

Fallen Arrow

Book II of The Kalelah Series

By
Marshall Ross

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Trin piloted the little transport back to the hole it bore earlier in the sediment that covered the *Kalelah*. With the giant ship still buried and the guide crew idled by the discovery that the time for guiding the population on the surface had long since passed, their work over before it ever really began, there'd been no need for dock control. Trin was able to initiate the parking sequence without communications with Command. On a human level, he was flying below the radar. No person, at least, knew the transport had ever left the ship.

The *Kalelah*, though, was a different matter. She and the little transport were inseparable, leashed together by a digital frequency that kept mother in constant touch with her child. A careful record of where the transport had gone these last three hours, and with whom, was already in the *Kalelah*'s database. A security team could find it in minutes. Trin was betting on his ability to find it even faster.

He guided the little craft through the *Kalelah*'s mostly dark airlock. He hovered while the outer doors shut, the lock drained, and the doors to the ports proper opened. The rows of berths and bays were even darker and seemed completely deserted. Not even a maintenance person in sight. *You're a lucky fuck.*

But he knew this was the easiest part of what lay before them. While he was pretty confident his own empty post might not have been too keenly felt for so short a period of time,

he knew Captain Argen's and Chief Ganet's absences were sure to be noticed. They'd have pushed a nervous question throughout the CC. And then there was Sarah, for whom no good explanation existed.

She was quiet the entire way down from the surface to the ship, her movements small, tight, like a bird on the wrong tree. When Trin put the transport into its bay, she let out a breath.

"It's okay. We made it," he said.

"So far." She straightened her shoulders a touch. "But it's not going to work, you know."

"It has to work. If Laird starts the Correction, there won't be any stopping it."

"You don't know us. What Wilson and Ganet are trying to do . . . people have tried forever. It's never worked."

"It's probably hard for you to grasp what a Correction is all about. We fail and there'll be no safe place, nowhere to hide. Everyone dies. Everyone and everything."

"Everyone's died before. Lots of times."

There was a gloomy confidence in her voice that told him not to interrupt her with the obvious: her own existence was a pretty convincing argument against whatever point she was trying to make.

"In grad school, I saw pictures of dig sites where the only way to explain all the human bones being found in the same layer of sediment was war. Babies, boys, girls, men, and women, all dead at once. There were thin, sharpened blades of rock next to neck bones. There were round rocks next to skulls. Those people didn't know a world any bigger than what they could walk in a day's time. Two thousand dead would have been the entire universe to them. It would have been everyone. And massacres like that happened over and over. They still happen. There's a lot of people like Riley in the world."

"You're not like Riley."

"We're all a little like Riley."

He looked at her and said nothing. This wasn't the first time since he'd met her that Trin had found himself just looking at her, nearly stunned by her beauty, saying nothing. His fascination shamed him. The direness of the situation should have made noticing her in this way entirely irresponsible, or even impossible, but he couldn't help it. And why? He could name a dozen women with blonde hair like hers—Cyler, for one. And the ship was full of women with her long legs, her seemingly perfect breasts, and her full lips. But this woman had a presence

he'd never seen before. A force both familiar and foreign. It hit him the instant he saw her on the deck of the *Lewis*. She'd been watching the three of them walk down the transport's ladder, he'd been last behind Ganet with Argen in the lead. The only thing that should have been on his mind was first contact. After all, it had never happened before, at least not that he'd ever been told. Contact was strictly forbidden on E-check. Or ever, actually.

Guiding never happened directly; it was always from a distance, invisible, untraceable. But all he could see as he made his way down the ladder to the most historic moment in Service history was her. He'd been nervous. Argen was nervous. Ganet was beyond nervous. But she'd seemed more interested than nervous. He could sense it from up on the ladder. Her hair was blowing wildly in the stiff breeze, but she hadn't seemed to care. She never once reached up to smooth it or contain it. And of all the faces he saw looking up at him those few hours ago, hers was the only welcoming face. She was the only one to look at them without even a hint of judgment or panic. Even when Riley first challenged the captain, she stayed open. That was why he picked her. Wasn't it?

Now, getting ready to bring her into his world, he wondered what she'd be like if the glitch that had forced the *Kalelah* to stay in Skip sleep too long hadn't happened. What if the 120,000 years the population had developed on their own had been guided as they were designed to be? Would she still be as strangely compelling? Would he still be fighting the urge to touch her, to move in slowly and kiss her neck? Or would she be just another beautiful woman?

He turned and reached back behind the second seat and twisted the handle of a small panel on the side of the transport's cabin.

She looked out the ship's big front glass to the docking bay surrounding the transport. "Can I smoke here?"

"Smoke?"

"Yeah, is it okay to smoke here? Or is that not cool?"

"Of course it's not cool. Smoke would be hot. Warm at least. A vapor, though, that can be cold. What are you talking about?" he said, still fiddling with the handle.

"Never mind. Forget it."

Trin offered a small shrug as an apology and returned his attention to the cabin wall. He had the little panel off now, revealing a small storage compartment. He reached in and pulled out a jumpsuit of low rank.

“You need to put this on.”

“Here?”

“You can’t leave this transport in those clothes. You’ll draw attention to yourself too soon.”

She took the jumpsuit. “Beige? This is a bad color for me. It’s a bad color for everybody. And it looks big.”

“It’ll get you to our first stop. The jumpsuit is the least of our problems.”

“What’s the most?” she asked, smelling the jumpsuit and crinkling her nose.

“Your cloud.”

“My cloud?”

“Yours is fucked.”

“What, exactly, is my cloud? And why is it fucked?”

“Every complex being is surrounded by a veil of viruses and bacteria. A microbe cloud. And each is more unique than a fingerprint or even a pupil. Yours won’t be recognized, it won’t scan. That’ll be a problem.”

“When will it be a problem?” She held a hand up in the light to examine it.

“Sooner than we want.”

“Great. Okay, turn around.”

“Why?”

“I’m not changing my clothes in front of you.”

“Why not?”

“Because people don’t do that.”

“Of course they do.”

“Not women in front of men. Turn around. Please.”

He did as she asked. But with the protective-alloy wool on the outside of the transport’s windows back in place, the inside of the glass was nearly as reflective as a mirror. He could see her almost as clearly as if he hadn’t turned at all. God, she was beautiful. But she was serious about him giving her some kind of privacy. Reluctantly, he turned his head just enough to respect her wishes and waited for the all clear. Could another woman have made him do that? He didn’t think so.

When she was ready, they opened the lower hatch and walked down the laddered stairs to the dock's main concourse. Sarah looked up at the metal ceiling with its graceful arches and its soft lighting and its impossible height.

"Jesus Christ."

"Don't talk out here. You need a language dose first. And don't gawk at everything like it's the first time you're seeing it."

"Well, it's my first time on an alien spaceship, so, you know, manage your expectations, okay?"

"Don't think of it that way. As alien."

"Oh, right. It's my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandma's house. I just didn't recognize the curtains."

"And this is just the dock. When we leave this area, things will look stranger still. Can you stay calm?"

She took a deep breath and let it out. "I'll be cool."

He raised an eyebrow. "I have nothing else for you to wear right now. Can you stay calm?"

She managed a small smile. "Yes."

The two walked another fifty yards to the large door that would take them to the lower level of Stem Six. He waved his hand across the glass in the door, leaving small, glowing, white dots where flora sensors did their work. The dots quickly turned green, and the door slid left and the lower stem of Leaf Six opened up before them. Trin walked quickly ahead.

But Sarah moved slowly, taking just two steps past the threshold before stopping. The stem was not particularly crowded, but like every thoroughfare in the *Kalelah*, it was a city unto itself. Its scale dwarfed that of the dock and its own massive concourse. As Sarah looked around, her eyes fluttered, and she dropped to her knees and then gently fell to her side.

Trin ran back, bent down, put one arm under her head, and lightly slapped her cheek. Her eyes opened slowly, reluctantly, and as she was about to speak, a voice called out.

"Is she hurt?"

"She's fine," Trin quickly called over his shoulder. "Just hungry I think. Sir."

A gray-haired woman in a lieutenant's jumpsuit knelt down next to Trin to get a closer look. She put her hand on Sarah's forehead. "She's cold."

“Like I said. Probably hungry.”

“How are you feeling, Initiate?” the woman asked. “Can you stand?”

Sarah looked at the woman with groggy eyes and brushed her fingers across the woman’s collar. “Such a pretty color.”

The lieutenant looked at Trin, confused, and then back to Sarah. “What did you say, dear?”

“Maybe she shouldn’t talk right now,” said Trin. “I’ll get us a table over there and some food.”

“Are you sure? That was strange. I’ve never heard sounds like that. She’s probably delirious.”

“She’s done this before. She gets some food and she’s better. Thank you, Lieutenant, very kind of you to stop. I promise to watch her.”

“All right, Analyst,” the woman said as she got back on her feet. “You do that. As I’m sure you know, this Waking was unusually deadly. If she doesn’t snap back quickly, you get her to a hospital.”

“Yes, sir. And thank you.”

Trin got her on her feet and walked them both slowly to a nearby café. “I’m going to get you something to drink. Can you sit straight?”

“I think so.”

“Shit, that was bad. Don’t make eye contact with anyone and, please, don’t speak. That lieutenant could have fucked this whole thing.”

“What thing? What is this plan of yours? I can’t possibly blend into . . .” She looked around her. “This.”

“That’s the plan. Temporarily, anyway.”

“I don’t get it.”

“When the time is right, your job is to be yourself.”

“That sounds like a stupid plan.”

“It’s the one we’ve got.”

“Jesus.”

“You’re going to have to stop saying that.”

“I thought you said be yourself.”

Trin tapped a triangular piece of glass embedded in the left sleeve of his suit and a small array of numbers and graphics floated between them. He touched several of the digits and the float collapsed and disappeared.

“What did you just do?”

“I reached out to a friend. She can help us for a bit while you dose.”

“How do you know she’ll be on our side?”

“She’ll be on my side.”

“Oh.”

Their eyes met just briefly.

