

Kyle's body flooded with pain as he hit the floor, hard. His shoulder felt as if a thousand knives had stabbed him. Sharp and intense, unlike anything he had ever felt before. He smelled the stench of burning flesh and then felt the burning of his shoulder. His thoughts were engulfed in his pain, and he couldn't think of anything else. Then he felt a hand grab him.

Aurik picked Kyle up, helping him back to his feet. The two raced down the corridor as the rest of the squad reached the hangar bay door. Luckily, the N'Roth had not yet locked down the ship, and the door hissed open. They all rushed in, Kyle and Aurik just in time to narrowly dodge an onslaught of rifle blasts. Kyle could barely think of anything but the unbelievably excruciating pain.

Kyle more stumbled than ran into the hangar bay, as his shoulder surged with pain with every movement. He grimaced with every fresh pang and winced at every minute movement. His mind flooded with agony, and he could barely concentrate. He wanted to scream out but refused to allow the N'Roth the satisfaction of knowing how much suffering he was in.

He leaned against a bulkhead as much for rest as to steady himself. He leaned into it with a grimace, closing his eyes, wishing for relief from his throbbing shoulder. He had never felt such agony before. Not like this. He fought back the pain and lifted himself off of the bulkhead.

Aurik, Jessica, and Sarah each raced for the first N'Roth they saw, while Yin stayed back, flattening herself against the opposite bulkhead from Kyle, next to the door. Seconds later, a half dozen armed N'Roth charged in, their weapons raised. Yin disarmed the first, catching it off guard, with an elbow to the face, then rushed the second. It, too, was caught off guard as Yin kicked it in the face with a spin kick. The two N'Roth stumbled backward as the remaining four turned their attention to her. She was close enough to the first to grab its rifle and sweep its leg out from under it, dropping the alien to the floor. She kept a tight hold of the soldier's weapon,

falling forward with it. Then, at the last second, Yin kicked her feet up into an overhead cartwheel, landing upright next to her fourth victim. She did this so fast that by the time the N'Roth realized what had happened to its counterpart, Yin had already grabbed the alien's rifle bearing arm, spun around towards an adjacent N'Roth, pulling it with her, and flung the alien into its comrade. She finished with a jump kick to its back and a wide swing with her newly acquired rifle into the face of the fourth N'Roth. Both aliens fell to the floor in a heap.

The fifth N'Roth, now within arm's reach, swung the butt of its rifle toward her face. Yin blocked it with her forearms, sidestepping toward the alien and smashing an elbow to the side of its face. The N'Roth stumbled sideways as she twisted her foe's hand, slamming her fist down into its elbow. She heard the sickening crack of bone, and her enemy let out a howl of pain.

She turned for the sixth N'Roth soldier only to find it on the ground with Kyle crouching over it, beating the alien with its own weapon.

Kyle finally stopped and looked up.

"I got him for you," he said with a smile and then nodded behind her.

She immediately spun around and finished the two N'Roth unwise enough to attempt to re-engage her in combat. The N'Roth whose arm she'd broken scrambled away down the corridor.

When she turned back to Kyle, he lay against the bulkhead, sweating and looking pale.

"Kyle, are you okay?" she asked as she knelt beside him.

"Well, I got shot, but other than that, I'm peachy," he replied.

"Come on, let's go," she said, lifting him up.

She glanced around, noticing Aurik, Jessica, and Sarah all in combat of their own. The hangar bay was massive. It looked to be at least three levels high and about several hundred

yards wide. There were half a dozen small ships and smaller shuttles. She picked the closest, a shuttle, and headed straight for it.

The shuttle ramp was down, as were most of the shuttles' ramps, and she hauled Kyle up the ramp, plopping him in the first seat she saw.

"Stay here," she ordered. I'm going to help the others. Kyle was in no state to argue, so he just leaned back, keeping off of his wounded shoulder. Yin darted out of the shuttle only to run right back in.

"Okay, we're in trouble," she said.

"Think, what to do," she said, more to herself than Kyle, as she glanced around.

"Kyle, do you think you are well enough to fly this thing?"

"Probably not," he replied as he stood, closing his eyes in pain. She understood.

"Okay, let's hope this thing doesn't have some sort of security access or anything," she replied

Kyle made his way to the pilot's chair and stared at the controls. Protruding from the console were two piloting throttles, each with a large oval-shaped top.

"What's the deal with the N'Roth and ovals?" Kyle asked as he gripped the tops.

"Easier for them to use, maybe."

"Pretty sure these are the piloting throttles," Kyle added, ignoring her reply.

"Let's see if there are any weapons in here," Yin commented and started pulling and yanking on anything that might have looked like a door or storage. She finally found a panel that opened to reveal a locker containing four of the oval-shaped pistol-like weapons she had seen when they were in the prison cells.

“Yes!” she exclaimed and snatched one up, taking a moment to investigate it. She put her fingers in the three notches meant for the N’Roth pinchers. She had to use both hands to hold the weapon, placing her right hand on top with her thumb in the notch that contained what she assumed to be the trigger. With her left hand, she held the oval pistol steady, gripping it by its bottom.

“Okay, Kyle, try and see if you can start this after I leave.” Kyle nodded.

Yin peeked out of the rear of the shuttle, noticing Aurik, Sarah, and Jessica, all on their knees with a dozen armed N’Roth surrounding them. She glanced around the hangar bay and found no more N’Roth, so she quickly dropped over the edge of the ramp and darted behind the shuttle, where the N’Roth could not see her. She swiftly made her way to the front of the shuttle and waved to Kyle to start it up, then disappeared out of his view.

Kyle fumbled with a few displays until he heard the hum of the ship powering up. After a few more moments, he found the engine display and powered it on. The hum grew into a faint mechanical roar as the engines powered on. Kyle immediately began manipulating the two piloting throttles, and the shuttle lurched into motion.

Yin crept her way to the nearest obstacle she dared to; she did not want to get spotted, so she knelt behind what looked like a power generator. As she did this, the shuttle Kyle was piloting lurched forward then upward, and back down, slamming into the floor, then scraping against the cold metal surface as it turned. She ignored the ear-piercing screech of metal on metal as best she could, cringing, despite her efforts.

She peeked out from behind her cover and noticed only three N'Roth guarding her friends. As stealthily as she could, she aimed the alien pistol at the middle guard and fired. She was surprised at the lack of recoil this weapon had, even for an energy weapon. A blue energy blast shot from its oval-shaped barrel, hitting its unsuspecting target square in the chest. The N'Roth soldier fell to his back, his chest smoking, and his clothes around the wound melted to his flesh. The wound began to seep blood.

The two N'Roth on either side hesitated in surprise as they saw their counterpart fall on its back. By the time they realized what had happened, it was too late. They turned back to Aurik, Jessica, and Sarah, who were already on top of them.

The two N'Roth weren't even able to bring their weapons up for defense before the three humans disarmed and knocked them out.

Yin raced to their sides.

"Glad to see you," Jessica commented as she snatched up the fallen soldier's weapon.

They heard a loud crash, and the shuttle closest to them slid with an ear-piercing scrape. Suddenly, another one slammed into the bulkhead near the entrance that they had entered through, then reversed and slammed into yet a third shuttle.

"Come on," Yin ordered. She led the four out into the open, peeking around the closest shuttle first, and darting toward the small spacecraft that was colliding with every ship or wall around it.

The four noticed several N'Roth bodies sprawled on the floor. Some were bleeding profusely; others didn't seem injured, though the four knew they were. They all understood now why Kyle had been crashing into everything.

Three N'Roth darted out from the cover of another shuttle, opening fire upon seeing the humans, but not before Yin fired. The first alien went down quickly as the remaining two aliens fired shot after shot, causing the four to scatter behind cover.

Just then, a shuttle slammed into the two N'Roth, and they fell in a heap, their rifles sliding across the hangar floor.

Kyle maneuvered the shuttle so that the rear faced the four and let the ramp down. The four raced for the ship, closing the shuttle's ramp just as another dozen N'Roth soldiers entered the hangar bay.

The five heard the energy blasts start hitting the shuttle just as the ramp closed. Yin was about to yell at Kyle to get them off the ship, but she saw that he had slumped over in the pilot's chair.

"Kyle!" she hollered, her concern allowing more of her accent to filter through her voice.

The squad immediately rushed over to help him, Jessica taking the pilot's chair.

"You guys might want to strap in," she suggested. The squad was already ahead of her, securing Kyle into the seat, then strapping themselves in.

The barrage of weapons fire echoed through the shuttle as they began to move. Jessica raised the shuttle almost to the ceiling, then piloted it down the length of the hangar bay.

"Guys. Hold on. This might not be such a good idea," she explained as she reversed the shuttle until it hit the third level walkway. Then, she punched it as hard as she could.

The shuttle lurched forward, smashing hard into the ship's hangar bay doors with a crash. The pilot's console lit up with warning lights as it slammed into the door.

The door itself bent outward from the force of the shuttle, revealing the dead of space. Lights and warnings erupted throughout the hangar bay as the small crack in the door resulted in any loose object, including the N'Roth being sucked out toward it. A second later, a force field that spanned the length of the hangar bay just behind the door shimmered into existence. Everything fell back down to the floor, including the N'Roth, now unconscious or dead from the fall.

Jessica backed up the shuttle, backing out of the force field. The force field had deployed to re-pressurize the hangar bay and was not designed to stop physical objects from passing through it. She punched it forward again, full throttle, slamming into the outer hull cargo bay door again. This time, the shuttle did not stop. It broke through the door with another loud crash, slowing slightly, then gaining momentum again when it cleared the door. Every single light illuminated on the pilot's console this time, and warning beeps sounded as if the small spacecraft were playing a symphony.

Jessica kept the engines at full power, trying to get as far away from the N'Roth ship as she could. Then she fiddled with the controls until a display of planets popped up on the shuttle's windshield. The display was barely readable, blinking, and phasing in and out with static so she could not read the N'Roth words on the display. She picked a planet at random, the display vanished, and they jumped into lightspeed.

"Okay, we should be good for a while. I'm pretty sure we can't be tracked in lightspeed," Jessica explained. "How is Kyle?" she asked.

"Not good," Yin replied. "He doesn't seem to be able to focus, and he can't think clearly. He's getting sick or something."

"It has to do with that energy blast that hit him in the shoulder," Aurik said.

“We need to take a look at it and dress it,” Sarah said. “I’m sure the N’Roth keep an emergency medical kit or something in here, just in case.”

“Over here,” Yin said as she jumped up, rushing over to the panel under which she had found the N’Roth pistols. “There might be something in one of these panels,” she explained as she began popping off the panels below the uncovered weapons container.

The first panel held food rations, and the second held what they were hoping for. Yin started pulling everything out of the container, handing it to Sarah and Aurik, who inspected each of the supply cases.

“I can’t make heads or tails out of most of this stuff,” Aurik complained.

“These, you could say, are bandages. One side feels a little sticky, and it looks like the clothing they wear,” Sarah explained.

“What about antiseptic?” Jessica asked.

“Well, there are a lot of bottles in here,” Aurik began. “But I can’t make out half of these N’Roth words on them.” He snatched up a couple of the bottles with clear liquid in them, opened the lids, and sniffed the contents. He jerked his head back after inhaling the second. “This has got to be antiseptic of some kind.” He passed it to Sarah, who gently sniffed it.

“Whoa. I think your right,” she said. “It smells like a combination of whiskey and rubbing alcohol.”

“Well, I hope so,” Jessica replied. “Let’s see what happens if we pour it on his wound.”

Yin returned to Kyle’s side and was about to speak when he lifted his head up. “Can someone please stop that infernal noise? It’s killing me!” Nobody missed the irony. Even in pain and sickness, he kept his sense of humor.

“I’ll try,” Jessica replied and went back to manipulating the console.

“Kyle, we are going to try and dress your wound, so it doesn’t get worse, okay,” Yin explained. Kyle nodded.

“I’m not sure it can get any worse,” he replied.

Aurik slowly poured the antiseptic on Kyle’s wound. The moment it touched Kyle’s shoulder, he let out a scream of complete agony, then passed out, his body going limp. Aurik stopped pouring the moment Kyle screamed, and Yin checked for Kyle’s pulse when he fell limp. She nodded to the others in relief when she found it.

“He must have passed out from the pain,” Sarah commented, then noticed Kyle’s shoulder. “Look.” She pointed to Kyle's wound.

The liquid had started bubbling and foaming as it ran down Kyle's wound.

“Well, I think that is a good sign. It looks like it is cleaning his wound,” Aurik said. Without warning, he dumped the rest of the liquid on Kyle’s shoulder. It bubbled and foamed, and when it had finished, the wound did indeed look clean. They bandaged the wound with what they could find in the first aid kit, and Jessica figured out how to turn off all of the warning signals.

She waited until they had finished bandaging Kyle's shoulder before she spoke.

“I’ve got some very bad news,” she said gravely. “All those alarms that were going off, well, they were basically telling us that the hull integrity is failing. The engines are about to give out on us, and we are draining power quickly. We’ll be dead in the water in under fifteen minutes,”

The crew looked at each other solemnly.

“Maybe if we drop out of lightspeed, we can buy ourselves more time, but I don’t know how much,” she added.

“Drop out of lightspeed. With any luck, we will drop out close enough to one of those planets you had on the display,” Aurik ordered.

“Yes sir,” Jessica replied and dropped them out of lightspeed. “Aurik,” she added. “I noticed, when that display of planets came on, there was a list of hundreds of habitable planets, not just those four shown. They were just the closest.”

They dropped out of lightspeed.

“How can that be? We only had a couple of colonized planets when we left,” Aurik replied as he came up beside her. He leaned over her chair, one hand on the console and the other on the back of her chair, and peered out the windshield.

“I know. Something weird is definitely going on here,” she replied as she manipulated the console again. A planet popped up on the display, still blinking and phasing in and out with static.

“Setting a course for that planet,” she reported. Aurik could see the distant stars move sideways as the shuttle altered course.

Jessica worked the console again, and moments later sighed. “Doesn’t look like we saved too much of our power. If I’m reading this right, we only added about ten more minutes. The course change may have had something to do with it,” she informed.

Fifteen minutes later, the shuttle entered the planet’s atmosphere, and immediately the cabin power shut off.

“I thought we had more time,” Aurik commented.

Jessica rapped on the console panel.

“The shuttle diverted power to the hull plating to keep it from getting more damage on our entry, and we are using a lot of power to slow our descent,” she explained

Just then, the console went dark.

“We are draining too much power. Everything is shutting down. Brace yourselves; if we make it to the ground, it won’t be a nice landing,” she reported.

The four braced themselves, Yin trying to keep Kyle from injuring himself as he sat unconscious in his seat.

They stared out the shuttle windshield, helpless, watching the orange flames of the atmosphere collide with the hull of the shuttle.

Then, as quickly as the flames started, they stopped.

Then the hull cracked wide open.

They could feel the cold air rushing in.

The atmosphere was thin, and they had difficulty breathing.

The crack grew wider.

The wind smacked hard against their bare skin and faces.

The ground grew larger and larger before them.

They saw the tops of the trees growing larger.

They watched as their deaths approached.

The treetops came fast.

They felt the pounding of the tips of the treetops as they plummeted into the forest below.

They saw the trees engulf them.

They felt the jerking of the shuttle bouncing against the trees.

The last thing they saw and felt before everything went black was the massive structure in the middle of the forest and a jarring so intense that brought with it a wave of pain.