

CONFLUENCE



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NEW ALLIANCE DEPARTMENT OF ALIEN AFFAIRS— LIST OF LINES AND THEIR PURPOSES

LINE	REPRESENTS
1	Health of crew and lines
2	Small mechanics 1—air circulation, heating, cooling, power, overall comfort, and running of a ship
3	Small mechanics 2—tools. Interact individually with other lines for repair, maintenance, management.
4	Gravity
5	Communications
6	Bose engines (engines with the capacity to take a ship through the void)
7	Allows ships linked by line eleven to move autonomously
8	Security
9	Takes ship into the void
10	Moves ship to a different location in space while in the void
11	Links ships together. Allows them to move/ behave as a single unit.
12	Actual abilities unclear, but known to communicate across all lines and appears to have some control over other lines

ONE



EAN LAMBERT

EAN LAMBERT'S QUARTERS on Confluence Station were in the same area as Jordan Rossi's, with a brand-new titanium-bialer alloy door between them and the rest of the station. The first apartment inside the blocked-off section had been gutted, and the newly opened space filled with state-of-the-art surveillance equipment, some of it of human origin, some salvaged from the damaged alien ships in the *Confluence* fleet.

It had been secure when Rossi was the only linesman here. Now, it was triply secure.

Ean gave it a cursory glance and turned to the more immediate problem.

His bodyguard, Radko, had inspected Ean's apartment with a thoroughness that bordered on paranoia. That was before she'd dropped the news that she wasn't staying.

"You're staying with the *Lancastrian Princess*."

Radko scowled at one of the screens. "It won't be for long."

Ean didn't know line one on Confluence Station as intimately as he did the line on the *Lancastrian Princess*, but he knew Radko, and he could hear a strong undertone of worry.

"But why?"

"Family business," Radko said.

Ean knew nothing about her family except that she was a distant relation of Crown Princess Michelle. "Will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine, Ean. So will you."

She shouldn't try to lie when the lines knew her so well. She was worried about something. And if Radko was worried, so was he.

The song of Confluence Station changed. Jordan Rossi,

Yaolin's level-ten linesman, had arrived. This was Rossi's home, and the lines welcomed him.

"Be careful, Ean. Don't do anything—"

"Stupid?"

"Don't do anything that would upset Vega. At least, not until I get back."

How long would she be away? "I'll be a model linesman."

Ru Li, who—like the rest of Bhaksir's security team—was pretending to work at the screens while Ean and Radko talked, snorted. "That will be the day."

Bhaksir frowned at him before turning to Radko. "The shuttle is ready to depart. And Captain Helmo only has a small jump window. We'll take care of him for you."

Radko nodded and glanced at her comms. "Remember, Ean. Be sensible."

She took off at a run.

Ean looked around. Everyone in Bhaksir's team pretended to be busy again. There was an underlying hum of worry from line one. It echoed the worry from line one on the *Lancastrian Princess*, for Crown Princess Michelle was going home on family business, too. Her father, Emperor Yu, had demanded her presence.

"Will Radko be all right?"

Bhaksir shrugged. Ean was glad she hadn't tried to lie. He was glad, too, that Rossi halted in the doorway then. It stopped him from asking what the problem was with Radko's family. If she'd wanted him to know, she would have told him.

"This is cozy," Rossi said. "I go away for two days, and look what moves in."

Ean ignored him. Through the lines, he saw Radko run onto the shuttle. The bay doors closed, and air was being pumped out before she'd even clipped herself in.

CAPTAIN Helmo called as soon as Radko was back on her home ship. "We're ready to jump, Ean."

On board the *Lancastrian Princess*, Michelle patted Radko's shoulder. Radko tried to smile; couldn't. Something was seriously wrong, and Ean had no idea what it was.

"Ready." Ean pushed the worry to the back of his mind.

Being distracted when you worked with the lines was a disaster waiting to happen. “Fergus?” Fergus was on the *Lancastrian Princess*.

“Ready.” Fergus’s line hummed with anticipation.

At least someone was happy.

The *Lancastrian Princess* was part of a fleet of six ships, joined together by the alien ship, *Eleven*. Until recently, they’d only been able to jump the fleet as a single entity. Then they had discovered that line seven could be used to allow a single ship to move on its own. They’d tried it before—of course they had—as often as they could get jumps. But every other time, Ean had been on the ship that had jumped.

Please let it work.

“Of course it will work,” the lines told him.

Fergus started to sing.

Ean could see it as clearly as if he were on the *Lancastrian Princess*. The ship lines connected. Line seven to every other seven in their mismatched fleet of six ships and one station. He heard them as song, saw them as lines of light, different colors for each ship. Every line had a knot at each end, tying the ships tightly to each other. Ean smelled fresh bread, tasted it, as the colors ran together and turned white.

“Ready, Captain,” Fergus sang.

“Prepare to jump.” Helmo’s voice was calm although Ean could hear the nervousness underneath. Helmo always said it wasn’t the jump that captains worried about; it was coming out the other end.

Line nine moved the *Lancastrian Princess* into the void, with Fergus’s line seven linking the fleet ships.

Line ten came in, and the *Lancastrian Princess* jumped.

Then they were out of the void. Helmo’s relief swamped the lines momentarily.

Ean checked the lines on each ship in the fleet. All were good. All were strong and straight. The song of the Galactic News ship had changed. They had a new engineer on that ship. He was surprisingly strong. Ean hadn’t realized he was a linesman.

The navigator on duty on the *Lancastrian Princess* said, “Confirming position 33.76785.23.45. The first digits were the sector—33 was Lancia.

It was the first time Ean had been in a different sector from

the *Lancastrian Princess* since he'd started working for Lancia.

Helmo opened the comms to Abram Galenos, and to everyone on ship as well. "This is Captain Helmo, from the *Lancastrian Princess*, calling Admiral Galenos on Haladea III."

"Receiving your call loud and clear, and in real time," Abram said.

A spontaneous cheer went up from the listeners. For this was history. The first time two humans had ever communicated officially in real time between sectors.

"Ean?" Helmo asked.

Ean could hear and see the *Lancastrian Princess* as clearly as if the ship were nearby rather than half a galaxy away. Michelle and Radko were entering shuttle bay eight. Vega and two teams entered with them. He normally knew everything that happened on ship, so why hadn't he known about Radko?

"Ean?"

He dragged his attention back to his job. "Everything looks normal. Are you sure you have moved?"

He didn't need to ask, for the leaving of the *Lancastrian Princess* was already causing a flurry on both media ships. The producer on the Blue Sky Media ship was saying, "Find out where they went," while Coral Zabi, the reporter from Galactic News, said, "We're supposed to be part of the entourage. They could have told us where they were going."

Captain Helmo laughed. "Look at the view from outside this ship, Ean." He pushed the view through the comms to Abram, but not to Ean. He knew Ean would see it, anyway.

A purple-tinged planet. Lancia.

The shuttle exited from the ship, and Ean couldn't see Radko or Michelle anymore.

BACK in the common outer area, Bhaksir's team were swapping gossip with Rossi's bodyguards. Bhaksir glanced at Ean and looked as if she was going to say something, then thought better of it.

Ean forced himself to break the awkward silence that had fallen. "We've still got full comms with the *Lancastrian Princess*. It's in real time."

Even if they got nothing more from the eleven-line ships, this one ability, that of being able to communicate instantaneously between galactic sectors, would revolutionize trade. Communication within sectors was instantaneous. But to relay a message to another sector, a ship had to jump into that sector first. Until now. The companies that made a fortune providing message ships would lose out, but everyone else would win.

“And full comms with Lancia,” Ru Li said. “Look, all the latest shows.”

“You already have the latest shows.” Ean didn’t watch them; he hadn’t watched anything from Lancia in ten years, but the crew loved them. Helmo bought them in batches. They were no more than a week old.

“But these are happening on air, right now,” Ru Li said. “Look, *Cry for the Stars*.” He changed the channel on the largest screen to where a woman in a scarlet dress was kissing a green-tentacled alien—which looked nothing like the real aliens. “Happening right now.”

“Turn it off,” Hana said. “We haven’t seen last week’s episode yet.”

Ean sang a different channel up for them. This one was a news channel, with a striking black-haired newswoman with a high-class Lancian accent, saying, “Her Royal Highness, Crown Princess Michelle, has arrived at Lancia and is believed to be making for Baoshan Palace to—”

Bhaksir turned it off.

No one looked at Ean. What didn’t they want him to know? Never mind. He could look it up later, in his room. For now, he had work to do.

He forced himself to stop thinking about what was wrong with Radko—and maybe Michelle, too—and spent the rest of the afternoon communicating through the lines with Sale’s team on the *Confluence*, with Abram on Haladea III, and Captains Helmo, Kari Wang, Wendell, and Gruen on their respective ships, testing what they could and couldn’t do between sectors.

He was so busy trying not to think about Radko that initially he didn’t notice the activity on the Galactic News ship.

“Wait,” he said, midsentence, and pushed through images from the media ship, where people were gathered around the

new engineer, who was gesturing at a screen. “Something’s happening.”

They were watching a newscast, where the black-haired Lancastrian reporter was saying, “His Imperial Majesty is hosting a party tonight to welcome home his daughter, Her Royal Highness, Crown Princess Michelle. There are rumors that an announcement will be made tonight.”

“I tell you, this is real-time,” the engineer said. The linesman. “The *Lancastrian Princess* only arrived there today.” He waved his comms at the man Ean recognized as the producer. “Call someone you know in the newsroom at Lancia.”

“What? I haven’t got time, Christian.”

“Do it, Coop. This is important.”

The producer took out his comms. “You’d better have a point to all this.”

“Trust me. You’ll be sorry if you don’t hear this. What’s the lag?”

“To Lancia? Anything up to an hour.”

Ships couldn’t communicate between sectors in real time. Or they hadn’t been able to before today. Other ships would record the message, then relay it after they jumped. A regular message ship jumped between the Lancian sector and the Haladean sector nowadays, but it only jumped every hour. In less-traveled sectors, the messages could take days, or even weeks.

The producer called up the Galactic News office on Lancia.

“This is Bob Cooper. Can I talk to Harper Fuji?”

The answer was immediate. “Coop. Haven’t heard from you in months. So they let your ship tag along with the royal yacht, did they?”

“I told you.” Christian slapped his comms triumphantly into the palm of his other hand. “We’re in real time.”

Cooper looked at his comms. “Where are you, Harper?”

“Where? Baoshan, of course. Covering the party tonight. If you’re down on planet, let’s meet for drinks.”

Baoshan was the capital city of Lancia.

Cooper looked at his comms as if it were about to bite him.

“Ean.” Bhaksir waved a hand close to his face, then stepped back quickly as he focused on her. “Admiral Galenos is talking to you.”

“Sorry.” He forced himself to concentrate on his comms. “Abram?”

“Can you turn instantaneous communication off for the media ships?”

The media ships were part of the *Eleven’s* fleet. “No.”

Bhaksir leaned over and said into Ean’s comms, “Begging your pardon, Admiral, but we’re also receiving and broadcasting real time on Confluence Station. We’ve already discovered we can get broadcasts from Lancia here.”

Abram blew out his breath. “Right. In that case, we might postpone these experiments for half an hour while I prepare a press release. I’ll call you when we’re done, Ean.”

He signed off.

When Ean turned away, Jordan Rossi was leaning in the doorway, arms crossed, amusement leaking through his lines.

“Lambert strikes again.” He waited expectantly, then looked around as he was ignored. “What? No defense? Where’s Radko?”

“On leave,” Ean said, and tried to make it neutral, but Bhaksir said, at the same time, “Mind your own business, Rossi,” and Ean heard the interest quicken in Rossi’s lines.

ABRAM’S press release was a brief, recorded vid pushed out to all media outlets.

“The New Alliance confirms that initial tests of the new intersector-communications device have been successful. You might experience small pockets of extended communication over the next few days as we continue these experiments. If you require further information, please contact Spacer Grieve at the Department of Alien Affairs.”

As press releases went, it was almost a nonevent. Definitely not worth half an hour’s delay in testing. Although . . . they had put Grieve onto answering any questions, and Grieve wasn’t someone you wasted on simple inquiries. Ean would have liked to talk it over with Radko, but Radko wasn’t here.

When Sale and her team arrived back from the *Confluence* that evening, they sat down to a shared meal. Rossi joined them, and Ean got the feeling he was glad of the company.

Group Leader Sale was Bhaksir’s boss. Bhaksir’s whole

team—Radko was part of Bhaksir’s team—were assigned to mind Ean, while Sale, and Sale’s other team, led by Team Leader Craik, spent most of its time working on the *Confluence*, the other eleven ship. They knew more about the ship now than Ean did.

“We found the hospital today,” Sale said. “At least, it’s similar to the area on the *Eleven* that Captain Kari Wang thinks is the hospital. Except that it’s ten times the size.”

The *Confluence* was four times the size of the *Eleven*. It had a fleet of 128 ships in tow and was the size of a small city.

Craik slid in beside Sale. “Not that we planned on going into that section at all. We were supposed to finish mapping sector three first. This is two floors down and a quarter of the ship across.”

“So how did you find it, then?” Ean asked. These were trained soldiers. If they were supposed to map sector three, that’s what they would do.

“We got a wild-card day.”

“Wild-card day?” Bhaksir asked. Ean was glad she was as mystified as he was.

Sale said, “People get bored doing the same thing day after day. So we decided to do a random exploration.”

“*She decided*,” came unbidden into Ean’s mind, the thought tinged with satisfaction. “*Showing, showing.*” The *Confluence*.

“What made you choose that particular corridor, Sale? Out of all of them?”

She shrugged.

“*We showed.*”

“*Nice work*,” Ean said, but he didn’t push Sale. She could deny it as much as she liked, but he’d ask again later, when there were less people around. Had the ship just shown a non-linesman where to go? If so, how had the lines known she wanted the hospital?

Sale scowled. “We’ve already got what feels like a hundred scientists and medical experts wanting access to it.” She scowled again. “I don’t know how they find out so fast. This is supposed to be a top secret mission. Thank the lines Galenos insists we leave as much as we can on the *Confluence* untouched, that any experiments we do come from the *Eleven*. Kari Wang can deal with the requests.”

Selma Kari Wang, the captain of the other eleven-line ship, didn't suffer fools. When Sale had a ship of her own—and Ean was sure that one day she would, for she would make a good ship captain—she would be a lot like Kari Wang.

“Do you want me to—” Not that he was sure what he could do, short of asking Abram to say something, and Sale would be horrified if he did that.

“Thanks, Ean, but no. I'm just sounding off. Admiral Gale-nos keeps them off our back.” She scooped up grains and beans from her plate, paused, “Speaking of experiments, after the press release, we all took half an hour to call up family.”

Bhaksir had let her team do the same.

“It was instantaneous. Like they were right next door. And clear as clear. If I didn't know, and you'd just told me we were in another sector, I wouldn't have believed you.” Sale spooned the beans into her mouth and choked. “What is this stuff?”

The kitchen staff on the *Lancastrian Princess* cooked for royalty and her guests. Even Ean had to admit that Ru Li and Hana, who'd been on mess duty, were not in their class.

“Borrow one of the chefs from Lady Lyan's ship.” Rossi glanced Ean's way. “After all, we do have a level-twelve lines-man on board.”

Ru Li filled Rossi's wineglass. “Another glass of this will make the food taste better.”

They had Lancian wine. An entire pallet of it. Ean had seen it delivered. He'd wondered at the time how much wine Helmo thought he and Rossi would drink. Ean looked at his own glass, shook his head when Ru Li offered to refill it for him.

Sale leaned back. “So, how do we think this instantaneous communication works?”

“I would have thought it obvious,” Rossi said. “Lines do communicate instantly within a sector, after all. If line seven links the lines through the void, then there is effectively no void for those ships.”

“So what makes a sector, then?” Sale asked. “And how can linked ships communicate through them?”

Back when humans had first left Earth, they had divided space into radial sections, 360 of them, one degree each, radiating out from a nominated central position on Old Earth. But after they'd discovered the lines, the old measurements had

been replaced by sectors, which was an area of space in which line ships had instant communication.

The sectors were constant, but different sizes. There was no known mathematical theorem that could calculate why each sector was the size it was. The smallest was the Grent Anomaly, less than a light-year in area. One of the largest was the Lancian sector, which was how—back when the New Alliance had been the Alliance—Lancia had gained so much power.

Rossi said, “Sweetheart, if we knew how linked ships communicated through sectors, human ships would have been doing it years ago.” He paused. “One might surmise that the fleet model—multiple ships common to a line eleven, with the sevens keeping individual ships linked—was the default model for alien ship movement.”

Say what you might about Jordan Rossi, he was a linesman at heart, and he was serious about line business.

Some of that respect must have leaked through the lines, for Rossi lost track of what he was saying momentarily and looked at Ean strangely, before continuing, “Especially given the way the *Eleven* is so ready to integrate any and every full set of lines it can. One might say that the only line that doesn’t provide added value to standard ship travel is line twelve.”

Ean ignored that.

Rossi looked around. “Where *is* Radko again?”

Ean ignored that, too. As did everyone else.

“Imagine,” Sale said. “Instant communication everywhere in the galaxy. What a shake-up that would be.”

“Especially for Gate Union,” Rossi said. “If you had instant communication, you could automate the jump process.”

Gate Union’s main advantage in the war at present was that they controlled the jumps. Would that mean the end of war?

Except the New Alliance only had two elevens, and Ean, to link the ships together.

Sale’s and Bhaksir’s comms sounded then, along with that of the senior of Rossi’s two bodyguards.

“Heart attack.” Bhaksir looked at her comms as if she didn’t believe it. She looked at Rossi, then Ean. “But there’s been no—”

No strong line-eleven activity, she meant. Ean might not

have reacted, but Rossi would, for he was easily overcome when line eleven was strong.

"I'll check it out," Sale said. "Craik, Losan, with me. Ean, watch us in case it's a setup."

They left at a fast walk.

Ean sang to lines eight and five, and asked them to track Sale through the station. He put it onto the closest screen. "Where's she going?"

"Station manager's office," Bhaksir said. "Apparently, the station manager has had a heart attack."

The station manager was the equivalent of a ship captain. If he'd had a heart attack, wouldn't the lines have registered something? A little distress, maybe. If Captain Helmo had a heart attack, the lines on the *Lancastrian Princess* would go crazy. If someone had attacked the station manager—which was why Sale was checking it out—wouldn't the lines have reacted?

Ean sang up the station manager's office on another screen. The room was filled with paramedics, along with an older, tired-looking man who was speaking to one of them, and a distressed younger man.

"Station staff," Bhaksir said. "The older man works directly for Patten."

Patten was the station manager.

"The younger one is new. Also works for Patten. Nothing untoward." Bhaksir called up Sale. "Looks clear so far."

Rossi snickered. "Nothing untoward. You people take your job so seriously."

Maybe one day, a heart attack could simply be a heart attack instead of paranoia. Until then? Ean watched as Sale, Craik, and Losan entered the already overcrowded office.

Why hadn't the lines become distressed?