

Crash

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Featured pairings: Ivanova/Starbuck

A.S.S Story codes: ff

Story rating: R

When the sun sank beneath the treetops and darkness covered the camp, Susan Ivanova inched close enough to Kara that only the cloth of their respective uniforms separated their skins. Kara put an arm around her shoulders.

"It'll be all right," Kara Thrace said. "The sun will rise in the morning, and there'll be light again."

The fire crackled in front of them. Its smell of smoke mixed with the dry, resinous smells of the pine forest around them.

"There's something out there, in the dark," Susan said.

As if on cue, something roared like a wounded beast in the distance.

"Hear?" Susan said. "It's coming closer."

"It won't come close as long as the fire burns," Kara said. "It doesn't like the light."

Susan closed her eyes and rested her head against Kara's shoulder. The solid presence of the other woman soothed her fears, somewhat.

"Hungry?" Kara said.

"A bit," Susan admitted. "How are we doing for food?"

"There's still plenty. The emergency kit in your ship was pretty well stocked. Could've done with some whiskey and cigars, though."

Susan smiled. "I'm afraid those are officially frowned upon by Earthforce."

She felt Kara slowly shake her head.

"That's the military for you," she said. "Always trying to decide what's best for you."

"So the Colonial Fleet doesn't have booze and smokes in their emergency kits either?"

Kara was silent for so long that Susan was just about to repeat the question when she finally answered.

"Well, lately we haven't had much in the way of emergency kits at all," she said. Her voice was distant and sad. "They all got taken away for the museum conversion."

Susan stroked Kara's thigh. Just to show she was there, to provide comfort by closeness when there were no words. Kara obviously took it a little differently, for the arm around Susan's shoulders moved down a bit and its hand ended up covering her breast.

Not that she minded. At all.

"It's strange," she said. "We've only met a little while ago, but it feels like I've known you for ages."

"Do you want to go to bed?" Kara whispered into Susan's hair.

Susan grunted her assent. Without letting go of each other, they moved into the tent and undressed. It would've taken a lot less time if they'd done it separately, of course, but where would the fun have been in that?

Later, as Susan screamed her pleasure into the night, the sky briefly flashed a red and black cloudscape, and the thing in the darkness roared.

The fire crackled and danced as darkness fell. Susan pulled her uniform jacket more firmly closed, to keep the chill night air out. The Captain's insignia on her shoulders glinted in the firelight. Kara sat down next to her.

"Hungry?" she said.

Susan shook her head. She wasn't the least bit hungry, in spite of spending all day doing...

She frowned. Doing what?

"Kara?" she said.

"Yeah?" the Colonial fighter pilot said.

"What did we do all day today?"

"What do you mean what did we do?" Kara said. "We..."

Her voice trailed off.

"You can't remember either, can you?" Susan said.

"I guess we drank too much last night," Kara said. "Spent the day hung over. I've done that lots of times, back on Caprica."

"We don't have anything to get drunk from," Susan said. "We talked about that last night."

"Oh," Kara said. "Yeah. I remember now."

Their camp was set up at the side of a clearing in the vast, dark forest. It was covered with knee-high dry grass, and most of it slanted downwards to where a small stream ran.

"So then what *did* we do all day?" Kara said.

"I can't even remember if there *was* a day," Susan said.

"Come on," Kara said. "There must've been a day. How could there not have been a day? The sun just set, we both saw that."

"I know," Susan said. "I just don't remember the day, that's all."

Kara took a piece of wood from the pile next to them and threw onto the fire.

Out in the darkness, the thing howled.

"It's getting closer," Susan said.

Kara didn't say anything. Instead, she moved closer to Susan and took her into her arms. Eventually, they moved into the tent.

Susan awoke with a start, gasping and sweaty.

She had been dreaming. A confused, incoherent dream. No story, no sense of continuity or logic. Just images. A sky full of billowing red and black, a horrible noise of tearing metal and the smell of burning plastic. For a moment or two, the smoke from the camp fire smelled like plastic rather than wood.

The thing bellowed again, still closer.

"Sleep well?" Kara said. She was sitting right next to Susan. The sun was just inching down below the treetops.

Susan frowned.

"How did I get here?" she said.

"You walked?" Kara said. "Or did you mean in a larger sense? If so, we crashed here, remember?"

"I don't remember crashing," Susan said. "I vaguely remember being on the bridge of the Titans, and my XO saying something about a sensor blip approaching insanely fast. After that, nothing until I woke up here."

Kara was silent for a while.

"Do you think we're dead?" she said. "That this is some kind of afterlife?"

This time, the roar was just outside the circle of light thrown by the fire, and for a brief moment Susan thought she saw a red light oscillating back and forth in the dark.

"No," she said. "This is something else."

"I think I remember this place," Kara said. "It looks like a clearing near my grandfather's cottage north of St. Petersburg."

Susan blinked.

"Kara," she said. "You have no grandfather in Russia. You don't even have any relatives on *Earth*."

Kara frowned.

"Yeah," she said. "Of course. I don't know why I said that."

"That," Susan said, "was *my* memory."

Kara looked at her.

"I remember," Susan went on, "standing outside the council building in Caprica City. It's opening day, and there are orchestras playing. I've just lost my grip on the string of my balloon. I can see it float higher and higher up, and I want to go after it."

"I was five years old then," Kara said. "After that, I always wanted to go where that balloon had gone. *Susan, what's happening to us?*"

The sky flashed red and black. For a moment, the entire forest was burning. The thing in the darkness' scream filled the world.

"Hold me," Susan whispered. "Touch me. Help me forget. Please?"

Kara bent down to kiss her. Soon, they began to undress each other and for a time the world ceased to matter.

The flames crackled and jumped.

"Are you hungry?" Kara said. She was, as always, sitting next to Susan.

"No," Susan said. She was staring into the fire. The burning wood looked like torn-up metal and broken circuit boards. When she wasn't looking directly at it, the forest surrounding the clearing seemed to be scorched bulkheads.

"When was the last time you ate?" Kara said.

"I don't know."

"Want to know something?"

"What?"

"The emergency rations box is still full. We haven't eaten anything since we got here."

Susan frowned at her.

"Don't be silly," she said. "I remember eating several times here."

"Yet the box still holds a full set of twenty-eight painstakingly conserved meals. Count them if you like."

"Kara," Susan said.

"Yes?"

"What's the last thing you remember before waking up here?"

The flames crackled.

"I don't remember very clearly," Kara said.

"But you remember something?"

"I was in the Cylon raider we'd captured and repaired. I'd just activated its hyper-drive, headed for Caprica. It didn't look like hyperjumps usually do. It was all black and red and swirly and stuff, and in the distance I saw something angular coming closer really fast."

The thing in the darkness not only roared, but also cracked trees and shook the ground. It was close, much too close for comfort. Susan could see where it was, by the toppling pines.

"Your ship," she said. "It was partly alive, wasn't it? I dimly remember it being all red and gooey inside."

"Yes," Kara said. "How can you remember that? How can you have my memories? How can I have yours?"

Susan took Kara's hand, held it so hard it almost hurt.

"I think we're about to die," she said. "And these are just the moments before."

Kara looked towards the dark forest. The light from the fire flickered against the deep green needles of the pines, and somehow it only served to make the darkness deeper.

"The thing out there?" she asked. "Is it going to get us?"

Susan shook her head. "It just wants to live too."

Kara frowned. "What?"

"I think it's your ship," Susan said. "The living part of it."

Kara looked towards the sounds.

"But it was all built into the ship," she said. "How could it move about in a forest?"

In the fire, Susan could see a storm of shattered glass being torn away by air escaping into vacuum.

"I'm scared," she said. "I don't want to die."

"Me neither," Kara said. "So let's not."

Susan was staring into the fire.

"But it's too late," she said. "I can see it happening. The ships torn apart."

"See it how? I don't see anything but this place."

"It's hyperspace," Susan said. "It amplifies psi. Bester told us once, long ago. I'm a weak telepath, and sometimes I get precog flashes. I must've reached out to you and your ship, when I saw what was going to happen."

"So what's this place, then? All in your mind?"

Susan nodded.

"So we're not dead yet. Which means we're not living on real time. This is slower. Dream time."

"I guess," Susan said. "Doesn't matter much, does it? I wonder if we'll feel it when we get torn to pieces."

Kara stood up. Susan had to tilt her head far back to be able to look her in the face. The fire lit her redly from below, turning her face into a mask from Hell.

"What kind of shit warrior are you anyway?" Kara said.

"What?" Susan said.

"I don't know about you or your people," Kara said. "But *I* don't give up until I actually *am* dead."

Susan shook her head.

"But there's no point," she said. "I've seen the crash. It's right there in the fire."

"I don't care," Kara said. "I'm just a pilot. I don't do strategy. I don't think. I shoot what they tell me to shoot, and I stay alive in between. That's it. And I'm not dead yet, so I'll keep trying to stay that way."

She turned and walked towards the edge of the forest.

"Wait!" Susan cried. "Where are you going?"

Already she could hardly make Kara out against the dark backdrop of the trees. Words wafted weakly back to her, as if echoing from a great distance.

"I'm going to see a spaceship about a crash."

Susan got up from where she was sitting.

"Wait!" she screamed. "You can't go alone! If I lose contact with you it'll all be over, damn you!"

She started running in the direction Kara had left.

The fire roared. The things burning in it didn't look remotely like wood any more. There were machine parts, electronics and even a skull. Susan wondered if it was her own or someone else's.

"I walked off," Kara said. Again, she was sitting next to Susan.

"Yes," Susan said. "That doesn't work. I'm making all this up, remember? This camp is all that exists. If you walk away, all that happens is that we lose telepathic contact. I think."

"I wanted to try to talk to the ship," Kara said.

"About what?"

"Turning. Firing weapons. Self-destructing. Doing *something*."

The forest was as silent as the void between stars.

"So talk," Susan said.

"But it's not..."

Kara's protest died halfway through. On the other side of the fire, something sat. Or stood. Or just was.

It was dark, a deep solid cloud of darkness. Somewhere near its middle, a red light moved back and forth.

"Ship?" Kara said.

"It doesn't know what it looks like," Susan said. "Its mind is very strange. I can't make any sense out of it. I'm surprised I can contact it at all."

"Can it hear me?" Kara said.

"Here, it can," Susan said.

Kara got up and walked around the fire. She reached out a hand and tried to touch the darkness.

"Hey," she said. "You don't want to die, do you?"

Somehow, they both just knew that the dark thing had said no.

"So turn," Kara said. "Maneuver out of the way."

The thing that had no mouth roared.

"It can't," Susan said. "I think it's been crippled."

"Oh," Kara said. "Of course. We cut its control connections to install our own."

"Then you can turn?" Susan said.

Kara shook her head. "I'm too slow. By the time I find the right connection, we'll already have crashed."

Susan looked at the darkness.

"It knows the connections," she said. "It may not know what it looks like, but it knows its own insides very well."

"So what?" Kara said. "It can repair itself after we get blown to bits?"

"No," Susan said. "But it can use *your* body to nudge the right place."

Kara took a step back from the darkness.

"My body?" she said, and for the duration of a blink of an eye her clothes weren't there.

"It could be our only chance," Susan said. "And even if time moves more slowly here, I don't think we have very much of it left."

"I guess not," Kara said. "And it's kind of karmic, isn't it? I'm riding inside its body and it's using mine."

She reached out a hand to the dark.

"All right," she said. "Here we go."

"Wait!" Susan said. She got up and walked around the fire. She put her hands on Kara's shoulders.

"One way or another, I think this is goodbye," she said. "So let's say it properly."

"And how is that?"

Susan pulled the taller woman down until their lips met. She kissed her deeply and

hard, and while they kissed her hands roamed over all the parts of Kara she could reach. Just when Kara's hands started to respond in kind, Susan broke the kiss and stepped out of reach.

"There," she said. "Now you have a reason to want to come back."

Kara laughed. "You're a bitch and a half, Ivanova," she said. "Do you know that?"

"It's a hobby," Susan said. "And you're not so bad yourself. Now go, before we really run out of time."

Kara grinned.

"See you on the flip side," she said, and stepped into the darkness.

Ivanova woke to the wailing of sirens and flashing red lights. She was sitting in her chair on the command deck of the EAS Titans. Adrenaline pumping, she looked around.

Everything looked all right. No fire. Nothing broken. No skulls.

"Report!" she barked.

A scared lieutenant looked up from a control board.

"Something almost crashed into us," she said. "It missed us by *meters*, Captain. And it moved much, much faster than anything I've ever heard about."

"Really," she said. She felt unreal. The entire interlude in the forest was fading fast from her memory, like a dream after waking.

"Did we get any scanner data on the ship?" she said.

"Yes, sir," another young officer said. "Putting on secondary screen."

The image on a screen to Susan's left changed from its standard Earthforce holding pattern. In its place came a blurry image of a ship. It was bronze-colored, kind of bird-like and had a dark strip with a red glowing spot where its eyes should've been. Seeing it, she was sure that the red spot would normally oscillate back and forth.

"Any idea where it came from?" she asked.

The lieutenant shook her head.

"Can't really say," she said. "From way out beyond the rim, at least. In the direction of the Large Magellanic Cloud, but I doubt it came from *that* far off."

"Any damage? To us, I mean?"

"None reported, sir. And frankly, the way it moved I think there would've been nothing but plasma left had it hit us at all."

"All right, then," Susan said. "Stand down to normal running. Log all data from the encounter. And somebody get us all some coffee."

She looked out into the red and black cloudscape of hyperspace.

Farewell, Kara Thrace, she thought. If you actually exist, it was a pleasure meeting you.