

# ALLIANCE



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*Please note*

*This sample comes from the uncorrected proof. There may still be a couple of typos.*

*Enjoy*  
*S&K*



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# ONE



## SELMA KARI WANG

CAPTAIN SELMA KARI Wang didn't recognize the deep tone that cut across ship comms. At least, not initially.

"I'll call you back," she said to her chief engineer, who had been explaining an issue with line five. He couldn't possibly have heard her over the loud tones, but he nodded anyway.

It was only when First Councilor—dressed in full council regalia—came on-screen that she realized what the sound was.

"Council announcement, people," Kari Wang said through her comms. "All hands, listen up."

They had never had a council announcement in all the years she'd been in the fleet.

"It must be serious," Will, her third-in-command, muttered sotto voce to Narelma, the comms officer. "I've never seen First Councilor in formal dress before."

Kari Wang had. Once. At First Councilor's swearing-in ceremony. She'd been young, straight out of academy, "honored" to stand guard beside the new councilor all day—in full dress uniform herself—on a day that sweltered at forty degrees Celsius in the shade. It had been the worst day of Kari Wang's life. She'd kept praying she wouldn't faint.

At the end of it all, the councilor had asked for iced water for them both. "I don't know who was going to collapse first out there," she'd said, fanning a thin piece of plastic to create a wind. "You or me."

Kari Wang had sipped iced water gratefully.

"Thank you, Spacer," and First Councilor had bowed to her although she hadn't been first councilor then, of course, only tenth.

Kari Wang had spent the next three days in bed with stroke. She hadn't seen the woman again—except on the vids.

A long time had passed since then. Selma Kari Wang was a captain now, with her own ship, while Agda Ayemann was First Councilor.

“Citizens of Nova Tahiti,” First Councilor said, and her voice was steady, if somber.

This same message was going out to millions of other people across the galaxy at the same time.

Had gone out, Kari Wang corrected herself, because they were in a different sector from Nova Tahiti, and the message would have been relayed.

“I am delighted to inform you,” First Councilor said, “that Nova Tahiti has seceded from Gate Union to become a founding member of the New Alliance of Worlds.”

Standing on the bridge, listening, Kari Wang didn’t believe her to begin with. Yes, they’d had problems with Gate Union. Yes, the Nova Tahitian fleet had been irritated with Gate Union’s tactics and the way Gate Union was trying to push them away from having any real power. But seceding from the most powerful political union in the galaxy didn’t happen overnight.

Not until a coded, high-security message flashed on-screen. For her eyes only. She held her comms up to scan her irises, then read the message that came up.

*Nova Tahiti Admiralty informs all ships that Nova Tahiti has seceded from Gate Union, effective immediately. All captains to implement immediate change of codes to Nova Tahiti native. There is to be no further exchange of classified information between Nova Tahitian ships and Gate Union. Personnel involved in Gate-Union-led initiatives are to return to their own ships immediately. Further information to follow. Repeat, all captains to implement immediate change of codes.*

It was true.

Kari Wang looked up to the screen, where First Councilor smiled, although the exhaustion showed through, and the smile cracked at the end. What in the lines was going on?

“I am sure you will all join with me in looking forward to our new future,” First Councilor said.

The ship rang with a final boong-boing-bong as the counselor signed off.

It was so silent on the bridge, Kari Wang could hear the air circulating. Will, intense and focused, turned to her. She held up a hand and turned on shipwide comms of her own.

“This is the captain speaking. I have had confirmation from Admiralty that Nova Tahiti has indeed seceded from Gate Union. I am about to commence a change of codes. Please note that as of now, there is to be no further exchange of classified information between Nova Tahiti and Gate Union. I repeat. No further exchange of classified information between Nova Tahiti and Gate Union. I will provide further information as it comes to hand.”

She clicked off and started to implement the change of codes. This was something she’d never had to do before, outside of training. Luckily, the instructions had been drilled into her as soon as she became ship captain and redrilled every time she went back for training.

“We’re not at war with them, are we?” Will asked. “I mean, what about the testing we’re doing? Are we going to deliver the results?”

The GU *Kari Wang* was out near the rim, testing top secret warheads. Given the fragile relations between the factions in Gate Union, Kari Wang had been surprised a Nova Tahitian ship had been chosen to test them, but she’d been pleased, too. It was an acknowledgment that many of her crew were weapons experts—especially Will, who was a leader in the field of weapons used in space warfare. She hadn’t realized how fragile those relations were.

“Nothing until we get further orders,” she said.

Kelan McGill, her second-in-command, who’d been off duty, came in then, hair still tousled from sleep.

“Kelan, Will, you are in charge. I’m going to walk around the ship. Call me when something comes through.” No one would call for a while. Who would bother with a ship out so far, with no one for parsecs, when half the Nova Tahitian fleet was actively working with other worlds in Gate Union?

Her crew were subdued and contemplative, not sure what was happening. Neither was she.

She was honest. “All I’ve got is official confirmation,” she

told them. “I wasn’t expecting it, and I don’t think Admiralty was either. As soon as I have more news, I’ll tell you.”

By the time she was done and back on the bridge, ship mood was a little brighter.

KARI Wang asked for further information and instructions and was told to wait. News dribbled in, mostly through the media, which you couldn’t believe anyway. Not only that, the news that came was not often about the formation of the New Alliance. For an alien fleet had been discovered at the confluence, and the media ran with that.

Their rec screens were filled with images of alien ships, and speculation about the—presumed dead—aliens themselves. Who would have thought that a breakdown of the two main political entities in the galaxy could be second-run news.

“*I’m* more interested in the aliens,” Will said, when they discussed it the next night at dinner. “Everyone is.”

Kari Wang agreed, but as captain, the political situation was more important to her and the well-being of her crew. “I just wish they’d tell us something.”

“Look at it this way,” Will said. “We’re New Alliance. We’ve got the alien ships.” For the New Alliance had claimed them. “Maybe they’ll assign us to them later on,” and his deep-set brown eyes sparkled at the possibility.

New Alliance. The words left a nasty taste in Kari Wang’s mouth. Two days ago, fifty of the seventy worlds that made up the New Alliance had been their enemy. What had caused such a cataclysmic shift in power? Surely, it couldn’t just be access to alien ships. Or could it?

“It doesn’t put us in any better position.” Although she tried not to be pessimistic. She’d heard rumors of factions in Gate Union, but she’d thought her home world would come out on top. After all, they had First Councilor on Nova Tahiti, and Ahmed Gann on the Gate Union Council itself, both of whom were strong political negotiators. If any world could come out well, it was Nova Tahiti. It was said Gann could make or break Union worlds by casting his vote.

Yet here he was, on the news, smiling alongside First Coun-

cilor, and if Kari Wang was any judge of smiles, Gann's was a lot broader and happier than First Councilor's was.

WITH nothing else to do, she kept her crew busy setting up the warheads for the next round of testing, along with the regular drills and activities that always took place on ship.

Life settled back into some sort of normality. Eat, sleep, work, and wait for news.

She asked Will to organize a triball tournament to keep them busy. Six teams of thirty players. Each team played the other twice, and the winners would be decided in a playoff of the top two teams. If they didn't have time to think, they wouldn't have as much time to worry.

That was Kari Wang's job.

Sixty-two hours after the initial announcement, Medic Halliday called her up. "You're scheduled for some suit time. Do you want me to cancel it?"

In space, there were some things you did automatically, and some things you did over and over, so it became automatic. Every member of the GU *Kari Wang*—or the *Kari Wang* now, she supposed—had to spend time in a space suit, and in space. Including the captain.

"No." Normality was good. "I'll do it now."

In fact, she was looking forward to it.

It seemed to her the ship was looking forward to it as well.

Kari Wang laughed and patted the lockers, then looked around guiltily to be sure no one had seen her.

"Don't worry. It's normal for captains to show outward signs of affection to their ship," Medic Halliday said from behind her, half frightening the life out of her. "Touching, talking to it. They've done studies on it." He handed over his comms. "Thumbprint here, please. You have three hours out there. Come in when I call, or I'll send someone out for you."

Kari Wang pulled on her suit. "You're making that up. About the study."

"Not at all. A scientist called Abarca. One of those happy accidents they always talk about. Got himself a lover who was a ship captain. Found it annoying the way the captain used to

talk to her ship, fondle it. Or so the story goes. They had a fight over it. Captain says something like, ‘Don’t come between me and my ship.’ It split them up, but this scientist was quite turned on by captains.” Halliday wiggled his eyebrows. “If you know what I mean.”

She laughed at him, not sure if he was having her on. Captain groupies were a famous trope on the vids, but she’d never met one in real life.

“True story, this. Got himself another captain and shock, horror, what does this captain do but go around talking to her ship and patting it in odd places.”

“What’s wrong with patting a locker?”

“If you don’t know, sir, I’m not the one to enlighten you. Anyway, by this time, the scientist in him was getting interested. He sought out another captain.”

“What? Another partner?”

“I’m not sure. But this captain had the same predilections as the other two. A paper, as they say, was born. I’ll send you the details.”

Kari Wang was still laughing as she exited the air lock.

Outside was nothing but stars and the emptiness of space. All around her. It was grand and humbling at the same time. Up and behind the ship, the blue-and-green solar winds of the Edamon binaries flowed across space. She imagined she could hear it roar. She couldn’t, of course. That was the air circulating in her suit.

“Suit’s good,” she said to Halliday. “Starting standard exercises now. Moving away from the ship. Going out thirty minutes.”

Some spacers couldn’t take space at all. Others could take it, provided they were close to the safety of their parent ship. Neither was useful to a spacer who one day might find him- or herself out in space with no ship in sight.

“Measuring heart, lungs, temperature,” Halliday said. “Are you ready for maneuvers?”

Maneuvers was a set of acrobatic exercises they practiced both in the suit, in space, and on ship, in the gym. A spacer needed to be able to move accurately in a suit because a miniscule miss when you couldn’t stop could mean the difference between safety and drifting forever in space.

Kari Wang was good at maneuvers, on ship and in space. She was accurate and agile.

The familiarity of the drill centered her. She felt calmer than she had since the announcement. No matter what happened, she still had her ship, she still had her crew.

In her helmet, she could hear the chatter from the bridge. There were two topics of conversation. Or one, rather, with passing references to the other.

“They called one of the ships the *Eleven*.” Narelma was on comms. “They say that’s because it’s a new line. An eleven.”

Kelan McGill was on bridge this shift. “That’s just propaganda. If there was another line, why haven’t we discovered it before?”

“Because we didn’t know it existed.”

A dark shape suddenly obscured the stars in front of Kari Wang. She pulled up midtumble, trying to work out what it was.

The chatter from the bridge continued. “There’s no line eleven because it’s a new line.”

Then she realized. It was a ship.

Kari Wang opened her suit comms and cut across the chatter. “What in the lines are you doing on the bridge? Why hasn’t someone said there’s a ship out here yet?”

The talk stopped.

“No, ma’am,” Kelan said after a two-second delay to check the boards. “There’s no ship out there.”

Another black patch appeared among the stars.

“There are two ships out here now,” Kari Wang said. She gave the coordinates as she fired her jets to raise herself above the ship. Sure enough, there was a black patch on the other side. “Three. Find them.”

She triggered the alarm herself and fired her jets on a long, wasteful spurt of fuel to get back to the air lock faster. “Coming back in,” she told Halliday.

It would take ten minutes to get to the air lock. “Somebody find those damn ships.”

“Looking, ma’am,” Kelan said. “Still nothing.”

What could hide a ship so well that only the naked eye could see it? “I don’t like the way they’re positioning themselves,” Kari Wang said. It looked like an attack pattern to her. “Get our gunners ready.” She gave coordinates of the third ship.



“Although I have no idea how far away from us they are.” Visual references were almost useless in space when you had nothing to relate them to.

She heard the order go out, felt the ship mood change. Five minutes to get back, and she’d never felt so helpless in her life.

Four minutes.

“Still no—” Kelan said, then, “Shit. They’ve uncloaked.” Alarms started clamoring. “That’s some cloaking device. And it’s four ships, not three.” He opened the comms. “Gunners, you’d better be ready.”

“Warn them,” Kari Wang said. She didn’t want to kill anyone by accident, especially not a former friend turned enemy. Or even a former enemy turned friend, if it came to that.

Kelan’s voice came strong over the comms. “This is the GU . . . the *Kari Wang*. We are a working warship and armed. Please identify yourself.”

Will said, out of breath, into Kari Wang’s private comms. “They’re equidistant from us and each other. It’s too much of a coincidence to be natural.” She guessed he had run to get to the bridge.

Three minutes back to ship.

She checked the positions on the screen in her suit helmet. Their symmetry made a perfect triangular pyramid, with the *Kari Wang* at the center.

“Identify yourself,” Kelan repeated.

The four ships disappeared.

“They jumped,” Kelan said.

Kari Wang didn’t like it. They’d been too well positioned to be doing anything other than targeting her ship. She arrived at the air lock—at last—and waited impatiently while it cycled through.

“See if you can find out what they did.” She didn’t wait to remove her space suit, just released the helmet, so it dropped down her back, and ran for the bridge, clumsy as it was. “I want to move the ship out of the direct line of anything those four ships might have fired at us. Get me some coordinates.” Just because they couldn’t see it coming didn’t mean there wasn’t anything. It had been a deliberate attack pattern.

“New coordinates 230.113.144,” her navigator said.

Everyone was calm. Even the ship seemed settled. They’d done this before, they were used to it. That was good.

She checked where the move would put them. Well away from any danger. "Move us now," and as she arrived on the bridge, she compensated automatically for the momentary change in gravity that accompanied the thrust of jets.

"We managed to identify the ships before they jumped," Will said. "GU *Byers*, GU *Haralampiev*, GU *van Andringa*, and the GU *Akaki*."

All combat class. Small ships, with crews of twenty or less. It smelled to Kari Wang like a quick hit-and-run.

The ship bucked. The board readings went crazy.

The presence that was the ship inside Kari Wang's mind disappeared.

"By its signature, they've surrounded us in a Masson field," Will said. "That's what it feels like. But it's too big."

The largest known Masson field was a meter in diameter. Large enough to chop any unwary body into pieces if you stepped into it. This was impossible magnitudes larger. Except . . . a Masson field did work around four equidistant points. If that was the case, then coming toward them was a massive flux capable of chopping the whole ship into pieces.

"Set the emergency jump," Kari Wang said. Every fleet ship had an emergency jump set. One that would get them out of trouble. "Jump as soon as you can." She pushed away the worry that the jump would be sabotaged. After all, they'd been Gate Union ships. Who knew what they'd meet at the other end.

How long did they have?

She felt the ship respond sluggishly to Kelan's request and knew, even before he said it, that they couldn't make the jump. "Lines aren't responding, ma'am."

It solved the question of what happened to the lines inside a Masson field, anyway. They were damaged. No one had ever made the field large enough to test that before. She didn't realize she'd placed her hand on the line chassis and whispered comfortingly to it—not until she saw Will's quick look.

A Masson field was made up of a network of force lines that undulated in long sine waves between the four nodes. The waves sliced through any matter in its way. That included metal and ceramics, which was the basic makeup of all ships.

Maybe the size of this one could help them. How far apart would the waves be?

“We’ll skip between the force lines,” she decided. “Jensen,” to her navigator.

Jensen nodded, fingers dancing over the board.

But they were out of time. The wave sliced through the bridge like a hot wire through wax, chopping the ship into neat-edged pieces. Kari Wang’s second-last conscious thought, as the wave caught her at the knees, was that they would never have been able to dodge the field. The sections were too small.

Her last conscious thought was that her space suit had automatically sealed itself.

## TWO



### EAN LAMBERT

EAN LAMBERT WAS on the *Lancastrian Princess*, halfway through his voice lesson with Messire Gospetto—self-proclaimed vocal trainer to the famous—when Captain Helmo announced through the speakers, “All staff. Parade assembly on the shuttle deck.”

Ship lines had been melancholy all day, but at that they dipped to a cold, bitter low Ean could taste. He checked the lines. Michelle was in the workroom she and Admiral Abram Galenos shared, knuckles pressed against her mouth in an uncharacteristic display of uncertainty. She glanced toward the speaker, took a deep breath, and exited the room.

Gospetto threw up his hands. “How am I supposed to work with this going on?” Ean knew by now that the theatrics were all for effect.

“That’s us,” Radko said. “I’m sorry, Messire Gospetto. We’ll have to cut this session short. I’ll escort you back to your shuttle.”

Which was, of course, bound to get him moving fast because all the action was on the shuttle deck. Ean wondered if Radko had done that deliberately.

They made good time, but when they got there, Radko had to subtly coerce Gospetto into his own shuttle, and he resisted. It was only when Ean moved toward him that he backed away hurriedly. Ean had once accidentally used the lines to throw Gospetto across the room, and the voice coach had never forgotten it.

“We’ll have to remember that trick next time we want him to leave,” Radko said, as they hurried down to shuttle bay six, where the soldiers were lined up with parade-ground precision outside the air lock.