

The Phoenix Conspiracy

by Richard L. Sanders

Book One in The Phoenix Conspiracy Series

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This is book one of an ongoing series. The sequels may be found at www.richardsanders.com and on most devices.

Chapter 1

All was quiet.

Those eyes not glued to computer-screens were staring out the windows at the two very large cruisers flying alongside them. Warships more interested in preventing their escape than offering protection.

Raidan felt the weight of every passing second, each moment taking him one step closer to the inevitable. And, in the silence of spaceflight, he heard the solemn bells of the executioner.

"This is it, boy," he whispered to himself. "I hope it was worth it."

His XO looked up from her station, probably a response to his mumbling. Her narrow eyes shot him a hateful glare. Seeing her that way, knowing her disgust was justified, it made him almost regret his decision to leave her in the dark. She'd been a faithful friend these past several years and deceiving her left a bitter taste in his mouth. But if he hadn't betrayed her, if he'd chosen to tell her everything, she would have worked against him and tried to compromise his efforts. Or, perhaps worse, she might've taken his side. He doubted it—breaking the law and defying orders wasn't her way—but if she had, she'd be a prisoner now too. And *that* would be unbearable.

Poor beautiful Commander Presley. And she really was beautiful with glossy golden hair, a splendid physique, and, most important of all, cunning green eyes that pierced anything, feared nothing, and gleamed with intelligence. She was more than most twenty-eight year old officers could hope to be, and an outstanding second in command. His eyes traced her misleadingly delicate face and part of him wished he were ten years younger, like the junior helmsman at her side, enthralled and intimidated by such a stunning young woman. With an amused smile, he imagined himself as the boy he used to be—the timid young officer at the ops post—nervously scouring his mind for an excuse to ask her out. It made him smile and, for a moment, he almost forgot the gravity of his situation. *Almost*.

"We're being instructed by the flagship to increase speed," said the helmsman.

Raidan raised a curious eyebrow. They were afraid he'd somehow slip away and escape, despite the massive force they'd sent to arrest him. *The powers that be must realize how much I still threaten them...* "Comply with all instructions," he said, knowing he had no other choice.

"Aye, sir."

The helmsman and the rest of the bridge staff looked elegant in their blue-and-black uniforms while they worked tirelessly to keep the damaged

ship under control. They had a certain dignity, and it had been a true honor serving with them over the years. An honor tainted by the fact that he was leaving them this way, shocked and confused. Wondering... why had fellow Imperial starships intercepted and boarded them? Why were they being escorted to the nearest government station, Praxis One? And why was their faithful CO under arrest? Had their last mission been the Captain's personal crusade and not orders from the Fleet?

Poor officers, they'd never know the whole truth. Very soon they'd all arrive at Praxis and the tribunal would invent whatever explanation it wished. No one would ever get the real story. If only they could, they'd realize he'd done the right thing. But that knowledge was too dangerous to have. So, for their own safety, he'd kept his crew out of it. If things didn't go as planned, if his friends didn't come through for him, then he'd be dead soon. No sense in dragging such fine men and women to the grave with him.

"I'm going to my quarters," he announced, all heads turned his way. "Commander, you have the deck."

"Yes, sir." Even though hate poured through her striking green eyes, her tone remained respectful. Despite how he'd betrayed them all.

"Thank you," he paused. "All of you." It was barely more than a whisper—an inadequate tribute, but sincere.

He left the bridge, flanked by a marine who followed him down three decks to his quarters. Raidan thumbed the plate and the door whisked open. Before stepping inside he addressed the marine. "What's your name, soldier?"

"Lance Corporal Charlie Davis, *sir*."

Raidan nodded. "Thank you for the escort, Corporal. That will be all." He stepped into his quarters, making it clear the soldier wasn't invited to follow. Instead the marine took up a position outside, guarding the door which slid shut.

Finally alone, Raidan was able to relax. He pulled off his uniform shirt, replacing it with something more comfortable, and took a seat at his small desk. His bedroom was the largest aboard the ship but he kept it just as barren as the lowliest midshipman. Basic carpet, empty grey walls, a standard bed, and a simple desk. His only luxury was the one he couldn't dispense with, the window set against the port wall. The current view was dominated by the very large ISS Andromeda, the flagship of the Fifth Fleet. She was an awesome spectacle to behold. More than four times the size of the Phoenix, she was like a giant tapestry with every contour and edge boasting the finest human craftsmanship and engineering in the galaxy. Her running lights splashed the royal Navy's colors against her hull, blue and white, and the ship glowed fiercely against the black vacant backdrop of space. To Raidan that starship was a symbol of everything that had once been great about the Empire, and his heart saluted it.

They wouldn't believe him. But the truth was, everything he'd ever done had been for the good of the Empire. That knowledge gave him some small measure of peace.

Vice Admiral Aleksandra Harkov was somewhere aboard that ship. Whether she was on the bridge or asleep in her quarters, her commanding presence filled every inch of her massive starship and permeated the space all around. She'd been kind to allow him the dignity of retaining his command until they reached Praxis, even if it was just a façade. And, even though she'd been the one to corner and arrest him, Raidan felt no grudge toward her. She was equal parts good intentions and ignorance. He doubted she could see or understand the true threat facing the Empire, despite her lofty position. Most likely she was just another unknowing pawn in the deadliest game ever played.

"Don't worry, Admiral. You'll get no resistance from me... *yet*."

He picked up the bottle of whiskey on his desk and pulled off the cork. An old proverb came to mind. "Eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow I die." He took a sip, trying to forget that in three hours' time he'd be taken into custody by the authorities on Praxis. And, after that, either his friends would come through for him or they wouldn't. But at least he'd done his part to save the Empire.

Chapter 2

The IWS Nighthawk was one of only a few phantom-class stealth warships ever to be commissioned. Small and agile, it was hard to see and even harder to target. Black from bow to stern with its identifier lights usually kept off, its signature was that of Intel Wing. One that, when transmitted to an Imperial Station, said in no uncertain terms: *Do what we say without asking questions. Why we're here is none of your business. Stay out of our way.*

The ship was fast and quiet, but relied mostly on stealth for defense, utilizing technologies most of the galaxy didn't even know existed. And it was because of those technologies that the rogue ISS Phoenix had finally been tracked down. The Fifth Fleet had swept its space looking for the ship for over two standard days before eventually appealing to Intel Wing for help. Two more days and the Phoenix was again under Fleet control. Now the Nighthawk trailed it, and the rest of the interdiction flotilla, on their way to Praxis where justice would be served. And, hopefully, the incident would be investigated.

Calvin Cross, the commanding officer of the Nighthawk, remained unsettled. The whole incident made no sense to him. His investigation into Captain Asari Raidan and the Phoenix had been unfortunately short, conducted in only the two days it'd taken to corner the missing ship, but he'd expected to find a motive in that time that explained everything. He hadn't. No one had. A decorated captain, a veteran of the Great War, had inexplicably gone rogue, attacked and destroyed a civilian convoy of alien traders, and then refused to communicate with all Imperial ships and outposts. Then, when finally caught, he'd surrendered without a fight. Now he sat, presumably on his bridge, soaring toward Praxis where he'd certainly face the death penalty.

Why did you do it, Raidan?

Some believed he'd mentally snapped. Years of too much pressure, perhaps a mid-life crisis, or maybe it was a chemical imbalance only now manifesting. Calvin dismissed all of these theories. Raidan definitely had a motive, it was just a matter of finding it.

"Entering Praxis System. Braking thrusters have fired and we're again in normal space, Captain," said Sarah from the helm. She was a young brunette, though a year his senior, with wide brown eyes and a relaxed demeanor that was famous among their tight-knit crew. People joked she'd be calm even if the ship were breaking apart and everyone was about to die.

"Thank you," Calvin nodded. He didn't like being called Captain, partly because it felt too formal, but mostly because it wasn't true. He wasn't a captain. Not a real one. On paper he was a Lieutenant Commander, a technicality few outside his staff knew about since he was a CO and therefore held the rank of Acting Captain.

"Contact the control tower, put in a docking request, and begin a standard approach. You know the drill."

"Yes, sir."

Their ship followed behind the Phoenix and the two warships at its flanks. The Phoenix's identifier lights flashed the brilliant white signal of surrender, illuminating its damaged hull—which highlighted another mystery. The plasma burns and the shredding patterns that scarred the renegade warship hadn't come from the Fleet's interdiction operation. Raidan had not resisted. But the injuries had come from somewhere. The question was—who had the rogue captain been fighting? Certainly the damage was too severe to be the work of the civilian convoy he'd attacked.

A transmission came over the bridge speakers. "IWS Nighthawk. Power down your weapons and standby for authentication." Two sentry ships broke from their patrol pattern and approached on the port side. Calvin watched them maneuver on the 3d display.

"We've been targeted by two small destroyers, weapons hot," said Miles from the defense post.

"They're a bit touchy this close to the border, aren't they?" Calvin had done plenty of missions this far out but had never docked with any of the deep space outposts. "Okay, power it all down. Do what they say."

A minute later, the ships broke off and swept back to their patrol pattern.

"IWS Nighthawk, you are cleared to approach."

They passed through the station's outer defenses and, after receiving clearance from Traffic Control, entered a long orbit around the planet, awaiting their turn to dock. They were last in line so they had a few minutes.

"What do you suppose happens next?" asked Sarah.

"Two words," said Miles, spinning the defense post's chair to face center. "Military Tribunal."

"I don't think so," said Calvin. "The Phoenix never fired on any of our ships, and given the international nature of the incident, I expect a General Tribunal."

"I would have expected a court martial," said Shen.

"It's a complicated situation to be sure, which makes me wonder what other people are speculating," said Calvin, flashing the mischievous smile he was so famous for, the one that made people guess he was even younger than his twenty-five years let on. "Let's tap into the local news. Shen, go ahead and put it on every non-essential screen on the bridge."

"Aye, sir," his ops officer said. His long, unkempt hair and bulbous figure made him seem a poor fit for Intel Wing but Calvin doubted there was a more intelligent person on the ship.

Seconds later, several dark screens flickered to life—including the one at the command position. The image clarified to reveal a female reporter whose voice filled the bridge speakers.

"... and we're getting reports now that the man who military police took into custody is Captain Asari Raidan of the Imperial Starship *Phoenix*. For those just tuning in, moments ago, military police swarmed the terminals of Access Point One and arrested who we now know to be Imperial Navy Captain Asari Raidan. A passer-by caught this footage."

The image on the viewers shifted to reveal several blue-and-black clad Navy officers descend a ramp, accompanied by marines in grey fatigues. Upon reaching the bottom, the lead officer—Raidan—raised his hands and allowed several military police to surround him, cuff him, and take him away. A throng of people, including station personnel, tried to get a closer look but were held back by a line of security officers.

"We've just heard that Asari Raidan is now being transported to Detention Center 201. The Military has refused to comment officially on the arrest but we've heard from one officer, under condition of anonymity, that a General Tribunal might begin as early as tomorrow. He did not know if the trial will be made public."

Sarah waved her hand to get Calvin's attention. "Message from Control. We're cleared to dock in five-B."

Calvin muted the broadcast. "Okay, Sarah, take us in."

"Your word is my command," her fingers deftly took the controls and, through the windows, the stardock slowly became visible.

"Roger that, Control, this is IWS Nighthawk beginning our final approach," said Sarah into her headset while piloting.

Calvin leaned back in his chair. "You know," he said, looking over at Anand, his best friend and faithful XO. "I'm really looking forward to this time off."

"As if *you* could ever stop working."

"No, I mean it," Calvin laughed. "I'm worn out."

"If you're worn out that means the rest of us are postmortem—or close. The way they work us, sometimes I wish I were in the Navy and could lounge around on one of those luxury liners." Anand shook his head in an exaggerated display of irritation. Calvin knew Anand somewhat resented the regulars for having several more conveniences aboard their vessels: lounges, bars, gyms—things a stealth frigate didn't have space for.

"Enough to request a transfer?" asked Calvin. His voice was full of laughter but he wasn't truly joking. He knew his XO had some real

grievances with Intel Wing and it was probably only a matter of time before he gave it up completely.

Anand ignored the question.

"Slowing to seven point two mc's per second," said Sarah as the ship angled into position and halted. "All stop. The docking clamps are attached, concluding another perfect flight." Sarah spun her chair to face the center of the bridge, grinning.

"Good work, as always," said Calvin. He tapped his intercom. "All hands, this is the CO. We're docked with Praxis One and the jetways are attached. You are ordered to the airlocks to vacate the ship. As of this moment you are all on official leave for four weeks. That is all."

"So does that mean we don't have to follow your orders anymore, Cal?" asked Miles with a dopey grin.

"Something like that," Calvin smirked. "But when it's all over, so-help-me, I'll make you swab every deck on this ship. Now hurry and get out of here, your freedom is ticking away."

Miles laughed, he was a big man and his laughter was deep. "You don't need to tell *me* twice." He stood up and marched to the elevator. "See ya around the casino, Captain."

"Not this time. I only have a little money and I can't afford to lose any of it to you," said Calvin, lying. As a single person earning a captain's paygrade he had more q than he knew what to do with, especially since he preferred a simple lifestyle, and Miles was nothing if not horrible at cards, if anything Calvin would walk away with Miles' life-savings. The real reason Calvin planned to avoid the casino tables on this trip was the Raidan case. He wanted to focus on it without any distractions—especially the kind that could swiftly turn his affluence into poverty.

"Suit yourself, Cal. I have 2,000q begging to turn into 20,000—so don't get jealous when I return with the deed to somebody's house." Miles flashed a huge grin and the elevator door shut.

Calvin exited the ship via the deck two jetway. Despite their being quadruple sealed and not very long, he always hated stepping through them. Somehow he couldn't hold back the thought of being blown out into space. Such accidents never happened, but it bothered him anyway because he could imagine it.

He cleared the secondary hatch without any trouble and descended the ladder, starting down the long ramp that led into the terminal. Before he reached ground-level, he caught sight of the concourse swarming with people. Some wore staff uniforms, others military garb—including soldiers at

every checkpoint—but mostly they were civilians. Scattered in hundreds of small groups, all awaiting transport on whatever ships docked after the Nighthawk was moved into long-term holding. The size of the crowds surprised him, until he realized that while it was late at night in Standard Time, what he was used to, in Local Time it was almost midday. As if to rub it in, enormous blue digits glared at him from the wall.

1110 L.T. and 0230 S.T.

Since he was government personnel, security ushered him over to a basic checkpoint instead of the usual customs screening with its cumbersome procedures and long lines. Immigration was tough in all Imperial Systems, especially alien immigration, but he barely gave it a thought since he was both human and in an elite branch of the government. They waved him to the next available desk where a middle-aged guard sat at a computer station. He wore a green uniform—local security, and sported a huge moustache.

"Hello, sir, and welcome to Praxis One," the guard said. "Hand me your I.D. and press your thumb to the plate."

Calvin complied. They waited a minute for the computer to analyze his card for tampering.

"So uh... black-and-silver," the guard said, whistling as he looked over Calvin's uniform and saw the colors of Intel Wing—mostly black from neck to boots with a touch of silver, including his rank bar and officer's sash. Calvin liked the look, it was much more stylish and interesting than the standard blue-and-black of the Navy.

"So... are you here for some kind of big assignment? We usually only get blue-and-black through here."

Calvin fought a smile; he did like the attention, but he'd be a terrible officer if he let his ego loosen his lips. "Sorry, just on vacation."

"Right, of course," the man winked. "Then I wish you good luck with your *vacation*," as he spoke, the computer beeped its approval and the old guard nodded him through. "Follow the arrows to your left for accommodations, transportation, information, and anything else you need."

"Thanks." Calvin put away his card and wandered to the offices against the far wall. Had he actually been on an assignment, the military would have pre-arranged everything and someone would have met him the instant he stepped through security. But since he was on leave—aside from his role in the Raidan tribunal—he was effectively a civilian. Which meant civilian accommodations, and having to deal with long waits, no-vacancies, prices, and lines. Inconveniences he'd forgotten about because they didn't exist in his world of starships and open space.

He fell into line, trying not to push his way too hard through the mob of people doing business with the various offices and kiosks. Calvin found

himself wishing Raidan had been arrested on some small fringe outpost with fewer people so he wouldn't have to put up with the delays.

He took a number and moved aside for others. Unable to find a seat, he leaned against the wall and wondered how he'd pass the time. That was when a random stranger tried to engage him in polite—and very boring—conversation about nothing. The idle chit-chat quickly turned to questions about Calvin's personal life—which he didn't want to discuss with a complete stranger. And when Calvin proved less than talkative the old stranger launched into a very spirited monolog about the positive traits of her granddaughters whom she'd love to have him court—or grandsons if that was more to his liking. It was very awkward and Calvin searched for an escape. That was when he spotted a familiar looking, extremely beautiful woman in full Navy garb across the room. Even from this distance she was striking.

"Oh what do you know," said Calvin, interrupting the old woman's boasting about one of her granddaughter's cooking skills. "I see an old friend. Thanks, though!" With that he rushed away.

The beautiful woman across the room was Summers Presley, XO of the ISS Phoenix, and definitely not an old friend. In fact, he'd never seen her before in his life, not in the flesh. She was breathtaking with her cascade of blond hair and exquisite physique, and her aura of certainty was disarming. He recognized her from his short investigation into the Phoenix and there was no mistaking her. Her file photo had looked more like something from a model's portfolio than a military profile, and even it hadn't done her justice. She was probably the most beautiful woman Calvin had ever seen. A fact he hoped to ignore since it gave her an unfair advantage.

"Summers Presley," said Calvin, catching up with her. "I'm glad I recognized you, I have a few questions..."

"I'm sorry, do I know you, officer?" She stopped and looked at him, seeming distracted and annoyed, no doubt because he'd just breached protocol. Unacquainted officers in uniform always referred to each other by title or rank, never by first name. Casual use of given names was something unique to Calvin's command style, and certainly not encouraged by either the Fleet or Intel Wing. But this practice had now come back to bite him, especially since, officially, he was the lower ranking officer here.

"Oh right, sorry," said Calvin, but the damage was done. "I'm Calvin Cross of the IWS Nighthawk."

Her eyes jumped to his rank insignia. "Lieutenant Commander?"

"Yes. But don't let the silver bar fool you, I'm a CO."

Her eyebrows shot up and she gave him a strange look—a mixture of intrigue, disdain, and skepticism.

"Listen," he said, waving her away from the crowd of people. "I'm attending the trial of your CO and, as an Intelligence Officer, I've had to do some research. And, frankly, several things don't add up for me. I'm hoping you can help to fill in the gaps, you know, the details that don't make it on paper. Like habits, traits, behaviors, and anything peculiar about Raidan's personality. I'd like to make it make sense—"

"I don't fully understand," said Summers, interrupting him. She made no effort to mask her reluctance to cooperate. "Am I being implicated in some way?"

"Oh, no, no, not at all," said Calvin, raising his arms innocently. "This isn't an official investigation," he wasn't yet convinced she'd had no part in what had unfolded on the Phoenix, but his priority was to investigate Raidan first. For now Summers was only an intelligence asset and nothing more. "Don't take this the wrong way. I'm just hoping you can tell me something I don't know. All of Raidan's, I mean Captain Asari Raidan's personnel notes describe you as an outstanding officer and, more importantly, a close friend. He trusted you. And you were near him when everything went down. Your perspective would be invaluable."

She looked hurt for a split-second. It passed almost instantly but Calvin knew what it was when he saw it. When it vanished she became even colder.

"Captain Asari Raidan was a very secretive man and he kept his true feelings to himself. I'm as mystified as you are, Lieutenant Commander. But the writing's on the wall. He either snapped and bowed to a hunger for violence or else succumbed to a deep hatred for the Rotham people he made us kill. Whatever the case may be, he's a criminal and unfit for command. Nothing more to it."

"With respect, Commander, there *is* more to it. A lot more. And you should be the first to realize that. You served with him for six years and were his XO for almost two. Doesn't it bother you that a nine-times decorated captain, from an established affluent family, and a full citizen, would throw everything away without a reason? Especially a fter twenty-nine years of diligent service?"

She closed her eyes for a moment and looked incredibly frustrated. "You speak as if I were somehow involved, Lieutenant Commander. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I was not."

"No, I'm sorry," said Calvin. "Sometimes I'm not very good at communicating what I'm trying to say. So, instead, if you don't mind, I'll just ask you a few simple questions about the days leading up to the Beotan Incident. Beginning just before Captain Raidan ordered the Phoenix to go dark."

Again he saw the glimmer of what might have been sincere hurt. But this time, instead of looking vulnerable, Summers' eyes narrowed and her voice

turned to steel. "I'm sure all your musings will be satisfied by the trial, which—despite what you may think—doesn't begin until tomorrow. Now, if you don't mind, I'd prefer not to discuss this any further off the record."

"Yes, of course," said Calvin, giving her an exaggerated nod.

"*Commander.*"

She returned the nod with a fake smile and walked away. He tried to keep his eyes from following her. He was irritated and wondering how he might have handled the conversation better.

He hated arrogant women, especially the attractive kind who'd probably had everything handed to them on a silver platter.

Chapter 3

The room Calvin had been given was about the same size as his quarters aboard the Nighthawk. Just large enough to have a bed, a desk, various drawers, and enough floor space for a pile of boxes. It was sparse and barren, with a small liquor cabinet as the only luxury. But since Calvin didn't drink, it was only there to take up space in an already cramped room.

At his feet, and in piles on his bed, were all the effects from his quarters aboard the Nighthawk. Even the posters had been removed from the walls, the remains of which were in tatters. He was probably the only CO in the Empire who decorated his military quarters with posters of music artists and slick-looking ads for upcoming blockbusters. He liked the color and noise they filled his space with, and they reminded him of the lighter side of life. But, because of the ship's scheduled cleaning, they'd all been removed and in their condition would never hang again. Luckily they were less than 1q a piece and would be easy to replace.

He shifted his things around, only unpacking the boxes that were on his bed. His better judgment knew he should unpack everything now and avoid taking a nap in order to adjust to Local Time. But, to Calvin, better judgment wasn't all it was cracked up to be. And he knew he couldn't be productive while tired. So, with a heave, he pushed the last box off the bed so he could sleep. It spilled open and a lemon-shaped chargeball rolled out. He scooped it up, feeling the firm leather as he turned it in his hands. It was worn from casual play and bore the white and crimson colors of the Camdale Cardinals.

He, Anand, and Miles had each been part of the so-called "miracle class" of 1212. The year when their rogue public school—from one of the dumpiest parts of Capital World—beat all the premiere universities in the Empire at both academics and the only sport the Empire seemed to care about, chargeball. And though he and his friends never attended a single game, it was still one more thing to be proud of. The rebel underdogs with the surprising—and never repeated—upset.

He smiled, thinking back on some of the "glory" days of just six years prior. From outlandish, and often unsuccessful, forays with girls to pranks and parties that as often as not ended on a low note, their academy years had brought them all together. And now, partly as a reward for his efforts on the Hadar Mission and partly because of good luck, they were still together. Calvin had been given the chance to handpick most of his crew once he'd taken command of the Nighthawk. He knew it wouldn't last forever,

transfers happened, but for as long as they let him serve alongside his friends, he'd enjoy it.

Lying on his bed, he rotated the chargeball in his hands and stared up at the ceiling. His thoughts shifted to his recent encounter with Summers Presley. He had a keen memory for images and as he replayed the conversation over in his head, he could see her in his mind almost as clearly as a photograph. He paid attention to her body language—which often proved more honest than words—and he found himself feeling unsettled. Something about the encounter bothered him. Yes, he didn't like that it had been cold and unsuccessful, but more importantly—she'd inadvertently given something away. Summers cared for Asari Raidan. For all her show of spite and ice she couldn't hide the fact that she felt betrayed by him personally and not just professionally. At one point or another, she'd had sincere feelings for him. What were they? Admiration? Friendship? Or was it romance?

Sadly, Calvin hadn't picked up on anything more. Summers had been too distracting with her flowing hair, eyes like deep green pools, luscious lips, teeth white and glossy, and a face that was both delicately crafted yet confident and strong. Her beauty pit his body against his mind, making her incredibly difficult to analyze. Eventually he gave up. Deciding she was probably not part of Raidan's scheme to attack the Rotham ships—though her relationship with Raidan was definitely more than she'd pretended.

The chime broke his concentration.

"Come," he said

The door slid aside and Anand stepped in, complete with stubble and mussed brown hair that matched his skin but contrasted with his overly-immaculate black uniform. In one hand he held a set of papers.

"Who dares disturb my slumber?" asked Calvin as he sat up. He tossed the chargeball to Anand who botched what would've been a neat one-handed catch. Anand reached down to scoop up the ball. "Don't worry about it," said Calvin. "The room's a mess anyway."

"It wouldn't be you, if it wasn't," said Anand with a smile.

"Very funny," Calvin rolled his eyes. "Is that what you're here to do? Harass your superior? Keep him from his much-deserved nap?"

"Easy there, Cal, I'm the one who's a full Commander here," Anand pointed to the gold bar on his lapel. "So I'm perfectly safe disturbing you and your much undeserved nap, *Lieutenant Commander*."

"You know that's the second time someone's reminded me of that today. I should just never step off the ship again... But don't think just because we're ashore that you get a free ride. The minute we're back I'll have you on continuous watch for days," said Calvin. "And don't think this big vacation will make me forget it either. I'll stew over it the whole time. I take my naps very seriously, you know."

Anand laughed, but there was a touch of sadness in his laughter, and when he stopped his face became pensive. "Actually that's why I'm here. I'm not going back aboard the Nighthawk."

"What are you talking about?" Calvin stood up and Anand handed him the papers.

"I've been given command of the Phoenix, effective immediately. It seems the Fleet isn't very confident Captain Raidan will return to duty any time soon. And they want an outsider to do a full audit of the ship and crew."

"And that's you?"

Anand nodded. "Who better than Intel Wing?"

Calvin thumbed through the documents which were all very official, complete with digital seal. "Why wasn't I notified by the Fleet about this?"

"After I found out, I asked the Vice Admiral to let me be the one to tell you."

"Well... that was nice they let you. Did they say who my new XO is?"

"No. I bet they're waiting for the trial to be over to announce it."

"Yeah right. I give it nine to one *on* that they haven't even decided yet."

Anand laughed. "That's the Imperial Fleet for you."

"Well..." Calvin wasn't sure what to say. He felt a little hurt but masked his disappointment. "Your own command..." he floundered for words. "That's got to be exciting."

"I'm ecstatic," said Anand, perhaps more eagerly than he'd intended.

"Not that I won't miss the Nighthawk or anything."

Calvin forced a chuckle. "Yeah right, you'll forget all about us the minute you sit in that big chair and hear someone call you *Captain* for the first time."

Anand shrugged.

"Well I guess we'd better get it over with." Calvin signed the papers and handed them back.

Anand then read the orders of detachment. "Commander Anand Datar, you are ordered to take command of the ISS Phoenix immediately, and all current assignments are hereby dissolved." He continued until he'd read the entire address.

"I relieve you as Executive Officer of the IWS Nighthawk," said Calvin.

"I stand relieved." Anand saluted.

"Well, Anand. You'll be missed. It was an honor serving with you. Do me a favor and try to keep yourself alive out there, the galaxy is a fearsome place."

Anand laughed. "You're the one I'm worried about. How many times did I save the Nighthawk when you tried to crash it into a planet or something?"

"At least a hundred."

"More like a thousand."

Calvin smirked. "All right, Anand, see you around the stars."

"Take care, Calvin." He nodded and left.

Once the door whisked shut Calvin shook his head. He'd just lost an excellent officer. And as a CO who put a lot of value in his XO's capabilities, he hoped his next one would be as good.

Calvin awoke slowly, rubbing eyes that seemed to be glued shut. His throat was parched and his stomach growled like a beast on the brink of starvation. Everything was black, except for the blinding glow of the clock on the nightstand.

0430 L.T. & 1950 S.T.

A yawn escaped him as he stretched out his limbs and crawled out of bed. His fingers skimmed his clumpy, messy hair and he realized he'd slept on-and-off for the better part of fifteen hours. The unhealthy result of sleep deprivation, stress, and way too much equarius. *Speaking of which...* he reached for the bottle of pills and placed it back in its locked case, which he then buried in one of his many boxes. It'd been sloppy of him to leave the bottle in plain sight, even in his own quarters. Had someone seen the pills, he'd be in a lot of trouble.

His shirt was sweaty as he peeled it off and he realized he hadn't showered in over a day. For someone obsessed with being clean, hygiene trumped breakfast as top priority, despite the protests of his stomach—food would have to wait a little longer.

The private shower was much larger than his on the Nighthawk and being on the station carried another advantage, the hot water seemed endless. He scrubbed himself more than he needed to, lathering everywhere with soap as he enjoyed the soothing hot water and steam. It was relaxing, like his own personal chamber of solitude. There was a tranquility here that even equarius couldn't offer, and in his relaxed state his mind wandered like a dream.

Until a chirping sound brought him back to the present.

At first he didn't know what it was, but he had to cut short his shower when he realized the comm panel was going off. As he grabbed for a towel to wrap around himself he wondered who would call him this early. *If it's a sales call they'll never bear the end of my wrath!*

He tapped a button on the panel and the screen came to life, blue text informed him that a private call was coming through. He tapped *Accept* to the

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