

## A Matter of Time

*Nancora Orbit*

*Arconan Expeditionary Force*

*Will of our Lady*

It was loud and chaotic in the command center of the ship. The bridge was a bustle of activity, people shouting across crew pits and some just staring at their consoles in disbelief. It was almost laughable how wrong this had all gone, the assault on the blockade of Nancora.

The *Will of our Lady* was taking a beating, and Kordath Bleu just watched from his position on the bridge. He was staring through the holo battle map and out the forward viewports of the ship. The crew, busy as they were, showed little concern for their Proconsul as he clutched the railing before him with one hand, a bottle in his other. Those that knew him better were feeling mounting worry over the battle; the Ryn was well known for being incapable of staring into the void for long.

He was dead to it all. The noise. The chaos. Even the lurching in his stomach as he poured more whiskey into it. His eyes were fixed on the gutted hulk of a Strike-class cruiser, flaming breaches sputtering out as the air fueling them was used up. The *Shadow's Promise* had been ravaged by multiple Dreadnaughts, her shields battered down, and a torpedo had struck her command deck. He'd felt it happen even as the comms from the vessel had cut out.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see a flashing red light from the tactical communications. He'd disconnected when the *Promise* went dark. No doubt the military commanders of Galeres were trying to reestablish connections with him. He ignored it, taking another drink, and tried to stay upright. It didn't matter. Their assault on the blockade was a complete failure. With dead eyes he noted vessels retreating on the battle map, though he couldn't tell if it was coordinated or not.

*Bugger it all. What's the point, now?*

He clutched the railing harder, till his hand began to hurt, and hung his head in despair. He wanted — needed — to sob, but couldn't. The tears wouldn't come. He opened his eyes and stared at the ribbon, purple and worn, wrapped about his left wrist. Kordath tore his gaze away and back to the viewports, watching the ruined ship ahead slowly spiral towards the planet below.

The ribbon had been her gift to him, after months of convincing her she didn't need to hide her hybrid nature. Zujenia. Half-Ryn, daughter of a medic and a Jedi, who'd left New Tython with him days before Pravus had leveled the planet. She'd used the ribbon to hide her Ryn heritage,

tying her tail down to her leg so it couldn't be seen. He'd gotten her to stand taller, and she'd saved him from many of his own demons. He'd given her a ring when he'd proposed to her, and she'd given him the ribbon.

Atyiru was going to marry them, whenever things calmed down. Then the Collective had dropped a turbolift on her.

And now...

He stared at the wreck ahead of him. He'd felt it when the Qel-Droma command was wiped out. No pain, no surprise, just...one moment she was there and the next she was gone. Everything they'd planned, the life they'd wanted together...gone. Gone because bad intelligence and terrible planning had led the Clan to assault a so-called stronghold world. Fortress world would have been more appropriate.

He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking and still unable to let the tears flow. Nothing mattered. All he could see were a pair of amber eyes, a smiling face, wild white hair and tanned skin with a speckling of blue throughout. Gods, he'd loved her. And he'd never deserved her. Now she was gone. She was still alive, and she was gone. His eyes opened again, and he glared at the map. It would be so easy to order the *Lady* to ram a Dreadnaught, end it all and cover the escape of the fleet.

Distant screeches of alarms, the lights of the bridge changing to red flashes, and a young Lieutenant in a blood-stained uniform yelling in his ear brought him back into the moment.

"—die, Sir! Please! Give the order to abandon ship!"

"Wha, huh?"

"Multiple hull breaches, Sir, the *Lady* is going down. Please, please issue the order to abandon ship, my Lord."

"Where tha' 'ell is tha Captain, mate?"

"Dead, Sir, as is the Executive Officer and most of the senior crew. Chain of command is broken. I think I'm the highest ranked officer left on the bridge, Sir."

Kordath stared at the map again, at the Dreadnaught that was closest, his eyes wandering towards the vessel that was Zujenia's grave. He began to give the order, the one that would set the course and let him join her, when golden eyes rose, unbidden, in his mind. Bleu's eyes closed, and he saw little Shay'Ira, barely a year old. Shay, who'd just lost the woman who'd decided to be her mother. Shay, who was innocent and alone back on Selen, and would have no one if he did this.

"Give the order," he rasped, "to abandon ship, Captain."

"Captain?"

"Yer tha highest ranked, yeah? Congratulations," muttered the Ryn, turning away from the viewport finally. Evacuation orders could be heard throughout the ship, and personnel swarmed from the crew pits, heading for escape pods. He followed suit, stepping past the toppled captain's chair and the surprised-looking, uniformed corpse sprawled next to it.

Something felt wrong, though, and the Proconsul looked back to see the Lieutenant standing, hands clasped at the small of his back, staring out the forward viewport.

"Oi, mate, ya comin'?"

The man didn't reply, and Kord sighed, running a hand through his hair. The ship bucked as it took more fire, and he realized time was running short.

"Bloody stupid," he grumbled, walking back up to where the man had stationed himself. "Come on. This whole place is gonna blow, yeah?"

"Said it yourself, my Lord. I'm the captain now. The captain goes down with his ship," stated the officer, a quaver in his voice despite his straight back and raised chin.

*Of all tha bloody fool things...he's practically a kid.*

Kordath stared at the man and stepped back, upending his bottle and swallowing the last of his whiskey. Turning it about in his grasp, he slammed it across the back of the officer's head, dropping him to the deck with a grunt. As he crouched to gather the man up, throwing the unconscious officer's arm over his shoulders, he looked out the viewport one last time. The *Shadow's Promise* was receding towards the planet below, and he felt his throat tighten.

"I'll see ya again, luv. t's only a matter o' time. Fer now...I gotta go home, for Shay. I'll make sure she knows how amazin' her mum really was, the mum that chose her. I'll see ya again, and I'll try not ta hurry. I love you, Zuj, and I'll do me best not ta get meself killed before it's time," he whispered.

When he slumped into the escape pod after strapping in his unconscious companion, he finally felt the tears come. He let them. He didn't fight it as the pod fired away from the broken vessel.