

## **Shifting Winds: A RVA Story**

**By Lauren Rivers**

Crimson light filled her vision as the Z’Kra triggered her ship’s distress signal. The computer was repeating a warning, one she could not entirely hear, but she did not need to. She knew what it was saying. Life support was failing, and if she didn’t get help soon, she would be dead.

She had been traveling through the space between systems, known colloquially as the ‘midnight run’ among her fellow couriers. It was risky, and usually included a fair amount of personal danger as no matter how well the Allied Worlds Patrol attempted to police the galaxy there were always a significant amount of places for those with less noble aims to ply their trade.

Ever since her last job had ended, she had been going from place to place transporting items people would rather not have on a formal cargo manifest. It was profitable, as long as you worked for the right people, and didn’t ask too many questions. At present her cargo was empty, save for a small computer chip she carried in her pocket. It was technically company property, but the company had decided to screw over its inventor, so he liberated it and asked her to deliver it to another company that had made him a better offer. It had been developed in secret so they couldn’t cry foul without admitting how they knew about the supposed revolutionary new technology within, and without the inventor to make another one they would have to start from scratch.

No doubt they were feeling vengeful about it. Up until her ship started drifting she was certain they had been the ones to attack her. All for a computer chip.

She felt it in between her hoof tipped fingers, the chip feeling stiff between her digits. No one had known where she would be, so how could they have found her? And if it was the original owners, then why hadn’t they finished her off? The last thing she saw before she lost consciousness was the lights of a stellar patrol ship.

Lauren had no idea how much time had passed. She first felt pain, so she knew she wasn’t dead. Her eyes struggled to focus, and after a moment they settled on a handsome young foxen of snowy white fur wearing a Stellar Patrol uniform. She attempted to sit up, which immediately caught his attention.

“Whoa, there,” he said, holding a paw to stop her. “You just had a pretty serious bump on your head. I don’t know if you should be moving around just yet.”

Lauren rubbed it, forced to momentarily agree. “Since there’s two of you, I am not exactly in a position to argue.”

“Well, your sense of humor’s intact,” he said. “At least, I hope that’s humor.”

“An attempt at it. I suppose thanks are in order, so thank you for picking me up.” She paused. “I mean, rescuing me.”

“It’s my duty as an officer of the stellar patrol. So, what were you doing so far off the standard space lanes?” he asked, skeptical.

“Trying to stay under the radar, so to speak.” She shrugged.

“You’re a smuggler?” The white furred foxen hesitated.

Lauren stared at him. “No, I’m a courier. I just tend to deal with the sorts of things people don’t want other people knowing about. Not illegal by any means, but let’s

just say in my line of work discretion is key.” She tried again to sit up, swinging her hooves over the edge of the bed.

“I took the liberty of scanning your ID while you were out. Lauren Rivers, registered courier. Your ship is, or was, called the *North Star*. I’m sorry to say it was unsalvageable. Once I pulled you off it lost containment and exploded.” He stood in front of her, his eyes watching carefully. “I apologize but I removed your weapon. You understand.”

“That I do. You got a name, handsome?” she asked.

“Lt. Commander Lu Ciedias Blacksailor,” he responded matter of factly.

“Do you always introduce yourself with your full name?” Lauren smirked. “I bet you’re the kind of dude who’d arrest his own relatives.”

Lu paused, visibly jerking at the comment, before regaining his composure. “Yes, well. Until we can get back to a stellar patrol station, I’m afraid you’ll have to come with me. The accommodations aren’t great, but it will suffice until we reach the closest facility.”

“Were you able to retrieve my ship’s data recorder?” Lauren began touching the controls.

“Hey, that is for stellar patrol personnel only!” He gently moved her out of the way and held up a paw. “To answer your question, unfortunately no. It went before I was able to establish a download.”

“Damn,” she replied. “I wasn’t able to determine who attacked me. I’d hoped the sensors would catch something, but I was too busy being knocked unconscious. Though it seems odd they’d knock me out and not board me.”

Lu touched his paw to his muzzle in thought. “It took me almost twenty minutes to arrive at your coordinates. If they wanted to board you, they had ample opportunity to do so.”

Lauren shrugged as she leaned back in the copilot’s seat. “Well, they obviously weren’t interested in my cargo, such as it is.” She stretched out her legs under the console, crossing her hooves. “But what else is out here, besides...” She sat up sharply. “We gotta go. Now.”

“I haven’t finished my analysis of the area,” Lu protested.

“Forget the analysis, if we don’t get out of here right now...” She did not get a chance to finish her sentence. The forward port was suddenly filled with an imposing heavy cruiser, dark grey in color. There were no obvious markings to speak of, but the ship was clearly no pirate vessel. Whatever it was, it meant business.

Lu pressed the console and opened a channel. “This is Lt. Commander Lu Ciedias Blacksailor of the Stellar Patrol. Identify yourself and stand down.”

“Seriously?” Lauren asked.

The white furred foxen continued as if she had not spoken. “You are interfering in the lawful investigation of the destruction of a civilian vessel. Stand down and break off.”

A female voice came back, Kinis, by the sound of it. “My good foxen, who do you think destroyed it in the first place?”

“Is that a confession?” Lu leaned forward.

“Sure, whatever.”

“Then I am placing you under arrest. Stand down and prepare to be boarded.” Lu got up from the controls.

Lauren glanced between him and the viewport. “You do realize they’re going to shoot at us, right?”

“That would constitute several additional charges, to say nothing of…”

Exasperated, Lauren grabbed the throttle and pushed it to full power. The ship shot ahead, with the heavy cruiser immediately giving chase.

“What in the name of the Mother Goddess are you doing???” Lu asked, holding on to the console as he slid back into his seat.

“Keeping us alive for another ten seconds. You’re welcome.” She switched the pickup to the aft view. “They’re in pursuit.”

Lu’s paws flew to the controls. “They’re shooting at us!”

“Noticed that, did ya?” Lauren gestured to the console. “If you let me, I think I can shake em.”

Lu slipped out of the chair. “Do it.”

Lauren took over, pushing the stick forward and diving before sliding into a roll. While she had little experience flying a Stellar Patrol ship, at its core it was really very similar to the commercial Firewing model, just with a few extra enhancements not available to the general public. Staring at the readouts, she spun the ship around dodging between the energy blasts.

Lu looked out at the rapidly spinning stars. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“If you have to barf, don’t do it on me!” She evaded another volley. “That’s why I don’t look out at the stars. If we can get to that nearby system, we can probably lose them behind one of the planets.” Any response he might have given was drowned out by the sound of intense vomiting from behind the two chairs. “Hang on, we’re almost in the clear!”

Her announcement was premature as the next laser blast was followed by an unfortunate boom and the sound of mechanical heaving as the engines gave out. “That didn’t sound good,” Lu said, as he wiped his muzzle clean with his sleeve.

“It wasn’t. They just took out our primary drive system.” She spun around to face him. “They’re pulling us in.”

The pair looked at each other as they felt the larger ship lock onto their crippled ship and draw it into the docking bay. She gestured towards his sidearm. “I hope you’ve got something bigger than that standard issue pop gun.”

“Afraid not,” he replied as the sparks began to fly around the exterior hatch. “It won’t be long before they get inside.”

Lauren took his weapon out of his holster and tossed it under the forward console. “Then we’d better look harmless.”

“Hey!” Lu moved to retrieve it when she stopped him.

“Look, their ship is bigger than ours and even if we somehow repelled this boarding party, we aren’t flying anywhere in a broken ship. Right now, our best move is to let them take us and hope they stash us together. So, stand there, shut up, and look helpless. You should be able to manage that last part.”

“Hey!” Lu repeated, this time in obvious offense.

Their conversation was interrupted by the clang of the heavy metal door falling inward followed by a rush of frigid air. Several Kinis soldiers stepped inside, with each

of them armed with heavy rifles of a type Lauren did not recognize, but she knew them to be lethal. Locking eyes with Lu, she attempted to silently warn him to stay quiet.

“My name is Lt. Cmdr. Lu Ciedias Blacksailor, and I demand to speak with your commander,” he confidently stated, immediately earning a facepalm from Lauren.

The sound of toe claws against metal cut through the awkward silence as a black furred Kinis stepped onto the ship. Dressed in a fine business suit it was clear she was the leader. Her claws were finely manicured, and her hair was perfect with not a single strand out of place. She walked past them both before turning to Lu and tapping his Stellar Patrol badge. “This has no meaning out here.” She tore it from his uniform, earning a protest from Lu before discarding it on the floor. “You have no rights but the ones I give to you. I should charge you for forcing me to use our primary weapons array.”

“What, are you paying by the laser now?” Lauren asked, earning her a backhand from the Kinis female. “Worth it.” She said, holding her cheek and pocketing Lu’s badge.

“We’ll see how well that wit of yours holds up in our brig. Take them away. We have what we came for.” She gestured with her paw as the soldiers grabbed both of them and roughly forced them down the hall. Shivering, she attempted to will herself not to feel the chill of what the Kinis considered a ‘normal’ temperature.

Lu attempted to argue various statutes regarding the treatment of prisoners, but they were all ignored by the guards. He eventually realized the futility of trying to talk his way out of it just as they were locked in the cell that would be their temporary prison, at least for a little while. He looked forlornly at the spot where his Stellar Patrol badge had been ripped from his uniform and sighed. “They make you pay for those, you know.”

“Wow, you guys got a lot of problems, don’t you?” Lauren asked rhetorically. “Anyway, we’d better get comfortable, at least for a little while. They don’t like it if you try to escape right away.”

Lu looked at her quizzically. “Excuse me?”

“Never mind.” She looked at him, clearly deciding it was best not to explain, at least right now. Having served in her fair share of complex professions, she knew how to get out of just about any cell they could put her in, but it was all about timing. She needed them to stop looking at them so closely and get distracted by something else. It would make their escape a little bit easier. For now, she decided to follow her own advice and sat down. “Of all the brigs I’ve been in, this one is actually pretty nice.”

The ivory furred foxen opened his muzzle as if to ask a question, but then he seemed unsure which one to ask. He ultimately settled for the simple one. “Been in many?”

“More than I’d like,” she replied. “It comes with the territory out here.” She shrugged. “You get used to it. Or you get really good at picking locks.”

“Why is it so damned chilly in here?” Lu rubbed his arms.

“Never been on a Kinis ship before? They prefer it cold. We could ask them to turn up the temperature, but they charge you for that.” Lauren gestured at the slot in the wall for a credit chip.

“Seriously?” He looked at the panel as if considering it, shivering miserably.

“Don’t bother. It’s a rip-off, and we aren’t going to be here long enough anyway.”

Lu stared at the doorway. “I don’t suppose they’d consider letting us contact someone for some sort of parley?”

Lauren gave him a deadpan shake of her head. “No.” She sighed. “If they follow standard procedures, they’ll let us stew in here while they do whatever it is they came here to do, and then probably come to ask us some questions after they have us sign the standard cell rental agreement.”

“You think they’ll interrogate us?” he asked.

“Maybe, or maybe not. There could be torture. In any case, we’d best try to figure out what they want. Maybe if we can do that, we might have an idea what kind of time frame we have.” She looked at the panel by the door.

Lu sat down beside her. “I bet if my sister were here, she’d know what to do.” He reached into his uniform jacket and pulled out a photo.

The Z’Kra paused, doing her best not to let the recognition show. But the image was someone she’d know anywhere, having seen her every day aboard the *Scarlet Claw*. Alinadar, known to some of the crew as Ali-Kat. From what she’d heard the Red Vixen had pawned her off on some noble and they ended up falling in love. It sounded like a ridiculous story out of some trashy romance novel but if Ali had found happiness, then she was all the better for it. Goodness knew she’d earned it. But yet here she found herself locked up with Ali’s brother of all people. And he was probably one of the most helpless Stellar Patrol officers she’d ever seen.

Oh, he could quote the rule books until the Mother Goddess called him to her den. But he had no experience to speak of. If he was going to be useful, she’d have to educate him, and fast.

“She a security officer?” she asked, hoping to prod him to conversation.

“Sort of. She’s the head of Lady Darktail’s personal security, and her lover,” Lu offered.

Lady Darktail. Now that name struck a chord. She’d heard it a few times in her travels, mostly that she’d found a planet through a bunch of shenanigans resulting in this medium level house becoming the custodian of a colony world they later called Greenholme. According to the rumors, she’d even been involved in taking down Bloody Margo.

“I bet she knows her stuff,” Lauren said, realizing she hadn’t said anything for a bit too long.

“She does. She helped rescue Lady Darktail when there was an incident there a while back.” Lu held the photograph between his paws.

Lauren noted his lack of details but did not press. “Well, since she’s not here, we’re going to have to get ourselves out of this cell. Do they teach you about escaping captivity in the Stellar Patrol?”

“I took a course.” He put the photo back in his vest.

“Okay, and what exactly did they teach you in this course?” She folded her arms.

Lu straightened up. “They put us through several escape scenarios in timed exercises with simulated obstacles.”

Lauren stared blankly. “So, you’ve never actually had to escape anything for real.”

“Technically, no.” Lu said. “But the first step is to examine one’s surroundings and find a point of weakness.”

Leaving him to investigate the cell, she removed his damaged Stellar Patrol badge and used the pin to pull the door panel from the wall. Using the point, she shorted out the mechanism and the door slid open. “All right, let’s....” Seeing his tail sticking out of the vent, she cleared her throat. “What are you doing?”

“The vent is unsecured, we can get out through here,” he said.

Lauren sighed. “No one uses the vent. It’s the first thing they expect you to try. Only newbies do that. It’s strictly amateur hour. Now I got the door open, so let’s go.”

Lu looked once more at the vent and then at the object in her hand. “Did you use my badge to break us out?”

“Yeah, I needed something pointy.”

“I don’t know how I feel about my badge being used to commit what technically could be considered a crime...” Lu said. “Although they did illegally detain us.”

Lauren threw it back into his paws. “Do you want to stay here? Because if you want, I could just relock the door. But if we do that, pretty soon we’re going to start freezing our asses off and...”

“Okay, let’s go.” Lu held up his paws and gestured for her to take the lead.

Outside the cell, she perked her ears up to listen. She held up two fingers indicating a pair of guards. Pointing to the one on the right, she began threading left holding her hand in a gesture for silence. Both guards were currently playing some sort of card game, clearly irritated at having been chosen for such a lowly unprofitable duty.

“When are we going to see the benefits of this job?” the first one said loudly.

“When the boss says we do. Do you know how hard it was to even get on this crew? Everyone says something big is happening and we’re in on the ground floor,” the black furred Kinis responded.

The ginger felinoid hissed. “More like the basement. All we’re doing is babysitting some striped pony and a space cop while they dig around for the real prize.” He tossed down a card. “I doubt we even see action on this mission.”

“Well, goodness knows we.... Unh!” the Kinis fell unconscious as Lu struck him from behind.

Lauren, unprepared as she had been listening to their conversation, quickly vaulted over the desk, shoving both hooves into the ginger one’s chest. Slugging him a couple of times with her fist, she sighed. “I was hoping to let them talk a little longer. They were letting some good info slip.”

“Oh.” Lu looked down at the black furred Kinis. “I thought we should move while we had the element of surprise.”

“You did that, for sure. But couldn’t you have waited a couple more seconds?” she asked, her breath visible in the cold air. “He might’ve told us who that lady was who grabbed us.”

Lu picked up one of their rifles. “I’m new at this.”

“I’d never have guessed.” She grabbed the other. “The shuttle bay is about five minutes from here. If we can fight our way to one of their support craft, we can get off this ship and be gone before they can stop us. But we’re going to have to work together. Considering I’ve done this sort of thing before, you’d better follow my lead. Think you can do that?”

Lu checked the weapon. "After you."

"Good boy," she said, pressing herself up against the wall and taking a quick peek around the corner. The hallway was clear, but things would get a lot more chaotic once their unconscious friends were found. She stepped out, gesturing for Lu to follow. She watched him, noting he carried the weapon properly and seemed to be more comfortable with her in charge rather than making his own decisions out in the field. No doubt he had received the best training the Stellar Patrol had to offer, but if there was one thing Lauren knew for a fact was that no amount of training could ever prepare for you for being out in the field.

Of course it gave you tools, but experience and instinct were only tempered by pressure, and it was these things that made one better at thinking on your hooves. She led the way down the corridor, coming to a stop at the next intersection.

Off to one side, a pair of Kinis were having a conversation, while just beyond it she could see the lift to the rest of the ship. Whatever they were discussing seemed to be more than enough to hold their attention, provided they moved quickly and quietly. She held up a hoof tipped finger for silence and mimed sneaking past them. Lauren waited until their conversation turned them towards the window and skipped across, with Lu close behind. She gave him a thumbs up and casually walked up to the lift, pressing the button.

"Nice job back there," she said.

"Thanks," he replied. "I still can't believe they didn't spot us."

Lauren scowled at him. "Why did you have to say something like that? Don't you know not to jinx an escape?"

Lu shook his head in disbelief. "Surely you're not going to tell me you're superstitious?"

"No, but I don't believe in giving fate a big middle finger, either," she said.

"Relax, it's not like that door is going to open and we're going to run into the head Kinis..." Lu was rendered speechless as the door slid apart, the female Kinis staring right into his eyes.

"What the hell?" she asked.

Lauren turned to him. "You KNOW this is your fault." She grabbed the female Kinis and spun her, pulling Lu inside the lift and giving her a big kick in the butt as her guards ran after her in shock.

"Not me, you idiots, stop them!" she shouted as the doors slid shut.

"So much for a quiet escape," the Z'Kra commented. Before they arrived at their destination the alarm klaxons began to wail. Looking down at her borrowed weapon, she checked that it was fully charged. "You ready?"

"If I said no, would it make a difference?" he asked.

"Not really." She leveled it at the door. "I'll keep you in one piece. Just watch my back."

Lu pressed himself against the inside of the elevator, as both watched the door slide apart. The foxen opened fire immediately, forcing the soldiers to scatter. Though he lacked experience in other areas, it was immediately clear to Lauren he was at minimum a decent shot.

Laying down additional fire, she shot one of the Kinis in the shoulder before diving behind a cargo container. Glancing around, she could tell that there were several

craft that would suit their needs ready for a heroic escape. Provided, of course, that they could reach them intact. Lauren glanced at Lu, making certain he was close by. To her surprise, he was right behind her, the perfect backup.

She identified the interceptor as their ideal escape vehicle just as the female Kinis and her soldiers emerged from the elevator. They had to move quickly or they risked being pinned between them and she was certain that the Kinis would not be appreciative of their escaping so quickly. The Z’Kra raised her rifle and smiled. Among their cargo was some barrels of fuel that was, among other things, highly explosive. Holding the weapon to her eye level she fired two shots, grabbing Lu by the shoulder as the pair ran from the growing explosions and Kinis profanity all the way to the interceptor.

She hurried him inside, turning around just in time to see the furious glare of the female Kinis. “That’s going to cost me,” she said. Not bothering to hear whatever her retort would be, she closed the hatch and slipped into the copilot’s chair. “Let’s get out of here!”

“Give me a second, I don’t exactly know how to fly Kinis ships,” Lu said, working on the startup sequence.

“Oh, right.” She inserted her credit chip into the console and the controls lit up as the engine started. “Paywall,” she explained.

Lu opened his muzzle as if to say something, then closed it again. “Whatever.” Pushing the throttle forward, he launched them into space.

Once the ship had gotten far enough away, Lauren leaned forward to examine the sensor display. “They’re not pursuing.”

For the first time since this entire adventure had begun, Lu seemed to know more than she did. He spun to face her. “There’s no point. They’ve already got what they came for.”

“Which is?” Lauren folded her arms and leaned back.

“They were after my ship.” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the Kinis heavy cruiser.

“What could they possibly want with a Stellar Patrol ship?” Her confusion was evident.

Lu folded his arms. “The transponder.” He paused, then continued. “Every Stellar Patrol vessel is equipped with a coded transponder which communicates with the rest of the fleet. Whenever it gets within range of a signal booster it updates with new fleet locations.”

“But something like that would have to be encrypted,” she pointed out.

“Yes. But now that they have one, they can attempt to crack it. Our computer security is fairly complicated but given enough time, they’ll be able to access it, and when they do, they’ll know the location and strength of the entire Stellar Patrol.” Lu pushed the engines harder. “We have to warn my superiors as quickly as possible.”

Lauren looked at the star map. “Even if we push this ship as fast as it’ll go it’ll still take days before we end up anywhere with a decent star port.”

“Then we’d best get moving.” He entered their course into the computer. “The only thing I can’t figure out is what that ship wants with it.”

The Z’Kra leaned back in her chair. “They’re seizing an opportunity.” When Lu did not respond, she finished her thought. “Think about it. For the longest time, piracy has been an issue. Between the Red Vixen, Bloody Margo, and a bunch of little fish,

they've been harassing the space ways for years. But now with the Red Vixen retired and Bloody Margo on ice, there's a power vacuum."

"And if there's one thing nature abhors, it's a vacuum." Lu steepled his paws in thought.

"Someone among the Kinis has realized that if they play their cards right, they can set up an organized crime business out there, and if they succeed things might be a lot more dangerous than they ever were with those pirates." Lauren frowned.

Lu exhaled. "I hate to think of what their plans are if they should crack the transponder."

"Nothing good, you can be sure of that," she replied. Turning to face him, she tossed her hair and gave him a smile. "You were pretty good back there, once you had a gun in your paws."

"Thanks." He blushed. "And thanks for keeping me in one piece."

"Don't mention it," Lauren said. With their course laid in, she leaned in close and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"For my rescue." She got up and walked towards the rear cabin. "I never properly thanked you for being my white knight." She stopped in the doorway, looking over her shoulder. "I'll leave the door open, if you're interested." And with that, she disappeared into the rear compartment.

The journey back to the closest interstellar hub passed quickly. Their 'borrowed' Kinis interceptor arrived early in the morning on the third day. The ship docked in one of the general shuttle bays after some explanation as to why Lu was not in a Stellar Patrol craft despite his identifying himself as such. Both of them had been debriefed, with Lu sharing his insights with the regional commander, and Lauren adding her comments to what she had observed since her own ship was destroyed.

Once the interview had concluded, Lu's superiors disappeared into a closed-door meeting, leaving the two of them alone once more. "So," she said, turning towards him, "what happens now?"

He shrugged, folding his arms. "They'll begin an investigation, but with the kind of equipment that ship was packing finding them isn't going to be easy. With luck they can get a lead on them and recover the transponder before they're able to crack it."

Lauren's tail waved gently behind her. "The Kinis are a lot of things, but stupid isn't one of them. Odds are we have less time than we think."

"I tend to agree." He walked outside into the hall with her. "So what will you do now?"

She brushed her hoof tipped finger through her hair. "Well, for right now I have to finish delivering my cargo." She held up the tiny computer chip she had been carrying in her jacket pocket. "Once I do that, I plan to submit my claim to the insurance company and see if I can't recover enough to at least get me back on my hooves. Other than that, I don't know."

Lu nodded. "Well, I wish you luck."

"You as well. What's next for you?" she asked.

The foxen paused. "I suppose for now, I return to base. Sooner or later I'm sure they'll have another assignment for me."

“Well, if it’s anywhere nearby, give me a call.” She gestured towards his waist. “Give me your palm comp.” He presented it to her, after which she entered her comm frequency into the database and handed it back. “See you around, Lt. Cmdr. Lu Ciedias Blacksailor.” Planting another kiss on his cheek, she gave him a hug before heading off into the crowd.