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“Scribe”

by Kellan Meig'h

Chapter Forty-Five

“Out In The Darkness”

Na'Krista and Jeffrey had mostly enjoyed a meal with their group down on the fifth ring of the station, a small dining facility that served Bil fare. The food had been spicy, sweet and very filling. Sort of Middle-Eastern meets Mexican. While the femmes went on an abbreviated shopping trip for goods that couldn't be directly imported to the surface, Jeff and Krista took a nap onboard the *Xaan'taan*. It seemed like a safe place for them to rest and try to unwind for a few *Heth*. At least Na'Kalya had called ahead to wake them and let them know the small shopping retinue was returning to the ship.

“Strap in,” Sa'Zarren announced as she carefully exited the landing bay. “We will be back at my station in about three and one half *Heth*. I'm not going in ballistic, just so you all know. No sense causing too much wear on the ablative surfaces.”

They made their call to enter the atmosphere, then Mere Trent'lan put the ship on autopilot while they descended. While this was going on, Na'Kayla was crewing the Navigator's console. During the common frequency navigation scans, she kept seeing an artifact on her radar screen. The radar was switching between four different wavelengths so the small debris in orbit could be detected and avoided if it was too big. Every time it switched, for one sweep what seemed like a ship was detected aft of them. On the next sweep, there was nothing there.

“Sa'Zarren, I keep getting an artifact on my screen.” she offered up, waiting until the smokey femme piloting the ship brought up a mirrored scan on her console to point it out.

“Yes, I see that. It sure looks like a ship of some sort, maybe a . . .” Before she could finish that sentence, they all felt and heard impacts on the dorsal plating of their craft. “What In The *FRACK?*”

“Somebody is trying to shoot us down!” Na'Kayla put forth, right as a few dozen more strikes were heard. “I can't find them on the scope but the aft cameras has the ship solid and tracking!”

“Don't they know this bucket of rivets and rust is still armored?” Zarren blurted out as she hit the control that removed her limits on maneuvering in the atmosphere. “Hang on, we're going after that ship! Nobody fires at me and gets away with it!”

The smokey black femme hit the retro-thrusters hard, peeling off a significant amount of speed and putting her behind the ship in question. Whatever it was, it wasn't fully assembled, from what they could see. There were a number of panels that were missing along the dorsal spine of the ship. A prototype, maybe? "*Who would be stupid enough to take an incomplete craft into orbit?*" she muttered under her breath. Just about that time, the aft Point Defense Cannon on the unmarked ship opened up on them, raking across the bow of Zarren's *Armored Lighter* but failing to do any significant damage beyond putting a few scratches in the thick transparent aluminum-cobalt viewscreen.

"Want to play games with me? I'll show you how to play!" Zarren spat out, bringing her forward Defensive Cannons into battery and the aiming systems for them onto her screens. A few taps on the controls later, she fired a short burst of tugsten tipped slugs at the aggressor, stitching a row of holes through the ship from stern to stem. "**Fracker!** Don't you dare mess with me! My late *One Love* may not have known this ship was armed but I **Fracking** do!" she growled.

Flank Commander Talmet Kevvit'lan was busy trying to silence all of the warning alarms that were going off and at the same time trying to get away from the ship he had provoked into returning fire on him. Dassan had told him the tiny transmitter that he had covertly placed in Na'Krista's clutch bag when she was incarcerated would let him know if she left the planet. All he had to do was shoot down the ship she was aboard in exchange for a fortune in Crown. Maybe that plan wasn't the best, since he observed the PDC rounds glancing off the hide of what must be a *Lestim Standard armored Lighter*. He knew how tough those were, since he had flown one during the Varpur Wars.

"Talmet, you should have never listened to me," a voice came through his helmet, startling him. It was a voice he was fairly sure he knew. Looking to his copilot's station, Dassan was sitting there, not wearing a space suit and he was not strapped in. Even though the ship was shaking badly, he was stationary, like the craft was motionless on the ground. What bothered him further was the fact the hull had been vented by the ship chasing him, so the internal atmosphere at the moment was too thin to support life.

"Dassan?" the Commander blurted out, not understanding the gravity of the situation.

"Tal, you should not have listened to me the last time we met but you need to listen to me now."

"Where's your space suit? How are you breathing?" Saar Kevvit'lan asked, shaking his head because two and two were not adding up. One was obviously not the correct answer.

"Oh, that," Dassan replied, smoothing out his shirt. "Well, I'm dead. That's how I can be here. Don't need a space suit or armor if you're no longer living. I lost my life a few rotations ago and I'm guessing you had not heard of my passing."

"WHAT?" Talmet blurted out. "What, you're dead? How can that be?" This was quickly becoming too strange for his tastes. A dead male, in his craft, talking to him?

“Tal, you’re going to die if you stay with this steaming bucket of shit that’s coming apart around you. Gah, you should have chose a better ship than this pile.” The one from the other side looked around at the damage, then turned back to face Talmet. “Listen, Zarren will shoot you down if you don’t bail out. Please don’t try and make an attempt to fight her in the atmosphere. Her ship is heavily armored and to my surprise, it is armed. Heh, my oversight, I suppose. You don’t stand a chance against her without a shielding generator for protection and at least a laser cannon to defend yourself.”

“Das, what do I do?” he asked. The apparition in the seat next to him was right, though. The ship, an early prototype he had taken from the *Lestim* shipyards, was starting to have way too many integrity warnings going off to keep flying and all of the Point defense Cannons were out of ammunition.

“Tal, *Od’tra the Wise* let me come here to save you. Doing this won’t save me from the *Eternal Fires* but you *will* live if you listen to me. Don’t bother trying to eject, that system isn’t connected. Release your chute pack from the seat, now. Use the manual override to open one of the airlocks, then bail out. Zarren is former military, she will not shoot at you when you bail.”

“Bail out?” That seemed very dangerous to him, considering they were traveling at close to sonic. A bailout right now would only kill him, if he tried such a dangerous stunt. Dassan speaking again snapped him out of his musing.

“Slow the ship down to just above stall speed, set the autopilot and open an airlock, then take a run at the opening. Dive low to miss the aft atmospheric vector thrust nacelle, then spread out to bleed off some speed before opening your chute.”

“You’re sure bailing out won’t kill me?” Talmet asked.

“Please listen to me, Tal. I want no more blood on my hands. I have killed family members for financial gain, then lost my own life to a goal I knew in the back of my mind I would never achieve. Talmet, get out of here before you die, too.” After a moment, he added one more word; “Please?”

The Flank Commander did as he was asked after slowing the craft, first releasing the chute pack from the seat, then opening the port airlock. Stepping back a few paces while the motors slid the door into the frame, he could feel the wind starting to blast through the opening. Moving back to the starboard airlock, he started running as fast as he could and executed a face-first dive out the door.

Once he had oriented himself face down and spread his arms and legs out to bleed off his air speed, he looked to his right to see what had come up in his periphery. What he saw shocked him; it was Sa’Zarren’s ship, pacing him with the port and starboard personnel egress doors open. That’s when he heard her voice coming through his comm system on a ship to personnel channel.

“Hey you! Need a lift?”

“I must be out of my mind, saving his sorry ass after he tried to shoot me down!” Zarren blurted out, observing a body in freefall after bailing from the craft. “That being won’t be able to lose enough speed to safely deploy their parachute. Everyone stay strapped in, I’m opening the personnel doors.”

Sa’Densa took over the pilot’s seat while Sa’Zarren went to the aft bays where up to forty soldiers would have rode down to the surface during a battle. Dassan had removed the seats but the divider that ran lengthwise through the bay was still in place as were the various attachment points. She took an arrester cable and used it to anchor herself to the ship, then she used a remote box to make minor adjustments to the ships’ attitude.

“Hey You! Need a lift?” she shouted through the ship to personnel comm, on a particular frequency that she thought the male in the suit would receive.

“I would really like that, if you can get me into the craft,” he replied as he gave her a palm flat, opening and closing his fingers sign that he would like to come aboard.

She detached a hook on a long pole from the ceiling, one that might have been used to grab an injured soldier that needed back aboard during a recovery. She took the arresting cable attached to the grip of the pole and attached that to a tiedown point before she extended it out the port doors. The one in freefall worked his way over to the craft and at an opportune moment, grabbed the hook which swung him into the bay. Sa’Zarren then shut the bay doors.

Talmet looked up as he got back to his feet, only to find his rescuer holding a large bore Falcoss revolver, aimed at his head. She smiled at him, then gave him an angry look that curdled his blood.

“I’m not sure who you are, Commander,” she began, “but your ass is mine!”

The pilot that she rescued was marched to the bridge where Zarren made him take a seat and buckle in. She then turned to Jeffrey and gave him the firearm with instructions to shoot him if he moved from his seat. Mere Trent’lan quickly made her way back to the pilot’s station and waited until Densa relinquished the position to take command of her craft. After taking a quick look at what was happening, she made a discovery.

“Na’Kayla, where does that ship seem to be headed to you?” she questioned.

“Zarren, it looks like it’s headed toward downtown *Kaaf’sam*.” was the reply. “And, we can’t scuttle it because we’re over the country homes laced in between the Ag stations around *Kaaf’sam*.”

“It’s on autopilot. Sorry.” Talmet offered up.

“Just . . . we can . . . maybe . . .” Mere Trent’lan started to form a plan but the elder Keth’lan sibling interrupted her train of thought.

“Zarren, the ship is changing course.” Na’Kayla pointed out. Checking her scans for accuracy, it would seem the craft was coming about to a different heading. “Look, it’s headed to that sparsely populated area that is mostly fields.”

“What?” the smokey femme blurted out, still checking the scans and visuals. “Well, maybe the autopilot has failed and its drifting. I did shoot it up pretty good.”

“No, the ship is lining up on that secondary roadway.” Na’Kayla put forth.

Sa’Zarren brought her ship alongside the soon-to-crash vessel and to their amazement, the retinue of her ship could all see a pilot at the controls, fighting a very obstinate ship. It was clear who it was; the being was Dassan Trent’lan.

“Dassan?” Zarren blurted out, shaking her head to clear it. Another look proved she was right about that person’s identity. Opening a hailing frequency, she called out to what might be her deceased *One Love*.

“Das, is that you in that ship?” she asked, watching while he appeared to tap the panel in front of him.

“Zee, I’m a bit busy right now,” he replied, using a pet name he had not used for her since before the Varpor wars. “I can’t let this ship crash into people on the ground. No more blood on my hands.”

“Das, how are you even here at all?” she questioned. He must have had substance, since there was evidence he was actually flying the doomed craft.

“Zee, I’m busy. Please?” he replied, tapping the panel to break the connection.

She followed the stricken craft down, watching it prepare to land. The landing gear extended and the vector thrust pods were swiveling to give some lift but the left forward nacelle was possibly not giving enough output. The ship was trying to land on a roadway which would not have been a big issue unless the crafts’ systems were heavily compromised, like Dassan’s ship.

A few scenarios ran through her mind but just as she began to open a channel and suggest something, the landing gear retracted. “*What the blazes is he trying to do?*” Zarren thought. Her question was answered when Dassan sat the craft belly-down on the asphalt and went to full reverse thrust with the reaction thrusters.

There were a tremendous amount of sparks and some flames from the hull’s contact with the roadway, but the ship eventually came to a halt. It was then momentarily blocked from sight by smoke from the bitumen being heated from the hot ships’ belly. Sa’Zarren pitched her ship around and made a rather hard almost vertical landing on the roadway, facing the prototype *Lestim Fast Lighter*. Now it was her turn to beat on the inner airlock door to hasten the opening.

Once the locks had cycled and she had hopped down to the ground, she threw her helmet back into the ship before running over to the downed craft. Just as Dassan’s feet hit the pavement, he was scooped up in Zarren’s arms.

“Das, how the blazes are you even here? You’re dead!” she blurted out between kisses.

“I *am* dead in the literal.” he replied, once she quit trying to smother him. “*Od’tra* allowed me this, since I confessed my last attempt at Na’Krista’s life, this one, and told him I did not want any more deaths on my hands.” He hugged and kissed her before continuing. “Zee, I want to say I’m sorry for all the times I paid no attention to you. I was wrong. You didn’t deserve that. You deserved love that I didn’t give to you freely.”

“But you’re right here, standing in front of me!” she stated. He was making some sense, though. He had been distant to her needs for a while, now.

“When Kayla killed me, I was on the floor dying with a *Bantra’saa’laa* through me and I was standing there with *Od’tra* at the same time, like an out of body experience, maybe? Well, I said that I was wrong for taking her life and that death was all I deserved, to die by her hands. I asked to trade my life for hers, since I had not fully crossed the veil at that point in time. I don’t know if that changed any . . . thing . . .” He stopped talking when Sa’Kayla came into his line of sight.

“Brother? Dassan?” the femme questioned, shaking her head because two and two were adding up to three. “How? How are you here? You were . . .”

“Kayla, I took your life from you, a long time ago.” he replied as he went to her and hugged her. “I was wrong, Kayla, please forgive me. The Phasic disease damaged my thinking to the point I could not rationalize right from wrong. You did the right thing when you killed me. I deserved that.”

“What? You’re saying you killed me?” his sister blurted out. “I thought Jessett was joking with me about . . .” Everyone stopped and turned toward the shadow that was slowly covering them, blotting out the sun. It was a being, an Elazi, maybe? He was at least ten times larger than any of them which seemed utterly impossible. The huge ruddy toned being looked around before tapping at something on his wrist. He then began to shrink down until he was slightly shorter than anyone.

“I sense you all know my identity.” he offered up as he joined their group. “I allowed Dassan this dispensation because he professed from deep within his heart, he wanted no more blood on his hands. It would seem he was successful in that accomplishment. Well done, Dassan. I commend your valor this day.”

“*Od’tra the Wise?*” Na’Krista finally blurted out. She was standing next to Jeffrey and at the moment, hanging onto his arm to keep from falling down if she passed out.

“You are correct, my child,” he replied, then he turned to her Om-Mother. “Sa’Kayla, I can hear your thoughts quite clearly. Yes, I am all-powerful and all of you in front of me are my greatest creations ever. I can move mountains and drain seas, cause the skies to flood the world and fire to rain from the stars but there are things I just cannot do. I cannot heal a broken mind or save somebody from a final ending. Maybe someday, as I become wiser, I will be able to do so. You are never too old to learn something new.” He shrugged his left shoulder, then continued his thoughts.

“It was a fault, I suppose that I made all of you so intricate, so special. Made in my image, you are so close to my form that I do not have the skills to just wave a hand and change how you function or think. I could change your pelt color but I could not make you like it. Who knows, maybe some day one of you, one of my creations will ascend, too. If or when, I do not know.” He looked back at Sa’Kayla and continued.

“Sa’Kayla, Dassan asked to trade his life for your death. You weren’t through the veil yet so the exchange was possible. To give Dassan his life back right now means some other being has to give up their life. I cannot ask someone to give up what is so precious. I hope you understand.” *Od’tra* then addressed the one from another planet.

“Jeffrey Andrews, an Earther. This was something I did not expect to see. You, in love with Krista.” the deity put forth. “I did not expect my greatest creations would take to the stars but they have found ways to escape this world and discover others. I wish you great prosperity with Na’Krista. I am sure your Creator would approve of this melding of beings.”

“Thank you.” Jeffrey replied, suddenly realizing he had heard the *Wise One* speaking to him in perfect Québécois.

“Sa’Kayla, when you had died and I had found your wandering soul, I bestowed upon you the position of *Esed-Fanzaa Rann*. protector of your lineage’ lost souls.” *Od’tra* put forth. “Since you are now back among the living, I need another to take your place. Your sibling, Dassan, has generously offered to walk the nether realm for some time to come in exchange for a reprieve from an eternity of fire and damnation. Dassan, it is time to go.”

The soon-to-be recommissioned Saar Trent’lan went to stand beside *Od’tra* and with a nod from the *Wise One* and a tap on whatever that was on his wrist, the pair slowly faded from sight.

Sa’Zarren was sitting in the left-hand auxiliary seat from Jeffrey, still very upset and frightened by what had transpired earlier. This still didn’t set well with her, that she had been in the presence of a deity of that magnitude and she was not dead when it occurred. *Od’tra* was the one that decided what happened to you once through the veil of death and she was pretty sure she had not crossed over.

Looking at the displays, it was clear the Earther was a good pilot, especially since he had no seat time in this model before today. To his right was Sa’Densa, acting as his co-pilot and navigator. Looking back at the rest of the crew and passengers, Saar Kevvit’lan turned his head, looking away from her in embarrassment for his part in today’s altercation. He had stated several times that he was thankful she had not shot him out of the skies when she had her chance.

“What just happened?” Sa’Kayla queried, still shaking like a leaf.

“I don’t know, Om-Mother.” Krista replied. “Was that legitimate? Were we in *His* presence?”

“I think we were.” Zarren offered up. She held up a piece of jewelry for all to see as she continued her thoughts. “Dassan gave this to me when nobody was looking. This is a ring I gave him for our tenth joining anniversary. I had put it on his finger when he was being prepared for tomorrow’s interment. He just gave it back to me with a note when we were on the ground. The slip says I should to keep it as a reminder of better times.” That prompted the elder Keth’lan femme to speak her mind.

“Very well, nothing strange happened. Commander Kevvit’lan landed the craft after being attacked by pirates, the same pirates that attacked Jeffrey and we picked him up.” Sa’Kayla put on the table. “Is that good with everyone?”

A chorus of affirmative answers were heard throughout the ship.

Jeffrey was helping Sa’Zarren and Sa’Densa to make sure the seating was arranged properly and all of the flowers were in the right placement to allow for the coffin that would carry Dassan’s body to be on display. He had heard the casket was clear so he didn’t know how he would react to it, considering he had been in the presence of Dassan living, then seen him dead on the floor in his home, then temporarily brought back to life again, as it were.

I had been a long day so far, arranging things and trying to psych himself up for this. It was a known fact Jeff was not a fan of funerals. Just to keep the jitters down, he had hand-polished everyone’s armor one last time, just to keep his mind off of things. It didn’t help matters much that Krista had went to get her pelt dyed again, just so she could look her best today. Without her to talk to or maybe just hold for a few *Mumar*, his nerves were shot. His comm unit went off while he was positioning the flower arrangements, startling him so it took a bit for him to answer. It was Na’Krista.

“Hello, Kitten,” he offered, stepping to the side of the room behind a rather large flower arrangement to gain a bit of privacy.

“I’m out front.” she put forth in reply. “Where are you in the building?”

“By the lectern, near the doors that Dassan’s casket will be carried out through.”

“Stay right there and close your eyes. Do not open them until I tell you to.” she instructed.

“Alright, I’ll do that.” he agreed. Jeff was curious what was going on since this was an odd request. He heard footsteps, then he sort of sensed Krista was standing behind him.

“Jeff, keep your eyes closed while I tell you this.” she ordered. “Mother made me tell this before she told you herself. You probably noticed we have no pictures of me as a small child in our home. There’s a reason for that.” She took a deep breath, then continued.

“I . . . I, um, I started to dye my pelt about grade two in school. I was being picked on so I took on the buff number sixteen color you have always seen me wearing. Well, you would have

noticed anyway at some point. I was going to have my stylist dye me to my original coloration but in a discussion with Susan yesterday, she made a suggestion and showed me some pictures.

“I had the work done, then I had my stylist put a temporary color over her work so I wouldn’t stand out any further today. I’ll take a shower tonight before bed to remove the temporary color, so you can have a real surprise. Go ahead, open your eyes and turn around.”

When Jeff did so, he was facing a rust-red femme that was his wife.

“Um, you look very pretty like that.” he offered as he made her turn around slowly. She was colored just about the same ruddy tones as Merrett Keth’lan and the dye job was perfect, from what Jeff could see. Krista had on a breast wrap and a short skirt so there was not a question as to the subtle variations in the coloration.

“Enough looking.” she put forth once she was facing him again. “We need to get our armor on for the ceremony and I need to take a mild sedative to settle my nerves.”

The ceremony to celebrate and remember Dassan Trent’lan had gone off without a hitch, other than one of the interment party could not be in attendance and Jeff had offered to stand in for that pall bearer. Sa’Kayla performed her part well, directing them in the slow cadence march from the chapel to the hearse, then hearse to tomb. The bearers were arranged so at one point, the strongest would be at the outer side from the shelf his casket would rest. Those bearers would have to push the container and carriage back into place which was not easy, considering how old the hardware was.

There was a short gathering after with food and drink provided to them, mostly so everyone could wind down. Retten Trent’lan told a very funny story involving Dassan and a harvester that had hooked a Kebra tree and pulled it over, trapping himself in the thick canopy that covered the machine. Trooper Grade Nine Sa’Vesi Derrel’lan told of his charge down the throat of a kill zone on Varpor’s main landing pad, taking several troopers with him to clear their way off of the pad. Sa’Zarren brought out a projector and showed some images of their life together, including the time he was repainting the main house and the electric paint gun he was using came apart, showering him with a deep blue-gray building paint.

Just as Na’Krista had agreed, she was showering that evening to remove the temporary colorant that covered up the actual dye work she had done for her. Jeff was trying to stay awake to see what this was all about and it was a fight, since he had consumed maybe a few too many shots of *White Fire* at the end of the services. Some movement by the archway to the bathroom garnered his attention.

“How do you like it?” she questioned, turning in a slow circle so he could see the net effect. Standing before him was what would appear to be an anthropomorphic female tiger.

“Um, ah, that is . . .” He was at a loss for words as she turned a second time for good measure. “Um, is that going to fly for your supervisor’s position next First-day?” he questioned.

“Is that all you have to say?” she queried with a smirk. She could see the total confusion on his face. He didn’t know what to say, in her opinion. “Susan said you would really like this.”

“I . . . I do like it!” he confirmed. “You look so sexy like that!” he added as he got to his feet and walked around her slowly. “How long did this take your stylist to do this? Had to be a very long time, in my opinion.”

“She took almost three *Heth* to do this.” Krista admitted.

“And it will not rub off?” he questioned.

“This pattern is good until my winter coat comes in. I’ll look odd for about two or three ten-days, then I’ll have it touched up. Same for my shorter summer coat.”

“Kitten, what would happen if you just didn’t go back to your color stylist?” he asked.

“In a full cycle, I would be back to my real coloration, mostly. Might need a touchup, though after the first year. Why do you ask?”

“Your mother is still trying to get you into the Diplomatic Corps.” Jeff put forth. “I asked and she said a posting might be for three or four cycles. That’s why I wanted to know.”

“So that’s what I’ve been hearing about.” Krista mused. “Father was asking about my teaching posting and I would guess Mother never told him about my taking the supervisors position. Father seemed a bit confused when I told of my taking over the department two days from now.”

“Well, I think you need to tell your mother what’s what.” Jeff suggested. He went to her side of the bed and turned back the light sheets on that side. “Well, let’s get some rest,” he suggested, helping her into bed.

“I don’t see us getting any rest, Commander.” she retorted. “I suspect we might be in bed for the next few days, doing anything but rest.”

“That’s a possibility.” Jeff put forth as he turned out the lights. “Come here, Kitten. Let’s get to know one another again.”