

Prologue

Kell stood, magnetically sealed to the hull of a derelict vessel partially lodged in an ice comet, his voice crackling slightly through the comms. “Hey, Piper? Did I tell you about being kicked out of this woman's house recently?”

“Did she discover how loud you snore?” Piper responded, static not hiding her amusement.

“Nothing like that. One minute we're making out on the couch, and the next, she's looking at my palm.”

“One of those types, huh? Kell, what is your attraction to crazy women?”

“Hey, they find me, okay?” Kell's magnetic boots thudded with each careful step toward the derelict's access hatch. “Anyway, after this woman looks at my palm, she gets up, goes to her front door, and orders me to get out. No explanation or nothing.”

“Next time we're planet-side, let me do the picking for you.”

“Not a chance. You'll pick someone who can kick my ass. Not sure my ego could take that.”

As he reached the hatch, Kell paused, feeling the eerie silence of space and the distant glitter of starlight reflecting off the ice. “But seriously, what do you think she saw?”

“I know exactly what she discovered.” Piper paused. “You're a lousy cook, Kell. No woman wants a man that can't cook.”

“I don't know why I bother trying to have a serious conversation with you, Piper.”

“You like the abuse, amigo.”

Bending down, he turned the old-style wheel set in the center of the door and lifted the hatch lid open. He stared into the abyss below, lost in

thought. What he hadn't told Piper or anyone else was what the woman had said to him, the very thought of which sent a shiver down his spine.

For the briefest of moments, he was back in her house, standing at that door as she spoke. "A terrible burden you will soon bear, and the death of many will be on your hands," she had said in an almost dreamlike voice. There were even tears in her eyes.

What did she see? he wondered.

"Is there a problem, Kell?" a new voice said over his comms. Startled, he recognized the voice of Captain Barnaby.

Clearing his mind, he responded, "No, sir, Barnaby, descending now."

Down he went, one ladder rung at a time. His only source of illumination came from his suit and helmet. When his feet touched down on the metal grating of the interior, he panned around. Directly behind him was a sealed door with a handprint of blood, permanently frozen to the surface, and smears streaking downward.

"Kell, can you look back up?" Captain Barnaby's voice announced through his helmet speaker. "Was that a handprint we just saw?" he asked, his voice sharp and inquisitive.

Kell swiveled his head towards the bloody handprint. "Yes sir, no body though," he said, scanning the dark. "I am near one of the main airlocks, so it is possible that it was dragged away."

"The handprint is on the engine room door, which is locked down and probably frozen in place, judging by the thick layer of ice surrounding the seams. It will take us some time to get inside, so I'm going to scout ahead."

"Tread carefully," Captain Barnaby said. "And Kell? Slow down your movements; we're experiencing a little lag over here in your feeds." Kell nodded, using his lights to survey the ship's interior. "Understood," he said. "So far, this entire hallway appears to be pods of some type. The interiors are empty, but spacious enough for humans to stand in."

“Just what I thought,” Barnaby said, the New Horizons is an old Colony ship from Earth.”

Kell took a deep breath as more pods came into view. “There is more blood splattering on a couple of the pods ahead,” he said.

“Any idea on what the hell happened over there?” Captain Barnaby asked, voice crackling.

“Not sure, captain, but it looks like one hell of a fight took place here,” Kell said. “Blood splatter and smears on just about every pod and floor. But still no bodies anywhere,” he said, crouching to look inside one of the pods, finding a pool of dried blood. “Captain, so far, there has been no evidence of any type of ballistic weapons fire onboard.”

There was a brief moment of static before he heard Barnaby speaking. “Kell, are you suggesting they stabbed or beat each other to death?”

Kell resumed his stride. “I would have an accurate assessment if I could find some bodies.”

“I’m sure you’ll come across them,” Barnaby said. “The dead don’t just get up and walk away.”

“Oh, I’m well aware,” Kell said. “I’m just hoping they are not piled up in a room somewhere.” He paused. “There’s a faint glow ahead.”

“What are you seeing, Kell? The image lag time has gotten worse on this side; we can’t make out anything over here,” Captain Barnaby’s voice crackled, almost fading out.

Kell walked on until he stood in front of a pod with a small glowing green light on the side and a steamed-over viewing window. Using his gloved hand, he swiped away the condensation and discovered the bloodstained face of a young man with a metal pipe clutched tightly in his right hand. And he was breathing. Kell could see the chest rising with the intake of oxygen.

What in the hell had he just discovered? The corridor continued ahead, terminating at another door, but he saw no other unusual lights.

Was it possible this young man was the only passenger? And if so, what about the bloody metal pipe? Had he used it to defend himself or for something worse? What should he tell his captain?

Kell stood frozen in thought, weighing his decision. If he told Barnaby that this young man was alive. Then Barnaby would insist on saving him. But on the other hand he could lie. After all he had no idea of what type of person he could be exposing the crew to. It all came down to hard evidence, which he was lacking. Pausing for a moment, he took in a deep breath, before speaking, "I found a survivor." In a situation like this, truth was always the best policy, he thought.

There was a long silence before he heard Barnabys response. He was sure that the captain was weighing his decisions as well, but time with the man had taught him. That Barnaby would rescue this young man. Because that was who he was. "Bill and Lilly...on their way to you. What are we...at, Kell?" Barnaby asked.

The response had been very static, almost to the point of incomprehension. "Based on the evidence so far, captain, this young man has a blood-stained pipe in hand. I cannot determine if it was used in defense or if he was the aggressor."

"Young man?" Barnaby asked. "How old are we talking, Kell?"

"Barely old enough to be shaving," Kell said, picturing the young man fighting with that metal pipe. He still couldn't decide which role he played.

"Kell, what's your gut instinct on this young man?"

And there it was, Kell thought. Barnaby wanted to make his decision based on Kell's initial instinct, instead of hard evidence. He could ask for more time to investigate; the bodies had to be somewhere onboard, and he had not fully explored it yet.

"Captain," Kell said. "I think I should investigate more. Let's have Lilly take some DNA samples. I'm sure I will find the bodies. That will help determine what role this young man played."

There was a long period of static in his helmet before he heard

Barnaby. “Agreed. Lilly is yours to direct. Still, instinct?”

The captain still wanted his answer, and Kell had to think. Peering back into that pod, staring into the young man's face. He tried to get a sense of who this blood stained, dark brown-haired person was. Physically he looked fit, with some developed chest muscles, but a little on the scrawny side. Taking a moment he mentally checked himself. What had been his first gut instinct?

Closing his eyes, he let his mind play out a fight scene between this young man and several no face assailants. And there it was, his first instinct was that this person was a survivor and something very tragic had happened here. And he told Captain Barnaby as much, with the words of the woman still echoing in his ears.

“Are you my burden?” he asked in a low voice.