

# **To Dance With Death**

*From the Log of Lt. Commander Tamsin McCabe  
SD 8819.01*

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*A bit of fan-fic I wrote, well, check the Star Date: 1988. It was a Trek fandom writing group, but not 'TV Trek' per se. More like what else was happening in the Federation... and it was all lots of fun.*

*The group requested we write an opening log explaining how our characters arrived on the Endeavor... this is Tamsin and Kyne's first story...*

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The woman in the fighter pilot's uniform was small and slender compared to the men around her. Yet her shoulders were straight with the confidence that comes from command. As she spoke, her dark gaze moved from face to face, adding a nod or a half-smile to her words.

"You have it, then? A double-V formation? On my mark as we break."

Five heads nodded at the commander of the *Dauntless's* Blue Squadron.

"White Squadron will ride shot-gun, mirroring our movements." She tapped at the com badge on her uniform. "You got that, Rho'kharis? We're counting on you to protect our asses out there."

"Got it, Mac," drawled a deep voice from another fighter bay. "That is, if you can keep from bumping into each—"

"Don't be smart," the woman called Mac cut in. "McCabe out." She snatched her helmet from the servo-stairs. She wrapped her long auburn braid around her head, then shoved the helmet on. She activated the com-link. "Gentlemen, let's make tracks. We've got work to do."

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Helthos loomed large and grey against the darkness of space. Tamsin McCabe tapped lightly at the fuel mixture control on her fighter as her eyes darted from scanners to sensors and back out to Helthos again. They'd be launching their fleet shortly, now. Fleet Intelligence had shown the Helthosians to have some fairly decent attack craft. 'Stingers', they called them. The name was unimportant to McCabe. What they could do was not.

"Blue Leader to White Leader," she said into the helmet's mike.

"White Leader," came back the familiar voice. "You're not holding it bad for amateurs."

"Stuff it, Rho'kharis. Talk to me about what your sensors are picking up."

"A good time to be had by all, is my guess. Why?"

McCabe frowned at nothing in particular. "Don't know. I've got something glitchy..."

wait. No, now it's gone."

"Where?" Rho'kharis's voice held a note of concern.

"Was about 11 o'clock. Gone now."

"Consider us to be notified. I'll spread the word. Rho'kharis out."

"McCabe out." She waited a moment. "Blue leader to Blue One."

"Blue One, Mac. What's up?"

"Not sure, Marcus. You got anything at all at 11 o'clock?"

"Yeah." The answer came back quickly. "But I could cancel it if your old man won't come lookin' for us, sugar."

"—Marcus!" she said in mock indignation.

"Okay, okay, Mac. You can't kill a dude for tryin'." There was a slight pause. McCabe could hear the man mumbling to himself. "Nope, doll. Nothin' I can put my fingers on. Fritz, maybe. Think these babies're overdue for service."

"Fritz? You've got fritz? At eleven?"

"Umm, sort of more like nine-thirty. No. It's gone. Forget it, Tamsin. It's just fritz."

"Forget, my ass," she said as the transmission clicked off. She scanned the instruments.

Suddenly a scream sounded in her ears. Her name. A warning. She banked the fighter just as her eyes and her sensors confirmed Blue Two and Four were gone.

Her hands moved quickly over the controls. "Damn it, Blue One! Do you copy? What the hell—?"

Something roared by her, so close her instruments momentarily maxed out. She felt her ship shudder as she forced the fighter back into an arc.

"Blue One!" she repeated.

"One here!" The usual jovial Marcus sounded strained. "Damn it t'hell 'n back! Somethin' got Finar. I didn't see—"

"Fritz, gods damn it, Marcus. Something's shielding itself as fritzing interference!" She went to open channel and called her remaining squad back into formation. Another transmission segued in as she finished.

"White Leader to Blue Leader."

"Ky! Did you see anything?"

"Negative, Blue Leader." Kyne Rho'kharis's voice was suddenly hard, professional. The Alisian had over three thousand hours in small attack craft, most of it in combat as a fighter squadron captain. The Ekinus System had had more

than it's share of wars. And Kyne Rho'kharis had been bred for just that environment. "But the *Dauntless's* picking up a cloaking residue— Wait. Have confirmation on number and heading. Feeding coordinates to you. Now."

Tamsin scanned the data on her screen. "Shit. Can we effect a scan-net tie in?"

"Affirmative, Blue Leader."

Tamsin nodded and went to open channel again. "Blue Squadron. Go to intership scan-net with White Squadron. Now." The computers of ten fighters suddenly merged, strengthening their scanning fields. A chattering of voices followed.

She switched back to White Leader. "Ky. I want to use a Pandora's Box formation."

"We've got ten," he reminded her. "That's only two for flank."

"It'll have to do."

"I'll initiate."

"At will, Lieutenant." She relayed the information to her fighters.

The small attack ships broke from their V-formation and drifted, ballet-like, into the new arrangement.

"Blue Leader, this is Blue Five. I've got ten, no, a dozen unidentified ships coming in at four o'clock. Real ones, Mac. Not fritz. I can see these."

"Got 'em," she confirmed. "White Leader?"

"Affirmative, Blue."

She drew in a deep breath. "Let's take 'em."

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Later, she would reflect that they were hopelessly outnumbered. There was nothing she could've done but what she did: fight until there was no more fight left in her. And later, too, she would know that it was the destruction of the *Dauntless*— one of the Fleet's best and her home for the past two years— that wrenched all their attentions from the situation at hand, even if only for a moment.

But that moment had been critical. Marcus and the rest of Blue were destroyed. Only Kyne and S'haviihr remained of White. She moved to regroup with them, choking on anger and tears. And suddenly control of her ship was wrenched from her hands. Her fighter's shields buckled under the impact of enemy fire.

She screamed, hearing Kyne's voice in her ears, calling her name. Her ship tumbled ass-over-teakettle; sparks flashed from her instrument panel. She was thrown around the cockpit, in spite of her safety harness.

"Mac!" Rho'kharis's voice was raw in her ears. "Use your manual stabilizers! Mac! The manual stabilizers!"

"I— can't—reach—!"

"You can! Damn it, girl, use them!"

"I—" She lashed out with her arm. It was whipped against a bulkhead by the force of the ship. Something tore her suit and into her skin.

"The stabilizers!" Rho'kharis shouted.

She was breathing rapidly, on the verge of hyperventilating. Her mouth tasted of blood and something bitter and she squeezed her eyes shut as another explosion tore through the cockpit. Warning sirens blared.

*"Attitude Control has Failed. Attitude Control has Failed. Please institute Emergency Procedures. Ship's structural integrity is threatened."*

"Tam-sin!"

"Oh, hell." She tore at her safety harness, fumbling for the release catch. She pitched violently forward, grabbing for the manual stabilizer bar as she did, forcing it downwards. The lever snapped into position, breaking off in her hands. She was still clutching the metal tube when she was slammed onto her back against the control panel. Her helmet was wrenched from her head.

The small fighter's metal bulkheading groaned in protest.

*"Attitude Control has Failed. Please insitute Emergency Procedures. Ship's structural integrity now at maximum stress levels. Attitude Control..."*

Something was buzzing in her ears. It bothered her. Her hand moved, as if through molasses, to swat it away. It only buzzed louder.

"Fuck it," she murmured. She blinked her eyes open and found she was lying on her back, staring down into the pilot's seat. She blinked again.

"Tamsin! Tamsin, can you hear me? Tamsin, do you copy?" continued the buzzing noise.

Slowly, she moved her arm, or what she thought was her arm, towards her head, towards the black band that sat on her auburn hair like a halo. She brought the com mike back into position.

"Ky?" she croaked.

The man made a sound that was a cross between a curse and a prayer. "McCabe, are you all right?"

She tried to move her head around, inspecting the cockpit. Everything was dark, her instruments dead. "Yeah, I think so. My shoulder's killing me, though." She eased her face to the right, wincing as she did so, and saw the faint glimmer of Rho'kharis's fighter beside her own. She wanted to wave but something was keeping her arm from doing so.

She fought back an urge to giggle.

"McCabe?"

"Huh?"

"McCabe, listen to me. You've got to get back down into the seat. Do you think you can do that?"

"Huh?" She shifted her body. "Yeah."

"Okay. You move down into the seat and strap yourself in."

She found her feet worked better than her hands. She floated, crab-like, in the direction of the pilot's seat. It seemed to take hours. She was so tired. Ky's voice kept waking her up, urging her to move again.

"It's cold," she complained at one point.

"I know, love. I know." His voice surprisingly gentle. "Your enviro-program's down, along with other things. Just keep moving."

She sighed. "Ky, where's Alastair?" Her brother would know what to do, know why it's so cold. She remembered the time she had gone mountain climbing with Alastair, when he'd been on break from the Seminary. He'd talked about a friend he'd made there, an instructor. He'd brought his new friend with him and introduced the tall, broad-shouldered man as 'Captain' Rho'kharis. A widower, he'd told his sister later when, she'd asked 'what the hell was up his ass'. Meaning, of course, the taciturn stranger and not her loveable Alastair.

Widower. It was a death word. It hung in her mind, heavy and cold.

"Tamsin!"

"Huh? Yeah. I'm, I'm almost there." She groped for the armrests, her own arms screaming in complaint. "It's broken."

"What?"

"The harness. Ripped. Ky, I'm so tired. Tell Alastair I don't want to climb anymore today."

"Weave yourself into the harness, Tamsin. Do you hear me? Weave yourself in. Like you did on Iceborn. Remember? Weave yourself in."

She remembered. It was the first time she and that man Rho'kharis had gone climbing alone. She was supposed to have gone with Alastair but when she'd arrived at the Seminary, only Rho'kharis was waiting, skimmer humming, gear at his feet. She'd bit back a sigh of disappointment. She didn't like the man. Didn't like his penetrating gaze, his tense — and infrequent — smile. She always felt as if he were tolerating her, humoring her, for Alastair's sake.

What in the Seven Hells did she want with an ex-mercenary and ex-commando captain who wanted to be a monk?

It'd been a bad climb, raining most of the way. Slippery going. Plateaus like seas.

On the second night they'd made camp on a narrow ledge. A small storm had washed their supplies downhill, but not so far that she couldn't reach them if she rigged up a harness and pulley to lower herself down. Rho'kharis had gone in search of dry firewood. No sense in waiting for him to get back. No sense in waiting for him to give her that inscrutable gaze of his, reminding her she'd been careless in her placement of her gear. And she, a Fleet Lieutenant!

But the rope had slipped, and she'd flailed helplessly for one breathless moment. Then her harness snagged on an outcropping of bushes and thorns. Saving her life. She was still struggling with her situation when she heard a deep voice rasp her name out into the wind and the darkness.

She'd leaned backward to try to see him, above. And the harness had broken completely. She'd hung only with bare hands.

Below her was a drop of three hundred feet into a rushing, swollen river.

She'd learned then, as Kyne Rho'kharis would put it, to "use what she had." Though this first time it had been all his idea. All his instructions. Starting with first getting her toe into what was left of her harness.

By the time he had rappelled down beside her, she was firmly, if not comically, ensconced in the webbing. "Trussed like a gavin-hen", were the words that had come to mind then.

But Rho'kharis hadn't been laughing, hadn't said a word. Until he had pulled her safely up the side of the cliff and onto the plateau. And then it was his mouth coming down hard on hers, his arms crushing her against him that had said it all.

All except the fact he'd asked Alastair not to accompany them on the climb. She had found that out months later from her brother, when he was less than sober.

"Tamsin!" There was that voice, again.

"I'm in, Cap!" she chirped.

She heard a sigh. "Tamsin, listen to me. Your ship's been damaged; stabilizers and attitude control gone. There's a rescue team on the way out. From the *Endeavor*. In order to stabilize your ship, I'm going to come up underneath you so we can attach a tow. But you're going to have to do some controlling work yourself, all right? Do the port and starboard auxiliary thrusters still show power?"

Auxiliary thrusters? What in hell were auxiliary thrusters doing on the side of a mountain? Damn that Rho'kharis!

"Tamsin, reach out and take control of the ship."

If you say so, she thought. Surprise crossed her features when she felt the hard, cold plasteel of the control panel hit her hands. "I'll be damned."

"What? Tamsin, can you see the aux-thruster panel on your left?"

"Uh-huh."

"Good. Now listen to me. Do everything I say..."

"Whatever." Her mind felt fuzzy again but she strained, listening. This was Kyne Rho'kharis. Alastair's friend. Ex-mercenary who wanted to be a monk. But he did kiss pretty damn well...

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Rho'kharis eased his fighter closer, powering down until they were almost touching. He kept talking to her, reassuring her, hearing the confusion in her voice and trying not to let his own reflect the panic he was feeling. If he lost her... He banished the thought.

There was a small thunk as he locked the grappling hook onto the other fighter's underside. Quickly, he fed in the interface requirements, feeding power to her damaged engine, data to her malfunctioning systems. Tamsin's ship's engines misfired, once, twice and to those watching from the bridge of the Endeavor it probably looked like the two fighters were embracing, executing a bizarre space ballet.

Tamsin's ship finally leveled out, though her port thruster still sputtered weakly.

"*Endeavor*, this is Rho'kharis. We'll accept that tractor tow now. With our thanks. But keep your speed down. I don't know how much more she can take." He didn't know how much more he could take. He'd almost lost her.

"That's affirmative, Lieutenant. Tractor commencing now."

Rho'kharis felt the slight jerk and held his breath for a moment.

"Lieutenant, this is the *Endeavor*. Will you require medical attention?"

"*Endeavor*, this is Rho'kharis. That's an affirmative. The best medical you've got. Hear me? The best damned medical you've got."

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