

**Ala'ar Rinn**

**Dossier #14234**

**[TAL] New Pursuits: Prompt 4  
Signal Discovery**

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The hangar bay was busy with pilots rushing to their fighters and doing last minute checks. Jord was busy going from fighter to fighter, unhooking diagnostic machines and making sure the pilots were good to go. She looked up at Aylin, her small grimy face brightening when the Nautolan finally gave her a thumb's up. She had personally seen to Aylin's fighter, and she had been hoping to impress her. At first, she had absolutely disliked that Aylin could outdo her as a mechanic, pointing out details that Jord felt were ridiculous, only to find out that the Nautolan was right and had a better way with engines that had surprised her. Jord begrudgingly conceded that Aylin wasn't her junior and could rival Bale himself when it came to mechanics, but what impressed her even more is that Aylin was a gifted slicer too, and how would she ever learn code if she didn't try to befriend her.

Another thumbs up from another pilot, Jord wiped her grimy hands on a dirty rag that she placed in her overall's back pocket, and moved on to the next fighter. The dark-armoured Mando didn't have his helmet on, and she was busy admiring Ala'ar's blond hair, chiseled face, and blue eyes as the man verified his Z-95's systems. He was trying to adjust the fighter's seat and controls, but his armour made him take up more room than most space jockeys out there.

Without thinking, Jord climbed up the fighter's wing and put her elbows on the cabin's canopy: "Feeling a little... cramped in there?"

The Mando looked up in surprise, his blue eyes locking onto Jord's own deeply inquisitive blue ones. The girl's mischievous smile made her look like she was more apt of getting into trouble than keeping her nose out of it. The grease stains on her cheek and chin only accentuated the impression.

She misinterpreted his cool analytical gaze and suddenly blushed, her eyes suddenly hiding beneath her mass of dark messy hair. "Ah.. not that you're bulky..!" she quickly stuttered. She felt her cheeks changing into a deeper shade of red as she remembered the time she'd spied on him when he was getting out of his armour that first day. "I mean... er... you're not..."

The Mando's serious demeanor evaporated as he noticed the girl blushing despite the dirt and grime. He laughed good naturedly, grinning from ear to ear. "So you noticed that I had that extra pastry for breakfast, and wanted to make sure I fit in the cockpit?" He asked in mock seriousness.

Ala'ar didn't think it was possible for the girl to get any redder, but the tips of her ears were now red too. She gave the piloting cabin a furtive glance, avoiding looking the Mando in the eye. Having found what she was looking for, she reached across him, her small figure extended comically over him and reached for one of the controls on his right. Suddenly the seat moved back. With another flick, she adjusted the controls which moved slightly to compensate for his suit's restrictive mobility.

"Much better, thanks... Jord, was it?"

She quickly gave a mortified nod and bolted from the canopy in a small panic, and waited in front of his fighter as she had done with the others.

He knew her name..!

She gave him a furtive glance as he put on his T-Visor and the cabin's canopy slid into place. He soon followed with a thumbs up, and Jord returned the thumb's up.

"Duke ready," Ala'ar chimed over the comm channel after his engines had roared to life.

"That's everyone," someone chimed on the frequency, "you're cleared to launch in three... two... one..."

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Jord watched on with envy as the fighters blasted out of the hangar bay. She wanted to be part of the scouting mission to the moon of Ostara, but hadn't been chosen. The fifteen year old frowned in disappointment as she put away her tools and reorganized the hangar's spare parts and diagnostic tools.



She chewed on a piece of bubble gum, her grimy hands tucked under her arms so as to not touch her face at her runny nose as she waited for the loader droid to finish loading the diagnostic and mechanical equipment back on the grav sled, when someone placed a hand on her shoulder.

Surprised, she turned to see a Taldryan officer she wasn't familiar with. The man had large barreling shoulders, and a stern looking face with a scar going down the left side of his face. The scar passed from the top of his left eyebrow, all the way down to the bottom of his neck. His left eye had paid the price. She couldn't help but stare at where his eye should have been; instead, the socket lay hollow, his eyelid shrivelling around the scar, leaving

the left side of his face with a depression where the eye should have been.

Her gum suddenly disappeared.

“Sorry,” he said, “I didn’t mean to startle you, could you just assist with that Delta shuttle over there..?” He pointed towards the far corner of the hangar bay, then returned his gaze on her, looking at her overalls, presumably looking for her service tag to know who he was talking to. “I assume you’re a mechanic apprentice?”

“Ahh, sure. I was just cleaning up,” she cast a glance at the shuttle. “Oh! That’s one of Sienar’s Abecedarian line with SFS-215 ion engines! I’ve always wanted to see one of those up close...! The engine I mean!” She started blushing, realizing she was babbling again.

The man roared with laughter, which made his bad eye almost look normal again. “Good eye!! I think you’ll do just fine...! I’m Lieutenant Commander Quade Selcarn,” he added pleasantly as the two started walking towards the shuttles.

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It ended up that one of his engineers was needed on one of the other missions, and while he didn’t expect that he’d need her services, regulations did impose that he bring a replacement with him. Everyone started somewhere, he had said, and he had noticed how she had taken care of her flight crews.

As Expedition Flight’s pilot launched the shuttle from the bay as Selcar explained the mission details to the rest of the crew.

“We’re being sent in Wild Space to investigate a communications signal that was picked up by SRI. They believe that they’ve located an undiscovered planet located within a few parsecs of the Caelus System. We’re supposed to check out the rock for signs of life, technology, and any valuable resources that may be planet-side.”

“As you can see, we’ve got a new crew member,” he continued. “Jord has a good eye when it comes to engines and computers, so I’ve asked her to help us out while Kev is out with another team.”

The shuttle’s deck plates shuddered as the hyperdrive engaged, leaving the main task force behind them.

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When the shuttle eventually winked out of hyperspace, Jord immediately started a passive scan of the system from the engineering station. The results started cropping up on the main viewing computer for others to see.

The system was comprised of binary stars, four planets, and a large asteroid field circling the system like a vast rocky shield, likely the remnant of a failed planet that had never managed to fuse together, but what interested the team most was the system's fourth planet from which a signal was being broadcast.

"Any luck at deciphering that signal?"

"Sorry, commander. It'll take a while for th—"

"There's something weird about the asteroid field," Jord interjected, but she couldn't quite put her finger on the matter.

"What do you mean?" Selcar asked as all eyes went to her.

"Well, it doesn't look natural. You'd expect to see an asteroid field to be more chaotic, but this one seems ... Organized, somehow. See how it's symmetrical, and how the larger asteroids are evenly spaced out?" She started tagging the various parts of the field, and sure enough there was no way for it to naturally have so many 'constructs'.

"So the field has been engineered?"

"It certainly looks that way."

"What about the bigger asteroids, the ones whose orbits couldn't possibly be naturally occurring..?"

"There are 2,160 of them, each spaced out by one degree from the center of the system, orbiting at roughly 250,000 clicks from the farthest planet. Just far enough to keep away from the last planet's gravity well, but close enough to shield the entire system's orbiting planets. It's like the asteroid field was purposely created around the system's core, probably acting as a protective shield of sorts."

Selcar whistled appreciatively, "the science community is going to have a field day with this one," he rumbled. "Let's keep a careful eye on that field as we approach."

The shuttle stealthily made its way deeper into the uncharted system, maneuvering carefully as it reached the spherical asteroid field — which was at least 25 kilometres thick according to the telemetry readings. Other than the signal emitting from the 4th planet, everything was quiet.

The crew itself seemed on edge the closer the shuttle got to what they had collectively dubbed the 'asteroid shield.' The ship's gunner and pilots were keeping a wary eye out for any signs of trouble, when Jord suddenly noticed a sharp spike in the field's energy readings and shouted a warning.

Heartbeats later, the pilot jarred at the piloting controls as the co-pilot engaged the ship's defensive countermeasures. "Incoming!!!"

From behind the nearest of the large asteroids suddenly appeared thousands of drones that glowed a menacing bright orange as they neared the ship. They swarmed relentlessly towards the ship, which banked and shuddered, the drones' combined lasers making a rather impressive dent in their shields.

"Shields 60%!" Jord yelled.

She held onto the control station as best as she could as the pilot manoeuvred and twisted to avoid the drones' lasers, but another blast rocked the ship.

"46%," she hissed.

The gunners were busy hitting the swarm with everything they had, but they only caused localized damage to the möbius swarming around them, a few drones trailed off damaged, but that did little to dissuade the others from attacking.

*'Just great,' she thought in a panic, 'my very first real mission, and we're all gonna die because some ancient civilization left their security defences on.'*

Jord watched nervously as the shield ratings slipped dangerously low, when she suddenly had a flash of inspiration (or desperation, she wasn't sure). She reached for the communications panel, and desperately burst out a transmission at the same frequency that the planet was emitting.

Suddenly the swarm around the ship dispersed like a cloud of smoke in every direction.

"They're disengaging!! Whatever you did, keep doing it!!" Selcar ordered.

The drones were retreating back to the asteroids that were housing them, taking the damaged drones with them, pretty soon the asteroid shield was 'debrisless' again, leaving the battered shuttle to assess the damage.

"That was quick thinking," Selcar nodded approvingly to the general cheers of the others on board. "What did you do?"

"I was thinking that we were all going to die because someone had left the alarm system on, which got me thinking that most alarm systems have an off switch. So I tried the frequency that's being broadcast from the planet."

"Your quick thinking saved our asses... what's the damage?"

"Shields at 27%, extensive damage to the hyperdrive and haul; minimal damage to the comms, but we won't be able to call for any long range help until it's repaired."

"How long to make the repairs?"

"Depends on the resources on hand; days or weeks for the drive, a few hours for the comms."

"Focus on the comms," Selcar decided, "we'll send out a transmission to Taldryan High Command and provide a status report. Besides," he paused for a few moments, pacing. "Besides, other than the asteroid shield, and the trick to get those drones to disengage, it's obvious we're not dealing with a secret Collective base."

"We can probably safely get past the shield now, we can also collect information from the system and planets beyond it," Jord said. She hoped that she wasn't going to get benched again when they were so close to seeing what was behind the curtain.

Selcar took a few moments to consider it, "Maybe so, but we can't risk more damage to the ship right now. Let's get the ship comms fixed first. I'm sure we'll have lots of opportunities to see what's beyond that asteroid shield once the brass learn what we're dealing with."

She smirked, disappointed. She'd probably be passed over and relegated to the flight deck again...

Selcar sensed her disappointment, his gruff features softening, and a smile creeping on his face. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll also personally recommend that you be part of the main team that works on it," he said as he put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

She looked back at him, her dubious expression slowly changing to one of hope. "I'll get started on the comms then," she said, finally smiling.