

The characters Jeffrey Alan Sakaar Andrews, Na'Krista Nahala Christina (nee Keth'lan) Andrews'lan, Jesset Sakaar Keth'lan, Sa'Kayla Mira (nee Trent'lan) Keth'lan, Kamram Keth'lan, Na'Kesta (nee Cern'lan) Keth'lan, Tegram Keth'lan, Traci McDonald, Talram Keth'lan, Bosteg Haas'lan, Kestam Ramm'lan, Treman Baze'lan, Merret Treet'lan, Tascal Hone'lan, Hallett Trasc'lan, Hammet & Na'Kayla Nahala (nee Keth'lan) Craine'lan, Gillat Deen'lan, Marlett Blane'lan, Sa'Densa Nasia (nee Deen'lan) Andrews'lan, Argess & Arrissa Wrraal, Rellen Sandren'lan, Sa'Jenna Nasia Deen'lan along with the characters Torvald and Victoria Svensen are the properties of Kellan Meig'h and may not be used without express written permission.

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“Scribe”

by Kellan Meig'h

Chapter Forty-Four

“Trans-Atmospheric Tango”

Sa'Kayla and her two grand-daughters were going shopping, their intent was to acquire a new wardrobe for the elder Keth'lan femme that was now among the living. Sa'Densa Andrews'lan was acting as their operator this day, using Krista's skimmer for their mode of transportation. The need for clothing was clear, since nobody expected Sa'Kayla to return from the dead when they gave away her garments.

“Kayla, are you feeling better today?” Sa'Kayla asked her namesake.

“I was at the doctor last day.” she admitted. “He took some images of my injury site and according to him, I was still healing just fine. He did take the opportunity to tighten this blasted support brace, though. I guess I had lost a bit of weight so he had to compensate for it.”

“I think your doctor is taking good care of you.” Sa'Kayla put forth. “Back during the Varpor wars, you might not have survived that injury. Our medical technology has really taken huge leaps in the time since that war.” That statement made their pilot put forth a snippet of information.

“A great deal of our technology came from the Bil race.” Sa'Densa chimed in. “They were the ones that had the superior electronic tech that boosted our abilities.”

“That is true.” the matriarch admitted. “I remember their occupation of the planet. I also remember “Reclamation Day” quite clearly. That same technology the Bil race tried to keep us from learning about was their undoing. I remember Jessett and Merrett both took part in the siege on the Bil homeworld. We thought we had level headed leaders but that proved wrong.”

“I remember Om-Father Jessett told of how Merrett went back to the Bil homeworld to do repairs, rebuilding what we had torn apart.” Na'Krista offered up. “You do know he's back on this world, Om-Mother?”

“I was told that by Jessett.” she agreed. “It was interesting that he has joined to a Bil femme. I suppose I should expect that, since he was living with them for so long.”

The Keth'lan matriarch looked out the port side windows at the agricultural stations that carpeted the landscape below her. Things had changed, since she was sure there were never that many crops being grown in the area. That station that Talram had purchased was to her

knowledge, an empty field the last she knew. Just as she was going to comment on the subject, a priority tone, followed by a faint communique came through on Krista's communicator.

"Kitten? Can you copy me? This is Jeff. Do you copy?"

"I hear you, faintly." she replied.

"Krista, I need you to see if any of our craft are anywhere near the *All Trades Platform*."

"Jeff, why do you need to know that?" she queried. This did not sound good at all.

"We're in space near the *Trade Platform* and we have an emergency, reactor is down, no nav control at all. Things are going pear-shaped at the moment, we're adrift and headed toward the *Platform*."

Na'Krista thought about this; she knew he was on a check flight, and if she remembered right, the squadron at *Post Fontaneauz* was out near the moon on a training sortie, which meant they were on the other side of the globe from Jeff. Then the possible reason for his emergency was coming clear to her.

"Jeff, are you piloting Six Eight One?" she asked, with a feeling of dread in her heart. That *Fast Lighter* needed to have been scrapped long ago, when several members of the Forces lost their lives to a reactor shutdown, leaving them drifting on the far side of the moon until their life support gave out. That was the reason several relay beacons orbited the moon now, just so there would be no communications loss while in the moon's shadow.

"Six Eight One is my ship." Jeff confirmed. "We're drifting toward the upper ring of the station, impact in one point six *Heth*, approximate." Before Na'Krista could form a reply, Sa'Kayla spoke up.

"Sa'Densa, take us to the Trent'lan station, now! As fast as this bucket of fasteners and wire will go! Sa'Zarren still has that *Lestim Mark Twelve Standard Armored Lighter* that my brother bought to convert to a goods transfer ship. I was in it just a few rotations ago when I was visiting Sa'Zarren and it's ready to go. We can thank my late brother for keeping it serviced and ready." While their pilot banked the skimmer around hard to head back to the station in question, she continued her thoughts. "He used it to go up to the *All Trades Platform*, offering goods for sale that he couldn't sell to a broker."

"Do you think Sa'Zarren would let us use the ship?" Krista asked.

"I'm sure of it." Sa'Kayla confirmed. "Call ahead and let her know we're on our way."

Na'Mari had a priority message come in from Krista, so she went out into the hall in front of the cafeteria of the station's mid-ring and spoke with her chattel holder. Just a few *Munar* later, the others at the table could sense her urgency as she approached the booth but didn't sit back down.

“Jeffrey Andrews’lan and his check ride instructor are drifting near the station with no nav and no reactor. Na’Krista says they will impact the station in one and a half *Heth* if they aren’t rescued by a tug that might not make it in time. We need to go assist him.”

“Absolutely!” Marinna agreed. After swiping her payment card through the reader at the table to leave a tip, they all ran as fast as possible to the docking bay where the *Dosh’vann’zang* was berthed. They went through a very abbreviated startup checklist and after gaining permission to leave the station, Dev tried to release the docking clamps.

“What in *The Ever-Consuming Blazes Of Halden-Faar?*” she blurted out, tapping the virtual button on the glass display to release the docking clamps several more times with no response at all. “Something is wrong,” she stated, making her way to the port-side hatchway and airlock to operate the release mechanism from the remote panel. When that didn’t function, she had a very bad feeling in the pit of her gut.

Opening a service panel and pulling a long lever that was the manual backup, she knew for sure what the problem was; someone had failed to connect the locking mechanism linkages completely. While the clamps were actually no longer in the ‘Engaged’ state, there was no physical connection to the mechanism that would retract them. She knew someone would have to go out and unlock them by hand so they needed to decide who would do that. Also, she was going to ‘talk’ with the person that signed off that part of the inspection. Just as she turned around to head back to the bridge, she observed a possibility through the observation window above the docking port, moored in the next ring up.

“Marinna, is that a *Lestim Utility Tug*, right above us?”

“You would be right,” she replied after turning in her seat to see through the upper canopy window above her. “Looks like it might be a Mark Seven or a Mark Eight to me. I don’t see a ventral grapple turret on it. Are you thinking of “borrowing” it?”

“Exactly! Marinna, you’re with me. I need an expert pilot so I can get a connection to Jeffrey’s ship on the first try.”

Sa’Zarren looked up from the pilot’s console, confirming who was boarding the craft while she was bringing up the powerplant. Sa’Kayla, Na’Kayla, Na’Krista and Sa’Densa were still making final adjustments and connections to their suits and it was fortunate that the suits of armor were at her station being polished when this went down. Her rag-tag crew looked odd, with only Na’Kayla’s suit being fully polished. Everyone else wore metallic protection that was a very odd-looking checkerboard of polished and frosty metal.

“I’m ready for liftoff and we have clearance all the way to the *Trade Station* and Jeffrey’s last known coordinates.” she put forth, waiting until everyone was seated and buckled in before sealing the hatches and taxiing out to the padd beyond the garage. Once they were on the concrete, she applied full vector thrust for liftoff and after they were above the ground by four *Hazecan*, she engaged the reactor drive.

“Zarren, I have warning lights all over the screen, and, um, I have a Master Buss warning, both sides.” Krista put forth from her Engineer’s position.

“Hit the Master Reset. Twice if it doesn’t clear on the first shot.” the smokey femme that was piloting replied. She had some familiarity with this particular craft and that was one of its quirks.

“Got it! We’re clear, well, sort of. Board says the landing gear doors aren’t fully closed,” Na’Krista reported, happy to finally see a mostly blue indication board in front of her. The *Standard Armored Lighters* were never happy in the atmosphere, since they were originally designed for space to ground warfare, not passenger comfort. She was somewhat worried by the shaking, though. She had never been in an armored lighter that was literally climbing straight up due to its enormous reactor output and massive drive pods. She wasn’t sure if this was a good or a bad thing. Well, it never hurts to ask.

“Zarren, is the ship supposed to shake this hard?” she questioned. On occasion, her panel was unreadable due to the violent movements of the airframe.

“Well, I am at the maximum limits for power output. Keep in mind, the reactor is making enough energy to run a small city right now. We will be at three hundred and ninety Hazecan in less than two *Munar*.” was Sa’Zarren’s explanation. “Krista, cycle the landing gear again. That will clear the warning for the doors.”

“I think I have a lock on his ship, looks like a *Lestim Fast Lighter*, an old one.” Sa’Kayla put forth from the Navigator’s console. “His ship is already too close to the station for my comfort. Looks like less than a *Hazecan*.”

“That’s not good.” Zarren said as she checked her screens. “If we have to, I’ll pull under him, go to station keeping and gently nudge his ship into a trajectory that will at least take them away from the station.”

“Will that be safe to do?” Krista asked. To her, that type of maneuver sounded sketchy at the very least.

“Krista, I’m not sure how safe it would be but I would think it’s better than colliding with the station. You said his shielding generator was down so a collision, no matter how gentle, is not going to be good. We can only hope I can still pilot this bucket of junk as well as I could during the Varpur Wars.”

Na’Krista gave that some thought; a collision with the station might do serious damage to whatever ring they collided with, with possible loss of life to whoever was in that area of the structure. It also might compromise the ships’ integrity which might lead to a reactor breach. Even in a locked down state, it would go critical if the casing were ruptured. In that case, they would all become low-hanging stars.

What she really wished for in the immediate, was for the ship to stop shaking so violently. Na’Krista could see her sister was getting ready to lose her lunch and to be truthful, so was she.

“Tammat, what do you think? This is a serious amount of damage to this wire bundle.” Jeff questioned, trying to splice together the wires as quickly as his cohort identified each pair.

“Jeffrey, it is a mess.” the gray male agreed. “I think, if we just connect up what we need and no more, we can be done in another fifteen Munar. That should get us thrusters only but that’s all we really need right now.”

“We need a plan ‘B’ in case this doesn’t work.” the Earther suggested.

“That would be to strap into the observation couch before impact. We should survive that, since we must be moving under twenty *Hazecan per Heth*. Actually, unless I’m wrong, there is the possibility we might just scrape our way by the station. Other than that, we could take some big chances in the escape raft.”

While Jeffrey spliced the wires, he gave thought to this; if he survived this incident, he was not going to leave the planet surface for space ever again. This was it, as far as he was concerned. This was not worth risking his life just to get a pilots license.

“Jeffrey, I have maybe twenty more sets of wires to reconnect. After that, I’ll jump the main buss where I see it might be damaged. That should get us thrusters.” the Elazi male put forth.

“Well, I hope this works to give us what we need.” Jeff stated. “The *Platform* is looking bigger every time I look up to see where it is.”

“Marinna, I think you might have used a too much force to persuade our engineer to allow us to borrow this tug.” Dev suggested. “He is out cold. We should have just offered him some currency. Engineers are usually swayed by some credits in their account.”

“Sorry, Dev. I didn’t mean to hit him that hard.” the femme leonid replied as she was getting her unwilling Elazi male passenger buckled in. “He moved just as I swung that wrench. Couldn’t stop my momentum.” she added as she connected his helmet and oxygen supply lines. “All good now, he’s strapped into the Observer’s jump seat so we can get on with this.”

“Nice of him to keep this bucket on standby.” the Bil femme commented as she ran through a very abbreviated checklist. “Well, someone isn’t going to like us. I’m not wasting my time calling for clearance.” With a few deft strokes of her fingers, the utility tug *Vairtram* was released from the docking ring and moving away from the station.

“I have a lock on Jeffrey’s ship.” Marinna offered up. “Sending the coordinates to your console.”

“I have it. These old reaction drives aren’t that fast. Maybe forty *Munar* to his location.” They were on the diametric position of the station from Jeffrey so this seemed like it would be a long haul to get around to the opposing side.

Marinna kept track of the channels, particularly *Zed Eleven* for traffic that sounded like someone was wise to their plan. The pilot, copilot and navigator were supposedly having mid-meal so maybe they wouldn't be noticed right away. She was bothered, however that she couldn't find the transponder setting so she could reset it to her ship's designation and make their movements go unnoticed. As it was, she hoped the station would just think the tug was taking care of business, moving someone's cargo that was stowed in an exterior pod.

"We seem to have slipped away un . . . never mind." Dev stated in a dejected tone of voice as she opened a hailing channel that was chiming in her helmet.

"This is Flight Commander Tannen'lan of the Utility Tug *VairTram*. Who in blazes is piloting my ship? Answer this hail." a male voice spoke with authority.

"This is Flight Engineer Dev Hadressen, Bil Protectorate Forces Reserve, currently assigned to the *Harb'ness'aal* Shipyards. We have an in-flight Trans-Atmospheric emergency and my ship is disabled. I am commandeering this tug under Regulation Fifty-Eight, Section *Ahn*, Subsection *Vaand* Sixteen of Space Travel in the Elazi System."

"Flight Engineer Hadressen, why didn't my engineer contact me concerning your need?"

"Um, my copilot hit him a bit too hard because he was being very uncooperative. He's out and if he so chooses, he may file assault charges on me when this is over. I will take the blame for that action."

"Why didn't he just call me . . ." The tug's commander put two and two together. "By the name, I'm guessing you're a Bil, right?"

"Affirmative."

"He probably said a number of crude things to you, I'm guessing? Very crude things?"

"Two for two. He could have made a dock worker blush."

"He wanted sex, I'm sure of that."

"Three for three."

"He will not press charges, Engineer Hadressen. You have my word on that. Just be careful with my ship, please? The reaction jets are a bit touchy. Wouldn't hurt to test them a few times before trying to couple to the other ship you're trying to rescue. I'll call the *Renansis* to see how long it will be before she's in the area to assist you." That made Dev smile.

"It's amazing how people will come together for a common need." she mused.

"You didn't give him much choice." Marinna suggested over an in-cockpit channel.

"Actually, I might have had sex with our unfortunate engineer, if he had not suggested I do it with him *that* way. He is kinda cute looking."

“If *Lestim* had not bought up *Convert Industries*, there would be several rescue tugs available, not a single tug each shift that has to waste time during transit in and out of our gravity well.” Sa’Kayla groused. “When this came up at a shareholders meeting back in the day, I voiced my opinion to not go through with the purchase. Those males on the board were idiots.”

“Where is the *Renansis*, anyway? I can’t find it on my scans.” Na’Krista asked. She leaned in until her bubble helmet gently touched the display, just so she could make out the finer details. At least she could zoom the screens out to full size, making the most of her still-impaired vision.

“I don’t see it on my screen, either, Krista.” her sister offered up. Opening a channel, she hailed the rescue tug. “Rescue Tug *Renansis*, do you copy? This is the *Xaan’taan*.”

“*Xaan’taan*, this is the *Renansis*. I copy you.”

“*Renansis*, what is your time estimate to the stricken ship?”

“I estimate fifty-five *Munar*.” was the reply. “I have you and the *Lestim Fast Lighter* on my screens. You are almost directly above me by twenty-five *Hazecan*.” After a moment, he continued. “Further, I have a dock tug on my screen, ship ident says she is the *Vairtram*, approximately six *Heth* from the *Fast Lighter*, headed in the general direction of that ship.”

“Thank you, *Renansis*.” Na’Kayla replied. “*Vairtram*, this is *Xaan’taan*, Sub-Commander Na’Kayla Crain’lan speaking. Are you en route to the stricken *Fast Lighter*?”

“Kayla! This is *Marinna*!” was the reply. “We’re piloting the *Varitram* and we’re on our way to help but this dock tug is slow. I’m sure I could paddle us over to Jeffrey’s ship faster than the reaction drives are pushing us.”

“My ship is not that slow!” Commander Tannen’lan blurted out over the mid-band frequency, since he was still listening in on the action. “Go into the menu, select Normal Flight. You’re in Docking and Handling mode right now.”

“Thank you, Commander Tannen’lan.” Dev replied. “Now to find . . . there it is! Much better.” The ship was now moving at a decent speed that might get them to the damaged ship before it impacted the station.

“Dev, this tug has a forward mag grapple.” *marinna* put forth. “The controls for it are in your green menu. Says there’s doors, so maybe the tug is newer than we thought it was with a grapple that stows in a compartment.”

“Thanks, *Marinna*.” the Bil femme replied, checking the menu herself. When she selected ‘Doors’ in the list, she could feel them opening under hydraulic power. “With a mag grapple, we can just slow the ship down, keeping it from hitting the station. Commander Tannen’lan, if you’re still on this frequency, how much pull does the forward grapple allow for?”

“Engineer Hadressen, the grapple is good for one hundred and twenty thousand *Zet*, basically the limits of reverse thrust. It could go more, but that is all the thrust you have available.”

“Thank you, Commander.” Dev then switched to an in-ship channel. “We get the mag grapple attached to the *Lighter*, use thusters to tighten the cable, then carefully apply reverse thrust. All we have to do is get them stopped, then the rescue ship can take them back into the atmosphere for repairs once Na’Krista picks up Jeffrey and his check ride instructor.”

While Dev did the in-transit piloting, the *Fask’aal* femme checked her displays and controls once more, getting a feel for a craft she had never been in before. While it was possible Dev had flown this design tug, she had never been in a *Lestim* dock tug until this day.

Looking at her screens, she could see Jeffrey’s ship, the rescue tug and the *Armored Lighter* Na’Krista was in. There was also some artifact, like a ship but it only lasted for one scan when switching wavelength modes. Must be an anomaly, she thought. While they were converging for a common cause, she really wished this was not necessary. She was worried something would happen to Jeff and that would be devastating to her chattel holder. Marinna could see just how much Jeffrey was the center of Krista’s world.

“Commander Andrews’lan, I think we should try our thrusters again.” Tammat Fenn’lan suggested, stowing the tools in the kit and magnetically attaching it to a bulkhead.

“Well, here goes nothing.” Jeff muttered under his breath. “Tammat, the plan?”

“Let’s just see if we can go to an all stop condition. If not, we adjust trajectory to miss the station.”

“Okay, I’m game.” Jeffrey offered up. “Going hot with the thrusters.” He activated the setting on his screen that was now fully lit up and touched the thruster control to stop the ship. Nothing happened.

“Commander, try using the ventral thrusters.” Tammat suggested. Still nothing happened when they were actuated. “Let’s try to roll inverted to the station orientation, then use the dorsal thrusters to push us up and out of line with the station.”

“We have nothing, Tammat. No thrust in any direction.” Jeff replied. “I just tried everything with no response. Time to strap into the observer’s couch?”

“I believe it is. From what we can see right now, I’m certain we will impact the upper ring.”

While Jeff strapped into one of the seats on the couch, he knew he would never leave solid ground again, no mater what. That was if he survived this incident.

The forward screen allowed Jeff a view of the station that in his mind, they should be colliding with it at any moment. The construction looked impossibly huge to him, causing him to have to keep swallowing down his breakfast, it was that bad. He had swiveled one of the auxiliary controls panel into his reach, just so he had use of the radio channels. He had heard some chatter between Na’Krista and Marinna but so far, no one had offered up just how close they were to rescuing his craft from the pending impact.

“Krista, do you copy?” he asked on a frequency he knew she monitored.

“I copy you.” she replied. Jeff could hear the strain in her voice.

“Uh, where is our help? I can’t get the radar back on-line to see where everyone is at.”

“We’re about ten out but Marinna should be almost on top of you.” she offered.

“Jeffrey?” another voice called out, one he knew. It was Marinna Rreal.

“Go ahead, Marinna.”

“Jeffrey, we are going to come in behind you and use a mag grapple to stop you.” she explained. “After that, we will try to get a better purchase and carefully move you to a big bay between the first and second rings. Orbital Control, to you copy that?”

“*Vairtram*, we copy. Bays in the *Ahn-Eleven* sector are all clear. A *Lestim Fast Lighter* will clear the bay doors without any gripes. We are opening all the doors so you have your choice.”

“Thank you, Orbital Control. Jeffrey, we are in position so be prepared. Are you strapped in?”

“Marinna, we are strapped in. Go ahead.”

Dev handed flight control to the *Fask’aal* femme and brought up the grapple controls. She put a laser designator on the point she wanted to attach to, a rather small square on the aft section of the dorsal area of the ship that she knew was highly magnetic; the top of the reactor shielding. This gave information to her pilot through the guidance computer to guide them to that spot.

“Easy, Marinna. Just settle us into a matching speed, then give me just a bit of closing rate.”

“Got it, Dev. How close?”

“Twenty Catre should be good.” the Bil femme stated as they coasted up to the stricken ship. From her viewpoint, she could see dozens of punctures and impact marks all along the side of Jeff’s ship. Those marks on the hull looked odd to her, like they had taken a volley from a Point Defense Cannon. No wonder it went to lockdown; the cooling array on the starboard side was missing altogether and for some reason, the port cooling array looked damaged, too.

She put the winch into free-spool mode, then used the small reaction jets on the unit to move the electro-magnetic head to the place she had selected. The ships' regular pilot was right; the reaction jets were a bit touchy, but not too much so.

"Speed matched, twenty out, holding position." the femme *Fask'aal* pilot offered up.

"Jeffrey, be ready." Dev instructed as she gently placed the mag head over the location she wanted. The magnet was carefully energized by a small amount while she finished making the connection to the hull of Jeff's craft, gritting her teeth as she did so. Once she had a blue indication on her board that showed they were solidly coupled, she turned the magnet on full and slowly locked the winch spool to prevent damage to Jeff's ship. "Give me station keeping."

"We are . . . stopped, no movement." Marinna offered up just as the two ships jarred just slightly to a stop. After a moment she remembered to breathe, now that the problem seemed to be under control. Nothing like piloting a strange craft while someone she knew had their life hanging in the balance. Looking down at her hands, they were shaking from nerves. And maybe, just maybe, she needed to change her underwear.

"Good piloting, Marinna." the Bil femme offered up as she patted the femme *Fask'aal* on the shoulder. "Commander Tannen'lan, are you still listening?" Dev asked after she changed back to the mid-band frequency again.

"Commander Tannen'lan on the channel. You have a question?" he replied.

"Yes, can you see the cameras remotely?" Dev queried. "I need your opinion, since it is your ship."

"Yes, I have the video feed on the terminal in front of me." he stated. "Good catch, Dev. Your plans?"

"I need to move the ship into a bay."

"I see. The menu for Stabilization Struts is on the bottom left of your mag-grab display. Mode *Veh-Six-Ahm* should work, you will have to lower your ship in relation to that *Fast Lighter* just a bit. Make sure the lower arms go under the exhaust cones as you extend them. You need to keep the magnet fully energized at all times while you're doing this."

"Thank you, Commander."

Dev carefully extended the arms to the ready position, then selected the proper mode. She carefully worked each arm, making sure the mini-grapples were not trying to punch a hole in their objective. It was nerve-wracking, not having any previous experience with that aspect of a tug but eventually, she had all six arms carefully gripping Jeff's ship.

"Jeffrey, we're going to move your ship to a bay. Stay strapped in." she stated before taking over the piloting duty.

The Bil femme slowly reoriented the coupled pair of ships in a careful dance, keeping a close eye on the pressure readouts from all of her connections. It took about ten *Munar* to accomplish but she finally had them lined up on an empty bay and established synchro orbit with the station. Gently scooting them into the open hanger, a dock crew came out with a low carriage that would normally be used with a very large cargo container.

The workers were walking on the bay floor, using mag-boots to do their job in almost zero - G. The carriage must have had some mag capacity too, since it was rolling on hard composite wheels. With plenty of hand signals from the stevedores and a generous amount of maneuvering, they finally had the crippled ship on the carriage. Zarren had followed them in and brought her ship into the bay after them, setting it down on its landing gear, most likely at Na'Krista's insistence. All that was left was to close the doors to the bay and restore artificial gravity and atmosphere. It was finally over.

“*Open, Gods-Damn you!*” Na'Krista shouted to nobody in particular, pounding on the port-side inner air lock door to make it open faster. It was still going through its integrity checks when she kicked it, trying to force the issue at hand.

“Krista, give it a chance. This is an older ship, you know.” her sister offered up.

Just as the buff femme was going to rebuke her sibling after turning to look at her, the door opened, leaving her with nothing to lean against. She almost fell on her face when that happened but quickly recovered, trying to play off her fumble. She then began to give the outer door the same treatment but stopped when she realized what she was doing. Now that all eyes in the ship were on her, she tried to show no emotion but her posture was giving that away. Eventually, the ‘Low Atmosphere’ light went out and the ‘Air Lock Equalized’ light came on, granting her egress from the ship.

Na'Krista hopped down to the deck and started to run over to Jeff's damaged ship but she pulled up short when she observed the significant damage to it. Down the Starboard side, the through-holes and dents in the hull were not made by micro-meteorites at all. They were from something else more ominous.

Even with her impaired sight, what she could see were two somewhat parallel lines of holes stitched down the flank of the craft from low on the nose to high on the tail, fairly uniform in size and spacing. Still stuck in the hull was one of the objects that she quickly recognized as the source of the damage; a three-quarter *Zet* weight tungsten tipped polymer round from a Point Defense Rotary Rifle that she was sure was just a prototype.

As far as she knew, a similar type rotary rifle been mounted on a recent-manufacture *Lestim Fast Lighter* prototype, not a production craft and that didn't make any sense to her. The prototypes were not ready to fly, as far as she knew. Not even close to being able to take off from what her father has conveyed to her. She was fortunate that she remembered to pop her helmet right before she almost threw up in it. Regardless, she knew the dock crew was not going to be happy with the mess she just left behind.

Getting a sip of water through the integrated drinking straw in her suit to clear the taste from her mouth, she noticed the starboard door was not open. Well, the damage did go right through the hatch. Running around to the port side, Commander Fenn'lan was on the deck, reaching up to get the forms from Jeffrey who was standing in the hatchway. Na'Krista was not going to let a little thing like a ranking officer stop her from getting to her *One Love*, not now. Taking a huge leap with all of her leg strength, she went over Commander Fenn'lan's head and tackled Jeffrey to the *Lighter's* deck.

"Don't you ever fly a military ship without me looking it over first! This bucket of shit has killed before! It's cursed!" she shouted at him between kisses and sobs. "I would die inside if something were to happen to you! Don't you ever leave my sight, do you hear me? And never step foot in this steaming pile of alloy metal shit ever again, no matter what!" she demanded as she kissed him further.

"I love you too, Kitten," he offered when she allowed him to take a breath. "I won't fly this bucket again. Nobody will. Commander Fenn'lan and I Orange-tagged it while it was being moved to this bay. It will be scrapped at *Lestim's* orbital facilities."

"You what?" she questioned.

"We Orange-tagged it." He held up the forms so she could see the big adhesive tag that held the binder closed. In big letters, Commander Fenn'lan had wrote "Scrap Only" on the cover. "Kitten, let's go home. I'm exhausted but on a lighter note, I now have an Orbital certification."

"But you didn't dock.. ." Jeff interrupted her.

"Commander Fenn'lan said I performed outstanding during the emergency and I deserved the certification. We would do the docking later, just so he knew I could do it."

"That's good." Krista agreed as they left the craft. They hadn't made it ten *catre* when they were stopped by a station security officer and a Forces Section Commander.

"Commander, we need to ask you a few questions." the security expert put forth. It was odd, in that he was a Pak'saa'naa'ni, what would pass for a buckskin equine coloration on Earth. He had also heard them refer to their race as 'Hununny' or something like that.

"Sure, go ahead. Ask me whatever you need to." Jeff replied.

"We just spoke with Commander Fenn'lan. Just to clarify, you didn't see another craft firing on you?"

"That would be correct." Jeffrey agreed. "We had our *Friend Or Foe* running when we left the atmosphere. There were no warnings, nor did I see another ship. Just a first strike, then a few more in succession."

"That's your statement? Are you good with that being on the record?" the Elazi male asked.

"I'm good."

“Commander Andrews’lan, this is what has damaged your craft.” the commander offered as he handed Jeff the round. “We found several more inside your ship, relatively intact. We suspect you were fired upon from a long distance, but there is a problem. We’re not sure where the round came from but it’s not production. A *Lestim* representative just confirmed that information; no *Lestim* craft are currently using this round.”

When the gravity of the situation finally hit her, it was all Krista could do to keep from either passing out or throwing up.