

Snapshots From The Dzaqtlas

IV. Hard Landing

The harsh deceleration that had shoved the three of us deeply into our couches let up, replaced with near free-fall as our lander fell through the middle reaches of the atmosphere. 'Now it's up to the chutes,' Maqtlaz said. She monitored the lander's status panel. 'I hope double the rated interval of cold and vacuum soaking hasn't degraded them too much.'

'Tazo,' Yalad said to me, 'are we still on track?' I sat at the so-called navigation panel. The reticle above the tiny Zhdant-globe in the analog location system lay pegged over the floodplains north of the mouth of the Friebrkad River. I read the coordinates off of the verniers, pulled the atlas out of its cubby and unrolled it to the page we'd marked before we left Comm Station Number Seventeen three hours ago.

'Near as I can tell from the iron idiot here,' I said as I shouted over the increasing slipstream noise, 'we're coming down about fifteen clicks north of some settlement called Dzaltlievan.' We all grunted as the initial drogue fired, explosive bolts blowing off the main chutes' shroud. The atlas flew out of my hands, falling at Maqtlaz' feet. 'Leave it,' I told her. We all counted off the seconds to ourselves until the main chutes deployed. Then the capsule jerked hard enough to slam our jaws shut, and then once again-

'Lost one, curse it!' The lander began to spin lazily with only two of the three main chutes slowing it. 'We're going to hit a little harder than usual, folks,' Maqtlaz finished. She spat out a tiny sliver of tooth.

Barely after the landing bag had inflated beneath us, the lander slammed into the gravel. It felt like a groundcar crash. 'Tazo here,' I said blearily.

'Yalad here,' he mumbled. 'Maq? Maq? Damnit, she's passed out.' We fumbled with our couch restraints, moaning at the bruises and strains from the hard landing. Maqtlaz began to come around. I looked out of the window in the egress hatch.

'Looks like the locals saw us come down. They're on scene.' I tried to keep the quaver of fear from my voice.

'Good! They can help us, and render first aid for Maq.'

'We've got other problems,' I replied. The hammering began

on the egress hatch. *Please don't pull the emergency handle*, I willed them silently. We could hear them shouting now through the atmospheric vents.

‘Death! Kill those who offended the Gods! Death to those who brought the death unto the world!’

‘DEATH’, the crowd roared . . .