chapter	8	The Second Bridge
Chapter	9	The Steel Bridges
Chapter	10	Evacuation
Chapter	11	Some Odds and Ends
Chapter	12	Recon Drones
Chapter	13	End Run
Chapter	14	Refuge from the Storm
Chapter	15	Convoy
Chapter	16	Enroute to Winter Haven
Chapter	17	Next on the Target List
Chapter	18	Somewhere in the Mountains
Chapter	19	Connections
Chapter	20	Eager to Please
Chapter	21	Moving Forward
Chapter	22	Introductions
Chapter	23	Tougher Than They Look
Chapter	24	The Valley
Chapter	25	Emergency Broadcast
Chapter	26	Broadcast Update
Chapter	27	“Is He Going to Get Us Killed Out There?”
Chapter	28	Two or Three Steps at a Time
Chapter	29	Overflight
Chapter	30	The <i>Asia</i>

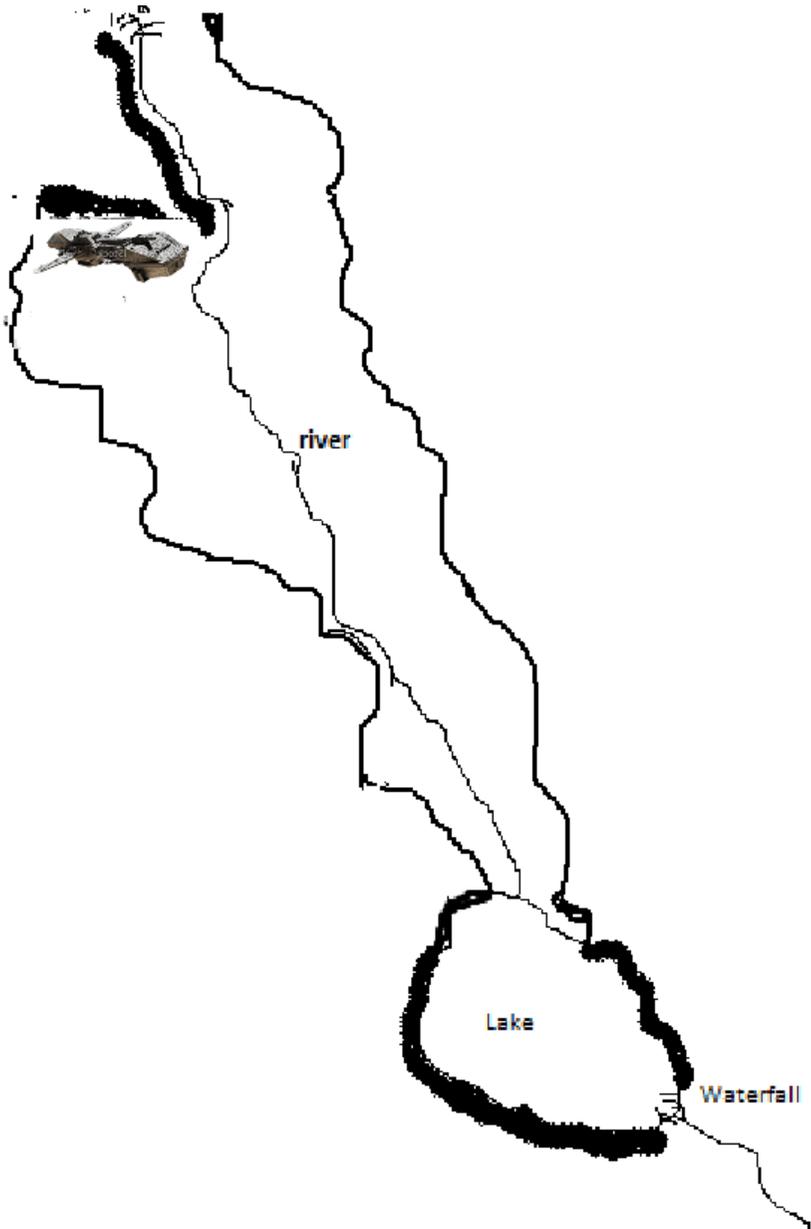
Appendix

FIRST CONTACT

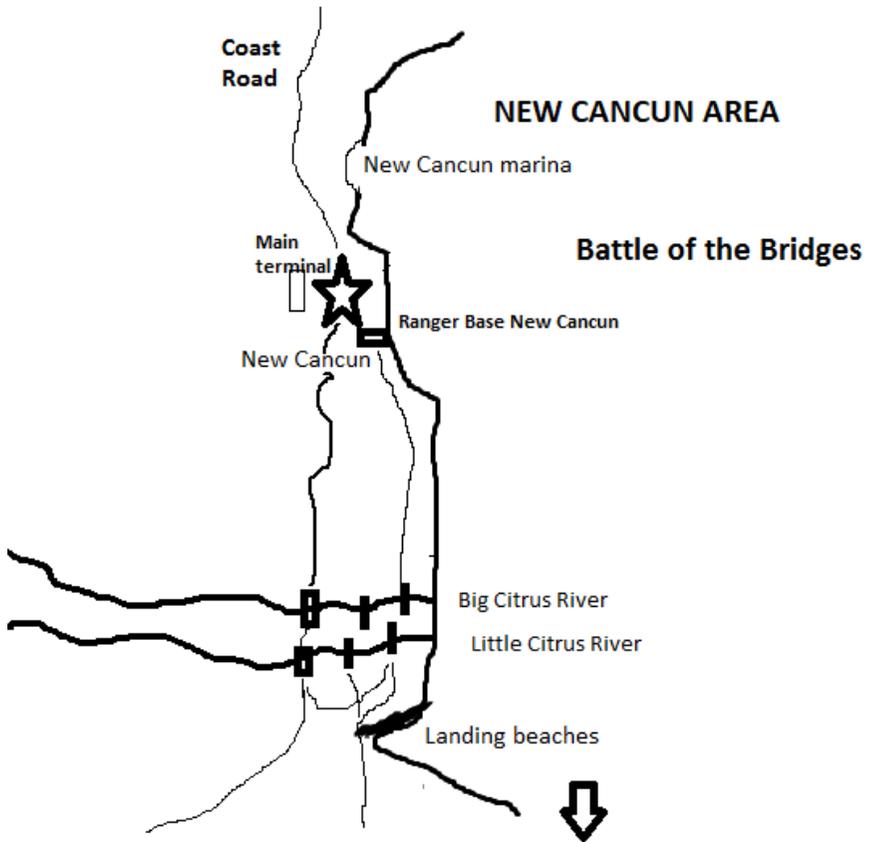


FIRST CONTACT

CAIRO'S VALLEY



FIRST CONTACT



## **Prologue**

### **Family Planning**

September 10, 2126

#### **Cassidy/O'Brien/McCord residence in Yonkers, New York**

It was the first time in months that Kelly Cassidy had her entire remaining Earth-side family at home at one time; the other four, Rick, Bridget, Ciara and Molly Pickford were all at or on their way to the New Hope colony. Kelly had spent the last month at the Colonial Rangers Officer Training School outside Florence, Italy and her middle daughter Marine Lieutenant Nicole O'Brien had recently completed the three-month course for field Rangers and was home on extended leave. Chloe had been in Massachusetts working in the family business Stellar Enterprises with her uncle, Kelly's brother Sean Cassidy. Sean had come in with his wife Helena and Chloe for the reunion. Helena sat on the board of Stellar Enterprises and she'd been the Chief Financial Officer for the family business since its founding six months after Rick and Molly had left for the colony. Kelly's husband Major General Robert Black the senior officer at Ranger Command in Geneva, Switzerland had come in with her after she'd received her commission.

Also present for the reunion was Melanie McCord and her immediate family. Ciara's mom had moved into Kelly's home four years earlier and now her husband Brian and their baby James, who everyone called Jamie, lived there as well. Brian Grant was a senior manager in the family business and Melanie was among its major shareholders although she worked in a medical nano-bot laboratory. Tommy O'Brien, the brother of Kelly's late husband Jimmy O'Brien, and his wife Lupe were in from Boston as well. Tommie was a retired police officer and was the company's head of security while Lupe was head of personnel and recruitment.

In addition to everyone else Kelly's sister Janie had come over to see everyone. They were all sitting in the large family room on couches or on the floor. Janie looked a lot like her older sister Kelly. She was two years younger and at age fifty-one she was also a grandmother. Rounding out the gathering was Paulie, the family's German shepherd guard dog, a former explosives sniffer for the navy, who sat in his usual spot at Melanie's feet.

“It’s so good to see you all again and at the same time,” Melanie said as the crowd gathered in the large living room. “The house seems so empty without you here. It’s definitely quieter than I’ve been used to,” she chuckled. Paulie barked agreement.

“Well don’t look for a whole lot of quiet this weekend my dear,” Kelly laughed.

Sitting on the floor in front of Janie Cassidy, the dark-haired Nicole was holding baby Jamie on her knees while the blonde Chloe made funny faces at him and said, “That’s right, little guy. There will be no quiet here for you!”

Janie, who had babysat for the infant several times snorted a laugh and added, “No worries, he sleeps like a rock when he’s tired.”

“You wake him, you got him,” Mel told Nikki and Chloe. “In fact, feel free to keep him for a while. I’m sure he’ll be well taken care of between the two of you while Brian and I get some un-interrupted private time for a change.”

“Planning to make a sibling for little Jamie?” Chloe chortled which elicited good-natured laughter from the entire group including a red-faced Brian.

“Don’t start, you,” Kelly told Chloe while wearing an angelic smile for Melanie, the mother of her granddaughter Ciara. Kelly had considered Melanie as one of her daughters ever since she’d gotten pregnant with Rick’s baby while still in high school.

“Get used to it, Brian,” Melanie told him with a laugh and a fond smile for her almost sister. “That’s Chloe being Chloe. Did I mention that she comes with the package?”

Brian sighed then grinned, “Yes, you did. I can’t wait till the shoe’s on the other foot though.” Chloe looked at him and stuck her tongue out.

A smiling Robert Black had been sitting back observing his stepfamily and he told Brian, “I’ve been getting it from her for close to four years now, on and off. I too am looking forward to when the shoe is on the other foot. Or should I say paw?” Chloe made a clawing gesture and voiced a cat’s growl then she giggled and rolled her eyes. The recent graduate had earned a degree with honors in business management and logistics systems at Boston College but she still reveled in trying to make other people blush.

“Enough, all of you,” Kelly said with a loving smile for the men and women in her life. “I think this would be a good time, since we’re all here at once, to talk about the future.”

“I’m glad you said that,” her brother Sean said. “Hard as it is to get us all in one place, sober *and* wide awake.”

“Right you are about that, the sober part, I mean,” Chloe giggled. “Three hours from now Jamie will probably be the only one who’s not staggering around the house.”

“Chloe, you’re *wrong* about that. Of course he’ll be staggering, he doesn’t even crawl much less walk yet without assistance,” Melanie laughed while the others chuckled merrily.

“I stand corrected,” the youngest of Kelly Cassidy’s offspring admitted with a grin.

Nicole looked at her mother and smiled, “Mom, before we talk about anything else I want to tell you again how proud I am of you, Major Kelly Cassidy. Congratulations on finishing the officer’s training course and getting your commission in the Colonial Rangers Security division.” Everyone clapped heartily and cheered for the most recent newly commissioned officer in the

family while Kelly blushed and smiled at them in thanks. “Bridget is going to be jealous when she finds out that you only had to go for a month because of your previous experience. She had to go through the full four-month Ranger commissioning course.”

“Twenty-five years of experience should count for something,” Robert snorted. “The Marine Officer Candidate School and Basic Infantry Course for Officers you had to go through was no walk in the park. They both had it easy in comparison.”

Nikki smiled agreement at her step-father then asked Kelly, “When do you plan to go through the Ranger course for Colonial Security personnel, mom?”

“The next three-week course starts in about three weeks,” Robert put in. “There is another one starting in six weeks. Did you tell them your decision about when you want to go?”

Kelly shook her head then announced, “I plan to go to the one that starts in three weeks. I’ve already put my name in for it.”

“Wow, this is happening so fast,” Melanie said. Her eyes lit up and she said, “You know this means that you’ll have to salute your mom, Nikki.”

“Marines only salute when they’re armed and covered,” Nikki retorted which brought more laughs from the group.

“Your daughter’s got a point there, dear,” Robert told Kelly.

“No worries. I’ll survive. But when she is armed and covered she had better salute or I’ll have her on the ground doing fifty push-ups.” Everyone chuckled and guffawed at the picture they all had in their minds.

Melanie asked, “Nikki, when is your detachment leaving for the colony?”

“I have to report in to the terminal outside Paris in six weeks. We’ll be leaving about a week later. Mom, will you be there to see me off or will you still be stuck in the security personnel course?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world, sweetheart. That’s why I asked Robert to grease the wheels a bit so that I could get through the OTC class and the three week course before *Australia* is scheduled to depart. That’s the starship you’ll be on.”

“I knew that. And thank you for doing all that so you could see me off. I really appreciate it. I love you.”

“Aw,” said Chloe.

“I love you, too,” Kelly replied ignoring Chloe.

“Aw, that’s so sweet,” Chloe said seriously. “I’m not making fun of you or mom, Nikki. I mean that. It is sweet and I love both of you.”

Her sister said, “Thanks. I love you, too.”

“Well, it kind of brings up what Uncle Sean and I wanted to talk to you all about,” Chloe told them.

“What’s that, sweetheart?” asked Kelly.

“You know how we’ve been talking about me going to New Hope eventually to help manage the various businesses that Rick and Molly have going? And maybe going out there on the *Vitus Bering* next January?”

“Yes,” her mom asked suspiciously. “You have something else in mind?”

Sean answered for her, “Chloe has been doing a great job working with me and Brian learning the business. I know she’s only been at it full-time for a few months but with her education, and she has been working part-time all through her four years of college, she’s really picked it up faster than I had expected. You can be really proud of her, Kel. She’s extremely bright, very motivated and she has worked her ass off to learn as much as she could as fast as she could. Business-wise, there is a lot going on at the colony and we, Chloe, Lupe, Brian, Helena and I, have discussed this at length, and if it’s possible we thought she might make the trip on *Australia* with Nikki.”

Kelly looked at her brother and then at her youngest daughter and took a deep breath then let it out before replying, “I guess I’m not really surprised. I even thought about how nice it would be if they could go together but I didn’t think she would be ready so soon. Chloe, are you sure you want to do this?”

Chloe nodded, “Yes, mom. You know I’ve been looking forward to this ever since they left for the colony. And I really miss Ciara and Bridget who’ll be there when we get there. I might need a little assistance from you, Robert. If you’re willing, I mean.”

Black put his arm around his wife’s shoulder and hugged her. He told Kelly, “I know it isn’t easy when the last one is ready to fly on her own but it’s her time. I think I can help you get on the passenger list for *Australia*, Chloe. They’ll only be about thirty or forty other civilians going out on that ship; the rest are Ranger detachments like Nikki’s plus a few support personnel. There are always a few berths kept open until the last minute for late additions. I can see that you get one of those spots. I think it would be good for both of you to make the trip together.”

Chloe smiled at her stepfather, “Thank you, Robert.”

“Alright! This will be a fun trip for sure now,” Nikki burst out.

Kelly sighed and nodded acceptance, “If that’s what you want to do I’m with you one hundred percent, Chlo.”

“Thanks, mom.”

Changing the subject Janie Cassidy asked, “Just how big is Stellar Enterprises now? I really haven’t been keeping up with that since the last time we talked about it a year ago, or was it two years ago? I’ve been so busy at the hospital.” Janie Cassidy was an administrator at a nearby medical facility. “Sean, I remember you saying that they had several restaurants and stores in operation in the various settlements. Are there more things going on now?”

Chloe snorted a laugh. “Let’s see,” said her uncle who grinned as he listed them mentally. “Rick and Molly, through their partners, have opened seven separate eateries in New Hope Town, Novo Napoli, Southport, New Cancun, New St Louis and Castillo. That does not include the *Wolf’s Tooth Tavern* in New Hope Town or the *Wolf’s Claw Tavern* in New St. Louis or the *Wolf’s Eyes Tavern* in New Cancun. They’ve got a sporting goods emporium in New Hope Town and a new one that’s just about to open in New Cancun. They’ve got the water bottling plant in Novo Napoli, several clothing boutiques, a bicycle shop in New Cancun with a second

planned in New Hope Town, a fabric store, another that sells some basic furniture that can be assembled and there's the brewery that began operations last year. Oh, and the winery that's being developed on Ryan's Island. Then there are the beach houses they had built in Southport and New Cancun and there's some riverside vacation villas planned for New St Louis."

Robert Black was a bit surprised to hear about all this and said, "Yikes, have I been gone from there that long? When I left the colony they'd opened *Russo's* in New Hope Town, and *Sonji's* in Southport. And they had a fabric store and two clothing boutiques but that was it I think."

Sean grinned, "It's been over a year since you left the colony Robert and we've been busy. The first couple of years were definitely a learning process. We had to figure out how to get the goods there first. That's when we set up Stellar Enterprises here. And we had to recruit the people who would run those establishments. That got easier as we grew. I have a whole group now whose job is to design what each venue is going to look like, acquire all the materials needed to be shipped to the colony, and Lupe finds the people to run them. Rick and Molly also recruit folks at the colony who are finishing up their contracts and would like to stay on and make some money. We give them a good deal too. They get fifty percent ownership which converts to one hundred percent after five years. At that time they can continue to operate the business, sell it back to us or hire someone to manage it for them. We'll help with that too. For a fee.

"So far the longest it's taken to recoup our investment has been a year and that includes the initial six months or so that the required material needed to get there in the first place. Rick and Molly have made a small fortune for us all. Not so small actually and everyone here is a stockholder. There is little if any competition other than the centrally managed cafeterias and commissaries. No one else has made the effort and there are 45,000 potential customers hungry for good food, some nice clothing, diversions and some simple personal transportation. You know what it was like when they got there four years ago. There was literally nothing to do other than work, nowhere to eat besides the centrally run cafeterias, and no place to buy things except at the commissary and what was available was very limited."

"So I remember," Black agreed. He'd been the Regimental Commander there for eighteen months and he'd arrived less than six months after Rick and Molly had. He'd already gotten to know the family, especially Kelly, before that. Kelly had brought the girls down to Quantico to be introduced to then-Staff Sergeant Susan 'Molly' Bennett. A few months later he'd assisted in the subterfuge that got Molly and Lieutenant Paul 'Rick' O'Brien into the Colonial Ranger ranks and onto the cargo supply ship *North America* under new identities as Lieutenant Rick Cassidy and Gunnery Sergeant Molly Pickford.

"And they've really done all that without abusing their position or using resources that didn't belong to them. They saw what was needed and they invested their own capital to get things rolling," Tommy added. "And they've got a lot more planned, don't they?"

Sean nodded, "That's correct. Right now we have plans to open not less than thirty new enterprises of one type or another over the next three years. During that time the colony's

population is expected to double. Stellar Enterprises has received location allotments from Colonial Business Services, through their Boston office, for one hundred parcels in the existing settlements with another hundred pending for the settlements that haven't broken ground yet. That's why we need Chloe to get out there. I'd send Brian if I could but even if he didn't have a family I need him here even more. We're in the process of searching for and hiring some additional managerial talent both for our local operations and to send out to the colony. Of course anyone going to the colony has to be able to make it through the screening process that everybody going there has to make it through. Chloe sailed through that easily."

"When can I get to go?" Janie asked jokingly.

"I've been trying to recruit you for two years now, so you tell me," Sean retorted. "You could at least start the screening process, Janie. Even if you make it through it doesn't mean that you have to go, it just means that you *can* go at some point."

"I'm thinking about it but no promises. I like it where I am right now," she told him.

There was quiet in the room for a moment then Kelly said, "Well Mel, with all the security upgrades they have in mind to protect the starship and colony programs and since there's been several more bombings of program related offices and facilities since the incident on *Asia* the sooner I get to work the better. So right after Nikki and Chloe leave I'll be heading for my first assignment at Colonial Ranger Command in Geneva. You, Brian and little James will have the house to yourselves for a while. Well, and Paulie of course." Paulie barked agreement.

Melanie looked around the room and as the reality dawned on her tears began to run down her face. "What? You're *all* leaving me now?" She paused and covered her face then said, "I'm sorry," as she wiped her face with the tissue that Brian handed to her, "but it's just hitting me this moment. For fifteen years I've always had you all here for me. You're my family and I'm closer to you than to my own parents or my sister. I'm feeling a little lost just now. Sorry."

Kelly got up from the love seat she and Robert were sharing and crossed over to Melanie. She took Mel by the hand and drew her up and the two women embraced. Melanie broke down crying on Kelly's shoulder and tears ran down Kelly's cheeks as well. She glanced over at Nikki and Chloe and saw that they both were now raining tears too and Janie was looking a bit glassy eyed as well.

"Guys, it might be time to break out the umbrellas," Sean said with a little grin to Robert and Brian. Helena elbowed him in the ribs. "Huh! What was that for?"

"Shush you," Helena told her husband. "Unless you want me to make you cry, too."

"Okay, okay."

Once Melanie had gathered herself Kelly released her and she sat back down. She returned to her seat next to Robert and took his hand while Brian had put his arm around his wife's shoulders and pulled her close. "Mel," Kelly said gently, "we'll all be back before you know it and I'll be visiting from time to time and we can talk every day. You know Janie loves you and she'll be here anytime you need her."

"That's right, sweetheart," Janie told her. "And I'll come over to help you with the garden. That is as long as I can have some of those delicious tomatoes you've all been growing."

## FIRST CONTACT

Kelly added, “And there’s Sean and Helena here, of course. And Tommy and Lupe. And their kids, who’ll be coming in soon too. And don’t forget the rest of the Cassidys and O’Briens. You can count on hearing from them and they’ll be looking out for you. You’re part of my family and theirs as well.”

Melanie McCord nodded, “Thanks mom, I’ll be alright. It just kind of hit me all of a sudden. It’s not like you’ll be leaving forever. And we’ll keep in touch, I know. Jamie’s going to miss you all as well.” The burbling, smiling little boy laughed as Chloe tickled him under his chin.

“You got that right!” Chloe nodded fondly at him.

## **Chapter 1**

**Captain Melissa Rossi**

**September 13, 2126**

**Day 1**

### **New Hope Colony September**

By 2126 the New Hope colony on the planet Tau Ceti Four had been under development for more than twenty years. The planet had a breathable atmosphere, a slightly higher gravity and a year that was equivalent to half a standard Earth year which made for rapid seasonal changes. The New Hope year was divided into two sixty-day winters and summers separated by twenty-four-day fall and spring seasons.

More than forty thousand colonists were distributed among the ten major and three subsidiary settlements. Most of these towns were situated in the temperate zone that encompassed the lower half of the Alpha continent, the largest of the planet's three major landmasses. In the west the colonial capital New Hope Town was the largest settlement in the colony. The next three largest settlements were New Cancun, Southport and New St Louis in the east. The capital was the home of the Ranger Regiment, the colonial administration, the main terminal and landing field for arriving starships and for the New Hope Academy, the colony's only school. The NHA was officially considered a high school but it functioned more like a small college. All its students were aged fourteen to nineteen; younger children were not permitted at the colony.

Dangerous predators roamed the mountainous areas of Alpha, the same areas where a large percentage of the planet's valuable natural resources were located. The Colonial Ranger Regiment had been established ten years before as a multi-national protective force and the number of Ranger personnel had reached over 4,400, most of them assigned to the 19 field companies each of which consisted of two separate national detachments of 100-110 Rangers. Twenty-seven different countries had detachments at the colony, some more than one but none more than three. Support personnel such as flight crews, administrative, logistics, maintenance and medical personnel, Colonial Security officers, communications specialists and the regimental and battalion staffs made up the rest of the Ranger Regiment.

Unbeknownst to the colonists the planet had been claimed long before by the alien Rift, a race of commercially-driven aliens that had chosen a violent response to what they considered an invasion and in their view the attempted theft of their property, the planet they called Rih'ta and its resources. The Rift had never encountered another technologically advanced race before and had no intention of negotiating with them, at least not before the planet was cleared of the intruders. To begin their re-conquest the Rift had brought in the first half of an army of sixty thousand primitive giants, the immensely strong and tough seven foot tall Andoval, natives of another world the Rift claimed. The Rift were not a race with a lot of experience at war and their blunt force strategy was to surprise and overwhelm the invaders' southeastern settlements first,

an objective they had partly failed to achieve when the element of surprise was unexpectedly lost before getting close to their first targets.

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### **Colonial Ranger Base New Cancun**

Indian Colonel Raj Gupta, the Regiment's Operations officer and the acting commander of Second Battalion, had just dismissed the officers of second and third battalions and Captain Melissa Rossi called all of her officers together. Gupta had told the stunned assemblage everything he knew so far about the approaching alien invasion force that was nearing the coast somewhere between thirty and fifty south of the New Cancun. He then gave them their initial orders - to be ready to move out within the hour and head south to set up defensive positions.

Captain Rossi was the commander of Falcon Company in the new Second Battalion. Along with her French detachment her company included a detachment from the Czech Republic under Captain Adam Baratek who served as her executive officer. Every company in the Colonial Ranger Regiment was composed of detachments from two different countries as required by the charter that created Colonial Ranger Command just ten years earlier. Each detachment had between one hundred and one hundred ten Rangers divided into three field platoons and one vehicle platoon that handled the seven transport trucks, two or three armored personnel carriers (APCs) and three ATV scout cars assigned to each detachment.

Since the first four Ranger companies arrived in 2117 the Regiment had grown to nineteen companies with national detachments from twenty-seven different nations. Including support personnel there were some four thousand four hundred members of Ranger Command on the planet. Among the support personnel were administrative, maintenance and medical personnel, flight crews, Colonial Security officers, communications specialists, and various others. Nearly half of the regiment was based in New Cancun on the southeast coast of the Alpha continent, the only landmass currently under development on the fourth planet in the Tau Ceti system, where Earth's first and only extra-solar colony, New Hope, had been under development since the first explorers landed there in 2103.

"Merde! C'est incroyable!" said one of Rossi's lieutenants Benjamin Dalan.

"This is for real, isn't it, Captain?" asked a stilled stunned Lieutenant Lenka Misek one of the Czech platoon leaders.

Captain Adam Baratek commander of the Czech detachment took a deep breath and glanced at Rossi before answering quietly, "It appears so, Lenka."

"Incredible, unbelievable and as real as we are, people," Rossi said focusing their attention on her. "You heard the colonel. Your platoon sergeants should have most everyone rounded up by now. Make sure everyone has their full allotment of ammo and two days rations and water. We'll move out in thirty minutes. Our assignment is to take station on the coast road ten miles some of here until we know where the aliens are coming ashore. If they come ashore to the south we'll go south defend the westernmost bridge over the Little Citrus River and be ready to blow it if necessary. If they keep going north we'll head that way." She studied her officers,

"Michelle, send a squad to the base explosives storage bunker and get as much demo material as they'll give you."

"Oui. mon capitaine!" replied Lieutenant Michelle Dubay whose mother Madame Michone Dubay was the French government's new representative to the colony. Madame Dubay had only arrived a few weeks before on the colony transport ship Amundsen.

Adam Baratek said, "The westernmost bridge is one of the permanent steel frame ones. It'll take more to blow one of them up."

Rossi nodded, "You're right, Captain! And the same holds true if we have to pull back to the Big Citrus. Make sure they understand that, Michelle."

"Oui, understood."

She turned to Lieutenants Simone Colbert and David Parkos, "Simone, David, I want all company vehicles moving as soon as possible. The APCs are to carry as much ammo as you can get your hands on. The colonel wants to set up a picket line south of the Little Citrus. Have all our ATVs head out right away and send them south. David I want you with them. Before they cross the Little Citrus the scouts from the companies moving south are to comb the area between the two rivers. Make sure they keep a sharp eye out. For all we know the aliens might have advance scouts already ashore and moving north. The rest of the company will follow with the APCs." The two vehicle platoon leaders acknowledged their orders and headed off at a trot towards the motor pool where their troopers should be waiting for them. "Okay then, let's get moving everyone."

Melissa Rossi was worried about what was going to happen if they had to fight the aliens. No one knew what kind of weapons they had or how effective the Rangers lightweight standard issue PR85 automatic rifles would be against them. As she walked back to battalion HQ to confer with the other company commanders she thought about what Gupta had said about an evacuation of the 8,000 inhabitants of New Cancun; it brought back memories of another desperate evacuation she'd been involved in seven years earlier.

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Born in 2095 in Navarre, France where her father was a professor of history at a local college Melissa Rossi had graduated from the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, one of the top universities in France. Melissa and her older siblings, her sister Elise and her brother Michelle, were raised by her paternal grandparents and her father after the death of her mother in 2103, a victim of the great viral plague that killed tens of millions of people worldwide. Navarre had been relatively unaffected but Eloise Rossi had been in China attending a medical conference in Beijing when the virus seemed to appear everywhere. She was one of the first doctors to contract the virus which was spreading among the conference attendees unbeknownst to anyone. China had been one of the hardest hit areas and the flu virus was believed to have originated somewhere in southern China.

After that tragedy Melissa's father Jean Pascal had doted on his kids and encouraged them to follow their dreams whatever they were. Her sister Lisa had gone on to become the owner of a clothing boutique and had two kids of her own while her brother Jean Pierre had gone

to the French Naval Academy. After graduation with a degree in international studies Melissa joined the French army and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in 2017. A little more than two years later First Lieutenant Rossi was with French army units assisting in the final evacuation of the Maldives islands as rising seas took over the last habitable areas. Jean Pierre was an officer on one of the French naval units involved. The brother and sister only crossed paths once during the operation but they shared the common bond of being part of it.

The final evacuation had been both poignant and rapid. Refugees were among the last holdouts and some had to leave with only the clothes they were wearing as storm driven waters threatened to wipe the remaining human habitations off the land and into the sea. In a driving rain and high winds Rossi commanded a platoon of eight amphibious personnel carriers searching for some of the last of the estimated 500 people who had refused to be resettled in Madagascar.

Rossi's unit and several others tasked with the same mission rescued people as they went from one swiftly collapsing house to another while rescue shuttles plucked others off their roofs as the sea rose swiftly Rossi's platoon had already picked up several dozen, some of them clinging to trees as the water had risen at least three feet deep in just a few hours as the winds rose to near gale force thanks to a cyclone in the Indian Ocean centered just two hundred miles to the southeast. The evacuation window had closed less than eight hours after the French naval task force arrived in the area with less than a half dozen islets still occupied; after that there was no one left to rescue although several score of the holdouts were unaccounted for. Her unit had then provided security for the climate refugees at the reception center on the island nation of Madagascar were many of them were being resettled.

Soon after returning to France in February 2120 Melissa was introduced to Captain Isabelle Caval who'd just returned with her detachment from the New Hope colony on Tau Ceti 4. Caval's detachment had been the first French unit to be sent there and they'd returned at the end of their three-year tour that had included thirteen months in transit to and from the colony. They'd been one of the first four detachments to arrive at the colony in 2117 on the colony transport ship James Cook. In August 2119 they'd been relieved by the second French detachment to go. By the time Caval's unit had returned the Ranger Regiment at the colony had grown to eight mixed companies, each with two detachments from different countries.

Melissa made no effort to hide her interest and she spent as much time with Caval as she could over the following months. Then with encouragement from Caval, and from her family, she put in her application to serve in a French field detachment assigned to the Colonial Rangers, the international force formed to protect the colony's survey and exploration teams from the deadly native predators. It was composed of roughly 100-110 man detachments from sponsoring nations plus several hundred support personnel.

Rossi went through the physical, psychological and intelligence screening that was mandatory for all prospective Ranger officers and passed them all easily. With a recommendation from Caval and her company commander she was selected to go to the colony and in 2121 entered the three-month Ranger training course, the first half warm weather training

in Thailand followed by six weeks of cold weather training in Scotland, with the newly formed French detachment. She was one of four platoon leaders, all lieutenants, under a captain. Each platoon had about 25 enlisted and one platoon was the detachment's vehicle platoon which provided transport, four passenger all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) used for scouting and heavy weapons support in the form of three armored personnel carriers (APCs), each with a four man crew.

Rossi arrived at the colony in January 2123 on the cargo supply ship *Antarctica*. On the same starship were three other national detachments and with the female officers in those detachments being in the minority she came soon met American Lieutenant Zoey Bryant, Japanese Lieutenant Yui Watanabe and Chinese Lieutenants Jing Woo and Eva Zhang. All four were field platoon leaders like herself and they would all become close friends over the next several years. Rossi also got to know the commander of the American detachment, Captain Claudia Stairs, who would serve as a mentor for all these women. These five young lieutenants would remain at the colony when their detachments returned to Earth at the end of their tours. They would all go on to be detachment and/or company commanders as new detachments from their nations arrived with the exception of Watanabe who transferred to the communications department. Claudia Stairs also remained at the colony and went on to be a company commander, then after serving time on the regimental staff became was selected to be the new Second Battalion's executive officer.

Melissa Rossi had been at the colony over four years now and was very familiar with the area around the two rivers twenty miles south of the Ranger Base. The two rivers ran east from the mountains and were about a mile apart. Each had three bridges over them, two of them temporary structures put up at the end of the previous summer during the dry season when the rivers were running slower. They were supposed to be taken down before the warming spring weather caused the winter snows to melt and sweep those bridges away. Eventually they were to be replaced with sturdier, permanent bridges.

Rossi wasn't concerned with the temporary bridges, which were simple pontoon sections made of an ultra-high density composite with concrete supports set into the riverbed at 100-foot intervals; they could be destroyed easily if necessary. It was the permanent steel span bridge over a narrow chasm two miles west of the center bridge. It was set into concrete foundations and would be a challenge to take down. Her company would also have to cover part of the river bank to either side of the bridge and there was little cover left to conceal her company; the area had been cleared when the foundations were laid and the roadway that led to New Cancun.

Captain Melissa Rossi had rescued civilians in a cyclone as ocean waves broke over her amphibious vehicles and she'd faced demon wolves and other very dangerous predators in the mountains of the New Hope colony but she'd never been as afraid as she was feeling now. The aliens had weapons which could reach a cargo transport lander flying miles above like the *Cairo* which had sent a warning message before contact with them was lost. Melissa wasn't so much afraid for herself as she was for her people who were just now learning about the invasion. Rossi had taken command of Falcon Company and its French detachment when it arrived nearly a year

## FIRST CONTACT

before and she knew everyone of its French Rangers, and many of the Czechs as well, and she had a feeling in her gut that many of them would die soon if combat commenced as she feared it would.

## Chapter 2

### The Rift Take Stock

#### Rift Flagship

Rift Expeditionary Force Commander General Bysr Osmu'a studied the reports from his attack forces and wondered why his sub-commanders were not finding as many of the aliens as he had expected. He knew there should've been thousands of them in the southern coastal settlement. They should've been able to trap most of them in the town if they really *had* taken them by surprise, but apparently only a few score had been taken while the rest had left on a large airship that took them somewhere to the north. It had received at least a few energy bolts and was seen trailing smoke but it had escaped nonetheless. "Despite the reports of your sub-commanders that they had been undetected it seems apparent that the alien transport ship must have alerted the settlement that our forces were approaching," he told General Warsh.

"You may be correct, General. There is no way to know for sure if it had sent a warning before their communications link was severed but I agree it appears likely now. Most of them had fled to the hill above the town before our ships were in sight of the coast. They must have known that we were coming." The Rift Ground Force Commander was mostly pleased with the way the plan was going so far but he was anxious about the incident with the huge airship that had spotted his central attack force before they were within firing range of the coast. They'd managed to hit it several times with the plasma cannon carried by the watercraft and Sub-Commander Ocha had said that he had seen it turn on its side while trying to escape then crash into the ocean somewhere north of them. Sub-Commander Ocha had followed proper protocol and had given the signal to destroy the communications satellites as soon as he knew they'd been spotted.

Osmu'a stared at Warsh through his monitor with an unhappy look. "It is unfortunate that our ships in orbit were out of position to follow the alien airship after their encounter with Ocha's force. We can't be sure where it is."

"Yes, very unfortunate."

What Ocha hadn't done, so far, was to confirm the location of the crash site so that the huge airship could be investigated and perhaps salvaged, a high priority for General Osmu'a. That failure worried Warsh more than a little. His confidence in Ocha had never been high but he was a favorite of General Miltcar his ultimate superior who was expected to arrive in the system with three more transports in the near future. Warsh was concerned that General Osmu'a would begin to doubt him if he reported that the alien airship that had spotted them had been shot down but could not prove it. *Better to not mention it. It would only confuse things*, he thought. *And if it had given warning? Well no matter now*, he thought.

Soon after the incident with the airship the western attack force under Sub-Commander Therba had come ashore with 5,000 Andoval warriors, landing along the shoreline of the large settlement on the south coast. There had been some brief resistance and the aliens had mostly fled before them. The central attack force had come ashore with no resistance at all and Ocha had

reported killing several dozen of the aliens, their bodies being used to feed the Andoval. Sub-Commander Aleri, in charge of the eastern attack force had the farthest to go to his target and he was several hours behind schedule due to high winds coming from the north and the heavy seas that had come with them early in the morning. And now it was apparent that his force had been spotted several hours before they could come ashore. They'd moved north more rapidly as the seas calmed closer to the eastern shore and his forces were now disembarking from the ships.

Warsh said, "Sub-Commander Therba reports losing many warriors to the strange projectile weapons used by these aliens. He reports that he has had more than 300 Andoval mercenaries killed there and many more wounded but the town has now been taken. He will soon be sending a portion of his force northward up the river that leads to the alien settlement that will be his next conquest. There have been no casualties among the central attack force. They have killed nearly sixty of the aliens. Ocha, reports that others have fled into the hills and his warriors are in pursuit."

"They will now be expecting Aleri as well. Aleri must take the coastal settlement before they have time to escape!" Osmu'a said.

Sub-commander Aleri had reported that a small alien aircraft had spotted his force several hours before they'd made landfall. Aleri further reported that his warriors were hungry for battle and alien meat but they were nearly a full day from the settlement with two rivers to cross. "There were few other places suitable to land unless they were to go even further north which would have just given the aliens that much more time to prepare," Warsh said defensively. He thought Aleri should have gone north of the settlement first as planned but being discovered early had caused him to land further south. Osmu'a was also not convinced that his eastern force sub-commander's reasoning was correct but it was too late now. "Aleri reports that all of his forces are now ashore and the vanguard of his force has started north. The force has been split into three separate columns. Each will take one of the three bridges that span the first river they must cross."

Osmu'a told Warsh, "With our plan moving forward satisfactorily, my greater concern for the moment is the starship that left here a few days ago. We are watching it closely for any sign that it suspects that there is a problem down on the surface now that we have cut off communications between it and their people here. I have ordered the transports to stay behind Rih'ta's moon for a few more days to avoid detection. By then the starship will not be able to observe the planet directly. A few more days and we will begin to send down the remaining half of our Andoval. We shall begin waking the remaining Andoval from transit sleep tomorrow. You will keep me informed of the sub-commanders' progress before I decide where to land the rest of our forces."

"If the aliens escape again food will be a problem, General," Warsh said uneasily.

Osmu'a's original plan already needed to be revised because of the failure to trap as many of the invaders as possible. Unless the ground forces made quick progress in capturing the aliens' food supplies, especially the aliens themselves, there would be problems sustaining the rest of the Andoval when they landed. "I have always been concerned about the lack of

information we had about these aliens and their capabilities. General Miltcar had assured me that the 60,000 troops that have been contracted for this mission should make quick work of the aliens. The aliens have reacted much more quickly than we expected however and their weapons were unanticipated. And there are many more of them than we were originally led to expect.” The beings down on the planet had been reported to be far fewer, less than half the number of his attack force, but it would be at least half a local year and perhaps more before the second group of transports with the remaining 30,000 troops of the expeditionary force arrived in orbit.

Osmu’a had been observing the aliens for months and he estimated that there were nearly three times as many of them on the planet as he’d been told. So far though, he’d seen little indication that the aliens were capable of repulsing his Andoval. The aliens the central attack force had come across had no weapons to speak of and the western attack force had mostly seen the aliens running away as fast as they could with only a few pockets of resistance that withdrew as soon as the aliens they were protecting had gotten away.

Osmu’a thought that if he could only land his forces right in the middle of one of the aliens’ settlements his warriors would make short work of them but he couldn’t risk that. Only able to transport and land relatively small numbers at one time, just 300 Andoval with four of their Rift officers and their riding beasts could fit in one of his atmospheric transfer ships that served as his troop shuttles, he thought that it was possible that the aliens could overwhelm them with sheer numbers. But losing some of his Andoval trying to make a landing in or near a settlement was not his concern; he had plenty of warriors to lose. He couldn’t risk any of his six troop shuttles. He had nothing like the huge ships the aliens used to move cargo from orbit to the surface and from one point on the surface to another. He needed his forces to destroy as many of those ships as possible or they might keep using them to transport the aliens out of reach before his warriors could get to them. It would be easier once his forces had secured the entire eastern portion of the continent. That would reduce the aliens’ options of where they could retreat to when he launched his attacks on the western coast. But that would not be soon. If he couldn’t secure the north during this fighting season he might have to withdraw his forces to warmer areas where the Andoval would have wait out the next winter.

## Chapter 3

### Losing Contact

September 10, 2126

#### **CTS *Amundsen* outbound from the New Hope colony**

“Excuse me, Captain Ming,” Lieutenant Commander Henri Grunier, *Amundsen*’s communications officer said as he entered the commanding officer’s cabin after knocking once, “we’ve received an immediate, classified top secret message from the *Asia*.”

“Subject tag?”

“It says ‘Sabotage attempt thwarted.’ There’s a preface from *Asia*’s CO with it.”

“*What?* Let me see that, Henri.” Grunier handed his data pad to Ming who read the text of the message. “It looks like this happened more than a month ago, a week before they made their jump. Two men who were part of the ship’s cargo crew planted explosives in the jump engine and main propulsion engine rooms but they were caught in the act and chased into the ship’s anti-gravity power generation room where shots were exchanged. One of them was killed, the other badly injured and captured. It says all other ships bound for the colony were informed shortly after the incident but since we were on the other side of jump space they couldn’t transmit it to us until now.” Ming paused thoughtfully. “Well, that’s very interesting! And it does make me wonder if there could be a connection between the anomaly down on the surface and this. It seems doubtful but I wouldn’t rule it out. I will discuss this with the First Officer and our Chief of Security. As we’re on the way home there’s probably little chance that anyone will try something on *our* ship but we’re going to have to take this seriously regardless. We’ll review our ship’s security program and start doing more random inspections of critical areas looking for materials that do not belong there.”

“Makes sense, Sir.”

“All right. Don’t let anyone else see this for the moment. Not until after we’ve had a chance to meet and decide what to do.”

“Aye, Captain.”

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September 12, 2126

Off-duty and resting in his cabin Lieutenant Commander Henri Grunier, the colony transport ship *Amundsen*’s Communications Officer was thinking about getting up and heading to the officer’s mess for a late night snack when he received a call from the duty comm officer, Lieutenant Karina Olsen. “Sorry to bother you, sir, but I’m having trouble making contact with the New Hope Ground Station. One moment we were in contact the next we were not. I can’t get the link reestablished, sir.”

“Have you informed the Officer of the Deck, Karina?” he inquired as he sat up and stretched his back.

“Yes, Sir. Commander Kaminski wanted me to inform you.”

“Very well, Karina. I’ll be up there in a few minutes.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll let you know if the situation changes in the meantime.”

Grunier took his time but he was on the bridge in less than five minutes after Olsen had called. He nodded to Kaminski who nodded back as he walked over to the comm station. “Any change?”

“No, Sir. We haven’t been able to link up with the ground station or any of the communications satellites.”

“You’ve run all systems checks on our comms?” he asked knowing Olsen would have done that before calling him but he had to ask.

“Yes, sir. All systems read green. I sent a test signal to the relay satellite mid-system and it pinged us right back.”

“I see. Well this isn’t the first time either the ground station or one of the satellites has gone down suddenly. All those satellites were refurbished before being placed in orbit here. The ground station equipment was already at least twenty years old when it was transferred here twenty years ago. They all need to be replaced.”

“But I’m not getting a signal lock on any of the four comsats in orbit.”

Grunier thought about it, “It’s not really all that surprising; a sudden loss of signal from the ground station, or one of the comsats in the chain can glitch the whole system until they reset it. I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about; they’ll probably have their comms back up within an hour or so. Longer maybe if it’s a serious equipment failure. Even so I’ll inform the Captain. Let me know if we regain contact.

“Aye, Sir.”

Grunier crossed over to the command chair to talk to Albert Kaminski, the ship’s Operations Officer who had the bridge watch and sat in the seat next to the Commanding Officer’s chair. “It looks like New Hope’s comm systems are having some problems, Commander. It’s probably something they’ll have fixed before long. I’ll inform the Captain.”

“Sounds good, Henri. Sorry to have to get you up.”

“No problem; it’s my responsibility.”

“The Captain should still be up. He and the First Officer were in his cabin twenty minutes ago.”

“Très bon. I don’t like waking him up but this is one of those things he needs to know about.”

The Captain’s stateroom was located directly behind the bridge and Grunier took the short walk from the bridge, knocked and entered.

“Good evening Henri,” David Ming said. Ming and the ship’s First Officer Captain Henri Dillion were playing chess in shorts and t-shirts. “Up a bit late I see. What do you have?”

“Sir, we’ve lost contact with the colony. All our systems are operating normally but we’re not receiving anything from them. We can’t tell if they can hear us although I doubt it.”

“Any ideas what might be the cause?” Dillion asked.

“Hard to say for sure, Sir. They do have a lot of old equipment and they’ve had a few problems with equipment failure before. They’ve usually got it fixed in anywhere from a few hours to a full day depending on the problem.”

“Hmm, another incident with curious timing. I wonder if there’s any connection between our loss of communications with the colony and the attempt to sabotage *Asia*, or with the mysterious anomaly down on the surface. Do you think there’s anything to worry about, Lieutenant Commander?” Ming asked Grunier. “Any thoughts you’d care to share?”

“It’s something to keep an eye on but it’s probably premature to worry. There’s nothing we can do about it anyway, Sir,” Grunier replied, “but in all honesty it wouldn’t be that hard to disable the ground station if you have someone on the ground there. So it is possible if someone at the colony wants to make it more difficult to communicate with any starships on their way to or from the colony.”

“Are we in contact with *Asia*?” Ming asked him.

“Not at the moment. It will be a couple of days before they’re in position to pick up a clear signal again, Captain.”

“Very well, Henri. Hopefully comms will be restored soon. Why don’t you go on back to bed and we’ll take another look at it during the day watch.”

“Aye, Captain. Goodnight sir, Commander.” The communications officer exited and returned to the bridge to inform Kaminski of what the Captain had said then returned to his cabin to get some sleep.

After he left the CO’s stateroom Dillion asked Ming, “Well, what do you think, David?”

“Could be nothing, Henri. Still, I don’t like coincidences and the timing bothers me. We can’t exactly turn around and go back now, can we?”

Ming shrugged. “He’s right about us not being able to do anything about it. Hopefully we’ll have comms back up by the beginning of day watch.”

“And if we don’t regain contact?”

“If we just can’t talk to the ground station, that’s one thing. If we can’t regain contact with the satellites then I’ll worry although we still won’t be able to do anything except alert *Asia* when we regain contact with *them* and pass along the information after we jump back to Earth. Perhaps it will convince the penny counters that the colony needs some new equipment sent out here. *Asia* will be there in nine weeks and they’ll know to look for any trouble if they don’t get in contact with the colony before they arrive.”

Dillion sighed, “Since there’s nothing to do now why don’t we just finish this. It’s your move, David.”

"May as well."

###

### **CSS *Asia* inbound to the New Hope colony**

Commander Rick Cassidy’s 14-year-old daughter Ciara Cassidy and several of the other students were taking a break from a workout in the zero-gravity gym. Ciara told them, “I heard from Fiona Winfield, the ship’s comm officer. They were finally able to send messages to the

colony. It took almost a month to get through between that solar storm and coming in on the wrong side of the sun for the relay satellite to pick up the signal. I can't wait until we start getting messages back. I know my dad's going to be surprised when he sees the one I sent him."

"My mother and father are in New Cancun," Ivan Tolkov said. "I wonder how long it will take my messages to get to them. I haven't heard from them since we left Earth."

"Yeah, I know. Our mom has been getting antsy waiting to hear from my dad," Jana Halstrom said. "He's in Southport. The weather is supposed to be really nice there most of the time. I can't wait to get there and go to the beach."

Ciara considered the timing, "We're going to get there near the end of the summer semester so we should have a week or two before the fall semester starts, which is optional. I think I'm going to try to take just one course in the fall so I can spend some time with my dad. He said he'd take me on a tour of the settlements since he and my Aunt Molly have to travel a lot. I'll get to go with him, or Molly, or both which would be even better."

"It's still going to take us another two months to get there," said Ciara's roommate for the voyage 15-year-old Katey Kennedy. "We have to finish all our classes before that. I sure don't want to get stuck on the ship on the ground there trying to finish them to get the credit."

"We'll get them all done, Kates." Ciara grumbled, "It's my biology project that's turned out to be harder than the other classes I'm taking that I'm more worried about but not really that much. I might have to spend less time with the Rangers though. I really like it that they let me train them. Major Johnson, the senior officer onboard, he said every one of the Rangers I worked with was getting better scores in the VR trainer and he was going to recommend to the Regimental Commander, that's Colonel Jamison, that they should let me work part-time at the Ranger base. I'd get paid for it if it happens."

"Wow! Do you want to do that?" Rosa asked her in interest. "You might not have a lot of time during the semester."

Ciara shrugged, "That might be true but I would like to do it if they'll let me. Maybe I can work during school breaks. I'll just have to see how it goes. Besides, I'll have to prove myself to all the Rangers who are already there first."

"That shouldn't be hard," guffawed Katey. "How long did it take to win over this bunch, two days, three?"

Ciara Cassidy grinned at her friends, "Actually, for Level IV it was just one day. It took two more days to show that I could handle Level V once they allowed me to try it. I own *Asia's* all-time highest scores at both levels, you know."

"We know, we know! You've only told us a dozen times," Katey said with a faux groan.

"Now you've heard it a baker's dozen times," Ciara grinned

###

"Captain, we've just lost our comm link with the colony," said Lieutenant Commander Fiona Winfield, *Asia's* Communications Officer.

"Any problems on our side?" Captain Whitfield inquired calmly.

## FIRST CONTACT

The Irish officer replied, "Running systems checks now. It looks like everything is green on our side, Captain. I've pinged the relay satellite but we won't get an answer for at least thirty minutes."

Whitfield scratched his chin in thought then shrugged, "Well's it's not the first time we've lost the link on this run. Keep me informed, Fiona. There may be an equipment failure on their end. No doubt we'll hear from them once they get it repaired."

"Aye, Captain."