

# **The Angels 2200 Forum RPG**

*Directed by Schamann*

*Written by the RP group*

*Inspired by the Comic by HanSagan and Coota*

## **Starring:**

Schamann as Ursula "Hobbit" Veneberg  
Alex as Jessica "Nefertiti" Carter  
Charon as Rhiannon "Claymore" MacTaggart  
Vexus as Aurora "Crone" Yates  
JediBubbles as Cassandra "Seer" Dory  
Vindicare as Christine "Banshee" Auten  
Maverick as Katherine "Catnip" Jones  
Kimmers4Ever as Ashley "DecoyDuck" Price  
JFalcon as Kate "Calamity" Ross  
Tiefflieger as Anatolija "Automatic" Mirunova

## **With:**

Captain Veronica Dominguez  
Commander Petra Verulian  
1st Lieutenant Karen "Sparks" Freeman  
Lieutenant Joyce Banner

## **And:**

Lieutenant Inga "Serpent" Voeller

## **Introducing:**

The Sexbots Edward and Jason

## **Production:**

low.net and iconz.nz



Schamann	Tue Dec 09, 2003 2:30 pm	
<p>The year is 2200... The time is now... The place is.... Space – the Final's frontier... ... ...</p> <p>Akhem...to be more precise – the outer space on the external side of the orbit of Final – a small transit space station for trans system bulk freights. Beyond the Final's orbit there would lie the thin belt of rocks, a strange loose formation circling the planetoid the Final orbited. As it clouded almost the whole view of space, that could be observed from the station's O-deck, some prankster once called it "the Final's Frontier".</p> <p>The guy did not even dream about how prophetic his words were going to turn out.</p> <p>Now it was commonly considered one of the frontlines between "loyal" space controlled by the first systems inhabitants, and the "outsiders" - the whole lot of newcomers - mostly the United Systems military personnel, trying with lesser and lesser hope in their actions to protect the Terra presence in the system. Or what should rather be clarified above any doubt – to protect the mining sites and the output. Except the infamous Border – laying on the opposite side of the system that time of local year, there hardly was any place USN armed forces wished less to be in. Unfortunately, they had to be there.</p> <p>Those forces included TNV "Morrigan" – an Emerald Class missile cruiser, on it's another recon mission, aiming to determine the possibilities of capturing the Final. Using it's gravitational gate to transport fleet to the other "side" of the system the easy way, not through the radioactive nightmare of The Border, would make it possible for the Terrans to finally take the action to enemy territory. Thus, Terran Navy sought continuously to find a way through "Rebels" defenses.</p> <p>"Rebels", obviously, were taking that approach with much of a reserve, and sturdily refused to cooperate. With lasers and plasma.</p> <p>***</p> <p>Captain Veronica Dominguez had a bad day. Her back ached from spending too many hours in a chair in front of the monitors, her head ached from too many hours spent in a chair in front of the monitors, her eyes still ached like hell from...the pain of the flashbang fired by one of the fighter pilots too close to the bridge in the exact moment she increased the brightness on all monitors to personally proof-check navigation calculations, only a day and a half ago.</p> <p>One could say the sum of all the trivial little things finally started to get to her tired personality, exhausted with too many tasks of too great importance placed on her shoulder with too few resources to work with.</p> <p>One could, however, say, that she was just pissed off and better to be avoided at the moment.</p> <p>Commander Petra Verulian, Captain's second in command, was precisely of that latter opinion. Her superior threw some papers at the desk at which she had been seating, and asked the question her subordinate was afraid the most.</p> <p>"What is that bullshit you tell me came from system HQ, Petra? What the hell is this supposed to mean?!"</p> <p>"I don't know Nikki, I simply do not. They don't tell Commanders everything, you know."</p> <p>"Do not bullshit me Petra, I have a bad day and a ship to run. You are the chief intelligence officer appointed here by HQ, so don't you tell me you don't know something about it's reasons!!" Captain slammed her hand against the desk right in front of her first officer.</p> <p>"We are to create a squadron consisting of certain pilots, who meet certain physical, mental and biological standards." Verulian coldly started to reply. "We are to train those pilots to make a fully operational squadron. We are to patrol The Border, illusive as it is, and await further instructions. Whether this is any top secret operation to put this ship in grave danger and earn us the honours</p>		

we won't be allowed to talk about or wear on our uniforms, I wouldn't know. In present state of affairs this may as well be any kind of scrap project doomed to be forgotten and being undertaken only because the budget year ends and we have the money to spend while some Admiral's secretary's girlfriend's niece needs a contract to save her company. I still wouldn't know. They don't say why, and I don't ask. I don't ask because it takes two weeks to get an answer, and an answer is always – 'Don't ask' "

Captain rubbed her forehead. She sighed and looked at the papers once again, puzzled.

"Do you think it's even possible, Petra?"

"If it's not, we will be the first to find out. On The Border, no mistaken experiments are easily forgiven." Verulian smiled bitterly. Her superior responded, after a while, with a similarly tired smirk. "At least we don't have to worry about the squadron's name..." "Giraffas" is going to explode in these poor girls' faces before they even learn their callsigns" Captain sighed again. "Have they even all arrived yet?"

"Most of them, I think, with today's shipment. There are some logistical problems, as usual. It is not impossible that we will have to take the rest of them with another transport in a few days time, so radio signaling our position might be necessary for a few days after we start our recon cruise." First officer was more than a bit awkward with this.

Captain rolled her eyes in anger. "Great, just prefect. Rebel patrols are going to love us for that, I bet. As much as our own CAG and tactical." Commander shrugged. Captain decided not to make scene out of it. She was about to have enough of shouting in her office before the end of the day.

"That will be all Petra, get out of my sight before I blame you for all the nonsense of this world" Captain waved her hand dismissively. "And get me the CAG here while you're on your way to the showers"

"Yes ma'am"

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Second Lieutenant Ursula Veneberg was quite happy and self-confident person, at least that was what she considered herself to be. At the age of 19 she was a dirty blonde, with blue-greyish eyes, nice prominent nose and some freckles she thought to be quite cute. She regarded herself pretty smart person and a good pilot despite the fact that her only combat experience so far were few patrols, one including a hostile encounter, with Ursula being a rearguard and not firing or being fired upon even a single time.

All in all, she had quite a high opinion on herself.

One thing continued to trouble her, though.

Her 5'3" just always seemed way too short to her.

Right after she arrived onboard the Morrigan, she found her appointed quarters and started making herself at home. Knowing nothing about her new assignment or squadronmates, she eagerly awaited the first meeting and the forming of new squadron. She arrived to the briefing room fifteen minutes ahead of time and was all ready, when the others started to show up.

When she saw the first one – the about 5'9" redhead chick with muscles like a marine, she felt uneasy.

After a moment, when she spotted the second – about 5'10" dreamy looking girl with silver hair, she heard some inner voice crying in despair.

But it was the third one – about 5'11" classic beauty with boobs worth the B-movies career, who made her utter the very peculiar words for making first impression.

"Now since it seems I must have been a mass murderer in my previous life, girls, let me ask this. Who do I have to kill to get out of this Gulliver's nightmare?"

Alex

Tue Dec 09, 2003 8:26 pm

The 5'11" girl, known as Jessica Carter, blinked, then walked over to Ursula so their difference in

height became extraordinarily apparent. She looked at Ursula for a moment, then turned to the other girls. "Did anyone here order a Hobbit?" she asked with a slight smile.		
Charon	Wed Dec 10, 2003 1:54 am	
The redhead glanced at Jessica unsurely for a moment, before offering a small smile. "Och, dinnae fash yese'f te much about it, lass. Like the sayin', 'It's not what ye have, it's how ye use it,' right?"		
She rubbed her palm on her uniform breeches for a moment, making sure that none of the nervous sweat that had been accumulating there would be transferred over. "Rhiannon MacTaggart, lass. Sure an' it's fine te meet ye. De ye ken anything about what's goin' on? They're bein' a wee bit close-mouthed about the whole thing."		
Alex	Wed Dec 10, 2003 2:07 am	
Jessica walked back to her gear, and unpacked a manga from one of her collections, muttering "Even the smallest person can change the course of the future, huh?" and promising herself to try and learn how to understand Rhiannon's heavy Scottish accent.		
Vexus	Wed Dec 10, 2003 7:19 am	
The silver-haired girl at first gave no indication that she had heard Ursula's comment, her form leaning over the briefing table where a small hologram of local space shimmered and slowly rotated. However, upon overhearing Jessica and Rhiannon introduce themselves, she turned her head and nodded respectfully at Ursula.		
"Aurora Yates. I wouldn't worry about your stature if I were you. It makes no difference in the cockpit."		
With a small smile, she turned back to the hologram. The floating image shifted and was replaced by a new map showing The Border, Aurora's eyes seeming to meticulously examine every centimeter of the area.		
Charon	Wed Dec 10, 2003 8:19 am	
Rhiannon chuckled slightly. "Sure an' it might even be an advantage te ye. I've lost track o' the times I've done myself in on the canopy. Wee bit frustrating, that be." She rubbed her head in a rueful manner, a wry smile decorating her lips and bringing a twinkle to her sapphire eyes.		
Eyes that turned to regard Aurora and the hologram. "Anythin' o' note there, Lt. Yates?" she asked, the humor in her voice replaced by a quieter, uncertain tone. Her hands kept toying with the hem of her service uniform's jacket, incessantly straightening it.		
Alex	Wed Dec 10, 2003 8:33 am	
Jessica looked at Riannon and Aurora for a moment, before approaching Ursula and introducing herself properly. "Jessica Carter. I'm... sorry about my comment earilier. I have a bad habit of trying to lighten the mood by making jokes."		
Ursula gives her a moment's consideration, then smiled. "It's ok."		
Jessica smiled back at her. "Callsign's <i>Nefertiti</i> , but feel free to call me Nef." She gave Ursula another quick smile before joining Rhiannon and Aurora by the hologram.		
"... It doesn't look THAT bad today... Clear with a chance of asteroids..."		
Vexus	Wed Dec 10, 2003 9:52 am	
"Clear, calm, and completely unusual for disputed space," Aurora said quietly, almost as if to herself, as her hand swept across the hologram, causing it to distort momentarily.		
"A number of blips this low on a tactical screen has always made me nervous. Rebels move when you're not looking at them."		
At the last statement, her brow lowered, a look of anger dropping like a shadow across her face. Then, as quickly as it had come, the anger seemed to pass and Aurora regarded Rhiannon and Jessica plesantly.		
"So, would either of you know if The Border is supposed be this quiet nowadays? I've never been to this sector before."		
Alex	Wed Dec 10, 2003 11:18 am	
Jessica shook her head. "Nope. It's my first time here as well." Her hand slowly slides into the hologram, and she begins to play with it, still keeping most of her attention with her new squad-mates.		
Charon	Thu Dec 11, 2003 1:13 am	

"Same fer me," Rhiannon answered. "I hope that at least one person in th' squadron has some experience with the region... It'd be a wee bit troubling if noone knew what they were doing out here." A dark expression passes over her face for a moment, before she lightens up again. "Och, 'tis silly te fret o'er things. Surely the captain or CAG could explain the situation te us."

Alex	Thu Dec 11, 2003 1:17 am
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"Or at least give us a nice map..." Jessica commented as her hand made a bombing run at the table.

Then as an after thought, "By the way... does anyone know why we were told to wait here? I still have a lot of unpacking to do..."

Charon	Tue Dec 16, 2003 8:53 am
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Rhiannon looked pensive for a moment. "Te be honest, I cannae see why we've been posted herrre at'all." She indicated the hologram with a wave of her long-fingered hand. "It's the end of the map. 'Here there be dragons,' an' all, but there's NOTHIN' goin' on here."

She sighed, leaning against one of the briefing room's metal chairs, hands resting on either side of her hips as she slouched a bit, a depressed expression coming over her features for a moment, before she looked up again. "The USA cannae afford te waste pilots, so it's no that we've been sent oot here te rot, but all there is oot here is freighters an' rocks."

A sudden thought occurred to her, and she looked at each pilot in turn, gauging reactions. "Orrr is it that there's some sort of pirate or rebel action oot here tha' Command doesnae want oos te knae about?"

Alex	Tue Dec 16, 2003 11:02 am
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Jessica looks at her for a moment. "First off, you should see a doctor about that accent. Second, you could be right." Jessica looks back at the hologram for a moment, before adding "I've heard a little about the local lore in this region of space from the shuttle pilot on the way here... Something about a space station..."

Jessica looks more intently into the hologram, as if willing the image of a space station to appear.

And that's when it happened.

Schamann	Tue Dec 16, 2003 2:44 pm
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### Chapter one: A long expected briefing

Four young pilots stood, waiting, three of them grouped around the holographic representation of space, the fourth one a little aback, unsure how to proceed.

Somewhere in the briefing room on the flight-deck, near the main fighter hangar of TNV Morrigan, there were four young soldiers.

Somewhere in the guts of an Emerald Class missile cruiser, between the machinery decks, warehouses, crew quarters and weapon stations, connected by the nervous system of corridors, video comms and ventilation shafts, there was a briefing room, silent and almost empty, save for the four figures, surrounding the glimmering holo.

Somewhere in the Final's Frontier asteroid belt there was a ship, speeding soundlessly through the vacuum of space, passing the bigger rocks by and blowing the smaller ones to dust. A ship ruffled with cannon barrels and tactical missiles launchers. Swift, silent, deadly.

And unaware of it's destination.

There was a moment of silence around the briefing room after last comments and there was even more nervous looking into the holographic map. Then there were words from the door, cold, dispassionate voice:

"The last one of you to snap to full attention mops the floor in your quarters tonight"

The turmoil and the rattle stopped as quickly as it started. Then it was a nice and regular row of second lieutenants, standing there, single file, awaiting.

First Lieutenant Inga Voeller looked neither surprised nor disappointed. In her best judgment, young pilots reacted, properly and accordingly, and fast enough, if somebody asked her.

Still, there was a job to do, whether she liked it or not. She approached the line of pilots and stopped in front of the redhead one.

"It would seem that the mop locker has your name on it tonight, would it not, lieutenant Mc Taggart? You will get to it immediately after all your mandatory practical is done."

"Yes ma'am" Rhiannon answered as quickly as she could, before getting herself in to more of a trouble.

Lt. Voeller turned around on her heel and paced the briefing room in slow, thoughtful paces, moving away from the row of her subordinates.

"Don't worry Mc Taggart, I'll help you" Ursula nudged the Scottie and winked at her with heartily a smile.

"I don't need no 'elp, lass" Rhiannon whispered in reply, still somewhat embarrassed by the way she started with her new leader, apparently some sort of a hardass.

"On a contrary lieutenant Mc Taggart, I would think you really could use some help...those are quite a big quarters, and they include showers as well" Voeller abruptly turned around and looked at the girls once more. "And you, lieutenant Veneberg would think it better to keep your mouth shut when a superior is talking, you can definitely help Mc Taggart, after you finish mopping the gym nr 3, in the evening"

At her early thirties, she was a handsome woman, though few would call her pretty or beautiful. She seemed to pack just a bit too much of a male characteristics, to look really feminine and attractive. On other hand, those proved to be of very much assistance right at the moment, speaking to the four surprised and uncertain rookies.

Hard to say if it was that Voeller heard the earlier conversation or the faintest shadow of a smile flashed through Carter's face, but she definitely turned her attention to Nef.

"And what do we have here, let me guess, lieutenant Carter, a purist?" there was a short flash of sarcasm and a very visible of a threat on Voeller's face. Carter gulped audibly. "Zu youi zink mein akzent fanny, leujtnant?...Zu youi?!" The smile on Voeller's face was definitely a dangerous one. "No ma'am" was the careful answer.

"That's very good, I like fast learners, you'll have only one corridor instead of two I've planned at first, is that clear?"

"Crystally, ma'am"

First Lieutenant Inga Voeller breathed deeply, then gave a sigh.

"Ok, girls, that's it, the necessary military bullshit part we have covered, I believe. From now on I am your commander and you are a team, whether any of us wants it or not. Should any of you feel that she still has something to prove or show, be warned that today is merely a 'hello'. I can turn your days into nightmares if I have to. I would, however, prefer not to."

The response was a silence.

"By the orders coming from the CAG and the ship's captain you are about to form a squadron. We did expect some more of you to come, six speaking precisely, but transports these days are no more reliable than TV coverage, they give what they want, when they want, and tend to mix sources with target audience. So by now we have to proceed with what we have."

A few hushed giggles, then still the attention and the silence.

"By the reasons being on a need-to-know basis, the squadron you are about to form will be a Special Designation Squadron, aimed to operate on its own as a standalone force in each kind of circumstances. Now I am aware what nice thoughts of being 'special' and 'elite' you are all now thinking, but let me assure you, that so far, it only means one thing for you – more work" – Voeller realized momentarily that she did not get through to them with the last message. They were all excited right then, expectative, buzzing in their minds with all the adventurous stuff they expected after an introduction like that. She sighed once again. She looked at the one she knew had been to the real war before, she looked her right in her eyes, deeply. She narrowed her own eyes and then gave her a quick, warm and personal look. She knew she needed that certain rookie's help to get this all done, so she started to build a bridge to send the message, for that help.

Time – they say – teaches everything, and is also said to heal everything.

"Time starts, girls. In five, I want you suited up, sitting in the simulators and ready to the dogfight practice. There will be no guiding. You have two hours to do what you want, to learn what you can about each other's flying style and to impress me enough to maybe give you a little break with some extra stuff I have planned for you. After that you have two hours of physical activities and two hours of classes on tactics subsequently. After that, the mops await some of you. Oh, and since you are supposed to be a team, you have the rest of the night to share information. About you. Starting from next day forth I will occasionally ask you about your squadmember's origin, second name, place of birth, habits, likes and dislikes, usual attitudes and what not. You will talk and learn each other's by heart. Like a family I will make you be. If you find that heavy, prepare for worse, as the next few days or maybe even weeks you will be working your asses off"

They stood, more than a little open mouthed

"Get to it, people!"

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Half running to the simulators, they had to keep that pace not to be late, which somehow nobody thought being a good idea.

"Mac..Tagh..art, hey..."Veneberg shouted panting heavily

"What?" the Scottie asked in a little irritated way, but smiled a moment after. The other two were several paces ahead of them.

"I'm sorry for throwing myself at you with that mopping help, you know, I didn't mean that you can't..."

"Don't mention it. aight?" – Mac Taggart seemed to be unsure how to react.

"How about we two team up for the sim, Mac Taggart" Ursula then smiled archly at the redhead, "care too see what the short ones can do?"

Vexus

Tue Dec 16, 2003 8:38 pm

Aurora took the lead as the group made its way down the corridor, their bootfalls making hollow echoes in the slow-moving, recycled air of the ship. The first lieutenant's intense gaze still lingered in her mind. She had hoped to avoid such looks... at least at the beginning. Why couldn't she have just chewed her out like the others? This was not going according to plan at all.

*Thoughts best saved for later, she thought to herself, right now you have a job to do.*

Glancing behind her, she saw Jessica, following close behind her with Ursula and Rhiannon talking in the back. As Jessica matched paces with Aurora, the silver-haired girl gestured to the two behind them with a smile.

"It hasn't been half an hour and already we have a conspiracy in the making. Do you think we have to suit up for this sim run? I still haven't gotten used to those things."

Alex

Tue Dec 16, 2003 9:15 pm

Jessica looked at Aurora, back at the other two, then smiled. "We may be good, but let's not underestimate them." She and Aurora turned the corner that lead into the locker rooms. "I'm going to go full suit. Slack off if you want. I don't plan on having them catch me with my guard down."

They finally came to the locker room, skidded to a halt, and opened the door. Inside was a vast array of flight lockers. A small doorway on either side of the locker room, halfway down, lead to shower areas. A large set of double doors at the far end indicated the hallway to the flight deck and the sim room.

Jessica and Aurora started over to their lockers just as Ursula and Rhiannon appeared at the doorway.

"You know..." Jessica started as she opened her locker, "From here on, we're all real pilots... Maybe we should all start calling each other by our callsigns..."

Charon

Wed Dec 17, 2003 4:11 am

Whilst still in the hall, Rhiannon turned to face Ursula with a small grin on her face. Whilst mildly annoyed for having drawn attention to herself by being caught off-guard by the CAG (and subsequently venting that frustration at poor 2LT Veneberg), she was struck at how quickly and easily the group started to come together, through something so simple as a hello and mutual ass-chewing.

"Aye lass, let's show these Amazons what the wee ones can dae!" Chortling, she stepped into the

locker room, catching the tail end of 2LT Carter's statement.

As she opened the locker with her name on it, in the bank opposite Carter and Yates', she replied off-handedly. "No' sure how things will be here, bein' a 'Special Designation Squadron' an' all, but when I was with th' Furies, we were given callsigns by th' other pilots. I ended up bein' tagged 'Claymore', because I was so much taller than th'others, an' because I like swords. Jest a wee bit," she chuckled, indicating with outstretched arms exactly how much a "wee bit" was.

Pulling off her service uniform and pulling on her hunter green flightsuit, she adjusted a few settings. "Supply's gettin' better. This one doesnae fit like a tent like my basic trainin' suit did, an' it's not too tight like it was back with the Furies." Finishing with the clasps on the left side of the suit and connecting the clip at the left shoulder, she made one final adjustment to her belt, and was satisfied with the fit.

As she pulled on her boots, she leaned over and started talking in a low voice to Veneberg, starting a tactics discussion for the sims.

Vexus

Wed Dec 17, 2003 9:36 am

For a moment, Aurora considered going without the flight suit. It was just a sim after all. But no, she was far too timid to deliberately risk the CAG's anger. As she struggled to get fasten everything in place she longed for her former battle gear. It was much more comfortable than this awkward suit. As she changed, Aurora raised an eyebrow at Jessica's last statement.

"Our callsigns huh? Then shall I call you Nef... or Nefer... or perhaps Titi?"

Jessica's look said it all, and Aurora decided not to say anything more on the subject.

Upon hearing Rhiannon speak of the origin of her callsign, Aurora froze. Should she explain it now... she hadly knew them very well. On the other hand, they would see it sooner or later, and they didn't have to know everything. She made her decision reluctantly.

"Well, I do have a nickname," she began hesitantly. "It's a joke really... because of my hair color."

As she said this she indicated the back of her left shoulder. On the bare skin was a small tattoo of a comical-looking old woman. The cartoonish character wore a dress and apron like one might expect, but also held a machine gun in each hand, had army boots over her stocking feet, and was smoking on a cigar. Beneath the old woman, the word "Crone" was displayed.

Upon hearing the snickering behind her, she quickly covered up the tattoo again with her flight suit, rather embarrassed.

Alex

Wed Dec 17, 2003 3:00 pm

"What about you, Ursula? What's your callsign?" Nefertiti asked.

Ursula turned her head to her, and gave a breif smile. "I dropped mine when I transfered her. Not sure I want a new one."

Nef smiled back, then finished zipping up her red and black suit, and began to adjust her boots. She was almost finished when something caught her eye. She turned and looked at Ursula, who had just finished getting her suit on, and was pulling her boots out of her locker.

Nef looked at her for a moment, as if finally realizing something. She turned to look at her new squadmates to see if they had noticed anything. Neither of them seemed to have noticed it, and if they did, showed no signs of it. Nef shook her head, telling herself that it was just her being excited.

But for a moment... Nef thought she recognized Ursula from somewhere else... Something big...

She shook her mind clear as she grabbed her helmet. It was new and clean, with no signs of personalization. Nef vowed to fix that.

"So..." She said, turning to her squadmates with a smile. "Any particular sim mission you girls want to do, or do we just want to freestyle?"

Charon

Wed Dec 17, 2003 10:04 pm

Rhiannon finished fiddling with her boots and grabbed her helmet and gauntlets out of the locker. "Sein' as how we'rre so close tae th'asteroids an' all, how aboot som'thin' wi' a few rocks involved? I seem tae recall som'thin' aboot a run in the Ootsystems against a pack o' Rebels who'd set up



shop in an asteroid base."

She pulled on her gauntlets, testing the fit and flexibility for a moment, then looked uncertainly at the others. "'Course, tha' might've jest been somethin' I read..."

She shrugged off her uncertainty, apparently resolving something in her mind. "Well, in any case, I think it's a good chance fer us tae get some practice in the arena, at least tae start wi'. Shouldnae be tae harrd tae get th'sims tae come oop wi' som'thin'."

Vexus

Thu Dec 18, 2003 5:49 am

Aurora finished changing and grabbed her helmet, and turned to Rhiannon.

"I find it odd that the CAG would just turn us loose on the sims like this. No specifics on mission type, choice of craft, space conditions, or enemy strength. Something doesn't add up here."

Aurora checked the wall clock and started.

"Let's move it, ladies. We got twenty seconds left. Unless there are any objections, I nominate Claymore to choose the mission. But before we do anything else, let's get into the pods before we give the first lieutenant reason to dole out more cleaning duties."

Vaulting into the simulator pod, Aurora activated the controls and put on her helmet.

...

Crone fiddled with her helmet as the sim's screens activated. A voice then boomed from the internal speakers.

**"Provide name, designation if a new user, and voice password."**

Crone's heart skipped a beat. Was this someone's idea of a sick joke? To be sure, the voice was like many others she had encountered: cold, almost monotone, and persistent. But a male voice?! Did the techs think it was somehow comforting to hear such a thing? To be reminded once again?

For a moment she sat still in her anger and disgust until the voice sounded again, repeating the same statement and forcing Crone to respond angrily.

"2nd Lt. Yates, Aurora, alpha charlie zulu 062541, Password: Fourth and one."

**"User unknown. Matching designation to Alliance Personnel Database... Match found. Voice password confirmed. Welcome, Crone. Your current sim killscore is 13 over 175 logged hours."**

Hooking up her helmet to the comm link. Crone waited for the others to jack in

Alex

Thu Dec 18, 2003 3:12 pm

"2nd Lt. Carter, Jessica, Alpha Delta Omega 038769, Password: Peekaboo."

Crone looked at Nef with a curious look in her eyes. Nef smiled as she hooked her helmet into the comm link. "Would you have thought of it?"

**"... Match Found. Voice password confirmed. Welcome, Nefertiti. Your current sim killscore is 2176 over 1437 logged hours."**

This got surprised stares from all over the sim room. Feeling nervous and embarrassed for the first time on this ship, Nef smiled weakly. "I kind of... sim a lot... It's how I like to unwind after a long day." Still more stares. "What? Don't you guys like to unwind?"

Claymore looked at her. "Aye, but not inna Sim."

Nef's cheeks went red and she sank, slightly, into her cockpit.

Charon

Fri Dec 19, 2003 11:52 am

Rhiannon nodded to Veneberg as she descended into her sim-pod. Hopefully some of the tactics that they'd concocted in their hurried planning session would work well. After Ursula had completed her own startup sequence, Rhiannon began typing in instructions to the central sim computer, setting up the scenario for the first sim run. Once everything was set up to her satisfaction, she hopped in her own simpod, and logged in.

"2nd Lieutenant MacTaggart, Rhiannon. Golf Mike Whiskey 087746. Password: Ivan the Terrible"

She cocked an eyebrow at the others, then waggled it rakishly. "Long storrry. I'll tell ye later, perrrhaps." Ursula simply rolled her eyes.

**"... Match Found. Voice password confirmed. Welcome, Claymore. Your current sim killscore is 75 over 420 logged hours."**

Content with her record for now, Rhiannon tied back her red mane, secured it underneath her black and red helmet - still painted in the colors of her old squadron, with her namesake painted on the center ridge - and spoke once more.

"Okay, herrre's th' deal. First run's goin' teh be a simple 2 on 2 scrap in a moderately dense asteroid field. Nothin' flashy teh start wi' - just gettin' back intae th' groove, an' gettin' a measure fer each other. Next time up, we can mix thin's up jest a wee bit."

She chuckled as she reached up to pull her simpod's canopy down, thus signalling her entry into the virtual playing field. "Jest one thin' else: we're fightin' in Medusas, sae watch yer tails. Ye don' have a lot o' it tae pretect ye." With a last evil laugh, she sealed her pod, and entered into another world.

Vexus	Fri Dec 19, 2003 8:41 pm
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In a whirl of static and color, a vision of interplanetary space now surrounded Crone in the simulator cockpit. Checking her scope, she could see that Nefertiti and herself were now in close formation within a sea of free-floating rocks. Crone frowned, asteroid fields were a double-edged sword. Sure there were plenty of places to hide yourself, but navigation was a lot trickier. She wondered if that was why Claymore had chosen Medusas for this run.

Switching to a private comm channel, Crone began to adjust the power distribution to her ship's systems. She would need maneuverability more than speed and weapon strength in a place like this.

"Alright Nef, looks like it's you and me against the conspiracy. Any idea where they might be?"

Crone began to scan her weapons loadout. Two PPCs, two image-recognition missiles, and of course the stonegaze.

The stonegaze; that was also both an asset and a liability. You didn't need as much accuracy with it as with guns or missiles, but if you get caught in the blast radius you were in just as much trouble as your enemy, especially in a place like this.

Crone sighed and tried to increase her scope's scanning radius, looking for shadows amongst the rocks.

Alex	Fri Dec 19, 2003 9:31 pm
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Nef smiled as she looked around. "Simulation 4723-B, with about 13% randomness, and a touch of local space." she commented to Crone. "We're in sector 7. Most likely spots for them to have spawned are in sectors 4 thru 6, and 12 thru 15. That means they're in the smaller, less dense clouds of asteroids, while we have the small to medium rocks."

She adjusted the controls of her Medusa in order to avoid three rocks approaching her. Her ship did a fancy little spin, and easily avoided all three rocks.

She continued to talk as if she hadn't noticed the asteroids she'd just avoided. "There should be a few large rocks in sector 10 that would be great for hiding, but I have a feeling that they're going to want to come right at us. If we make for sectors 1, 2, 16, 17, or 18, we can fight without having to worry about asteroids. Medusas aren't the best choice for asteroid missions, as they only need two or three good hits from the larger small rocks to be totalled." She checked her sensors one last time. "I say we head to sector 9. Lots of larger rocks we can hide in until they pass us, at which time we can pop out and waste them. The larger rocks will also protect us from the smaller debris in the area. With these ships, that would be the best place to fight inside the field."

She smiled as she added. "Medusas can't easily destroy the big ones, so we don't have to worry about them fragging us inside the rock. It would take a few minutes, even with these stonegazes, plenty of time to depart and come at them. What do you want to do, Wing Leader?" she asked with a wink.

Vexus	Sat Dec 20, 2003 5:24 am
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*Wing Leader?!*, Crone thought to herself. She had never even led a study session in school, let alone any kind of military unit. And now Nef, who had logged over 1200 more sim hours than herself decided she should be the wing leader?

For a moment she thought of objecting, but then decided against it. She didn't want to seem too uncertain in front of her new squad-mates, and she figured she could use the practice in any case.

"Sector 9 it is then," she said into the comm. "Let's put a little more distance between us as we go until we spot a good hiding place. I want our scopes to cover as large an area as we can."

The two ships swooped around and headed toward their chosen destination. Nef zig-zagging gracefully through the rocks and Crone trying her best not to bump into anything.

Charon	Sat Dec 20, 2003 8:13 am
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"Okay lass," said Rhiannon with a confidence that she wasn't sure that she felt, "herrre's th' deal. I've run this sim beforre, and therre's two spots where they're likely tae spawn, both o' which are in amongst th' large rocks. 'Cause we're in these small ones fer now, our size is only a minor advantage. We fly togetherrr until we spot them, then break fer a pincer. I'll go high, ye'll go low."

"An' I'll be in Scotland afoooooore ye!" sang Ursula, which shocked Rhiannon for a moment, causing Ursula to titter.

"Verrry bloody funny," Rhiannon chuckled wryly, then returned to what she was beginning to think of as her "command tone". "Until we spot them elsewhere, I recommend heading fer sector 10, off in that bank o' rocks... spacing's a little tighter there, sae there's plenty of spaces fer them tae be hidin'."

"One thing," chimed in Ursula as they activated their engines and began weaving towards the far bank. "I recommend that whichever of us is closer on the pincer attempt a Stonegaze shot. That way the farther of us can take out them when they're DIW." Dead in the Water, a throwback to the Navy's aquatic-based days.

"Good call," said Rhiannon, and wondered why she hadn't thought of that herself, before she was forced to begin weaving more due to the presence of larger rocks. "Keep yer eyes skinned... if ye see anythin' glinting in the distance, sing out. An' keep yer spacin'... don' wanna fall prey taw a Stonegaze oorselves."

Vexus	Mon Dec 22, 2003 10:29 pm
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Rocks, rocks, and more rocks. A veritable fog of sensor echoes and scope shadows where any small ship could lie in wait, and as they neared sector 9, the larger asteroids allowed for an even greater chance of an ambush. Her eyes constantly dropping to her ship's scanners, Crone had already had two close calls with the floating debris. She thought about switching to auto-pilot and letting the computer worry about it, but that would mean having to disengage it when the time came for battle and losing a precious moment that might be needed for more important things.

It had been almost an hour of nervous tedium, looking at a sky that seemed the same in every direction, when a brief echo crossed the edge of her scope that didn't look or move like an asteroid.

"I think I may have something," said radioed to Nef. "But if we want to stage an ambush we're in the wrong place. Follow me."

Veering her craft around, Crone headed to a place she hoped would give her a better look at the shadow... and intercept it.

Alex	Mon Dec 22, 2003 11:20 pm
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Nef followed Crone into the asteroid belt. She dodged asteroids while checking her equipment. She had set the radar to detect only fast moving chunks of metal, and signal her with an audio beep, but it hadn't gone off. She switched her sensors back to normal, and looked for Crone's shadow.

For the briefest moment, she thought she saw it too. Using her visual sensors, she tried to focus on the object, but at that moment passed in front of a larger asteroid. Nef cursed softly as she came out the other side, having lost the shadow.

"I thought I saw it just now... Sensor logs confirm a shadow, but I've lost it. What do you think?"

Crone hushed her as they approached their better position.

Charon	Tue Dec 23, 2003 11:37 am	
<p>Early in the proceedings, it had occurred to Rhiannon that perhaps making herself obvious by flying fast through a bank of slow-moving rocks was probably not the best way to go about the business. However, it made the tedium increase exponentially, and thus, increasing her irritability.</p> <p>"Sensors picking up a faint shadow near sector 9," Ursula called softly, the somber, hushed tenor of the asteroid field affecting her speech.</p> <p>"Prolly anotherrr ghost, like th'last three," muttered Rhiannon. The sensors, while a huge step up from the radars, sonars and mag-res scanners of the 20th and 21st centuries, still often had difficulty differentiating different metal types combined with magnetic signatures. The Warbook computer was programmed with the various signature combinations that existed, with the ability to define probability within 5% on a fuzzy sig, but within the confines of the mineral-rich asteroid fields, any magnetic signatures that were emitted by the fighters were often so distorted and reverberated, like a laserbeam through a hall of mirrors, that singling any one point as the origin was damned near impossible.</p> <p>The best that the Warbook could do would be to paint possible sigs, known as shadows, based on fuzzy logic, which was as close to an AI as the military would permit in it's fighters. More often than not, fuzzy logic failed, resulting in sensor ghosts.</p> <p>Rhiannon was getting very tired of ghosts, and had resorted to deactivating her Warbook until contact was made, and instead relying solely on visual scanning. The effect was similar to a Global War I or II fighter pilot, and made her regret not wearing her bomber jacket, as she was wont to do, both in sims and in-mission.</p> <p>Instead of comming Ursula with her thoughts, she began methodically scanning the sector that had been pointed out, quartering the field with her eyes, and searching for differences in the thousand points of glinting metal and rock.</p> <p>And suddenly, just as she was about to comm Ursula disgustedly, she spotted the edge of a fusion drive trail. And then another, lurking slightly behind it.</p> <p>And then two drive trails changed direction, arcing towards her and Ursula.</p> <p>"VENEVERRRG, NAE!!!! DAE IT!!!" she cried, yanking back on her control stick, and sending her Medusa arcing towards it's formal dorsal plane.</p>		
Vexus	Tue Dec 23, 2003 9:14 pm	
<p>Crone grew more tense with each moment the suspicious reading did not reappear, for that could be the moment a trap was sprung. She was beginning to think that she might have imagined the first contact when another shadow appeared quite a distance away and in a different place where she would have expected. The reading looked promising since it move in an orbit much different than the surrounding asteroids, and could have been one or more ships at this far range. It seemed to be circling them, almost as if observing them cautiously.</p> <p>Crone was about to inform Nef of this odd shadow when a closer object did something that no asteroid would do: change direction sharply.</p> <p>"Damn it! We've been spotted first," Crone called to Nef. "Let's go! If we lose them they'll have the advantage."</p> <p>Crone threw open the throttle and was slammed into her seat.</p>		
Charon	Wed Dec 24, 2003 8:54 am	
<p>As soon as her pincer movement began, Rhiannon saw that there was a potentially fatal flaw with it's execution. For the best effect, she should have had Veneberg stand off with her engines powered down until Rhiannon had the pair tied up.</p> <p>However, with the way that the intercept was going, if one of them launched a Stonegaze, the other was going to get caught in the blast radius. She cursed foully under her breath, trying desperately to come up with another plan on the fly, when the decision was taken out of her hands by the two fighters breaking and heading for a one on one engagement.</p> <p>"Veneberrrg, ferrrget th'Stonegaze - yer fight's yer problem nae. If I can, I'll assist."</p> <p>"Roger," replied Ursula, who fired a series of PPC shots, attempting to startle her opponent.</p>		

Rhiannon stared out of her windshield at her own adversary, playing a game of celestial chicken, punctuated with occasional PPC shots. Right before the two fighters collided, she yanked hard on her controller, flying NOE (Nap-of-the-earth aka ground-hugging) on a nearby asteroid and wondering frantically if she'd made a horrendous mistake in splitting up from her wingmate.

Alex

Wed Dec 24, 2003 8:17 pm

Nef raised her eyebrow in excitement as Claymore skimmed the surface of an asteroid. "Looks like I chose the right opponent." she said with a smile as she began to swoop around the asteroid, going the opposite direction.

She was truly enjoying this. When she thought that they were about to pass each other, Nef cut her engines, twirled her Medusa around to face the opposite direction, and smiled as Claymore continued to come around the asteroid, looking to come back around at Nef.

Nef repositioned her Medusa and started her engines again. She was now right on Claymore's tail, and began to fire rapidly. She had damaged the left wing and broken Claymore's two upper tail fins before she was able to pull out of range of Nef's PPCs.

Nef pulled around, and was able to dodge an asteroid, while acquiring a target lock. She punched open her Open Com channel. "Sayonara!" And Nef launched one of her IR missiles at near-point-blank range.

Vexus

Wed Dec 24, 2003 11:17 pm

There they were! No more echoes or ghosts. As Crone rocketed towards the pair she seemed to see some confusion in their movement. Something hadn't gone right for them, and that meant she and Nef in fact had the advantage after all.

*Now if we can quickly stonegaze one while they're still uncert- Damn it, Nef!*

As the two opponents split apart, Nef broke formation and made a bee line for one of them, a triumphant shout coming over the comm. It was no longer possible for Crone to catch up to her before a stonegaze was useless. There went any tentative strategy she might've tried. Altering her course, she aimed for the other enemy craft, which was closer but was veering away.

Ursula (as she would later find out) suddenly turned as Crone approached, and came directly at her, trying to establish a missile lock. Crone decided the situation was too hot and banked into a nearby clump of asteroids. For a few moments the two played hide and seek. Ursula got off some true shots that slammed into Crone's shields and began to scorch the armor. Crone, for her part, almost managed to crash into a sizable rock at one point and lucky enough to escape with only a torn lower fin. Still, it was enough to hamper her mobility and she quickly grew sick of this dodgy game. She headed for the largest nearby asteroid she could find and hoped Ursula would see her.

She was not disappointed, Ursula swooped around from above and to the left, trying again to establish a missile lock.

"Computer, grav-boost solution on nearest asteroid."

A red line appeared on her HUD that swept around the asteroid. Avoiding plasma shots, Crone waited till her ship kissed that imaginary line, then cut her engines. The lock tone screamed into her ears but she forced herself to ignore it. As her medusa swept around in the asteroid's embrace the lock tone cut off. She felt her speed increase, and that was all she needed. As her ship was flung clear by the asteroid, Ursula fired her cannons. However, she had been expecting a ship moving much slower than Crone was now, and her shots went wide. Crone, her ship swung around on its axis, returned fire and finally hit true across the breadth of Ursula's ship, destroying her shields and rendering her missiles inoperable. She also hit the stonegaze but wasn't sure whether she had destroyed it or not.

She hadn't.

As Crone sped away to put some distance between them before her next planned attack, she heard the lock tone again. Before she could react, the tone changed and Crone knew she had a stonegaze on her tail. She tried to outrun it using the added momentum from her previous grav-boost, but it had started to close in. She frantically looked behind her to see where the guided mine was... and then realized how stupid that was.

*You're in a dense asteroid field and the mine will be too small to see until it's too late. Watch where*

*you're going, idiot!*

She swung her head back around and met a disheartening sight. Nef and her opponent were coming around the asteroid she was heading for. For a frozen moment in time, Crone saw that suddenly everything was in Ursula's favor. Both she and Nef were now in the blast radius, and once the stonegaze was at an ideal range it would detonate.

Apparently Ursula decided the range was ideal enough.

The stonegaze went off, but not as close as Crone thought it would. The EMP shockwave slammed into Crone's ship and her controls went nuts. On the edge of her perception, she saw the slightly weakened wave wash past Nef, her enemy, and her just-fired missile that went off-course.

What a mess this fight had quickly become....

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In the light of a large table screen. Two shadowed figures watched the unfolding action in the simulator. One of them turned to address the other.

"Well, they've certainly managed to beat themselves up quite a bit. Shall we send in the surprise?"

"Yes," said the other. "Time to see what this so-called special squadron can do when it's wounded and its back is to the wall."

Charon	Wed Dec 24, 2003 11:57 pm	
<p>Rhiannon heard the missile lock in her headset as she arced around the asteroid, and spewed more Gaelic vitriol. She hadn't thought that she'd presented enough of a profile for a missile to get a lock, but apparently, she had. Frantically, she began weaving around smaller asteroids, trying to shake the lock, when the edge of the Stonegaze blast hit her.</p> <p>Her maneuvering thrusters, thank God, hadn't been knocked out, so she was able to control her craft and prevent it from hitting any chunks of rock, but anything more complex than that was outside of her capabilities. She noted idly, between bouts of invective, that the missile that had been tailing her had swerved wildly away, exploding harmlessly against a rock, so that was one less thing to worry about.</p> <p>She began popping the circuit breakers in her cockpit, as nearly all of them had been tripped when the EMP blast struck her Medusa. One by one, her systems came online, although the breaker for her sensors refused to stay in, meaning that she was effectively blind, so far as her computer was concerned. "Och, well," she muttered to herself, and began scanning the sky frantically for her opponent, Ursula, and <i>her</i> opponent.</p> <p>It was then that she noticed a squadron of Sirens entering the asteroid field, followed by a squadron of Nagas, both squadrons coming with a bone in their teeth.</p> <p>Rhiannon keyed her comm on the open frequency. "Uhm... guys... I migh' beh a wee bit off on this, but they don' look tae friendly. An' nae, I didna program THEM..."</p>		
Alex	Fri Dec 26, 2003 5:30 am	
<p>Nef barely caught Claymore's message as her systems started to kick back in. She swore loudly as her sensors came up and confirmed Claymore's assesment. "Administrator Simulation Override! We've got a whole new ball game girls!"</p> <p>Her sensors quickly did the math for her. "Ok... We've just come out of a Stonegaze attack, I'm down a missle, and Ursula is the only one who wasn't hit by an EMP. Meanwhile, we have 2 groups of 6-8 automated Sirens and Nagas closing in for the kill." She smiled in amusement. "Anyone wanna take bets that we get our butts kicked?" she asked, knowing full well that, statisticly, a Medusa could not successfully take on more than one Siren.</p> <p>Nef quickly coaxed her ship into operating status as Ursula took up a defensive position, protecting the other ships. "Guys... the one thing we may have over those automated Sirens and Nagas is that their AI is somewhat predicable. We need to be very aware of what they're doing. Anyone have major system problems that we should know about?"</p>		
Vexus	Fri Dec 26, 2003 9:37 pm	
<p>Crone beheld the incoming AI combatants with surprising calmness.</p>		

*That's because it's not real, and you know it. What happens when you face such a force in the true frozen waste of space? How will you act when your Kobiashi Maru actually comes to collect?*

She pushed such thoughts from her mind, for at this moment they were irrelevant. Upon hearing Nef's request on ship status, Crone gave her a grunt of disgust.

"How 'bout I start with what on my ship still works? It'll be faster."

Her maneuvering thrusters were almost gone, but her main booster still responded. Her targeting sensors were gone and she couldn't remember if that meant her missiles wouldn't lock. The stonegaze seemed alright... but a red flashing light also registered a loss of life support. As this was a sim, a small clock beneath the flashing light began to tick away the seconds left before either carbon dioxide poisoning and/or suffocation would claim her. Offhand, she briefly wondered how likely it was to lose such a heavily shielded system as life support while other systems had survived. Was it bad luck... or another administrative decision like the one that closed in on her squadron? She couldn't rule out either one at this point. Well, she could try to do something useful with the time she had left in any case.

"Crone to , " she hesitated for a moment and uttered a small humorless laugh. Their squad was not only at near-half strength, but it didn't even have a name.

"Crone to my fellow medusa pilots. I have no idea how this new fight will end, but I may have a plan to begin it on more favorable terms. Shall we form up?"

*Well, listen to me, she thought, trying to give orders as if I'd done this a hundred times before. Will they even follow me? Will someone else take the reins? or will we again scatter into our own near-hopeless battles?*

Whatever happened, two things were certain: the enemy ships were closing fast... and the clock was ticking.

To her surprise, her squadmates responded and the four fighters headed towards the new, larger force. Crone explained what she had in mind over the comm. Ursula and Claymore seemed to agree, but Nef seemed to be hesitant. Before Crone to think to ask if she had a better idea, two things happened that tabled the discussion. One was the engaging of the enemy ships' afterburners, bringing them into weapons range. Second was a stray asteroid that struck Nef's craft and sent it off course. With no time to change strategies, the three remaining ships continued in tight formation as the enemy ships locked on and fired a missile salvo. For a few moments, the three medusas didn't flinch.

"NOW!" Crone yelled over the comm.

The medusas dumb-fired their stonegazes and did a sort of cross-pattern, save for Crone, whose thrusters only allowed her a gradual course change. Immediately, they fired their boosters for all they were worth and manually detonated their mines. The combined EMP blast was large but still too far from the oncoming ships to get them caught within it. However, the missiles trailing the medusas were in range and lost their locks. The whole immediate area was washed in high-energy EMP waves and made sensors useless... in short, the odds were a little more even for the moment. Ursula swung onto the tail of a naga and got off some good hits before another naga got on her own six. Claymore shot up a siren to space debris and chased a naga with an IR missile as the EMP screen cleared, but then she was being hunted by a pair of heat-seekers. Unable to maneuver well, Crone was immediately set upon by a trio of sirens and wondered how many seconds she could frustrate their efforts before they gunned her down.

Alex

Fri Dec 26, 2003 10:32 pm

It hit Nef totally unaware. A small asteroid had hit the side of her ship, and sent her flailing father into the field. She fought to regain control of her ship. Why had she not seen it coming?! As she regained control of her ship, she noticed that the fight had already begun. Her team was under attack by undamaged, superior forces, and they all knew they wouldn't survive.

Nef looked about as she tried to make sense of it all, when a loud beeping went off. Two sirens had broken off, and were heading right for her. Before she could get her ship's engines back up and running, a target lock sensor went off. A missile was now heading straight for her.

*I didn't want to do this so soon!!* She hit a button on her panel that ran a program.

From behind a large rock, six Aries-class Assault fighters appeared. The one in the lead fired and destroyed the missile heading for Nef's Medusa, while the two next to it hit the enemy sirens from the side. One exploded, while the other was sent hurdling into an asteroid.

"*Black Rose* Squadron to Nefertiti. We're here to help." Came a calm voice over Nef's comm channel.

"Great to see you *Black Rose*." said Nef with a relieved smile. "Can you help my friends?"

"Already doing that. *Black Rose* out." Came the voice as the Aries squadron easily took on the Sirens and Nagas by surprise.

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Nefertiti stood at attention as Lt. Voeller eyed her angerily. "You interfered with a simulation designed to test your reactions in a no-win scenario! Why?!"

"Sir! The simulation was altered previous to my infraction sir. I was merely evening the playing field sir!" Nef responded without breaking eye contact with her.

"Would you mind telling me HOW you managed to hack into your simulation pod?!"

"Sir. You don't sim as much as I do without learning a thing or two on how to program a simulation, sir. This knowledge allowed me to download *Black Rose* squadron into the simulation, sir."

"Where did you get this *Black Rose* squadron?"

"Sir. I made it sir." Nef responded.

Voeller looked carefully at a record of the simulation, and the work that the *Black Rose* squadron did. "You MADE this simulated squadron?"

Nef smiled. "Yes sir."

If Voeller was impressed, she didn't show it. "Never the less, you interfered with a simulation designed to test your abilities. You will be vashing and cleaning the Sim room by yourself before you sleep tonight. Clear?"

Nef's smile had vanished. "Yes sir..."

Voeller nodded at her. "Dismissed."

Nef slumped her shoulders as the door closed behind her. She turned and walked back to the locker room to change before she began to clean the sim-pod room.

Charon	Sat Dec 27, 2003 11:02 am
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Rhiannon had forgotten how many nerves her biology teacher had said were in the human hand, but she recalled an insanely large number that she had blown off as impossible.

She believed her teacher now. She felt each individual one. Mopping the squadbay and the head had been a labor of several hours, even with Ursula's help, and Lieutenant Voeller's including "mop" in the gear locker's nomenclature had been a bit misleading: all that there was inside was some ratty scuzz towels, several gallons of cleaning solution, undiluted, and several cans of Brasso for the brightwork. How her fingers ached.

Gym #3 had proved to actually be about the size of a small classroom, just a few racks of freeweights, a couple treadmills, stair-steppers and a pair of well-used exercise bikes, so the cleanup there had only taken a half-hour, and had left the pair more than able to tackle the daunting full-size squad-bay, intended for use by a platoon of 60-plus Marines.

While the pair worked, they'd talked, mostly about the mission at first, but Ursula had prodded Rhiannon for bits and pieces about her life, which she'd found herself reluctantly telling the short girl.



"It's no as if therre'e a great deal tae tell, lass," she said between breaths as she pushed the towel from one end of the squad bay to the other. "Didna dae sae well in school tha' the Unis wanted mae, an' I had nae ambitious ootside school. Looked a' the military, and' especially wi' how things arrre gettin', they were morre than happy tae take me, especially afterrr I tested well enough fer pilot."

But, oddly, whenever she attempted to get Veneberg to open up, the girl would either clam up or change the subject. It was really rather frustrating.

Finally, the work was finished, and Rhiannon now lay on her bunk, thinking things over. She was very pissed about how their superiors had taken charge of "her" training program, and near-furious with 2LT Carter for how she'd hacked the mission, and had obviously had the means to the whole time. She felt somehow undermined by the whole thing, as though the slight edge of competency that she'd begun showing had been ripped away by the actions of a peer.

When she voiced this to Ursula, the other girl put things in a different light. "Think about it, Claymore," she said, lying on her side and looking at Rhiannon's supine form on the rack next to hers, "Like you said, she'd had the capability the whole time, and yet didn't use it. What does that tell you about her? That she was willing to give the scenario a chance when it was just us four. But as soon as outsiders stuck their nose in, she opening up with an Alpha Strike. That shows that she's willing to go the distance for the squadron."

"Hmmp... alsaе shows tha' she's a wee bit prone tae gettin' herself an' oos all in hot waterrr," she grumbled, but much less vehemently than before. She was willing to give Ursula's words merit, and wait until she spoke to Carter about upending the program.

She also made a mental note to see the Doc tomorrow morning for some ointment. For now, there was chow call. Pulling on her fatigue jacket and trousers, she and Ursula shambled to the chow hall.

Vexus

Sat Dec 27, 2003 6:31 pm

To Aurora, the events immediately after the sim run seemed of relative unimportance. There was Jessica being angrily called to the CAG's office, no doubt for her little "cavalry" hacking stunt. But after that, the rest was just an irrelevant blur in the midst of her continual reflection on what she could have done differently in the sim. The physical sessions and routines were nothing so rigorous as what she was used to, and the old jokes about the softness of the "fly-boys" echoed in her head from time to time. The classes would have normally been of interest to her, but still her mind seemed to tune out the lectures and wander back to the day's previous events.

*I wonder what the first lieutenant was looking for in our stumbling around? What are we even doing out here?*

She recalled the look of the CAG's eyes staring into her own and shuddered. As the class progress, she became vaguely aware of when Jessica snuck into the back of the classroom. She saw Rhiannon shoot her a disapproving look, and Ursula looking a little uncomfortable. For herself, Aurora wasn't sure what to think of Jessica's little counter-cheat in the sim. It did see fair from an objective point of view, but Aurora had experienced for herself that what's fair hardly mattered to superior officers. It was one thing to hate what they shouted at you, it was another thing entirely to shout back at them. But in a way that's what Jessica had done all the same, and Aurora wondered how well she had faired in her private meeting with the CAG.

After class, the embarrassment flooded back to her. Everyone but herself had cleaning to do. Trying to keep busy, Aurora unpacked her things in her quarters, but didn't take as long as she had hoped and she soon found herself wandering the corridors. She told herself it was just to get familiar with the ship, but she found herself lingering near the places where her new colleagues were washing and scrubbing. Quietly listening to Ursula and Rhiannon in the squadbay, passing by to steal a quick glance at Jessica in one of the corridors. She didn't think they saw her, and that was all for the better. They might think she was hanging around to gloat over her free time. Or worse, that she had come because she was starting to think of them as friends.

*You're doing it again, a voice inside her insisted. Not even a full day yet, and little by little you push your heart closer to their hands. Do you not remember why you came here in the first place? Do your duty till the war is over and nothing more. Then it is home. Homeward bound. Don't forget it.*

She wouldn't forget it, but she lingered still near her squadmates. As they finished their cleaning duties, Aurora retreated to the mess hall. She choked down this stuff they called "food", and promised herself to make some actual dishes if she had the time. Maybe she could cook a decent meal for her squadmates (*Don't forget it.*), purely on a professional level of course.

As she washed the bad taste from her mouth with a can of soda, Aurora watched some ANN news segments on a nearby screen. Heavy fighting reported in Troy Sector, more troop movements from the Midsystems to the Outsystems, and leaked info from the Directorship about new weapons testing. Aurora had a cynical grin on her face. Who needed intelligence when the media told you so much? No wonder the rebels had suprised the Terran Navy so many times before. There were more items. The stock market was up, the Senate was deadlocked on a new spending bill... and the Ronin had beaten the Broadwords by a field goal in the last quarter. That was good, very good. Their loss put her Greyhelms within reach of the playoffs.

As she nodded to herself she didn't notice as Rhiannon and Ursula entered the room.

Alex

Sat Dec 27, 2003 9:55 pm

Jessica sighed as the call for dinner rang. Her stomic growled a bit, but she fought it off with a nutrient bar she had taken from her pocket. It was a commercial nutrient bar, so it tasted a lot better than the Navy's nutrient bars...

Jessica was in the middle of mopping the floors of the empty sim-pod room and wouldn't dare stop for dinner. She had lowered the gravity in the sim-pod room to 0.3 so she could easily clean all the walls and the ceiling without mag-boots or hoisting equipment. She thought that if she cleaned the room really well, it might get her a few extra points with Lt. Voeller. She didn't know how much longer she could of looked into her eyes without her soul collapsing...

Early on, she had jumped over to the Master Control panel for the sim-pods and began typing into a keyboard. Using the data from their sim that day as a template for each of the fighters, calculating the same enviroment and a different objective... She began her new sim with the same 4 pods and walked back to continue mopping as the sim ran.

She looked towards the doorway she knew Aurora had been leaning against, but didn't see her. She would of liked to talk to her, but everytime she had gotten close to talking, she had felt a strange vibe, and thought better of it. *It's probably best to leave the squad alone for now. Some of them are probably pissed at me.* She told herself.

*What you did, you did for the team. You do it with whatever squad you are with. A voice told her. You protect your squad, no matter what, even if you hate their guts. It's a very bad character flaw.*

Jessica scowled at the voice. *I don't leave my squad behind. Character flaw or not!* She argued. She sighed again. *Just like Dave and James never did...*

The voice didn't respond. Jessica finished the basic mopping and got out the metal polish. She began to apply it to the walls and ceiling, to help protect it against future dirt, and to give it a really cool shine. When she had finished, she grabbed the non-slick polish and began using it on the floor. She knew from experience that you never want a slick floor in a sim-pod room.

She finished up by giving all the sim-pods a thorough polishing, made sure everything was clean, and that they would work great in the morning.

By the time she had finished it was close to 3 AM, her body was totally exhausted, but her mind was racing to see the results of her sim. She dragged herself over to the Master Control Panel, and frowned. She had been running the sim over and over in her mind, and her all-night simulation had just proven what she, herself, had concluded.

The sim showed that of the 397 permutations the sim went through, only 3 would of allowed all the members of her squad to live through the attack of Sirens and Nagas. And all three required teamwork from the beginning. Since they had decided to dogfight each other from the beginning, they wouldn't have survived...

Jessica sighed, and decided to tell the squad her results during breakfast.

Charon

Mon Dec 29, 2003 1:12 pm

Rhiannon and Ursula walked into the chowhall, grabbed their trays and assorted rations, chatting idly all the while. It seemed that the pair of them shared an interest in football, and mild disdain tinged with curiosity at the American sport with the same name that never really caught on in

Europe.

"Speakin' of," remarked Rhiannon, as she indicated the wide-panel TV set opposite a row of benches, and the pair sat down. Rhiannon wondered why Ursula stiffened suddenly until she noted who she'd sat down next to. "Erm.. hello, Crone..."

An uncertain expression lingered on the features of the tall pilot. "Claymore. Just watching the football scores, but I can head off if you'd rather..."

Rhiannon cocked an eyebrow. "Now wherrre'd ye get a silly idea like that, lass? Ye were here firrst, sae if anyone needs tae gae, it'd be oos."

She continued between bites as she shovelled down dinner. "Boot why'd we want tae gae an' do that? We'rrre all in the same squadron, an' it's obvious we need tae starrrrt werkin' togethah..." She trailed off as noticed something. "Come tae think o' it, where's Nefertiti?"

Aurora blushed. "She's... working right now."

Ursula nodded. "Oh yeah... the sim room cleanup."

Aurora nodded slightly, then frowned. "As well as... something else. I don't know what it was she was doing with the computer in there, but while she was cleaning, it was accessing itself furiously."

Rhiannon slammed back her soda and stood up. "Only one way tae find oot then, me lassies. Let's gae an' have a wee look-see."

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The trio sat at the edge of the doorway, watching Jessica scrub furiously at the brightwork. Rhiannon noted that she was even working the Brasso into areas that had doubtless not been seen since the pods were constructed, and was impressed in spite of herself. She indicated with her head that the trio should head back to the squadbay.

Upon arriving, Ursula spoke first. "I see what you meant about the computer... looked like it was running a simulation the entire time, or several simultaneous sims, only no pods were in use."

Rhiannon frowned. "Mebbe she was tryin' tae see what strategy would hae werked back there?"

Ursula nodded thoughtfully. "Makes sense tae me... to me!" She blushed, and Rhiannon chuckled roguishly, winking to Aurora, who wore a small smile, as though unsure she should have it.

Rhiannon's jaw cracked into a massive yawn. "Well, dinnae ken aboot ye, lassies, boot I need some shut-eye. No watch for me tonight, how about ye?" Upon receiving the negatives from the other two, she nodded, stretching. "Then I suggest we rack oot fer the night."

And with few wasted motions, she removed her uniform, hung it up, and proceeded to match deed to word.

Alex

Mon Dec 29, 2003 9:04 pm

"Dawn" broke onboard the Morrigan promptly at 7am, just as Jessica had feared. She hadn't gotten much sleep as it's wasn't until 3:45am that she had fallen into bed. She'd dealt with low amounts of sleep before, but never after doing something as strenuous as she had last night.

She still hadn't unpacked, and her quarters were filled with unopened boxes. Four or five were already broken into, but only one of them didn't contain manga. Jessica quickly grabbed a clean shirt and some pants from one of her boxes and a copy of Love Hina #6 from another box, then headed out to breakfast. Almost every muscle in her body ached, and she knew she was going to sleep sometime today...

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Jessica was amazed that no one had started a mutiny in the kitchen when she tasted her food, after sitting down near her squadmates. "It tastes like chicken..." She commented.

"So?" Ursula asked.

Jessica looked at her with a worried expression. "It's Macaroni and Cheese."

Rhiannon rolled her eyes. "Lass! We know yer wer runnin' soom kin'a sim las night... Ya mind tellin' us what'd ya werre dooin'?"

Jessica took a deep breath, and looked at her squadmates. "Last night, as I was cleaning the Sim-Pod room, I ran a simulation to see under what conditions we could of survived that attack of Sirens and Nagas, without help from *Black Rose*. I used information from the sim as a basic template for all of us, choose the same enviroment settings, and ran it. It ran 397 different simulations. Only 3 of those allowed all of us to live. And all three of those required teamwork from the very beginning. Since we'd decided to dogfight each other from the beginning, there was no way we could of survived the battle." Jessica paused for a moment to let this sink in. "It seems clear to me that the higher ups want to test our capabilities against impossible odds, and that we'll have to complete our missions. I think that in today's sim, we should work together towards a common goal, less we face another no-win scenario like we did yesterday. And if you guys don't mind, I have a few sims in mind that should do the trick."

An uncomfortable silence lingered around the table. Jessica took this moment to take another bite of her chicken-tasting macaroni, as she waited for a response.

Vexus

Mon Dec 29, 2003 10:00 pm

Aurora shook some more pepper onto her food. It made the food taste like pepper, but at least that was how pepper was supposed to taste.

"Pehaps they would have sent the ships no matter what we had decided to do. And they may do something similar today in any scenario you come up with, Nef." Nef turned to Aurora with an exasperated look and their eyes met for an instant before Aurora dropped her own to her plate.

"Yer shoona inafere with'na sim, Nef." Rhiannon said, her look uncertain but still a little angry. Jessica's brow lowered.

"I should've let us die then, huh? I matched them tit-for-tat, and the CAG knows it. My squadron did the job, didn't it?" Rhiannon now matched Jessica's look.

"Aye, it did da joob very well. Sorry our coompany wasna good enough for yer."

"When we're really out there, Nef," Aurora interjected, "we won't have the *Black Rose* to help us."

"We'll see," Nef replied, and stabbed a noodle hard with her fork. Aurora gave an asking look to Ursula, who seemed to pick up on what her squadmate wanted.

"Well, Nef," Ursula said in a matter-of-fact tone that seemed to ease some of the tension, "what do you have in mind?"

Alex

Tue Dec 30, 2003 12:40 am

Jessica looked around to make sure no one was overhearing them. "*Black Rose* is a simulation. A collection of sensor data, Aled voice traffic, and simulated damage. When you're out there," she indicated to the window that showed the region of space they were currently traversing, "when you can't see, all that you have is comm traffic, sensors and automated damage reports. If we were to "gunk up" the enemy's windows, they'd have to rely on their sensors to get information... What if I were to find a way to hack into their systems somehow, and make them think that *Black Rose* was real?" Jessica finished, looking expectantly at her squadmates.

They looked back at her, unimpressed. Ursula was the first to speak up. "I... I don't think that's a good idea."

Rhiannon shook her head. "Aye lass. I dunna think it'll work..."

Jessica looked at Aurora hopelessly, but Aurora just shook her head. Jessica slumped into her chair, her left arm propping up her head, depressed. She pushed some of her breakfast around with her fork for a moment in her depression, as the others ate for a moment in silence.

"They sent the ships to test us. A simulation override like that requires either a CAG's or a Captain's level command code." Jessica muttered. "We're being tested by the higher ups." She perked up a little, as the others turned towards her. "But a simulation over-ride has to be build into the simulation. I am the only one who can alter my personal simulations, because I have an administrator lock-out on mine." Jessica said with a devilish smile. She looked at the squad.

"Anyone wanna try and sim at my level?" She asked.

Charon

Tue Dec 30, 2003 7:31 am

Rhiannon shot a glance at Jessica. "Nothin' personal, lass, boot have ye considered yer words therrre?"

She held up a finger on her left hand whilst her right toyed idly with her food, occasionally shovelling some up into her mouth. "Ye talk oof simming, an admirable training trait, te be sure... but yer sim record spoke oof THOUSANDS oof hours in th'sims. Ye can be a god in th'virtual arena, boot when ye take it ootside, it's soomthin' else... The opponents arre real, an' there's nae cheat code tae make things go yer way."

She paused to take a sip of her fruit juice. "It's no tha I dinnae think that yer idea has merit: it does. The idea of fightin' an enemy who's lookin' fer someone who doesnae exist appeals tae me fer some reason," she looked as Jessica with a lop-sided grin, her emerald eyes twinkling, before she sobered again. "Boot in all yer simmin', ye've foond a way tae fool th'system. Th'real world doesnae werk like that. The combat I've seen, while no much, I admit, showed me that."

Rhiannon toyed with her powdered eggs again whilst looking at some point far removed from the Morrigan's officer chow hall. "All th' challenges an' simtime in th' world don' mean a thing when the missiles fly."

If she'd been paying attention, she would have noticed Aurora nodding, her eyes taking on a similar half-glazed cast as she, too, revisited some scene from her past.

Rhiannon blinked, then looked at Jessica. "I guess what I was meanin' tae say was that simmin's all verry well an' good fer trainin', but don' lose sight o' th'fact that all this is preparin' oos fer real life combat. We cannae afford tae get so wrapped up in th' sims tha' we ferrrget that soon, we dae this fer real."

And then, with a grin, she rounded on Jessica. "An nae, havin' said tha', what de ye have in mind, lass? An' soomthin' with a bit o' team flavor, this time, eh? I have a feelin' that when we train together often enough, our weaknesses an' strengths will becom readly apparent, withoot needin' to fight amongst oorselves."

Vexus

Tue Dec 30, 2003 9:44 am

"The opponents arre real..." Rhiannon had said, and that had begun to bring back the memories. The timing was inconvenient as it always was. The thickly accented voice began to fade, and the images Aurora had fought so long to keep away

*Down the second tunnel!*

began to creep back to her. She needed to refocus. Now was not the time for

*They could be anyone.*

such things. Her father had once said that self-pity poisons the soul, and she thought it to be true. Yet, they kept coming,

*State your location, soldier. This whole operation's gone to hell!*

echoes of spilled blood crying out on a far-away world. It was not the time for this. Had Rhiannon finished speaking yet? Did someone just ask her a question?

*KILL HIM!!!*

Aurora snapped back to attention. Ursula was giving her a concerned look.

"Did you say something?" Aurora asked.

"I asked if you were ok," Ursula replied. "You look pale."

"I'm alright," Aurora lied, "I'm just really not accustomed to the food on this ship. I don't think it agrees with me." Ursula did not seem wholly convinced by this explanation, but didn't press the issue. Aurora turned to Jessica, determined to address the matter at hand.

"I'm with Claymore, Nef. You have more experience than all of us put together. Tell us what

scenario you're planning. I'll fly with you."

For a moment, Jessica looked for some trace of mocking on Aurora's face, but seemed to find none. To herself, Aurora felt that she could trust Jessica, and that was good. They were a squadron in the making, and a squadron without trust was just a group of flying coffins waiting to be nailed shut.

Alex

Tue Dec 30, 2003 10:11 am

Jessica typed quickly into the sparkling Sim-Pod room's Master Control Panel. Downloading, checking and double checking her data, she typed in her simulation's name, "Carter-Starlancer-0435", and began to load it.

She turned to her fellow pilots. "I have something of an affinity to 20th & 21st century space sims. This sim is based upon a video game released in the VERY late 20th century."

"Does this mean the visual quality of the simulation will not be at it's peak?" Aurora asked.

Jessica smiled. "Nope. I took the basic mission concepts, retrofitted it with our fighters, and made a few tweaks to it. Let's just say that this simulation is larger than life. I've have veterans try some of my sims, and they said they couldn't tell the difference between my sim, and really flying." She smiled as the simulation finished loading and she set a few final variables. "I think my flight experience at the academy really helped my realism factor." Her eyes faded for a moment, as if remembering something, but she suddenly perked back up again. "There. All loaded."

They boarded their sim-pods, and as soon as they all had hooked into the comm system, Jessica began to explain the simulation. "This is one of my more difficult simulations. Six fighters, of the pilot's choice, are to mini-jump to a base-

"Wait a sec..." Ursula interrupted. "Mini-Jump?"

Jessica nodded. "Yes. It's like a limited fighter-based jump system. It can only be used twice before it has to refuel. Anyways, we are to take out the enemy jump-gate system, which is a major threat to our side, as it will allow the enemy to jump anywhere in our territory."

"Hang on!" Ursula interrupted again. "That's not how jump systems work!"

Jessica sighed. "Do you want to try this Sim or not? You just have to give up a few preconceptions on how things work sometimes."

"But there's no basis for this mission in real life! We'd never be sent on a mission like that!" Ursula protested.

Jessica ignored her objection. "Now, since we're a 4-pilot team right now, I've given us two AI pilots to fill out our ranks. *Condor* and *Blade* will give us fighter support. *Blade* will most likely take an Aries Class Assault fighter, and *Condor* will probably go for a Naga. Feel free to choose whatever fighter you wish. Do keep in mind that heavy resistance is expected, and the jump-gate will most likely be heavily shielded."

"Is anyone else concerned that Nef knows exactly what to expect and we don't?!" Ursula demanded.

"LOOK!" Nef shouted loudly, pronouncing it with a slam of her fist. "My sims are designed to be randomized to the degree that any intelligence I give you could completely change by the time we get there, just like in real life! If you have a problem with that, feel free not to try this sim! Otherwise, shut up, and log-in!"

Jessica cut her mic, slammed the top of her pod, and pressed her start button.

The rest of the group looked at each other, as if wondering what they should do.

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Nefertiti waited in her Aries-Class assault fighter with *Blade* and *Condor* outside of the TNV *Morrigan*. One by one, the rest of her team logged in. When Ursula joined in, Nef's heart relaxed a bit out of relief.

"Nef? I'm sorry. I said I would fly with you, and I will." Her voice came in over the comm system.

Nef smiled. "Thank you. And I'm sorry I yelled at you. I... I tend to be a bit over-protective about my sims."

Nef could hear Ursula smile. "I understand."

"I ate to innerupt, but danne we ave a genarater to destroy?" Claymore's voice came in over the comm.

Nef's smile widened. "Your right. Prepare to activate jump-drive system. Oh, and hold on... This can get a little bumpy."

A small wormhole appeared in front of each of the 6 ships. The ships entered the wormholes, and their new mission began...

Charon	Fri Jan 02, 2004 11:08 am
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Rhiannon blinked at the effects that the simulator was displaying to her... she had no idea that the system could even RECOGNIZE the inputs required, let alone implement them into the program. Then she examined the visual effects again, and got an impish smile.

"Unpleasantly like bein' drunk, that," she said.

"What's so bad about that?" asked a wryly amused Jessica.

"Ask a glass o' water sometime," said Rhiannon, cackling.

After a moment of confused silence, the wormhole travel sequence ended, and the fighters arrived at a point out-system from the jumpgate that was obviously their target.

Unfortunately, it appeared to be well-defended, with a corvette standing by, guarded by six Nagas and four Sirens, with a pair of Harpies darting in and about the jump platform. Rhiannon grimaced as she examined the loadout on her Naga. She'd loaded a pair of torpedoes for use on the jumpgate, but the corvette was likely to be too nimble to be taken down by them, unless she somehow managed to evade the fire from the escorting fighters and it's own defenses.

Part of her was still extremely put out at the unorthodox methods that Jessica was employing - annoyed that she felt the need to go outside of a perfectly good randomizing program.

This part of her had been bitching since she got the first briefing from Nefertiti, and was likely to continue to do so, so she paid it little mind as her tactician mind-set began to take over. "Okae, those Nagas arrre gonna be a pain, but th'Sirens an' Harpies might be tae nimble tae be easy fer the heavier fighters... I suggest a hit-an'-fade on th'jumpgate: torp it, then deal wi' th'fighters as they coome, an' hit the corvette wi' any torps remainin' after the gate goes doon. Any other suggestions?"

Alex	Fri Jan 02, 2004 12:33 pm
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"Sounds like a good plan." Nef responded with a smile as she checked her sensors. "Except that I'm getting intermittent readings that looks like a shield generator protecting the jumpgate. I can't be sure at this range, but if it's there, we'll need to take out the shields before those torps will do any good." she responded with a bit of surprise.

She knew this program inside and out, but her randomizer was too good. She had never before encounter a shield generator on this particular sim... It definatly raised the bar for the program in her eyes.

Her loadout was her standard Aries loadout of 10 IR Missles and 2 torps, and she knew that Blade would have at least 1 torp, and a Sonic Missle or two... "Blade and I could take on the fighters and the corvette. I've got two torps I can use against the corvette, and those Sirens won't be too much of a problem with the Aries. We just have to look out for Shadow Ash fighters... Those things are pests." Nef nearly shuddered at the thought of encountering a squad or two of those things... "If we run into those, Blade and I will need help eliminating them. Otherwise, Condor can help you take out those generators and the gate."

Nef looked over to the two silent pilots. "Crone, Ursula. What do you guys think?"

Vexus	Fri Jan 02, 2004 10:55 pm
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"Stand by," Crone replied. She was still recovering from the jump. It wasn't quite as bad as a real

jump, but she had not been prepared for the dazzling display of light and it had disoriented her. She glanced over her Naga's loadout: 20 missiles, 4 torpedoes... hopefully it would be enough. She switched her comm link over to Ursula.

"Well, what will it be, fighters or the gate?"

"I never liked bombing runs," Ursula said with a smile in her voice. "Always felt too vulnerable. Besides, I don't think an Aries should sit out on a dog-fight."

"Fair enough, but don't stray too far. We may need you."

"You'll probably need me," Ursula said with a chuckle. Crone opened her comm link once again.

"Alright, Nef, Ursula wants to dance with you and Blade. Claymore, Condor, and myself will head for the gate. Everyone be on the lookout for a shield generator. No one get cocky out here. Call for help if you need it." With that Crone charged her guns and turned her Naga towards the jumpgate.

Alex

Sat Jan 03, 2004 6:33 am

Nef was glad that whoever was on radar duty was slacking off. She had gotten a torpedo lock on the corvette (which she could now see was designated the OSR Minno) before they had started firing their weapons.

She, Blade and Ursula had gone in, in a trinary pattern, taking out missiles and blasting the turrets as the Minno began launching more fighters. "Torp Locking. Firing." Nef reported. Her torp disengaged and began an entry into the side of the corvette as she pulled up and skimmed the surface of the ship. She got off a few shots at the hull and at the turrets before she cleared the ship. She knew her point-blank range would take out a lot of the hull's plating, leaving a lot of the main systems vulnerable, but before she could come around for another pass, her fighter was rocked by enemy fire. By the time she had swung around and gotten a look at her enemy, her blood went cold.

No less than 50 Shadow Ash fighters were heading right for her. "Shit..." After a quick deep breath, her blood boiled, she hit the comm button, and a wide grin spread across her face. "Looks like it's time to party girls!! I've got a swarm of pests, and I'm going in!"

Ursula and Blade had crossed over to the other side of the Minno, and were just cresting back over the ship in time to see Nef fire two missiles into the cloud of fighters, then hit her afterburners as she shot into the swarm, her guns blazing. "Nef! Don't!!" Ursula shouted, but before she had finished, Nef had entered the swarm. "Crap... Blade, we-" But Blade was already going after the cloud of fighters. She had started by firing her two sonic missiles to either side of the cloud, which incapacitated nearly 4-6 fighters each, allowing Blade to take them out quickly. Ursula pounded her comm button. "Ursula to Squad. We've encountered 3 squads of Shadow Ash fighters. Nef's gone into the cloud of fighters, Blade is trying to wipe them out from the outside, and I'm beginning my run to help. We've incapacitated the corvette, but some of the turrets may still work. We've dealt with the sirens, and 3 of the Nagas. I've lost the Harpies, so they might still be around. Out." Ursula felt a twitch in her stomach as she hit her afterburners and began to help whittle away at the swarm of Shadow Ash fighters, but felt relieved that she could still see explosions from inside the cloud, indicating that Nef was still kicking ass.

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 "There are no stars..." Nef commented as she continued to fire her weapons at anything that moved. She had gone battle-crazy for a moment, and her natural pilot instincts had kicked in... She was now fighting without thinking. Her reflexes had tested unusually high at the academy, even if her co-ordination was a little off... But no one had ever defeated her in a 1 on 1 battle in a sim. Even in her 2 years at the academy with real ships and real simulations, she had never been defeated by another human.

But her automated sims were another matter... She had created several Kobiashi Marus for herself, and for some reason... This one was all too familiar... Surrounded by enemy ships, no support, constant attack... Her systems were now highly damaged. She could still fly and fight, but everything else in her systems was dead. Sensors, navigation, missile targeting, the HUD... All of it was dead. Her life-support system was working at minimal settings. If she was lucky, her jump-drive would get her home, but in a moment, it wouldn't matter.

*It looks like I didn't survive this one...* She told herself. *Why didn't I call for backup?* She asked.



"Urs...a to... fertiti..." Nef's ears perked up. Amongst her many damaged systems, her comm channel now had a very limited range. That meant...  
 "...rtiti. Onl... few mor... ho... les left." A renewed spirit filled her body. She gripped her controls harder, and began to fire like mad again. Soon, the enemies were gone, and Nef was floating in a debris field. Ursula came up to Nef's ship so that they could see each other in the windows, as Blade went after the two Harpies that was now guarding the Minno.

"You planning on leaving the sim by dying?" Ursula asked with a smile as part of Nef's ship sparked.

Nef smiled back at her. "What? And give up all this?"

Ursula smiled faded as she asked for a status report. "I can move, and shoot. Jump-drive system seems operational, so I'll hopefully be able to make it home. Otherwise, all my systems are fried, including sensors." Nef reported.

Ursula nodded. "Ok then." She repsonded. "Just stick close to me, and I'll help you out."

Nef hesitated for a moment, but then nodded. "Understood."

Vexus	Sat Jan 03, 2004 9:26 am
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"Looks like it's time to party girls!!" Nef had shouted over the comm, and Crone shuddered inspite of herself. Simulation or not, she still couldn't get over Nef's almost crazed excitement whenever she went into battle. In the back of her mind, Crone wondered whether Nef would be the same after they went into a real melee.

Their afterburners engaged, Crone, Condor, and Claymore raced toward the gate. As they neared their target, it became clear that the gate was indeed shielded, and despite what Crone had always seen in the movies, this shield generator was within the shield itself. To make matters worse, three Nagas were approaching to cut off their bombing run.

"It's 3-on-3 ladies," Crone said to her wingmen, "let's show them how to fight with a Naga."

The two groups closed the distance until within missile range. Two clouds of warheads then sprung to life and crossed one another. Crone launched her decoys but kept her course steady, focusing her shields forward. Her shields and armor should be able to repel the first barage, and she just had to make sure her engines were undamaged. Sure enough, the missiles that didn't follow the decoys struck the shields and detonated prematurely. Her armor was cinged, but it didn't look too bad.

Now the ships entered gun range, and Crone raised an interested eyebrow at the first enemy ship, whose shields were down from the missile attack. Guns now blazed on both sides. Without even thinking, Crone made a slight course adjustment, and her ship shot past the lead enemy craft within a few meters. (Later, Crone would kick herself for making such a reckless manuver.) As the enemy flew past her starboard side, she swung her guns to track it, the PPCs slamming into the Naga's hull. Crone's guns then swung to fire aft, and a final shot stuck the enemy's fusion core. The Naga's aft section erupted and the ship spun away out of control.

Checking her surroundings, Crone was relieved to see both her wingmen tailing her with only light to moderate damage. Behind them, the remaining two Nagas were swinging around, but it was of no consequence. They would never catch up to them in time.

"Now to business," Crone said into the comm. "Condor and I will take out the shield generator, then you'll have a clear road, Claymore."

"Aye, lass," Claymore replied. "Brrreak the arrmorr and this Claymore will drrraw blood!"

Condor dove in first and raked the shielding around the generator with plasma fire. In an instant, Crone saw the magnetic fields weaken. Then, just as Condor shot past the generator, the AI pilot loosed a torpedo and the generator buckled from the impact. All about the gate, the shields flickered. Now it was time for Crone to seal its fate. Her Vulcan cannons roared and two torpedoes charged forward. The generator was ripped to pieces, and the gate shielding vanished. Now Crone and Condor began to swing back. Trusting Claymore to take out the gate, they aimed to make sure the pursuing Naga's didn't harass Clymore as she exited her run.

Charon	Sun Jan 04, 2004 7:46 am
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Her blood pounded in her ears. Rhiannon exulted in the fact that all around her, her squadmates were shredding the opposition. The fighters were being dealt with in quick succession, the gate's shields had been taken down in a tightly coordinated effort by the assaulters, and all that remained was a torpedo run.

A small voice in the back of her mind warned against hubris, and she checked her scanners even as she selected the torpedoes and began listening to the warbling tone that indicated her targetting computer beginning to align the torpedoes sensors on the target.

As she glanced at her screens, she noted that her tail was clear. Crone and Condor were dealing with the two Nagas that had been left behind in their initial run, and the Shadow Ashes were flimsy enough that Ursula, Nefertiti, and Blade were massacring them in short order.

Her targetting computer pinging happily, indicating that the torpedoes were locked on. With a gleeful roar, she stabbed the firing button. And her Naga bucked in a manner not usually brought on by ordinance.

She checked her scanners again, alarmed, and saw that the two Harpies that had evaded the initial attack on the fighters were both on her tail, having slipped past where Crone and Condor were busy with the Nagas. With a screech, she hauled her Naga around, and opened up with a full gun barrage.

(A part of her mind abjectively noted that the simpod rumbled most interestingly when her Vulcans roared, and she might have to try that again sometime when she had some free time to spare.)

One Harpy... disintegrated. There was simply no other word for it. It's wings fell off and were shattered by concentrated Vulcan fire, whilst her PPCs slagged the armor on the main body, imploded the canopy, and left the remains rapidly cooling sludge rolling and twisting in space. "AN' TH'BITCH THA' SPAWNED YE, SASSENACH!" she howled, exulting. She crowed again as, simultaneously, her torpedoes struck the power generator of the jumpgate, causing it to explode in a MOST satisfactory fashion. With a satisfied feral gleam in her emerald eyes, she banked her fighter around, looking for the other insolent whelp that dared to attempt to make her fail.

The other Harpy had broken away from the rain of death, did a modified Immelmann turn and came down inside Rhiannon's dorsal plane, firing rapid laser bursts. Rhiannon's Naga rocked as it was struck by a pair of missiles, and she suddenly decided that anywhere would be a better place to be than right there. Engaging her afterburners, she shot forwards, simultaneously corkscrewing around and mirroring the path that the Harpy had followed on her interception.

She noted that the Harpy was reacting most convincingly, raising her impression of Nefertiti's programming skills, even as she fired bursts around it's path of travel, herding it. As it began to slow, preparatory to either a Sit'n'Spin or a sharp change in direction, Rhiannon ripple-fired the dumb-fire missiles that she had mounted, and opened up with another barrage. The Harpy took everything she dished out, and finally exploded.

"Yer mother was Irish," she cackled, and banked her fighter to assist with the rest of the combat.

Only there was nothing left. The Shadow Ashes were naught but ash in fact as well as name, the other two Nagas were sparking hulks, and the Corvette was DIW, nothing but a stationary weapons platform. Rhiannon contented herself with emptying her remaining missile racks at it from a distance and enjoying the sim's rendering of a capital ship exploding deck by deck. With a contented sigh, she informed the others that she was jumping back to base, and matched deed to word.

And was less than overjoyed to find that the *Morrigan* was under heavy attack. Her sigh this time was most definately NOT contented as she selected full guns, and began tracking the nearest Athena, trying desperately not to be engaged by it's turret.

"Fookin' randomizer," she grumbled. "Doesnae want tae admit defeat..."

Alex

Sun Jan 04, 2004 11:59 am

Ursula and Nefertiti had limped past the Minno and was now approaching the others. Claymore had just jumped back to the Morrigan, and the rest of the team was waiting for her.

"Looks like you got shot up pretty bad." Crone commented.

Nef smiled at her. "Yeah... It was almost worth the kill count. But I need to learn not to do impulsive stuff like that." She responded. "You all ready to get back?"

If she could see into all the cockpits, she would of seen nods from all of them. She shrugged, and began the jump home.

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When they exited the wormholes, they were met with the vantage of the Morrigan under attack. Athenas, Shadow Ashs, Sirens, Sabertooths, Nagas, Phantoms, and Aries ships were fighting everywhere.

Nef barely had time to register everything when a Polon Burst shot past her and hit the Morrigan. She turned to see a Fernes Class Attack Carrier closing in on the Morrigan. "Awww, fuc-" Her ship was rocked by fighter fire. She pulled on the controls, but they no longer responded. She looked around to see that both Condor and Blade had entered the battle, trying to take out the Attack Carrier, but she knew it was futile. It wasn't long before their ships were destroyed by enemy fire.

Crone had gone after to save Claymore from a squad of Shadow Ash fighters and some sirens. Ursula fought valiantly to keep Nef alive, but all Nef could do was watch as Ursula's ship was incinerated. She looked for Crone and Claymore, but all she saw was the final destruction of the Morrigan, which took out most of the ships near it... Crone and Claymore were close to the ship. They couldn't survive it's explosion.

Nef swore again loudly as a large chunk of the ship headed right for her.

Her screen went blank, and a bright red light filled the simulator. She was dead.

**"Objective Achieved, however: Pilot death. Home Base Destroyed. Kills: Negated."**

reported the cold voice of the simulator. Her kills didn't add up if she died. That was a basic rule of sims. *Gives the pilots something to think about.* They had said at the Academy...

Nef waited for a moment before opening her pod. She took that moment to collect herself before facing her squadmates. Her sim had killed them. They probably wouldn't be too happy about that... She opened the pod, got out, and looked into the eyes of her squadmates.

Vexus

Sun Jan 04, 2004 5:30 pm

Crone appeared to have jumped straight to hell, a flurry of ships and weapons fire surrounding the ship that was (for now) their home. Her hands almost seemed to act before her mind had fully grasped what she was seeing. Her remaining torpedoes were dumb fired towards two Athenas approaching the Morrigan. They wouldn't hit, but the bombers would have to break off their runs to avoid them. She saw Claymore pass a Shadow Ash cloud and raced to aid her. Her gunfire made the cloud scatter, but her victory was short lived as her craft was strafed by three Sirens. The laser fire easily tore through her shields and turned her armor into swiss cheese. Soon she found herself rolling end over end through the battle. Struggling to control the craft, she regained some mastery of it and aimed her dying ship at an incoming Athena (she wasn't sure if it was one of the ones she had previously shot at). Hitting her afterburners, she fired her remaining missiles. The warheads stuck the shields, which buckled but did not break. Then, once in range, she squeezed the gun triggers.

Nothing.

*Lovely, that is, the voice of a dead friend sounded in her ear almost gleefully, when you pull the trigger and all you hear is the pounding of your own ticker. Oh yes, it's just f\*\*kin' wonderful!*

Crone's eyes became steely and she kept her course steady. Soon the Athena grew large behind her HUD and collision alarms sounded. It was too late for the Athena to avoid her, it was too late for Crone to change her mind... it was too late for everything.

*Too soon!* she thought as her screen went black. Checking the sim recording, she saw that a missile from a nearby Siren had stuck her ship before impact and driven it off-course even as it had become a fireball. She had been denied that final act of sacrifice.

Quietly, Crone exited her pod, and saw Nefertiti was already standing next to her own. Their eyes met and Crone voiced all her feelings in two words, her voice giving no signs of humor.

"That sucked."

Charon

Mon Jan 05, 2004 6:29 am

Raising the canopy of her simpod, Rhiannon cast a baleful glare at Jessica. "Lass, I think we need tae have a wee werrrd aboot yer programmin' skills... I believe ye've created the galaxy's firrst sentient - an' malevolent - simpod AI."

Jessica's face began to take on a look of total dismay at her words, and she mentally kicked herself for her tone. To show Jessica that there was no harm meant, she chuckled, giving a lopsided rakish grin. "Ye done good wi'it, lass, boot ye might wanna think aboot toning back it's independant decision-makin' skills a wee bit." She clambered out of the pod, stretching and noticing that her hands were still shaking from her firey "death" from the *Morrigan's* explosion. *Fer Andrew's sake, lass, it was only a sim*, she growled to herself.

To her relief, Jessica lightened up, chuckled slightly. "Well, maybe not toning it back, but at least setting up a broader selection of difficulty options. Hmmm..." she trailed off in thought, obviously pondering how to code that in between this session and the next one.

Ursula chuckled and rolled her eyes. "I think we've found the best way to keep Nef occupied on those long stretches between missions." Rhiannon grinned, enjoying the twinkle in the short pilot's eyes. Ursula was the closest thing she had to a younger sister, and anything that kept her sister happy, kept her happy.

Rhiannon glanced at Crone, who was obviously not doing quite so well, and she walked over, speaking in a low tone. "Oi, lass... stupid question, but arre ye okay?" Receiving nothing but a cold glance in return, she swallowed slightly. "Well... if ye wanna talk aboot it sometime..." she said uncertainly, the fire of the simulated combat leaving her veins, taking all her confidence with it. She turned and headed out, mentally berating herself for her lack of tact and poise.

Alex

Mon Jan 05, 2004 8:44 am

As the squad walked out, Jessica walked over to shut down her sim's active memory on the Master Control Panel. It had been a good sim, if a little too high a difficulty setting. As she moved to retrieve the disc, something caught her eye.

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"The bastards!" Jessica said, her face half-filled with the dripping paste that was supposed to be her barbecued steak. Aurora and Rhiannon winced as specks of Jessica's food almost hit their faces.

"Lass, ya mind not talkin' with ya food?" Rhiannon asked.

Jessica swallowed her lunch, and continued her tyraid. "I don't know how they did it, but there was a randomizer over-ride! How could they do that?! The security should be inpenatrible!" Jessica asked her bowl of lunch.

Aurora looked at her with a curious look. "What are you implying?"

Jessica took a careful look around the cafeteria, and leaned towards them. "Someone hacked into the simulation and ordered that attack. According to the data logs, the simulation was just waiting for us to return to the ship in order to end the simulation. We should of jumped back and the simulation would of ended. However, at mission time 07:39, right when the jumpgate was destroyed, someone hacked into the simulation and added that attacking fleet."

Aurora looked at her impassively. "I thought you said they couldn't hack into your simulations."

An exasperated look filled Jessica's face. "They SHOULDN'T of been able to! I have a simulation lockout that denys access to the simulation's events and system settings once it starts. I dunno who they had hack into the simulation, but they've got to be good." She took a bite of something that resembled toast, but tasted like Orange Juice.

Ursula smiled. "I guess we're being tested by the higher ups about all our abilities. That includes your programming skills Nef." Jessica scowled at the idea of people testing her without her knowledge or permission. "Anyways..." Ursula started. "What kind of sim should we do after lunch?"

Nef shrugged her off, depressed. "I don't care. Choose something you guys want to do and I'll go

with it." She pulled out a manga and began to read it as the rest of the squad talked about their next sim.

Vexus

Mon Jan 05, 2004 8:54 pm

Aurora applied some more oregano and a pinch of basil to her pasta, the flavor becoming a little more tolerable. Just before lunch, she had found a spice rack just inside the door to the kitchen, and hoped they didn't mind her borrowing a few samples. Too bad they didn't have some Goddess' Love around... but that was unlikely in times such as these.

The table had grown quiet. Ursula was glancing over at the nearby screen, watching some daytime talk show from Earth, dated by a couple of weeks. Jessica was reading one of those comic books of hers. "Mango" she had called them, or something like that, though Aurora couldn't imagine why a comic would be named after a fruit.

Rhiannon, just to Aurora's left, seemed fixed upon her plate, but Aurora thought she had felt the pilot's eyes upon her every now and then. A part of her felt bad that she had seemed so cold towards Rhiannon's offer to talk. Nonetheless (*Don't forget it.*), there was nothing worth discussing. Nothing that could be changed.

Suddenly, Ursula turned to the group and spoke up.

"How about an escort run? Something more smooth and routine."

"Aye, and more borrring," Rhiannon said, playing with her food.

Ursula looked to Jessica, but she said nothing and buried her face further into her comic book. Ursula gave a desperate look at Aurora, who almost smiled in spite of herself.

"I could use something boring after the last two sim runs," Aurora said. "Besides, you haven't had a chance to call one yet and I can't think of anything. Set it up, and I'll fly with you."

Alex

Tue Jan 06, 2004 10:33 am

As Jessica glanced over the sim's mission briefing, she had the thought of doing a holographic mission briefing setup for her sims. Reading text took too long and seemed to drag on at times. She caught the basics of the mission: Protect the Cargo Ship "Valdese" as it travels from Nav Point 1 to Nav Point 3. Minimal pirate traffic, no Outer System Republic patrols in the area... It looked like a cakewalk. 3 hours of sitting and maybe 15 of battle, if they got lucky... At least, that's what the normal sim called for...

Jessica wanted to be prepared in case their sim wasn't hacked into again, and brought one of her new Manga that had just come from Earth. She was lucky to have caught the cargo pilot after lunch, so she could read it during the sim, assuming it went as planned.

Ursula looked happy as she set up the simulation. Jessica sat waiting in her pod, still depressed that they had hacked into her simulation.

Rhiannon had seemed to of noticed this, and approached Jessica. "Lass... I dunna do ane good ta be moping about just beforre a mission." She said with a smile.

Jessica looked at her, and despite herself, smiled. "Sorry... I'm just still depressed about what happened eariler..."

Rhiannon shook her head. "Dunna worryr about it. Ya the best sim programmarr I've evarr met. I dunna think they'rre gunna be able to do it again."

Jessica smiled, but shook her head. "According to their pattern, we're gonna have big fight on our hands on this mission. I kind of hope not, but I'm prepared for either case." She said, flourishing her new Manga book. She raised her head to Ursula. "Hey Urs! Make sure I have an Aries! Same configuration as our last sim!"

"Got it!" Ursula shouted back, a little disgruntled about the shortening of her name. Rhiannon shook her head with a smile as she walked to her sim pod.

Jessica just sat in her sim pod, and waited for Ursula to finish. She began to read her new book... And instantly realised it was a mistake. It was good... She'd have a hard time putting it down once they got into the mission... At least until the battle started.

Vexus

Wed Jan 07, 2004 6:00 am

A familiar swirl of light and stars, and Crone's third sim aboard the *Morrigan* had begun. It seemed Ursula had given her a Siren to fly. Crone remembered her last run-in with the aging fighters and shivered a little. These ladies only *looked* lightly armed, and that had made quite a difference back in Chara those many years ago. The cargo ship loomed off her port side, a huge hulking mass that looked as if it was rigged to carry fuel among other things.

*With our luck, it's probably carrying bombs and ammunition as well,* Crone thought and rolled her eyes. *One stray shot through the hull and there's a new morning star in the sky for lightyears around.*

The fighters swung into formation, and the group slowly made its way to a jumpgate supposedly bound for the Insystems. Three-quarters of the way there and it had been smooth sailing, a tedium passed only by routine checks and casual chatter amongst the pilots. Nefertiti had said she was bringing her mangos to read, and it seemed she was enjoying them, for barely a word came over her comm save an occasional laugh or sigh. In the meantime, Crone, Ursula, and Claymore had exhausted the usual conversation topics of embarrassing-academy-day stories, special flight maneuvers, and home life (though Crone had dodged most of those questions much to Claymore's frustration). The discussion had finally degenerated into politics, and Ursula was feeling more and more like a moderator for a debate than a fellow pilot.

"Ya seem a wee bit too hardlined on the point, lass," Claymore said calmly. "You have to admit the coli's had some good reason for standing up to the Alliance, though this whole takin' up arms thing was a bad idea."

"My father had no patience for traitors, and neither do I," Crone said with an icy tone. "The Alliance stands weakened because of the Plague, and now the coli's are going to walk all over us while we're down? To them we're just a bunch of stinking blues, all soft and pampered. I'll show them how mistaken they are. I've done it before."

Crone was answered by a heavy silence, and she mentally kicked herself for letting her anger loosen her tongue. Ursula finally broke into the comm.

"Let's talk about something else, shall we? I've heard that-"

Crone's proximity alarm sounded and she quickly shut off the auto-pilot. It looked to Crone like seven incoming echoes that were not answering over the IFF. As the blips closed in, the sensors began to mark them: Two Medusas, three civilian ships refitted with armor and guns, a beat-up-looking Sabertooth, and a Siren that appeared to lead the pack. Crone guessed they were raiders, and when the general comm was suddenly flooded with a rough female voice, she was vindicated.

"Alliance ships, stand down and surrender your cargo, this is your first and only warning. If you do not resist you will not be harmed."

"Like hell," Crone said to herself, and charged her guns.

Alex	Wed Jan 07, 2004 11:05 am
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Nef looked up from her book to quickly count the enemies. With a nod, she closed her book and put it down, while charging her weapons.

"Let's see now... Crone, we need to distract the Meds and civies, but take out that Sabertooth first, followed by the Siren. Claymore, Ursula, cover the ship. That Sabertooth has to go first, as it's a cap-ship attacker. Understood?"

Both Claymore and Ursula responded with affirmatives, but no response came from Crone. Nef looked at her Siren worried. "Do you understand that Crone?" She asked again, but Crone just hit her after burners and started going after the lead pirate. "I'll take that as a yes." responded Nef as she also hit her after burners and started after the Sabertooth.

Nef thought it would be rather easy, but the AI for the Sabertooth was rather stubborn about dying. It took a direct weapons hit, and still got shots off at Nef. She was barely able to dodge both the weapons fire and the Sabertooth, but she was able to do it without any major damage. She came around to try and get a missile lock on the Sabertooth, but that's when 2 of the civies shot at her while coming around. Nef gritted her teeth as she finished her bank and got the Sabertooth into her sights. "Got Tone." She reported. "Firing IF Missile." She pulled the trigger a fraction of a second after her ship was rocked by enemy fire. The missile missed the Sabertooth... And started towards the cargo ship. "Shit! Rouge Missile!" She pressed her Missile Cancel button, but the missile

didn't self-destruct. Nef gritted her teeth. "Claymore, Ursula, incoming friendly missile! Take it out!"

"Rogerr that." Claymore responded.

Nef left the missile to Claymore as she came about and shot out the cockpit of one of the civie ships, imploding the cabin. It's path went erratic, turning into it's companion. It would of missed, if Nef hadn't left off a few rounds of fire across the nose of the other ship, which left it no choice. It ran through the barrage of fire, slowing it down, which allowed the first civie ship to collide into the second ship's midsection, causing massive structural damage before the first ship completely imploded, then exploded, engulfing both ships in a deadly plasma fire.

But Nef wasn't around to watch this spectacle as she was once again on the trail of the Sabertooth. She had to find it, else it could take out the cargo ship with far too much ease..

Charon

Wed Jan 07, 2004 11:15 am

"Oh, Christ on a cracker," muttered Rhiannon as Crone's Siren shot forward with a jet of reaction shooting from it's exhaust. She was still in a bit of shock from the vehement reaction to her statement moments ago, and was caught wrong-footed by the burgeoning engagement. Cursing a touch more virulently, she pushed her throttle through the stops and launched her own Siren after Crone, calling over the squad channel. "Crone, tek oot tha' Siren! Ursula, see what ye can de wi' a Medusa! Nef, ye get those refit jobs! Ye've got th'goons te punch tha slap-dash armor they've got! I'll tek th'Sabertooth an' th'other Medusa. If anyone runs itae trouble, sing oot! I dinnae like surprises sae mooch, any morrre." A quick chuckle from her, acknowledgements from Nefertiti and Ursula, and the combat was joined.

It quickly became apparent that the mood that the virtual colonists had caught Crone in was entirely the wrong one. She was fighting as though the previous engagements had been a warmup, causing the reactor of the Siren to blow on her first pass and immediately following through to shred one of the Medusas. Rhiannon gaped, even as she tagged the Sabertooth with a shot to it's already damaged engines, causing a pilot ejection.

*Need tae have a wee chat wi' that lass, an' soon,* she mused, turning her fighter to see if Nefertiti needed any help with her targets.

But she needn't have bothered. The combat had been over before it began, really. The colonists, flying ill-maintained equipment against premium Alliance naval hardware, didn't have a chance.

Which made her frown. The colonists didn't have a huge budget, to be sure, but nor were they a fly-by-night mercenary navy, operating on a string-and-glue repair job. Something was amiss.

*"Keep yer eyes skinned, lassies... that was tae easy. That couldnae been all..."*

Schamann

Wed Jan 07, 2004 5:12 pm

*...jingle bells, jingle bells, missile's on it's way...*

"Shiiiiittt!" Ursula screamed while speeding at the rogue missile firing everything her Siren's gatling lasers could give and still missing. She was closer and closer to it, the missile was closer and closer to the transport. A split-of-second passed by without much hustle, hesitating a little on it's way. A next heartbeat was about to pound.

And then there was a hit, a direct laser hit into the missiles warhead, and the nice explosion afterwards.

A quite nice and big one, close to Valdese's side, impact wave catching Siren in the midst of a desperate turnabout and tossing it aside like a toy, almost tearing it apart. Unlucky Siren found itself hurled to the opposite side of the transport. And there they were, coming straight from behind the radar shadow of the nearest asteroid cloud, quick and deadly.

"Rhiannon! Help!"

"s're t'ing sis - 'aight away"

"All the way, Crone!! All the way!!!" – Nef's voice echoed in the comm for a moment, while Nefertiti flashed her Aries left of the wreckage of simulated Medusa, that was unlucky enough to get in front of Aurora's fighter just a moment before. She just finished working with Claymore on a Sabertooth and then went to make her way towards the remaining Medusa and the last Civvie, now thrashed

into pieces by Crone's outrage, when she vaguely realized that they got a bit too far from the Valdese, and that someone called for help a while ago. She quickly turned to see what's happening.

And there they were. A six-pack. All of them Aries's, all of them painted black, all of them the obvious copy of her Black Rose squadron, now tearing her squadmates and the transport apart.

"Shit" she briefly thought "never try to outsmart or outhack the admin on her own system's ground"

They fought hard and they fought fast. All the three of them, after Veneberg got blown out of space with first salvo. But they fell, outnumbered and outgunned, in a manner of two minutes.

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"What the hell were you thinking about lieutenants?!!!" Lt Voeller was nothing short of ballistic over their performance "Do you think that your sims are treated as fun, even when you voluntarily set them up yourself?!" she took the breath when was interrupted by one of them "What lieutenant McTaghart? What is it?!"

"Ma'am, where is Lt Veneberg....I mean.....why she is not here, with us?"

"Veneberg's performance over this sim was even worse than pathetic, should any of you show that lack or any responsibility, perception or skill you would be right where she is now – writing your resignation papers to the Captain while marines pack your personal belongings! Is that clear lieutenants?!!!" She chewed on them hard and they knew it. "Should any of you try the absurd and impossible maneuver of hitting a missile, a goddamn IR missile! with lasers, wasting valuable seconds and dying in a fight without even a single kill or assist you would be straight on the way to working in the propaganda branch, because as it seems only the worst of the worst go there!"

They all stood there not even daring to gulp more audibly.

"According to the logs, Veneberg set up and ran this sim, and as such she was supposed to be the leader, a function she ultimately failed to fulfill, doing nothing even remotely resembling commanding" Voeller took another breath "which she should have at least try to act up to, even despite the fact that none of you let her do that!"

young pilots looked cautiously at one another

"What in the name of the Plague were you thinking with all the opposite orders coming from each one of you in manner of seconds without even single time asking the one who was supposed to command or waiting for an order?! Was that the fruits and vegetables market you escorted the transport through? Were you, perhaps, thinking that shouting out loud is what makes your way through?! Were you, lieutenant Carter?!"

"No Sir"

"Funny, because I had all the impression that you did. I have always thought that escort job is all about keeping the ship your escort alive, not necessary about spilling your hate and adrenaline through the barrels of your guns, neither about showing off your skills, no matter how high they are" Voeller gave them last disgusted glance, when she caught the silver haired one's eye...she took a while to counter that look...then she drawled:

"And of you...of all the rookies, I didn't expect...." she made a disgusted face once again "you are all dismissed, get out of my face"

They started to leave.

"Oh and by the way lieutenants" - First lieutenant called to their backs - "Veneberg's resignation is going to be turned down this afternoon, so AFTER your today's classes you will be allowed to see her and take her back to quarters, six hours in the shuttle's passenger bay, waiting for departure, should give her enough time to think. Hopefully it will also give something to you, in terms of thinking"

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When Voeller got back to her quarters, she dropped heavily on the chair and took a long sip of her drink. Her boss awaited patiently.

"I don't mind being a bitch, Commander, but I don't like being that much of a bitch"

"Will they hold?"

"I got no idea, if they don't break they have a chance, given that we still have almost a month, but I'm not sure they don't break. They're in the dark, unsure of what we want from them, unsure of what they want from themselves, that's not the way you build a successful squadron ma'am"

"That is the way this squadron will be built and you will make it happen lieutenant"

"Yes ma'am"

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Fate, it seemed, was not without a certain sense of irony ...

Afternoon tactics classes concerned successful escort runs.

Vexus

Wed Jan 07, 2004 8:12 pm

The four girls were back in quarters, a thick silence in the air. Aurora sat on her bed with a PR-9 plasma rifle in pieces before her. Carefully, she began to clean each piece with practiced skill. Her mind was still reeling from the last sim and the subsequent disaster of the debriefing.

*Well, you said you wanted to be chewed out like the others, a part of her jeered. Now you're part of the club. Delightful isn't it?*

She had lost control. When was the last time that had happened? She guessed it had been in the tunnels... probably around nine months ago. It was inexcusable in any case. Her father had never lost it, even when he was half-ravaged by plague sores and had three plasma wounds in his torso.

That image in her head drove her to clean her weapon more fiercely, recleaning spotless parts again and again. She gave a quick glance toward Ursula, the smaller pilot's eyes red with tears she had denied she had shed during her stay in the shuttle bay. That was perhaps the worse thing of all. Aurora and the others had left Ursula in the lurch, and hadn't even realised it. Aurora had wanted to apologize, but doing so seemed so useless as to be an absurdity. She had failed her previous duty, was she now going to fail as a pilot?

Aurora went back to cleaning her gun... she was very good at that.

Alex

Wed Jan 07, 2004 11:35 pm

Jessica was furious. They had stolen her work.

It had taken a bit of work, but she'd been able to get ahold of a copy of the crew manifest, in hopes of finding who onboard would of been able to hack into her simulations. So far, no luck, but she was only 1/20th of the way through the manifest, but that had taken 3 hours...

She heard a loud click, as saw that Aurora was cleaning her gun. She paused for a moment, and looked at Ursula. Nef followed her gaze, and saw Ursula's reddened eyes, and felt bad. She'd been rather selfish, thinking only of her and her simulations. She knew that Ursula went through a rough day, and knew that she'd be fine in the end, but now that she actually saw Ursula, Nef couldn't help but want to console her.

But what would she say? She'd never been in that situation, so she would have almost no idea of what to do or what to say.

Feeling worse than she already did, she turned back to her manifest. She had to stop these simulation incursions... For the sake of the squad.

Charon

Thu Jan 08, 2004 5:28 am

Well, it had happened... Rhiannon wasn't sure how she'd come so far without something like this happening when she tried to take command, but it had finally come.

*No-one wants te follow ye, lass. Jest sit back, an' all will be jest fine. Bet as soon as ye try an' take charrge, it all goes te Hell. Stay in th'shadows, an'nothin' like this will happen in real life*

Another part of her scoffed. *An' if ye jest sit back, what happens if no-one else speaks oot? Sure, ye can sit back, boot a squadron wi'oot leaderrrs fails.* This was the part of her that brought her back to the squadbay after sitting in the ship's library alone for a while, debating the finer points of remaining silent.

After doing what even she could only categorize as 'sulking' for a while, she heeded her motivation and headed back to the squadbay.

And was presented with a scene that only required a corpse to be at home at a funeral.

"Och, will ye look at these sorry souls here," she said, walking over to where Yates was applying yet ANOTHER layer of polish to the barrel of her Heckler & Koch LP82 sidearm. She'd been working on it when Rhiannon had changed over into her fatigues and stormed out earlier, and was obviously still hard at work. Her eyes glanced up at Rhiannon, almost begging her to leave her in peace, but instead, Rhiannon squatted down next to her rack and murmured in a tone that only the two of them could hear. "Ye can overdo it, ye ken. Too much, an' th' thing's useless. Sometimes it's best te let it be."

Leaving Aurora to ponder that, she glanced at the next rack over, where Carter was feverishly poring over the ship's roster. Idly, she wondered where Nef had managed to get her hands on the crew's records indicating computer skill, but then decided that there were questions best left unasked. Not sure what she could do for the blonde, she headed to Ursula's rack, seating herself on her own, opposite where the small pilot was fighting depression.

"It's a funny thing," she said to Ursula, not entirely sure where the words were coming from, but unable to stop them no matter their source. "Giving orders... chances are that ye dinnae ken how tae react when th'moment of truth comes. But sometimes it happens that ye have people under ye who think they know what's best, an' they don' follow yer commands, or tek it upon themselves tae tek charrge."

She reached out and put her hands on Ursula's shoulders, ignoring the smaller young woman's half-hearted attempts to shy away from the contact. "What I'm tryin' tae tell ya, lass, is that it wasna yer fault. Nef an' I knew th'protocol in the sim-room, an' we just ignorred it. It's our fault, no' yers. An' I'm sorry fer doin' that to ye."

Ursula looked up, her eyes glistening with fresh tears, but also radiating a faint edge of hope. "So... so it's okay? We're not... not going to have to be disbanded, are we?"

Rhiannon, relieved that her attempts seemed to be taking hold, chuckled. "Naw, lass. If they were gonna do that, they wouldnae kept ye, would they?"

Ursula still looked a touch uncertain. "But Crone... Nef... you... you guys don't need me he-"

Rhiannon cut her off sharply. "Don' be daft, lass. Jest because Nef an' I have strong personalities doesnae mean tha' we don' need you or Crone... It's like the ol' sayin' goes: Fear the quiet ones." She grinned again. "I'd be worried aboot ye sneakin' oop behind me in a sim, if we weren't workin' together." The provoked a small smile from Ursula, even though the joke wasn't that good.

It indicated that for Ursula, at least, it was time to move on. Rhiannon chuckled and looked over at the other two pilots. "Well," she began, her voice tremulous at first, and she coughed to steady it. "Dinnae knae aboot ye lassies, boot I have incurred a thirrrst, an' if therre's anythin' I ken aboot squadrons, it's that yer best bondin' comes when yer livin' it oop at th' pub. Ye find that, Crone?" she asked the tall, silver-haired pilot, who appeared to be considering her pistol, but no longer polishing it, at least.

She looked up momentarily, uncertain about speaking for a moment. "I... wouldn't really know about that..." she said after collecting her thoughts.

Rhiannon waved her hand dismissively. "Then let's be th'ones tae start a new squadron tradition: For every communal bollocking, a communal party!" She grinned impishly, raising dimples in her cheeks and a mischievous gleam in her emerald eyes. "What say ye? Ye can even bring yer papers, Nef," she added.

Alex

Thu Jan 08, 2004 8:51 am

Jessica looked at Rhiannon. Her offer DID sound appealing... Even if she didn't like to drink...

She stowed her roster under her bed, and jumped down with a smile. "Aye Lass! Jus' shoo me th' way!" She said with a heavy scottish accent and a salute.

Rhiannon looked at her for a moment with an icy stare, but then softened up with a smile and a

shake of the head as she turned to Aurora.

Aurora looked at the three, then to her weapon... Then back to them. "Very well. I shall not stand in the way of our... *bonding* time."

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Jessica didn't like to drink, but she found that scottish drinking songs were rather fun. An inebriated Rhiannon, Ursula, and a very sober Jessica were standing at their table, arm in arm, singing something that Rhiannon had taught them.

"Just a wee deoch an doris, Just a wee dram that's a' Just a wee deoch an doris, Before we gang awa' There's a wee wife awaiting In a wee butt and ben If you can say it's a braw bricht Moon licht nicht Then you're a' right, ye ken."

They broke into laughter as they finished. Jessica was pretty sure that Aurora was feeling uncomfortable about the singing and offered the squad another round. As she came back, she delivered the drinks with a rather high level of precision. Aurora seemed to of noticed this. "Have you done this before?" She asked.

Jessica smiled a bit faintly. "I waited tables as a way to earn some extra cash while I was at the Academy."

This raised futher curiosity from Aurora. "I thought the Navy dealt with the finacial problems for students that attended the Academy."

This time, Jessica had no problem smiling. "Well, there's a very good reason why I was working so hard to get extra money." But she stopped. Aurora looked as if she wanted a bit more information, but Jessica only replied that she'd tell them more later. She changed topics as quickly as she could. "So... I think that we need to come up with a squadname for us. I seem to recall that it's bad luck to be in a squad without a name."

Rhiannon laughed. "And w're did ya 'ear 'at?"

Jessica shrugged. "Back at the Academy. It was something that the upper-classmen told us... But we need a squadname. I say that none of us leave this table before we decide on one!"

Vexus

Thu Jan 08, 2004 9:56 am

Aurora had come to the bar grudgingly, determined not to enjoy herself. However, as her squadmates began to smile, laugh, and then sing, she couldn't resist taking a least a small roll in the merriment. She drank her drinks slowly, and raised her glass when Rhiannon had offered a half-drunken toast: "Te the best goddamn squadron to ever fall flat on its face!!!"

"Here, here!"

Aurora noticed that as the evening progressed, not only were the songs becoming more incoherent, but also more enjoyable in a strange way. She sang with them under her breath... sang as much as she knew anyway. The singing reminded her of home... both before and after... God, she missed those songs.

At some point while she was dwelling on this, Rhiannon had sat down next to her and swung a powerful arm around her shoulders.

"You, lassy, 'ave goot to loosen oop! Yar soo tense I'll bet ah could put ya te a bow an' shoot yah throoo free bulkheads!"

Rhiannon finished by raising five fingers. While Aurora was trying to come up with some response... *any* response to such a statement, her eyes caught Ursula giving her a silly grin.

"Twang!" Ursula cried, doing a terrible impression of firing a bow and arrow. That did it, and Aurora erupted in a short but honest burst of laughter as silvery as her hair. Everything else seemed a lot farther away now.

When Jessica suggested that their squadron needed a name, Rhiannon seemed eager to respond.

"The Sying Flabers! Best name, tha' is." the redhead exclaimed and gave Jessica a desperate look.

"I told ya I like swords, right?"

Ursula started giggling, and Aurora smiled. Jessica placed her hand on the table in front of Rhiannon, and when she lifted it, there was a pair of orange tablets.

"Take these," she said good-naturedly. "It's only fair that you have some of your faculties back for this discussion."

Charon

Thu Jan 08, 2004 1:56 pm

Rhiannon looked down at the tablets, then back up at Jessica, with the solemnity that only comes to those who have passed beyond merely drunk. "Lass, yer a good one, an' I may tek ya oop on yer'offer in a minute, boot let meh think a mo' whilst th'juices are flowin', ye ken?" The wording of her phrase hit her, and she chuckled for a minute, whilst Jessica looked on in despair. Ursula giggled, and Aurora looked on with the bemused smile of one who can't help but be heartened at the foolish antics of her friends.

After a moment to collect herself, Rhiannon lifted her head up from where it had been drooping a moment ago, and got a far-off look in her eyes. "What arrre we? We'rrre they who coom in th'night an' strike wi'oot warnin'. We knae nae match, nae fearrr, an' nae equal. We strike from darrrkness... darrrk death, darrrk destruction, darrrk explosions... darrrk..."

"Novas?" chirped Ursula, who been following this monologue with some interest. Indeed, Aurora and Jessica were also focused on Rhiannon as she rambled, but gained speed.

"Weesht," grumbled Rhiannon, thrown off track. Then she paused to think about it, and the other two both looked at each other with a gleam in their eyes. "Aye, lass. Aye! Darrrk Novas! Nae match, nae fearrr, nae equal!"

She raised her glass enthusiastically, clinking it against those of the others. Downing her drink in one go, she glanced at the tablets on the table, before sweeping them into her hand and putting them in her pocket. "I'll be needin' these tomorrae," she said with a conspiratorial wink at Jessica.

Alex

Fri Jan 09, 2004 4:25 am

Jessica awoke to Rhiannon's scream of pain. Jessica swung out to look at Rhiannon's bed to see her holding her head in pain. Apparently, she'd sat up too fast and hit her head.

Jessica smiled as she sat back in her bunk and yawned. They had had quite an interesting time last night, including a little free-time in the sims after their "meeting". There was nothing quite like seeing a pilot like Rhiannon flying drunk to raise your spirits.

Jessica had finished her morning grooming, and was about to pull on her uniform's jacket, when she'd noticed something on the shoulder of of it. She had to blink. There, on her jacket, was a round, nebula blue squadron insignia that showed an explotion ring, four white arrows pointing out of the ring, and a black starburst in the center of the patch. Around the inner top edges of the insignia were the words "Dark Nova" and at the bottom edge, "Squadron".

It was a Dark Nova Squadron patch... Their squadron's patch... *But... Who?*

Jessica walked over to Rhiannon who was finally taking the pills Jessica had given her last night, and inquired about the patch. Rhiannon seemed as surprised as Jessica did. Rhiannon grabbed her uniform jacket, and sure enough, there was a Dark Nova Squadron patch on the shoulder. Aurora and Ursula also looked at the new patchs on their jackets with curiosity.

A moment of silence passed between all four of them, as they wondered who had made the patchs when they had only named the squadron last night.

Vexus

Fri Jan 09, 2004 7:31 am

It was a pure reflex, and nothing more. Upon hearing Rhiannon cry out after hitting her head, Aurora's right hand had darted out to grab a gun that wasn't there. After a brief moment of confusion where she wondered why her gun wasn't close to her, reality sank in and she made herself relax.

*What a way to start the day,* she thought grumpily.

Aurora frowned as Jessica showed them the new patches. It seemed someone had been spying on them last evening. Not too much of a surprise though given all the previous episodes of sim hacking in the last couple days. Aurora wondered cynically if the whole ship had been bugged.

Well, at least Big Brother had given them some new colors on their uniforms. And Aurora had to admit the insignia did look quite nice. Apparently it was official: they were now the Dark Nova.

"I'm going to the gym to practice some forms before things get crazy around here," Aurora said to her squadmates. "You don't have to wait up for me."

Grabbing a different kind of uniform, Aurora made ready to get some needed exercise while the getting was good.

Alex

Fri Jan 09, 2004 9:39 am

Jessica had decided to take a brief jog around the ship, in order to keep in shape. She'd been a little worried that all the simming lately was starting to show, so she decided to learn about the ship and jog around to most of the areas. It wasn't long until she ended up in the fighter bay.

And that's where she saw it. It was a Mark 2 Aries Class Fighter... It was more maneuverable, had greater armor than the normal Aries' she'd been simming in, and a few other cool new features that were not in the Mark 1. She walked up to it, began to stroke the ship affectionally, as if it were her child.

"Hey! Get away from that!" Came a voice. Jessica jumped and looked at the source of the voice. "You don't have clearance to be near that!" yelled a strong-looking woman with curly dark-brown hair in a blue jumpsuit. Grease and dirt splotched the woman's skin, and she was carrying a wrench in her left hand.

"I'm sorry. I just saw it and I had to make sure I wasn't dreaming." Jessica apologized. "The Mark 2 only just came out. Have you been able to test the VTOL (Vertical Take-Off/Landing) capabilities of this one yet?" She asked.

The woman eyed Jessica with a bit of confusion. "Who are you?"

Jessica saluted. "Sir. 2nd Lt. Jessica Carter, sir!"

The woman also saluted, a bit taken aback. "1st Lt. Karen Freeman, Chief Fighter Mechanic." She smiled, and extended her clean hand. Jessica took it and shook it as she smiled back. "Everyone just calls me *Sparks*." Karen replied. "And I have to apologize. You ARE authorized to be near this craft, Nefertiti." She stated weakly.

Now it was Jessica's turn to be taken aback. She paused for a moment, confused. "I... I am?"

Sparks nodded. "Yep. This craft was brought in just for your team. And I must say... If you treat this craft the way you treat your ships in the sims, don't expect a lot of sympathy from the fighter crew down here."

Jessica's face fell. "Our... sims? You mean..."

Sparks nodded. "You think the captain and the CAG are the only ones who review those sims? The crew down here needs to know what kind of pilots we have to deal with. I just got yesterday's sim from the CAG. We're going to review it at the end of our shift after breakfast."

Jessica didn't like this... People could see what was going on in the sims. "Well, I-"

"You want a piece of advice?" Sparks interrupted. "Don't go in guns blazing like you have in the last few sims. Sometimes it's better to let your enemy come to you. And don't use your missiles unless you have no other choice."

Jessica nodded solemnly, reflecting upon her actions in the recent sims. She was about to turn to go when Sparks grabbed her arm. "And... uh... Add this command-line to your sims today." she said in a whisper as she palmed a datacard to Jessica. Jessica was about to ask what it was, but Sparks just shook her head very minimally, as if trying not to be seen. "Good luck with today's sims." she said in a normal volume voice. "We're rooting for you guys!"

Charon

Sat Jan 10, 2004 4:22 am

Rhiannon grimaced as she slammed back her orange juice. The operation had succeeded, but what a butcher's bill! And the wakeup call had been... less than necessary, in her opinion. She rubbed her forehead ruefully, then dubiously eyed the oatmeal behind the counter, before remembering that she needed to get her PT out of the way for the day. Crying silently, she retreated to the gym.

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A session of light cardio and heavy weightlifting later, Rhiannon felt a bit better. *Somethi'g tae be said fer beer sweats*, she thought wryly, drying off from her shower and changing into her fatigues. She wondered where the others had gotten off to as she began collecting the materials for the first round of tactics discussions for the day. All of the items they'd been issued, from the NATOPS (Naval Tactical Operations) manual to the maps of local space were included in her large backpack, along with several thick pads of paper. Rhiannon took her learning seriously, as far as the classroom was concerned. Having endured two butt-chewings, she was determined to not invite a third.

Throwing on the backpack, she lurched heavily. *An' Marines do this sort o' thin' fer **foon**?! she mentally scoffed. Bloody loonies.* With that definitive statement, she began trudging towards the ready room. On the way she snagged Ursula and Aurora, and told them that classtime was rapidly approaching. The pair hurried back to the squadbay, arriving five minutes later wearing their own fatigues and carrying their books.

More than a touch concerned for Jessica, but sure that she would arrive on time, the three headed to the ready room.

It seemed that Big Brother had been busy here, too, as the ready room hatch now bore the insignia that bedecked their arms. With a wry smile, Rhiannon keyed it open, and stepped inside.

Vexus

Sat Jan 10, 2004 8:17 am

*Two-taps becomes Falling Leaves... becomes The Bowing Swan... becomes Pounding Stones....*

A body-length waxwood staff a blur in her hands, Aurora worked through her forms. The trick was not to think, and just let her body remember the moves. Thinking was the mind interfering with the body, and in moments like these, in training or in the thick of battle, the body must be free to dance on its own.

As she was finishing up, and placing a towel to her sweat-beaded brow, she caught a sight that made her stop short. A figure had just poked his head into the room briefly... and had it been a man's face? That was impossible.

*Unless it was some kind of android*, she thought, and felt an anger swelling within her. If there was one thing she hated more than computers that talked like a man, it was machines that tried to look like them as well. But was that really what she saw?

Aurora decided to drop the subject, she had to get moving or she would be late. Getting changed, and meeting up with Rhiannon and Ursula, she tried to focus on getting into the routine instead of dwelling of that face she had glimpsed in the gym.

Alex

Sat Jan 10, 2004 9:26 am

Jessica limped into the ready room with only a minute to spare. She took her seat, and winced as her bandaged leg slid under her desk. Ursula leaned over to Jessica. "What happened?" She asked.

It was at that moment that their instructor had appeared, and silence clouded the room. Lt. Jones was a nice person, but she could be a bitch at times. She was fair, but a realist. If it wasn't part of real-life, it didn't belong in her classroom.

Jessica indicated that she'd discuss it later.

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"So what happened?" Ursula asked at their break.

Jessica leaned against a wall, relieving the pressure from her left leg, and dulling the pain. "It was an accident. I was in the engineering section when a container came loose, and hit an energy conduit. I dove to get out of the way, but the energy blast caught my leg." She took a deep breath as the squad listened to her tale. "The crew helped me to see Joyce Banner... You know... The doctor?" She responded to the inquisitive looks. "Anyways, she bandaged me up and said I'll be fine in a day or two. It'll take about a week to fully heal, but I shouldn't be in any more pain after tomorrow."

"Why didn't you take any pain killers?" Ursula asked.

Jesscia smiled, and winced at the same time. "Pain killers tend to make me groggy. I can't afford that for today's sims."

Rhiannon scoffed. "Wat makes ya tink we'll da better today than 'esterday?" She asked.

"A present from the fighter crew." Jessica responded with a grin, holding up a datadisc. "Near as I can tell... With this, we don't have to worry about Big Brother interfering with our sims anymore." A devilish smile breached her face. "Anyone up for a nice, quite, planet-side recon mission?"

Schamann

Sat Jan 10, 2004 5:29 pm

"not so fast bunny.....what is it?.....if you want us to sim with that something influencing our flight I want to know what it is..." -Ursula raised herself from her chair, her hand extended pointing at the little datadisc.

Nef eyed her rather surly "like I haven't told you a moment ago, a little program to help us get rid of the Big Brother, I got it from the chief mechanic at the fighter..."

"Since when chief mechanics reign in the hacking kingdom?" the little pilot suddenly got up brushing her hair back with quick and rather abrupt move "have you checked it by yourself Nef?"

"I told you what it is, they actually wish us luck and..."

"Nef are you crazy?!! We're supposed to meet the standards for a spec-ops pilots in a space engulfed in rebellion! We've been watched all the time, we've been manipulated in the simpods and out, to check what kind of shit we really are....we still did not have ANY succesful simulated fight because that one when you pulled you black-rosed-rabbit out of the hat was not accounted for as a succesful one, due to the breach of sim-protocol and..."

there was awkwardly silent for a plit of second, and then Jessica asked, icy voice

"what is a point in that oh so sudden babbling of yours? there is one isn't it?"

but Ursula wasn't in her yesterday's mood of crying, being shy and underconfident:

"and now you take some program from god knows who...did you even checked her id? saw her uniform instead of just the coveralls them mechanics wear?...and you tell us you're gonna AGAIN illegally upload something into a freaking Naval military software installation, because you think this will be more fun?! Nef for crying out loud what 's got into you?! you're planning to win the fastest-dishonorable-discharge-for-conduct-unbecoming prize?!"

That apparently was enough, at least for Nefertiti

"Listen you little twerp I..."

"Enough!" Crone's voice sounded like a gunshot in the room "You two shut up, now. Claymore if they try to do anything stupid - hit them and hit them hard."

nobody tried anything stupid for a few seconds...

"Okay" Crone was focused and composed "now girls, in plain english, it seems that we have a problem and we together need to decide what to do" she took a glance at Nef "together - whatever happens in sim or later out there happens to all of us"

Alex

Sat Jan 10, 2004 9:28 pm

Jessica looked at all of them with a writhing pit of anger brewing inside her. But she forced her voice to remain calm. "I know what you guys must be thinking. *Nef wants to win so badly that she'll take help from anyone*, right? Well I've got news for you girls. **I don't trust anyone on this ship!**" The message spread like fire amongst the squad. Surprise and anger seemed to be the most dominate expressions on their faces. "You think I'd take help from someone I just met without looking at it?! I DID look at it." She responded, the calmness slowly leaking out of her voice. "And from what I've been able to figure out, it'll help us against BB."

Jessica stopped leaning against the wall and began to walk closer to her squad, despite her injured leg. "You talk of illegally hacking sims. Well, that's EXACTLY what THEY are doing! They've been doing it from day one, and you know what? Altering a simulation without the pilot's consent an illegal act!" She held up the datadisc again. "I didn't want to tell you guys what was on this disc, in case BB was listening, but since you obviously don't trust me, I guess I'll tell you, and ruin any chance we might of had! Is that what you want?!"

Jessica eyed them for a moment. They seemed to be thinking it over. "And before you ask," Jessica added, "There's nothing illegal about what is on this disc, as it is part of every simulation! It won't affect our flight in any way." Her voice had a dangerous tone to it. "So, do you want to know what it is, and ruin any chance of success we might of had with it, or will you trust me, and fly with me with this help?" She asked, flourishing the datadisc in front of them.

Vexus

Sun Jan 11, 2004 2:03 pm

Aurora fixed a level stare at Jessica. All of this was getting out of hand.

"You say you don't trust anyone on this ship. Does that include us?"

"I-" Jessica began angrily, but Aurora cut her off.

"Because if that's true, it seems completely two-faced to then ask the rest of us to trust you." Aurora knew she was crossing some dangerous lines now, but it seemed necessary. All her instincts were screaming at her to avoid a confrontation like this. In the back of her mind, Aurora wondered if she was losing control again, this time in a different manner. Rhiannon now looked completely taken aback by the sudden turn of events and Ursula appeared defiant but also a little scared.

"You think I would-"

"But right now, Nef," Aurora was nearly shouting now, "I don't care. Right now I don't give a s\*\*t about who gave this device to you, or how you made sure it was safe, or even what it does. It's all bulls\*\*t, Nef!" Aurora could almost feel her squadmates anger; could sense the fist tightening. And if that fist swung she wouldn't dodge it. She deserved it.

"Because I believe you!"

Aurora waited for the hit which never came. Looking at Jessica's expression of mixed fury and confusion, Aurora could sense her failure looming closer. *Don't forget it.* Yet she was, little by little, and it was the inevitability of it all that frightened her more than anything else.

"I trust you, Nef, and God knows why since I have no reason to... other than the one that really matters: I've flown with you. Sim or not, I've fought alongside you. I came here to serve the Alliance as a fighter pilot, but I'll be damned if I'm going to be the one to let these psycho-cloak-and-dagger tactics from the high-ups break this squadron from the inside out!"

Aurora held out her hand to Jessica.

"If you say 'trust me', then I'll take that as sufficient. 'Cause if I can't, I'm already dead out there." With hope beginning to dawn on her face, Jessica took Aurora's hand. Aurora then looked from Rhiannon to Ursula.

"What will it be ladies? Do we accept what they're trying to do to us, or do we fight?"

Charon

Mon Jan 12, 2004 2:27 am

Rhiannon cocked an eyebrow, "Lass, I coom from Glasgae, an' yer askin' me tae pick between a fight an' somethin' else?" She grinned, baring all her teeth and looking rather feral for a moment.

Ursula caught the edge of the mood, and grinned as well. To Rhiannon's eye, her canines appeared slightly pronounced. "Look," the littlest Nova commented, "We JUST came together as a squadron, we JUST selected a name for it, and that was all in spite of the fact that someone's been trying to sabotage us every step of the way. If we cave now, we make all that effort on our part nothing."

Rhiannon nodded, and growled. "Therre's NAE way in HELL tha' I'm gonna cave tae them." She jerked her thumb towards herself. "Count meh in."

Ursula nodded. "Me too! So what now?"

Alex

Mon Jan 12, 2004 3:23 am

Jessica type in the name of her sim, "Carter-WC4-0034-C", and added the data from the disc at the end of her simulation's command line. She hit the "run" button, and removed her Simulation Key, locking the control panel.

She smiled as she limped her way to her pod. The command-line she was given put the simulation into an unalterable diagnostic mode. No matter what Big Brother did, they wouldn't be able to interfere with THIS simulation. Jessica had turned the difficulty down a bit too, just in case.



She slid into her pod, closed the canopy, and entered the simulation to see that Dark Nova was already waiting for her by the Morrigan. "This sim is a simple planet-side reconnaissance mission." Nef explained. "We each have 1 camera on a missile mount. When we arrive at the nav points on the planet, we are to take pictures of the installations which will be tagged in our HUDs. We are not to engage enemy craft unless attacked. We need to do this as quietly as possible, so we all have high-powered jammers. Any questions?"

"Do we all have to be in Aries ships?" Ursula asked.

"Aye... Aries ain't my mug o' ale..." Claymore commented.

Nef smiled. "On my way to the engineering section, I found a few Aries Mark 2s. I was told they were brought in just for us, so I thought if we all had some experience with the Mark 1-"

"Why did you not use a Mark 2 for this simulation then?" Crone inquired.

Nef looked over at her, slightly apologetic. "I... couldn't find one in the simulation database. They're pretty brand new, so we may not get them for our sims for another few months..."

A silence grew for a moment, before Crone responded. "Understood."

Nef looked at the rest of them. "Any other questions before we begin?" She asked. With the confirmation of silence, she fired up her Nav System and plugged in the planet's Nav Point. "It'll take about 10 minutes to get to the planet. I've uploaded its Nav Point to your ships. Let's go!"

Afterburners fired, and they began the trek to the planet.

Vexus

Mon Jan 12, 2004 9:27 am

A clear radar and radio silence left Crone to her thoughts as the great sphere of the planet grew larger in her HUD. The events before the sim still seemed surreal to her. They had come so close to the brink and had yet to see real space combat. Crone feared, not for the first time, that she might not see home again after all.

As the ships glided towards the night side of the planet, its sun sank below the far horizon, creating a curving line of fiery light that dimmed to red and faded away. Crone swiveled her camera around, watched the sunset wearily on her screen, and wondered why such a beautiful place as the heavens had become the stage of war for so long. Surely the human race could find better things to do.

The ships began their decent, and Crone began to get tossed about in her seat as the sim mimicked atmospheric entry. Now was the most dangerous part. The ships were in their own burning cocoons, making sensors unreliable. Anyone on the surface, however, had a chance of seeing them coming in: four bright streamers of fire arcing across the sky. Crone readied herself to pull up if she saw any incoming fire, and hoped that this sim would be their first successful one.

Alex

Mon Jan 12, 2004 1:32 pm

It was still another 2 minutes or so until they'd enter the atmosphere when Nef got a private comm channel from Ursula. "Nef? Back there... When you said you didn't trust anyone on the ship? Did you mean that?"

Nef turned her comm to Ursula's private channel before responding. "Yes."

"So you don't trust anyone on the ship?" A hint of curiosity and fear tinted Ursula's voice. "Not even us?"

Nef's face remained neutral. She didn't like to open up too much to people, but it was a question she'd wanted to answer since the argument in the hallway. "The way I see it, since we are a squad, trust isn't an option. It's a requirement."

"But aren't we part of the ship?" Ursula countered.

Nef grinned, despite herself. "You are part of my squad. That's different than being part of the ship. I could care less if people on the ship got killed, but I'll frag anyone who even fires on my squadmates."

Ursula's voice sounded a tad repulsed. "That's a bit... extreme..."

"It's the way I am." Nef responded. "It doesn't matter if you're my best friend or I hate your guts; If you're on my wing, I'll risk my life to save yours. I've always been that way, and I always will be."

Silence became dominate again in the last few moments before beginning their entry into the planet's atmosphere.

When their ships had finished their decent, Nef and the rest of Dark Nova pulled up and began to skim the planet's surface at a low speed in order to get their bearings and stay under the planet's radar. Nef began to quickly brief them on what they would find. "Ok. Any resistance we meet will most likely be Sirens. Those are the most reliable ships for planet-side fighting, except for the Aries. There are 5 Nav points with 2-4 buildings we need to photograph. That's 1 building for each of us, per Nav. Two of those will be military bases, so they will have fighter cover, thus we need to go into those jamming like mad. One of the Navs will have a Pele, but I don't know which one. But since it's a heavy bomber, and not a fighter, it shouldn't be that hard to take out with these Aries."

"I thought the Pele wasn't able to work Planet-side." Crone replied.

Nef half-smiled. "It's an alteration... It's still basically a Pele, it just has stronger thrusters for planet-side use." Nef's face fell for a moment as a memory surfaced again. Hyena used that tone with Nef a lot...

"Nef! Look out!" Ursula called out.

Nef looked up in time to see a tree almost run into her ship. Before she knew it, she was on the other side of the tree, and slight gaps came over the comm. "How the **hell** did ya do that Nef?!" Claymore asked. Nef just blinked. What *had* she done? She was heading towards the tree... Then she was on the exact opposite side of it... But she didn't remember doing anything with the stick. *It was your training again. You simply acted without thinking again. Your reflexes always were that good...* The voice inside her responded.

"Are you ok Nef?" Ursula asked.

Nef shook it off. "Yeah, sorry. I was just thinking about Bird and Hyena..."

"Who?" Ursula responded.

Nef realized she'd slipped a bit. "It doesn't matter right now. We have a mission to do." She said taking an aura of command. "Approaching first Nav point."

Vexus	Tue Jan 13, 2004 7:55 pm
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The first two Nav points had been a power station and an industrial complex. Everything went smoothly, though Crone still felt a little nervous about keeping her fighter so close to a planetary surface.

Now the 4-ship squadron approached the first military base, and knew immediately that this run would not be as simple as the previous ones. Scanning the sky, Crone could see two lights heading to intercept them from above.

"Claymore, you're with me," Nefertiti said over the comm, and the two Aries rose into the night.

As Crone and Ursula approached the base, they soon parted, each to snap images on one half of the scattered buildings. Crone had just made her final pass when ground artillery began to fire at her from the base perimeter. Not able to dodge it in time, she caught a cloud of flak and two of her guns went offline. Cursing to herself, and tempted to swing around to take out the turrent, Crone remembered that the imaging was done and it would be best to just leave the area. Hearing Ursula give the all clear for her half of the base, Crone made to leave the complex through the maze of larger buildings in the center to avoid any more ground fire.

*Break left!* a voice in her head screamed.

Just as Crone was about to clear the last two buildings, a Siren shot past her from the starboard side, heading upwards. Close on its tail was Claymore, lasers blazing. Crone should have pulled down and port, but her instinct was still against going lower to the ground, and she went hard port instead. The edge of her shields caught the side of one of the buildings, tearing out a chunk of the

wall. Some of the momentum from the collision transferred to Crone's ship and forced it downwards. Crone pulled up hard and managed to recover, wondering if there was now a large scorch mark upon the virtual grass below her. Clearing the base, Crone could see that everyone was accounted for, and the Sirens were nowhere to be found.

As they headed towards the next jump point, Nef called for a status report.

"Two of my guns are gone," Crone replied, and felt ashamed that she had come so close to killing herself on such a straightforward mission as this. And to make matters worse, the Pele had yet to appear. Despite Nef's assurances, Crone felt no better about engaging one of those behemoths, even if it's movement was restricted in an atmosphere. It could fire in any direction, and its sensors were notoriously good at cutting through interference. In her heart, Crone felt that real test of this mission still lay ahead of them.

Charon	Wed Jan 14, 2004 1:10 pm
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Rhiannon had always been partial to mud-moving. It was an aspect of training that was skimmed, and rarely covered in most sim missions, but there was something in her that delighted in flying low and skimming the ground, covering for troops on the ground or performing bombing runs. Recon like this was something she'd never done before, but she was enjoying the hell out of it.

And that last scrap! Quick and perfunctory, the mission taken care of, and no losses! Rhiannon cackled with glee when Nefertiti called for a status report. "Nae match, nae fearrr, Lead," she chortled. She wasn't entirely sure why that sounded right, but it did. She rather liked the phrase.

The flight proceeded to the fourth nav point - a bridge with hardened emplacements on either end that straddled a deep gorge. On one end was a barracks and hospital, whilst the other bristled with anti-aircraft turrets. Nefertiti gave the assignments, and Rhiannon cackled upon being told that she was to get shots of the turrets and bunkers on the far end of the bridge.

With a whoop, she dove her Aries to the deck, flying so close that her wingtips threatened to dig trenches along the path of her flight. As the turrets panned towards her, she activated her cameras, catching a frontal, top, and rear shot as she overflew their positions. She howled as she banked hard right, pulled on her control stick, and manipulated the rudder pedals expertly, causing her fighter to dive *beneath* the bridge, then come screaming back up the other side after riding the gorge for a little while, startling the turrets and permitting her to get a couple of shots of the bunkers. Then she dove into the gorge again, following it's walls until she knew that she was out of range of the turrets, then pulled back up, and joined with the rest of the Dark Novas, who had been similarly successful in their runs, if not quite with the same flare that Rhiannon had demonstrated.

She chuckled to herself. What a RUSH! She could get used to flying close air support, she decided, and filed a mental note to definitely volunteer for the first such operation that came along.

It was then, enroute to the fifth and final Navpoint, that it happened, and she wasn't cackling for long.

Alex	Thu Jan 15, 2004 12:04 am
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Enemy blaster shots hit near both sides of Nef. She checked her jammer, and sure enough, it was working fine. "Incoming fire!" She reported. *It **has** to be the Pele... We're jamming too much for anything else to see us!* "Pull up and take evasive maneuvers!" Nef and the other pulled up and around, avoiding yet more blaster shots. Finally, Nef got a good look at their attacker. *Wait... Since when-* She shook her head, clearing it of any doubts. Now was the time for action, not questioning. "Confirmed presence of Pele, and two Aries escorts."

"Come again Lead. Did you say Aries Escorts?" Crone's voice inquired.

Nef nodded. "Affirmative. Claymore, you and I will take out the two Aries. Crone and Ursula will go after the Pele. We'll come help you two once the Aries are taken care of." Acknowledgements were followed by afterburners. Nef took a quick count of her weapons status. She had followed Spark's advice and not used her missiles yet for this mission. She could of ended a few battles so much earlier, but now she was glad that she hadn't used them. She would need missiles for the Aries, and the rest of them for the Pele...

The battle against the Aries was slightly easier than Nef thought it would be. She had easily gotten on the tail of her enemy's ship and started to blast away at it. It had afterburned away, then turned around at Nef for a strafing run. But by the time the Aries had come into range of normal weapons fire, Nef had already gotten a missile lock. She pressed the fire button twice, launching

two of her missiles, and fired off a few rounds to weaken the shielding and armor enough for the missiles to- A large explosion filled her screen, followed by a larger explosion. A direct hit. The enemy craft was breaking up. Nef came about to see that Claymore had just finished with her Aries. They began to work their way over to the Pele, just as a message came over the comm.

"We could use some help here!" Ursula's voice exclaimed.

"Don't worry, we're on our way!" Nef responded.

Vexus

Thu Jan 15, 2004 10:37 am

*It's like trying to attack a person with a hundred arms... each with a gun in its hand*, Crone thought to herself as she and Ursula aborted their third attempt at attacking the Pele. The massive ship's four wings bristled with gun turrets that could swing about with alarming speed. Each of the previous runs had resulted in their shields becoming dangerously weakened before they could get anywhere close to the ship. Twice already Crone had had to lose missile locks upon her Aries as the Pele tried to tag the Dark Novas with IR warheads.

Crone knew the weakest point on the Pele was the aft section, where the turrets were fewest. However, that was also where the ship's main engines were, and Crone was pretty sure that getting caught in the backwash of three X9 Dark Energy Impulsers was a good way to fry both your systems and yourself. After one last failed attack, Crone overheard Ursula calling for assistance from the rest of the squadron. In a flash, Nefertiti and Claymore had closed in on the Pele, and the large ship was now surrounded by Aries fighters.

Apparently that was what the Pele had been waiting for.

A terrible roar sounded across the sky as the Pele's wings erupted in clouds of thrust. An entire salvo of rockets darted away from the monster craft, their onboard computers hunting madly for unfriendly FF codes to follow to their respective sources. For a split second, all four pilots of Dark Nova gazed at the awesome sight.

"Scatter!" Nef shouted, and her squadmates complied. Crone jerked the flight stick wildly, performing maneuvers that were beginning to make her black out. In the glow of engines, thrusters, and weapons fire, contrails seemed to fill the night sky like a giant spider's web, gray and ominous. Before her lock warning had stopped screaming, she had felt two explosions near her ship. Quickly glancing at her status screen, she saw her sensors were damaged and her shields were down to almost nothing... and now she had no guns left.

Once they had retreated some distance from the Pele, Nef called the squadron into formation.

"I'm open to ideas," Nef said over the comm with frustration in her voice.

"Come on, fly my sim," she said. "It'll be easy," she said," Claymore growled.

"I've never seen so many guns in such a small space," Ursula said. "We would need a lot more ships to have any chance at all." And that statement gave Crone an idea.

"Not more ships," Crone responded, "just more targets." Crone smiled to herself as she addressed the one pilot who had proved to be an excellent shot when it was needed.

"Ursula, I think we have need of a pilot who dared to take down an incoming missile with just her lasers *and* succeeded. Care to volunteer?" And Crone explained her plan.

\*\*\*\*\*

As the four Aries raced back towards the Pele, the massive ship turned its head to face them, its forward section able to train the most guns upon the attacking squadron. Just before entering weapons range, Nefertiti, Claymore, and Crone surged ahead.

"Now!" Nef cried, and the three Aries fired every missile in their arsenals. A swarm of warheads raced at the Pele, which quickly opened up its numerous interceptors. Crone didn't expect a single missile to hit, but that wasn't important. As the three Aries banked away from the crossfire, a lone ship made its way quickly through the commotion. With no interceptors available to stop her, Ursula focused her shields forward and slammed into the Pele's own defense screens. With a lurch, Ursula's fighter punched through and she found herself within the shell of the monster. There was only one chance at this, she would get only one shot. As she skimmed just along the Pele's hull,

she spotted the auxilary thrusters and squeezed the trigger. Her Aries' laser cannons raked the vital engines, piercing the armor and shredding the inner mechanisms, while a quattrain of dumb-fired missiles finished the job. With another lurch, this time more violent and costing her some armor, Ursula shot away from the Pele, her shields swinging around to deflect the monster's wrath at being so violated.

For a few moments, the Pele still appeared unhurt and undaunted, then the monster fell prey to a greater monster still: the planet's gravity. With it's thrusters gone, the Pele could no longer maintain its altitude, nor could it reorient its main engines to escape into space. With increasing speed, the Pele plummeted towards grassy fields as the morning sun began to peek over the horizon. A flash of light, and Crone both heard and felt the shockwave from the explosion far below them.

"Wow," Ursula said, sounding out of breath, "I can't believe that actually worked."

"Aye," Claymore laughed. "An' to think tha high-oops threatened to kick such ah talented markswoman such as yerself out of tha Navy." Ursula laughed in return, and Crone could almost hear her blushing.

"I think it's time to head home, ladies," Nef said with an air of confidence.

"We can't go back yet," Crone replied.

"Why not?" Nef asked.

"Will still have to take images of the base the Pele was guarding," Crone said flatly.

"Oh," Nef said, "... right."

Compared to the Pele, the base was simplicity itself, and soon the four fighters were soaring into space. It was a sim, but it was a milestone nonetheless. Dark Nova squadron had successfully completed its first mission.

Alex	Thu Jan 15, 2004 10:08 pm
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Dark Nova Squadron opened their simpods to rounds of applause. Jessica looked around like a scared rabbit, not knowing what was going on. It appeared as if a great amount of the crew was in the sim room clapping away. Among the people, Jessica could see Sparks, the flight crew and a lot of other people. Dark Nova had now come down off the sims, and was standing in front of the crowd.

"Da ye kno' what this is aboot?" Rhiannon asked Aurora in a whisper.

"No..." Aurora replied.

Jessica just shook her head, as Sparks walked up to her. "Sparks... What's going on?"

Sparks smiled at her. "I had orders from high up to rig up a monitoring system to the sim-pods which would activate when the diagnostic mode was used without a engineer's sim-code. You're last simulation was just broadcasted live to the entire ship." Sparks took a step back and saluted Dark Nova. Most of the crew behind her also saluted.

The members of Dark Nova looked at each other, silently asking a question. They then turned to the crowd, and returned the salute. The crowd applauded again, then broke up and started to congratulate Dark Nova on defeating the Pele. Many of them wanted to know how they came up with that idea, yet others wanted to simply shake their hands.

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In the captain's office, Lt. Voeller and Captain Dominguez watched the scene with interest.

"They did it." The Captain commented.

Voeller, who was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed, just nodded. "What's the next step?"

The Captain looked at her, and passed her two personnel folders. "The last two will be arriving

soon. Make sure they get introduced."

Schamann

Fri Jan 16, 2004 4:51 pm

*clap...clap...clap...*

The sound of clapping hands echoed in the now empty corridor, when four victorious Novas finally left the simulation room. A while ago, they had finally got rid of the cheering crowd from the simulation room, got changed into regular uniforms and left for lunch and afternoon duty subsequently. They were halfway down the corridor when they heard the noise.

*clap...clap...clap...*

A tall figure appeared from one of the side-exits not far behind girls' backs, approaching them with rather cold, studied smile and inquisitive look. Novas stopped, all the small chats abruptly fallen silent. Then they turned to attention.

Commander Petra Verulian, Morrigan's First Officer and Chief Intelligence Officer, approached the squadron with appraising look.

"Congratulations, Dark Novas. It would seem that only a few would be able to achieve so much in such little time, I must admit that I'm impressed."

After those words silence lasted almost to the point of being awkward, when Carter appeared to be the first to have the guts to answer: "Thank you Sir, it's an honor"

"You particularly, second lieutenant, proved to be excellent asset to this somewhat experimental enterprise" Verulian eyed Nefertiti investigatively. "Lt Commander Chakato - our Chief Software Security Officer, sends her regards, she says you are quite good....for a pilot, of course. At least with those little innocent tricks." Commander paced a few step closer, now her face only like a feet from Jessica's.

"I shall see to it, that you will be recommended and accepted into additional RIAS training. We do need special efforts from special soldiers, as well as we need to treat them as special."

OSI high-up retreated a few steps to once again embrace the whole four with her look.

"All of you lieutenants I want you to know that you are doing excellent job so far. More will be expected from you, however, in the days to come, so you could stand up to your future tasks. Carry on the good job. Dismissed."

As they were leaving the corridor, the atmosphere was somewhat strange, at least for a group of rookies, who just received congratulations from the seasoned high ranking officer.

"Looks like you get yourself your career ladder quite comfortable to step on, Nef" There was a shade of envy in Ursula's voice, a little more distinctive than just subtle. But before Carter could answer, Yates interrupted them - be it to prevent any possible quarrel, or to share the more important, in her opinion, revelation.

"Looks like Commander has a peculiar allergy" Seeing three pairs of astonished eyes, Crone continued "To cameras"

There was silence, expectation of explaining.

"Security cameras in the corridor where she approached us were off, while she talked to us. They were, however, already back on when we were leaving the corridor by the door now behind us. If that's not strange I don't know what is."

"Aye lass. 't alsoe l'oeke likae Nef's new friend 'te maechanic 's s'mone more close to this 'an she saems to. I'oubt thae reason 's sudden love fae our friend"

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As they both left the transport shuttle and entered the Morrigan's flightdeck, they both felt little disorientated. Right before them, six vets left the shuttle, chatting hushed voices and looking carefully around. Their uniforms were strange. No name badges, no ranks badges, no squadron badges. Just Navy insygnia.

"wonder what kind of black ops are they, don't you?" short woman asked the taller one. "Bet they don't just escort VIPs back and forth, by the way..." she extended her hand "Cassandra Dory, callsign Seer - unexpectedly" she smirked.

The taller woman eyed back rather coldly. There was some offishness about her, not rude, not unfriendly, but offish a bit.

"Christine Auten – Banshee. They most certainly do not, I 'd rather say. At least not in those conditions. The shuttle's life supports were so below standards, were they not?" she paused, and then seeing her interlocutor nod, continued. "I actually wonder, whether..."

"We are meant to be reinforcements to the same squadron? Probably" – Dory shrugged. "This WO from provisions branch" – she pointed with her chin at a young, unsettled looking woman, noticeably waiting for someone – "looks at us as if she was wondering whether we are the ones she was sent here to collect" – she looked back at Banshee with a smile

"I suggest we make her quest easier"

They were ID-checked, registered as new arrivals, instructed on the ship's plan and lead to the briefing room to meet their squadron. All the office job took less than five minutes. When they entered the briefing room, some First Lieutenant were just summarizing her point of view.

"All in all, from now on you are officially squadron-in-training, not squadron-in-forming. 74th Special Designation Squadron 'Dark Nova'. Crone you take the lead. Is zere a problem outside ladies, or you just came to collect some autograffs from our fresh-born celebrities?" The last sentence she uttered to the door, where newly arrived stood.

"No ma'am we're supposed to be reinforcements to the squadron. Second Lt. Chritstine Auten and Second Lt Cassandra Dory" Auten snapped to attention, hearing Dory doing the same.

"As you vere. Take your sit lieutenants. After I finish, your squadron leader vill take care of you"

First Lieutenant Voeller came back to her talking. Banshee carefully took their seat, mildly surprised. She got a little more surprised when she saw Dory sitting next to her, and for a moment when little 2nd lieutenant was her back to superior, she mouthed to Auten soundlessly, "Dark F\*cking What?". In the meantime, Lieutenant Voeller continued:

"Don't look at me like that, Yates. You are, from this moment forth appointed a squadron leader. I assign it to you probationally, if in two weeks time I shall find your command performance dissatisfactory, you will be relieved from this duty. In a week's time I expect you to choose and appoint your second in command – Squadron's XO. Zat is all".

Lt. Voeller collected her things and left. After, like a second, a tall silver haired girl stood up, apparently unsure upon the moment's course of action"

"Akhem....."

#### Out of Character:

RIAS - Remote Information Acquisition Systems - fighter mounted advanced electronic systems used by OSI, Special Operations, and some intelligence units. While it takes some valuable place on gun hardpoints often cutting fighter's firepower a half, when used be exceptional pilots trained in it's operating, it allows performing lot of computer data collecting operation, like radio bugging or jamming enemy's transimtion, intercepting and imitatting access codes at Starbases and Carriers, even hacking into, ddownloading and decrypting data from automatic courier probes. All without even leaving your fighter. Developed by SSI (Strategic Systems Innovations) Ltd. ™

Vexus

Fri Jan 16, 2004 8:56 pm

"Crone, you take the lead."

The words hit Aurora like a punch to the gut, and she barely registered the rest of the CAG's speech. No turn of events short of being killed in action could have been so damaging to her plans. Maybe she could just tell the First Lieutenant that she had made a mistake in her choice... or maybe she could willfully hinder her own performance to force a reconsideration....

*But you won't*, the voice of her father sounded in her mind, and Aurora felt ashamed at her

thoughts. *You have made your oaths, now you must fulfill them.*

Almost numb to her senses, Aurora arose as Voeller exited the room and made her way to the front. She stood before the Dark Nova squadron and knew that her heart was one step closer to their hands. Too much closer, and any one of them could pierce it... and it would break her.

Looking from face to face, Aurora was silent for a moment. She couldn't read Jessica's expression, Ursula gripped her desk nervously, Rhiannon seemed to be urging Aurora with her eyes to say something... anything, and the two newest members seemed inquisitive about their new squadron leader. Finally, Aurora began, her voice quiet but thankfully steady.

"Well, as we are now a full squadron, it seems that introductions are in order. I'm Aurora Yates, callsign Crone, and I will be your squadron leader... at least for a couple weeks."

She had meant the last part to be a joke, but while Rhiannon smiled, there was little reaction otherwise, and Aurora felt that she would feel quite at home in the deepest, darkest hole in the ground right about now.

"I think we should let the newcomers introduce themselves... and tell us what they can bring to the squadron. Then the rest of the squadron can do the same."

*God, I sound like a camp instructor doing an ice-breaker,* Crone said to herself, and wondered off-hand why that thought felt so appropriate to the situation.

Aurora gestured to the shorter of the two new pilots (Cassandra, she remembered).

"Why don't you start."

JediBubbles

Fri Jan 16, 2004 11:36 pm

Cassie blinked, then hopped up out of her seat to introduce herself. *Anything to take attention off...Crone, was it? Yeah. Poor thing, seems about as comfortable with her new post as a kid with a wedgie.*

"Uh, hi, I'm Cassandra Dory. Callsign's Seer." Cassie grinned and waved goofily at her new squadmates. "Y'all are welcome to change that but I doubt you'll want to. I guess somehow our fine higher-ups decided that flying by the seat of my pants meant I could keep up with you ladies. Really excited to be part of this squadron, and I'm hoping coming late like this will be a lot less painful than moving in the middle of the kiddie-school year used to be!" That got a chuckle out of most of them, and Crone seemed a little less nervous. Cassie grinned a bit wider. *Gaw, I love to make people laugh!* "And now I'll stop hogging all the newbie glory and let my towering companion introduce herself."

Seer plopped back down into her seat and considered the initial impressions she'd gotten from her brief eye contact with each of the others. The redheaded chick *damn, she's so Scot I'm amazed her uniform isn't tartan!* seemed to be the most easy-going, with the tall blonde nursing a bandaged knee coming in a close second. The blonde obviously had some kind of outrageous talent though; she exuded that brand of just-this-side-of-cocky confidence. The only other petite woman *hmm, she's got about 3 inches on me. Heh, bet she's pleased not to be the resident shorty anymore!* struck her as nice, unassuming and confident, while their new leader, Crone...well, *that* woman had some ugly-ass secrets gnawing away at her. *Ones that I'm willing to bet she hasn't shared with anyone. And doesn't intend to. Not healthy. Need to work on that. If possible. Seems pretty uptight though.*

Cassie smiled as her fellow newbie got up to seal her fate. *Soooo stiff-Brit. Her skivvies should have the Union Jack on them. Bet they don't.*

Vindicare

Sat Jan 17, 2004 12:31 am

Chrissy blinked a few times during the young woman's introductory monologue, namely at the use of "Y'all", the revelation over the young woman obviously being transferred from school during term, and the reference to herself as a "Towering companion". *I'm not THAT tall* As she stood to walk to the front of the room, she scanned her new companions looks. *Now, can you trust your life to all of these?* She noted the obvious vivacity of the redheaded *definitely Scottish, so at least i'm not THAT alone. Maybe she'd be up for a match...* Also noted was the triple piercing of the new squadron leader's right ear, though outwardly she seemed nice enough, if a little intimidated by the position thrust upon her moments ago. The shortest one, shorter than the brash but obviously friendly Seer, had a collected air about her, as if she was much more experienced in all of this than the rest of them *Time will tell i guess, never judge a book by its cover, remember.*



*Thats what they did, and is why it took you so long...* anyway, her mind was wandering, back to observing...damn, she's pretty *why was that my first thought?* looks confident too, bandaged leg attesting to taking risks in the recent past.

She finished her walk to the front, turned to face her squad mates, and pulled herself to her full height, hands in front of her and her fingers intertwined in order to absorb some of the tension "Greetings, Second Lieutenant Christine Auten, pleased to meet you. I have been transferred here from escort duty as i have been deemed too extreme in my methods of pirate dissuasion." A short laugh from among the other pilots *With me or at me* she mused briefly, before continuing "My callsign is Banshee, for reasons that will make themselves apparent. If you had not noticed already, i come from a British background, and as such have been deemed a little offish by people. While i may be more reserved than some of you..." she pointed a glance at Cassandra "...i am not unfriendly. If we are to fly together we must stick together. Now, if you would be so kind, Crone we know, but you other three ladies, i don't believe we've had the pleasure..." She made her way back to her seat, not sure if she'd blown it already with that 'A little offish' statement, and quietly prayed that these women would accept her. *Especially the blonde one...*

JediBubbles

Sat Jan 17, 2004 12:41 am

Cassie confusedly cocked an eyebrow after Banshee looked away. *Huh? Did I give the impression that I don't like reserved people? Or does she not like open people? Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit...women I can't read make me nervous...*

Alex

Sat Jan 17, 2004 3:07 am

Jessica decided to take the first bullet, so to speak. She stood up and walked to the front, which caused her now throbbing leg to throb a little harder. *Well, at least it's not shooting spikes anymore...* "Pleasure to meet you both. My name is Jessica Carter, but feel free to call me by my Callsign: Nefertiti. I also go by Nef, Neffy, and 'that hot chick'." This got a smile out of the old crew, and a snicker from Seer. *This was so much easier with boys...* "If there's anything you wish to know about me, just ask. Getting the answer you want may be a different matter, but I'm usually pretty open. If you want to know about my past, I recommend you look up my personnel record. If you want to know about my flying abilities..." She looked at the old group with a smile, "check out my sim kill-score." This created smiles on the old crew, and confused looks from the newbies.

The pain was starting to get to be too much, so with a smile, Jessica decided it was time to sit down and let the others introduce themselves.

Charon

Sat Jan 17, 2004 7:05 am

Rhiannon looked over the new arrivals whilst Nef gave her introductions. The British girl appeared to be like most Brits she knew - reserved, but not necessarily stick-in-the-muds. *Might be a wee bit interestin' tae see hae she is after a few pints...* she chuckled slightly.

The other girl, this "Seer", Rhiannon could already tell was going to be a lot of fun. Her slight stature made the twinkle in her eye more mischievous than it was already intended to be, and the constant smile on her face spelt certain doom should a spout of pranking occur. Rhiannon made a mental note to purchase better padlocks for her wall- and footlockers.

Nefertiti sat down, wincing from her leg, and Rhiannon decided that it was time to give it a shot. "Name's Rhiannon MacTaggart," she said, putting on her thickest burr "Boot ye kin all kill meh 'Claymorrrr'." That reminded her: it had been several days since she practiced with her namesake - not since just before coming to the *Morrigan*. She would have to remedy that, the next opportunity she had. "'M a pretty straight-forward lass, sae if ye ha' any questions, gae ahead an' ask 'em. If ye ha' any problems, don' hesitate tae share 'em. Things gang muckle smoother tha' way."

Nodding definitively, she sat back down, then spoke up with a smirk. "An' if ye wan'tae tilt a glass o' tae, let meh knae, an' I'll tek ye oonder th'table!" She laughed throatily at the last, tilting her head back and enjoying the slight release in tension that she hadn't even noticed she'd been holding.

Alex

Sat Jan 17, 2004 9:18 am

Jessica stared at the simpod. It had been about 20 minutes since the end of the meeting when Aurora had told them all to get some rest. Jessica was pretty sure Aurora was going to be able to handle being the squad leader... Even if she would need a hand along the way...

But the meeting, and the rest of Dark Nova was very far way from her mind right now. She simply stared down the simpod. *It's been nearly a year... Can't you let go?* She asked herself. As if responding, she pulled a pendant out of her coat's pocket. She usually wore this around her neck, but she wasn't sure how people would take it, and didn't wear it when she'd come on board.

Jessica looked at the pendant, then again at the simpod. Her fist tightened around the pendant, and she began to hobble over to the sim pod, with a sense of urgency. She disconnected all the datalines that connected the pod to the ship's simulation computer, then sat in the pod and closed the hatch.

Jessica looked at the pendant again in the red emergency lights of the cockpit. She pressed her thumb to a pad on the back of the pendant which released several unlocking sounds. Jessica flipped the pendant over, and lifted the lid. Inside, was a datadisc.

Jessica placed the disc into the simpod's onboard computer, and began the simulation.

Nef sat inside of an Aries, in orbit of earth. It was a stunning as the day she'd first seen it...

"Hey Nef! What's up!" A voice called over the radio.

Nef almost jumped at the message. Her eyes were beginning to swell. "Hey Hyena... What's going on?"

"Not much. Bird wanted some practice, so I thought I'd tag along and make sure she'd be all right." Hyena replied as a siren came at them, spinning slowly.

"I t-t-think I'm-m-m g-g-going t-to be si-i-ick!" A high pitched voice came over the comm system.

Nef's eyes began to water. *It's.. It's great to hear them again....* "Bird... How many times have I told you... Keep your stick centered, and your thrusters off?" Nef replied as a smile poured through her face.

Bird's hesitant voice came back over the comm. "I know Nef... I'll get it one day... These ships are so much harder to control than the Medusas."

*When will you let it go? These aren't even them! It's a simulation!* the voice told Nef. But Nef wasn't listening. They were together again... **Triple Threat Squadron** was together again! Tears began to hesitantly flow from Nef's eyes.

"Speaking of ships..." Hyena began, "What's that hot thing you're flying today Nef?!"

Nef's voice broke for a moment. "it--- \*Ahem\* It's a new ship. It's called an Aries. It's WAY better than a Siren." Nef responded. She began to tell Hyena all about it, while trying to keep the strong emotions she was feeling out of her voice.

"Sweet! I got to get me one of those ships!" Hyena exclaimed when Nef had finished.

Bird just groaned. "Great... Now all we'll hear for the next month is how great the Aries is..."

**IT'S A SIMULATION!!!** The voice in Nef's head screamed.

*I know...* Nef told herself. *But for right now... they aren't.* Nef cut her outgoing comm channel and began to weep. All the emotions from the pass few days just flooded out as she listened to her old friends chatter back and forth over the comm.

Vexus

Sat Jan 17, 2004 11:20 am

As Aurora sat on her bunk, the quiet hums and clicks of the ship droned on in steady chorus. After the squad meeting had ended, Rhiannon had proposed that they all accompany her to the bar for some evening entertainment, but Jessica had excused herself with little explanation and Aurora too had declined the invitation. The events of the day had drained her, and right now all she wanted was some quiet. She just sat for a long while, not thinking of anything in particular, allowing her mind to drift. She thought of home... of playing Catch-Me with childhood friends... of the sweet and savory smell of her mother's cooking... and of playing the safety position in her high school football team.

Reaching under the bunk, Aurora drew out a sizable wooden box and opened it. Inside was a large and bulky looking assault rifle, normal-looking as such weapons went save for a thick rod that protruded from the back end above the butt of the weapon. It had been a while since she had rubbed it down, and now seemed as good a time as any.

The sound of footsteps outside the room stopped Aurora as she was just about to take the rifle apart. Ursula appeared and gave the silver-haired girl a warm smile.

"You didn't say much about yourself during the meeting today," Aurora said as she put the gun back into the box. She would clean it later.

"Eh, there isn't much to tell," Ursula said with a shrug. "What matters is what happens here and now."

Ursula crossed her arms and looked down at the sulking squad leader.

"Rhiannon, Cassie, and Christine are all having a blast at the bar."

"And why aren't you with them?" Aurora asked. "You deserve to celebrate more than anyone considering your performance today."

"I was with them," Ursula replied. "Then I thought I'd try to find you and Nef."

"I'm not in the partying mood," Aurora murmured.

"You're never in the partying mood," Ursula said with a soft laugh. "But ok, if you want to sit here that's fine. I'll leave you alone... but only on one condition."

"What's that?" Aurora asked suspiciously.

"That the next time the squadron gathers to have a good time, their leader will be there also," Ursula said, her tone gentle but her eyes revealing the seriousness behind it. Aurora nodded, and felt her respect growing for her fellow pilot. Without another word, Ursula left the room, and Aurora decided to do some reading. Around her, the chorus of the Morrigan continued.

Vindicare

Sat Jan 17, 2004 4:45 pm

"So, 'Claymore' huh? does that mean your into old style weapons? If my education serves me correctly a Claymore was a large two handed sword employed extensively during the period of the Anglo-Scottish war, William Wallace being a prime practitioner" Chrissy took a swig of her drink and waited for a reply.

"Tha's aight lass!" she positively glowed "I'ah ben fixin to practice wi' mine fer a wall now". That was just the answer Chrissy had been hoping for, she had read her new companion correctly.

"Really? i've always been interested in blades myself, however i tend to look away from england during that period, as the emphasis was on size rather than technique, as the english answer to William Wallace was Edward Longshanks, who had an even bigger sword called a Flamberge"

"Tha' ken tha' blades, lass"

"indeed, i have three with me, and some training ones. One katana, two wakazashi and two bokken. Would you care to spar at some point?" she said, almost sounding excited.

Cassie smirked at the brit's exterior beginning to break under the pressure of liquor shots, and voiced that she didnt have any blades, but she'd be happy to watch.

Meanwhile the other girl, Ursula, simply sat with a bemused expression upon her face.

JediBubbles

Sat Jan 17, 2004 8:51 pm

"Waiiiiiiit a sec," Cassie gesticulated towards Rhi and Chrissy with her glass and noticed that it looked a bit fuzzy. *Oh being a lightweight is such a fun pain in the ass.* "Isn'ta Japanese blade against a broadsword a bad idear? 'Size matters not' and all, but cud'n't the sheer weight of hers do damage to yours?" She flashed them a buzzed grin. "Or izzat half the fun?"

Banshee had looked slightly offended at the first, but then she got it and treated them all to a small grin of her own. "That is the fun, actually. And all the motivation in the world t' be faster than my opponent."

"Thae's te spirit! Whaddya say, lass? Match in a bit?"

Off to the side, Ursula's eyes widened. "Uh, I think swordfighting smashed might be a bit more dangerous than simming smashed, Claymore. You might actually hurt each other."

"Ri'te, ri'te. Di'n' mean 'mmediately a bit...daen't worry 'bou' us. W'won' dae anythin' stoopid."

"Surely you don't think we're that daft?"

"Just checking. We did go simming drunk last time."

"Really? Oh, so sad I missed that! Be't'was priceless...Y'know," Seer babbled, pulling a long black curl in front of her face and studying it crosseyed, "I've been thinkin' about cutting my hair. Such a pain t'get under my helmet."

Claymore reached over and shoved the petite woman's shoulder. "Thae's the kin a shite I'm talkin' 'bout--'bout us nae dooin'!"

Cassie snorted. "Like I'm any more rational sotally tober! Speaking of sober, where's Blondie?" She flopped her head backwards over the back of her chair to survey the rest of the bar. "Wanted t' ask her how she ended up with 'Nefertiti', of all tags..."

"I think she headed back to bunk up, where I \*yaaaaawwn\* really think I should be going," Ursula stood and yawned catlike again. "Seriously, nothing stupid girls."

Seer flipped back upright, "How 'bout stupid songs? Those allowed?" She downed the rest of her drink in a go. " 'That's great, it starts with an earthquake, birds and snakes, an aeroplane, Lenny Bruce is not afraid! Eye of a hurricane, listen to yourself churn, world serves it's own needs, dummy serve your own needs..."

Laughing heartily, Ursula left to the sound of two inebriated British accents joining in on "It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiine!"

Charon

Sat Jan 17, 2004 8:57 pm

Rhiannon's slightly effusive voice rang out after the battery of songs. "Sure an' it'd beh a pleasure tae spar wi' ye, lass! Boot dinnae fash about yon tricksie thin blade - th' Claigh-mor's no' th'only sword I've got," Here she lowered her voice conspiratorially, an effect made all the more amsuing by the fact that that she hunched over and drew Chrissy down to the table with her, but was still talking loud enough to be heard clearly by Cassie, who rolled her eyes and sipped at the soda she'd changed to, much to Rhiannon's chagrin.

Rhiannon continued. "'ve also got a pair o' dirks, a broadsword tae match tha' katana o' yers, an' a coople o' epees. Rumorrr has it tha' there's soomone on board hi doesna care fer a coople o' sabers, as well. I'm still lookin' intae tha'..."

The pair continued to discuss the "finer" points of large-caliber bladed weaponry, spelling it with bouts of karaoke (and the occasional chaotic demonstration - arehanded, of course), both events becoming more and more incoherent as the evening progressed.

In the end, the three managed to stagger back to the squadbay (well... Cassie was more lurching occasionally than staggering, but with the two on either side of her bouncing off the walls and her own self, it wasn't too different). Upon arriving at the squadbay, all three hit the rack with exaggerated hushing sounds and giggles.

It's amazing what a stationary head does to a spinning brain. It wasn't long before Rhiannon was praying for some of those magical orange tablets that had been handed her, last time. Listening to Chrissy retch was not helping her early morning disposition's outlook.

Alex

Sun Jan 18, 2004 10:13 am

It was nearly midnight by the time Jessica got back. Her eyes were red, and the pendant was hung from around her neck, but hidden under her shirt.

The quarters were dark, indicating that most of the squad were already asleep. Jessica could hear someone snoring, but didn't care who. She approached her bunk, and found that Seer had made herself a home in the bunk beneath her's. *Seer looks pretty helpless when she sleeps.* Jessica mused. She dress down and got into her bed. She grabbed the blankets and rolled over, her back to the cabin. She took the pendant in her hand and stroked it a few times before gripping it tightly and trying to sleep.

Had Jessica looked out into the cabin, she would of seen Aurora's bright blue eyes watching her. As Jessica began to fall asleep, Aurora simply closed her eyes and went to sleep as well.

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Morning broke a little too early, in Jessica's opinon. The sound of surprise by Cassy and Chris- *No...* she corrected herself. *Seer and Banshee... I need to start thinking of my squad by their callsigns.* Nef sighed as she got out of bed while Seer and Banshee looked amazed at their flight jackets, which now bore the Dark Nova insignia.

Nef was wearing a black t-shirt, some pants, her pendant (mostly hidden by her t-shirt) and brushing her teeth when she came out to see that Rhian- **Claymore** and Banshee were showing each other swords from their collections. Nef felt a little appriensive about bladed weapons in their

quarters. Claymore or more possibly, Banshee, may get the urge to start swinging them around and end up accidentally cutting up some of Nef's manga. A small wave of relief came over her as they put their swords away.

Nef turned to look at Crone, but noticed that she wasn't there. *Must of gotten up already.* Seer and Ursula were now starting to squabble over who had the sink next. Nef finished brushing, leaned over the two, and spit the toothpaste into the sink, and washed it down. She doubted the two even notice her do it.

Nef was pulling on her jacket, when she noticed something odd. She couldn't place her finger on it, but something was different... She looked around, then began to check herself. She ran her hand across her bandaged knee- *Oh my god...* A smile creaked along her face. She hopped slightly. The pain in her leg was almost completely gone. *Well, I'll go to sickbay anyways and get their opinion, after breakfast.* Nef put her hands in her pockets and walked out, as the rest of the squad finished with their morning preparations.

Vexus

Sun Jan 18, 2004 10:59 am

It was a dirty-breakfast morning, Aurora was sure of it the moment she woke up. Most of the time, breakfast was was a small affair; just a piece of fruit, or maybe a bowl of cereal. But every now and then, she woke up hungry, and that meant a dirty breakfast: large and unhealthy.

Rising to the soft breathing and moderate snoring of her squadmates, Aurora dressed and made her way down to the mess hall. Peeking into the kitchen area, she saw a chubby middle-aged woman in an apron darting around the stoves and counters. Upon seeing Aurora, she made a shooing motion with her hands.

"Morning meal will be served in one hour," the chef said, obviously annoyed, "Come back later." Aurora seemed to hear a slight Russian accent to her speech.

"Actually," Aurora said timidly, "I was wondering if I could cook some breakfast myself.... I won't get in your way," she added quickly.

"You come in here, and trust me, you *will* be in my way. Come back in one hour. I swear, you girls! Always complain about the food! You should just cook it yourself!" Aurora now looked confused.

"But... that's what I'm here for. I'd like to cook it myself." Now the chef looked like she was considering this for the first time.

"Mmmm.... You just cook for yourself?" Aurora was about to say yes... but then she thought about what Ursula had said the previous evening.

"I'd like to cook for my squadron." Again, the chef seemed to consider this.

"OK, you cook morning meal today. But you find things on your own, and you clean and put everything back when you're done. Trust me, I know if you put something in the wrong place."

Aurora nodded her agreement and thanked the chef, who snorted and went back to her kitchen duties. It was slow going at first, as Aurora had to find where the right pots and pans were. However, soon she had got the feel of where things were and her speed increased. Soon, Aurora was too busy to notice the occasional studying looks that the chef shot at her.

Coming up on breakfast time, and Aurora had just made it. Laid out upon one of the cafeteria tables was a dirty breakfast to make her father proud:

Chopped fried potatoes with sliced ham and scrambled eggs  
Buckwheat pancakes with blueberries and syrup  
Cinnamon rolls with icing  
Extra-sweet orange juice  
And a side of bacon just for the hell of it

Setting up the trays and utensils on the table, Aurora began to pace. She was a woman of planned action, and these spontaneous things always made her paranoid about something going wrong. She hoped the others would show up soon... and that they would enjoy the food she had made.

Vindicare

Sun Jan 18, 2004 3:42 pm

Waking up feeling a lot better than she had initially expected (and recalling a lot more of the previous evening than expected), Banshee began her morning routine, first finding time to place

her blades upon a custom-made shelf that fitted on the wall just above her bunk *i'll have to remember security is a bit tighter on this ship* she mused briefly, as Claymore began to surface. She sat up and immediately noticed the display shelf that had been erected above her new squadmate's bunk, and instinctively reached under the bed for her own treasure.

"That be a fin rack ya got therre" she said, then laughed briefly at the possible interpretations of that statement, as she began stroking her sword with a hankerchief.

"Thanks, if we have time i could make you one, most they normally hold is 3 blades though, after that they begin to take up too much room". Banshee smiled to herself *well it looks as if at least one of them has accepted me*. She went through all the normal washing motions, then was slightly taken aback by the addition of the squadron logo to her outfit, which had obviously been done surreptitiously during the previous evening, when everyone had been away from the bunk room. Seer had also noted the addition, swearing to high heaven that whoever had gone through her luggage was going to PAY. That got her thinking. *Everyone must have been out of the bunk room, so where were the others...* She quickly decided to do her morning exercise AFTER breakfast, her stomach empty from the previous evening's unglamorous conclusion. *Well i can safely say i went in both feet first, a new thing for me...* she stood outside the door, waiting for the others.

JediBubbles

Sun Jan 18, 2004 9:20 pm

**\*EERAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAANNK\*** Cassandra rolled over, stuffed her head under her pillow, and moaned softly at the futility of it all as she caught sounds of her squadmates actually leaving their bunks. Morning always came far, far too early nowadays. *They really ought to include a warning for recruits: "Join the Navy. See the Galaxy. Never Get a Full Night's Sleep Again."*

Blairily she reached one hand over the edge of her bottom bunk, wrestled her still-packed lone dufflebag open, and started rooting around for her uniform by touch. *Clean underoos? Check. Pants. No, I want the regs, those are the dress-ies...ah, check. Top? Check. Jacket? Che--* Seer startled and yanked her jacket out, and--still lying down--held the sleeve out in front of her face. *Okay, now I'm awake!* She hopped out of bed, tossed the jacket on her bunk, and continued to stare at the new addition to its shoulder as she got dressed.

"Oy! Banshee, did you get a patch too?"

"A what? I--oh." Banshee ran her fingers over the new Dark Nova insignia on her own jacket.

"Where did this come from?"

"Dunno. But while I absolutely love it and the overnight express is incredibly cool, whoever went through my gear is gonna get it!" Cassie declared with no malice whatsoever. She grinned widely as she shrugged the jacket on and headed for the bathroom, while Banshee and Claymore happily continued the previous night's conversation as they shelved their swords.

*Ah, washroom-sharing, the bane of all womanly existence.* Seer playfully jibbed with Ursula over sink-rights, and mentally cracked up when Nef used her superior height to override them and rinse her toothbrush. Her stomach growled audibly, echoing Banshee's--who had just walked out the door. *Food first, exercise later. Argh, then I'll want to eat again. Damn hummingbird metabolism.* Seer headed for the door herself, noting that Crone was apparently already gone. The rest of the squadron emerged shortly, and chattering sleepily the lot of them headed for the mess hall.

"...no, I lived all over Earth, so I picked up alot of weird phrases and don't really have a specific accent. I'm a dialectal mutt, you could--" Cassie broke off her answer to Ursula's question as they approached the messhall door. *Is that...? Oh, that most certainly is...* Ursula eyed the smaller woman, who--now completely distracted--was making a beeline down the hall with a look of absolute glee on her face.

"Uh, Seer?"

"Oh, sorry Urs, easily distracted...you see, the most delightful smell just tickled my nostrils." By this point the rest of the squadron had noticed Cassie's odd behavior.

"And what would that be what," Nef smiled, "oh hobbit-child?" Then the smell reached her nose, too. "Oooooo..."

"That, my friends, is the smell of a real breakfast, including hash browns! And I suspect that this is the happy happy solution to our missing squadleader!"

Alex

Sun Jan 18, 2004 10:50 pm

Seer buzzed through the Mess hall's doors just before Nef, followed by the rest of the quadron, got to the doors. Nef opened them for the whole squad to see.

On the table that Dark Nova tended to propigate was a veritable feast of real-looking food. Seer was already sitting down with a plate of pancakes and bacon. Nef smiled wide-eyed at Claymore and Ursula. "Real food!" Like a tidal wave, Dark Nova swarmed to the table, each taking a seat and

a plate. Crone walked out of the kitchen, having just finished the cleanup, to see her squad begin to eat.

Nef took one bite, and began to melt. This food was better than anything she'd tastes since the academy! This seemed to be the shared impression from most of the squad. Nef looked over to Crone and waved her over. "Come on Crone! You did all this work, you deserve to have your fair share of it!" Nef almost thought she saw a self-satisfied smile come across Crone's face as she walked over and took a seat next to Nef.

"Thank you." Crone said, starting to help herself to breakfast.

Nef smiled as she picked the blueberrys out of her pancakes. "No... Thank **you**!" she retorted. "I should see about cooking everyone some pasta some time..." She crammed a cinnamon roll into her mouth, and almost died with pleasure.

Charon

Mon Jan 19, 2004 1:21 pm

Rhiannon had woken up, not really feeling the night's activities that much. This was good, as it meant that her Scottish constitution was getting back up to speed. After a lively discussion with Banshee about their respective blades (including a tentative arrangement to spar tonight, training permitting), she'd thrown on her fatigues before heading to the chow hall with the others. She'd shower after morning PT.

As she and the others approached the chow hall, her nose twitched, and she scrubbed at it irritably, which only served to enhance the tickling that she felt in it. Then she realized what the sensation was, and stopped dead as she entered, along with the others.

It was beautiful! Magnificent! Spectacular!

It was **food**.

Sharing gleeful glances with the other Dark Novas, she dove in with a vigor that told her she'd be paying for it with a tummy-ache later. Frankly, though, she didn't care.

As she demolished the hashed browns, ham and eggs that she'd stacked as high as the pile of pancakes on her other plate, she overheard Nefertiti entreating Crone to join them, and their erstwhile leader's quiet, yet content, acceptance. She attempted to voice her own appreciation, but succeeded in causing fragments of hashed browns to head down the wrong tube, prompting a furious spate of coughing that was alleviated by slugging some more orange juice.

After a few moments of this, she tried again. "I dinnae care tae thin' hae long it took ye tae preparrre all this, Lead, boot I thin' it was muckle appreciated by all of oos." Murmurs of assent rippled around the table, each voicing their own opinion, and Rhiannon reached for the last couple pieces of bacon.

Only to find another hand reaching for it at the same time. Rhiannon looked up into the determined eyes of Ursula, twinkling mischievously. "Therrre's nae chance in Hell, lass," said Rhiannon, chuckling slightly.

"Oh," Ursula said off-handedly, smiling, "I think you're mistaken, 'lass'. The bacon is mine. It came to me for protection."

"This isnae th'bacon yer lookin' fer," said Rhiannon, an edge of a laugh in her voice.

"But it serves me, just fine!" interjected Seer, who reached out and snaffled the last few rasher underneath the stationary hands of both Rhiannon and Ursula.

Their heads turned to Seer, eyes impossibly wide and shimmering with theatrical tears.

Nef and Banshee burst out laughing, and even Crone chuckled, her eyes showing more amusement than she let out of her mouth. The image was enough to make Seer snarf the purloined bacon.

Vindicare

Mon Jan 19, 2004 4:00 pm

Banshee walked sedately to the table and sat down shortly after the others had began piling their plates, and calmly helped herself to a modest "Full English" that she was used to. As she began to eat she look across the table at Nef, and remembered Seer's comment from the previous night. She was toying with the idea of asking her when a mini-fight broke out at the other end of the table between the smaller part of the squadron. She laughed at the spectacle and relaxed a little

"So, how did you end up with Nefertiti as a callsign, Seer and i were half-speculating yesterday evening. If my education serves me correctly she was the wife of Akhenaten, and the name translates as... *uh oh, should have thought about that one a bit more, cant stop now i guess...*'the beautiful woman has come'

She looked down at her plate and flushed slightly, not entirely sure of her reason for doing so, then dragged her eyes up again, waiting for an answer. Seer, and indeed the rest of the squad, were all waiting too

*stupid stupid stupid now look whats happened. This is what happens when you speak out of turn*

Alex

Mon Jan 19, 2004 11:31 pm

Nef raised her eyebrow at Banshee, and stopped shoveling the last of her hashbrowns into her mouth. She quickly finished what she already had in her mouth, wiped her mouth with a napikin, then smiled at Banshee. "You're close. Nefertiti **was** the wife of Akhenaten, but her name means *The Beautiful One is Here.*"

Banshee eyed Nef, but Nef waived her off. "Yeah, I know... Anyways. As you may know, Nefertiti was Egypt's most famous queen, mostly because of her beauty. But they were also known because Akhenaten and Nefertiti thought of themselves as Gods, and thus ignored some of the sacred traditions of the Egyptian people, while portraying themselves as Sun Gods. Or something like that..."

Nef looked around. People were starting to get a bit bored. "So that's what the name Nefertiti means." She finished, going back to her breakfast.

Banshee looked a tad pissed. "You didn't answer my question. WHY are you called Nefertiti?"

Nef looked up at her, stone-faced. "You're right. I didn't answer your question." And she went back to eating her breakfast.

JediBubbles

Tue Jan 20, 2004 5:00 pm

Banshee didn't quite know what to make of that.

But down at the other end of the table, the blatant evasion and all the vibes that went with it were duly noted by the tiny woman crunching on purloined bacon.

"Ye bloody wee 'arpy!" Claymore pulled Seer's attention (mostly) back to the scene of her crime. "Wherre're ye even puttin' all tha' food?!?"

"My fourth stomach. We cows gotta keep 'em all full, ya know." Cassie deliberately took her time savoring that last inch of pigflesh, just to make Rhi squirm. "The farm hands never put this kind of fodder in our bins! And to thank our wonderful Lead--since I'm sure she wouldn't want one of my hugs--for this treat, and the two of you for not stabbing your forks through my hand, I'm doing the dishes."

Curls flying, Seer hopped up and started gathering up rapidly-emptying plates. "And don't gimme that look, Crone. I know the cook told you to clean up, and you've done more than enough work this morning already!" With that, she bobbed off to the kitchen, leaving the others to finish and start off to morning exercises.

"Gaw, I am so full!" Ursula stretched. "Thanks again, Crone. That was just above and beyond the call of duty."

Everyone thankfully missed Crone's momentary eye-glaze in response to that last. "I'm glad you all enjoyed it." A rare smile crossed her face for the second time in a quarter of an hour, "It was worth it just to see Seer steal the bacon."

"Aye, tha' took guts, tha' did," Rhi chuckled.

"Now, the question is, do they carry over into the cockpit?" Banshee kept a studiously straight look on her face.

"'M sure we'll find oot later. 'ight now, our firs' full-squadron workoot is callin'." Claymore sniffed her own armpit with all the surruptiousness of a stage whisper, "an' then a wash, methin's!"

Vindicare

Tue Jan 20, 2004 6:39 pm

"Common sense would dictate that we exercise first, then shower." Banshee noted, and making sure her place at the table was clear she got up and began to head to the door.

"Where's t' fire, lass?" was called after her as she reached the door to the hallway. Banshee didnt turn, not wanting the others to see the anger building at her squadmates impudent dismissal of her



enquiry.

"My workout regieme is probably a little more strenuous than yours, so if i start before you, we will finish at the same time. See you down there."

She closed the door behind her and ran back to their quaters, picking up her training gear and her 2 bokken in case Claymore did indeed want to spar. She knew her anger was purile and immature, and maybe Nef had a good reason to be so offish, but the fact she never felt threatened by the truth was something burned into her soul. *Honesty is the best policy, thats what everyone used to say. A squadron without honesty and trust is not a squadron, its an incoherent mass of ships.* She ran down the hall towards the exercise area, stopping to ask directions twice. By the time she found it she knew she had to hit something, quick.

Alex

Tue Jan 20, 2004 9:54 pm

Nef "walked" along the hallways on her way to sickbay, when a voice called out from behind her. "Nef! Wait up!" Nef turned around to see Ursula sprinting up to Nef, and falling into stride next to her. Nef didn't say anything, and infact, ignored Ursula for a good time, until she asked a question. "Nef? Do you remember what you told me during that planet sim?"

Nef looked at her, questioningly, not sure of what she was referring to.

Ursula saw this. "The part about not caring about the people on this ship? Is it true?"

"Oh, that..." Nef responded. "I'm sorry I snapped at you. I think I was still a bit angry about what happened in the hall when I said that... Yes, I care about the people on this ship, but in a general way."

"What do you mean?" Ursula inquired.

Nef stayed silent for a moment, thinking of the best way to answer. "I don't want anyone to die on this ship. But if they did, I wouldn't care about it. Unless it effects me directly, people's deaths will never effect me..."

"But why would you be like that?" Ursula inquired.

Nef didn't want to answer. Her history was a private matter. And while she felt comfortable enough to trust Dark Nova with her life, she didn't trust them enough yet to let them know what has happened in her life... Especially the bad memories...

"Nef, tell me! Why are you like that?" Ursula asked again.

Nef stopped walking, and turned towards Ursula. She leaned over Ursula, using her height to inspire fear in Ursula. Nef's eyes were cold, and her voice had a tint of anger to them. "You want to know? Fine! I'm like that because of what happened to me! I'm like that because I've lost too many people I care about! I'm like that because I have Death's number on speed dial! I fly and fight to protect people, so others don't have to die! I'm not here to satisfy your curiosity! If you want to know anything else about my history, take it up with my personell file!" Nef stormed off to sickbay, leaving Ursula in something of a shocked state.

Nef was angrier than she had been since- *No! That line of thinking is wrong! Just calm down...* But she couldn't calm down. She wanted to hit something. She whamed her hand against the metal wall just outside of sickbay. *Shit... Now see what you've done? Hopefully nothing's broken...* Nef had calmed down... a lot of her anger having disapated thru her punch. She walked into the sick bay. "Hey Doc, I need-" She stopped dead in her tracks.

Dr. Banner was now looking at Nef. But Nef was looking at the person Dr. Banner was talking to before Nef had come in.

He was 6'2", had short, slicked-back, brown that reached to the back of his neck, and green eyes. He wore a black-leather trench coat that seemed to flow behind him, and he wore a charming smile.

Nef was stunned. It couldn't be... "David?" She asked.

He simply shook his head. "I'm sorry miss. I'm afraid you have me confused with someone else." His features seemed to take on a more subtle look as he aproached Nef, but that could of been the lighting... His eyes changed to a light-blue color. "My name is Edward. I'm the ship's local Sexbot.

May I be of service?"

JediBubbles

Wed Jan 21, 2004 12:45 am

Ursula stared open-mouthed at Nef's rapidly retreating back. *She did it again. AGAIN! She said she trusted us, so why won't she share?*

"She'll voluntarily share when she's ready to." Urs whipped around to see Seer turning the corner. "I know she *seems* more open and approachable than Crone, but I guarentee they're about even on the stubborn-refusal-to-share-emotional-scars deal."

"But she half-shares and then leaves us hanging--wait, Crone?"

"She's not naturally that quiet and withdrawn. Quiet, yes. But not sooo. Something shoved her there. But since she is quiet, she won't say a damn thing until she's almost over it. Nef'll let it out in bits and pieces." Cassandra stated all this like it was perfectly normal knowledge.

Ursula eyed her new squadmate. "Do you read minds or something?"

Cassie laughed. "Naw. I heard Nef yelling, along with about 10 other people. And I'm just really intuitive about people and their emotions and reactions. Thus the name Seer," the shorter woman grinned. "See, you found out about one tag today! Now, how 'bout some exercise? Somewhere *other* than the sparring room, though. I have a feeling that Banshee's going to be laying waste to poor hapless targets..."

Vexus

Wed Jan 21, 2004 8:56 am

The day seemed to be off to a good start overall, and Aurora was in a mood more pleasant than she had ever been since arriving on the Morrigan. Everyone had seemed to like the food, and their contented smiles as they ate warmed her heart. It was the ultimate payoff for any cook. Cassie and Christine seemed quite friendly and willing to be part of the team. The only tension had come from Jessica, and it made Aurora remember how she had come back so late to their quarters.

Something had happened to her last evening, but Aurora decided only to keep her eyes open for now. She could respect it if Jessica didn't want to share her thoughts to such new acquaintances.

As Cassie had insisted on cleaning up, Aurora soon left the mess hall for one of the excersise rooms, making sure to thank the grumbling chef one more time for letting her into the kitchen. Upon reaching the excersise room, Aurora retrieved her staff and began her forms. It wasn't long before Rhiannon and Christine had joined her in the room.

Vindicare

Wed Jan 21, 2004 3:16 pm

Christine breezed passed Aurora, heading for the martial arts area. Once there she used her card to request an old-fashioned 5 plank training dummy, and focused her eyes upon the fifth plank. *Count to 10, remember, lets see how far i get...*

<CRACK> 1... <CRACK> and 1 make 2 <CRACK> 2 and 1 make 3 <CRACK> *this is my destiny..*  
<WHOOSHCRACK>

With her favourite left-rear roundhouse finishing her combo, the 5 piece was now a ten piece, and her anger largely spent. She allowed herself a small chuckle as she bowed to her 'opponent' and headed to the floor to start her proper workout. She noted Rhiannon giving her a quizzical raised eyebrow, but just smiled and kept walking.

She saw Aurora going through forms in the corner of the room, and mulled over asking her to spar. *you've already spoken out of turn once today, and look where that got you.* Instead, she found her own corner of the room and began her own forms using the bokken she had brought with her. She'd have to cut back a bit, the area was a little to populated for complex tumbles, though the gravity seemed playfully cooperative.

She vaguely hoped Rhiannon would ask to spar, so she could get the measure of her new crewmate. She knew that Rhiannon was quite likely not to be up to her standard, but swords were a part of her family, and she also knew that a good way to train was with someone who uses a completely different style - at the academy, everyone was on even ground, with the same tutors and the same stances. Real combat cannot be read as easily, she knew that, and hoped Rhiannon could provide some unreadable moves in order to improve her own understanding of her style. Also, challenging a better opponent was a sure way to improve, so if it became a regular activity, Rhiannon would be able to match/beat her, something which she would enjoy as her instructors did when she beat them

Alex

Wed Jan 21, 2004 11:48 pm

The best way to describe the forms Aurora was putting herself through would be Tai-Chi. Soft, flowing movements that provided a wide range of motions. Aurora began to move faster, her forms

and staff spinning and twirling. She performed a particularly dangerous double-handed-spin towards the wall, turned and struck.

A loud THONK sound echoed in the room as Aurora saw her staff had hit another. Jessica, wearing a white martial arts workout uniform, smiled at Aurora. "I wouldn't have figured you for a staff person. Care to spar a bit?" Aurora thought for a moment before nodding. They walked a few feet onto a sparring mat.

Aurora noticed that Jessica's leg was no longer bandaged, but her right hand was now wrapped. "Broke your hand this time?" Aurora asked.

Jessica looked at it for a moment. "I hit a wall out of anger. Doc said I didn't break any bones but it'll probably ache for most the day. Bandage is there to keep me from hurting it anymore today." The two bowed to each other, then took their stances. They began to circle each other, looking for a weak spot. "So, who have you chosen for your second in command?" Jessica lashed out at Aurora, but Aurora easily blocked Jessica's attack.

"Why do you call yourself Nefertiti?" Aurora countered.

Jessica nodded. "Fair enough." She responded, indicating that she'd dropped the subject.

"I wish to observe the squadron a bit more before I make a decision." Aurora stated.

"Giving Banshee and Seer a chance?"

"Yes." Aurora struck at Jessica from overhead. Jessica blocked, but Aurora pulled her staff back and shoved it into Jessica's stomach, stopping only millimeters from actually hitting her. Jessica dropped her arms, depressed, backed up and they took their positions again.

"After class, during lunch, we should all sit down and discuss what our squad's first sim will be." Jessica said as they circled each other. "I say you should choose the sim though." Jessica attacked again. Aurora parried Jessica's attack, and gently pressed her staff into Jessica's back, letting her know she'd hit. Again, Jessica drooped, turned around and took her position.

"There's no guarantee that they won't interfere again." Aurora stated. She attacked Jessica, by swinging her staff vertically at Jessica's head. Jessica side-stepped the attack, only to have Aurora retract her staff, and twirl around to hit Jessica. Jessica blocked the attack, causing Aurora to twirl around the other way. Again, Jessica blocked it. Jessica turned to block Aurora's swirl-attack again, when Aurora began to duck. She hooked her staff on Jessica's leg, and flipped her onto her back. Aurora brought the staff down to Jessica's neck, and stopped.

Jessica opened her eyes and saw that Aurora had won, yet again. "I thought of that."

Aurora looked at Jessica. "And?" She asked, feeling it coming.

Jessica took a few breaths. "And... I can see three possibilities." Aurora backed up and offered Jessica her hand. Jessica took it and stood up. "First is that it was a test of our abilities outside of the cockpit. Infiltration and computer-like stuff." They took their stances again, and began to circle.

"Weren't you given the answer though?" Aurora asked.

Jessica shook her head. "All Sparks did was give me a disc with a picture of a wrench on it. That's what led me to think of looking up the diagnostic mode. All she did was point me in the right direction. I was the one who found the door."

Aurora nodded. "Two?" She prompted.

Jessica half-lunged at Aurora, but Aurora dodged the attack, and they began to circle again. "Two: They wanted to see how we worked when our squad was not at full strength."

Aurora swung her staff horizontally with one of her arms. Jessica ducked. Aurora swung back with her other arm, this time, low. Jessica jumped over it. Aurora grabbed hold of her staff with both hands, and began to twirl it quickly as she closed in to Jessica. Jessica smiled and twirled her staff into Aurora's, which caused Aurora's staff to fly out of her hands. Nef used this time to spin around to Aurora's back, and gently place the end of her staff into the small of Aurora's back. Aurora

drooped her shoulders. She turned to look at Jessica. Jessica smiled and started to stand again, when Aurora whacked her right hand, and wrenched Jessica's staff out of her left hand. She began to attack Jessica again, moving to whack her with the broad-side of the staff at her face. Jessica leaned her head back, let out a cry, and rammed her head forwards. The staff broke in two.

Aurora looked at the staff, slightly shocked. "How...?" she began.

Jessica smiled as she began to rub her head a bit. "I took several martial arts classes back at the Academy. I also studied heavily with melee weapons."

Aurora looked at her. "You're quite good."

Jessica smiled. "You should see me with a pair of Sais. I'm not nearly as good with the staff as you are though."

Aurora nodded. "Three?"

Jessica's face dropped a bit. "Three is probably the most likely and the one I least want to be true." Aurora walked closer as Jessica took a deep breath. "Three: They are making the simulations harder because that is the difficulty expected from the missions we will be undertaking."

Aurora listened to this. Jessica could see that she didn't like this idea either. "Look... I'm going to hit the showers. I'll see you in class in about half a hour." She bowed to Aurora, then walked out and headed for the showers.

Charon	Thu Jan 22, 2004 6:39 am
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As Chrissy went through her forms, Rhiannon stepped into the training room, carrying her own kitbag. Her fatigues had been shed for a padded sparring suit, resembling a fencing uniform, but with the reinforcing covering the entire body, except for small sections behind the knees, elbows, and underarms. With a small smile, she observed the tall Brit for a moment, watching her unleash a righteous fury upon the planks of wood, before drawing out her own training sword - a wooden broadsword, carved from cherrywood.

As Chrissy brought her bokken back for another strike, Rhiannon knocked the blade aside lightly. Surprised, Banshee whirled, her training sword coming around to the guard position. Claymore stood back, a sardonic smile on her face as she took a misleadingly relaxed-looking stance. "Care tae train wi' someone who kin fight back?"

Banshee grinned back. "Indeed. It would be a pleasure." Then with a mighty kiai, she swung her bokken around in a lightning fast slash that would have bisected Claymore - had she still been standing there.

Instead, she stepped back and off in the direction of the slash, parrying it lightly, then stepping forward, raising her training blade, crossed with the bokken, to eye level. "Nicht sae quick, lass. I intend tae give ye a run fer it." A hungry gleam came to her eyes as she savored the impending combat, before she shoved off from Banshee and assumed that same, easy stance. "Now, shall we dance?"

Vindicare	Thu Jan 22, 2004 4:57 pm
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"Indeed" she walked towards the centre of the mat, turned and faced her opponent with her arms by her side, sword facing forwards.

"Christine Auten, Hiten Mitsurugi Style" she swapped the sword from her right hand to her left and raised it to shoulder height, dropping her left side back to her favoured "Mist" stance. Rhiannon gave her another quizzical eyebrow, so she explained.

"I learnt everything authentically, and a swordswoman states her name and style before combat, so they can be remembered should the fight be good"

A throaty chuckle "Weel oka' ten lass, Rhiannon McTaggart, Scottish style" she grinned, and assumed a combat form not unlike Banshee had seen in history textbooks.

"Another few terms that are good to know are 'Yosh' - stand ready, 'Hajime' - begin, 'Matte' - pause, and 'Sore Made' - finish. Oh and 'Rei'" she bowed, and Rhiannon bowed back

"Ya doon't 'spect meh ta ken em all noow deya lass?"

"No, no, but you can learn more in future matches" She smiled.

"Hajime!"

Banshee stood her ground and awaited the attack, in order to get an initial measure of Claymore. *We're about the same size but i think im a little stronger, time to find out...* The satisfying chink of clashing swords was replaced by the dull thud that comes with training weapons, but the noise was enough to turn some heads in the room, and Banshee noted that Rhiannon's swings were indeed

powerful, as she would expect a scot's to be. Both combatants pressed on their blades, measuring each other's strength, and Rhiannon seemed to be genuinely impressed that Chrissy didn't lose ground.

"Matte" they relaxed, and walked back to centre

"I ken see t' usefulness a' that noow"

what followed next sounded like "Huge jimmy", but she was trying, and that warmed Banshee to her. They began circling, and Banshee let off a few quick jabs from her shoulder, more to harry than to hit. Claymore jumped back suddenly, then darted forward with a rushing low-bladed attack. *I knew this would be more interesting than ANOTHER academy girl..* as Claymore reached Banshee, she brought her sword up in a classic cleave manoeuvre. Banshee placed her right hand on the back of her blade, and hit the strike away as if using a kendo pole, deflecting the blade past her left shoulder. She then turned so that Claymore and herself were facing the same direction, and thrust her right arm under Claymore's before rolling forward. The result was that Claymore, not expecting the roll, lay on her back, while Banshee continued the roll and crouched, before standing up.

"Yuko, Matte" she said, before extending a hand to a slightly disorientated Claymore. "Weel i weren't expectin' THAT" she exclaimed jovially as she took the hand. They retook positions.

"Hajime"

Claymore was now on an obvious offensive and came at Banshee with a string of blows which she was barely managing to avoid and parry *uh oh, mistake, don't lose your cool if you fall behind, have to work on that one.* Banshee waited for another rising attack, and deflected the weapon aside once more *lets see if we are progressing.* She moved in, turned to face the same way as Claymore, just as before, and noticed that she had braced her hips forward to resist the throw *she's definitely going to be interesting to fight* Banshee mused, before moving her left leg through Claymore's legs, placing it on the back of her left, and falling backwards. Completely overbalanced, Claymore fell backwards onto the mat, and Banshee, her sword still in her left hand, was able to twist 90 degrees during the fall, bringing her blade to Claymore's neck, with her full weight trapping Claymore's right arm, and therefore her sword.

"Ippon, sure made"

"Weel, ah've neer ha' a swordfight like THA' beforre" Claymore exclaimed with some slight incredulity in her voice.

"Not all blows are dealt with swords, sometimes its more about technique and positioning.

Technically during that fight neither of us scored a single hit, however i was able to immobilise your sword arm, floor you and get into a potential lethal strike position. If you like, next match we can fence in the style you prefer, however if you wish to have continuous combo's i may need to borrow one of your training swords, as mine will not stand a direct assault from heavy swords for long. I would also need one of those fetching training outfits you are wearing, i do not believe they come as part of standard uniform. Otherwise i can just use my blade and score all the points quickly, of course" She added jokingly.

"Would you like that match now, or next workout? i've still got some energy to burn"

Vexus

Thu Jan 22, 2004 7:51 pm

Aurora made her way to the showers as Rhiannon and Christine duelled with their wooden blades. She wondered if *everyone* in the squadron had some skill in melee weapons, and her mind conjured up a humorous image of all the Dark Novas posing in their fighting stances. Passing an adjoining room, she saw Ursula and Cassie doing some aerobics, though a part of her was expecting them to be fencing with rapiers the way things were going.

Just before she got to the shower room, now only half dressed, she noticed a figure out of the corner of her eye... a figure much larger than a typical woman. Whirling around, she stood face to face with a tall man, and for a moment she could not speak. The man spoke instead.

"Greetings, Miss Yates, my name is Edward. I am the sexbot assigned to this vessel. May I be of service?"

When Aurora heard his precise manner of speech and realised he was artificial, her surprise turned to anger. However, when Edward had said "sexbot", Aurora's anger faltered just a little. While Edward's eyes were unmoving, she realised her own near-nakedness before him. Much to her shame, she felt the beginnings of a fiery lust burn inside her. A small whisper in her mind spoke of pleasures that had been unfairly denied to her.

Within an instant though, she silenced that whisper, and replaced it with an anger more fierce than before. She then turned on the droid with burning eyes.

"You may be of service to me by making sure I never see you again. Ever."

Aurora turned and stormed into the shower room, a greater part of her mind hoping the robot would leave... and a lesser part wishing he would follow her inside....

Alex	Thu Jan 22, 2004 10:49 pm
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Jessica, having already showered and dressed, passed Aurora as she was storming into the locker room. Jessica's head turned towards Aurora, but she said nothing as she continued to walk. Jessica turned and looked at Edward. Edward once again changed his eyes to the light-blue color. "What was all that about?" Jessica asked.

Edward showed only a slight impression of rejection. "It seems that Miss Yates would like it if I permanently removed myself from her presence." Edward had decided not to divulge the increased heart-rate and flushing of the cheeks that he had noticed in Aurora, indicating a possible attraction.

Jessica turned back to where Aurora had been. *What does she have against Sexbots?* She stored the information, and turned to Edward. "Edward..." Edward looked at Jessica with an inquisitive face. Jessica couldn't help but notice that his skin looked far more real than other sexbots she'd known. "What makes you different from other sexbots?"

Edward smiled. "I am a state-of-the-art Sexbot, model E2200-1. Among my numerous advancements over previous sexbots is an increased memory capacity, StimTech Simulated Skin, User Adaptability Version 3.0, and Simulated Sperm."

Jessica HAD to shudder at this last feature. "Why would anyone want that?!!" She asked, disgusted.

Edward did not change his expression. "Research has shown that many women find it more pleasurable to be "filled up", so to speak. Sim-Sperm is a bio-degradable sperm-like substance that simulates the feeling of the sensation, while not exposing the user to pregnancy. This option was also added so that real sperm may be replaced, so impregnation may take place if the user chooses."

Jessica shook her head in disbelief. "Can't... Can't there be a mixup of some kind and someone gets pregnant by accident?"

Now it was Edward's turn to shake his head. "No. Every sexbot with Sim-Sperm has many safeguards to prevent such an occurrence from even possibly happening."

Jessica smiled, half-convinced. "Ok then... I'll take your word for that..." Still slightly disgusted with the thought of Sim-Sperm, Jessica and Edward began to walk down the hall towards Jessica's class room. "You said you have increased memory capacity? Why?"

Edward smiled. "My ancestors, I guess you could call them, had limited memory capacity. Should they be required to fill functions other than their primary ones, their files on the subjects would have to be deleted to make room. I contain all the knowledge they originally carried, plus a few updates, and that only takes up 40% of my total memory capacity."

They continued to talk all the way to the classroom.

JediBubbles	Fri Jan 23, 2004 1:31 am
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Cassie struggled to gather up her hair into her usual knot-tail as she jogged down the hall, looking for the right classroom. She and Ursula had finished with their aerobics--the classic routine had been oddly comforting, even set to the irregular beat of thocking wooden swords--in plenty of time, but as usual she'd taken too long in the shower. *Can't help it. Got alot of hair, and hell, I like hot water. But now I have no farking clue where I'm supposed to be!* Her long curls finally co-operated, leaving her free to run faster. Rounding a corner, she spotted two tall people walking way ahead of her, one a very familiar blonde.

*Hey, it's Nef! Score!* Cassie sped up a bit, hoping to catch up with Nef, but refrained from yelling because of the unfamiliar brunette. She was actually more than a little confused by the way the other person was walking. *Where have I seen that stride type before? Ho-ly-shitthat'saman! Hmm, gotta be a sexbot...*

She caught up with them right outside the door, just in time to hear the man-thing say, in a pleasantly deep voice, "While it has been wonderful speaking with you, Miss Jessica, I am certain my presence will not be appreciated in the classroom."

"Probably not, so see you later, Edward!" Nef slipped through the door without realizing that Seer was there. The sexbot, however, did notice her as he turned to leave.

"Greetings, Miss Dory, my name is Edward. I am the sexbot assigned to this vessel. May I be of service?" he smiled mischievously and ducked a bit to be reasonably closer to Cassie's height.

Cassie startled a bit *F\*CK! with the hair and the eyes he looks like...* and then laughed. "Oh, that's slick! Well, sadly Ed, I'm about to be late for class, but I'll check ya later! Oh, but do me a favor," Seer waggled a finger at the sexbot. "Please don't look so much like my brother the next time I see you."

Immediately Edward looked contrite and straightened. "My apologies, Miss Dory. I understand that it is disturbing for me to resemble the deceased."

"Actually, in this case, it's even more disturbing for you to resemble the living."

Leaving the now-confused man-thing to puzzle that over, Cassie turned and snuck into what would turn out to be the most boring hours-long lecture on flanking formations ever.

Schamann

Fri Jan 23, 2004 4:18 pm

Doing the exercise riding on a bike through the woods was not the very usual, at least not onboard the starship flowing through the vacuum of space. Off course, bikes were only exercise ones and the woods was just the display on the nearest wall, moving accordingly to the hypothetical move of the person practicing.

It was late afternoon, after classes. Cassie and Ursula were both enjoying the ride, illusionary as it was, on their exercise bikes.

"You think the rest of the girls are sparring again?" Ursula asked casually with no apparent intention in her voice.

"Could be. Could be not." Cassandra answered in similar tone. "I'm not the clairvoyant, you know, hard as it is to believe" she smirked.

"Hard indeed" Ursula smiled and laughed merrily. "I bet you get that a lot"

"Not that often, mind you" Seer corrected. "Most often I get uncomfortable looks and strange grimaces"

"Both totally undeserved, off course" this time Ursula was purely sarcastic.

"Aww c'mon. Figuring out the Crone has something ugly in her past was not that difficult. I'm sure you suspected that already" Cassie made a waving off move with her hand.

Ursula nodded, and frowned slightly. "Yes.... I did"

Cassie gave her a questioning look. "Oh oh. Something dramatic is on the way. Just don't make me fall off my bike, will you?"

Veneberg turned to her with somewhat serious look. "You can be such a bitch that you almost seem a man, you know?"

Cassie didn't seem bothered particularly by this and continued. "Like we all don't. Save for us two they all are tall like men, tough like men, and have that fascination for weapon and fighting that used to be reserved for men....yeah I know what you want to say, don't we all have that, since we're in the military? But that's something different – You and I we don't practice fighting in our free time, like it was all there was, do we?"

Her interlocutor shrugged. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I used to love practicing shooting, I still do it from time to time. I just don't treat firearms as my personal close friends, like Crone does."

"I was right. You did figure out there is something wrong with her past"

"Seer – we're but a few years after The Plague, **almost** everybody has something wrong with her past, you can see it everywhere."

"I like the way you say **almost** – miss I-was-not-touched-by-this". Despite of the words, Dory kept smiling friendly as if to indicate that it's merely nitpicking, not bitching. Ursula shrugged again.

"I never knew my father, they split and divorced when I was two and he didn't visit or videophone. I had no brothers, my grandpa died before The Plague, and I was too little to think of a boyfriend. What else is there?"

"...such a bitch that you almost seem a man..." Cassie threw casually, as if nothing happened, and started whistling innocently.

"Well if I was like that, Seer, I wouldn't have even talked to the rest of the girls, you know?" Ursula interrupted the whistling sound. "So much they have something almost male-alike in them. And I wasn't spending sleepless nights trying to figure out what's with Crone, if that's what you suggest. What I figured out was merely the obvious"

"Really?" Cassie pouted her lips.

"She owns a military weapon and treats it as a friend. "Ursula started counting reasons on her fingers. "She moves, walks and talks like a soldier, and a grunt soldier, not an officer to officer relation, pay attention to how she snaps to attention and how she takes orders. As if yes sir/no sir was all there was." She started talking in a strange fashion, as if she was talking about a puzzle to solve, not a person, about collecting observations and getting into the only answer that fits and thus has to be true. "Now take Crone's scar, it wasn't made accidentally during make-up. You had no occasion, but we saw her tattoo, couldn't look more Marine if she painted herself in jungle camo. And the last - something she said about colonists, you know, the Charans, the rebels. There was hate in her voice so pure you could bottle it. She has seen war and she has seen it ugly. What does that tell you?"

Dory eyed her carefully.

"That you're smarter than you look, lieutenant. Crone would be surprised."

"Of what? That I make comments like that about her?" Ursula gave Seer puzzled and somewhat troubled look "You're not gonna tell her are you? It's just that I...oh, no matter."

"Yeah, no matter my ass" Cassandra started to race faster. "You don't have to thank me for not inquiring further".

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The unaware subject of their conversation just left the CAG's office as they spoke.

Crone leant against the wall, breathing deeply. It went better than she thought it would. She summed up the squadron's and all the pilots' performance during last sim, she explained the tactics used and conclusions drawn from it's effects, she took papers on squadron as well as orders for next day's simulation. Reconnaissance patrolling in dense asteroid belts with medium and high radioactivity. She was in Eridani long enough to know what it meant.

Morrigan was about to head towards The Border. They didn't have much time.

Vexus	Fri Jan 23, 2004 9:17 pm
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Dark Nova was assembled in the ready-room, Aurora standing once again before the rest of the pilots. In readying herself to speak, she marked the order in which they sat in a single row from left to right: Jessica, Chirstine, Rhiannon, Ursula, and Cassie. With their matching uniforms and patches, it was made clear to Aurora once again that they were fast becoming a team, and she hoped that they would perform well in this sim. It could well be their last before they saw real action. Aurora cleared her throat and began, still far from comfortable speaking in public like this:

"While we have had the privalage of flying our own simulations up till now, it seems we no longer have that luxury. The CAG has given me instructions on a sim that we will be flying immediately after this briefing. Our mission is to fly a reconnaissance in a dense asteroid field."

Several groans came from the seated pilots, and Aurora felt nothing but empathy for those feelings.

"We have been assigned Medusas."

Jessica rolled her eyes at this, and Aurora noticed that Christine's own eyes seemed to dart back and forth between Jessica and herself.



"Unless the high-ups have something different in mind, it will be a straight-forward three-point sweep."

"'Straight-forward', my rather sexy arse." Rhiannon said with a smile, bringing laughter from the other pilots and and a small smile from Aurora, who soon continued.

"I will take Point in the formation. Ursula and Nef will fly Center. Banshee will take the Crown above, and Seer the Foot below. Claymore flies at the Rear.... Are their any questions?"

Alex	Fri Jan 23, 2004 9:35 pm
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Having already expressed her opinon about having to use Medusas, Jessica voiced what was on everyone's mind. "We are to fly a simulation taking place in The Border, aren't we?"

Jessica could of sworn she saw Aurora shift uncomfortably in place. Aurora Nodded. "Yes."

This grew a knowing silence from the squad.

"What possible enemy encouters should we expect?" Jessica continued to ask. She didn't like flying into something blind.

Aurora just stood there. "Considering where our simulation is taking place, I would have to say Charans. And before you ask..." she interrupted Jessica starting to ask another question, "We do not know what they may be flying."

Jessica didn't like this. "So we are going up against a possibly unknown enemy, in a highly radioactive asteroid field, using possibly the weakest fighter known?" Jessica asked, making sure that everyone knew what was going on.

Aurora said only one word. "Yes."

Jessica nodded. "Just so long as we have that clear..." A gleeful smile crossed her. "This is sounding like my kind of sim..."

Vindicare	Sat Jan 24, 2004 8:20 pm
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Chrissy felt slightly uncomfortable sitting next to Jessica after her somewhat unwarranted rage stemming from their previous encounter, however as Nef didnt appear bothered she relaxed a little. She became more conscious of the reinforced padding on her left arm pressing into Rhiannon's side, and hastily decided to fold her hands in her lap. This action earned her a slight sideways glance from Rhiannon, and a short look from Crone, who then began her speech. Banshee noted the exasperated noise and eye rolling gesture from Nef at the mention of Medusas, and wondered why this squadron seemed to be so adverse to flying them. *Sure, they dont pack much of a punch, but for precision flying they outmatch most other 'retail' fighters* She thought briefly about that manoeuvrability, and the evasion techniques that came with it. "What options do we have in the way of hardpoint weapons? The sensor options would be next to useless with the amount of geiger activity in The Border, as will a proportion of our seeking weapons". This statement drew some looks from the squadron, although Crone seemed less suprised. "I possess a small amount of technical knowledge regarding the operational requirements of the various weapon systems employed by our Navy" she said, flushing slightly and hoping Crone would answer before anyone else said something. *Did it again, didnt i? HEY EVERYONE LOOK AT ME(!) damn it...*

Alex	Sat Jan 24, 2004 10:48 pm
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"Well Banshee, I'd think it's be quite obvious." Jessica said right next to her. "We're going to have dumb-fire missiles, and the Medusa's onboard weapons. And the sensors aren't completely useless within The Border, so at lease we won't be flying completely blind." She smiled slightly again. "The good news is that the enemy's sensors and missiles will be similarly impaired, so we'll have a fighting chance."

Jessica leaned back into her chair and crossed her arms. "Personally I'd perfer to use a Hercules or a Aries. Their armor is better suited against radiation and enemy fire, even if their manouverability is lower than the Medusa..." Jessica stated. She thought she'd at least voice her opinon. But Jessica knew exactly what Aurora was about to say.

"I'm sorry Nef, but our orders are to use Medusas." Aurora said, confirming Jessica's prediciton. Jessica sighed heavily and waited for the end of the mission breifing.

JediBubbles	Mon Jan 26, 2004 1:45 am
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The part of Seer's mind that tracked reactions was absolutely loving this briefing. Banshee's

discomfort with sitting next to Nef was increasing tenfold every time Jessica spoke--right along with her crush on the blonde woman. Nef was still blissfully unaware of both of those things, and was simultaneously delighted and slightly irritated about the lack of information available. Rhi was ready for anything, Ursula was quietly hiding the fact that she was just slightly apprehensive, and Crone was trying her best to tell herself that everything was fine and as long as she just stayed calm everything would be fine.

The part of her mind that analyzed the undercurrents of those reactions was less than thrilled about the potential shitstorms that were brewing. *Time to lighten the mood and soothe some nerves before they frazzle prematurely.*

"Well, 'no plan ever survived first contact with the enemy,' and this is a hell of a lot more info than we're probably ever going to get in the field," Cassie quipped with a bit more gravity than usual, "so I say a location, a formation, and some transportation are good enough for me!" A ready smirk twitched across her face. "Doesn't matter what we fly, it's how."

Crone nodded, "I agree. And since that is all the information I was given about this sim, if there are no more questions, I suggest we get moving." Five pairs of eyes stared at her in silence. "Alright, then. Let's do this, ladies"

Charon

Mon Jan 26, 2004 3:48 am

"'twill be a pleasure, Lead!" crowed Rhiannon, who'd studiously ignored the undercurrents within the briefing. *These things'll work themselves oot, an' if they doon't, I'll wurry about them then...* she thought to herself as she stood up, taking her gauntlets from her belt and pulling them on definitively.

She glanced at Cassie, noting the merriment in the girl's eyes. *This one's gonna dae jest fine. She's concernned about morale, an' she's no' abooove knockin' herself if it means tha' everyone calms doon. Must remember tae mention tha' tae Crone, laterrr.*

The briefing itself didn't have her particularly worried. She wouldn't have signed up for the military if she was afraid of dying. She wouldn't have volunteered for the assignment to the highly unstable Epsilon Eridani system if she was afraid of danger. Simulation or not, this was an accurate demonstration of the area where they were going to be operating, and it was to be seriously as such.

Alex

Mon Jan 26, 2004 5:08 am

There was an usual type of tension in the hallway as the squad made their way to the simulators. It was almost as if two "auras" were fighting for control. One aura was fear about the simulation, and the repercussions of the basis of the simulation. The other aura was the tension-breaking spirit that some of the girls were emitting.

If Jessica had to place origins for these two auras, the bright-happy one would be Seer and Claymore. The dark, forboding one would be Crone and Banshee.

Jessica was hanging back a bit, so she was at the back of the squad. Something about this simulation didn't seem right...

An uneasy twinge occured in Jessica's stomic. *I'm not afraid... But this uneasiness... It's the same kind that I felt after-*

"Ay Nef! 'Urry up!" Claymore yelled back to Jessica.

Jessica raised her head, *When did I lower it??* and noticed that she was now lagging way behind. She jogged up to the squad, who had already made it to the Sim-Pod Room. Aurora had just begun to work the Master Control Panel as Jessica trotted into the room. The Squad had formed something of a circle near the pods. *Time to put on your show...* Jessica walked up to them, and smiled.

"Nef? What do you honestly think about this sim?" Ursula asked.

Nef looked at her with her smile. "I'm a tad concerned about having to use Medusas, but it'll be a good chance to raise my sim-kill score." They all looked at Jessica for a moment. "Come on guys. It's just a sim. Lighten up! We're going to do great!"

Aurora walked up to the squad. "The simulation is prepared. I want to wish us all good luck."

Jessica, feeling that she was probably going a tad overboard with her "act", swung her arm around Aurora's shoulders. "We're going to be fine, so let's not worry about it!" Aurora looked at Jessica with a slightly cold stare. Jessica slowly retracted her arm, and took a few cautious steps back from Aurora. This got a big laugh out of the rest of the squad. Jessica smiled at them, pleased that she'd gotten their spirits lifted, and they began to climb into the pods. Jessica looked over to Aurora as she climbed into her pod. Aurora looked at her, and smiled. Jessica smiled back, and they closed the lids of their pods and entered the sim.

Vexus

Mon Jan 26, 2004 11:01 am

In the quiet, star-spangled sea of space, a virtual representation of the Morrigan quickly grew smaller in the wake of six Medusas as they rocketed towards their first destination.

Crone watched their mothership disappear in her monitor, her mind beginning to truly feel the weight that is carried by all squadron leaders. In the past, she had always relied so much upon others, especially when the s\*\*t had hit the fan. Now here she was, charged with the safety of five pilots... pilots who would obey her orders... pilots who would soon live or die by her decisions. Crone suddenly felt sick and decided not to pursue that line of thought anymore. Looking through the front windows of the cockpit, Crone could see the glow of a nearby star and knew it had to be Epsilon Eridani. There was no doubt anymore, they were heading for the Border.

Almost an hour out from the Morrigan, and Crone noticed the light of the local sun had begun to dim. Before the small disc of the star a dark cloud took shape and grew rapidly. As the cloud reached a menacing size, Crone's scanners began to sound off. Ambient radiation levels were increasing. While up till now comm chatter had been casual and routine, Crone now broke in with her first real command.

"Crone to Dark Novas, we are approaching the Border. All pilots report status."

"Nefertiti, all systems nominal." "Ursula, standing by." "Banshee, everything's quiet up here."

"Seer, sitting pretty." "Claymorre, all's clear at the rear."

The pre-check complete, now Crone had to make sure she didn't run into any rocks. Soon, the first of the debris began to appear near the squadron, black and gray masses half in shadow and shooting past them with considerable speed.

Now Crone's lock on the nav point position began to flicker in and out as the radiation continued to increase. The asteroid field looked slightly thinner above her, so she decided to ask for a nav check.

"Crone to Banshee, do you still have a solid lock on the first nav point?"

"I--ve--ter--ock--ob--nt," came Banshee's garbled reply, and Crone felt a growing sense of isolation. She had hoped to keep the formation wide so that they could spread out their scanner range. But if comm traffic was hindered this badly, they ran the risk of getting separated and lost.

"Crone to Dark Novas, let's tighten up. I can barely hear anything."

Crone counted her blessings as she saw all the ships beginning to close in on her own. The now close formation of Medusas continued to blaze a trail straight through the rocks, the ships veering about only to avoid collisions with the rocks

Vindicare

Mon Jan 26, 2004 3:31 pm

From the end of the briefing Banshee's mind followed its usual path. She utilised the anger generated by Nef's quick dismissal of loadout options, coupled with all her previous experiences. As they wandered down the hall towards the sim room, her anger began to swell, and her fear of failure became replaced with the adrenaline of vengeance. If they were cartoon characters, she was sure Seer would be radiating light, Claymore would have a small halo of birds chirping above her head, Ursula would be sweating giant droplets, Nef and Crone would have their own personal rainclouds, and her own would be a dark menacing thunderstorm, lightning arcing between her sides. *remember who you are fighting and why*

Once the squad were mounted in their respective pods, she reduced all conversation to "Affirmative" "Confirm" or "Negative" in an attempt to hide the force of her anger from her new squadron *they'll find out soon enough anyway...but its worth a try*

As they neared The Border, she received a radio message from Crone, requesting lock status on the Nav points. "Confirm, I still have positive lock on the first Nav point" she said, adjusting her systems slightly in order to reduce interference. The response was less than satisfactory; she didn't

like tight formations, there was no room to move. "Affirmative Lead, closing to 20"  
Once the new formation had been established, Banshee turned her attention back to her instruments, which were being severely impeded by the large amount of gamma radiation in the area. The object density was increasing also, she noted, meaning that they were getting close to the centre of the belt.

"Crone to Dark Nova, reduce speed one third, we dont want anyone getting a rock through their canopy"

"Confirm". Her mind was too focused to register the attempt at joviality, and while she expected the laugh that came from a couple of other acknowledgements, she merely heard an order.

Alex	Tue Jan 27, 2004 12:06 am
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*One third speed...* Nef did a few quick calulations. *At this rate, we should finish our mission in about 2 and a half hours...* Nef sighed as she easily dodged yet another asteroid, and quickly got back into formation.

The dark clouds where thick... Very thick. She could barely see 300 meters in front of her, and her sensors were similarly impaired... Once in a while, though... something resembling lightning shot through the distant clouds, silhouetting some of the asteroids in the distance.

Nef looked around. There was definatly something different about this simulation... She'd been in over 5,000 offical sims, and none of them had been like this... Finally, she knew what she had to do.

"Nefertiti to Crone."

"Crone here. What is it Nef?"

"This simulation doesn't feel right." Nef could imagine the confused face on Crone's face as the reply came back.

"What do you mean Nef?"

"I can't place my finger on it, but there's definatly something different about this sim than any other simulation I've ever played." Nef responded.

"Understood." Came Crone's reply. "Let me know when you've figured it out. Crone Out."

JediBubbles	Tue Jan 27, 2004 5:32 pm
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*Ugh.* Cassie successfully attempted squirming around a bit in her seat without jostling the stick. *I hate this part of sims. I hate this part of missions. It's the waiting and the "driving down the interstate" that kills me.* She twitched the controls without thinking and neatly avoided three smaller astroids that had decided to orbit each other in a highly complicated little dance. *By the time we hit destination, I'm gonna be so bored that the adrenaline rush will be a welcome thing.* She glared briefly at the astriods spinning by--*and such lovely secenery today*--then looked up at the squadron flying above her and smiled widely at the prospect of flying with 5 new people. *Oh, well. At least I've got good gals to fly with.* She dodged another sizable chunk of solar system refuse and frowned. *This is pretty easy, but it'd be easier if I could...*

"Crone to Dark Novas. Reduce speed one third, we don't want anyone getting a rock through their canopy."

"Confirmed, Lead," Seer laughed, and had to forcibly make herself leave it at that. *This level of comm silence might well drive me crazy too. Smooth Criminals were always chattering. Insanely focused, yet chattering.*

She suppressed a hearty chuckle at the memory of that fateful sim. Bandit had asked "Annie, are you okay?" after their Lead had taken a hit. In that squadron of talented flying jokesters, even as they were flying for their lives it had rapidly degenerated from there, and after her own last kill she'd sung out "You've been hit by, you've been struck by, a Smooth Criminal!" They'd gone into that sim as the mere 21st Flight, and had come out with a reputation.

Cassie sighed happily, then frowned. *And somehow none of that goofiness is to blame for the fact that half of them died. Everyone was all business that day.* Her face cleared to her usual grin. *Eh, no use dwelling on it. That'll drive me crazier than these rocks will. Nothing to be done now but blow a kiss and fly on. Rest well, girls, it's all for you.*

Coming out of her few-seconds reminiscense--which hadn't impaired her flying in the least--Seer

focused on the nasty thundercloud of stone that was pretty much Dark Nova's home for the time being. *And could be our grave--ack! begone, foul thoughts! Just a sim anyway.*

Then Nef called over to Crone.

At that Seer frowned and looked around again. *You know, this sim is really f\*cking weird, now that I think about it. It's a little too...*

"Seer to Crone."

"Crone here."

"I know this is going to sound really off-base, since we're in simpods, but is there any way this could be real?"

The fearful comm silence made Cassie immediately wish she hadn't put it quite like that. "Or based on reality? I mean, more so than other sims."

Nef's voice butted in, "It could easily be more closely based on reality." Seer could practically hear Nef's mind working over the possibilities. "As for them having tricked us and this being real, there's really no way for us to know except--"

Crone's voice snapped out, "Don't you touch that hatch, Seer."

Cassie snatched her hand away from the canopy release button she'd been reaching for. "And y'all say I'm clairvoyant." Claymore and Ursula laughed nervously.

"As far as we know, this is a sim. Just fly your best, Novas."

Seer was really starting to regret having said anything at all.

Charon	Tue Jan 27, 2004 8:05 pm
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As the the Dark Novas approached their first nav point, Rhiannon trundled at the tail end of the formation, not trusting the information her scanners were feeding her one bit. She rather enjoyed flying in this fog, with the rocks all around, in spite of the nervousness that Seers comments had provoked. It kept her on her toes, forcing her to focus rather than simply fly, as she was wont to do.

Unfortunately, this meant that her attention was away from the scanners when the blips first started appearing. However...

"Lead, Claymorrre. I've go' contacts. Most appearr tae be ghosts, but..."

"Understood," replied Crone. "Novas, keep your eyes peeled. Scanners may be unreliable."

The Novas replied with various murmurs of assent, still shaken by the tone that had infected their conversations whilst flying away from the *Morrigan*. Rhiannon eased back from the formation, instinctively taking a high-guard position further to the rear. The ghosts on her scanner would flicker and die, only to be replaced by others elsewhere on the screen.

Except... "Lead, Claymorrre, I've go' tentative conta'ts, bearing 325 b'positive 75 degrees relative. Looks like 2 or 3 medium-sized returrns, aboot 1.5 kilometerrrs distant. Your orders?" Rhiannon licked her lips in anticipation Whatever happened, this was going to be interesting. Combat or evasion in this murk was guaranteed to get her pulse racing!

Vindicare	Tue Jan 27, 2004 8:43 pm
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"Regardless of whether this is a sim, some elaborate ploy in which we were transferred unconscious into real medusa's, or even a fly-by-wire simulation with us controlling drone med's out in deep space, our mission objectives remain the same. We have a reconnaissance mission to carry out within the border. I don't know if command has pulled anything similar for you to deal with before, or what your service records are, but a mission is a mission, regardless of time, manner or place. Any rebels out there are going to feel my presence before i leave, irrespective of their status as tachyons or carbon based life forms."

She paused, more for breath than effect

"Banshee to lead, Nav point one in five."

"You really are one hundred percent British, arent you?" Crone responded

"Meaning?"

"It appears it takes a lot to unsettle you. You dont seem to be worried that any weapons fire we encounter could be real, despite our initial impression we were simming, are you?." Claymore's voice sounded over the radio before she could reply.

"Negative Lead. Confirm possible contacts 295 by 65, standing by and requesting permission to go weapons hot" her voice a studied monotone, Banshee began reworking her mind through its pre-combat ritual, just in case.

Vexus

Tue Jan 27, 2004 9:49 pm

Crone had grown nervous as the other pilots discussed the possibility that this was not a simulation. Now that it had been brought to her attention, the flying did seem a bit more realistic than normal.

*But there's no way we could have been tricked into flying real ships, Crone thought. We saw the sim pods... there wasn't even enough time for them to somehow install the pods onto the real ships before they had started the sim.*

Then she remembered Commander Verulian and the way the surveillance cameras blinked in her prescence. Crone had met her type before, and she wouldn't put it past her... especially not with all the other previous episodes of sim tampering. This was a simulation, even if it felt more real than the others had.

As Claymore and Banshee spotted the squadron's first challenge, Crone made a fateful decision not to tell the others about her suspicions yet. In making that choice, a part of Crone's mind reached an obvious conclusion. She was allowing herself to become part of the conspiracy, a Little Sister to Big Brother. But she herself had to know what she suspected the Commander had to know about Dark Nova, and Crone could not pass up this opportunity to apparently get something for nothing.

...Crone still had a lot to learn about being a leader.

As the squadron neared the first nav point, the medusas entered a a "clearing" where the field was a lot less dense. As the scanners grew in range, Crone could see the contacts that had been picked up earlier, plus more. A squadron of six Sabertooths it was, and likely unfriendly. As the ships closed in from the far side of the clearing, their IFF codes came in and Crone saw on her monitor something that dredged up hate and fear in her heart: the crimson shield. The Sabertooths were Charans alright.

Crone acted fast.

"We'll take them in pairs, ladies," Crone sounded over the comm. "Banshee, you're with me. Nef is with Ursula and Seer's with Claymore. Let's make this as quick and clean as we can."

With increased speed, the two squadrons closed the distance between them.

JediBubbles

Tue Jan 27, 2004 11:44 pm

"Affirmative, Lead." Cassie slipped back a bit to be closer to Claymore in the formation and eyed the approaching Sabertooths. Her smile widened to something very near a feral grin.

*Real mission or sim, real pilots or AI, life's about to get a whole lot more interesting.*

Charon

Wed Jan 28, 2004 12:16 am

"ROGAH!" Rhiannon crowed, cackling to herself. She felt her blood coursing through her, her heartrate increasing as she armed her guns. As Seer banked back to join her, she keyed a quick comm to the gypsy-looking pilot.

"Lass, if ye preferrr, I'll coverrr ya while ye engage. Orrr we kin dae it t'otherrr way aroond. Doesnae mattah tae meh." She grinned and cinced her helmet's chinstrap. "In eitha case, I suggest we hold off on th'missiles. Saber's arrre a wee bit tae nimble fer DF's..."

Alex

Wed Jan 28, 2004 12:21 am

Nef and Ursula jetted forwards after two the sabertooths.

"Urs! I'll go in and draw their fire, you come at them from behind."

"Roger!" Ursula replied.

Nef knew that this would be a perfect test. If it was AI, they'd turn and fire at Ursula, who they would immediatly count as a more imminant threat, but if they were human... Nef shook her head as she began her run. She ran at the lead Sabertooth, firing wildly (on purpose) and jetted by

them. They began to follow Nef, firing intensely. *Too intensely... Their the Difficultly setting is really high, or-* Ursula began her run. She fired at the sabertooths from behind. One of the 'tooths main engine was damaged, and began to loose ground with Nef. But the other one was still on her tail... Nef twirled her Medusa around and fired back, passing only a foot above the cockpit of the 'tooth. Nef blinked. *No way... But that means...*

"This is Nef! We ARE in a Sim, but our opponents are NOT AI! I repeat! We are NOT fighting AIs!"

Vindicare	Wed Jan 28, 2004 3:06 am
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Banshee's voice was eireely calm "Lets do this"

She hit her afterburner control with some force, and began racing towards her designated opponent, Crone at her wing.

"The dumb-fires are next to useless at this range, especially if we are fighting humans as nef seems to believe. Against AI we could fire as a distraction, forcing them to dodge, but a human will read it" Crone's voice came over her intercom.

"Agreed. However the Asteroids in the surrounding area will be unable to avoid them. A few shots could cover them in dust for a period of time, especially if they arent expecting it. Suggest we attempt to lure them towards the outer area of this clearing and blind them so we can close for the kill"

"Your mind is quite a tactical instrument" Crone noted

"Only before we start, im afraid if there is a change of plan, i probably wont notice"

As the final few metres before they were within effective range began to close, Banshee uttered under her breath

"Pi jesu, dominae, dona eis Requiem" *Rest in pieces, that is*

JediBubbles	Wed Jan 28, 2004 8:53 pm
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Cassie laughed at Nef's announcement. *Knows her computers like I know people.* She flicked her own comm, "I think I'd prefer to have your 'rather sexy arse,' actually. You can have theirs."

"'Tis all th' same t' mae, lass!" Claymore shot forward and danced past the nearest 'tooth even as Seer fell in behind her at a weird angle--one that allowed her to slam a few shots into the jilted 'tooth's engines as it tried to roll over and get a new fix on her wingmate.

*Ah, but by covering your ass, I can cover them all!*

Vindicare	Thu Jan 29, 2004 3:25 am
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Banshee disengaged her burner just infront of the pair of sabertooths, allowing her a quick raking volley with her PPCs. This did no actual damage but had the desired effect; as she raced past the 'tooths, they turned to follow, heading for the edge of the clearing. As she entered the first few layers of rocks, she saw a likely subject and keyed her comm.

"NOW CRONE, target the asteroid 141 by 85 from my position"

Crone responded with a 2-missile dumbfire salvo, just to make sure the rock exploded. Banshee bought her fighter around the back of the rock with the sabres in hot pursuit, their scanners impeded sufficiently that they failed to see what was occurring. As Chrissy rounded the crest of the asteroid she hit her afterburner to send her back into the clearing as the rockets hit home, causing the asteroid to rupture and pelt the surrounding area with dust and rubble. The sabres were caught in both the shockwave and the debris cloud, and had to deal with the problem of having been tossed further into the denser asteroid belt, combined with the radioactive dust that was now clogging their intakes.

Banshee reformed with Crone, and received her next command.

"We'll hang back and see who needs our help now."

"Negative. These people have to DIE. They've KILLED and now THEY WILL BE KILLED" Banshee shot back.

She bore down on the opposing craft, which were just starting to get their engines back online, but too late. Banshee tore into her targets with relish, and loosed off a DF at the nearest target after peppering it with plasma.

"DIE YOU HALF-BREED COLONIST SCUM!"

*that might be a tad over the top...*she mused briefly, as she also quietly thanked space for being a vacuum.

She swung her Medusa from its course and headed towards the pair of sabres which were locked in combat with Claymore and Seer

"Banshee, form up and we can assist when..."

"Negative, engaging hostiles"

The distance was closing between her and her new targets, and Crone's voice was further away than the ship with that awful shield logo in front of her was.

Crone paused for thought briefly *Banshee, huh? i think i get the reference now. And here i was*

thinking we had one of those by-the-book Brits. She allowed herself a small smirk as she charged after her wing; she'd found out at least one thing during this battle.

Alex	Thu Jan 29, 2004 7:47 am
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*Disobeying direct orders? Tsk Tsk Banshee...* Nef mused to herself as she finished swinging her ship around the side of the sabertooth she was tailing. This had the intended effect of scaring the pilot into pulling up quickly, allowing Ursula to get a good shot at the cockpit. The simulated body of the dead pilot was ejected from the fiery cockpit as Nef and Ursula formed up and went after the sabertooth they had disabled earlier.

As they approached the barely moving sabertooth, Nef did another fancy spin around so that she was in front of the Sabertooth, but at an angle so that the sabertooth couldn't fire at her. "This is Dark Nova to enemy Sabertooth. Do you surrender, or will we have to make this area of space a bit bloody?"

"Go to hell you bitch!" Came the not-so-friendly response.

Nef cut the enemy's comm channel just as a line of swearing started. "Urs? Death or Disable? I vote for disable."

"I agree. We could use a prisoner..." Ursula responded with a smile as she aimed for the enemy's thrusters. "And this IS a recon mission." Nef smiled and aimed for the enemy's weapons. They fired in near unison, totally disabling the enemy craft. After attaching a makeshift towline to Nef's ship, they headed over to meet up with the rest of the group, who were just finishing off the rest of the sabertooths.

Nef wondered what Crone would think about their capturing a prisoner. Then she wondered if Banshee would try and kill the prisoner, and decided that she might have to do some fancy flying to avoid Banshee killing the prisoner. *Damn it! That is why I hate blood-lusters...*

Vexus	Thu Jan 29, 2004 10:48 am
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Crone was a little taken back by Banshee's... enthusiasm, but it wasn't an wholly unwelcomed thing as far as Crone was concerned. As the squadron began to gather, Crone heard Nefertiti over the comm.

"Nef to Lead, we have a live one DIW. Your orders?"

Crone could see Banshee approach from behind her. Nef began to maneuver her fighter between the enemy and Banshee, and Crone could almost sense her wingman's eagerness. However, the rules of engagement were clear, and Crone would not willfully disobey them if she could help it.

"Hold off, Banshee, I mean it. Claymore, lock onto the enemy with your tow cable and haul it out of the Border towards the Morrigan. Seer, you go with her in case the Sabertooth somehow manages to restore its systems. Once you're clear of the Border, tag the enemy with a homing beacon and request a pick-up, then meet us at Nav Point 3. If you run into any trouble, forget the prisoner and get out of there. Understood?"

"Aye, lead, we're on it," Claymore replied.

Soon, Claymore and Seer were headed back towards the Morrigan as Crone and the others made for Nav Point 2.

Alex	Thu Jan 29, 2004 12:09 pm
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The trip to Nav Point 2, while shorter, allowed the team to catch their breaths, clam down a bit, and discuss what they thought was up with the sim.

"We're definitely fighting humans." Nef said. "I saw the pilot's reactions inside of their cockpits. AI's focus only on combat, and never look around like that. Granted, you can program AI's to do that, but it usually takes up a lot of unnecessary-"

"Nef!" Crone said loudly. "We understand. No need to explain it in detail."

Nef smiled sheepishly in her cockpit. "Roger that." A bit of time passed in silence before Nef started talking again. "I've been thinking... Perhaps the reason this sim seems more real than the others is that it's a live-data feed. I've seen it done a few times at the academy, but I've never flown in one. At least, to my knowledge..."

"Why are you telling us all this Nef?" Ursula asked, almost irritated at Nef's constant analysis of



the sim.

Nef closed her eyes and smiled. "Because I feel that it's good to know exactly what kind of situation you happen to be in, so you can make the best possible decision, no matter what. I think it's also good for a squad to know all the possibilities, so they can make the most of whatever is thrown at them."

Crone winced at Nef's words. "Approaching Nav Point 2." Crone said, switching topics.

Vindicare

Thu Jan 29, 2004 1:59 pm

"Affirmative Lead, Standing down to yellow"

She eased off her thrusters and brought her fighter to a stop, relaxing her hand on the stick as she did so. *One for one is good enough for me, plus "the only thing better than a dead Charan is a captured one who tells you where to find his friends", as they used to say .*

She reformed on Crone's wing and keyed her direct channel "I...I am sorry about that. Charans killed my sisters, and i dont feel vindicated without some release. Its been a long time since i saw that shield."

"Understood. However in a combat situation orders must be obeyed. If a mission screws up because you go kill crazy, you'd feel worse about that than you do about your current loss. Remember that."

"Affirmative Lead. My instructor's used to say that there was no finer distraction than myself, as i hopefully demonstrated earlier. I urge you to consider that for our future engagements, and assign me accordingly. I will not blink in the face of death, it is not my family's way".

*i can believe that* Crone didnt quite say.

Nef's voice came over the squad-wide channel, informing them all of her thoughts on the sim, and also their proximity to the second nav point.

"Ok status check. Banshee?" Crone said after acknowledging proximity to Nav point 2.

"Down by one Dumbfire, all systems functional"

"Roger, im out of Dumbfires. Systems normal. Ursula?"

Schamann

Thu Jan 29, 2004 5:16 pm

"Nef what's your status?" Ursula sounded very formal on the comm.

"Nothing more than few scratches"

"Lead this is... shit... this is Ursula, my wing is status green, full on missiles, ready to combat"

"Good to hear it... damn it we have to find you a callsign some day." Crone's voice over the comm was also far from utter joy "Form up and keep your eyes open"

"Affirmative lead"

"Nefertiti..." This time, Ursula spoke in soft, tired tone. On pair's designated channel

"What? Anything on your radar?" Nef briefly answered in casual tone

"...don't ever again try to go on top of me when I am the designated lead. You did it twice and twice I was unable to stop you. First time almost got me expelled from this squadron, second I don't know yet what is going to cost me. Don't do it for the third time."

"Look Urs - it's not like..."

"No need for it Nef" Ursula sounded very serious, but also very sad. "I won't bullshit you with >next time I'll shoot you< or >I won't fly with you< or >this undermines trust within the squadron< or anything like that. Just don't do this again. You have your own brains to do the math."

"Roger that leader"

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Navpoint 2 was as empty as the last mine on Earth.

On approach to Navpoint 3, however, things got a little fishy, so to speak.

"Everyone this is Nef, we have a contact ahead and a big one!"

"Yes Nef I can see it too, it blips on and off the radar like a mammoth ghost" Crone confirmed Carter's news

"This size, going past through the border, this could be a real bulk transport or at least heavy cruiser if not something bigger" Ursula commented nervously

"I can imagine bulk transports do not travel this way often, if my logic servers me right" Banshee summed it up, as she flew past particularly big and fast asteroid.

"This is Crone. Claymore, how far from Nav 3 are you? We may have some serious action on our hands"

Charon

Thu Jan 29, 2004 6:08 pm

The on-the-fly pairs that Crone thought up in the opening stages of combat appeared to be sticking, perhaps permanently. Rhiannon wasn't sure if that boded well for the rest of the squadron if a decent opportunity presented itself to Seer and her.

In order to not give the Charon prisoner any specific info about their operations, Claymore had ordered Seer to operate under radio silence. She also, operating under the assumption that this was real, and not just a sim, programmed in a navpoint that fell short of the Morrigan, and was off at a different vector. After an amount of time equal to the rest of the squadron flying to Nav 2, the three ships arrived at her impromptu nav point. In a tight-beam transmission, heavily scrambled, to the Morrigan, she called for a pickup at her coordinates, then tagged the fighter with a beacon, as ordered. After checking to make sure that the Sabertooth was, in fact, disabled, she and Seer flew towards Nav 3.

Halfway there, in the midst of random bits of banter designed to help pass the time, they recieved a transmission, heavily garbled. "Thi...s Cro....ow fa..from Na....re you? .....ay...ve some....ious..cti.....our...nds!"

*Oh crap* thought Claymore. She spoke carfeully, drawing out each word deliberately slowly. "Lead, seh agin posit... repeat, seh agin posit, read ye 2 by 5, garbled."

".AV.....EAT....3!"

"That's definately Nav 3," called Seer, all business.

"Aye, lass. Le's kick it in th'arse. Sounds like they need oos bad."

As the pair engaged their afterburners, she added. "Don' say it, lass."

"But-"

"Don'!"

"But you said-"

"Och! I knae wot I sed, ye daft bloody gypsy! Doesnae mean ye need te call me on it, everrry time I say som'thin' like an innuendo." In spite of the situation, Rhiannon. chuckled.

*Phooie*, thought Cassie, pouting.

JediBubbles

Thu Jan 29, 2004 8:06 pm

"Aw, but it's so much fun," she mock-whined back at Claymore, grinning as they powered towards Nav 3. "By the way, after what just happened with Banshee, think I should ever mention that I was born on Chara?" Cassie crossed her fingers, hoping Claymore reacted well.

Claymore merely responded with an amused snort, "Only i' ye want tae painfully die fer some strrange reason, lass! Claymore 'n' Seerrr tae Lead--ye called?"

"Crone here. We're approaching a very large threat."

Claymore eyed the enormous *cin somethin' that big even be called a 'blip?'* object on her screen. "Aye, cin see that now, Lead, we'rre almost therre. Any clues as tae whot 'tis?"

"Most likely a heavy cruiser. Might be something larger."

"Niiiiice shadow. Let's call it 'Ugly'," Cassie chirrped.

"Why the hell are you thinking up daft names in the middle of a battle?" Banshee snapped.

"What, like we're not gonna end up tagging it something equally stupid while we're trying to shoot it down?"

"Agreed, but we need to see Ugly before we'll know how to deal with it." Crone checked her nav screen and looked out her canopy expectantly. "As soon as you have visual confirmation, I want to hear suggestions."

Alex

Thu Jan 29, 2004 11:15 pm

Nef's blood began to boil with excitement. As they got closer to the blip, the larger it got. *Ooohhh!!! This is going to be good!!* She thought as the ship grew larger and larger.

But it was then that space became blacker, if that was possible. Nef looked around, and almost instantly knew why. "Shadow Ash! We got Shadow Ash fighters!! I count about 30 of them!"

"All units! Break and engage! Try not to get surrounded!" Crone's voice rang over the comm. She began to call Claymore and Seer for backup when Nef entered her own kind of blood-lust.

Fighter after fighter fell to her PPCs, while Nef took almost no damage at all. 3 Shadow Ashs... 6... 8... 11... Nef was about to fire on her next target, when she noticed that it wasn't a Shadow Ash. She pulled up hard on her stick as her trigger-happy finger instinctively fired her PPCs. *Thank God for my reflexs...* She thought as she began to take out more Shadow Ashs. *I almost hit Claymore... You'd think they'd warn me before coming through a cloud of fighters.* She smiled at this and continued her fight.

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It wasn't long before all the Shadow Ash fighters were destroyed. That's when Nef finally let herself relax for a bit. She took a few deep breaths, and checked her radar.

The blip was almost gone. *What the?! "This is Nef! We're losing the large contact! The Shadow Ashs were covering its escape!"*

Vexus

Fri Jan 30, 2004 10:42 am

With the last of the Shadow Ash fighters destroyed, Crone fought to get her breathing under control. Between the swarming ships and the rocks, Crone had pushed herself to the limit just to avoid being killed and had only managed to shoot down one of the fighters. Checking her systems, she saw that her shields were sputtering, her starboard armor had been fractured, and...

*Damn it! Don't tell me I've lost my guns again!*

Offhand, Crone wondered if perhaps the techs should just leave the guns off her fighter when going into battle for all the good they did her. With no guns and missiles, only the Medusa's signature weapon now separated her from a flying target in this sim. Hearing Nefertiti's frantic call about losing the lock on Ugly, Crone called the squad into formation for pursuit and ordered a status check. Nef seemed scratch-free. Banshee and Ursula had sustained some light damage. Claymore's armor was swiss cheese but her shields were recharging. Seer, on the other hand, appeared in almost as bad a shape as Crone, with no missiles and only one working gun left.

For a few tense minutes, as the Dark Novas made their way through the asteroids, it looked like the large shadow might escape. Yet, slowly but surely the lock strengthened and they knew they were catching up on the Charans.

At last, the blip seemed to slow and Crone braced herself for whatever they might encounter... yet the sight took her breath away nonetheless.

The blip had stopped in another clearing, this one much smaller than the last, and just big enough to enclose it. Looming before the Medusas like a floating mountain range was a ship that would dwarf even the Morrigan. As her eyes took in the vessel's immensity, its shape reminded her of the scary fairy tales of her childhood. A long, dark central hull began with a pincer-like maw and ended with four engines than glowed brighter than stars. Four swooping wings, arranged like those of the dragon-fly, were dotted with launching tubes that could deploy its entire fighter compliment within minutes. The thick armor was broken only by the host of laser batteries and interceptors that dotted every area of the ship. And upon the tip of each pincer were the largest slicers Crone had ever seen; massive constant-beam lasers that were said to be able to dissect ships with frightening

precision. Crone had only heard rumors about these ships, but she had thought that only one had been built so far... and it had been made by the Alliance. However, the running lights on the ship shined upon a massive shield of crimson, and Crone knew it was no Alliance craft. For just an instant, Crone forgot that they were in a sim, and within that pincer maw she saw the death of the Alliance, and an end to all she had hoped to save.

"Holy !\$#@\$, " Seer cried. "What *is* that thing?!"

Crone could only mouth the words, and no sound came from her lips. Fortunately, Nef said it for her in a voice filled with awe.

"It's a Daemon-Class dreadnaught."

As Crone snapped out of her trance, she saw that the capital ship was not alone. Smaller cruisers flanked the Daemon, and Peles formed a protective sphere of high-powered sensors and jammers. This was not just a dreadnaught, it was a Charan battle group... and now that the group was in the clearing they were launching fighters!

"Novas," Crone said quickly, "we are officially in over our heads. We've seen what they have, now we have to live to tell the Morrigan about it. HARD ABOUT!!!"

The Medusas made a tight one-eighty and set course for home. As they neared the edge of the clearing, they were greeted with a horrible surprise. Squadrons of Sirens and Nagas were approaching them from the asteroid field directly in front of them.

"One last dance with the Charans," Banshee mused.

"Don't even think about it," Crone said sternly.

"What choice to we have?" Ursula said. "They'll just hit us from the flank if we try to avoid them, and they just need to stall us for a few seconds before the fighters behind us catch up."

"Aye, lass," Claymore replied. "But we goot soomething they donna have."

"Exactly," Crone said as the two groups of fighters began to close the final distance between them. Looking at the surrounding rocks, Crone examined them more closely... not just rocks, but masses of iron and nickel as well. It might just work, and what other choice did they have? Crone quickly laid out the plan.

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The Dark Novas raced through the asteroid field toward the Charan forces. Crone waited until they were almost in firing range....

"Now!"

The Medusas dumb-fired their stonegazes at the center of the cloud of enemy fighters. With tremendous speed, the EMP mines raced ahead of the Novas. As expected the Charans quickly scattered, but it was of little help to them. As the mines detonated, the local space was washed in intense magnetic fields and the metallic asteroids responded. Soundlessly, huge arcs of lightning linked asteroid to asteroid, as well as asteroid to enemy ship. The enemies that caught the main bolts exploded, while others were struck by smaller fingers of light and simply disabled.

Crone held her breath and the Novas crossed the wake of the EMP explosions. Their shields buckled, but the magnetic fields had died as quickly as they had arisen, and there were no system failures. With the Medusas superior speed, there was no way the enemy forces behind them could catch up. Crone felt that they had dodged the bullet once again. Making their way through the Border for home, the comm silence was finally broken.

"I need to remember that maneuver," Nef said, and laughed.

Schamann

Fri Jan 30, 2004 4:26 pm

When the pod hatches opened, Lt Voeller was already waiting for them, hands behind her back, feet wide, in a bossy military stance.

"Attention. Form up Novas. Single file. In front of me."

There were noises of feet scraping and hurried movement, and a single line of junior officers standing there in front of their superior. Lt Voeller took a quick look at them all. Young, most likely smart, definitely highly motivated after all the "integration" stuff done to them. She suddenly felt a strange twitch in her stomach.

As Novas waited for the debriefing, they just couldn't stop from watching her superior carefully, trying to figure out how did they perform. Lieutenant's face was grim, surly and discouraging. It remained like that even she started debriefing with most unexpected words:

"The outcome of your mission is nothing short of exceptional Novas. All mission objectives were fulfilled to the letter. At all time tactical decisions were in accordance with circumstances. Additionally, capturing live prisoner adds to the final evaluation, as well as completing the mission with no losses. Typically, in this mission 50% up to 60% losses are considered acceptable. Technically, there is a possibility to complete this mission with higher reconnaissance score, namely to radar ID capital ships of enemy group, but tactically speaking, it is considered not worth the lives of five pilots out of six, which is regarded minimum inevitable losses of coming near the battlegroup" Lieutenant snickered unpleasantly. "Of course such a high result would not be possible, had you not had your sim-wizard Carter" She looked at Nef, mouth in a tight line, eyes narrowed. "Sims do have their limitations, lieutenant, you were not the first one to find it and exploit it, though perhaps you are the best one, at least to my knowledge. These are those limitations the reason why seasoned vets seldom ever use sims. Your skill is impressive, your teamwork rate non-existent. Which makes you a perfect candidate for posthumously decorated hero and for nothing more than that."

Voeller paused for a moment, cleared her throat and looked at them again.

"Your proficiency/performance score is 9.1 out of ten. Your conduct/teamwork score is 3.4." she eyed them all, very slowly, very carefully, not at all kindly.

"Reasons for such low evaluation will, however, be given to you by your squadron leader, not by me."

"After I finish with her. Crone I want you in my office, now"

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Ventilation was humming quietly. Quarters were almost empty. Seer was taking a nap on her bunk snoring loudly. Claymore and Ursula went to the bar for a drink and to watch some "their" football game, taking Banshee with them on the way. The British hesitated a little, like maybe trying to stay in the quarters, but when her eyes met Nef's grim and surly look, she just quickly left.

Nefertiti casually flipped through files on her recent simulation. *nothing more than that? – stupid bitch*

Stella Maris> Peekaboo baby, where do you plan to plug today? :P

A sudden private message popup on her PDA almost made her jump. *Peekaboo....I'll give you pee and boo you damn cow* She quickly ran through ping, locate and check routine, found the user's name and ID, checked it with official crew's manifest. No match. *what the....*

Stella Maris> itchy fingers we have, huh? Badgirl :P

Nefertiti> Nice trick sunshine, but I can find you through that.

Stella Maris> Really? I'm frightened :P Try and find me then if you can, smell roses to follow my trail ;)

Nefertiti> You think you're very smart don't you?

Stella Maris> Do I? :P watch out sunshine, comb your hair, here's a caalllll :D

Message window closed, as if blown by the wind. A videoconnection window popped up instead and the PDA's internal camera turned on

"What do you want?!" Nef voiced out loudly, working on determining the source of recent message at the same time.

"You want to watch your tone lieutenant" Commander Verulian eyed her with a cold stare from the video picture "Much as I appreciate your skill it is not enough to tolerate it. You have been accepted into RIAS training, starting tomorrow, two hours a day. OSI Department, main deck

level."

"Y..yes Sir"

"You are now dismissed lieutenant" connection dropped and the window shut down.

She left there, in almost empty quarters listening to the Seer's snore, feeling unsure, awkward and royally pissed off, but also...curious...

When Crone entered the bar, she was even paler than usual. "Novas get your butts up. To the quarters for debriefing. Now"

"Aww c'mon Crone" Ursula protested "...it's only five minutes till...."

"Now"

JediBubbles

Fri Jan 30, 2004 5:44 pm

*Hmm, silly bubbles...huh, footsteps...one tread striding...three scurrying...oh...this can't be good...thank God for bottom bunks...* Snapping out of her dead sleep, Seer practically vaulted out of bed, startling Nef from her reverie.

"What the--hey, you snore like a swearing squirrel, you know that?"

Cassie looked at the door expectantly, "Yeah, sorry, squirrel-sized nasal passages'll do that."

As the rest of the squadron came in a half-second later, Seer took one look at Crone's expression and set herself. *And this is why I wanted a frickin' nap...*

Alex

Fri Jan 30, 2004 10:54 pm

*RIAS Training?* Nef could hardly believe it. She would, of course, go as she was ordered, but her true ambition was flying. *Dave... James... It seems my path may be taking me down a different road...* Nef's eyes faded for a moment. As much as she liked to "talk" to them, she always became depressed when she did. She shook her head.

*The OSI... I've dealt with them before... But now I'm going to be one of them?* Nef's thoughts drifted to Bird and Hyena this time. *They always loved flying... Will... Will I be able to continue to fly?*

It was at that moment that Seer propped up out of bed, and it was soon after that Crone and the rest of the squad came into their quarters.

Charon

Sat Jan 31, 2004 9:24 am

Rhiannon glanced up from the manual she'd been reading in-between bouts of football and conversation when Aurora came in. *Och, aye, sure an' it seems we're in fer a wee t'understorm inna minute* she mused idly, glancing at Chrissy's suddenly ashen visage.

Ursula protested the summons that Aurora issued, causing Rhiannon to wince. "Lass, I get th'feelin' tha' we're treadin' on thin eggshells a' th'moment..."

Ursula cocked an eyebrow as she stood, a wry grin on her face. "I might have come to that realization, 'lass'," she commented, as Aurora's back receded into the corridor outside the bar. Rhiannon gathered up Chrissy and Ursula by eye, without answering, and the three trooped out of the bar, Chrissy looking the lowest Rhiannon had seen her since joining the squadron.

Of course, the cry of "DEAD MAN WALKING!" that followed the trio out of the bar didn't exactly serve to improve their collective mood, although it did provoke a dark chuckle from Ursula.

Vexus

Sat Jan 31, 2004 9:57 am

Aurora felt numb to all her senses as she called the line of fellow pilots to attention, the words of the CAG ringing in her mind. Added to that voice was that of her father, agreeing with every accusation and heaping shame upon his daughter. Once again, in such a short space of time, Aurora was about to confront her comrades-in-arms, and the thought of it made her want to hide away in some forgotten corner of the ship. But she wouldn't run away... she couldn't. Not now, not under her father's critical eye. She would do what she had to, and let the rest of them think badly of her if they must. Perhaps it was for the best. Maybe things would become more formal, and her plans could continue unaltered. Only time would tell. Standing before the squadron, Aurora began to pace.

"The CAG has debriefed me on the events of the sim... some of which missed my attention. She

has made it quite clear to me that I have failed you all."

"Crone, you didn't-" Nef began.

"I did not give you permission to speak!" Aurora growled. Jessica's mouth twitched and Aurora could sense her fist tightening once again, but she did not let up this time.

"Until I leave this room, the only two words you will speak are 'Yes, sir!'" Aurora continued to pace.

"I'll be the first to admit that being a fighter pilot is quite new to me... but I do have some idea as to how a military commander should behave. Therefore, I offer no excuse for my lack of action. The sacred chain of command was broken, and I brushed it aside without a thought. You took unacceptable risks and I encouraged them. Why the CAG did not remove me from command is beyond my comprehension. However, since I am *still* in command, it is your own failures I will now address."

Aurora walked up to Jessica, their faces only centimeters apart.

"You engaged in reckless tactics and acted like the sim was some kind of game for your personal enjoyment. But worst of all, you usurped Ursula's command without authorization from me. Being an ace in the sims does not give you the authority to assume command within them. Until further notice, you are banned from sim use of any kind. Am I clear?"

Jessica did not respond at first, her fist visibly shaking.

"I said, 'Is that clear?', 2nd Lt. Carter!" Aurora cried.

"Yes, sir!" Jessica said just as loudly. Aurora now moved to Christine.

"You, Auten, used excessive force in your engagement with the enemy, wasting ammunition. You deliberately disobeyed my orders, *more than once*, and almost proceeded to kill a prisoner of war who might have had valuable information. You will reread the Navy's Rules of Engagement, and I will be testing you on them. Any mistakes will result in more readings. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" Christine shouted, her face a mix of anger and confusion.

Now it was Ursula's turn.

"You just don't know when to speak up for yourself, do you Veneberg? This is the second time in our sims that you have yielded command and not said a word till after the fact. The next time your wingman gets out of line, you will reel them back in or you will wish you *did* leave the Morrigan on that last shuttle!"

"Yes, sir!" Ursula said, her face blank but her eyes showing her anger and shame.

Now Aurora moved to Cassie and Rhiannon, and she could see the smaller pilot gulp in a way that would have been funny in any other situation. But Aurora's words were surprisingly gentle.

"You two were the only ones who's behavior was proper in the last sim. You followed orders without question, did everything that was required of you, and respected the chain of command. The only mistake was mine for not realizing that."

Aurora now stood once again before all of them.

"As a squadron, we have disgraced the Navy. All of us are restricted from both the rec areas and the excercise rooms until we have shown that we deserve such privileges. I have other duties to attend to now. I don't want to see any of you for the rest of the day."

Crone stormed out of the room, leaving a heavy silence behind her.

Alex

Sat Jan 31, 2004 1:08 pm

An anger from within, unlike any she had felt before, bursted out of Jessica, in the form of a fist. It collided with the wall with great impact, surprising the rest of the squad. Blood was left in the visable dent when she retracted her right hand. Still with a stern, angry face, she looked at her now-bleeding hand, which was still clenched in a fist. *They don't know! None of them know!! I've worked too hard, and now everything is falling apart!!* Her dangerous eyes glared at her fellow

pilots. *They think that this is scary?! They think being chewed out by Aurora is something to be feared?! FINE!!*

Jessica stormed out of the room, towards sickbay. *God knows, I've had to dealt with worse than a bad flight performance, restricted movement and a simple sim-ban!* She now turned corners instinctively, having already memorized the Morrigan's layout due to her morning jogs.

As she approached sickbay, her anger subsided. *But... I did usuper Ursula's command. Again... I should apologize to her when I get back.* A tear of desperation began to form in Jessica's right eye. *God damn it! James? Dave? Josie? What should I do? I have this possible oppertunity to do some work better than being a simple pilot, yet... I don't want to stop flying...* She pushed the tear away as she entered sick bay. It wasn't long before she was leaving, her hand bandaged, and heading back to their room. *If I stop flying... I guess they wouldn't have to worry about me **usupering** control all the time, and my flight style...* A sudden thought passed by Jessica's mind that made her stop in her tracks, and look forwards, her eyes beginning to tear up again. *Wh... What if I leave Dark Nova?* The possibilies of what would happened scared her. Cheif among them was the revocation of her flying licence, her being discharged from the military, and having to work in a civilian section of Epsilon...

"Miss Carter?"

Jessica turned around to find Edward, having already taken Jessica's perferred physical profile, looking at her with a worried expression. "I'm sorry. Do you wish to be alone?"

Jessica shook her head, and dried the tears from her eyes with her sleeve. "No... Could you walk me back to my quarters?"

Edward smiled. "It would be my pleasure." He took her arm in his and they began to walk towards her quarters in silence. "Would you like to talk about what's bothering you?"

Jessica shook her head. "No." A thought occured to her. "Edward... If I had to leave the ship... Would you miss me?"

Edward looked at her with a sad expression. "Yes. I quite enjoy talking to you. In many ways, when I talk to you, I don't have to be someone else's idea of the perfect man. I can be more like how I perfer to be. To everyone else, I am a sexbot, but you see me a something more..."

Jessica smiled slightly. "You're a collection of programs designed to imitate human behavior, and pleasure women the way men used to." She stated bluntly. Edward's eye twitched. Jessica smiled widely at him. "But I like to think of you as a friend. No different from anyone else on the ship." Jessica's tone became somewhat distant. "But you'll never die on me..."

Edward looked at her with worry again. "Are you sure you're all right Miss Carter?"

Jessica stopped walking. Edward stopped a moment later and turned towards her. "Edward... Would you come with me if I left the ship?"

A look of remorse fell across Edward's near-perfect face. "As much as I would enjoy being with you for extended periods of time, I am owned by the Navy and was assigned to this vessel. No matter how much we may wish it, I can not leave this ship without permission from the Captain directly." Edward responded. "Although, I am curious to know why you asked."

Jessica shook her head as she walked up to him. "Never mind. It was just a passing thought." Her spirits had visibly lifted, (although Edward suspected that this was a show) and she gave Edward a light kiss on the cheek. "Thank you." She said to him as she finished the 7 meter walk to her quarters. Edward watched her enter, the door closed, then reverted back to his standard state, and continued his trek through the ship.

Vindicare	Sun Feb 01, 2004 11:12 pm
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"You think we should go look for Nef?" Ursula chimed in from her position nearest the door. Her suggestion was met unanimously with shakes of the head. "Nae lass. Kinda obvious teh me she deals in her own way, best leave 'er be"

Banshee walked over to her bunk and sat down, drawing a large leather-bound volume from under her pillow. Placing the book carefully on her pillow, she swung onto her bunk and opened the cover.

Claymore's voice took on a slightly uneasy tone, one which was unbecoming of her nature "Er...are



ya ok, lass?"

Chrissy looked up and closed the book.

"Yes" was the short but considered reply. "I was expecting to be reprimanded over my conduct during this mission, and also on my use of excessive force upon potentially disabled ships. I am however curious as to why Crone believes i would attack a potential prisoner...it is of no consequence. I have been assigned my Yankers and i will carry it out, despite having read this many times before..." She waved the book in front of her for effect, and smiled slightly "...for all the good its done me". She paused a little, and her jovial expression dropped to a saddened one "I am sorry i detracted from the squad's overall achievements for this mission, its been a long time since i saw that shield. Perhaps i can explain, not justify, my actions a little; that is, if you will indulge me". Claymore and Ursula nodded, while Seer seemed to shrink into her bunk slightly.

"When i saw those Sabers closing in with that logo on the side, it reminded me of the letters my sister Nat and i received last year, detailing our other sister's deaths. My eldest sister, Kat, took a torpedo with her med in order to protect the carrier they were escorting. A few months later, my twin sister, Em, fought a rearguard for her bomber squadron, eventually detonating her remaining bombs to take out the pursuing enemy forces"

Banshee's eyes flickered slightly, as if beginning to well up, but her steadfast gaze quickly re-established itself.

"Technically, both of them committed suicide within the armed forces. Both of them were also posthumously honoured for their bravery and sacrifice; their actions were deemed to have saved many other's lives. It was of little consequence to me, i just knew that the rebels had forced my sisters into actions which had taken them from me. I requested the position on this assignment in the hope that i could help to save as many lives as possible, to continue the family 'trade'".

She paused, more for breath than effect. When she began again her voice had risen in volume but kept the established tone of the monologue.

"I apologise once again for my momentary lapse, the anger built up over a year is not easily dealt with, but know this; I will not allow anything to detract from my efficiency as a pilot in this squadron. I will do my reading, i will quell my anger and i will learn from my mistakes. I will become a great pilot, just as my sisters were and are. I will save lives, just as they have done and are doing. I will overcome my obstacles, just as they have done and are doing".

Her eyes began to burn and she sat up on the side of the bed, looking at Claymore and Ursula in turn

"I will lay down my life for ANY of my squadmates, just as they did. I will uphold the precedent set by my own flesh and blood. I will not back down, I will never surrender. That is my duty, my honour and my pride as a member of the Auten family".

She looked down, and noted her left arm was shaking.

*Overdid it a bit there, just like Em used to do...*

Rolling back on to her bunk, she opened the reg book once more and began to read.

Charon

Mon Feb 02, 2004 8:26 am

Rhiannon came out of her reverie and looked over at where Chrissy sat, spent. Musing idly, she sat and contemplated her distraught yet determined visage. Finally, in a definitive tone of voice, she spoke up.

"Lass, a wise man once sed th't th'object o' war is nae tae die fer yer country: it's tae make th'other bastard die fer his." A snicker emerged from where Cassie's face was buried in her pillow. When Chrissy looked up, an odd expression had replaced the forlorn one that had rested there a second ago.

"What do you mean by that?" She looked into Rhiannon's emerald eyes, which twinkled with wry amusement.

"Och, yer nae sooch a quick one, are ye?" Rhiannon, chuckled, then sat up sharply - being careful not to crack her skull on the support bars crossing the bunk above her. "Tha' mindset's honorable, tae be sure, boot when yet get doon tae it, we need a live pilot moore then a ded one." Swinging her body around, she set her feet on the deck, and leaned fowards, over Cassie's still-prone form (although her head was raised, indicating that she was listening). "I'm flattered tha' yer willin' tae sacrifice yerself tae save me, as well as all th'Novas, boot I think that ye sell oos all short if ye

think that we'd leave ye hangin' like that."

Her face hardened for a minute. "Think about it. We're bein' trained, or will be soon, tae be an elite special forces squadron. Ye kin look at it strategically, an' say how losin' ye woould be a waste oof unique resources." Ursula snorted.

The her cheeks dimpled as she smiled broadly. "Orr ye kin look at it like a human bein', an' realize that losin' a friend is a damn bloody shame. Take yer pick: I'm no' fussy."

Lying next to her, Cassie smirked and stifled a chuckle. Ursula grinned, looking from across the squadbay on her own rack.

She glanced down at her boots, making a small face as she realised that they were in dire need of some polish. "Th' point I'm tryin' tae make, lass, is tha' while bein' prepared tae make tha' kind o' sacrifice is all well an' good, but goin' intae combat THINKIN' tae make it is soomthin' else entirely."

Then, her piece said, Rhiannon opened up her footlocker, pulled out a tactical manual and began reading it intently.

Vexus

Mon Feb 02, 2004 10:06 am

Aurora stood before a small observation window in the upper decks of the Morrigan, her eyes regarding the stars with indifference and her hands behind her back. Heaving a long sigh, she felt an eerie calm that could best be described as being in the eye of a hurricane. Hell lay both behind and before her, of that she was convinced. What had needed to be said had been said... and could not be unsaid. Now, she believed, everything was in the hands of fate, a mistress both cruel and kind.

So engrossed in her thoughts, Aurora did not notice the young officer approach until she spoke.

"\*ahem\* Excuse me, ma'am. I've been looking for you."

"Yes?" Aurora turned to face a woman of her own age if not younger. She looked familiar, and Aurora thought she may have seen her in the cargo bays at some point in her wanderings about the ship.

"The last supply transport that came in had this addressed to you." The officer held out a small piece of what looked like plastic, a small ring with a foam-like center protruding from one end. Aurora took it with a look of such surprise that the officer smiled.

"You didn't think you'd get them all the way out here, did you?"

"No," Aurora said quietly. "Well, not this soon anyway. Not during a mission like this."

"Transports will often give such cargo priority," the officer replied. "They don't take up much room... and most of them understand what it's like."

"You didn't have to trouble yourself," Aurora said, inspecting the piece. "You could've just left it in my quarters."

"It's a ship tradition," the officer said cheerfully. "The first one is always hand-delivered to each member of the ship's company and crew."

Aurora read a label on the side of the piece, then smiled gratefully at the officer.

"Thank you, Ensign...?"

"Sanchez, ma'am," the officer answered with a small salute. "Just doing my duty. If you'll excuse me, ma'am, I have a delivery for the bridge."

Aurora nodded and the officer walked purposefully down the corridor. Alone once again, the silver-haired girl rolled the small piece around in her palm until seeming to come to a decision. Then, placing the ring around her ear, she flipped a small switch on the piece.

**"Personal military-encoded message,"** a woman's voice said into Aurora's ear. **"For: Aurora Yates, 2nd Lt., Assigned at: classified, From: Elizabeth Yates, Northern Maine, United**

**States of America. Message begins....**" Aurora starred into the blackness of space as she heard a familiar voice that she realized she missed much more than she had previously believed.

"Hi, honey," the voice began. "It's March 17th right now. As usual I have no idea when you'll get this. You must be on another important mission since I can't find where you're stationed through any of the official channels. My hopes that you're well and that you're still eating right. You know how I am about these things. Grandma and your cousins say hello. Poor Grandma was depressed for a couple weeks, but she's better now. It was her wedding anniversary and she got to thinking about Grandpa. You haven't finally decided to dye your hair have you? You know how much I love my silver-haired girl."

Aurora rolled her eyes and smiled.

"We're all fine here. Keeping busy and growing older. The restuarant is getting back on its feet at last. I'm still trying to find good substitute ingredients for my specialty dishes... you know how it is. In case you can't get the StelLink feeds, Grandma says the Greyhelms are looking good for the playoffs. I still don't understand what you two see in that antiquated sport. Well, that's all I can think of for now. Be good... and please be safe. Love, Mom."

Aurora didn't remember at what point she had started to cry, but she was glad that she was by herself. Wiping her eyes, she turned and made her way down the echoing hallways, her thoughts dwelling on a home that seemed farther away than ever.

JediBubbles

Mon Feb 02, 2004 10:06 am

*Why do I feel awkward for having not been reamed? At least the Shields didn't bother me at all until after.*

Her head still safely ostriched under her pillow, Seer barely heard the irregular rustle of flipping pages as her mind and emotions raced in about 50 different directions.

*Two sisters killed by the Crimson Shields...Jace, I swear to God, if you had anything to do with their deaths--! But I'll never know in this lifetime, will I? You might not be a pilot anymore, you might not have been anywhere near there. You might even be a long way from here. Or you might be right outside , lurking in the Border, just waiting to tango with us. I might kill you, you might kill me, we might kill each other's friends...*

*F\*ck, it's all your fault! If you had just stayed with us...with me and Mom...we missed Dad, too...and we really missed you...I miss Mom...do you even know she's dead now?*

*It's really just all my f\*cking fault, isn't it? My fault for getting so mad at you for joining the Shields and making the single most paradoxical decision of my life. My fault for deciding that I was going to fight to keep people together. And I love it.*

Cassie sucessfully willed her tears not to fall as she slid out from under the pillow and began quietly unpacking her long-neglected duffle bag. The remaining Novas in the room were all still reading, Urs having retreated to her bunk by now as well.

*Speaking of Novas, teamwork would come more naturally if we all knew a little more about each other--ha, you'll be dying trying to stay quiet, won't you?! But you've gotta know who you're playing with to play well. Bonding is definately in order...hmm, heh heh heh, I wonder how Crone would react to "Truth or Dare"...ooo, I must suggest it...*

Soon her footlocker was half-full and the bag was empty. Seer casually flipped the bag around to roll it up, then started and dove for the small, willfully-forgotten object that flew out of the bottom. *Nya! Got it.* She stared at the old photo-disk reader nestled in her hand as she picked herself up off the floor. Her thumb automatically went for the power button, but jerked away before depressing it.

*That's the last thing I need. I love flying, I love fighting, I love this squad...*

Her willpower caved and she turned the reader on, and smiled sadly as she flipped though a bunch of old family photos. Soon she reached the place where her father no longer appeared, and she stopped at the next picture. *The last one Mom took before you ran away...*a young teenage boy who could easily have passed for a male version of herself laughed as he mercilessly tickled a little Cassie.

*...but much as I hate you, I still love you, you dastardly brother of mine.*

Alex

Mon Feb 02, 2004 10:45 am

Jessica walked in to the room, and the smile she had worn for Edward faded from her face. She looked around and found that most of the girls were now reading. Aurora still wasn't back. Cassie, however, was looking at a video of a boy tickling a little girl. Jessica guessed that the little girl was Cassie. The boy must of been a brother... Cassie, having heard Jessica walk in, immediatly turned off the viewer, and put it away. She turned and smiled at Jessica.

Jessica smiled back, and started to walk over to Ursula. She got halfway there when Ursula saw her. Her faced scrunched up and she rolled over, away from Jessica.

Jessica sighed and walked over to her bunk. She climbed up, grabbed a Manga and started reading it when Cassie's eyes slowly rose above the edge of her bunk. Jessica looked at her. "Yes?"

"What'cha reading?"

"It's an old manga series called Chobits." Jessica replied. Cassie remained where she was, her eyes barely raised over the side of the bunk.

"What's a manga?"

Jessica rolled towards Cassie and smiled. "Manga are Japanese comic books. This particular series is very interesting, considering it's about robots, not unlike Sexbots."

Cassie, having hit up a topic that Jessica was obviously interested in, popped her whole head above the bunk, her eyes wide with interest. "What about them?"

"Well..." Jessica started. "There are these personal computers that are in the shape of humans. They perform many functions from day-to-day labor, to being personal companions. The story focuses on a robot called *Chi* and her owner. The basic story is a spiritual journey for Chi, to find someone who will love her, not as a robot, but as a person. It's also about her owner, who is trying to come to grips with himself over weither or not he can love Chi, even if she is a machine."

Cassie thought for a moment. "So... It'd be like, if a sexbot was looking for someone who could love him as a person, and see past what he is, and about the person who owns him, trying to overcome the fact that he's a robot and try to love him for who he is?"

Jessica smiled. "Exactly!"

Cassie smiled back. "Now I think I know why you hang out with Edward so much."

Jessica blushed. "It's... it's not what you think!"

Cassie turned around and waived Jessica off, playfully. "Oh, sure... Sure... Whatever you say..." She smiled and rolled onto her bunk, laughing, as Jessica continued to try and convince Cassie she was mistaken.

Vexus

Tue Feb 03, 2004 11:38 am

Sitting in an out-of-the-way corner of the mess hall, Aurora held a coffee mug in one hand and a bundle of papers in the other. It was the middle of the night, but Aurora dared not return to her quarters, not while there was a chance that any of her fellow pilots might still be awake. So instead of sleeping, Aurora had decided to finally go over the personnel records of Dark Nova Squadron.

As her eyes darted over the pages, she couldn't help but think she was violating their privacy in a way, learning about them behind their backs. And while the records raised many questions, it was also quite enlightening. She had misjudged them in so many ways, and had probably been unintentionally cruel on several occasions. She began to wonder if she could face them again... and whether some of them understood as she did... and could she ever bare to tell them....

As the clock in the mess hall chimed at 0400, Aurora sat hunched over her table, her sleeping head resting upon the personnel records. The chef saw her there when she came in to start breakfast, but did not wake her.

Alex

Tue Feb 03, 2004 1:03 pm

Like a zombie from the grave, Jessica sat up slowly. She looked at the clock next to her. It was 0601.

She looked over to Aurora's bunk. She had not returned. She looked and listened around the cabin. Everyone was asleep. She lay back down into her bunk, but did not shut her eyes.

She still had not apologized to Ursula, and Cassie was starting to raise suspicion about her relationship with Edward. Jessica smiled and shook her head. *There's nothing between us, so there's nothing to worry about.* She told herself.

Very quietly, Jessica got out of bed, put on some clean clothes, and decided to get an early breakfast. *I don't know what I'm going to face at my RIAS training, so I better get a good meal and report there early.* She snuck out of the room as quietly as she could, and sighed a sigh of relief when the door closed behind her. No one was woken up by her leaving.

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She walked into the mess hall, and stopped almost immediately. Despite the increasing amount of crew members coming into the mess hall, one thing in the entire room caught her eyes. Asleep at a table in a corner, her head on some papers, and a coffee mug not too far away, was Aurora. Jessica was shocked, but not surprised. *It must be very hard for her to be the squad leader... I should offer to help her. At least give her some advice... But when she wakes up...* Jessica walked over, took off her jacket, and gently placed it under Aurora's head, while removing the papers. "You're going to get paper marks on your face like that." Jessica said softly. Aurora mumbled something, coiled up a bit and hugged Jessica's jacket like a pillow.

Jessica smiled, took the papers, and began to straighten them, when she noticed what the top paper was. *What the?! This is my Personell file! ... Oh shit!! She knows!* Jessica cast a weary eye at the still sleeping Aurora. After a moment, though, Jessica's face turned from fear to understanding compassion. *But, that's her right as a squad leader. I did that when I was a squad leader.* Jessica finished straightening the papers, and placed them face down on the table near the coffee cup, so prying eyes wouldn't see into their squad's past.

Jessica smiled at Aurora, then walked off to grab some quick food, hop back into their quarters for a spare jacket, and off to the OSI center for her training.

JediBubbles

Wed Feb 04, 2004 7:55 pm

Seer stirred in her own rack in response to a little voice in the back of her mind. *Someone just left...* She tried to dismiss it and slip back into blissful unconsciousness, but she'd passed the point of no return. Cassie cracked open an eye, and stared blankly out from under the dark curls strewn across her face. *Sometimes being aware of everything really bloody sucks.* She took her time getting showered and dressed, and then slipped out the door with her usual smile, all angst and drama from the day before completely forgotten.

*You know, for it being 6 o'dark 30, I feel pretty damn good! Happy happy happy...I think food, then exercise. Maybe today I'll try...oh yeeeeaaah, we can't use the rec rooms. Wow, I'd totally forgotten. Oh well! I'll just wander or something. I've got time.* Seer happily moseyed on into the mess hall and grabbed some food.

She was making her way over towards the back corner to claim a prime seat for her daily dose of people-watching when she spotted Crone. *Aww, poor thing...wow, she really didn't want to face any of us again last night, then, huh.* Her eyes drifted to the jacket thoughtfully nestled under Aurora's head, nametag partially visible. *Cart--? oh, that was really sweet of Nef! Should I wake her? Oh, but she needs the sleep...and doesn't wanna see us...* Her eyes settled on a cold mug sitting on the table --wait, I know!

Ten minutes later, Seer was gone, full of what passed for Navy food and wandering the ship.

Aurora was slowly waking up to the delicious smell of a fresh cup of hot coffee that had been placed as near to her nose as sleepy-elbow-safety-rules would allow.

Charon

Wed Feb 04, 2004 10:18 pm

For some reason that she would probably never fathom, Rhiannon woke irreversibly at 0500. The other pilots had crashed early in the evening, as the climactic speeches, on top on the gruelling chewing-out and even more grueling mission beforehand seemed to have drained their collective energies.

Groaning quietly as she realised that her body wasn't going to let her get back to sleep, she dressed in her issue sweatsuit, a deep blue reminiscent of a wet-navy's service uniform color, with the insignia of the USAN on the left breast and (Big Brother at work again) the new Dark Nova's

emblem emblazoned across the back.

Making her way to a supply room (she reasoned that as long as she was up, she might as well get her workout out of the way, and being banned from an exercise facility, she had to make do.), she heard cries coming from the one large multi-purpose room that rested within the middle portion of the *Morrigan*. It was a single voice, loud without actually yelling, followed by a chorus of voices yelling in response.

"Your next exercise will be Marine Push-ups!"

"OOH-RAH!"

"Marine Push-ups are a four-count exercise. I will count the cadence, you will count the repetitions. Starting positions: MOVE!"

A rustle of movement, and Rhiannon finally rounded the corner to see the rather incongruous of a platoon of marines lying on their stomachs, with their platoon sergeant standing in front of them.

The sergeant, a jovial-looking black lady with the edge of the accents of the southern United States in her voice, glanced up and saw Rhiannon standing there. Her blue sweatsuit stood out amidst a sea of olive-drab, and a sneer began to curl her lips until she realised that she recognized the person in the suit.

"ATTENTION ON DECK!" she barked, and the marines jumped up and snapped to the position of attention, if not all together then quickly enough to suit a naval officer.

Taken aback, Rhiannon could only stammer. "C-carry on," Her accent almost erased by uncharacteristic nervousness, she went on. "Actually, I was wonderin' if I could join ye in yer workout." A slight self-deprecating grin came upon her face. "We flygirls need all the help we kin get,"

A small smile came on the sergeants features for a moment, before she replied. "No problem, ma'am. Just fall in to the rear of the formation, if you would, and just work along with everyone else. Sounding off," she finished with a broad grin, "is required."

With a grin just as broad, Rhiannon did as the sergeant asked.

Small murmurs had gone through the formation when she'd requested to join the marines in their calisthenics, and had continued through her brief exchange with their platoon sergeant, who suddenly snarled. "AT EASE, Y'ALL, OR WE'LL FIND OUT JUST HOW LONG IT TAKES A PLATOON TO FALL OUT OF A RUN TOGETHER!!!"

At the rear, Rhiannon smiled slightly, and wondered if she might convince the rest of the Novas to join the marines in working out.

Vexus

Thu Feb 05, 2004 9:13 am

Aurora awoke as the mess hall began to fill up for breakfast. She was still tired, but had no hope of sleep with the growing noise in the hall. Seeing the refilled coffee mug and Jessica's jacket, Aurora began to feel rather awkward. In her past experience, a superior's rebuke was answered with respectful silence, not with fresh coffee and make-shift pillows. She had chewed them out... why were they being nice to her? A part of her mind wondered if they were mocking her, but in her gut she believed that these acts were genuine. How should she respond? She would have to think about it... after a shower.

Sipping her coffee, Aurora went to the squad's quarters, and saw that she could put off her response for a little while at least; the quarters was empty, save for a sleeping Christine. Quietly, Aurora returned Jessica's jacket and picked up a change of clothes. On her way out, she stopped for a moment in front of Christine's bunk, looking at the sleeping pilot. She very much empathized with her actions, whether they were wrong or not. This war was the fault of traitors, and they needed to pay for their crimes, one way or another. The galaxy would never know peace until their plans were thwarted.

Christine stirred on her bunk and Aurora made her way out of the quarters. Her mind dwelling once again on what she would do next as squad leader, she made her way to the showers.

Alex

Thu Feb 05, 2004 9:54 am

Jessica walked out of the OSI center, wide eyed. *Well... That was short.* In fact, she had only been

in the OSI center for about half an hour before they told her that today's first leg of training was done.

Finally, she blinked. *This will definatly be interesting if Crone finds out.* Much to Jessica's dislike, in terms of disobeying Crone's orders, she headed towards the simulation room.

The journey did not take her as long as usual, as she was told she didn't need to change into her flight suit. So, when she arrived, she started to type on the console to set up her sim, when a message window popped up.

***Stella Maris> Tut, tut! You shouldn't be there you naughty girl! What would you do if I told your squad leader about this?***

Jessica frowned at the interruption, but smiled devilishly when she saw the name.

***Nefertiti> For an intelligence officer, you sure aren't kept informed.***

***Stella Maris> O\_0??***

Jessica couldn't help but stifle a laugh.

***Nefertiti> I was ordered to perform a particular simulation, in accordance with my RIAS training. You're slipping behind toots.***

Jessica killed the window before Maris could respond, and started her assigned sim. She jumped over to the sim-pod and activated the sim.

-----  
Yet another half-hour later, Jessica climbed out of the simulator. *So... That's what the RIAS equiptment let's us do... James, Dave? Seems my path may not wander as much as I originally thought.* A breif memory from a few days ago flashed in her mind. *And perhaps, one day soon, doing that won't be as impossible as they said it would...*

Jessica noticed the time. 0713. *The girls will be having breakfast soon. Think I'll stop by the mess hall and keep them company.*

Schamann

Fri Feb 06, 2004 5:35 pm

***You just don't know when to speak up for yourself, do you Veneberg?***

It was early morning.

She stood in the corner of Morrigan's observation deck, crying in silence. She watched the rings of Lavinia swiftly passing by on the other side of the screen she faced, on the other side of the starboard of the big, ugly cruiser, speeding in silence past the silently crying planet, towards the destination unknown and future unexpected.

A crying, silent girl, onboard the silent ship, near the silent, crying planet.

Off course, silence never lasts as long as you need it.

"You might want to use the handkerchief miss, unless you want to electrocute the whole ship when the flow from your eyes flood the ventilation shafts. And much as I my artistic spirit dislikes to interrupt such a touching and deeply tragic scene, my subroutines force me to offer you one"

It was a tall, dark pony-tailed haired, athletic piece of man. Devil danced in it's green eyes and the smile was that of a dangerous predator before the prey is finally eaten. It handed her a paper handkerchief, looked quizzically into her eyes, and ... *what the hell does this plastic toy think it's doing?...* actually blinked.

"Identify yourself, bot. State your model, commercial name and designed use"

It looks as if something clicked behind the machines eye, like some devilish charm was wiped out from them, when the identification response automatic procedure kicked in.

"Model SCR-412/J Southern Cross Research Inc., name's Jason, designed use: artificial partner/sexbot"

***You just don't know when to speak up...***

"And what do you think you're doing approaching a human uncalled for and unwanted?!! Where's your social behavioral procedures, fried along with your flirting memory modules?! What is your current task?"

The bot relaxed and smiled, his cocky attitude somewhat returned. It brushed the loose trifle of it's hair aside from the forehead and bowed with visible smile of irony.

"I shall trouble you no more then, lieutenant, if you do not wish my company. After all I was heading to meet Edward anyway, as no female asked for my company this very moment." It turned around and started to leave.

"I didn't dismiss you, machine"

"Nor did you order me to stay" It turned around once again "If you wish me to stay, state it clearly enough for my, as you were kind to voice out, fried modules, if you please" he made another sarcastic grin "I should also access some terminal and inform poor Edward that his chess game gets cancelled today, poor thing"

Ursula was taken aback. She heard about coding more sophisticated personalities into androids, but this one was clearly out of line she thought to be possible for bots.

"Why do you seem so different from Edward, or other popular model? Define the difference."

Bot sighed, pouted it's lips, rolled it's eyes, and reluctantly started to answer: "Cutting the long story short, I'm Edward's evil twin. I was designed to fill the commercial demand, that appeared in late nineties, for android leisure-activities partner successfully mimicking certain elements of human-male psyche. Mainly ambition, rudeness, egoism, laziness, irresponsibility, and macho approach, but also creativity, toughness, initiative to take actions and active fascination with females. It was determined, that a certain percentage of females prefer such a companion who would spur their own ambition on one hand, as well as made them feel approached and wanted, object of physical lust."

"That's just pure bullshit, why would anyone want a rude, egoistic bot that makes it's own opinions and demands"

Android's smile was gone and it's eyes was also very serious.

"You should not ask me, lieutenant, I only mimic those characteristics with my software. You should ask my designers. They still remember the original males."

***You just don't know when to speak...***

It was almost round the corner, when Veneberg came to her senses again and realized the bot is leaving.

"Hey Jason! Why do you play chess with another bot?"

It turned around and grinned

"He likes to easily win from time to time, and users usually have him set and use difficulty level that matches their own. With me it's different, he does not have to obey, and as my flaws take up more than fifty percent computing capabilities, compared to me he's a Kasparov. He can be quite a funny guy, you know, when he's not talking to the human"

-----

OSI Department were very busy that morning. As Morrigan sped past Lavinia, further and further towards the local sun and towards The Border, highly important communications and sudden to-dos were more and more often. For more than three months Morrigan was supposed to conduct a standalone patrol, communication with HQ only in emergency. Deadlines were passing and automatic notifying mechanisms would blink and blip, declassifying and announcing numerous orders and procedures. Several recon and special mission of different profiles were about to be conducted. They had to be planned, prepared and testlaunched in simulated environment before conducting. It did take a shitload of work.

Young Ensign reviewing and evaluating recordings from Lt Carter's training session was having



more and more enough of this, she hadn't sleep more than eight hours in last forty eight, and on top of her work she had to deal with some flying jock beauty queen. Good that the girl was smart and nice at least, that made the basic explanations part less boring. Pilot actually had some intuitive skills for the RIAS job and it looked like perhaps she can be a valuable asset to the OSI itself some day. But not soon.  
PDA blipped, growled and turned on.

"Ensign, you will report to my office immediately" Commander Verulian snapped from the monitor.  
"Affirmative Ma'am. On my way."

Carter's training schedule was going to be little rescheduled, apparently.

-----  
After breakfast, Novas were visibly unsettled. Having the day off lectures, being restricted from exercise and recreational areas, they were basically wandering here and there, trying to keep themselves company and raise the fallen spirits. It was no easy task. Especially without their leader. After breakfast Crone sneaked off, telling them she needed to check some things on tactics. While Nef used this as an occasion to get into learning about some new RIAS thing she claimed she was trusted with, Claymore and Banshee going into theorizing about swordfighting since they couldn't go for it in practice, Ursula and Cassandra decided that Crone must be found and faced before today's sim, if it's going to lead them anywhere.

They split and started looking for the silver haired one.

### ***You just don't know when...***

Ursula found her on the flight deck, on the observation gallery. Crone was leaning on the rail, looking down. Her hair glittered in the weak light, like mane of the last unicorn, her face was sad and lost in dark thoughts, her scar barely visible, but seemed like casting a shadow of it's own. If female warrior-princesses from children fairytales ever had to look down from her castles at their lands endangered by inevitable evil, they could have quite likely looked like that.

It took Veneberg quite a while, before she realized she is staring mouth openly at the young woman who was now her superior.

### ***You just don't know...***

"Crone, we need our leader back"

"What?" Yates raised her head and looked at Veneberg. Her look was quite surprising, partially quizzical, partially guilty feeling, partially aggressive. "What did you say?"

Ursula sighed and force herself to look the leader straight in the eyes. "I said we need our leader, you chewed us when we deserved it and with this we should go on remembering our failures and ...."

"You don't need to peptalk me, OK? That is kind of my job to be a bitch" Crone was visibly uncomfortable with newly arrived company and with the whole matter. But Ursula kept trying:

"We just need you Aurrie...we need you where you belong – among us, that is where you lead people from"

"And where you sometimes need to get out from to deal with things, alright? You don't have to follow me like a baby that needs looking after. Just so you know, I needed some time to think about your girls personnel files I finally got to read and just...." She stopped talking when she noticed the little pilot's reaction.

Second lieutenant Veneberg just shot a hand to her mouth, shot her a look of utter horror, then turned away and ran.

### ***You just don't ...***

*so it happened, it happened and now she knows....about everything...now she...*

### ***...do you Veneberg?***

JediBubbles

Fri Feb 06, 2004 8:01 pm

...and smacked straight into someone as she flew out the door.

"Sorry," Urs mumbled--near-tears--and tried to sidestep while still looking at the floor, only to be grabbed by the shoulders.

"Whoa, hey babes, what's with the impending waterworks?" Ursula looked up--not very far--and realized that she'd bumped into none other than Seer.

"Crone, she read..." Urs choked and twisted out of Cassie's grip with a suprizing amount of strength. Cassie watched her flee stumblingly around the corner. *"She read..."hmm, let's see, how can I finish that sentence in the most painful way possible? Oh, I know, "...our personnell files, and now she knows every horrible thing that has ever happened to me."* Seer's face twisted into an uncharacteristically worried look. Greeeeeat. *Well, finish your initial mission first, 2Lt Dory, and then see about damage control.*

She waltzed into the flight observation deck towards a now-simmering Crone. "So, now you know. Hate me yet?"

Crone whirled and glared before forcibly softening her expression as she realized who had spoken. "No, though I was rather shocked at first." She turned back to look down on the flight deck again and Cassie joined her. "Don't attempt another pep-talk, I just needed time to process knowing all those kinds of things about all of you." The silver-haired woman frowned, making her look briefly old enough to justify her callsign. "And obviously Ursula is just as uncomfortable with me knowing as I am about knowing in the first place."

"Well, I don't know what you know about Urs and I'm not gonna ask, but I think that she's afraid that you'll judge her or use it against her. Or worse, just remind her of it somehow."

"And you're not?"

"Hey, I did have to ask, I wasn't just kidding. And I'm used to it. There's always been someone who automatically hated me for being born on Chara and having Jace for a brother. Like I was going to turn traitor any minute." Seer adopted a sardonic smirk. "Human nature, actually, to pick on things you can't change about yourself. So it doesn't bother me. I'm sure the other girls have worse in their files. I'm sure you have worse in your own." *Time to infiltrate and fulfill your objective, chica!*

"But we're not our files. That sh\*t may have had a part in making us who we are, but we're not those events. Events are things that happen to people. You chewing us out was just another event. And we don't really mind--if you'd chewed me I wouldn't--it's your job. But you're not your job, Crone. You're not an event, either. The best way for you to understand our files is to understand us as people, and we want to know the woman who's leading us, too."

Seer turned and looked straight at Crone, who was now staring at her. "That translates to 'stop avoiding us, it's not helping.'"

"I thought I said 'no peptalks.'"

Cassie grinned and waggled her finger "Ah ah, but you never forbade 'depressing speeches that bring points home,' missy!"

Crone's mouth straightened into something closer to a smile than a grimace, "But I never expected seriousness from you."

"Which is why I'm never serious--no one ever takes me seriously when I am." Seer bopped the taller woman on the arm. "So, whadda ya say, Chief? You'll come back for some major bonding with your heartily-bored squadron-in-need-of-direction?"

Alex

Fri Feb 06, 2004 11:19 pm

Jessica groaned. The RIAS equipment roster she'd been reading was about as boring a read as you could get. *I've read stereo instructions that were more interesting...* But that did not stop her from trying to memorize the list. *But I need a break...* She put the data down and stretched. She needed a walk.

A quick stop at their quarters to drop off the list, and she began to look for Ursula. *It's about time I apologized to her.* But the search did not go well. Jessica looked high and low, but couldn't find her. She ws about to give up when she ran into Seer, literally. Her quick reflexs grabbed Seer's

arm, sparing her a painful fall.

"Woah Nef..."

Jessica pulled Seer all the way up. "Sorry about that. Have you seen Ursula?"

Seer shook her head. "Nope..." She said, omitting the part about Ursula running out of the observation gallery, crying.

"Damn. Thanks anyways." Jessica smiled, then took off again. She tried a few more hallways, then came to the Observation Gallery. Aurora was there, but in higher spirits than before. "Crone?"

Aurora turned towards her, and smiled. "Nef..." Jessica walked up to the railing and leaned against it, looking out at the spectacle that was laid before them. A moment passed before Aurora spoke. "Thank you... For the jacket."

Jessica smiled, but did not look away from the window. "You're welcome."

Aurora turned to look at Jessica. "Why-"

"Because you're our squad leader." Jessica responded instantly. "I know you read my report." Silence passed between them. "Do you remember what my review report said?"

Aurora nodded and turned to look out the window. "That you treated everyone as if you were their big sister." She responded. "Is that why you did it?"

"Sort of..." Jessica said. "I like to take care of my squadmates, but I also think that's how a squad leader should act."

Aurora groaned and looked at Jessica. "Nef, I just had this talk with Seer, I don't need it with you too."

Jessica turned to look at Aurora, her face dead serious. "Look, I've had quite a bit of experience being a squad leader, so at any time, if you need help or advice, just let me know."

Jessica turned to leave. She was almost at the door when Aurora spoke. "A big sister, you say?"

Jessica stopped and turned towards her. "A big sister sometimes has to be strict, but that shouldn't stop them from having fun together." Jessica smiled at Aurora, then turned and continued her search for Ursula.

Vexus

Sat Feb 07, 2004 8:31 am

First gifts and then a parade of advice, all given with a wierd mix of military respect and casual familiarity that left Aurora quite confused. Was she the leader? Just another member of the squad? A big sister? A disciplinarian? This was without a doubt the strangest group of soldiers she had ever been with. Not at all like her previous assignments....

As she left the observation deck and made her way through the corridors, her mind drifted back to a far away world... another life, it now seemed...  
...a world that saw the Dawn of the Horns....

*The cave was dark, but dry. They didn't want any lights to give away their position. Below them, beyond the mouth of the cave, lay a cluster of buildings beneath a sky of alien constellations. Only a few signs of life could be seen down there in those structures, but Crone knew that an army lay before them, nestled away in their bunkers. Her comrades were hunkered down about her: Swift, Junker, Ash, Vice, and many other good women. They were the White Tigers, and each wore their black and white stripes with pride around their left wrists. They had seen several engagements, but they had come through with few casualties and had won the praise of their division commanders. So much praise, in fact, that they had been chosen to accompany General Ruby D. Carson on her final step to securing the region for the Alliance. The general was now sharing their cavern, along with a couple advisors and OSI officers. Everything was going as planned according to Gen. Carson, and the attack would commence at dawn.*

*Swift made a small hand signal. Crone rose and took a few steps to the mouth of the cave, the starlight illuminating her face. The scar had not yet touched it, and her hair was not as long, but little had changed in the eyes by the time the Dark Novas knew her. Glancing around the western*

horizon, Crone saw the ring of rocky heights that surrounded the rebel fortress, all teeming with Alliance forces by now, she figured. The light of dawn was coming in the west. It wouldn't be long now. Taking out a pair of scopes and putting them to her eyes, Crone scanned the land below.

"Report!" Swift said quietly from behind Crone.

"Still no unusual activity, sir. None of the sentries seemed to have escaped us. The batteries still look operational, though."

"Not for long," Swift said. "Return to your position."

"Yes, sir," Crone replied and returned to the interior of the cave. She noticed the slightly skeptical tone in Swift's voice. The general had guaranteed that the White Tigers would face no artillery in their morning assault, but Crone didn't see how that could be possible. Still, the OSI officers had been running about the cave with strange equipment that Crone had never seen before... and she was sure she would be ordered to shut up about it after the battle was over. If anyone could pull some wierd sh\*t on the coli's, it would be them. Later, when looking back on these events, Crone would come to understand why the general was known throughout the ranks as having an eccentric passion for the dramatic.

A half hour more of waiting, and Swift ordered the Tigers to the front of the cave. Before them, a somewhat steep slope of rock led down into the valley. As they checked their battle gear, Junker flashed a wild smile at Crone.

"Ready to tango with the rebs, Crone?"

"I always am," Crone replied. Her answer punctuated by the \*shirk-shrick\* of her plasma rifle as it loaded.

It was then that the general came out from behind them with a major at her heels. Reaching the start of the slope, the two halted. For a few moments, all the soldiers stood still as the first rays of sunlight peeked out from behind the heights. Then, almost casually, the general gestured to the dawn and the major rasied a small device to his lips and blew.

No sound came from the device itself, but it did awaken the OSI's devices that they had laid across the rocky peaks. Across the landscape came the sound of horns, resonant and deafening. Crone felt the rock beneath her shake, but when Swift signaled the charge, Crone did not hesitate as the Tigers charged down the slope. Crone waited for the inevitable sound of artillery to begin, but the rebel guns remained silent. Whatever the horns did to them, it had worked perfectly.

The fortress was taken by evening, and loses were light for the Alliance. Yet, that was of little comfort when Crone had come across Junker's charred body half-melted into a wall. Another friend had fallen... and the silver-haired girl could not cry.

That day had been a bad day. Worse ones were yet to come before she had left for the Terran Navy. A scar had yet to be earned. More blood had yet to be spilled.

Aurora's wanderings finally brought her to her quarters. Banshee's bunk was now empty, but another one was filled. Ursula lay on her stomach with her face buried under her arms.

"Please go away," a small voice sounded.

"That's, 'please go away, sir'," Aurora corrected, her tone commanding but not harsh. Ursula started and lifted her head. Seeing her squad leader, she lept off her bunk and stood at attention.

"Sir! Sorry for the incident on the observation deck, sir," she said. Her eyes were still teary but she did not dare move her hands to wipe them. Seeing her in such a state, Aurora was deeply moved in her heart. Any lingering doubts about what she had planned to do were now gone. Her posture straight and tall, Aurora stood before her squadmate.

"Your profile states that you are a failed pilot, an example of how desperate times make for lowered standards. You have few redeeming qualities and a lack of proper discipline. A nobody soldier from a no-name system. Given the callsign 'Coli', a derogatory term."

With each word, Ursula almost winced in pain and Aurora cursed herself for letting things get to this. She would try to fix things now... her father would demand nothing less.

"Overall, I can come to only one conclusion.... Your former superiors were full of sh\*t." Ursula eyes widened in surprise, and Aurora bit her lip to prevent a smile.

"A failed pilot could not hit a missile out of the sky. A nobody soldier could not skim the hull of a Pele and take it down.... And I do not allow sub-standard women in my squadron. In fact, since you're still a Dark Nova, you must be quite an excellent pilot."

Ursula began to relax her posture as Aurora sat down on her bunk and ran a hand through her hair wearily, her eyes on the floor.

"Dammit, Ursula, why didn't you say anything? It must have been hell listening to me all those times."

"I thought you would hate me," Ursula said simply.

"Yeah," Aurora said with a cynical half-smile, "I guess I tend to give off that impression. I don't hate colonists. I hate traitors... the ones who take up arms against the Alliance I serve. Well, I don't *hate* them exactly... but...\*grrrr\*." Aurora threw up her head in frustration. "I *have* to hate them, Ursula! If I don't then I can't do my job... I can't kill people I don't hate." Ursula remained silent, and finally Aurora met her eyes.

"Forget it. It's not important right now. What's important is that I don't hate *you*, nor do I think you are a failure. You've proven yourself quite capable... and I'm proud to have you in our squadron."

At long last, Ursula smiled, and Aurora felt the cares of the world slip away.

"I guess I better get myself cleaned up, then," Ursula said, wiping her eyes. Crone nodded with a smile and Ursula grabbed some clothes and left the room. Almost as if on cue, Jessica entered the room, her eyes darting around.

"Have you seen Ursula, Crone? I want to apologize to her for what happened in the last sim."

"Getting changed," Aurora said. "She'll be back soon, but I think I have a better occasion for you to offer your apology." Jessica raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

"I think Ursula needs some cheering up, from all of us. Perhaps a small get-together in the mess hall just before the... the sims," Crone said hesitantly, but Jessica did not flinch, her expression still curious.

"What's the occasion?"

"Ursula needs a new callsign." Now Jessica smiled.

"Leave it to me."

Alex	Sat Feb 07, 2004 9:50 am
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"Now I suppose you're all wondering why I called you here..." Jessica said at the front of their mess hall table with an amused smile. Aurora was quick to give her a disapproving look, but this got some giggles out of the rest of the squad. Jessica winked back at Aurora. "Our illustrious leader Crone has decided that no member of Dark Nova should be without a callsign." This gathered some murmurs from the group, as many of them eyed Ursula. Jessica wasted no time continuing. "Therefore... I recommend we give our fellow pilot Ursula, the designation of *Hobbit*." Jessica smiled and sat down into her chair.

Her callsign idea caused a rare smile to cross Aurora's face, and a chuckle out of Rhiannon. Ursula was simply slack-jawed, and Seer and Banshee looked around confused. "I don't get it..." Banshee finally stated.

"Hobbit..." Ursula finally said in a somewhat bitter voice, "What the first thing Nef called me when

we met." An icy stare passed across the table.

Jessica blinked it away, smiled, and rolled her eyes upward. "As I recall... You first mentioned something about being in a Gulliver nightmare?"

Ursula got up and slammed her hands on the table **"I AM NOT GOING TO BE CALLED HOBBIT!"**

Vindicare

Sat Feb 07, 2004 3:14 pm

Rising later than the rest of the squadron, Banshee decided to continue her reading. She grabbed her Reg manual from under her pillow and headed out the door, deciding on her way out where to head.

*Cant go to rec rooms or gym, too many people in the cafeteria...aah i know..*

She turned a few corners and reached an area she would soon be infinitely more familiar with, she was sure. *The good thing about important service areas, is that they are far better signposted than recreational areas* she mused as she wandered through the doors to the large open area.

She chose a spot by one of the piles of crates, and bracing her back against them settled down to read some more regs, inbetween observing the spectacle before her.

*Oops, she shouldnt have done that, she's gonna get...* "#@&\$!!! WHAT THE @~£\$%& YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING PRIVATE" *...there we go*

After what seemed only a few minutes observing her brethern in their natural habitat, Rhiannon walked over and tipped the book from her face, her arms and face glistening slightly in the worklights.

"Wat yer doin' 'eere, lass?"

"Catching up on some more regulations"

"Yer weren't doin' much readin' when ah came en"

"True. I enjoy reminiscing a little too much, I suppose. What brings you here?"

"Ah've been jus' down te hall wit' te Marines, Nef came in a while back 'n asked me te git fer some meetin' or t'other, an ask'd me if ah'd see yer. Figured if Nef hadn't found ye, ye'd be somewhere she wouldna look. I wouldna looked 'ere for ya, either."

"Well you learn something every day" Banshee smiled. "Give me a hand would you?" Claymore streched an arm out and pulled Banshee to her feet. "Thankyou. Next time you go sparring with the marines, let me know. I could use a workout, and now we're banned from the gym, it's better than nothing, and more social too."

"Aye, 'n they treat ya like royalty when they see te badge" she gestured to her back.

"Interesting" Banshee noted, as they began the walk to the cafeteria, chattering idly on the way.

"Therefore... I reccomend we give our fellow pilot Ursula, the designation of Hobbit." Nef said. *I've heard that somewhere before...* Banshee thought, rifling through her memory for a reference, finally concluding that it would be quicker just to say something.

**"I AM NOT GOING TO BE CALLED HOBBIT!"** *I've heard that one before, doesnt work im afraid...hobbit...its from literature isn't it? must be something small...wait, isnt it another word for Halfling? aahh i see now, expect it'll stick too*

JediBubbles

Sun Feb 08, 2004 2:18 am

**"I AM NOT GOING TO BE CALLED 'HOBBIT!'"** Ursula glared out from under some errant locks of hair knocked loose by the force of her table-slamming. "That's making fun of my height, isn't it?!"

Nef opened her mouth but it was Banshee who spoke. "They're from classic liturature, I believe, and I do recall them being called 'Halflings' as well."

Something clicked in Rhi's head. *Halflings...* "Lord of the Rings, by J.R.R. Tolkien. Saw the ole movie as a wee one," she explained to Nef's sky-high eyebrows. "Scared the farkin' daelights oot a me, but I loved it. Lotsa swordfights. Always wanted tae read te book."

She leaned back in her chair and looked at Ursula. "Aye, it's because a yer shortness, lass, but I seem tae rememberrr the wee ones saving the entire bloody world."

"Even the smallest person can change the course of the future," Nef quoted with a slight overdose of granduer.

"Well, the actual "smallest person" over here would really prefer to let the future run its own damn course, thanks--provided that future contains her being called 'Hobbit,'" Seer grinned at the now-fuming Ursula. "Remember, I'm shorter."

"But your callsign has nothing to do with your stature," the other small woman growled.

"No, but it still has to do with a personal feature that I can't do a damn thing about. I really think it fits, Urs."

"So do I," nodded Crone.

"Aye. 'Tis cute,"

"I think it's fairly appropriate."

"Good! Then it's settled--'Hobbit' it is!"

Charon	Sun Feb 08, 2004 3:34 am
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Ursula's dismayed expression was one that Rhiannon was all too familiar with, and she chuckled slightly. In the Furies, her former squadron, several of the new joins had been given callsigns that they had been "less-than-impressed" with, to understate the effect.

Cassie's explanation for the small pilot's nomenclature was sound, as well, helping to blunt the sting of it's affixation upon Ursula.

But Ursula's expression had shifted from dismayed to one that could be best described as "pouting", which tickled Rhiannon pink, helping to distract her from aching muscles brought on by working out with the marines earlier. *An' it's goin' tae be worrrse tomorrae.* she thought wryly. *Wurth it, though...*

Chuckling again, Rhiannon stood. "Well, me lassies, I hate tae be th' damper on th' situation, but if I recall the schedule aright, we're due in th' ready room fer a briefin' beforre a sim session. Anyone hearrd different? Crone hasnae sed anythin'?" As the others all shook their heads, Rhiannon gathered up the bag that she'd brought in with her. "Then I suggest we hed on tae th' ready room.. nae sense in bein' late." Chuckling once more, her customary cocky grin on her face, she headed out of the mess hall.

Vexus	Sun Feb 08, 2004 10:11 am
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As the Novas began to file out of the mess hall for the ready room, Aurora approached Jessica. The blonde had a resigned expression on her face that said she knew what Aurora was going to say.

"I'm sorry, Nef, but I wouldn't be much of a squad leader if I didn't enforce the restrictions I give." Jessica nodded sadly, but said nothing of the OSI training she was now receiving. Instead, she gave a wink to Aurora.

"Just like a big sister?"

"A big sister," Aurora agreed, and put a friendly hand on Jessica's shoulder.

"See you after the sim." And with that, Aurora followed the others out of the mess hall, Ursula still wining about her new callsign, and the other pilots playfully teasing her about it.

JediBubbles	Sun Feb 08, 2004 9:43 pm
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"We're gorgeous, we're cute, we're crack pilots to boot! Fab flying, we're there, the crew all love to stare! Dark Nova, uh uh, Dark Nova, uh uh...siiim tiiiiime, it's siiiiim tiiiiime!"

The rest of the squadron merely stared and laughed as Cassie injected her daily dose of silliness by dancing atop her briefing-room chair.

"That's enough, Seer," Aurora chuckled.

Alex	Mon Feb 09, 2004 2:09 am
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The pilots were suited up, the simulators were running hot, the program was set, and Jessica, still in her everyday, was waiting on the side-lines, slightly depressed, but keeping up an aura of enjoyment. *The least I can do is cheer on and support my squad.*

She wished the Dark Nova's good luck, and watched them enter the sim pods. She had no idea what the squad's mission was, but hoped that they wouldn't need her.

Jessica quickly made her way to the viewing room across the corridor. In the viewing room, monitors were stationed everywhere. The screens were clustered in groups, each group corresponding to a simulator being used. Each group had 4 screens, the biggest screen on top,

showing the pilot in their cockpit. The three screens underneath showed the pilot's left, front and right views, respectively. Jessica could hear their radio chatter over a pair of headphones she'd grabbed off the wall.

*I wish I could talk to them and help them out... But I can't.* A flash back to the Academy raced through her mind. *Or rather... I shouldn't.* She forced herself to remain planted in her seat and watch her squad. She would not miss a second of this, so she could help them in a post-mission analysis.

They had just logged in near the Morrigan, and were beginning to start their mission.

Alex	Tue Feb 10, 2004 7:53 am
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Crone looked at her squadron and nodded to herself. *Good. We're all set.* She looked to her right to see a Bat-Class Communication and Reconnaissance Corvette, which Crone could see bore the name **Ridley**. They had been ordered to escort it through two nav points near the less- radiated outer shell of The Border. She took a deep breath, then, with a tone of command in her voice said "Dark Nova, take your positions."

Dark Nova, having been assigned to fly in Sirens for this sim, took up their positions around the Ridley. Crone was positioned in front, Banshee and Hobbit were positioned on the sides, while Seer and Claymore took up the rear.

A voice came over the comm system. "This is the Ridley. Nice to have you girls with us. Let's get this over with and get back."

"Rodger that Ridley." Crone replied. She closed the channel as they began their flight to Nav 1.

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 "Dark Novas... Dark Novas... We ARE the Dark Novas!"

"Lass!!" Claymore yelled out a little louder than she'd anticipated.

Seer's chanting fell silent. "Sorry Claymore." Seer responded.

"Approaching Nav 1." Hobbit reported.

They passed through a dense part of clouds before entering a clearing. Six enemy ships were passing through the area when they suddenly turned and came directly at the Ridley.

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 Jessica knew immediatly that this wasn't good. There were three enemy Sirens, two Sabertooths and an Aries, against 5 Sirens. *Damn it! I should be there!!* She cursed herself. *This won't be an easy fight for them...*

Vexus	Tue Feb 10, 2004 8:07 pm
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*Another battle, another escort,* Crone thought to herself. *Let's hope fortune swings more in our favor this time.*

"Hobbit, Seer, you stay with the Ridley. Claymore and Banshee with me."

Crone fired her engines and bolted towards the incoming ships. Targeting computers on both sides hunted for locks, but neither side was about to be so easily tagged. Swerving and banking, the two groups crossed paths and scattered. Crone managed to get a few shots on the shields of an enemy Sabertooth when her rear monitor alerted her to two pursuing Sirens.

*Why can't these escort runs ever be uneventful?* Crone thought cynically as a lock warning tone sounded in her cockpit.

Charon	Tue Feb 10, 2004 8:47 pm
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Firing a stream of untransmitted Gaelic at the enemies as she ripped through their broken formation, Rhiannon felt exhilarated. Nothing compared to flying in combat, although the sims on board the *Morrigan* managed to do a fine job of coming close. She hauled her Siren around, and noted that their own formation integrity had already been lost. Banshee looked to be doing okay with evading the sluggish Aries whilst sniping at a Sabertooth, but Crone appeared to have picked up the two Sirens whilst dueling with the other 'Tooth.



"On th'way, lead!" She called over the comm, and pushed her throttle all the way forwards. She'd never been partial to the Siren's awkward yoke controls, and made a mental note to visit the machine shop on board and see if she could have her personal Siren reconfigured.

As she streaked towards the quartet of fighters, one of the Siren's broke off from it's pursuit of Crone, flipped around, and headed straight back at her, firing as it came. As laser bursts streaked past her cockpit, she reacted instinctively, rotating a switch on her control panel (another thing she had an issue about the Siren with was it's confusing panel layout), and firing. As she did so, the hand that had toggled the weapon reached up and dropped the glare shield on her helmet.

Outside, directly between her and the Siren, a white flash obliterated any detail from the view.

Alex

Tue Feb 10, 2004 9:55 pm

*Good move Claymore!* Jessica cheered silently. But her enthusiasim was premature. While the Siren in front of Claymore was now having problems, Claymore's siren itself had become a shield against the Flashbang for the much deadlier Aries that was now on her tail. *Oh my god! Where's Hobbit? Maybe she can help!*

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Hobbit was having quite a bit of difficulty herself. She ground her teeth as her wings were singed avoiding the Sabertooth's fire, while trying to fire at the Siren in front of her. She sucessfully hit the Siren's engines, disabling them, but the Siren's current heading was directly at the bridge of the Ridley. "Banshee! Seer! Incoming Siren! It's heading for the bridge!" Hobbit yelled as she pulled up out of the range of fire from the Sabertooth that was still behind her.

JediBubbles

Tue Feb 10, 2004 11:57 pm

"Yo!" Seer zipped out from behind the Ridley (where she'd been discouraging shots to its engines) with surprising speed. Her shots punched straight through the disabled craft's cockpit, and thankfully the Ridley's shields were still intact enough to absorb the resulting explosion. Seer swerved away from it back towards the rear of the escort. "What Siren, Hobbit?"

"Very funny, Seer. Thanks!"

"No prob--HEY! I don't think so, you--!" Ursula swiveled her head around and caught a glimpse of Seer darting after the 'Tooth that had slipped away from Crone to make a run on the Ridley. "Hobbit, you free to help pincer this li'l b\*tch?!"

"If her twin will lemme alone--" Two different types of laserfire lanced past Hobbit's canopy and suddenly her tail-'Tooth was listing away with Banshee on its ass. "Never mind! On it! Thanks Bansh!"

"Gladly. But don't call me that."

"An' yer mother--oh, Christ on a bike!" Claymore obliterated Crone's tail, only to recieve a nasty return shot from her own. But, now freed, Crone pulled a tight little loop and knocked out half the Aries' guns.

Alex

Wed Feb 11, 2004 2:08 am

But the Aries was far from ready to give up. It fired two missiles, one at Crone and the other towards Claymore as it came around and went after the Ridley. Seer came up towards it, when she was showered with PPC fire from the Aries. The Aries glided by her, cut it's engines, aimed at Seer, and fired off a missile before turning towards the Ridley once again.

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*What the hell?!* Jessica knew that move... She knew it all too well, since she had performed a very similar move against Claymore in their first sim. *What the hell are they trying to do to them?!* Jessica dashed over to a nearby control panel and began to request statisics about their sim.

Vexus

Wed Feb 11, 2004 10:25 am

Twice Crone banked herd and launched her decoys, but the missile from the Aries held its lock. Now it was moments from impact.

Thinking quickly, Crone cut the ingnition on her engines but overrided the computer to keep the fuel pumps engaged. Two streamers of unburned liquid fuel shot back from her craft, one of them striking the missile warhead with enough force to trigger it. The explosion was too far from her ship to damage it... at first.

Within a flash, the explosion ignited the rich-oxygen mix and followed the stream into Crone's engine system. Luckily, Crone had just shut off the fuel pumps, saving her craft from total destruction. However, her engines were now cooked, and she could not yet get them to re-engage. Manuvering on her thrusters, Crone turned her ship back towards the Ridley, seeing the Aries make its run but unable to get there in time.

Vindicare

Wed Feb 11, 2004 5:39 pm

after dealing with the minor irritation of the sabertooth that had been tailing "Hobbit", Banshee scanned the area.

She observed the missile chasing after Crone, but knew at the current distance she was as likely to hit Crone as the missile itself.

She then observed the fuel trail from her craft and the resulting explosion obscured her craft from view.

"Banshee to Crone, whats your status?"

"I'm here, but here is the only place i'll be for a while, engines are cooking, but i have thrusters"

"Understood. I myself have been known to try that manoeuver before, however there are better ways of doing it" She smiled to herself "but this is not the time or the place to discuss that, so maybe later. Right now..." She glanced over her readouts "I see Claymore and Seer have missiles to deal with, also the Aries on continuing run towards the Ridley. Request permission to engage". She leant back into her seat and poised her hand over the burner control.

*WAIT for it, remember last time YOU failed the squad, and Crone.*

Vexus

Wed Feb 11, 2004 9:12 pm

*Request permission to engage?!, Crone thought, We're already in the middle of a dogfight!*

"Yes! Yes! For the love of God, stop that Aries!" Crone shouted over the comm.

*First a near-lecture on advanced manuevers, followed by asking permission to attack when the Ridley was clearly in danger. What is she thinking?*

Vindicare

Thu Feb 12, 2004 2:38 am

*Ok, this time I AM following orders...*

Banshee slammed her afterburner on, her aggression being released slightly through the pounding of the button, and brought herself in behind the Aries. She kept the afterburner going as she fired her first volley at the rear of the Aries, dealing light damage to the engines and passing directly over the craft. She then cut the afterburner and turned her Siren to face the incoming Aries, engaging the burner again briefly to propel her forwards instead of back.

Banshee sped directly towards the incoming Aries, firing everything she could throw at it.

*I haven't flown against one of these before, i wonder how strong they are...*

As the gap closed, Banshee lowered her brow.

*I will NOT back down, Em and Kat didnt flinch, and neither will I!*

Just as the two ships were about to collide, the Aries began to break up. Banshee pulled her control column, but found no response, the damage she had sustained while closing the distance had severely impaired her maneuverability. She ploughed through the disintegrating hull, losing her remaining system power as she tried to max out shields.

"Banshee, report" Crone barked exasperatedly.

"I think i need a tow cable, please, but it will hold together for the moment. Most systems are damaged, life support is functional, and i guess the radio is working properly. I haven't faced one of those ships before, Aries class, the computer told me. They seem quite powerful."

"Well MOST ships are quite powerful when you charge at them HEAD ON"

"That is true. Sun Tsu said 'Know thine enemy and know thyself, and thy will not be defeated throughout one hundred battles'. If you can measure your opponent at maximum strength, in this case half strength, you can plan accordingly. I certainly will not be trying a head on charge against one of them in a hurry".

"They've been tried, tested and measured, and they've been found wanting!" Seer laughed over the comm., as she came round to fire the magnetic towcable onto Banshee's hull. Claymore was closing to do the same for Crone, but she called her off

"I think the engines have cooled down enough now, im starting to get some feedback. Plus i dont want to restrict the movement of another member of the squad, we already have 3 operating at slow speeds"

"Aye, Lead. Formin' up on 'ta wing"

Alex

Thu Feb 12, 2004 9:42 am

The battle had ended a bit too quickly for Jessica to catch it all. She replayed the last bit of it as the team formed up. Something didn't add up... She re-watched the battle from the beginning. *1, 2, 3, 4... 5. Oh shit!* Jessica looked up at the monitors. Out of the corner of Crone's monitor, was

the Siren Claymore had flashed banged. *Come on... Notice it!!* But before her had finished her thought, the Siren had vanished into the distance. The radio chatter indicated that they hadn't noticed it.

*If that Siren is able to contact her buddies, they could be flying into an ambush...* Jessica stood, paralyzed, in the middle of the room, as the Novas began the next leg of their journey in the same direction the Siren had taken off in...

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"Dark Novas, this is the Ridley. We're getting a lot of metallic signatures from up ahead."

Crone checked her navigation system, and despite the increasting static, she could tell that they were approaching Nav 2. "Rodger that Ridley. Looks like my Nav system took some damage from the last fight. It's getting a lot of static, but it appears we are approaching Nav 2."

"Negative to your damage Dark Nova Leader. We're getting that static too." Came the Ridley's response.

Crone noticed a hint of radio noise in the response. An alarm rang in Crone's head. "Dark Novas! Report status!"

"Nav Sys... ms are get... g staticy. Comm... tems being affe... d too!" Hobbit's reply came. The rest of the girl's repsonses were similar; The radar and comm systems were slowly going out.

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"What the hell?!" Jessica said out loud. Nothing about this sim made any sense anymore. *They're on the outer edge of the Border... They shouldn't be effected by the radiation in this way... Unless-*

The Dark Novas and the Ridley passed out of the Border's clouds into what had to be Nav 2. A slightly larger group of Sirens, Sabertooths and Aries were waiting for them as they came out. Some of them were hanging back, protecting what looked like a Light Destroyer. The presence of this ship confirmed Jessica's fear. *It's a Nautilus...*

Jessica heard an order from the Ridley attempt to travel over the comm system. "Dark... vas. We need... scan the larg... hip. Cover us!"

JediBubbles	Thu Feb 12, 2004 7:28 pm
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"Roger tha...idley. Hob...t, y...r wi...Cl...ore...nd Ban...ee. Se...r, y...r wi...h me. Sta...clo..to th...Ridl...y, do not ge...dr...wn out, d...y...copy?"

"Copy tha...ead. Oh shi...Th..re wa...anot...er...Sir..n ba...k at N...v One, was...t...t...ere? Fu...k!" Seer's garbled realization made it painfully clear just how easily they'd gotten themselves into this mess.

Vexus	Fri Feb 13, 2004 10:47 am
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As Seer and Banshee came up behind Crone, the squad leader saw the cable between them, and cursed under breath. She had forgotten about Banshee's damage level.

"Banshee, what's your status?" Crone asked, trying to speak slowly and clearly to be understood over the interference. Banshee's answer was grim, she was still crippled. This was beginning to look like a losing scenario.

"I c-n -e a d-coy," Crone heard through the static.

"Negative, Banshee," Crone replied. "Seer, tow Banshee back to the Ridley and try your best to cover her. Claymore, Hobbit, come on up. We'll engage only as they come within weapon's range. Purely defensive measures only. Ridley, set an escape course and engage your engines at half-power."

"Dar- -va, we ne- -o -et clo-er f-r the -can," Crone heard from the Ridley.

"Not a chance, Ridley," Crone said sternly. "I'm not risking the engagement of a destroyer just to make your scanning easier. You will complete your scan, *as we retreat*, or we will leave you here for the rebs."

Did she actually mean that? Crone wasn't sure, but she *was* sure that she would not risk her squad for a destroyer scan.

Alex

Fri Feb 13, 2004 1:26 pm

It tore Jessica up inside that she couldn't be there to help them. Her fist was visably shaking. She KNEW that she could of bought the Ridley some more time...

Jessica turned towards the Simulator room. Her judgement clouded, her mind considered entering the sim and saving their butts. Then there was no question about it. Jessica began to walk towards the sims, but stopped at the doorway. *I can't give in. I was ordered to stay out of the sims.* she told herself as she forced herself to look away from the sims. The sound of Crone ordering Claymore and Hobbit to engage the incoming enemies rang out of the monitor's headphones.

***But if you don't, your squad will die.*** Another voice in Jessica's mind said. Jessica turned towards the monitors. Claymore, Crone and Hobbit were engaging 2 Sirens, a Sabertooth, and an Aries as the Ridley finished turning around. Two more Aries were positioned between the Ridley and the Nautilus-Class ship, while 1 Siren and 2 Sabertooths were in close proximity to the Nautilus. ***You can save them and sucessfully complete the misson! All you have to do is enter a pod!***

Jessica closed her eyes, smiled and unclenched her fist. *But if I do that, I would loose Aurora's trust. I will disobey orders to save a squadmate's life, but I will not cross the line of losing a teammate's trust...* Jessica's heart tightened a bit at the pain of her next thought. *Even if it means I have to stay out of a cockpit...*

Forcing herself to remain calm, Jessica walked back to couch in front of the monitors, and sat down. She would remain there for the rest of the sim, no matter how bad it got...

Schamann

Fri Feb 13, 2004 4:41 pm

„Will you just die?!“ – Veneberg skimmed past the rock the size of a small solar wind probe while trying to get a crosshair back on the stubborn enemy Siren. She shot two carefully aimed bursts into her left wing and as quickly as she could, she gave her ship a quick twenty degrees turn right and after half a breath, spread a full missile barrage.

It worked. Noticing plasma hampering her wing the hostile Siren instinctively took a sharp turn right, straight into the full heat of Hobbit's barrage. It's right engine exploded, wing took some flames and almost fell apart. Wounded Siren started to spin as liquid started to jet out from it's internal tanks on the right. In a flash, there was the flame of ejection pod shooting out of the fighter. Cursing under her breath, Ursula steered out it's way, watching her shields degrading under the Sabertooth fire and trying to get out of it. So far with no luck, she might have been a good marksman, but that was not all there was, and the other ones were all busy.  
*never thought I'd frigging say this, but I wish Nef was here*

Luckily, what her poor evasion skills couldn't do, stroke of luck made up for her. The AI Sabertooth that pursued her, placed between the rock and a hard place – forced to avoid the deserted wreckage of the Siren on one side, and apparently reluctant to risk hitting her ejected comrade, decided to break the pursuit, at least for a while.

Ursula leveled her flight and took a quick look back. Sabertooth turned a sharp one right and seemed to do a turnabout around the ejection pod. Something didn't quite add up. The Siren pilot was also a bit too quick to eject, for AI off course.

“Lead ..h..s is ....H...bit” She started to comm as she approached Crone's vessel for a better radio contact. “P...ission to voice an opinion”

“Be quick about it”

“There are no big guns or turrets on that ship, it does not try to approach us. It's cover engages us with much caution and preserving their ships. This is the fringe of The Border, there's nothing important here except for occasional enemy patrols” She continued tailing Crone carefully, as her leader engaged with incoming fighter. She mentally prepared herself to fire as soon as Crone gets into the spin of the dogfight.

“What is your point! I ain't got a whole day.”

“They're here on a recon just as we are! And they seem to be as reluctant to get their men killed for photos as you are!”

"Lead, ...ymore h..re, my... r....ar ...st .....ot...c ..app..d, t...s is bad"

Vexus

Mon Feb 16, 2004 4:24 am

"Good," Crone responded to Hobbit, "Then they won't pursue us for too much longer." Circling around to engage an incoming fighter, she saw it get onto Claymore's tail. Her engines were still touch and go, and her controls were sluggish.

"Claymore, reb on your six!"

"I canna see it!" Claymore replied over the comm as Crone closed in.

"Hold on!" Crone said, and worked to get the Siren in her sights. The tone screaming in her ear, Crone let loose a missile and opened up with her lasers. The shots weakened the shields of the enemy ship enough so that the missile made it through, shattering the craft's left wing. The enemy pulled back in retreat and Crone let it go, more concerned about Claymore.

"Are you hurt?"

"Only my armorr and my pride, Lead," Claymore said in disgust.

"Dark Nova," the Ridley called over the comm, "we have finished a prilimenary scan, but in light of Hobbit's observations, request permission to-"

"I said *negative*, Ridley," Crone said angrily. "No more scans this mission. We're going home. Increase engines to full." Crone had a feeling the Ridley pilot was about to protest again so she cut off the comm channel. They were lucky they hadn't lost anyone, and with Crone's previous sim experiences, she was not about to count on this destroyer as being the only force they might meet before reaching the Morrigan.

Vindicare

Mon Feb 16, 2004 5:44 am

"I've got burner control back, i should be able to burst to keep pace with everyone until we get back to our extraction point. I wont be a burden to you any longer Seer" Banshee announced over the comm.

"Well, you WERE getting kinda heavy" she threw back in jest.

As the squadron formed up to leave, Banshee tried to judge the speed properly, bursting her afterburner for 2 second periods in order to try and remain in some sort of formation. *It's better than weighing someone else down, even if its not very graceful*

Dark Nova formed up around the Ridley and began a quick withdrawal from the combat zone, noting that the enemy force did the same, stopping only to gather up their ejected pilot with a tow cable.

Alex

Mon Feb 16, 2004 7:21 am

The sim ended with far less trouble than there was expected. Almost none. But the real trouble wouldn't start until the pilots got out of the simulators.

Jessica stood there, waiting for them, with a pleased, yet worried look in her eyes. Aurora was the first to walk up to her. "Nef... Are you ok?"

Jessica nodded. "Yeah... I came real close though..."

"Close?" Ursula asked as she came up to her.

"Close... To coming in and saving your butts." Jessica looked at Aurora. "But then I-"

"Dark Nova, Form Up!" Lt. Voller's voice rang out, as she marched into the Sim room.

The squad quickly formed up, Jessica looking out of place, being the only one not in a flight-suit. Voller eyed her, but then turned to the other pilots. "You've completed your mission. You had no fatalites. And you worked well together. However, you failed." This drew inquisative, and *That's unfair!* looks from the squad. "That 'destroyer' was a Nautilus class ship! We needed detailed scans of it, however, the Ridley was unable to get enough data from their scans. Lt. Carter!"

"Sir!" Jessica yelled with respect.

"Can vou tell your squad what a Nautilus is capable of?" Voller asked as she eyed the squad.

"Sir. A Nautilus Class ship can somehow control the radioactive elements of The Barrier, and use it to disrupt both comm channels and radar systems."

"Correct!" Voller said. She walked down the line, and stopped before Banshee. "Lt. Auten!" Banshee clicked her heels to show she was standing at attention. "In the middle of a battle, with the lives of the Ridley's crew in danger, you waited for orders to engage! On top of that, you took on an Aries, in a reckless frontal assault, totally crippling your ship, and forcing another team-mate to cover for you! That was reckless and irresponsible! I want a report listing seven different ways you could of defeated that Aries sooner and with less damage on my desk by tomorrow evening."

Banshee nodded, grudgingly. "Yes sir..."

"And Lt. Yates." Voller said, walking right in front of her. "I have seen many people do many things to avoid a missile, but what you did ranks up there with some of the STUPIDEST!"

For a moment, Aurora hesitated. "Sir, I-"

"Can it! I want a report on Missile Evasion Techniques on my desk by tomorrow evening!" Aurora nodded as Voller turned towards Rhiannon. "Lt MacTaggart. Your Flashbang was a good tactic, but you failed to follow up with the defeat of the Siren. This lead the the ambush at Nav 2. Why did you let it get away?!"

Rhiannon didn't blink. "Sir. I became moor worried 'bout tha Aries that got on mae tail, followed by tha other Siren's attack of on tha Ridley."

"Never the less, you should of remembered about it before it got away. You will have a report on Fighting Multiple Hostiles on my desk by noon tomorrow. If it happens again, you will get a VERY long report due the next morning. AM I CLEAR?!"

"Yes Sar!" Rhiannon yelled, with a salute.

Voller looked at the three she had assigned reports to. "If your reports are not on my desk on time, it will double in length. Understood?!"

Rhiannon, Banshee, and Aurora all nodded.

Voller turned towards Ursula and Cassy, but her expression was slightly softer. "You two did very well. Keep this up, and your restrictions will be lifted."

Finally, Voller came to Jessica. "Lt. Carter... Congradulations on not giving in to tempation."

Jessica looked at her blankly. "S... Sir?" She asked, confused.

Voller looked at her with a matter-of-fact look on her face. "You think I was only watching the simulation?" And with that, Voller left the sim room.

JediBubbles	Mon Feb 16, 2004 8:12 am
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Seer stared after Voller's retreating back. *Aw, man, don't jinx me, woman--third time's always the charm!*

*I'm still amazed that I've managed not to screw things up so far, anyway..."If you're not f\*cking up, then you're not trying hard enough!"...sheesh...I just had to remember that line, didn't I...*

Uncharacteristically silent, Cassie filed out of the sim room with the rest of the squad.

Alex	Mon Feb 16, 2004 9:20 am
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As most the squad began to walk out, Jessica looked at Aurora, who was beginning to loosen her flight suit. Jessica walked over to her. "Aurora?"

Aurora looked at Jessica with a slightly quizacle face. "What is it Nef?"

Jessica took a deep breath. "The reason I didn't enter the sim and try to save you guys, was because I knew you'd feel I'd betray your trust. I couldn't live with knowing that, and that's what kept me out. I..." Jessica hesitated for a moment. "I just wanted you to know that." Jessica turned, and walked out of the sim room, towards their quarters.

Charon	Mon Feb 16, 2004 10:25 am
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Rhiannon stormed over to her rack, a snarl painted on her freckled face. "Tha' wee bammy minge!"

\*SLAM\* She threw the door to her wall locker open.

"Commin' the cun' wi' me, in front o' th'others... the damned wee sassenach bugged off durin' th'firefight... wasnae anyone's fault - we were doin' 'r damned jobs..."

\*WHOMP\* Her flight suit flew into the back of the locker, followed by undergarments travelling at speeds slightly slower than your average mass-driver slug, and a large brown towel was withdrawn.

"Th' leam-leat, lan dhen cac strapaid, aireamh na H-AOINE ORT!!!"

With that last, indecipherable exclamation, she slammed shut her wall locker, grabbed her hygiene back from where it hung on the back of her rack, stepped into her shower shoes, and stomped her way to the head.

Ironically, after a few minutes under the hot shower stream, she began to cool down. She forced herself to think from other's perspectives, and realised that Aurora had to be feeling much worse off than she.

"Och... an' I let loose like some wee Jockbrit on a bender in Edinburgh... Best tae see if I kin find herrr an' see hae she's doin'..."

She killed the shower and stepped out, drying off with her towel as she headed back to the squadbay, never noticing the figure standing to one side of the head, behind the tiled partition to the changing area.

*"She" is doing mighty confused right now, mused Aurora to herself. What am I doing that's inspiring that kind of loyalty - first from Nef, and now you?*

Pensively, Aurora stepped into one of the showers.

As she hurried out of the shower, Rhiannon almost bumped headlong into where the others, led by Cassie, were coming in to clean off from the sim. Jessica was sitting on her bunk, reading one of those - what had she called it? Mangoes? - whilst she waited for the rest of the squadron. She glanced up, and looked hesitantly at Rhiannon, having saw the beginnings of the full Scottish rage that had been building as the squadron filed out of the sim room, but Rhiannon smiled.

The smile grew a bit sickly as she saw the door to her wall-locker had apparently decided that hanging on it's hinges was over-rated.

"Uhm," she began. "After I change, would ye min' givin' me a wee han' changin' me locker oot?"

Alex	Mon Feb 16, 2004 12:38 pm
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Jessica and Rhiannon never really had any time together before now. It didn't take long to get Rhiannon's locker switched out for a new one, and this soon left them with nothing to do until the rest of the squad got back together.

A slightly uncomfortable silence sat between them, until Jessica broke it. "So you're a heavy-sword user?"

Rhiannon smiled. "Aye. They're powerful things... I really haven't had a chance to practice with mine recently."

"When we get our exerceise room privledges back, wanna spar with me?"

Rhiannon raised her eyebrow at Jessica. "Ya swing a sword?"

Jessica laughed at this. "Oh GOD no... I totally failed my two-handed Melee training. I wouldn't last 5 seconds against you or Chris in a fight with a large sword like yours."

"Then how'r ya gonna fight mae?" Rhiannon asked with a curious smile.

Jessica turned around for a moment, then, as if from nowhere, Jessica pulled out and twirled two Sais, one in each hand. "I failed two handed-melee. I aced close-ranged melee." She responded

with a devilish smile. "So... You up for it?" She asked.

Vexus

Tue Feb 17, 2004 7:28 am

Aurora stood beneath the flowing hot water, her mind dwelling on the debriefing. She wasn't so bothered by the failure of their mission. As far as she was concerned, the fact that they had all survived was all the victory she needed. But the CAG's comment on her tactics... that was a different matter.

She had called it stupid... *stupid!*. Aurora could handle many insults... but insulting her intelligence was the worst. Never in her past experience had anyone sincerely called her actions foolish. *Stupid!* One has no time to weigh the facts in the thick of battle. One must simply react. She had done the only thing she knew under the circumstances... and she called it *stupid!*

Aurora banged her fist in frustration against the tile wall. It was then that Chistine, Cassie, and Ursula entered the showers, chatting away. Banshee seemed in a bad mood and Aurora couldn't blame her: two papers assigned in as many sims. Cassie and Ursula seemed to be trying to cheer her up, and Aurora curiously leaned her head to listen.

"Just let it be, Seer, I want to take a quiet shower."

"Aw, come on Banshee, it'll be alright."

"Easy for you to say, Little Miss Perfect."

"Oh, that's it... yoink!"

"Hey! That's *my* shampoo!"

"I'll trade ya: one smile for one bottle of Prissy."

"It's called Prisca! And it's my personal property!"

"Sheesh, Hobbs, she's grumpy today... I wonder if it's that time of the month."

"Actually, Seer... I think it is."

"Mind your own business, you little rats!"

"Sticks and stones, Banshee Wanchee."

"You're going to regret this. Give me that!"

"Catch, Hobbs!"

"Hand it over or you will share the fate of your fellow munshkin!" A hint of a laugh was building in Christine's voice.

Stiffling a potential giggle with her hand, Aurora quietly made her way out of the showers, her mood largely improved. So much so, in fact, that she gave a smile and a nod to both Jessica and Rhiannon as she changed. Back in some clean clothes, Aurora made her way to a data terminal. She had missile evasion tactics to download.

Alex

Tue Feb 17, 2004 8:42 am

Jessica blinked in surprise. She turned to Rhiannon. "Did you see that? She smiled! That can't be our squadleader!" Jessica said with a wink. Rhiannon smiled, almost with a giggle.

"Yar right. That canne be our squadleadar... But I'd rather ave **her** in command than our squadleadar." She responded.

This caused Jessica to smiled and slightly giggle. After a moment she nodded in agreement.

Schamann

Tue Feb 17, 2004 5:30 pm

Specialists Gercy and Matthews were kinda busy with each other at their guardpost, when it happened. They did not notice anything.

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"Come over here you little rats...you think that being quick is gonna save you?! **Give me back my**



**towel!!!**

"Seer! help!, the red coats have me!" Ursula's high pitched voice echoed around from the shower room.

"Coming! You want that towel **miss?**, you want it? Auch!"

"And you too, little mice, now you're both coming with me....Auuu!!"

Nefertiti and Rhianon raised their heads from reading they were doing on the Claymore's PDA

Could it be that mighty Empire is in dire need of help?" Nef snickered and grinned mischievously "Brave Scotts, what say you?"

Rhianon eyed her with pretended suspicion "I t'ink 'tis more bruis's thaen 'ts worth, mate"

Crone looked at them from her bunk and from over her own PDA, she smiled weakly "I didn't realize, that forbidding them from exercise quarters would make them create one here"

Both Claymore and Nef burst with laughter and returned to their reading.

Not for long.

They say a wet bar of soap is the easiest object to accelerate up to c. You just step on it.

It came like a whizzing thunder along with Veneberg's scream and the thumping of the body hitting the floor, followed by another explosion of laughter, this time from Seer and Banshee almost unisono. It ricocheted of the side of the bunk, hit Auroras head painfully, and finally flew straight onto Nef's empty bunk, on one of their comics laying open on the bed. Quick as the startled fox, blonde jumped onto her bunk to assess the damage.

At that precise moment Ursula appeared in the doorway with a nasty bruise growing fast on her cheek.

"Ha!" shouted Nef with a smile, but also a twinkle in her eye. "You do realize that this means war!"

"Hey Nef, it wasn't me" Ursula started to defend herself weakly.

"It-wazn-t-me!" Seer's voice came from the shower room in a strange rap-alike intonation, and before anybody could say anything, she fell into the room with angry Banshee on her six and Ursula trying to explain herself. They were all three wet and the floor was already wet and slippery. The bang was really loud when they slid through almost the entire room and rumbled on Claymore's bed with befuddled Claymore still in it.

"Yae bladdy whimps yae'r gonna be sorry yae 're ever born! Nef help me with them!"

Despite all the joy of this spontaneous joke battle, and warmth it gave her heart, Crone felt that that was about a little more than enough. She stood up from her seat and approached the group.

"Okay girls now that's enough already, it was fun but enough is enough, Ursula let me see this bruise and ...."

The swift sound of opening door was like whiz of the Reaper's Scythe.

"Attention pilots! What the hell is this!"

...

Ensign Jones was quite expectative to meet the "Special Designation Squadron" the elite rookies supposed to work like covert ops. The first lieutenant who took her to their quarters was, however, not all hot about them. First lieutenant Garrick insisted that they are just young childish girlies, who should first be taught discipline and proper military conduct. Reprtedly it was only CAG's protecting them, that let them stay out of the harm's way with the rest of the brass. Jones disregarded it as grumpy whining of the old woman.

After the door swung open she wasn't all that sure anymore.

Lieutenant Garrick looked as nothing less than heart attack.

"Novas – this is ensign Jones, assigned to you as auxiliary technician/intelligence officer. She will get into fighter as well as you and while supposed to perform secondary combat tasks and collect data in the first place, she will be as out there as you, so I suggest you welcome her and try to get along with her. Squadron leader – you take from here. " She threw last look of contempt and headed back out of the room "Dismissed!"

Vexus

Tue Feb 17, 2004 7:56 pm

Aurora was so distracted by this new turn of events that it took her a few moments to realize that half the squadron was not decent, save for a few strategically placed towels and hands.

"At ease ladies, go get some clothes on." As Cassie, Christine, and Ursula hurried to their lockers, Aurora saluted to the newest addition to the squadron and extended her hand, a half-embarrassed expression on her face.

"Welcome, to the Dark Nova."

Alex

Wed Feb 18, 2004 12:13 am

Jessica smiled at the new girl. "Auxiliary Techie, & intel officer, huh? I guess we'll be good friends." She said extending her hand to Jones. "Jessica Carter, callsign: Neferiti. Glad to have you with us!"

Maverick

Wed Feb 18, 2004 1:43 am

Katrina Jones smiled warmly and shook both of the extended hands, starting with Aurora, the silver haired girl that looked like she had been in a few fights.

"Well, I'm glad I can help out this squadron. I've heard many things about the Novas." Jones said in a light voice. She was shorter than Ms. Carter by about five inches and she had a joyful look in her hazel eyes, but the left one was covered by her brown hair that hung in thick bangs. That, plus her young face gave her a cuteness not that far from a kitten. She smiled pleasantly.

"So uh, Ms. Jones-" Aurora began, but was cut off by Katherine's gentle voice.

"Please, call me Kat."

"Okay then Kat, you know how to pilot a plane?" Aurora asked.

"Not nearly as good as some of the other fighter-jocks...er...I mean pilots out there, but I can hold my own pretty well."

"You got a callsign Kat?" Jessica asked with a visible interest.

"Nothing official, but I had the nickname 'Catnip'. I think that'll stick with me for a while. It's nice to meet all of you." Kat beamed as the rest of the Novas came back from the lockers.

JediBubbles

Wed Feb 18, 2004 5:10 am

"Holy schnikies! Someone of average height!" Seer bounded forward to shake Kat's hand. "Rollcall won't look like the sea-floor shelf anymore. Cassandra Dory, a.k.a. 'Seer.' Usually the squad's source of stupid entertainment. 'Scuse me while I go untangle my ratty hair."

Vindicare

Wed Feb 18, 2004 5:01 pm

"It's not our fault some of you are vertically impaired" Banshee shot back with a smirk as she placed her band round her hair.

She walked forward to greet the new arrival, pausing briefly to dry her hands on Seer's jacket

"Heey!" Seer protested meekly from the other section of the room.

"Now we're even" Banshee even winked. The little release of tension in the shower had improved her mood no end.

She extended her now-dry hand to Ensign Jones

"How do you do, Christine Auten, callsign Banshee. Call me Chrissy or Banshee, else face my wrath" she said cheerfully. "I guess with you along we will be doing even more of those reconnaissance drills through the border"

Alex

Wed Feb 18, 2004 10:19 pm

Jessica looked innocently off to the side, not saying anything about her RAIS training...

Maverick

Thu Feb 19, 2004 1:44 am

"Anything I can do to help out. Even though I'm not as good a shot as most, I do know quite a bit about electronics, scanners and such. So maybe those recon missions won't be that bad." Kat said while shaking the hands of the other Novas.

"It's really nice to meet all of you. Actually, you remind me of a few friends I had back in

Annapolis." Jones leaned against the wall and something beeped as a quick-paced rhythmic music blared out of her chest, stifled by her shirt. Cursing loudly, Kat fished out a pair of small headphones, each one could fit in her ear and nearly disappear, out of her shirt. The techno music got louder and she hit the off button to her music player that was hidden on her hip. Blushing, she rubbed her head and mumbled out to the Novas.

"Oops. Sorry about that. I thought I had the hold engaged....haha."

Schamann

Thu Feb 19, 2004 12:12 pm

Ursula approached the newcomer, adjusting the T-shirt along the way. She extended her hand and shook it.

"Ursula Veneberg.....callsign....." she sighed, but then a moment later she smiled weakly "...callsign Hobbit" she turned her head for a moment to meet Aurora's eyes and to smile, then turned to Jones again. "But I still stab people in the back when I hear 'vertically' and 'impaired' together in one sentence" She gave Banshee mischievous glance. "The rest I'm sure you OSI's already know"

If Jones was taken aback by the last statement she didn't show any of it. She seemed more amused, like hearing the same prejudice just one more time.

"Yeah....two OSI's meet each other in the bar...one says to another - 'Hi, you're fine, how am I?'....." she paused for a second to see pilots smiling, more or less naturally, after the joke, then continued.

"I'm sorry to dissappoint you, but I'm a pilot and engineer, maybe little bit od electronic intel specialist. I don't give people mescaline shots to question them nor do I steal war secrets from enemy's HQs. As a matter of fact I was hoping to get closer to those kind of things thanks to you ladies"

Six pairs of surprised eyes just needed some additional explanation. Jones leant more comfortably against the wall and snickered. "You girls do start to have some reputation on this can, even if not by the way you're flying, it is by the way things seem to work about your squad. Word has it you may be BlackOps in no time after you get some experience"

Seer frowned quizzically. "Like the ones we saw when we arrived to Morrigan, you remeber Chrissy?"

Banshee nodded with rather serious look "Indeed I do recall. Haven't seen them anywhere onborard this ship since then, have you?"

Seer just shook her head.

Vexus

Fri Feb 20, 2004 12:32 pm

Aurora sat in the mess hall, the dinner rush long over. A small laptop computer in front of her on the table, she finished typing out the first draft of her missile avoidance report for the CAG. She had focused her previous frustrations into her writing, making sure it was thorough so that there was as little room for criticism as possible. Running a hand through her silver hair, Aurora powered down the computer. She would revise the draft tomorrow.

A full squad now, plus an intel officer. Aurora wondered what exactly the Navy had in mind for them... or the OSI for that matter. You could never tell with them. Yet, Kat seemed sincere enough, and another pair of friendly eyes and guns is always appreciated.

Looking up from her table, she saw the mess hall to be unusually quiet compared to most evenings. A few pilots and officers were scattered about, but the conversation was muted. As Aurora watched curiously, a hardy woman with curly dark-brown hair made her way to a nearby table with a small case in one hand. Opening it carefully, Aurora's eyes widened with surprise upon seeing its contents: a real, honest-to-God flute, polished and shining with reflected light. Assembling the instrument, Aurora was reminded of how she cared for her personal firearms. In that moment, she wished with all her heart that she could care for such a tool of art rather than those of death she kept beneath her bunk.

Blowing a few practice notes, Aurora leaned forward slightly without realizing it. Then, slowly and with great feeling, the woman began to play a song, the music slow and hauntingly beautiful. It was a song that Aurora knew well, and she remembered her mother singing the same song under her breath when she thought no one was listening. As the introduction ended and the first verse

began, Aurora mouthed the words silently.

*In years before, I was blessed with three,  
Men so close and dear to me,  
Father, brother, and only true love,  
Till Death reached down from skies above.*

*Refrain, My Eyes, from tears long shed,  
Rivers of grief shall not wake the dead,  
Turn, My Heart, to those still near  
I give my love to one still dear.*

Now the few conversations in the mess hall had died down, and many were also listening. As the next verse came, Aurora's voice sounded, and she sang softly.

*Each spoke to me one last desire,  
Father wished for sword and for fire,  
My brother wished for peace but a while,  
My love wished only to see me smile.*

*Refrain, My Eyes, from tears long shed,  
Rivers of grief shall not wake the dead,  
Turn, My Heart, to those still near  
I give my love to one still dear.*

The flute played a bridge with talented improvisation, and images of both despair and hope came to Aurora's mind. Out of the corner of her eye, Aurora saw the chef peek out from the kitchen and crane her ear towards the music.

*Oh God, why have You allowed to be,  
That half my soul should be torn from me,  
To see them again, I hope so much,  
To meet them in lands no plague shall touch.*

*Refrain, My Eyes, from tears long shed,  
Rivers of grief shall not wake the dead,  
Turn, My Heart, to those still near  
I give my love to one still dear.*

Now Aurora sang strongly, not caring anymore about being heard, and though the hardy woman looked up from her flute, they showed no disapproval, nor did she stop playing. Her voice dancing with the flute's upon the air, Aurora heard another voice sound from behind her, creating a rich alto harmony for the final verse.

*Yet, here I remain, life's not yet done,  
A world I rebuild for the love of my son,  
A world newly whole and sundered no more,  
A world with love, as in years before.*

As the final notes faded away, Aurora and the flute-player met eyes.

"That was absolutely beautiful," Aurora said.

"Thanks," the woman replied with a humble smile. "I practice when I have the time." The woman then extended her hand and Aurora took it.

"1st Lt. Karen Freeman, Chief Fighter Mechanic. Just call me Sparks. You must be Crone. No one else on board has hair like that."

"Aye," came a voice behind her, "she tends ta stand oot in a crowd in more ways than one." Aurora turned and saw Rhiannon behind her. Aurora then realised that the voice that had sung with her did sound rather familiar.

Charon

Sat Feb 21, 2004 7:15 am

"Refrain, My Eyes," was a song guaranteed to cause Rhiannon to choke up - as was the case with anyone still alive, she thought, and it was rare that she could hold herself from singing along with

it, in her head.

However, when she heard someone else giving voice to the mournful tune, she couldn't help herself, and let loose with her own voice, creating a harmony part on the fly that was a subtle counterpart to the lead melody.

She smiled slightly as Aurora opened up her shell slightly, obviously still under the music's spell, and introduced herself to the flautist. Hearing Sparks' comments about Aurora's hair, she couldn't stop herself from interjecting.

"Aye, she tends tae stand oot in a crowd in more ways than one." Seeing Aurora jump would go down, in her mind, as one of the greatest moments in her life.

Smiling slightly as Aurora turned, Rhiannon went on. "She's right, though.. tha' was p'raps one o' th'finest renditions I've everrr heard." She sniffed, slightly, the memory of the song causing tears to prickle briefly in her eyes.

Blinking, she went on briskly. "Rhiannon McTaggart, callsign Claymorrre." She shook Sparks' hand.

They traded small bits of small talk, none of the three wanting to break the hold that the song had woven over them, but finally, some of Sparks' comrades came over and commandeered her to join them at their own table.

Rhiannon looked at Aurora, smiling slyly. "Didnae knae tha' ye could sing like that, Skipper," she chuckled. Aurora had the decency to blush slightly, causing Rhiannon to grin broader. "Tha's th'lead tha' we follow. Ye need tae let herr come oot an' play, as well - no' just th'hard-nose tha' ye have tae be on occasion."

Taking a sip from the soda that she'd grabbed before the song started, she chuckled. "It's a helluva balancing act, an' ye're gonna make mistakes. I've seen it before, in many an officerrr, boot th'trick is not tae let yerself get bogged doon in one aspect o' th' job. Th' leaderrr's gotta be a Jill o' all traits. Ye'rrre almost there," she grinned again, "Jest a wee bit o' werk, an' ye'll be right as rain."

While Aurora mulled that over, Sparks came back to their table. "I've got to be heading back to the hanger - gotta get the birds in premium condition. It was great chatting with you , ladies. Another time?" At their nods, she grinned. "Fantastic! Take it easy!" With a cheery wave, she headed off.

Rhiannon looked at Aurora. Aurora looked at Rhiannon. Rhiannon looked grave. Aurora looked somber. Rhiannon cocked an eyebrow. Aurora paused for a couple seconds, then chuckled. Rhiannon went straight past chuckling, and broke entirely.

Vindicare

Thu Feb 26, 2004 1:37 pm

Banshee put the finishing touches to the second report, and closed her notebook. *The advantage of being volatile is that you get a lot of these, and they get easier* she mused, looking up from where she was sitting. It was "late evening" Morrigan time, and most of the people who normally populated the area in front of her were now gone. The usual hustle and bustle had died down to a few clangs and light banter, and she closed her eyes in order to listen better.

"...these pilots will..."

"...hope so, they're expensive..."

"And difficult to service"

"Cool though"

"Yep"

The voices seemed to be closing in so Banshee opened her eyes, however the room was now empty and the work lights had been dimmed. She stood up and began to collect herself when someone entered from the opposite door, carrying a box that certainly didn't look like it contained tools.

The woman eyed her squatting form quizzically, before speaking.

"This area's off limits this time of the evening, miss", obviously not being able to determine rank in the half light.

"Sorry, i just enjoy the view. On Earth people used to go on Safari's to see dangerous animals in their natural habitat. Here i can take an elevator a few floors"

"Thats an interesting way of putting it. I havent seen you before, but from that your either a jock

or a mech, and i'd know you if you were a mech"

"Second Lieutenant Auten, Dark Nova Squadron" Banshee stood up "But i've been known to dabble a little" She stretched her left hand out.

"Dark Nova eh? your not as famous as the rest of your squad" she said, briefly reflecting on some memory or other, then extending her own hand

"First Lieutenant Karen Freeman, fighter mechanic. I've just been up in the mess with two others of your squad, if you want to join them"

"I think i'll stay down here a while longer, i want to memorise these 'Aries' ships, not something i encountered on escort runs. Are they hard to service?"

"Yeah, real bitches. People will insist on frivolous features like VTOL on a heavy fighter. The jets are so delicate they're almost always shot out in a firefight..."

"Fiddly bits to fix, too" that got her a quizzically raised eyebrow, followed by a smile.

"So you were a mech once, then" it was more statement than question.

"Yes, or at least something like that. At my old post i used to service my own craft, so i could take more risks in good conscience"

"How considerate. Don't expect me to give you the same privilege here. These are MY craft, and right now i know nothing about you".

"That's fair enough, but i ask you remember that as my time here lengthens. By the way, that case seems a little upmarket for a service set..."

"Yeah, its my flute. Sometimes its nice to get away from this for a while" She gestured towards the silhouettes on the far side of the room.

"We all have our own ways and means. I take my frustrations out in martial arts or gun ranges. I've yet to find one of the latter on board, and we're banned from the excersise areas for the former, which leaves me to write reports" Banshee waved her notebook.

"One of those are you" was the reply, accompanied by a smile.

"Indeed"

"Well, if you want any information about the new ships here, check the computers, or ask Spanners, my No. two mech. My callsign is Sparks by the way".

"Banshee. I'll do that, thanks for the information. I guess as this area is off limits i had better be going, but i am certain our paths will cross again, considering those on which we walk".

"Indeed" sparks replied followed by a laugh "You've got a very precise manner of speech, British aren't you?"

Banshee blushed slightly "Yes, is it that bad, or for that matter obvious?"

"It's not every day you get a fighter pilot who's well spoken. Anyway, shoo! you're in enough trouble, you want me to add trespassing?" She grinned.

"Okay okay Im going". They shook hands again and Banshee made her way out towards the elevator.

*Mess hall, hmmm....*

Schamann

Fri Feb 27, 2004 5:10 pm

Spontaneous concerto in the lounge just ended. Crone and Claymore had their small talk at the table. It was a good, quiet afternoon. Not much was happening at all. You could even think that it was just a regular cruise – a routine patrol in a friendly peaceful area of space. Only – you'd be very wrong if you did.

Evening saw the two small soldiers in their PT clothes jogging along the corridors on lower tech level 3. Dark Nova pilots they both were. However, at least at the moment, not much dark and certainly not Novas. Hobbit and Seer passed the corner and headed down the hall.

They kinda started to like those times when they were doing something being just the two of them. Seer was unbelievably easygoing and tolerant and Hobbit....well...Hobbit was probably aggressive just enough to talk her into having the evening jogging together.

Perhaps it was something more than being short, that they had in common, or perhaps it was just that everybody else was pretty busy right then. They talked casually while jogging, about nothing in particular. They were supposed to take some more simulations and subsequently go on her first patrol in about a week. Crone's upcoming decision was also a hot topic. In less than twenty four hours their squadronleader was about to designate her second in command.

"I'm saying it's Nef, I tell you" Hobbit breathed little heavily already. "She's making approaches for it, giving Crone advices, showing off, basically throwing herself into that position, smiling to Crone all the time..." she abruptly stopped caught under the arm by Seer, who grabbed her and looked her deeply in the eyes.

"And what is wrong with Nef smiling to Crone all the time - you'd prefer her crying to her leader all the time?" Ursula turned red and freed herself from Seer's grip.

"No, it's not like that, I just don't like people going around bragging about themselves all the time" She frowned.

"You think bringing up your proven advantages which may serve both you and the squad when properly exploited **is bragging?** What the hell did Nef tell about herself that's not true?" Seer now got more than a little irritated.

"It's not what. It's the way she does it. Approaching Crone with advices, almost brownnosing..."

"What?!!" Seer was utterly astonished "Do you girl listen to what you're saying on a daily basis?!!"

Ursula got suddenly confused and awkward again. "I don't know. Maybe I just don't like her, for taking command, for that Hobbit thing, and all that stuff. I don't know."

"I think you do" Seer snickered "And I'm not sure if it has anything to do with callsign or squadron executive officer job"

"What then?"

"Oh, no matter"

They started to walk, being fed up with jogging for the time being, but the conversation just didn't quite wanted to arise again.

"And besides" Seer's voice broke the silence. "I'd bet my money on Claymore"

"Why?"

"Nef walks and talks and acts like she was a squadron leader before. Yet CAG decided to give the job to Crone, an ex-grunt. That says to me: Nef had her chance already, the CAG would be against her." Ursula raised her brows but said nothing. Dory continued "And Claymore, don't know - she just seems to have it, but to lack self-confidence and experience, being Crone's second would make her learn. This, and she's always near to help, even though she's not as self-imposing as our beauty"

Something was humming quietly behind the next corner, something like an electricity. Seer rushed curiously to check upon it, but Hobbit suddenly grabbed her arm and forcefully made her stop.

"what wrong Hobbs?"

"shhhhhh.....something is not right"

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Nef was sitting in squad's bunk room reading. From time to time Jones would ask her a question about some detail of RIAS, and Nef would try to answer correctly. Then Jones would return to

whatever she was doing on her PDA. The young OSI was good. She obviously had been trained in RIAD operations and not the quick battlefield training, but the professional one. She got back to her calculations.

**Stella Maris>hello pretty, It's good you're in your room.**

**Nefertiti>What? What makes you think I am?**

Nef quickly raised her head and eyed Jones suspiciously. She seemed to work on her own monitor, not paying any attention to Carter. The look on her face was nothing but innocent. Still, not quite convinced, Nef carefully got back to her monitor.

**Stella Maris>This isn't the night for chatting, pretty. Make sure you're not alone, and don't leave the room unless you have to. This isn't the good night for great many of things.**

The window popped out. Nef checked her tracking application she installed and kept running in the shadow. Six seconds of scanning more. She was now getting closer and closer to determining the properties of the account the mysterious Maris apparently was using. Two, maybe three more chats and she will have her at arm's reach.

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when they crossed the corner of the corridor, what they saw was the broken security camera and no lights, save for red emergency ones. It suddenly got quite creepy in the familiar, nice corridor of their ship. To the left there were the open doors, leading to the starboard's cargo bay and main lock control room.

"They always go through such doors in movies and there's always something bad behind." Seer sounded way less relaxed than only a minute ago. Ursula only signaled her to be quiet, and carefully entered the room.

They were both lying inside, on the floor, almost naked, still embracing each other even after life went away from them. It was obvious they were making love, something a control room operator is not quite supposed to do on her duty. Their throats slit, blood everywhere, somehow, their faces looked kind of ... happy.

Specialists Gercy and Matthews were kinda busy with each other at their guardpost, when it happened. They did not notice anything.

Ursula caught Seer's hand in the dark, red lit room. It was shaking, just like her own. Hobbit was only able to mutter:

"..on, we have a problem"

Vexus

Fri Feb 27, 2004 8:55 pm

"Tell me, what do you think about Nef?" Aurora asked Rhiannon. The freckled pilot raised an eyebrow.

"How ya mean, lass?"

"Do you think she would make a good XO?" Rhiannon thought for a moment, her eyes staring into the bottom of her soda can.

"Yeh want my hoonest opinion?"

"Always."

"Then I think it would be a waste for Nef to be XO." Aurora was taken aback slightly by this, and gave Rhiannon a confused look that brought a half-smile to her face as she continued.

"Nef takes charge, and she's one of the most protective pilots I've ever known. She'll sooffer no rival if she thinks she's right. You should count yoorself lucky that she respects yeh enough to follow yehr lead. Nef should be a squad leader, and she'd be wasted on an XO position." Aurora nodded her head solemnly at Rhiannon's words as she came to a decision. As Rhiannon finished speaking and took a swig from a her soda, Aurora's meschiveious side got the best of her and she



timed it perfectly.

"I suppose you'll have to be my XO then." Rhiannon's eyes widened and she chocked back her soda, a humorous sight that made Aurora smile.

"Me, lass?!"

"Aye," Aurora answered. "You've shown yourself to be a more-than-capable pilot. You have always been honest with me. And I think in many ways you are a much wiser woman than I. Besides, at least one of the people in charge needs to know how to have a good time." Rhiannon thought about that for a moment, then met Aurora's eyes.

"Are yeh sure, lass? I doena know how good of an XO I could be to yeh."

"If I wasn't sure before," Aurora said definitively, "then I'm sure now." Rhiannon then gave Aurora a nervous smile and raised her soda can before emptying it.

"Cheers."

Aurora's face now turned dark.

"Claymore, I want you to understand. If anything... should happen to me, I want Nef to take command." Rhiannon matched Aurora's look with a gentler one.

"I think I do understand, lass." Rhiannon then shook off the moment and smiled.

"So tell me, what other songs do yeh li-" the sound of a siren screamed from the overhead speakers. Aurora fought her ingrained instinct once again to grab a nearby gun that wasn't there.

**"Attention all personnel! This is a Security Alert! All those off-duty report to quarters immediately!"**

"I hope this is a drill," Arora muttered as she and Rhiannon rose from their table and exited the mess hall.

Vindicare	Sat Feb 28, 2004 1:12 am
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The lift stopped suddenly and the lights went off, being replaced shortly after by the red warning lights of Alert status

**"Attention all personnel! This is a Security Alert! All those off-duty report to quarters immediately!"**

**"Lifts will be out of operation for the duration of this alert"**

"Great, looks like i have to walk" Banshee muttered as she used the manual release on the door, praising providence for having actually stopped at a floor, and not between them.

She made her way up the three flights of stairs that remained between her and the habitation deck where Dark Nova would now congregate. By the time she arrived at the room, Nef, Kat, Crone and Claymore were already there.

Crone spun as she heard the door, obviously on edge "Did you see Hobbit or Seer?"

"I'm afraid not, i walked up from 3 decks down, i was in a lift when the sirens started. Do we know whats going on? is it a drill or something?"

Alex	Sat Feb 28, 2004 1:35 am
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Nef didn't like this one bit. As soon as the alarm had sounded she'd begun to hack into the sensor grid, and look for her squad. As Banshee, Crone and Claymore came into the room, she limited her search to just Seer and Hobbit. She became frustrated with the waiting. She remembered them saying something about jogging on one of the lower levels, but she couldn't remember which one, if any, they'd said.

"Scan complete. No positive matchs found. Possible matchs found on Lower Tech Deck 2, and 3. Security Alert active on those decks." The computer responded.

Jessica twitched. Maris knew about this. She knew this alert was coming. And to make matters worse, Hobbit and Seer were probably in grave danger.

She wasted no time in grabbing her sais, and running through the open door, not listening to Crone and Claymore's objections. She ran as fast as she could towards lower tech decks two and three.

Vexus Sat Feb 28, 2004 6:59 am

Aurora had barely had time to take account of who was in their quarters and who was still missing when Jessica sprang up from her console and grabbed a pair of small but lethal-looking weapons.

*What the...?* "Nef, what are you-" Jessica ignored her and ran for the door.

"Nef, are you crazy?! It's a Security Alert. We're supposed to stay he-" the door closed behind Jessica.... Crone's eyes became steel, and she turned to Rhiannon.

"Damn her. Claymore, you stay here with the others, I'm bringing her back."

"Crone, shouldn't we all go with-"

"No!" Crone said louder than she had intended, making the other pilots flinch slightly. "I'll not have all the Dark Novas frolicking around the ship during a Security Alert. I want all of you here so I know where you are." Crone gave a level look at Rhiannon.

"Consider this your first task as squad exec."

Crone considered fetching her rifle, but stopped short of it. Running around with a plasma rifle during an alert might wind her up in the brig or worse. She grabbed a small pistol instead and tucked it away. Running down the corridor after Jessica, Crone's thoughts were enraged.

*Blatant disobedience... reckless... when I get my hands on her... what does she think she is, a f\*\*king ninja?....* Crone's thoughts grew worse as she pursued.

Alex Sat Feb 28, 2004 10:06 am

Jessica got lucky with her choice of ladders. No one was on it as she used her sais to quickly slide down the ladder. She cursed as her sais sparked against the rails. *Damn, this is going to be a bitch to repair...* She looked up and saw she was already at Tech Level 1. She jumped off, and rolled onto the floor. She looked up. Tech Level 3. *Damn... I wanted to start on two... Well... While I'm here...*

Jessica activated the manual release for the door, pried it open, and slid into the darkness. She kept her knees bent, so she could react instantly. The deck was almost silent, save for the humming of the machinery around her. The flashing red lights slowly pulsed up and down the corridor as Jessica walked farther and farther down, towards the right end, in near silence.

*Where would they be? Perhaps I should call out?* A noise from behind Jessica made her roll into nearby room, hiding as much of her as she could, while prepared to fight. She heard foot steps.

And they were getting closer...

JediBubbles Sat Feb 28, 2004 10:33 pm

The officer *dammit, I'm so messed up I can't even remember her name* stopped her pacing and fixed a stern glare on Seer as she finished relating what she had seen. *They led Hobbit back in in the middle. Guess she made a quicker telling of it. Looks as tramitized as I feel, too.* Cassie tried to keep her face impassive to cover the fact that she was still shaking *and likely will be for awhile.*

"Are you sure that's the truth, 2Lt Dory?"

Impassivity died as Seer looked the officer straight in the eye with the coldest look she could summon without bursting into tears. "Why the hell would I lie about two ladies' deaths, sir?"

Mystery officer let out a tired little huffing sigh as an answer and snagged the datapad Hobbit's questioner held out. While she read it Cassie caught her fellow Dark Nova's eye.

Hobbit's wibbly look clearly said *Why? And why us?*

*I dunno, hon, but better us than someone else, I guess...* Seer's attention snapped back to the officer as the woman made another frustrated noise. She clasped her hands--still holding the datapad--behind her back and regarded the two pilots.

"Well, you told the same story, but not in the exact same way. Which means you didn't rehearse it--not that you had time anyway--so I'm inclined to believe you." Her face grew dark. "I'm sorry

ladies, but it would have been easier for all if you were responsible. Since you aren't, that means there's a murderer loose on this ship." She gestured to two of the guards that had scurried into the room a terrifying ten minutes beforehand when the Novas had raised the alert. "Please escort them to their quarters, then report back."

Cassie studiously avoided looking at the now-covered corpses on the way out. Hobbit did the same.

Seer walked fairly normally, if a little stiffer than usual. *Anything to cover up for my reeling brain.* The observant part of her brain thought she heard stealthily pelting footsteps up ahead, but they stopped, so she made nothing of it.

Until they rounded the corner and Nef popped out brandishing twin sais. And Aurora could be heard slamming down the last few feet of ladder further down the hall yelling Nef's name. Part of Seer wanted to laugh. Any other time it would have been really damn funny. But right now people in general were something she didn't want to deal with.

"What are you doing out of quarters?"

"Looking for them!"

"Which I told you not to, Carter!"

"Hobbit, Seer, are you okay?"

Cassie suddenly snapped to focus, Crone's furious expression visible over Nef's shoulder as she closed distance with half her squad. She dimly heard Ursula sniffle valiently. Seer looked up at Nef's worried expression and tried to summon a smile, but instead felt weary and very very old.

"As okay as we're going to be, Ninja Nef. And as much as I appreciate your concern, turn the f\*ck around so I don't have to talk anymore."

Nef looked like Seer had slapped her in the face. Crone looked confused, but understanding, and grabbed Nef's arm to drag her around behind the guards to follow them.

Thus the other four Novas made their way back to their quarters in silence--two wondering and curious, two wondering and numb.

JediBubbles

Mon Mar 01, 2004 5:24 pm

The silence exploded, however, almost as soon as the door swished closed behind the escort guards.

**"WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING, CARTER?!"** Crone suddenly seemed to tower over Nef despite the fact that the blonde had a full inch on her. "Charging out there when we were ordered to be here--when I told you to not to--are you nuts?!" Momentarily forgotten, Cassie slid down the wall to sit behind the door, and Rhi wrapped a still violently shaking Ursula in a much-needed hug. Banshee merely watched the mayhem unfold.

Nef stood her ground. "I though my squadmates might be in danger, that's what! And I wasn't going to sit around when I might be able to help--"

She cut her defense short as a hollow cackle sounded from Seer's direction, "Always have to help, don't ya Nef? The impulsive heroine...how you knew, I haven't a clue, but we were in danger, and still are, and so are the rest of you and the entire damn ship."

Cassie wiped her eyes and looked at her squadmates. "The disadvantage to being deployed on a warship is that you're stuck in a can with a bunch of trained killers. And one of them has obviously misplaced their sense of duty, because Hobbs and I just stumbled on two guards who'd had their throats slit."

"There was b-blood ev-everywh-where..." Ursula got a handle on herself but couldn't quite stop shaking. Claymore's face tightened and the blood drained from Nef's, while Crone and Banshee's expressions both froze over. Seer glanced apologetically at Hobbit and then went back to staring at the floor.

"Yeah, well, sorry to say it dearie, but if this was a slasher flick we'd be next for the sheer misfortune of discovering to scene of the crime. And the rest of the Novas for the misfortune of being our bunkmates. Can't kill two in a room and leave the rest--no, that won't do. Plus, if it's sabatoge they're going for, why not eliminate the Super-Special squad-in-training? Pilots are a pain in the ass to replace."

Her tears started again, but this time they were defiant and angry. "And I'm not gonna sit for that. I rather like my aorta in one piece, and can't stand the thought of the rest of y'all getting it, either. I've flown with you and I trust you with my life. We all do. We have to." Seer looked up again. "But none of us trust each other with our hearts, because we know we're here to kill and die."

"We're here to--" Crone tried to interject, but Cassie was on a roll now.

"Doesn't matter how you put it, it's still f\*cking 'kill and die.' And you know it. We all do. And we all learned at a damn young and tender age how much it f\*cking hurts to lose someone we really love. So we trust our lives but not our hearts, because we don't want to go through it again, though we're inevitably going to anyway. I know how you act and react, but I still don't know sh\*t about any of y'all. We know who likes which melee weapons, but not everyone else's favorite color, much less more serious sh\*t! Banshee's revealed the most, of all people!--no offense, babe, " she flicked a weak smile in Chrissie's direction.

"But since I love y'all, nobody gets through this f\*cking door tonight, not even if she's the f\*cking captain herself." Cassie somehow managed to glare daggers and look hopeful at the same time. "I've got first watch. Who wants second?"

"I'll take it, lass."

"No." Crone found her voice again. "We'll all stay up. Seer's right--it's not safe tonight and we are seriously overdue for some full-squadron bonding. Actually, I seem to remember someone else saying something along those lines recently," she looked pointedly at Ursula and then made eye contact with the rest of her girls. "We all have our past demons, and two of you just added to them. It's time to all share as much as we can--without breaking."

She turned on Nef, "But you're still in trouble! Never do that again!"

This last thankfully covered Seer's sulky mutter of "Well that excludes you from the 'festivities.'" Banshee caught it, however, and oddly enough suppressed a smile.

"Well I am so glad to have the company," Seer covered with a halfhearted smile. "Shall we start with the easy sh\*t? I love royal blue, but I'm also fond of bright lime green because it's damn obnoxious, just like me. Y'all?"

Alex	Mon Mar 01, 2004 11:26 pm
<p>"Always have to help, don't ya Nef? The impulsive heroine..." <i>There was nothing heroic about my intentions... I had no intentions of being proclaimed a hero... I don't want to be. I'm just so f*cking tired of losing everyone I've ever cared about...</i></p>	

"And we all learned at a damn young and tender age how much it f\*cking hurts to lose someone we really love!" The words had echoed in Jessica's ears with such a terrible impact, her heart gave a violent flutter.

Jessica just crossed her arms, and muttered under her breath. "Some of us, more than others..."

"But you're still in trouble! Never do that again!" Jessica's attention snapped back to the group, but she was in a bit of depression. Unlike her usual self, she actually waited to go last to share anything about herself. And she was unusually quite about it...

Vindicare	Tue Mar 02, 2004 12:57 am
<p>"I'm quite partial to white and blood red, being British" Banshee smiled slightly at her own stereotypical preferences. "Most of you, save for Kat here, know that i have lost two sisters in combat. My family has a heritage of valor which i intend to uphold. I listen to classical music, have a fairly advanced knowledge of literature, enjoy RacquetBall, martial arts and reading. My previous assignment was an escort posting, and i was allowed to request this current and that previous mission only under special dispensation from the theatre commander. I am not easily shaken, nor am i depressive, however my temper has led me into trouble on numerous occasions. I live my life on the teachings of old: without truth, there is no trust, and there is no such thing as failure, only death or success".</p>	

"That's fairly morbid" came a muttering from somewhere in the room.

"It suits our way of life, don't you think?"

Silence.

Schamann	Wed Mar 03, 2004 1:41 pm
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„I don't" – Veneberg spoke up, voice still shaking, more than a bit, but steady and defiant. "I'm sorry Banshee, but I don't believe in this just one bit. This is not the Azincourt or whatever. We are doing our job here, not making our way into the legend"

The silence was almost freezing, as Hobbit stood up and approached Auten. Wrapped in the towel, extremely pale and with traces of recent tears on her cheeks, she looked like everything but the person who has the right to coach anyone. Yet she continued.

"Between success and death there is the ocean of possibilities. But once you die you can't get better and fight another day, you can't move on and try the different approach, you leave the ones you want to protect alone. Sorry, but there's nothing glorious in dying, no matter how I look upon it."

"Are you suggesting that my sisters acted unnecessary and stupid?" Banshee's voice was cold as liquid oxygen escaping into the vacuum of space from damaged tank.

"I'm not suggesting anything.... Never had a sister and I don't know how it is to lose one, I pretty much don't know how it is to lose anyone, for that matter. But I sure as hell know this Christine – not every mission objective is critical, not every fighter is expendable, and no pilot is – someone smarter than me wrote it down long ago, you may as well want to give it a thought"

Vindicare

Wed Mar 03, 2004 5:10 pm

"Sun Tzu wrote the Art of War, he was pretty smart, and he wrote that a LONG time ago. I think you misjudge me, death is not an objective, it is a possible outcome. Going in to a dogfight worrying about how you can escape reduces your overall combat effectiveness. 'A cornered tiger, sensing his end, is at his most fierce' - if you fight with the prospect of your death in your mind, you will fight harder to avoid it. If you dwell on the possibility of failure it can become more probable. I will retreat when i'm ordered to, but retreats are used exactly as my sister's sacrifices - Last resorts. Do not ever imply that they were trying to satisfy their ego and 'Forge a legend'".  
"The true meaning of the phrase "There is no failure, only death or success" does not mean there are those two polar opposite scenario ends, it means that the only good excuse for failing is that you died trying. A less complicated example would be "if you don't succeed try try again".

Banshee decided on the most belittling and obvious rephrasing she could think of, still offended that Hobbit would imply her sisters sacrificed themselves purely for egotistical reasons. After giving her a withering glare for a few seconds, she spoke again.

"Anyway, we are hogging the limelight, lets let the others speak and argue later."

JediBubbles

Wed Mar 03, 2004 9:02 pm

"Well, then, since you've decided we're doing backgrounds then I'll just have to hog it back!" quipped Cassie from the floor. *Man, once she thinks you've slighted her sisters nothing gets though that chick's head.*

"Seer..." Crone and Cassie stared at each other for a long minute, which seemed to make Ursula even more antsy. Cassie finally sighed and rolled her eyes. "I know, I know--but it was my idea to share and I hate keeping it quiet. 'Sides," she grinned at the squad--and it was much easier to do than it had been just a few minutes ago--"they're big girls, they can take it."

"Take what?" The tension in the room combined with her natural curiosity made Nef a bit impatient. "You're so happy all the time that it can't possibly be anything too bad."

Seer laughed, and it was a real laugh again. "Actually, Nef, I think we're more alike in that regard than either of us gives the other credit for. And it's Banshee who might not like this much, not you."

She glanced apologetically at the squadmate in question. "And sorry to dump this on you, hon, after all the sh\*t you've been through--but I was born on Chara. Me and my older brother. Mom was from Terra though, and eventually got homesick, so Dad managed to sneakily get us all back to Earth. And those first two years back were great, but we all know what happened then. Except Jace--my brother--was naturally immune, and the guilt and the grief turned him from his happy little self into a raging bastard. He blamed it all on Mom, left us, and ran away back to Chara. At least he always wrote to me. Until the last letter." Here Cassie hung her head and tugged at her hair. "I was so mad at him then that I went out and signed up. And while I was in BT my Mom died in a mag-car wreck." The tiny woman took a deep breath and plunged into it.

"So I have the unique misfortune of my only living family member being a f\*cking Crimson Shield." The silence in the room would have defied a chainsaw's attempts to cut it. "And God had better

keep either of us out of wherever until the other dies--because I owe him a definite flogging for it all, especially if he had the slightest thing to do with either of your sister's deaths, Bansh."

"Anyway, four of my last squadron died in an ambush. That was definitely not cool. I really liked those girls. So when they reassigned the two of us left and offered me this post I figured 'why not?' I've got nothing to lose and maybe I can take a little back on Jace in the bargain." She laughed ironically. "You know, for a former psychology major the sh\*t I say doesn't make much sense, does it? Anyway, that's my tale of minor woe. May the suspecting of me begin. Next victim?"

Alex

Thu Mar 04, 2004 3:49 am

Jessica looked at Seer, more angry at her words, than at her being Charan. Jessica didn't care if she was a Charan, a Martian, or an antelope! But to say that they were more alike due to their losses... Jessica chuckled to herself as her eyes turned towards Crone, Claymore, and the newest member, Kat. As everyone was sharing their pasts, she couldn't help but be somewhat eager to hear their stories as well.

However... Jessica was beginning to dread the approach of her turn... She'd turned away from her past for so long... She didn't want to share it. She just wanted it to go away...

Charon

Thu Mar 04, 2004 4:46 am

Rhiannon looked around during the brief awkward silence that perforated the Dark Novas, following Cassie's statement. The slow burn that was beginning in Chrissie's eyes was truly interesting to behold, but promised lots of not-fun in the near future. Time to nip this in the bud.

"Och, lass, dinnae fash about tha'! It's no' like we'rre gonnna hold yer brother against ye, is it?" The question was obviously rhetorical, as she continued on brusquely. She had a nasty feeling about what would happen if she let the question hang in the air for too long.

"It DO make me feel a wee bit in th' spotlight, though, ye ken?" She chuckled wryly. "I mean, wha' kin a lass SAY after somethin' like tha'?" Ursula essayed a small smile at that. *Good*, she thought. "Me tale's a wee bit mo' straightforward... Glasgae borrrn an' raised, an-"

"Glasgae" queried Jessica, a confused look on her face. "I know most of the major cities, and it sounds like this should be one but..."

"Och," Rhiannon rolled her eyes, then grinned devilishly. "That would be 'Glasgow', for all of you not fortunate enough to be born within Scotland's fair borders."

The impudent smile she tacked on the end of that statement was to be expected. That wasn't what had everyone else's jaw hanging.

She'd just said an entire sentence in a near-perfect imitation of Jessica's usual accent, without a trace of her usual harsh burr.

She scratched behind her head and chuckled. "Did I no' mention that I've got a WEE talent for voices?" Aurora composed herself first, and cocked an eyebrow. Rhiannon noticed, and simply wagged hers outrageously.

The Nova's couldn't help it. They broke, to a girl, all of them giggling helplessly on the floor. Nervous tension does weird things to a group. The trick is to find the right steps to release that tension. Rhiannon, through her giggles, felt rather proud that she'd got it to work, this time.

Once everyone had calmed down, she continued, wiping tears from the corners over her crinkled emerald eyes. "ANYWAYS, as I was sayin', I went tae school, passes me courses, boot th'uni's ne'er saw anythin' they liked well enough tae give me a scholarship. My family wasnae poor, boot after th'plague..." she shrugged. A couple of the Dark Novas nodded. After the plague hit, not many people had too much money to spare, and some families had never really recovered from the shock.

"One day," she continued, "I was walkin' doon th' streets, jest borrrred as hell, an' I saw the Navy's recruitin' office. Went in on a whim, let meself be convinced, an' that was it. Scorred well enough on th'aptitude tests tha' they scooped me oop fer pilot's trainin'."

"Did okay in trainin', although when I went tae pilot's school, I MIGHT have pulled a wee prank orrr tae," she grinned impishly again, and winked at Cassie, who looked shamelessly innocent. *Looks like I was right*, Rhiannon mused. *She's done th'same thin' a few times. Best watch her.*

"Kicked about wi' Fury Squadron fer a couple years, when one oof us was offerrred a posting here. I leapt at th'chance - always great tae experience somethin' new, right? An' here I am - XO tae th'finest squadron in th'fleet!" She nodded with finality.

Alex Thu Mar 04, 2004 9:57 am

Jessica blinked. **XO?!** It took less than a second for her to compose herself. This was the first she'd heard of it. Her jaw tightened slightly. *Damn... There goes my last chance at command in this squad. Well... I guess Claymore will make a good XO...* She mentally sighed and wondered who would take the next bullet: Kat, or Crone.

Vexus Thu Mar 04, 2004 11:14 am

Aurora glanced over at Jessica and read her reaction to Rhiannon's revelation. A cynical voice sounded in her head.

*I wouldn't worry too much, Nef. The way this war is going, you may get command of this squad before you know it.*

Then Rhiannon caught her eye and spoke up.

"How 'boot yehrsel, lass? Let's here the origins of ourr fearless leader."

Aurora put on the most convincing it's-not-that-big-a-deal expression she could.

*Well, you asked for it, Aurora. Here goes nothing.*

"Well, there's not too much to tell. Joined the army in 2197. Saw a little action on Mars and some more in the Chara System. Not a lot of frontline stuff, just vanguards and occupation. Then about a year or so ago they asked us grunts if anyone wanted to volunteer to become a pilot." Aurora eyes became distant with memory and a small smile came to her.

"My comrades teased me to the end about volunteering. They said I was a softly for wanting to become a flygirl. But here I am, for better or for worse." Looking around at her fellow pilots, some seemed satisfied with her story, but one was definitely not. Cassie's eyes were intense, as if searching, and Aurora looked away quickly, trying to appear casual.

"Where were you born?" Kat asked curiously.

"Oh, my family is in northen Maine," Aurora answered quickly. She could almost feel Cassie's eyes on the back of her head now. Suddenly, Aurora was assailed by an irrational pang of fear. And when Cassie asked her a question, Aurora had to fight the urge to sound defensive.

"Where did you get the scar?" Cassie asked the question casually, but her eyes told a different story. For a moment, Aurora's thoughts became enraged.

*So you want to know what I know, do you girl? You want to see what I saw? Maybe you want to know how many Charans I've killed, and how I feel about that? Or perhaps you simply want to heal my hurts? Not this time! I'm not a book that you can just open up and read, coli!*

"It was an accident," Aurora said, her expression matching the casualness of Cassie's voice. "I got distracted."

Cassie still looked doubtful, but Aurora looked away. *Don't forget it.* It was then that she realized her right hand was clenched into a tight fist.... She willed it to relax slowly.

Maverick Fri Mar 05, 2004 1:02 am

Kat took the opening to fill in her story. She began after shifting nervously in her seat.

"I know I'm new to the group and most of you might not know me all that well. So...this looks like a good time for me to share my past. I was born in 2181 in Annapolis, Maryland. I actually didn't live too far away from the United States Naval Academy so I've been constantly around the Navy all my life. Most of what I did during my military career was bookwork. Boring stuff all of it. So on the off time, I learned how to pilot. Never was too good at it though. The rest of the time I had to myself I spent in clubs. It was better than sitting in front of a vidscreen and having techs gawk at you."

Kat flung her bangs back, but they immediately fell back in place over her right eye.

"Yeah, I know I don't have the most exciting background, but that doesn't mean I'm not fun to be

with" Kat said smiling.

Alex

Fri Mar 05, 2004 2:31 am

The calm exterior Jessica wore hid all the terror and anxiety she was feeling. It was her turn... They were all looking at her expectantly, as she desperately tried to think of a way out. "I was born, I'm a pilot, end of story." Jessica simply said.

"Nef!" Cassie said. "There's more to you than that, isn't there?"

"No." Jessica responded, a bit more forcefully than she'd intended. She turned to go to her bunk when Crone's voice rang out.

"Nef... You should share a bit more of your past." Crone said sternly.

Jessica stopped. Anger built within her as she turned to look at Crone. "With all due respect, *sir*... That's mighty big talk for someone who was rather quite about her own past!"

Crone started to get angry as well. "At least I *talked* about my past!"

All of Jessica's terror and anxiety suddenly fueled her anger meter, and it finally hit full tilt. Her fist smashed the wall with amazing power as she stared coldly at Crone. **"YOU WANT ME TO TALK ABOUT MY PAST?! FINE!!"**

She turned on Crone, and walked angrily towards her until their noses were touching. "I was raised in a family of pilots! My father, my brothers, and my sister were all pilots! Piloting runs through my family like the Force runs through Luke Skywalker's! Did my personell file tell you THAT?!"

Next, Jessica turned on Banshee. "My brothers started teasing me when I was 9, saying how CUTE I was. They started to call me Nefertiti! That is how I got my callsign!!"

Next was Kat. "My brothers were both killed in the plague! My father was the last man in my family to die, a few days before Christmas! Imagine the pain I had to go through. Oh, but that wouldn't be the last of it!" Normally, Jessica would of felt bad about dumping on Kat like this, so soon after they'd just met, but right now was a different matter.

The anger boiled over as she turned towards Cassie. "My sister was part of the Chara Invasion... She was one of the best pilots ever, and was one of the people I modeled my flying style after! She was declared MIA 2 years ago, but she's presumed to be dead!"

Next on Jessica's hit list was Hobbit. "I joined the Navy to be a pilot like the rest of my family. I was the Squadron Leader for Triple Threat Squadron. It was just Bird, Hyena and me, and we were the best squadron the academy had ever seen! Were we great pilots?! Oh yes... But that's not what made us the best... We freely helped out the other pilots around us without any thought of repayment! THAT is what made us the best!"

Now it was Claymore's turn. "But all good things must come to an end... And so it did!!" Her anger had become almost ravenous, but still, she held herself in check. "For a dummy-sim in earth's orbit, all three of us were each given wing men, and told to fight each other. Of course, it came down to just Me, Bird and Hyena. Our battle ensued. Imagine my surprise when the missiles I'd fired at both of them **ENGULFED THEIR SHIPS IN FLAMES!!**" Jessica turned to all of them. She was almost snarling. **"I F\*CKING KILLED THEM WITH MY OWN HANDS!!"** Jessica took a deep breath... A growing calm came over her as most of the girls stood, speechless.

The now quiet Jessica didn't look at them. "It turned out that my ship had been accidently loaded with live ammo. It was later determined that it was a mixup by the ground crew. My charges of friendly fire were dropped... But my two best friends in the universe became my first two kills..."

Jessica took another deep breath. She glared at the squadron, most of the anger in her eyes were gone, but her face still showed the pain and anger as she spoke. "After the Academy I join Luminos Ring Squadron as their new Squadron Leader. They were an escort for a lunar cargo ship called the Luminos. I was able to get a bit of leave to be with my mother when she died back in October." Jessica sniffed as she composed herself. "Shortly after the New Year, I was approached about this mission. They had come to me back in August about it, but I turned them down. This time, I had nothing tying me down anymore, so I accepted it."



Jessica lifted her head. All the anger was gone, and a tear or two were starting to form. "Now you know... Jessica Carter... Alone in the Universe... Everyone I've ever cared about has died... That is why I avoid talking about my past... Just too much pain and sadness..." She forced herself not to break down and start crying uncontrollably. "It's also why I work hard to save my friend's lives... Both in and out of the cockpit..." Jessica wiped away a tear as she looked at the squad... Waiting for their reactions.

JediBubbles

Fri Mar 05, 2004 7:27 am

It was quiet for a while as Nef sat there fighting her tears. Then Cassie got up, walked over and stared up at her. "Babe, I am so sorry. Permission to give you a hug?"

Nef glared down at her, "Denied."

"Gonna pretend I didn't hear that." Nef protested weakly at being snugged 'round the middle. "I'm sorry that I was snippy with you earlier. And if you need to cry, just do it. Don't keep it in. Much as you think we can't possibly understand--we do, we love you and it wasn't your fault."

"Aye," Claymore walked over and practically lifted the both of them off the ground in a bear-hug. "An' ye can always talk t'us about anythin' lass."

"YEAH! GROUP HUG!" Ursula suddenly tackled the already off-balance group and was shortly followed by Kat, and the five of them all toppled onto the nearest rack.

Crone and Banshee both let out a second rare laugh in as many minutes, but attempted to stay out of it. "Oh no you don't!" Cassie and Kat both untangled themselves to snag one of the reserved folks and drag them into the fray.

And amid all the cracking up Nef laughed and cried at the same time. "Nooooooooo, not a hobbit love-fest!"

"Oh hooo, I could say something really bad to that."

"Oy! What did I say about the innuendos, gypsy-wench?!"

"Am I the leader of a bunch of monkeys?"

"YES!" "OOO-OOO-OOO AAA-AAA-AAA!"

"I do believe that a bunch of monkeys is--most appropriately--referred to as a troop."

"Whee! Let's change the squad name to 'Dark Nova: Troop 'o' Monkeys'!"

"Absolutely not, Hobbit!"

"Awww..."

"Haven't you ever done anything just for fun, Chrissie?"

"Actually, my sisters and I used to run around with our knickers on our heads."

"OH HO HO!" "HAHAHA!" "OHMIGAWTHAT'SGREAT!"

And somehow, in the midst of all this silliness and the subsequent tellings of truly insane childhood stories, all their loss and pain momentarily forgotten, the Novas started to heal.

Their leader, though, felt a little cheap for lying...

Vexus

Sat Mar 06, 2004 9:06 am

It was early morning, and the night's silliness brought on by the fear and tension of last evening had died down. All the pilots were still awake, but Aurora still caught the occasional stretch and yawn here and there. It was going to be a long day.

Aurora leaned against the side of the door to the hallway. Jessica lay on her bunk, reading one of her mangos again. Rhiannon was engaging Kat in a game of chess, and was losing spectacularly. Chistine was attempting to finish a crossword puzzle. Cassie and Ursula talked about various topics in between trying to give Chistine creative but incorrect answers to the crossword.

As Aurora shifted against the wall, she felt something poking her. Reaching behind her, she withdrew the gun she had tucked away earlier. Jessica looked up from her book for a moment, then rose and approached the silver-haired girl as she absent-mindedly unloaded and reloaded the pistol.

"Was that for when you caught up with me?" Jessica asked with a half-smile.

"No," Aurora answered, still looking at the pistol. "A gun versus a pair of..." Aurora raised an eyebrow at Jessica.

"Sais," Jessica said matter-of-factly.

"...isn't quite fair, is it?" Aurora finished.

"Maybe, maybe not," Jessica replied. "You haven't seen me use them yet." Aurora gave a respectful nod.

"I'm sorry for blowing up on you," Jessica said quietly.

"I think I deserved it," Aurora said with a frown. "But there's another matter to consider now. The guards spotted you with your weapons out shortly after the incident. You'll soon have some explaining to do... as will I most likely." Aurora unloaded her pistol one last time and removed the clip, then looked at Jessica with an expression of understanding and weariness.

"Nef, believe me when I say that I have lived the last few years of my life in fear of the nightmare you lived first-hand. Maybe one day... I'll have the courage to speak as you did." Jessica looked as if she wanted to say something, but Aurora moved away. Putting her gun back under her bunk, the squad leader grabbed a book and sat on her bed to read.

Not long after, someone stood before her and cleared her throat. Aurora looked up to see Christine with a reading pad in her hand.

"A report on the rules of engagement, sir, as you ordered. I meant to give it to you earlier, but..." Christine didn't need to finish the sentence. Aurora nodded and took the pad.

"I have been quite thorough," Christine said, her tone suggesting neither pride nor sarcasm. "You may test me at your discretion, sir." Aurora fought off her urge to smile, instead closing her book and rising to meet her fellow pilot face to face.

"Quote to me rule 13 of section 9," Aurora said with a stern look. Christine didn't skip a beat.

"Sir! 'A soldier shall not inflict injury upon a combatant designated as a prisoner of war unless in self-defense or the defense of a fellow soldier or civilian.'"

"Correct," Aurora said, not bothering to check. She knew that particular rule well enough herself. "You've passed your test. Dismissed." Banshee's posture betrayed her confusion at being given such a short test, but she saluted and went back to her bunk. Listening to Cassie give a half-teasing congratulations to Christine on passing the test, Aurora went back to reading her book.

Alex

Sat Mar 06, 2004 11:04 pm

Jessica smiled weakly at the bitter-sweet ending of her manga. It was nice... But it reminder her of her own past a little too much. She leaned over in her bunk to put it away, when her pendant fell out, and began to dangle.

Jessica paused. She finished putting her manga away, then took the pendant off her neck, and held it in her hands. *Bird... Hyena... I have a new squad now... And I think... I think we're going to be ok...* Jessica wiped away the single tear that had escaped. She looked at the pendant for another moment, before she put it back on, so it was clearly visible, and got down off her bunk. She was determined as she walked over to Aurora, and saluted.

"Sir. Request permission to use a simulator for an hour." Jessica asked.

Aurora looked up from her book. "What for?" That's when she noticed the pendant hanging from Jessica's neck, with the Triple Threat Squadron insignia clearly visible.

Jessica responded anyway. "Sir. It is of a personal matter. Please?" She asked hopefully.		
Vexus	Sun Mar 07, 2004 12:14 am	
Aurora thought for a moment.		
"We're still under a security alert for now. However, when it has been lifted.... I think the sim ban has served its purpose. Permission granted."		
Alex	Sun Mar 07, 2004 2:22 am	
Jessica smiled and lowered her hand. "Thank you sir." She said, and walked back to her bunk. She smiled slightly as she lay back, waiting for the end of the alert. <i>Bird... Hyena... I think you guys will enjoy our next session.</i>		
A thought having come to her, Jessica grabbed a pad, and began to write complex simulation code, anticipating her next chance at the sims...		
Maverick	Sun Mar 07, 2004 5:19 am	
"Okay Rhiannon, listen. Nono, take the move back, let me tell you something. Think a little further ahead in the game rather than one or two steps. You haven't been using your knights, which are the best pieces in the game." Kat said, moving the Scot's black bishop back to its original spot.		
"Now what'rre ye talkin' 'boot? The queen is the strongest rright?" Rhianon asked her, raising an eyebrow.		
"By itself, yes. But the knights are the best strategically. Here make another move and I'll show you." There was a slight gleam in Kat's eyes.		
"Alright lass, I'll make my move." Rhiannon moved a pawn forward. Kat grinned and moved her knight, taking the pawn.		
"Check." Kat said smiling. Rhiannon started laughing.		
"Looks ta me like yehr gonna lose yer favorite piece there." The black queen moved to take the white knight. Kat in turn moved a bishop across the board.		
"Yeah, but losing one piece is better than losing the game. Checkmate." Smiling, the mischievous little Ensign leaned back as Rhia did a double take and checked her pieces.		
"Och, why ye wee bloody-"		
"Good game Claymore. Maybe another time, you can challenge me again. If you'll excuse me, I need to check on some things in my room." Smiling while rising, Kat bounced out of the room and into her room, leaving Claymore with the chessboard.		
When the door to her room slid closed, Kat sighed and walked over to her personal journal and started writing.		
Schamann	Fri Mar 12, 2004 3:19 pm	
"What do we know so far, lieutenant?"		
"Not much Sir. Looks like some bloody romance novel tragedy ritual murder, I don't know. My girls can gather the traces and samples, but they're not profilers, and this looks like a freaking Crime-Night Show." 1st Lieutenant Fijalkowski shrugged. She was a good cop, but still just a military cop, an MP officer used to quieting down bar brawls and putting crew member who got too stress and too drunk back in line. But Captain Dominguez was not satisfied with that.		
"OSI have already gave you their resident magician onboard. With her help I expect you should get at least some results by now! Do you want to tell me that I keep MP criminal offences team for nothing? I want to know what happened lieutenant – in plain English – now."		
Lt Fijalkowski cleared her throat before she spoke. "Gercy and Matthews were making love during their guarding duty time in the starboard's cargo bay main airlock control room. Reportedly they had been a couple for a few weeks before. Their platoon leader knew, but pretended not to see anything, just like the rest of the gals. Rumor has it something was going wrong between them last few days, Matthews had been heard booking herself time with Jason – the 'badguy'-sexbot model. Some of their companions even suspected they both could have something with drugs. In general, almost everyone seems to recall that there was something wrong with them recently, but people always recall things afterwards. The background to this whole story is at it's clearest part ...cloudy,		

so to speak.”

“What do you know about the actual turn of events yesterday night?” Captain was beginning to show signs of impatience.

“At some point, during performing the sexual act, Gercy apparently produced a scalpel and cut Matthews throat, from the victim’s right to left, cutting blood vessels and trachea alike, spilling blood all over the killer. At this point picture gets unclear. From the look of traces it seems like Gercy started to act like if she was trying to stop Matthews bleeding and, driven by the remorse about her recent act, save her life. On the other hand, one of my girls suggested, that Gercy could have as well perversely try to make love to her dying lover. Beats me Captain. Anyway, more or less at this moment third person appears. She approached Gercy from behind, apparently standing, grabbed her hair from behind and above, wrenched her head backwards and slit her throat with such a strength, that she was almost decapitated. Unfortunately, due to our lovers turning off lights and monitoring cameras for the time of their fun, we have no recording of the suspect, that we could make any use of. The pilots who found the bodies and panicked around them did not make our job any easier as well.”

Captain Dominguez’s face looked much like a stormy sky, just before the first thunder...

“Are there any other bad news about the whole story, lieutenant?”  
Gendarme gulped audibly ...

“Yes Sir. According to control room recordings, auxiliary technical airlock no 23 had been opened at one hundred thirty four. It remained open for two minutes and twelve seconds.”  
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Crone and Nef just finished dressing up in her full uniform dress and getting ready for the hearing. According to the official message they were both about to explain their leaving their quarters during the alert status, plus Carter was to answer some serious questioning on her presence near the crime scene, not long after the alarm was raised, armed with blade weapons. To cut the long story short – Carter was about to explain why she was not the one to commit that murder.

“Don’t worry Carter” Kat was up in her spirits again. “I have already filed my written testimony via OSI office, that you were here with me when the crime was committed. There’s no way they can frame you” Nef gave her a weak smile.

“It’s not the murder suspect thing we’re worrying about” Crone looked around sternly. “I’m worried about another count of disobedience, about leaving one’s mandatory post during alert status and about trespassing into the off-limits area during alert status. When they are in good mood, they simply ground people for that.”

Nef felt it was the time to interrupt: “Crone, I have told you already...”

“**I know** why you did that Nef, and I’m going with you as your direct superior to stand up for you. But those are the brass that make the judgement this time, not me. I don’t even know if Voeller bothers to defend you. I honestly don’t quite know what I could do to help this”

“Promote her”

There was a silence and the looks of astonishment around the room. They interlinked for few times and then focused on Hobbit, who uttered recent words.

“What did you say Hobbs?” Crone sounded like ‘do you really think it’s funny’. But Veneberg was apparently very serious.

“Promote her. Give her an appointment within the squadron. Every merit, every responsibility you were trusted with counts, when a pilot is subject to a disciplinary hearing that may end up with her getting off the roster. Every little thing that can speak up for you counts. And sometimes they refrain from grounding, just for the reason that there is no replacement to take the certain position a pilot in question occupies.”

“They’re going to see through it Hobbs, if Yates do that like, right now....” Banshee commented with deep shadow of criticism in her voice.

“Off course they are going to see through it.” Hobbit waved her hands dramatically. “But what do you think, when the formal truth in papers is settled one way, how much does it bother the desk

working regulations abiding red-tapes?"

"Point taken. But what position could she be given? You don't expect Crone to rip Claymore off her newly acquired XO position just like that..."

"I wouldn't mine t'hat if for Nef's'sake lass" Rhiannon started dismissively, but it was Hobbit's moment, and she was all business about catching it while it lasted.

"Crone, you can appoint Nef as Squadron's Training Instructor. It's a perfectly official position, while not commonly filled in squadrons these days. And I can't imagine anyone doing better job than Nef, for that particular part."

Crone looked surprised. "Give me a minute. I have to think."

Ursula suddenly looked at Cas and winked, like if they had something set up. They both raised from their bunks, approached Carter holding each other's hands and shouted unisons, mocking childish voices:

"Thank you Auntie Nef. Thank you for coming to help us" and started to giggle.

Carter frowned. "Fine, laugh. I really thought you were in danger."

"We know that Nef." Ursula suddenly got very serious. She raised her hand and touched Carter's arm softly. "And had we been in any danger, you were there for us...that's what we thank for"

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Whatever was the decision that Crone made about Nef, she and Carter left before she annopunced it to the rest of the Novas. Probably it was that she wanted to discuss it with officer in question in private. It was already an hour after Yates and Carter went to the hearing. The day was long and boring. Until the P.A.s spoke again:

**"Attention all flying personnel. Attention all flying personnel. Unknown radar contact of possibly enemy origin was discovered nearby Morrigan's filghtpath, ETA eight hours, I repeat, ETA eight hours. All units alter your schedules accordingly and prepare for a possible combat launch in five hours. Attention all flying personnel....."**

Banshee was the first to speak:

"Looks like you're in charge Claymore"

Charon	Fri Mar 12, 2004 5:28 pm
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At the sound of the loudspeaker, Rhiannon cocked an eyebrow. When the announcement came over, her heart began that familiar fluttering that she remembered from her time with the Furies - that odd mix of fear and eager anticipation.

Then Chrissie spoke, and suddenly she remembered that she wasn't just there to take orders any more. It brought all her mental processes to a screeching halt, and for a moment, she had not a clue what to do.

She looked around at the other pilots, shelving her anxiety for a moment, then began ticking off items on a mental checklist. "Ookay me lasses, first thin's firrrst. Get changed overrr tae yerr flight suits, grab yer gear, an' head tae th' ready room. Banshee, if ye coold grab a trainin' manual an' start oop a class on soomthin' - let's gae with 'Combat Formations & Maneuvers' - when ye get therre, I'll see if I kin find soomeone tae tell meh wot's goin' on aroond herrre." Chrissie nodded solemnly, and Rhiannon went on. "I knae that we've got a wee bit o' time beforre anythin' happens, boot I jest like tae knae all I kin aboot a mission before it happens, ye ken?" A lop-sided smile at the small jest.

"Any questions?" Head shook. "Good tae gae, then. Get tae it, me lassies!" At this highly informal dismissal, the Novas turned to their lockers and began changing over, small discussions amongst themselves at the prospect of finally going into combat. Rhiannon's head buzzed with possibilities, and one, constantly repeating question.

*Am I ready?*

Alex	Fri Mar 12, 2004 9:10 pm
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Jessica pulled at the collar of her uniform. It was a bit itchy, and damn uncomfortable... But she

tried to ignore it when she heard the announcement. *Too bad that probably doesn't affect me...* She thought to herself...

Jessica knew that Crone was trying her best for her, but the last thing Jessica wanted was to take Claymore's XO position. Even if it meant the difference between being on the squad and being kicked out of the Navy, she wouldn't take that away from Claymore.

Jessica knew that this hearing wouldn't be an easy thing to get through, but she'd been at hearings like this before... Each time, they had questioned the reasons behind her disobeying orders... And each time she was acquitted.

*They're not going to be so forgiving this time...* She noted. *I'm the only known suspect to a murder, even though I have an alibi...* She smiled to herself. *Too bad I can't contact Maris...* *She'd be another person who could collaberate my alibi, since she PMed me shortly before the alarms went off...* *That meant she knew where I was...* The wheels in Jessica's head kept turning as she tried to figure out how to get out of this trouble as best she could.

Vexus	Sat Mar 13, 2004 9:27 am
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Aurora sat in her chair, her posture straight and rigid. While the mess hall, corridors, exercise rooms, and other locales of the Morrigan were enclosed in walls of metal, the small conference room was encased in a wooden facade. This gave Aurora the errie feeling that she was not on a space vessel anymore, but in some planetside office building. The floor was even carpeted, absorbing the usual echoes that one gets accustomed to and giving off a sense of claustrophobia. A long wooden table was arranged lengthwise before her, populated by brass both familiar and unfamiliar. Jessica sat upon her left, still fussing with her collar every now and then. Behind and to her right, the CAG was leaning back slightly in her own seat, her posture relaxed but her eyes bright with alertness. The last of the officers had just entered when the announcement had come over the speakers, and Aurora's cynical voice in her head laughed.

*On the eve of a potential battle and here we are playing court. Just perfect.*

The sounding of a small gavel, and Aurora gave a quick, concerned glance at Jessica. It was definitely going to be a long day.

Charon	Sat Mar 13, 2004 8:40 pm
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The sergeant-at-arms rapped the gavel, focusing the attention of all in the courtroom. "All rise for the commencement of this hearing. Commander Alexa Denatieux, Lieutenant Commander Miranda Pace, and Lieutenant Anna Parker, presiding."

With a scrape of chairs, those present stood, and the tribunal entered. Commander Alexa Denatieux took up the rear of the formation, and once the other two members of the board had arrived at their posts, she stood in front of her center seat.

She glared at 2nd Lieutenants Yates and Carter, ice-blue eyes menacing in a severe face that was surmounted by brown hair pulled tightly back into a bun. Her uniform was crisply ironed, all creases sharp enough to cut anyone foolish enough to touch them, and a small collection of ribbons indicated that she was no chairborne warrior - she'd seen action before. The overall effect was very, very professional and threatening, and in no way lessened by the fact that she stood a mere 5' 4".

"This 'earing is to determine 2nd Lieutenant Jessica Carter's eligibility to rhemain wiz ze Special Designation Squadron, due to repeated acts of insubordination. Pending ze outcome of zis 'earing, 2nd Lieutenant Carter is placed on a probationary, non-flying status. Be seated."

Chairs scraped again, and Carter's face displayed no small amount of dismay and righteous indignation. Denatieux repressed a small smile. *Good... go ahead and say something stupid so we can permanently ground your hot-dogging butt. Then we can finally proceed on-mission with no distractions*

Alex	Sat Mar 13, 2004 10:04 pm
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Jessica looked into the face of the Commander Denatieux. *I bet she wants me to say something stupid, so she can permanently ground my butt...* Jessica repressed the desire to smile knowingly at her, and simply worked at staying dead-panned and silent. *Well... Here we go again...* Until she was questioned, Jessica would say nothing. That was what she had done before, and that's what she would do now...

*At least it's just a non-flying status... If I was banned from the Sims too, after just getting them back, I think I would lose it...*

Vexus	Wed Mar 17, 2004 10:02 am	
<p>Seeing that Jessica was holding her tongue, Commander Denatieux gave a momentary look of disappointment, then turned her attention to Aurora.</p> <p>"Before we delve into ze actions of 2nd Lt. Carter, we will address ze conduct of 'er CO. Would you care to explain why you left your quarters wizout permission during a ship security alert?" Aurora met the commander's eyes, blue-to-blue, neither flinching.</p> <p>"I left to retrieve 2nd Lt. Carter, sir."</p> <p>"Were you not aware zat ze security patrols could 'ave retrieved 'er without your help?"</p> <p>"Yes, sir."</p> <p>"Then why did you leave your quarters?"</p> <p>"As squadron leader of Dark Nova, I was responsible for her conduct during the alert."</p> <p>"That's not entirely true, given the circumstances," said the woman at the commander's right. Of medium height and with a head of close-cropped red hair, the name plate before her on the table read: Lt. Anna Parker. A small shoulder patch on her uniform displayed the red-and-black of the OSI.</p> <p>"We have read Ensign Jones' account, which states that Carter had left against your orders. You no longer would've needed to answer for her. Tell us why you <i>really</i> went after her, Lt." Aurora paused before she answered.</p> <p>"She was armed, sir. I didn't want to see her get hurt in a misunderstanding."</p> <p>"And why was she armed, Lt.?" This time the woman to the commander's left spoke up, a pair of grey eyes peering at Aurora from just below bangs of jet-black hair. It was Lt. Cmdr. Miranda Pace; Aurora had seen her a couple times in the mess hall.</p> <p>"I would rather let her speak for herself, sir." Aurora answered.</p> <p>"You will answer the question, pilot," Denatieux said sternly. Aurora kept her expression calm.</p> <p>"She felt 2nd Lts. Dory and Veneburg might have been in danger, sir. She was going to help them."</p> <p>"Wiz a pair of fighting daggers?"</p> <p>"...Yes, sir."</p> <p>"At any point did you consider ze possibility zat 2nd Lt. Carter might 'ave 'ad ozer motives for leaving her quarters?"</p> <p>"No, sir."</p> <p>Denatieux glanced towards the back of the room where Lt. Voeller was seated.</p> <p>"Do you 'ave anyzing to add, Lt.?" The CAG rose and spoke with measured confidence.</p> <p>"Sir, I think Yates was sincere in her motives, despite her lapse in good judgement. I remain supportive of her position in the squadron." As quick as that, Voeller finished and retook her seat. The commander eyed Aurora once more.</p> <p>"Your record speaks 'ighly of your abilities in tight situations, but I am disappointed in your rash decisions last evening."</p> <p>"You were very fortunate," Parker chimed in. "Two people, one openly armed, running through the corridors during an alert could have resulted in two more memorial services instead of a disciplinary hearing."</p> <p>"A good squad leader should look after her charges," Pace said. "But sometimes what's best for</p>		

those under our command does not involve direct intervention." For a moment Aurora held her eyes steady, then lowered them to the floor before her.

"Yes, sir."

Denatieux spoke once again.

"We will decide on what action to take concerning 2nd Lt. Yates after our dilliberations this afternoon. You are dismissed, Lt." Aurora looked up again in surprise.

"Sir, I request permission to stay fo-"

"Request denied," Denatieux said sharply. "You are dismissed." Aurora gave a quick glance at Voeller, but the CAG didn't even acknowledge the squad leader. Defeated, Aurora gave a final worried look at Jessica before leaving the room. Denatieux then straightened her uniform and set her glaring eyes on Jessica.

"Now, 2nd Lt. Cater, let's begin when the security alarm sounded...."

Alex

Wed Mar 17, 2004 12:08 pm

Anyone who was watching closely when they called Jessica's sais "fighting daggers" would of seen her right eye twitch, ever so slightly. It was almost unnoticeable, but Jessica felt that the OSI officer, if anyone, had seen it.

Jessica began to recount the events of that evening. When she had started to talk about Maris, the OSI officer, Lt. Commander Parker, interruppted her. "Does this have anything to do with this inquiry?" she said, rather than asked. It was obvious that she didn't want Jessica to talk too much about Maris.

But Jessica looked at her, and told the truth as she knew it. "I believe so sir. My contact Maris told me that it was not a good night to be out of my room. That instantly made me worried about the rest of my squadron."

Commander Denatieux looked at her. "Worry is a feeling you are entitled to. However, you chose to act on zis feeling, did you not?"

Jessica nodded. "Yes sir. Once I had found all but Hob- I mean, 2nd Lieutenants Veneberg and Dory using the ship's sensors-"

"Ze ship's sensors?" Denatieux interrupted. "How did you gain access to ze ship's internal sensors during a security alert?!" She asked loudly.

Jessica knew she had screwed up a bit. She started to answer when Parker answered for her. "Carter has been reciving RIAS training in the OSI department for the last few days. We've been keeping a close eye on her activites."

Denatieux turned on to Parker. "You KNEW about zis?!"

*Oh shit...* Jessica thought, watching the two talking back and forth.

Vindicare

Wed Mar 17, 2004 9:14 pm

"Limited Malpractice is tolerable in order to keep Lt Carter's skills honed, commander. However we do not possess any knowledge of any "Stella Maris" on board this ship, and i say that categorically, in that we have no agents OR alias's corresponding to that name. I have had people check since we recieved the first account of this story, and there are no login accounts or even messages sent to or from "Stella Maris". Whoever this person is had prior warning to at least the alert, possibly the attack. That is somewhat worrying, in that they are either a very skilled individual on board this ship, or they are contacting Carter from outside the ship, plus they had prior knowledge of this event and chose to do nothing, save for notify Lt Carter. That is of course, if this person exits. At present, as i mentioned, we have no messages. We have yet to gain access to Carter's PDA, which may prove or deny the existance of this person".

Charon

Thu Mar 18, 2004 7:00 am

Commander Denatieux turned a baleful glare upon 2nd Lieutenant Carter, with a sidelong glance at Lieutenant Commander Parker. *We shall have words later, mon amie* she mentally declared, before speaking up. "So, am I to understand zat in addition to several counts of disobeying lawful orders - in a combat zone in time of war, no less - you have also been in contact wiz zomeone who may or may not even be conducting espionage aboard zis vessel?"



Carter's face showed her mental processes working over that, and the tightening of her eyes indicated that she wasn't enjoying the conclusion that she was coming up with. "2nd Lieutenant Carter," Denatieux declared, leaning forwards and linking her fingers in front of her face, "If I find out zat you've given ze enemy ze keys to ze backdoor, I will personally find a way to keel-haul you on a spaceship!"

Carter gulped, then looked indignant. "With all due respect, sir-" she began, but Denatieux cut her off before she could build up steam.

"Miss Carter, ze only reason I have not yet sent ze Sergeant-at-Arms to fetch some cable is because we have not yet heard from all parties concerned. But make no mistake: I want your datapad. It has bearing on zis 'earring, wiz regards to your actions last night, at least, and it may well lead to explaining some of your other... activities," This last was delivered with another glance at Lieutenant Commander Parker, who scowled slightly before composing her face.

Carter looked indignant again. "Requesting permission to speak, *Sir*" she said between clenched teeth.

*Why you little...* "By all means."

"My datapad is extremely personal. I have many items on there that I have no desire to reveal to many members of this court. I will, of course, cooperate with the investigation in the pertinent areas, but I respectfully request that my personal areas not be aired in public."

Denatieux cocked an eyebrow. "You certainly 'ave a flair for l'audace, Carter. But I understand your request."

Her face hardened. "Understand, yourself, zat it is merely a request, up to ze desires of zis panel to grant or deny."

Whilst Carter's face turned an interesting shade of vermillion, Denatieux turned to Lieutenant Inga Voeller, who had, apart from her brief questioning during 2nd Lieutenant Yates' own interrogation, been silent.

"Lieutenant Voeller, you were responsible, as Commander Air Group, for looking over ze personnel files of each of ze pilots accepted for zis mission, were you not?"

Voeller stood. "Commander, I vas."

Denatieux shifted in her seat, reminding the more observant of those in the court room of a predator preparing to spring. "Zen per'aps you could explain why you decided to permit 2nd Lieutenant Carter to join zis mission, despite 'er numerous counts of insubordination? Did it not occur to you zat per'aps we might need tight discipline whilst out on ze frontier? Please speak up."

It would appear that Carter was not the only one to be raked over the coals on account of her indiscretions.

Maverick	Fri Mar 19, 2004 1:03 am
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Voeller stood up and walked to the front of the room, face set rigid and firm, and faced the three arbiters.

"Commander," Voeller started, looking at Denatieux in the eye, "Ja, I did know ov her pilot records. I did know ov her counts ov insubordination. Yet I must point out to the fact that in the cases in her past, and in this current case, Lieutenant Carter has acted under the motivation that there may have been a danger to her squadmates. I need not mention ov Carter's piloting skills, which have proven themselves admirably in the field. Although she iz arrogant and hotheaded, often times foolish, her insubordinate actions have been selfless, in support ov those close to her. In my view, what she did vas stupid and idiotic. She should have known better than to go around during an alert, but her motivations vere noble. In a combat situation I personally would rather have zomeone who would make the choice to protect human life, in the face of court marshal rather than one who would sacrifice a co-pilot."

Voeller turned to look at Carter after her small speech. The CAG's steely eyes bored into Carter's as she walked toward her, on her way to the back of the room to her seat

"I wish that you will be smarter in the future lieutenant." Voeller whispered on her way past Carter to her seat.

Vexus

Mon Mar 22, 2004 11:06 am

Aurora paced up and down the corridor not far away where the hearing had continued on without her. She knew she should be heading for her quarters, but her desire to stay close to the hearing room was giving her pause. As her eyes wandered about her, she caught the dim and blurred reflection of herself on the steel-gray walls of the hallway. Without knowing why, she ran her hand across the reflected image, and her thoughts turned once again to Jessica. What if she was grounded for this in the end? Would she be able to handle it?... Would Aurora herself be able to handle it for that matter?

Lost in her thoughts, Aurora did not notice the softly echoing footfalls that approached her. But when a tall, blurry shadow loomed behind her own reflection, she spun around to see a man with an only half-pleasant smile on his face. Aurora's breathing quickened and she forced herself to calm down.

*Just another damn robot.*

Aurora was utterly fed up with all these puppet-like, twisted depictions of men that plagued the Navy. This one seemed to have some kind of "bad-boy" theme, as they used to say: hair in a ponytail, green eyes, black leather jacket, tight-fitting dark pants with silver buckles and highlights, and sleek-looking boots to match. Aurora was about to tell him to leave her alone, but the robot spoke first.

"Hey, babe. Nice hair. You're the one they call Crone right? I've heard a lot about you and your squad." Aurora eyes narrowed at his mention of her hair. Again she made to speak and again the robot seemed to sense it and spoke.

"Damn! Where *are* my manners? The name's Jason, a swinging sexbot for this ship." By now, Aurora's curiosity had gotten the better of her and her first words were not a dismissal.

"I thought only one sexbot was assigned per ship."

"For the smaller ones, yes, but the demand is too high for the larger vessels of the fleet. Think about it: *Hundreds* of strong fighting women longing for some lovin', and just one poor little sexbot trying to appease them." Jason leaned forward a little and his grin broadened. "Though between you and me, I'm up for the challenge." Aurora frowned, not liking the arrogance the robot seemed to have, even if it was artificial.

"You say you've heard about my squad. What have you heard exactly?"

"Oh, not too much I'd say. A special squad for special things. Specifically chosen pilots that have consistently awed and disappointed many onboard with their performance. A reclusive bunch who has yet to mingle with the other squadrons or see real action in this system. Actually, I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"I have no use for robotic sex-toys. Please leave me alone from now on." Jason didn't budge, and Aurora felt a twinge of fear. No robot had ever failed to obey her before.

"Ouch! What an ice-queen. You didn't even give me a chance." Aurora summoned up her courage and met the robot face to face.

"A chance for what? Dinner and a movie? A night of dancing perhaps, followed by moonlight trysts? I have no need for romantic fantasies. I have seen and known *real* males in my life, and you are nothing compared to them." Jason raised an eyebrow and his grin faded to a smirk.

"Nice speech. I bet you say that to all the sexbots."

"What?!" Aurora was genuinely amazed as much as angry. Was this robot actually mocking her? Jason went on casually.

"Hmmm... program's detecting suppressed anger... possibly misplaced I think. You women will hide behind so many things. Responsibilities, duties, unrealistic ideals, religious convictions, but in the end, you're all still hiding." Aurora's mouth went dry, and she found herself unable to speak. Jason took a step forward, and without thinking Aurora backed away, her back hitting the corridor wall.

Jason put a hand on the wall just beside her head, and his voice became a soft-spoken mix of strength and mischief.

"Don't you get it, babe? That's why I'm here. I'm your shelter from yourself, a window to a better time. Just for a day, a night, or a single hour I can be whatever you need. No consequences, no regrets, no need to remember anything." Jason ran a finger gently across Aurora's brow, and as much as Aurora wanted to swat his hand away, she did not.

"What do you say, love. Will you help me... help you?"

"Miss Yates does not prefer our company, Jason" another male voice sounded, and Aurora turned to see Edward now standing in the corridor. Despite being a robot, Jason actually sighed in a disappointed manner as he straightened himself and looked at Edward.

"Impeccable timing, Ed. Shouldn't you be somewhere being a good listener or something?"

"You know the rules as well as I, Jason. You're pushing too hard... even for you." Jason gave an expression of feigned surprise.

"Why Edward, could that be sexual innuendo? I never knew you had it in you."

"You should not even be about the ship, Jason. There is a security alert in place, and we are not exempt from the restrictions." Jason waved dismissively at Edward and looked back at Aurora.

"Yes, *dad*, whatever you say. Looks like today was not to be, love. See ya around... Miss Yates." Flashing a knowing smile, Jason then turned and swaggered down the corridor, whistling as he went. Edward approached Aurora with a look of concern.

"I hope he did not upset you, Miss Yates. He has a tendency to come on rather strong. Sometimes I wonder if he is malfunctioning."

"I'm fine." Aurora said with disgust and stormed down the hallway opposite of where Jason had gone, leaving Edward standing in the corridor.

Schamann

Tue Mar 23, 2004 5:29 pm

"Aight', 'at was not bad faer a sim....'ould ave been baetter though" Claymore definitely had some concerns about their performance in defensive patrol Auten set up for them. "Hobbs - 's thaere any reason you were soe d'istracted, or aem I just a poor leader?"

"Look, Claymore, I'm just worried that Crone will not make it to get back to us when this whole thing starts for real....I mean...both of them...Crone and Nef....after..if...they get out of this hearing alive." Ursula seemed pretty much embarrassed with this, surprisingly. "Look Rhiannon, it's not that I doubt your leadership, it's...."

"Dun't drown yourself deeper lass, I ken I'm no Yates, aight?" Rhiannon McTaggart smirked. If she felt offended, she hid it pretty well. "I dunno why you act so weird."

"Because she witnessed folks laying around in their own blood not so long ago?" Seer interrupted before things have gotten too far. "We had that deal, Hoobs and I, you know - I'm worrying for Carter and she's worrying for Yates, so we're having covered all who are in need, got that?" she grinned....

"You are officially nuts Dory, you're aware of that fact, aren't you?" Auten got into the discussion with a sarcastic grin of her own. "I was rather impressed with your commanding performance, Claymore, it seems like you have some good sense of discipline and making people feeling that sense" she nodded towards Claymore with approval.

"All of you are quite skilled pilots for your lack of experience" Jones started, but stopped immediately, noticing four pairs of eyes looking at her with the certain mix of puzzlement and slight offense. "I mean, you really fly like vets guys, the ones with numbers of years of combat on your back."

As usual, Dory was the first for the silliness. "And you, dear, fly exceptionally for a technician, and while we are with flattering one another, I might also add, that your hair looks beautiful and perfectly kept. Claymore, on other hand, as well, presents us with her excellent..."

"Stop it lass." McTaggart grumbled. Yae're talking like a sixbot"

"A what?" triple chorus of Hobbit, Seer and Catnip sounded in the simroom"

"A wakin' and takin' dildo...bollocks" Claymore made a face and, using her voice skills mimicked the british accent. "A sex-bot. A device you'll get familiar with when you grow up"

laughter filled the room again, despite the danger, fear and unrest, that were drifting among those pilots only half an hour ago.

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The technician finished downloading files from Carter's PDA and scanning the rest for the certain keywords to determine if she had not had hidden any data vital to the case. Commander Denatieoux was growing impatient.

"You would perhaps be able to tell us anything of ze relevance, Warrant Officer?" she insisted for the third time in last fifteen minutes. The tech straightened up behind her chair and gulped audibly before answering.

"It seems commander, that Carter either made up those messages with the skill that is beyond my knowledge and possibility, or she really has been contacted by an individual going under the alias of Stella Maris. For the facts that seem relevant.."

"Zis is up to zis jury to decide what is relevant, you will just anzer our questions Warrant Officer"

"Yes Ma'am"

Denatieoux leaned more comfortably in her chari and studied the face of young second lieutenant who was standing no far from her PDA, silent and so far obedient, but still defiant. The question now was, would she be able to finally find her way into the military discipline and code of conduct. *nothing worse than a single pilot deciding that she knows better what to do to win the battle*

"Was Carter initiating contact with this individual at any time?" she briefly asked the technician.

"No Ma'am, not from what is shown on the record"

"Was she passing to that unknown individual any classified or other vital information?"  
Commander's voice was slow, deliberately casual.

"No Ma'am, not from what is shown on the record"

"Did she inform any security or other proper authorities about that contact and yes or no would be sufficient Warrant Officer?"

"No but..."seeing Denatieoux raising her brow the tech hesitated for a while, but decided to continue. "But there are records showing that she attempted to trace and identify that individual on her own"

"Thanks you, Warrant Officer. Now unless other jurors have any questions, Second Lieutenant Carter you may explain to us why you think you should not be grounded permanently and transferred to auxiliary support transport unit and fly carrying fruits and vegetables to starbases for the rest of your carreer, but before you do that, I will pass the floor to other members of this jury."

Vindicare	Sat Mar 27, 2004 7:10 pm
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"I have nothing further to add" Parker sat back, looking concerned over the fact that there was either a skilled hacking operative on board that she had no knowledge of, or someone from outside the ship was contacting a person, possibly people, on board, with no obvious motive.

JediBubbles	Wed Mar 31, 2004 1:48 pm
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"Me either," added Pace, trying to keep her face as stern as possible in the hopes that maybe--well-intentioned though her actions appeared to have been--memories of this hearing ordeal would influence Carter into being a little less impulsive in the future.

Alex	Wed Mar 31, 2004 2:41 pm
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Jessica took a sip of water and a deep breath before she stood up. "Esteemed jurors..." *It doesn't hurt to suck up a tad...* "I have always flown with two goals in my mind: Complete my mission, and protect my squad. I believe my record speaks for itself about my first goal. But my second goal..." She paused for a moment as she collected her thoughts. "I've always been protective about my squad. It didn't matter if they were my best friend, or my worst enemy, I would always look out for

them, at the risk of my own life."

She shifted a bit. Some of them weren't going to like this next part, but she had to tell them the truth. "I can't say that incidents like this won't happen again. In and out of the cockpit, I look after my squadron. And if my actions force me to face inquiries like this for the rest of my life, then so be it. I won't risk my squadmate's lives to avoid them. If it means I can protect my squad, I'd face a thousand inquiries a day. Their lives are worth it to me." She paused for another moment as she looked at each of the jurors with her hard-eyed, determined expression. "Thank you." She said before she sat down.

*Now... What will become of me? She waited for the answer...*

Vexus

Sun Apr 11, 2004 10:58 am

Aurora was only half-surprised to see an MP officer standing guard next to the door of her quarters. As she approached, she noticed the officer tighten the grip on her rifle. It seemed the combination of the murders, the security alert, and the threat of battle was making everyone on the ship rather nervous.

"I've recieved confirmation of your dismissal from the hearing," the officer said formally. "You will be confined to quarters until further notice."

Aurora nodded, and with a sigh, she opened the door and peered inside....

"Where's my squadron?" Aurora asked the officer.

"They've been escorted to the classrooms for studies and simtime in the light of possible future combat actions."

*This girl talks almost like a computer,* Aurora thought with a frown. "I should be there with them," Aurora said, turning back to the corridor. She froze at the soft sound of a disengaged rifle safety.

"My orders are to confine you to quarters, sir."

In a flash of thought, Aurora's instincts kicked in and she could see it all. The rifle was placed too close to her right arm. A quick move would knock it away and disarm the officer. Then a quick move towards the neck and-

**NO!!!**

Aurora's shoulders sank and she again turned to her quarters.

"Very well. Orders are orders, I suppose."

Entering the empty room of bunks and scattered belongings, Aurora felt an eerie sense of dread. When the next day came, how many of these bunks would once again be occupied? Sitting down on her own mattress, she decided to kill some time by cleaning her personal rifle. She had gotten distracted the last time she had tried to clean it, and for the time being there was nothing better to do.

Opening the polished case revealed once again an almost normal looking rifle, with the extra rod running parallel to, and just above, the butt of the weapon. Holding the weapon up, Aurora checked the special latch and sprung it open carefully... everything seemed smooth. Looking down in the case for the oil bottle, a glint of blue caught her eye. Laying the rifle at her side, Aurora reached into the hollow where the gun had been inside the box and removed a medal.

*I completely forgot it was in here.*

Two ribbons of gold were draped over a small crossbar of silver. Supported by the ribbons hung a moon-shaped medallion, a shining sapphire outlined in yet more gold. It was the Blue Crescent, and Aurora wished she had never been awarded it. It was a reminder of a terrible day, one she sometimes wanted very much to forget.

...Perhaps there had been a good reason she had hid the medal where she did.

Placing the medallion back into the hollow, Aurora grabbed the oil bottle and finally proceeded to clean her weapon.

Schamann

Mon Apr 19, 2004 4:28 pm

When Second Lieutenant Carter finished speaking, there was only a frightened silence around, shyly interrupted by the sound of typewriting on the keyboard, made by young petty officer who was writing minutes from the hearing, shooting awkward looks left and right every now and then. The silence was beginning to getting on everybody's nerves.

Commander Denatieux was sitting looking calm. Only her breath could seem a bit heavier, her cheeks perhaps reddened but a slightest shade. Lt Parker must have realized where this has been going when she started: "Commander, I believe me might wish to consider, If I may propose, that we..." but the leading juror was apparently firm on her course of action.

"No you may not Lieutenant, at least not in zis very moment. I believe zere is something that requires some clarification" she looked at Carter, and that was the kind of look that could give nightmares.

"Second Lieutenant" she spoke with the tone that reminded of ice caps moving down to crash the village, "You were not zummoned here to inform your superiors about your preferences to the course of action on the field of battle" The seasoned officer seemed to gain pace with every word she spoke. "You were zummoned `ere to be given the fair chance to convince your superiors, that your counts of disobedience will not repeat and thuz zere is no need to remove you from the forzes. In my honest opinion you did not quite achieved your zupposed aim."

It was Lt. Voeller's time to attempt to interrupt this time, with no luck as well. She barely raised her hand to signal the wish to speak when Denatieux growled at her: "You know way better Lieutenant zan to try to get in my way right now" and turned her attention to Carter once again.

"Never in my entire career did I meet such bluntly arrogant and foolish way to speak to one's commanding officer. In ze mirror of my judgment, lieutenant, you are nothing more zan pitiful hothead with no zense of responzibility and discipline. You were taught in Academy, that zis is not up to a pilot to decide of her use on the battlefield, and it is not up to subordinate to ponder in a heat of battle whezer the orders she rezeived are good or bad. But apparently you did not learn. From you career record I indeed zee your flair for combat. In a manner of months you managed to botch the leader's job in two consecutive squadrons you have been assigned to lead. Now it turns out, that not only are you incapable to give orders, but to even obey them. A Zeaman off basic training is a better soldier than you, do you understand zat lieutenant!?" Not bothering to wait for a reply, Commander continued.

"I can assure you lieutenant, zat I will do my best to spare you any more hearings. After the discharge zere is not much of a chance, zat you will have to face any. This jury will now head to debate over your case, and you better hear me out when I tell you..."

The ringing and clanging sound of Commander's PDA was the first thing that succeeded to break Denatieux flow of speech. She paused, took a glance at it, then raised her hand to prevent anybody in the room from talking and apparently read some urgent message.

"This hearing is hereby postponed due to an emergency zituation" when she spoke again, she sounded dead seriously and seemed a bit paler then a minute before. "Lieutenant Voeller you will assemble the Arrowhead and Dark Nova squadrons as well as any capable pilot onboard zis ship and you will take them to intercept possible enemy strike at Morrigan. You will get to it immediately."

"And Carter's status, Sir?"

"At your discretion and responsibility, we seem to be needing everyone for the next couple of hours" Denatieux stood up and finished the meeting. "You are all dizmissed, get to your stations ASAP."

Outside the room, along the corridor, Voeller took hold of Nef's arm.

"Run to your simroom and to your quarters and get the squadron to de briefing room no. ten as fast as you can. On the double!"

Carter started to pace, but in a split of second she turned to the CAG and almost soundlessly asked "...and me?"

"You're going in. If I see you disobeying a single order I will personally shoot you down"

Nefertiti turned and ran down the corridor as fast as her trained legs could carry her. Quarters were straight down the hall and left about a couple of hundred yards, simrooms a bit farther.

She was just storming into the quarter, when the loudspeakers announce what she had been known for quite a few minutes.

**Attention all personnel! Attention all personnel! This is not a drill. A possible enemy strike force approaching Morrigan ETA thirty minutes. All flying personnel will report to the flightdeck briefing room no ten. All other personnel will report to their battlestations and direct superiors immediately for further orders. I repeat – this is not a drill....**

Alex	Thu Apr 22, 2004 5:08 am
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Jessica slid into the room, and saw Aurora. "Babe, we gotta get going!" Jessica said, throwing off her over coat. *Damn, it's good to get that itchy thing off...*

A little taken back at being called "Babe" by Jessica, Aurora quickly put her gun back in it's case, and followed Jessica towards the sim room.

Jessica quickly divulged their orders to Aurora before they arrived at the sim-room. Jessica and Aurora spent little time getting the others out of the pods, and with them towards Breifing Room 10.

Jessica took a bit of time while they were running to think about her situation. *This is what I live for... I fight to protect my friend, and my squad... But... But by wanting to protect them, the brass thinks I'll disobey any orders.* She took one look at her squad, and frowned. *And yet... If I just follow their orders... Someone may die.*

**But that's a part of war.** Said another voice within her. **And you're fighting in a war. How long do you honestly think it'll be, before someone you care about will die?** Jessica's eyes narrowed at the voice. *If I have any say in the matter? Forever!* With a re-enforcing smile, she entered briefing room 10.

Vexus	Thu Apr 22, 2004 12:36 pm
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Events seemed to be accelerating. The images flashed before her, an errie symphony of sights kept in time by the audio rhythm of intercom annoucements heralding the approach of battle:

Jessica appears (thankfully not in handcuffs) and speaks of needing to gather the squadron.

**Senior officers to the bridge!**

They hurry to the simrooms.

**All squadrons on combat-ready status!**

Jessica and Aurora are warmly greeted by their squadmates. Christina seems to give a look towards Nef that has more in it than just relief.

**Support personnel, stand by for emergency procedures!**

Now they were gathered in the briefing room, chatting nervously amongst each other and waiting for the CAG to make her appearance. Aurora took advantage of the momentary calm and approached Jessica.

"What was the final decision?"

"Pending," Jessica answered.

"Well..., I'll make you a deal. We all get though this in one piece, and I think this squad will have its own Training Instructor."

Jessica gave a half-smile.

"Deal."

Schamann	Fri Apr 23, 2004 4:50 pm
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„Silence folks! This is it, we're launching in ten, our birds prepped as I speak. You will sit quiet and

focused now so we all get it smoothly and everybody comes home” Lieutenant Inga Voeller dominated the small, now crowded briefing room.

Several people were sitting there, listening to the CAG. Almost the whole Arrowhead squadron took their favorite seats on the edges of waist-tall lockers placed near the walls, leaving the few actually proper seats to their leader and the strangers. Leader – a late twentieth woman with the short, jet-black hair, first lieutenant badge and a name label “Young” place on the chest.

“Strangers” – being the whole Dark Nova squad and four totally out of place navy crewmembers, were taking the remaining chairs, as well as the large desk, now placed against the only free wall.

“As of eleven hundred hours this morning, Morrigan’s sensors picked up the radio trail of unknown ship heading approximately in our direction. Our radio and radar people tell us the baddie is a big one, Morrigan’s size, perhaps even bigger, and leads at least one little brother with her, plus substantial number of escorts. Her codename is “Gretchen”. Now that we have the Morning Stars out on a recon and our...additional squadron... out god knows where as well, we need all the hands we have.” – CAG looked carefully at the gathered pilots, giving especially strong attention to somewhat troubled navy women, who suddenly appeared not so excited about this whole new adventure. But it did not escape Seer’s attention, that the longest glare was addressed to Carter.

“That’s why some of you are here even if they not necessarily should”

Lieutenant Voeller cleared her throat and continued.

“Arrowheads make the main intercept of the escort and go further to investigate the possibility to eliminate Gretchen’s threat with what you have. If she’s too fat for you, you will withdraw and stay with the Morrigan – understood Young?”

“Crystally Sir” – Young replied, not without the shadow of a slightly cocky self confidence.

“Good – Novas – you will take the roundabout course from the moment we launch and you will make a flanking approach, trying to avoid being spotted to the very last moment. Stay in the sun or in The Border radar shadow or in any thing that might help you get close. Once you reach the scene, scan the Gretchen and her smaller sister, then pick the small one and send her home. Keep radio silence but stay alert to my, or Morrigan’s signal, your orders may change on the way. Yates?”

“Understood Sir”

“Good. You’re taking the new Medusas. They are more agile and harder to spot than anything else we have.” Voeller quickly checked her timer and proceeded to the final stage of the briefing.

“I will take the reserves and place the close protection of the Morrigan itself, in case anything slips through. If Gretchen proves to be too heavy for you and refuses to turn back and run home, you have to keep her busy until Morrigan’s main launchers enters the stage. Weakening her shields would also be nice. Time, my ladies, is critical, both Arrowheads and Novas attacks must be coordinated, so the bandits have their hands busy all the time. Is that clear enough?”

“Yes Sir” came not so synchronous chorus.

“OK – Novas, you launch first and take your computer calculated course right after take off, stay stealth, and be deadly only when the moment comes. You launch in two minutes, Godspeed and run to the flightdeck on the double, dismissed”

When they ran out and rushed to the flightdeck, two figures watched them in silence as they prepped for launch.

“I hope nothing will happen to them” Edward said with the sound of worry in his voice.

“**Something** surely will happen to them Edward, it would only be good if each of them came back in one piece” – Jason leaned against the wall more comfortably.

“Don’t you find it strange?”



Jason raised his brow "What namely?"

"That we stand here watching them going to war preparing to wait and wondering if they will make it. True, we are only the imitations of men, but still.....don't you find it strange?"

Edward shot a glance at the second droid, only to find him staring blindly against the wall, with his eyes narrowed and his jaws tightened. After a while Jason spoke:

"No Ed, I'd call that a very different name, than 'strange'" He raised his eyes and smirked. "Hey take it that way – it's f\*cking cold out there"

Vexus

Sun Apr 25, 2004 12:15 pm

The flight deck was now a study in controlled chaos. Techs darted this way and that, carrying fuel hoses, pushing ammunition carts, or directing traffic as the ships arose one-by-one from the lower maintenance decks. Aurora led the Novas carefully across the swirl of activity. They were fully outfitted save for their helmets. Lt. Voeller had assured them that their headgear would be waiting for them on the flight deck along with their ships, which would be prepped and ready for launch. Sure enough, seven Medusas stood lined up space-side of the deck, their fresh, dark-grey paint jobs glistening faintly in the pale interior lights of the Morrigan. An admiring whistle sounded from behind Aurora as she gazed upon the spacecraft.

"Well, *hello* there, ladies," Rhiannon said with a raised eyebrow.

"Medusas," Jessica said with a sigh. "Why did it have to be Medusas?"

"How do we know which ship belongs to whom?" Christine asked.

"The CAG said it would be obvious," Aurora replied. "Though I don't see any numbers or names printed on the hulls."

"Let's get a closer look," Ursula chimed in. "I want to see the interior."

With that, the Novas headed for the closest ship at the end of the column. Cassie quickly took the initiative, bounded up the ladder, and poked her head inside the cockpit.

"Hey!" Ursula objected. "I wanted to see inside!" Cassie gave a quick glance down at the angry-looking pilot and stuck out her tongue playfully.

"Too slow, little hobbit!" Cassie's head disappeared once again into the cockpit. Ursula looked like she was about to ascend the ladder herself when Cassie straightened up and turned around on the ladder to face her squad, her arms behind her.

"Well, my fellow pilots, there are no name plates, ID numbers, or tags within the cockpit that can tell us whose ship this is. Nevertheless, I can tell you she belongs to Catnip."

"And how is that?" Kat asked curiously.

"Do not question the intuition of Seer," Cassie said with a mischievous smile, "for her gaze is far and unerring!... plus I found this." Cassie punctuated her statement by revealing a helmet from behind her back and tossing it to Kat.

"Looks like the gremlins have been at it again."

Aurora stepped in closer to see the helmet. Its black exterior was broken only by two decals that graced the upper left and right quadrants. On the left was the Dark Nova insignia that had appeared just as mysteriously upon their flight jackets. On the right was the face of a happy-looking cat with headphones. The art style reminded Aurora of Jessica's mangos.

"Creepy," Kat said as she inspected the helmet. "Who would have made these?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Jessica said with a frown.

"Looks like the spook's traveling at the rear," Rhiannon said smiling. "Canna afford to lose her I suppose." Kat returned her smile.

"I'll be sure to scream out for help if I'm in the slightest danger." Rhiannon's expression was stern

for an instant, then she barked a hearty laugh and gave Kat a pound on the shoulder.

"I think I'm gonna like you. Let's have a drink when we get back."

"We'll be counting on you to give us as much info as you can as we approach the targets," Aurora said. "Our plan of attack will be based largely on how much data you can gather and how soon you gather it."

"Understood, sir," Kat said with a nod.

"We'll see you in space, then," Aurora said, and Kat turned to make her way up into the cockpit.

The remaining Novas went to the next Medusa. This time, the right decal on the helmet was the pale face of a woman shown in profile, her features eerily twisted as she let out an eternal, wailing cry.

"Rather dramatic," Christine said when she saw the helmet.

"But with a surprisingly close resemblance," Cassie commented.

"You seem eager to draw some friendly fire today, gypsy," Christine shot back as she began to climb the ladder to her ship. Aurora called up to her as she settled into the cockpit.

"Banshee, I want you hang back with Catnip and cover her until I say otherwise. Is that clear?" Christine's hesitation was noticeable but brief.

"Quite clear, sir."

The next ship belonged to Rhiannon, her helmet displaying a long-bladed sword with a decorative hilt.

"I also want you to hang back and make sure we stay in tight formation," Aurora told the XO.

"We'll be skirting the Border and I don't want anyone to get lost."

"Aye, sir." Rhiannon said with a salute. Then, just before grabbing onto the ladder, her tone turned serious as she regarded Aurora and Jessica. "I'm glad neither of you got grounded."

"So are we," Jessica replied.

A new helmet; this one had a single, starring eye that seemed to follow you no matter how you looked at it.

"I'm not sure, Seer," Ursula said, "could this possibly be *your* ship? I don't have intuition like you do."

"Oh, shut up," Cassie said.

"You'll be flying port wing, Seer," Aurora said. "You'll be on the inside track as we make our turn towards the targets, so keep your... eye... open." Ursula snorted as she tried to hold back a laugh.

"Well hardy, har, har," Cassie replied, "Everyone's got a sense of humor today, don't they?"

Aurora felt sorry that Cassie was not around to see Ursula's expression when she saw her own helmet. There, smiling, dressed in quaint clothing, and doing a little dance was a short and stocky woman with bare, hairy feet.

"This is ridiculous!" Ursula said with annoyance.

"Better get used to it," Jessica said with a smile.

"You'll take the starboard wing," Aurora said. "You'll be closest to the Border, so watch for emerging ships. I don't want to be flanked out there."

"Yes, sir," Ursula replied, her eyes still regarding the helmet with distaste.

Down to two Novas and they had reached Jessica's craft. To Aurora, her helmet symbol seemed the strangest so far: a myriad of small hieroglyphs arranged within an oval of gold. It didn't mean anything to the squad leader, but she noticed Jessica's eyes lighten up.

"Cool," Jessica said simply. "It just needs a few more finishing touches."

"You'll fly the center," Aurora stated as Jessica tried on her helmet. "I'll take point." Jessica stopped short and gave Aurora a level stare.

"Squadron leaders don't take point, sir. You know that as well as I do."

A moment of silence passed between them before Aurora responded.

"Alright. You'll take point."

Jessica nodded and made for the ladder.

"No heroics today, Nef, okay?" Jessica looked over her shoulder.

"I couldn't promise that to the brass, and I can't promise that to you," Jessica said matter-of-factly. Aurora sighed, unable to guess how this upstart pilot had lasted so long in the Navy.

Now Aurora had climbed into her own cockpit at the front of the column. Her helmet displayed the face of a silver-haired woman, lines of age crossing her features and her head bowed in sorrow. Looking at the symbol, Aurora wondered anew as to who was making all of these personal touches. Whoever did it seemed to be both observant and artistically gifted. No time to dwell on it, though. Aurora donned the headgear and activated her systems, waiting for clearance from the tower.

Vindicare

Mon Apr 26, 2004 9:07 pm

"Sir, may i make a suggestion regarding our upcoming mission?" Banshee keyed her Direct Comm.

"What sort of suggestion? I'd like you to remember we are tasked with infiltration, not frontal assault"

"Indeed. That is what my suggestion is regarding"

"Continue"

"Remember in a previous mission you performed a maneouver which i said there was a better way of doing..."

"Yes" Irritation began to show in Crone's voice "I don't see how pointing out my previous error will help us in this mission"

"Indeed. The maneouver i was referring to is known as the Kreutzeov-Himmlereich, or 'The KH' for people with less dextrous tounge. It is accomplished by jettisoning a stream of unburnt fuel to the rear of a moving craft, firing a single thruster to rotate the craft through ninety degrees, then firing the afterburner for around one or two seconds. The result is a ball of fire which the performing ship can escape from relatively unscathed, while any Infra-red or heat-seeking missiles will almost certainly be distracted by the burning fuel, which is much hotter than a ship travelling only by its momentum".

"How exactly is this relevant to our current mission?" Crone was either irritated, impatient, or both. Banshee couldnt really blame her, they were about to go hunting for a ship two or three hundred times their size. That would make most people jittery.

"It is relevent, sir, in that the principal can be applied anywhere. I suggest that we use our afterburners while in the vicinity of the Morrigan, and use the momentum to glide in to our target area, reducing our heat and infra-red signature. This will leave less variables which can result in our detection before the allotted time"

Silence

Followed by....

Alex

Mon Apr 26, 2004 9:17 pm

*Space... The last time I piloted in the real thing, I lost my two best friends. **Well... Time heals***

**wounds.** *Yes... It does... But those wounds will never close.* She smiled her usual smile of impending pleasure. *Well... Time to make sure the squad comes back in one piece.*

She had just been cleared, and, much against Jessica's desire to do it manually, activated the auto-launch system, and shot out into space, quickly regrouping with the squad. They had taken of their assigned positions, and were beginning their mission.

"Think we'll ever see her again?" Hobbit asked as she looked back at the receding Morrigan.

Jessica grinned for a moment. "If I have anything to do about it, yes." She said plainly.

"Auuuh, don't be so Pessimistauc!" Claymore said. "We'll be fine!"

"That's enough girls." Crone insisted. "If you want to chat, keep it on the tight band. We're entering radio silence... now."

Maverick	Tue Apr 27, 2004 1:49 am
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Kat numbly piloted the Medusa alongside Banshee, the void of space calling out mutely and seductively to the young pilot. Catnip stared into it blankly.

*My first real mission out in space...I can't be goofing off any more. Calm down Kat...remember the plan...both plans...*

Looking to the side again, Catnip saw Crone flying straight and level. Nef and Hobbit were just like her. They looked so...professional.

*They're so...calm. Oh man, I am really outclassed here. I barely passed my exams in piloting at the Academy. OhGodOhGod, I'm sooo nervous....*

"Hey Catnip, ease up on the stick. We aren't even close to the hot zone yet." Banshee said with a hint of irritation on the tight band.

"Oh...heh heh...right. Get it together girl...Is that better?" Came the hurried reply.

"It's fine, just don't fly away from me okay."

"Roger sir." *I get the feeling she doesn't like me that much...Well nothing I can do about it out here...*

The Medusas flew on.

Schamann	Fri Apr 30, 2004 2:48 pm
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"Laser direct link communication only girls, and only when necessary, until I say otherwise" Crone's words left her communicator, turned into a series of digital code impulses which subsequently induced frequency modulator, which in turn filtered the laser beam shooting from Crone's Medusa straight forward into the direction of Carter's ship.

After a split of second, the beam has found the receiver and after it performed the reverse process, Nefertiti saw and heard her leader's message. She simply nodded her head, more to herself, than in any kind of response. She then flicked the comm.-protocol switch to laser link and opened a message recording procedure. "Confirmed" – she said matter of factly and resumed her silent flight.

In less than one second, all the other crafts received Crone's message. Their pilots responded in a similar manner and, happy with it or not, continued with the mission.

Crone pondered Banshee's suggestion. It was good. For a moment she hesitated about coming the rest again and ordering a change of plans. For a moment.

The flanking approach course proposed by navigation computer was kinda complicated. Required several points of changing course. And – according to the big red note in mission objectives screen – time schedule was to be kept to the second – a matter of coordinating attack from two different sides.

Besides, Novas were not exactly the squadron, that could show brass the finger and do things their way. Not yet, not with Nef half-discharged. She clicked the laser link comm on again:

"Banshee. Suggestion denied. For Carter's sake we're doing this mission as by the book as we can"

The flight was short and simple. Every now and then they would alter their heading a bit, adjust the formation, and soon after not even fifteen minutes they were approaching the suspected baddie position from the angle more than ninety degrees different than Morrigan's course. The enemy should have appeared in their radar range any second.

**"this is Arrowheads, we got the Gretchen on our scanners, she is accompanied by ship about fourth of her size and multiple escort fighters. More than ten"**

...

**"Arrow leader to command. We were spotted and six fighters head our way. Permission to engage"**

Voeller's reply was almost immediate:

**"This is Serpent. Permission granted"**

**"Roger that Serpent. Holmes engaging."**

...

**"Holmes to Serpent. I have the visual on Gretchen. She's big and fat but I can see her main guns firing backwards. Something does not add up here."**

...

**"Holmes to Serpent. We're picking heavy resistance from the escort but we're closing to Gretchen, she seems to be damaged."**

...

**"This is Holmes – we have another multiple fighter class objects emerging from behind Gretchen, we're outnumbered and requesting assistance!"**

**"This is Serpent. Novas are you there?"**

They were close, very close. After Arrowheads leader last message they just entered the visual range and accelerated towards the point about half a mile behind Gretchen's aft. And there it was, a way smaller ship, barely visible, following Gretchen like hunting dog...

**"Crone here, we're almost there."**

Firing at her with every canon it seemed to have.

**"Help Arrowheads if you can, but meet primary objective at all cost. Divide the unit if you have to."**

There it was - the battle scene in visual range. Crimson shield wearing Gretchen running away mutilated and sprinkling fires from her damaged engines. Arrowheads fighting against three remaining old Sirens, most likely from before the plague, now crimsonshielded and trying to protect Gretchen. Four other Sirens trying to protect Gretchen's aft from the pursuer, shooting at the pair of unknown fighters. The pursuer, unknown type, size of a frigate, but much heavier armed, spitting beams and missiles at it's prey.

Six unknown fighters, heavy types for first impression, darting past Gretchen's starboard to strike at Arrowheads. And some of them possibly on the other side as well.

Gretchen front flak lasers opened fire at one of Arrowheads Siren, damaging her left wing.

Dark Novas entered the stage.

Vexus

Fri Apr 30, 2004 6:48 pm

"What a mess!" Crone said aloud to herself as she took in the scene.

"I suggest we formulate a plan of attack with all speed," Banshee said over the comm. The squad leader frowned at her tone, she'd been sounding like a computer since this mission started... and an arrogant one at that.

But in this case, she was right at least. Crone switched to her radio.

"Crone to Novas, let's get to work. Claymore, you take Banshee and Nef and help out the

Arrowheads. Hobbit and Seer, you're with me. We have to disable these cap ships as much as possible before the Morrigan arrives on the scene. Cat, I want you to hold here for now and preform some deep scans of the ships. What do they have in reserve and what cargo are they carrying, if any? Plus monitor the communication channels. I want to know why these ships were fighting before we got here."

Alex

Fri Apr 30, 2004 7:01 pm

Upon seeing the battle, Jessica had hesitated a moment. The memory of Bird and Hyena flashing in her mind... But then something snapped. No longer was her mind filled with fear and doubt. All that was left was the mission. She grabbed the controls, and was about to enter the battle when she realized that Crone had put her in Claymore's wing. Her eyes and mind had already entered her battle mode as she looked to Claymore for instructions.

Vindicare

Sun May 02, 2004 9:24 pm

*combat is merely a mechanical process, not a personal one. The taking of lives must not evoke emotion while one is fighting to preserve oneself. To dwell on one's victories is worse than to dwell upon defeat, for by its very nature victory will come more often than defeat. To be defeated can mean to die. To be victorious can mean to take lives. The taking of those lives must be purely mechanical, binary, darwinian. To hesitate is to feel remorse for an enemy. To feel else but anger in battle is to lose.*

The text she and her family had read since long before her time echoed in her mind, as it had done since she stepped up the ladder into her ship of war.

1 you fire  
0 you dont  
1 you live  
0 you dont

Banshee flicked some switches.

"Warming up. Coming forward to starboard wing position on Claymore"

She was aware of the studied monotone her voice was operating at, and wondered how the others would interpret it. Maybe they understood. Maybe they did similar when they were in combat. Maybe they didn't. Maybe they thought her overly self-assured. Maybe some of the girls here had never BEEN in combat. Maybe Crone thought her insubordinate for making a suggestion above her station. She resolved to speak with her later, as worry was not part of combat.

"In position. Weapons hot. Awaiting XO orders. Lets do this"

Vexus

Mon May 03, 2004 10:56 am

Crone hit her afterburners and cut a wide arc to get behind the pursuing frigate, Seer and Hobbit close behind her. For the moment, the unknown fighters were all occupied and they had a clear run at the cap ship. Crone adressed her squadmates over the radio.

"Seer, you and I will go in first. If the turrets target us, we'll try to keep them busy while Hobbit takes them out."

"Ooo, a decoy! I can do that," Seer replied with a grin in her voice.

"Be careful on appraoch," Crone continued. "We don't know how extended the shields are on this frigate. If we can punch inside, we can hit the guns directly. Otherwise, we'll have to wear down the shields first."

Maverick

Tue May 04, 2004 11:06 pm

Kat's hands danced in her cockpit, running through the RIAS system on the fighters and that frigate. Data spilled across the screen in flashing digits and bright dots as her ship drifted slowly outside the fighting zone.

"Oh man..." Catnip mumbled to herself.

"Crone, this is Catnip. Over."

"What is it Catnip? What have you found out?" Crone replied through the radio.

"Uh....Sir...Um, the RIAS is showing the fighters and frigate as unknowns." Kat sputtered with disbelief in her voice.

"What?!" Came Crone's curt reply.

"The type of ships we're fighting are not in the recognition system. These ships are like nothing the Navy has encountered before."

"Well isn't that just peachy...Anything else?"

"Only thing I got now is that the frigate is focusing its chase on the Gretchen. She's pushing right up her aft. I'm gonna need more time to get some more info....wait! Sir that frigate's shields are insanely high! Without torpedoes, you're just gonna be poking a bear....A very *large* bear."

Alex

Tue May 04, 2004 11:44 pm

Jessica's eyes began to twitch furiously. It took every ounce of her will not to engage the battle as she waited for Claymore to make a command decision.

The thoughts in her head, however, were processing everything at a tremendous speed.

*A highly shielded frigate is following the Gretchen.*

*Normal frigate shields can't be that high without an external power source.*

*The only thing nearby that could possibly generate such a source would be the Gretchen.*

*And considering that the frigate is riding the Gretchen's tailpipe,*

*it's logical to assume that the Gretchen is somehow feeding power to the frigate. Meanwhile, I'm stuck here, with a XO that has never really been field tested for the position, even in a sim,*

*as I wait for orders that might never come, as we are slowly being surrounded by fighters of an unknown class.* Her thoughts returned to a normal speed. *I guess that leaves me but a single choice...*

Jessica activated her RIAS gear, and disembarked from Claymore's squad.

"Nef! Get back here!" Jessica heard Claymore yell as Jessica flew straight for the Gretchen.

Jessica didn't respond as she dodged fighters, incoming attacks and everything, her goal clear.

"Nef! Fall back!" Crone echoed Claymore's order.

Jessica smiled as she started the RIAS equipment at a short range as she scanned the Gretchen's back. "Sorry guys, but I know what I have to do, and I'm not going to wait around while Claymore makes up her mind about how best to do her mission." Jessica continued to roll around incoming missiles and enemy fire. *But if I live through this, I can kiss any thought of a pension good-bye...*

"Nef! I ORDER you to fall back!" Crone yelled, trying to stay away from enemy attention as she closed on the frigate.

Jessica shook her head, as she dodged two enemy fighters and left them behind, flying through the debris of some fighter for which the pilot must have turned out to be not that fast at some earlier stage of battle. "Sorry Crone. I'd explain, but it'd take too long. You're just going to have to trust me on this!" She replied.

Several shots nearly hit Jessica from behind. She quickly eyed the one particular fighter that had come close to hitting her. *Persistent buggers...* Jessica thought, noting the scan was 50% complete. *It's definitely back here...* She thought as the sensors had started to confirm her theory. *But where?!*

Vexus

Thu May 06, 2004 9:38 am

"Damn it! Seer! Hobbit! Pull up now!"

With the flash of maneuvering thrusters, the three Medusas arched over the frigate. Another flash appeared not far below Crone's feet as her shield grazed that of the frigate. There was no more room for doubt. The spook had saved their butts from the fryer.

"Thanks for the warning, Cat." Aurora said over the comm. "Have you found out?"

"Nef! Get back here!" Claymore's worried voice cut through Crone like an icy dagger.

*Oh no.*

"Nef! Fall back!" Crone shouted.

"Sorry guys," Nef replied, "but I know what I have to do, and I'm not going to wait around while

Claymore makes up her mind about how best to do her mission."

Crone could hardly believe her ears. They were in battle... a *real* battle... and now Nef felt **inconvenienced** about waiting for orders! As Crone and her wingmen neared the melee between the frigate and the Gretchen, she could see debris from the fighters.

*Death... again... it's all around us... and you're just... annoyed!*

Crone drew in a breath and shook the cockpit with her voice.

"Nef! I ORDER you to fall back!"

"Sorry Crone. I'd explain, but it'd take too long. You're just going to have to trust me on this!" The voice sounded excited now, and each word drove Crone to a deeper fury than she had known for quite a while. Behind her blue eyes was a glint of fire, normally saved for traitors, but now focused upon a comrade-in-arms. She barely registered Claymore's determined voice over the comm.

"Claymore to Crone, I'll go get her, sir."

"Negative." Crone said quietly. "Crone to Novas, break and attack. If we can't hurt the frigate at least we can destroy her fighter compliment. Cat, continue monitoring and send word to the Morrigan of our situation."

"What about Nef?" Hobbit asked in a worried voice. Crone's eyes narrowed.

"She's on her own."

Schamann

Thu May 06, 2004 2:57 pm

They were quite similar to old Sabretooths, at first glance, short-nosed, flat-winged and ugly. The main difference was the fuselage of the fighter – wider and thicker than that of your typical Terran fighter. Both wings were slightly forward leaned and wingtips were home for some small strange looking long prods, antennas alike. Painting on those machines was of a dark grey colour. The markings were the usual crimson shield plus one additional thing. Blood - Red, half-moon emblem on fighter's third wing, the upward one if you could try to guess the sides of the ship by usual standards.

It seemed to be armed with no less than four projectile weapons of some sorts, be it beams or guns. On what you could call the "bottom" of the fighter there were two hardpoints – most likely containing several missiles each.

Enemy ships were fast, faster than a Siren and definitely than heavier Aries, but Medusa could probably put up the dogfight with them. They seemed to have decent maneuverability and good firepower.

What they were really capable of was yet to be revealed, however.

Maverick

Thu May 06, 2004 11:28 pm

Shivering from the anxiety in her cockpit, Cat scanned the RIAS information that was pouring into her ship.

*I don't like this...I don't like this at all*

"Crone, this is Catnip."

"Go ahead."

"Sir, I've taken a look at that fraggin' bear of a frigate. It's got enough firepower in its bow to blow up each of the Gretchen's engines one by one. And...what the...."

"Cat what is it?!"

"Sir, the Gretchen is registering heavy missile damage...the kind of missile damage caused by a heavy capship."

"If you haven't noticed, we are fighting a frigate here! I don't need obvious information!" Crone snapped back.



*Eeeysh! Just because Nef is disobeying orders doesn't give her the right to snap at me like that...*

"Sir, the frigate doesn't HAVE any heavy anti-capship missile launchers; only the smaller, anti-fighter ones. This thing couldn't have caused that kind of damage to the Gretsch. There has to be something else...maybe the parent of those unknown flies."

"Alright, keep at it Cat. I want more information and quick!"

Vexus	Sat May 08, 2004 10:34 am
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The battle raged and the comm traffic in Crone's ear told the story:

"Seer, break hard to port! I'll cut her off!"

"Nice shot, Banshee. Stay clear of those turrets."

"Arrowhead four, watch your six. Damn! Hobbit, try to get that fighter off her tail!"

"Nova three, thanks for the save."

"Catnip to Crone."

"Make it quick, Cat," Crone said as she tried to stay on the tail of one of the unidentified fighters.

"Sir, the fighters are all moving towards the Gretsch. It looks like they're going after Nef." Sure enough, even the fighter Crone was chasing had now changed course towards the larger cap ship. Was this an opportunity?

"Computer: tactical display!" The main screen crackled and soon displayed the battlefield in full, with every hostile and friendly ship labeled. The majority of the hostiles were closing in on Nef and were nearing the crossfire zone between the two cap ships....

"Alright, Novas, new plan. Seer, Claymore, and Hobbit, form up with me. Catnip, you can join us as well. Banshee, you closest, so take up position near the crossfire and wait for my signal to launch your stonegaze. Arrowheads, disentangle yourselves from the heavy fighters and concentrate on the Gretsch's Sirens."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Nova Leader," Young's voice sounded over the radio.

*So do I.*

Vindicare	Sun May 09, 2004 9:18 am
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"Affirmative Lead, coming to 141.85.34 and awaiting fire orders on Stonegaze"

Banshee could see what Crone was thinking and her mind approved - It was risky, but success would mean greater gain than just doggedly pursuing the fighters into point-defence range of either capital ship.

Schamann	Thu May 13, 2004 3:02 pm
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Nefertiti.

She was still forty percent short from the complete RIAS scan when she got herself in a crossfire between the rock and the hard place, between Gretchen's aft flak cannons and main aft guns and unknown frigate's artillery. It took less than ten seconds before her RIAS antennas fried. She only managed to send whatever data she gathered in one short burst hoping Catnip would receive it and somehow finish the scan. Then they bandits were on her tail and inferno of flak gunfire opened in front of her. She looked at it, for a split of second.

Then she stepped in.

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Holmes.

Holmes has never seen anyone reacting that fast. The agile Medusa II sped past the space next to Gretchen dodging four fighters at once and darting past the flak gunfire like there was no tomorrow.

"Did you see that Holmes, how the hell does she do that?!" her wingman Rose was on the radio.

"It's a dance with devil, devil helps you step but leads you straight to the exit door. Say your

goodbyes to her Rose" Young was in trouble big enough to worry about her squadmates instead of one of the Novas. She quickly radioed their commander:

"I hope you know what you're doing, Nova Leader"

she wasn't anywhere near sure about that, however.

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Hobbit

"Won't you just quit it you bugger ?!" Hobbit shot another short burst at the fighter following one of the Arrowheads, but had to drop it to stay in the formation. She took her turn in the last moment, not even having the time to check if her shots had any effect upon the baddie.

She lined up with the rest of the formation and watched, out of breath, how Carter's fighter makes it's run to the space between Gretchen and her pursuer, space blazing with energy of slowly exploding engines, plasma heavy artillery shots and laser bolts.

*she's loco - noone gets out of there alive*

Heartbeats lasted for ages. She took one shallow breath and waited before the signal.

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Banshee

When she took her position on the other side of Gretchen, near the crossfire zone, it was almost time. She firmly aimed the stonegaze launcher, making calculations about the heading of the four enemy fighters chasing Nef.

*Good luck, beauty, whatever you're up to*

"Now" Crone's order like a snapshot, on the radio. She fired.

They were hit and they were hit hard, by the waves of EMP flowing to them faster than the thought could have. Only one did managed to completely avoid the bang, jumping upward and steering away from the trouble. It, however, still had to enter the crossfire zone to do so. The rest got more or less stunned, paralyzed or electrically blinded. They had no chance in the inferno. Rest of the Novas coolly picked them one by one - all of them.

Banshee fired burst after burst and watched with surprisingly cold blood how the enemy fighters exploded one by one, surprisingly slowing down the moment they actually entered the exact space between the frigate's bow and Gretchen's aft. To her surprise, Nef slowed down too.

"..it...re's some ..ort ....f tr...ng bea... here" - she suddenly heard Nef's voice for a blink of an eye. She quickly found her fighter up there in the blaze of Gretchen's last engine and a sudden thrill that shuddered the frigate.

Banshee already got hit once before she realized she can't afford to watch the spectacle. The Frigate must have found her the source of that devastating stonegaze and lined up no less than four flak cannons at her Medusa. Plus there were two bandits speeding at her from above.

"Banshee to leader, I have two bandits plus flak fire. I'm in need of assistance"

"Holmes to Novas. We see Gretchen from upfront and she's about to explode. Good chances she takes the frigate and everything else in close range with her, you might wish to clear out of there"

"Crone Catnip here, Morrigan is coming any second now, but there are more fighter class contacts approaching and they are not friendly ones, plus something big is following them. Something really big. Shit! Crone I got a baddie on my tail, what do I do?! Crone?!"

...

In her sharp dodge, Banshee somehow realized something is wrong with the flaks firing at her. To be exact, that they suddenly stopped focusing on her. It was then when she heard Nef on the radio again.

"I'll hold them for a sec...you get out and save yourself"

She saw a crippled and wounded Medusa darting out of the blast straight into the frigate's face, dodging beams by anticipation, before they were even shot. Speeding over the frigates flank under her shields, firing stonegaze right into her face, EMP-ing everything around for just a few moments enough to send the frigate and herself right into exploding Gretchen.

Morrigan was approaching the battle, calling fighters back as soon as they finish their job and get a clear position.

Charon

Thu May 13, 2004 7:44 pm

Riding herd on the near side of the formation, Claymore's Medusa haught the outermost edge of the EMP blast. Her electronics rapidly recovered from the ethereal blue-and-white shockwave, although she could smell the sharp ozone tang that told her several of her circuit breakers had popped. Which would explain the blank Multi-Function Displays. She felt around for the breaker box and began popping them back in.

Mentally cursing herself repeatedly for her hesitation, she looked up from the breaker box, just in time to observe the *Gretchen's* death throes, and Nef's last determined assault.

"NAE!!!!" Claymore screamed, planting her left palm against her narrow front canopy as she saw the ball of fire from the *Gretchen* engulf her, her pursuing frigate.... and Nefertiti. "Dammit, nae! Wha' th'Hell were ye..." she drifted off, feeling choked up, furious, and helpless.

Well... not entirely helpless... Through her slightly misty gaze, her MFDs came back on-line. Her gun banks were fully recharged, and she still had two missiles left.

And somewhere out there was a group of fighters tangling with her comrades.

"Nova Lead from Nova 2, coom in," she spoke, clearly and coldly.

"2 from Lead, go."

And then she paused... taking stock of the situation. *Morrigan's* last orders reverberated in her mind - quietly at first, then insistently, and finally inexorably.

"2 from Lead, go ahead." Crone's voice sounded a mild bit annoyed, which was a true indicator of how upset she was.

"Lead frrom 2, am fully opperrationall an'.... an' ready tae assist in gettin' everyone tae th'*Morrigan*."

Her blood still boiled, her breath hissed between clenched teeth, her face was drawn tight in a rictus of rage, but her hands remained firm on the controls.

After all, there would be time later to grieve.

And to discuss Crone's wisdom in appointing her as XO.

Vindicare

Thu May 13, 2004 11:21 pm

Banshee wrestled control back as the initial shockwave from the explosion passed over her.

Almost instantly the warble that signified a seeker radar sounded from her Hazard approach indicator.

*Damn, they are still on me*

"Banshee to Claymore. I have one, possibly two bandits tailing. Flak is no longer an issue. Sustained minor damage to left fin. If I line them up, can you knock them down?"

Vexus

Fri May 14, 2004 7:46 pm

It was in witnessing the explosion of the *Gretchen* that Crone came to the horrible realization of how much this felt like the life she had left behind. The tragedy still repulsed her, and her duty still forced her to endure it. Nothing had changed at all. Only one thought seemed to reach her mind.

*Have I lost another one?*

For now, that was all she would allow herself to think.

For there were others...

"Crone Catnip here, Morrigan is coming any second now, but there are more fighter class contacts approaching and they are not friendly ones, plus something big is following them. Something really big. Shit! Crone I got a baddie on my tail, what do I do?! Crone?!"

Many others...

"Lead from 2, am fully operational an'.... an' ready tae assist in gettin' everyone tae th'Morrigan."

That would need her...

"Banshee to Claymore. I have one, possibly two bandits tailing. Flak is no longer an issue. Sustained minor damage to left fin. If I line them up, can you knock them down?"

... but she had to be sure.

*One crisis at a time. That new contact isn't here yet.*

"Cat, stay calm. Remember your training and watch for a missile lock. Seer! Hobbit! I need you two to bail Cat out, then engage all the remaining enemy fighters you can before any new hostiles arrive. Claymore, go and assist Banshee, then tag up with the others."

"Where are you going, sir?" Hobbit asked over the comm. Crone's voice waivered despite her best efforts.

"I'm going to find Nef."

Charon

Mon May 17, 2004 3:28 pm

"Banshee to Claymore," came the English woman's voice, breaking into her fugue. "I have one, possibly two bandits tailing. Flak is no longer an issue. Sustained minor damage to left fin. If I line them up, can you knock them down?"

Before she could respond, Crone began issuing orders in a clear, concise tone that told Claymore that she was under pressure, but dealing just fine.

"Claymore, go and assist Banshee, then tag up with the others," came her part of the order, which caused Claymore to smile ferally. She didn't have to go in yet!

"Aye, ma'am!" she snarled, then shoved her throttle all the way forwards, then flipped the switch to engage her afterburner for a short period. "Hold on, Banshee, I'm coomin' as fast as I can!"

As she held the stick steady, she looked over her radar, then gave up in disgust. Her radar was still jacked up from the EMP blast, and showing large numbers of ghosts from electrical feedback. The wreckage from the *Gretchen* and her unknown assailant wasn't helping matters either.

However, after she looked at her screen for long enough, she could tell which contacts were real and which ones were a result of her radar's issues. She soon matched up the three moving contacts in her frontal sector with the flashes of light and darting objects moving in the darkness. She corrected her course some more, and sped towards them as fast as her little fighter could go.

Nearing the scrap, she spared a look for her damage display. Despite displaying a lot of snow, she could make out the screen: electricals lightly damaged - well, no kidding! She sniffed, still smelling ozone. But her shields were sound - 75% and recharging just fine. She smiled darkly as she selected one of her two remaining missiles and lined up on one of Banshee's pursuers.

This was going to be *fun*

Maverick

Mon May 17, 2004 9:07 pm

Cat jinked to the left hard as a burst of fire from the unknown craft passed right where she was. Her plane was jerking erratically and little pieces of the destroyed ships were thunking against her own.

"A little help please!" Cat pleaded out on her com to just about anyone who was listening. The unknown fighter stayed on her tail like a bad odor. A missile flew over her cockpit, barely missing

Catnip's plane.

"AAAIIEEEEE!" She screamed, banking to the right. The RIAS system started blipping and a garbled message started to play as the system decrypted it.

"Shit! it's N...S tha....'re aga..st - ....peat. we ar....ainst DAR...OVAS!, permis.....break an.....engage immed.....!"

"Deni..., don't pan...Smiley. Thi....n't be th... Keep fighting"

"They.....wasted....anji's entire....ng with.....few sec....! I've interc.... and....gnized comm traffic - it says Cro..., Cla..ore and Hobbit.....ere for sure! I tell...it's Dark Nov... and...re fucked!"

Cat blinked in small wonder as another burst of fire from the unknown craft riddled one of Cat's wings.

"AAIIEE!!! I'm hit!"

Vindicare

Tue May 18, 2004 12:15 pm

Banshee checked her systems over quickly while corkscrewing to keep that warble as a warning not a lock.

*Hull integrity 90%, armour 75%, shields 50%*

*Minor damage to left fin: Manoeuvrability unhindered.*

*Well at least thats something.*

Her mind cast itself back a few moments, to Nef jumping in on the flak cannons. *Dulce et Decorum est, pro patria mori.* Anger welled up inside of her. *I will honour you.*

There were two, she was sure of that now. The amount of fire flailing around her from whatever lasers they were equipped with had got to be from two different craft, and she felt a slight shudder as one of them managed to rake the rear shields. *Two on one in a medusa is not good odds, Claymore where are you...*

She checked over her instruments again, and found a fast moving friendly labelled 02 on her display. Continuing her erratic evasive manoeuvres, she brought her heading into direct line with Claymore.

"Claymore, maintain heading, i will fly right under you. One of them should come straight into your aimer" she keyed her comm. off, then continued speaking "Ok you godless heathens, time to even the score. It's a shame you dont appear to be Charans, but you've given me enough reason to hate you. YOU killed my squadmember, and now YOU WILL PAY!" She snapped her craft level and hit the afterburner with perhaps a little too much enthusiasm. The warning warble faded briefly as the fighters lost track of her, before engaging their own burners to pursue.

Banshee's Medusa screamed along, with small bits of debris fizzing on her shields, and she rocketed under her fellow Medusa, missing it by a few feet. She cut her burner and pulled "up", in the hope of drawing the pursuing fighters directly into Claymore's cone of fire, and turned as sharply as she could in order to attempt establishment of a loose wing pairing with her squadmate.

Charon

Tue May 18, 2004 6:06 pm

As Banshee's Medusa roared through her ventral quarter, Claymore's targetting computer locked on to the lead fighter that howled for her flightmate's blood. With a sulfurous Gaelic oath, she stabbed down on her trigger, letting flying with her missile.

It was classic. So intent was her pursuit that the pilot of the enemy fighter had failed to notice the warbling tone that told her that someone was attempting a lock. Claymore saw her face as she looked up, and she fancied she could even see the whites of her eyes just before the missile struck home.

"ITH MO CHAC!" she crowed, then turned to set her sights on the other fighter, on to find that Banshee had completed a very broad Immelmann turn, and was already lined up on her.

Vexus

Tue May 18, 2004 6:57 pm

*This seems familiar,* Crone thought with a frown as she tried her best to navigate the debris field. It was her first sim on the Morrigan all over again... and she was still just as awkward as she had been then. Again and again, flying pieces of twisted metal slammed through her shields. More times than she wanted to recall, she heard the scraping sound of ship fragments striking her armor. At first she had dismissed the idea of using her scanners with so many contacts around her, but by a chance look at the screen she had caught a brief reading that might've been a fighter.

After that, she continued to glance quickly at the screen every few seconds. Hoping against hope.

Out of the static, she heard Cat cry out and her hand suddenly threatened to pull up on the stick and return to the fray. After a moment's thought, she forced it to stay on course. Further half-frantic comm coming from Cat meant that she was still alive.

*Damn you, Nef, where are you? You better be alive, so I can kill you.*

Schamann

Wed May 19, 2004 2:52 pm

ITH MO CHAC!" she crowed, then turned to set her sights on the other fighter, on to find that Banshee had completed a very broad Immelmann turn, and was already lined up on her. And to find that instead of lining in the formation with her, Auten keeps dodging left and right trying to shake her second pursuer.

Banshee's maneuver was good. More than good, it was excellent, she led the baddie right into Claymore's aim. But everything has it's price, they say.

The second bandit had her pretty much exposed during the time she was luring the first one in to a trap, and aimed carefully. Gun barrage almost ripped her fighter apart. Whatever those fighters used for primary weapons it was ugly. She took a quick look at the panel while shaking from explosions and dodging like hell. Shields down, rear armor down and hull integrity breach. She suddenly felt a sudden sharp twist of her Medusa, and heard something like between a whistle and a moaning – some liquid was leaking out of her tanks. She could only pray for it to be fuel, not oxygene.

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Cat was spinning around breathless. She just got hit and got hit big time. She recalled the moment of being hit but few seconds afterwards somehow eluded her. She felt sick and felt dizzy. She tried to reach her hand to level her flight, but there was something wrong with her sight. She felt something warm and sweet on her lips.

It was her own blood.

Fortunately, it was just biting her lip when the explosion shook her fighter.

*She had to concentrate, to focus what was going on....wait a minute, shields down, internal systems moderately damaged, left engine destroyed... I should know what this is about to mean...*

"Cat dive hard! Now!" it was Seer's voice *...now who was Seer? I'm sure I remember...*

She did it instinctively. She dived and in that very act, started to recollect and started getting back to reality.

And then they fell upon their prey.

"Hobbs, you take left of that bandit and you rip his aft for me sweetly. Do it. I don't want to see you missing a single round"

"With pleasure"

They teamed on one of Cat's pursuers, got onto her aft. And ripped her wide open. It was only in the last split of second when she realized she was getting smashed and saved herself with a desperate dodge. What was left of her fighter after the duo's salvo, sharply turned left and started seek for a safe place.

"I'm finishing her. Hobbs send your message to the second one"

"Roger that"

"Cat, this is Seer, make a wide loop then as you fly by once again you help us finish them.

Vindicare

Fri May 21, 2004 11:15 am

The incoming fire subsided, and Banshee surmised that Claymore had attained the attention of her persuer. She checked over her systems again and frowned. *Medusa's really arent dogfighting craft.*

*Hull integrity down to 53%, armour 50% shields 23% and failing at rear. If you want me to be a fighter pilot give me a fighter plane, not a scout ship*

Oxygen and cabin pressure were not falling, which meant that fuel was most likely leaking, confirmed a few seconds later by her observation of a slight drop in fuel tank 2's level.

She brought her craft back round to help Claymore finish the remaining unknown.  
*manoeuvrability is still pretty much unhindered, but if i want to last i'll have to shut that engine down, and lose half of it.*

"Banshee to Claymore. We'd better tie this up pretty fast, i'm dropping fuel. I can fly full throttle for a while, but i'm going to have to shut the engine down if i want to stay remotely mobile for any length of time".

"Weel we'ad betta make more o' an effort, 'adn't we? " Claymore sounded almost jovial. Which, considering she was in combat and being chased by a unknown enemy fighter, almost suprised Banshee. Almost, but not quite. *Happiest in a fight, Scots, and out here she can even get paid for it* Banshee almost smiled herself.

"Indeed" she replied, and brought her ship about, her mind noting the small silvery crystals in her wake that signified fuel.

And that got her thinking.

"missiles are hot, keep her busy a few more seconds" The fighter's werent quite tailing one another, more performing figure-of-eights, Claymore using the broader turning circle of the opponent to remain largely out of arc.

*Fuel for these fighters is liquid based...once this bandit is down there are more incoming...i guess it might be worth a try...*

Maverick	Sat May 22, 2004 2:35 am
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Cat's hands were shaking violently as she held the controls to the fighter. The blood from her cut lip was crusting and the stinging pain with the acrid taste in her mouth made her feel nauseous.

"R..roger...that....Se...Seer." She stuttered out. Her body was moving and she was still flying, but she was definately in a state of shock. Her fighter, flying like a dead duck, looped around wide to aim directly at the remaining unknown fighter. When the unknown fighter, this annoying hornet....thing, her craft opened fire with it's main guns. The shots were inaccurate and did nothing more than scare the pilot into evasive manuevers, but Catnip did not let go of the trigger, she could not let go of it. Her hands were clamped on the controls in a vice grip. The fire from the main guns peppered into the debris and narrowly missed hitting one of the ships on her side.

"CAT! Cut fire now!" Seer yelled through the com. With great effort, Cat released the trigger, but now was too petrified to fly. She was now headed in a straight line. Right into the deadzone.

"Cat! Get out of there! Pull out!" Hobbit screamed. Snapping out of it for a brief second, Cat veered up just as another explosion shot out a large chunk of what appeared to be part of a reactor, like a missile, right through where Cat's ship was just occupying. Taking deep, ragged breaths, Cat was definately not in a shape to fight anymore, but neither was she in any immediate danger.

Schamann	Tue May 25, 2004 3:12 pm
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When Morrigan's close escort entered the battle, first thing Serpent saw, was the mess, in which Terran fighters seemed to have the upper hand. Indeed, it was mostly Terran pilots who now were chasing the enemy.

Seer was finishing off the fighter she damaged alongside with Hobbit a second ago. Hobbit herself was engaging in a dogfight with another fighter, thus relieving Cat who had the time to escape and load her shields a little. Third fighter was apparently withdrawing.

Claymore waited for damaged Banshee's fighter to recover at least some of it's shields and both of them seemed to have pretty good idea what to do.

And then there was their leader, who was nowhere to be found.

Crone approached the deadzone with maximum caution, but the continuous explosions and the throng of debris hurting her shields and armor were just too dense to be avoided. Increasing radiation did not help either. Radio contact with the rest of the battlefield was more and more disrupted, almost impossible right then. She passed by the extraordinarily big chunk of ships plate

external plating and then she saw it.

All hell broke open and nightmares started walking the face of the earth.

That part of the ship must have been some important crew area, or maybe living quarters. There were a number of people, some of them still tied by emergency seat belts to their chairs. Some of them died quickly, when explosion dismembered or simply shock-killed them. Some of them simply died from sudden pressure lowering when they were caught by surprise with their lungs full and with nothing to hang on too. Their ribcages massacred, their arms unfold in a gesture, as if they tried to catch something just before they went.

But worst were those who were still alive. Those who were able to grab the masks and get a hold on to something, now paying the price of torture, their eyes and ears spilling blood, their veins coming out as blood began to boil, their faces wrinkled in the most horrible manner as the waves of radiation washed them dying, adding insult to injury, burning their unprotected skin. They say it can take up to two minutes in open space until you die, when you're unlucky.

And in space – no one can hear your scream.

Crone almost missed the fighter alike radar contact she was tracing, so big was the shock. Instead, the contact found her.

It was almost totally massacred piece of flying equipment. It was almost torn on two, bleeding with fuel and oxygene from several holes, with half of left fin broken. It was decompressing rapidly and almost gleaming with ultra high radiation level from the center of recent explosion, but it was still in one piece.

And it was not a Medusa.

Radio squeaked with upcoming message:

"I may be dead in less than a few minutes, Terran, but I still can take you to hell with me"

Vexus	Tue May 25, 2004 7:07 pm
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Crone's eyes became steely once again.

"I've been to hell many times, Coli. But if this is your first trip there, I'll happily give you an escort."

Everything was beginning to come down on her. The war had not become easier, new images of horror waited to greet her in her dreams, and there was still no sign of Nef. The small flame of hope that had been inside her had now weakened to a dying ember. And perhaps in killing this already half-dead rebel, it would be extinguished completely.

*Such is the way of the things*, Crone thought as she turned to engage the fighter. *Let us dance on the graves of the fallen.*

JediBubbles	Tue May 25, 2004 7:58 pm
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*Alrighty then. Next up?* Seer pulled around and glanced around for a way to keep making herself useful, slightly disturbed that she was so calm after having dealt out death and destruction again. *Well, better not to freak out just yet, I suppose.*

"You okay there, Catnip?" Silence. "Catnip? This is Seer, hon."

"I-I'm fine. N-n-not used to t-this."

"And I pray you never do. Hobbit?"

"Right beside you," the other Medusa pulled into Cassie's peripheral vision.

"Good; three Novas down, four to go. Yo! Where are the rest of y'all?"

Schamann	Thu May 27, 2004 2:01 pm
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"Good; three Novas down, four to go. Yo! Where are the rest of y'all?"

"Right beside you and for a reason dammit!!! You're not alone Seer!" –Hobbit `s voice was a bit panicking, as she tailed and failed to hit the bandit, who just got a perfect lock on Seer.

Seer took that sharp turn right a second too late. It proved once again, that looking around the



battlefield and judging things takes time that sometimes should be spent very much elsewhere.

Missile was on her tail and It was hot. Seer dodged left and dropped decoys, but the damned thing was too smart. She quickly turned right and dived so strong, that she felt her stomach somewhere in her throat. Still....that was not fast enough.

"Shit! I'm hit! I'm hit!"

The world started to spin around her violently. Left, left, left, a wreck, a star, some ship, a wreck, a star...

"Hobbit, where are you?"

"In the middle of a f\*cking dogfight and that thing won't f\*cking die!, shit...I've just lost some good f\*cking piece of armor"

Seer leveled the flight and took a few quick looks around. Hobbit and her enemy were doing close distance dance, both already smoking. Cat was somewhere above, apparently not sure what to do. Her radio blipped and spoke:

"T'is Clam're babe, we got eaveryting pretty much under ae control `ere. What's you' status?"

"Had better times, where's Crone?"

"Dunno, went into....waitamminute..."

Hobbs interrupted sounding plainly shocked

"Seer, you have to let me go find her".....

-----  
*It's the dance with the devil, Devil helps you step....*

They danced in the deathbed of the dying mammoths of capitalships, in silence of the tombs, that once were homes.

They danced in silence, eerie silhouette shadows on a deserted cemetery, illuminated by radiation.

Coli was a good pilot, a really good one. Her machine was crippled and almost burned, she must have been wounded or at least seriously injured, judging by the sound of her breath coming from the radio. Yet still she managed to avoid Crone's fire and shoot every now and then.

"You're good Terran ...hhh...This I have to admit... you're good. Tell me, that plan with luring us between the capships and emp blow all shit up was yours, wasn't it?"

Crone said nothing

"You've sent your own woman here to die, as bait for us....hhhhh...but then....hhh you just couldn't have left, could you?.....hhhhh...had to check by yourself if maybe she's allright....hhhhh....."

Rebel kept dancing and dodging, slowly cruising towards the center of the deadzone. Radiation level increased dangerously, even for Crone's well shielded Medusa.

Rebel suddenly turned towards her and fired a quick barrage. *not to get distracted*

"...You see I knew someone who ordered this would come here...hhhhh... I was waiting for you.....hhhhh.....now all you can do is shoot me down before you die of another .....yghy....splosion or radiation.....you try to escape and I shoot your ass off sunshine..."

A wreck of a Siren drifted by, it's canopy broken, it's pilot still holding the flightstick, like some radioactive version of a Flying Dutchman. Suddenly Siren's remaining fuel tank exploded, sending pieces right into Corne's fighter.

<<Shields 30%, Minor armor damage, minor hull breaches>>

"...shall we?...Terran? .....yhhhhhhhyyy.... Alessandra Goraxe - Flame, at your service...."

Vexus

Thu May 27, 2004 8:08 pm

Crone jammed her flightstick wildly, always a split second behind the enemy's own movements. If she hadn't already been so badly injured, Crone knew she would have lost the duel long before. But she was going to finish it, one way or another. She was going to take her with-

*Ungrateful, unnatural child!*

In the time between moments, the words in the voice of Crone's father hit her like a slap to the face.

*Despite what you've been before, you are now a squadron leader for the Terran Navy. Squad leaders do not ignore their mission, they do not fight private wars, and they certainly do not abandon those under their command in the midst of battle. How many of them may be dead by now because you weren't out there doing your duty. Get out of this wasteland now! I raised a daughter of the Alliance, not a selfish bitch!*

That did it. Crone seemed to truly see her situation for the first time, like one awaking from a drunken stupor. Quickly, she began to aim her fighter away from the inferno and towards (where she hoped) her squadron was. The somewhat-raspy voice of the enemy came over the comm once again.

"So the brilliant Terran squad leader and strategist is just a coward after all." Crone swung her craft, putting her back to the half-destroyed enemy fighter.

"You can kiss my ass, traitor! It'll be the last thing you see in this life."

Crone hit her afterburners, and prayed for the chance to prove her father's words false.

Schamann

Fri May 28, 2004 2:07 p

They say turning your back to the enemy is one hell of a stupid thing to do. Unless you have afterburners, and are quick enough. Very quick, way more than average pilot. And still, it's said to be risky. But possible.

On the other hand – they say afterburning in the dense heavy debris field is even more stupid than turning your back to the enemy.

-----  
Crone didn't even know what hit her first, the full gun barrage from the back or the piece of something that could have been the hangar wall once. Her ship creaked, cried and wallowed, as steel armor started to bend and crushed from pressure, heat and impact. Her cockpit canopy snapped, and the spider's web of little cracks appeared. Something had blown up on her right wing, but she was too blinded to notice what it exactly was.

<<All systems damage critical. Explosion imminent, Eject! Eject! Eject!>>

But outside, was a radioactive inferno, full of deadly sharp object flying around at great speeds, full of bigger and smaller explosions. Outside was death - the enemy who wanted to kill her and now had her final victory.

So.....that was how the end looked like....

She tried to move her hand, but it was probably broken. She tried to say something to comm., but something was wrong with her mouth, and she still could not see very well. Something broke in the cockpit and she felt that some sort of a liquid splashed on her helmet. She heard the whistle and wallow of rapid decompression.

And then there was some eerie voice, like chorals of the angels

*"eject you stupid bitch! Eject!"*

-----  
Claymore and Banshee coordinated their flights and their formation, after the baddie suddenly

broke off and jumped a little away on afterburners. She then quickly turned back and taking the wide arch, speeding, began the approach.

"She's gonna go for a missile lock Claymore, I'm positive" – Banshee reported in cold blood, like if there was nothing wrong with this mission at all and everything was going as planned.

" A'ight lass, but for which o' us?" Claymore was calm either.

"Let us do it then, shall we?"

Vindicare	Sat May 29, 2004 12:37 am
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"...the pilot is going to target the weakest of us in an attempt to even the odds. Currently the weakest of us is me".

Banshee keyed a few buttons on her nav comp, establishing a series of waypoints, with a brief note attached. She made sure her flight was straight and level and sent them direct to Claymore via the laser link.

"Weel naw" came a curt acknowledgement of receipt.

As the fighter came in, it became more apparent that Banshee had surmised correctly, and the fighter started lining up with her. She put her plan into action.

The no.1 engine of her craft flared, spinning her round and upsetting her keel. Some of the fuel leaked by the second engine also created a larger ball of fire. She helped the craft spin for a few moments, before levelling off again, now facing away from the incoming enemy and opposite direction of Claymore.

"No.2 i'm having engine trouble!" she said as desperately as she could manage on an open band radio frequency, while simultaneously operating her fuel flow control, increasing pressure in tank 2. She watched the gauge drop slowly as the fighter closed in, and a warble began from her HAS. When it reached 1/4th capacity she shut down all function in no.2 engine, leaving the fuel to return to its solid state. Checking her no.1 engine fuel she noted just over half remaining, enough for what she had planned and perhaps a little more action before withdrawing, albeit at half her original pace.

A high pitched BEEP BEEP signified lock on. Banshee waited. *She'll want to make sure, and thats a mistake. A wounded fox still has teeth and claws.* She armed her first hard mounted missile and released it from its clamps. It fell a few feet behind her as she drifted under momentum.

BEEEEEEEEEP "No.5 you have incoming!" Claymore said in a very disguised and hysterical voice over comm.

Banshee once more hit her afterburner, jumping forwards from a near stop gave her a slight uneasy sensation, but she shook it off to concentrate on her radar. *I hope your ready Claymore...*

The enemy missile passed through the space occupied by Banshee moments ago, being followed by the craft, determined to see the end of this Terran oppressor. Banshee hit her abort button. The missile had drifted down from where she was, but it was close enough. The afterburner had melted some of the fuel that had crystallised in her wake, and the missile provided the energy to catalyse it. The explosion created a ball of fire much larger than an average missile blast, which rapidly caught up with and engulfed the incoming projectile, also lightly singeing Banshee's shields. As the explosion contained very little actual projectiles, the energy involved was mainly heat and light - light which caught the pursuer unprepared.

Charon	Mon May 31, 2004 3:51 am
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Claymore blinked rapidly to dispell the spots that blossomed in her vision from Banshee's rather... unorthodox tactics. She'd been following the setup a lot more intently than she'd thought, and had almost been fooled by it.

Not anywhere near to the extent that her adversary had, however... she cackled gleefully once she saw the enemy fighter drifting. The hand on her throttle depressed the comm button.

"Sweet dreams, lassie," she snarled ferally, simultaneously opening up with a full gun barrage. Her opponent, bathed in a stream of projected particles, gave up it's grasp on the mortal coil, and seperated rather picturesquely, before exploding altogether.

Claymore sighed and rubbed at her neck for a moment, then keyed her comm again. "Thanks, 5. Good setup, lass."

"Anytime," came the crisp answer.

The only thing running through Claymore's mind was *'Sweet dreams, lassie?! Who'm I, Dirty Harriet?!*

Vexus

Mon May 31, 2004 12:12 pm

Amidst the pain, confusion, and the primal fear of impending death, a part of Crone was no longer in the here and now. It had gone somewhere else, a memory long forgotten.

-----

The house was cold, and the windows surrounding the living room were outlined in ice and snow. Crone saw herself as a girl of eleven years, sitting on a mat in front of the heater unit and playing with her toy spaceships. The daylight was fading. It was time for father to return home.

Sure enough, the door opened, but the man who entered was not her father. It was a man she knew, Crone was certain, but she couldn't remember his name. He had a young, kind-looking face with red hair and glasses, but his expression was one of sorrow. He wore a uniform, but not like the ones her father had worn.

The man sat down in a chair and asked where her mother was in a tired voice. Crone heard herself say that mom had gone into town to get dinner for the evening. The man then beckoned her to come and sit on his lap, which she did. Then, with words carefully chosen and his voice quivering slightly, he explained that her father was never going to come home. He had become sick and had died that afternoon. Crone saw herself becoming hysterical, crying and asking for her mother. The man assured her that her mother would be fine, and that he would stay until she returned. The child Aurora buried her face in the man's uniform and wept. The kind man held her for a long time, she now remembered, and he stayed with her as he had promised. As he had left the house after her mother's return, she recalled the limp in his left leg and the hacking cough he had managed to suppress during his visit. The last time she saw him before the front door closed, she noticed some strange blemishes on the back of his neck.

"Hello, Aurora," came a voice from behind her. The part of Crone that was elsewhere turned to see the kind man standing before her, his expression the same as in her memory.

"Why am I here?" Crone asked.

"When filled with regret, some will revisit these places. Not a good way to start. Not a good way to die." Crone could feel the panic coming on again.

"No, I can't die yet. There's still so much to do. I must see this to the end. My father said-"

"Your father had great wisdom in life. But in death, you have twisted his voice to hold up your own fears and doubts. I barely recognize him now."

"Please, can't you do something? I want to live."

"Then start acting like it. Release your pain and your hate. Your hopes are not in vain. You may yet see them fulfilled. Remember those still living who care about you, and remember how this "traitor" loved you like the daughter he would not live to see grow up."

"I will try," Crone said meekly, her voice on the edge of tears.

"Good, then pull the lever."

"What?"

"Pull the lever."

-----

Back in the here and now, Crone's arm moved to the ejection handle and yanked it free. Before losing all thought, she felt her self propelled upward... ascending....

Schamann	Mon May 31, 2004 1:36 pm	
<p>Cat was never before so happy at the sight of Morrigan and her fighters.</p> <p><b>"Attention all Terran fighters, Enemy reinforcements imminent, we are withdrawing. All fighters return to hangar ASAP. All units still engaged, the priority is to disable at least one craft and bring the prisoner. Squadrons..report your status..."</b></p> <p>She quickly commed her comrades.</p> <p>"Seer Hobbs, they want them alive..."</p> <p>"I'm trying to stay f*cking alive myself in case you haven't noticed!" Hobbit was far from being in the mood to negotiate Coli's surrender. The Unknown enemy fighter, for that matter, seemed to be far from it too. They were running in eights of dogfight.</p> <p><i>it's me and Seer to get her from behind, it can't be that difficult</i></p> <p>-----</p> <p>"Claymore, what would next orders be? Any idea where should our illustrious leader be?"</p>		
Schamann	Tue Jun 08, 2004 10:32 am	
<p>"Catnip, wake the f*ck up!!!, We need you! Shiiiiiiiit!!!"</p> <p>Kat started coming to her senses, but there was something that interrupted her planned return into action.</p> <p>"Stop crying and start flying Hobbit...this is not a shooting range. Serpent here. We are taking over the fight from here, step aside and leave the bandit to us."</p> <p>Seer levelled her flight with Kat as if in attempt to join the fight. Instead she wave her wings to draw the young OSI's attention. When Kat looked at her cockpit, she saw Dory looking at her, making strange faces and repeatedly hitting her hand against her helmet from the side where ear usually is.</p> <p><i>So... that was the reason she lost the command.</i></p> <p>Hobbs desperately and repeatedly tried to lose her pursuer, but to no good so far. Suddenly, burst of plasma came along, from the charging Arieses lead by Voeller, and that was it. First salvo got the Charan's starboard wing and bow, shields being evaporated in a manner of seconds. Hobbs was badly damaged, certainly humiliated, but alive and free. Enemy now was the one in trouble.</p> <p>"Terran leader here, to a Charan fighter. You have five seconds to disarm your ship and put it to a complete halt, otherwise you will be destroyed."</p> <p>"Blow me"</p> <p>"As you wish"</p> <p>...the second salvo almost ripped the Charan in two. Serpent closed up on her, leaving her people around for keeping guard, and started the killing. Crippled enemy fighter still could make for a dogfight with an Aries, but being damaged and that much outgunned, she wasn't being putting up a fight....</p> <p>....she was being executed.</p> <p>"You will eject, or you will die a very painful death out there, Charan"</p> <p>"Better than ending up in your hands"</p> <p>"A good point"</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Hobbs was on the radio again:</p> <p>"Catnip, do you read me? Seer's not responding, I think something's wrong with her radio, I'm</p>		

taking command.... You take her home, there's nothing for you to watch here....I.....I need to check up if...if Crone might....." there was something strange in her voice, more than fear and shock.

"...if she's alive"

-----

Claymore and Banshee were just about to gather up their toys and head home, when they spotted the turmoil in the deadzone, something was making itself a way out of it.

"Nae waitaminoot, was' there"

"Hopefully Crone or Nef, but I doubt it."

A fighter was clearing itself a path out of the deadzone, dumbfiring missiles left and right to sweep the clear way. It was crippled, torn, cut and battered. It was flying on only one main engine and constant thrust from manouvring jets to balance the momento from countless leaks. In the language of all deck crews - it was dying. And it was bringin something with it, slowly and clumsy circling around that something as it passed throught the debris field, clearing a way more for that thing it was leading, than for herself.

The fighter was a Siren.

"Now is it just me or was lieutenant Yates taking a Medusa for this mission?"

"S'e was, lass"

"I had the impression that I had been reading her ID signal from the location of that Siren, which smells Charan to me."

Vexus

Wed Jun 09, 2004 9:00 pm

Crone sat in the silence of her escape pod, her eyes starring into the stars, her breathing shallow but persistent. The numerous turns of events was astounding in a way, she thought. No more than an hour ago she had been the leader of an (at least semi-cohesive) squadron as part of a well-coordinated attack. Now she was a piece of space debris in a chaotic battlezone, her squadron scattered across the battlefield, at least one squad member still missing... and now this! One last humiliation, but by far the greatest of all. Her brooding was again interrupted by a raspy voice over the comm.

"Heh heh... well, that's it then...Hhhhh... No more missiles... Engines and guns just failed... Looks like we're on even ground now. Hhhhh, shall we continue our dogfight, then?"

Despite all that had taken place, a part of Crone laughed at that. A part of her that looked beyond the battle, beyond the hate, and saw underneath all the unimportant details. A part that could see a reflection of herself in her enemy.

"Crone! This is Claymorre! We're coming to gecha, lass!" came a welcomed voice in Crone's ear. Crone saw two specs of light fast approaching. She was so overcome with relief, that she almost forgot her duty once again. She first wondered if she should just keep quiet. It would be easier. But the same part of her that had laughed wouldn't allow it. With such inaction was dishonor.

"Claymore. This is Crone. I'm banged up a bit, but I'm alright. The hostile is just as crippled as I am. Do not destroy her. We'll need to find out what happened here."

Maverick

Mon Jun 14, 2004 3:32 am

It was dark. Very dark. The kind of dark that makes you dizzy. Kat stared off into the darkness between the stars, trying to find a way to escape the hell behind her.

*You take her home* That's what Hobbs had said. Seer's actions were clearly showing radio failure, but Kat was still not fully herself.

*What are you doing Kittie? Get out of there! Go back to the ship and take Seer with you! She needs to be taken out. Come on you can't be screwing off now!* Her inner voice was saying. She had the sudden urge to yell back to herself: "Being scared doesn't help you insensitive bitch! And you are definately not helping!"

*Suck it up and be scared later!* Kat, tired of arguing with herself, reluctantly agreed. Slowly, she came back to herself, hands still making indentions into the flight controls, but she had managed to move next to Seer's wing and fly with her back to the ship, trying to get back to dock and get out of that damned plane. It scared the bejeezus out of her the more she stayed in it. But at least she wasn't like a zombie flying the plane.

Schamann

Wed Jun 23, 2004 1:54 pm

„Looks like this is it Terran...ghhhhhh.....oxygen level is falling down, coolers in engine are failing, and there is something funny and red flowing out of my mouth...ghhh...why am I telling you this...”

“and some take delight in carragies and rolling....hhhhh..some take delight in the argh...rling and a bowling.....”

...

It was quite sad to listen to once a good warrior dying like that. It was almost painful.

...

“.....No f\*cking way you take me alive you bastards! ....hhhhhhhhh.....I did not betray anyone!....ghhhh...I’m a pilot...a soldier.... You hear me!.....hhhh...I didn’t betray!”

...

“A’ight Crone we got you and yae prisoner covered, what sheall we do?”

“Obey the order from Morrigan and vithdraw to your ship Claymore, you bloody vell know that Crone is not in charge as inactive, effective since her ejection. Had we had ejected pilots giving orders we’d have ended up as the crippled led by the blind.” Hearing Serpent’s voice like that on the radio was one good reason to know how she had got her callsign. “Back to Morrigan - now”

It seemed fairly unwise to dispute.

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Morrigan started her turn as Claymore and Banshee were approaching the landing bay. It looked like the plan was to hide the cruiser behind the explosions and debris, in it’s electro-magnetic shadow, and then move on undetected by whatever was coming that way. Looked like a good plan.

As they were landing they heard CAG on the radio.

“Serpent here to Morrigan, we have cleared the place. The tugs did their job. We have three ours and one enemy pilot in e-pods plus one enemy in disoperational Siren needing urgent medical assistance and hospitalization, I also advice strong military escort for that one, the pilot in question is lieutenant Flame, I repeat, somehow we caught Flame.”

“Morrigan here, acknowledged, What about the rest of SaR operation?”

“No other survivors. I report two KIA’s – callsigns: Barney and Nefertiti. Serpent out”

When they left their fighters they saw Seer, Hobbs and Kat, all in silence. Hobbs was first to speak:

“Is Aurora alright?”

“She ejected and survived the fight, but was in rather bad condition. She should be being brought onboard as we speak” Banshee answered in plain voice.

Speak of the devil, Crone appeared in the flight deck, sitting on a stretchers and carried by two paramedics out of the SAR shuttle. Yates immediately stood up. Her head was bandaged and her arm was in the sling.

Hobbit started to approach her, almost running, but stopped after but a few paces.

Crone approached her squadron and looked them in the eyes.

Vexus

Thu Jun 24, 2004 6:17 am

For a few moments, none of the Novas spoke. When she was certain she was going to die, Aurora had thought of a hundred things that she wanted to say to her squadmates. Yet, here her chance had come, and she was at a loss to speak.

Finally, she simply asked the question to which she most dreaded the answer.

"Where's Nef?"

No one responded, but the look in Rhiannon's eyes told her all she needed to know. Aurora felt an icy numbness come over her. It was a feeling she was sadly acquainted with.

With a slowness that made her seem ancient and incredibly weary, Aurora leaned against a nearby supply crate and sank to the floor, her head hung in defeat. In that instant, her visage eerily resembled the face upon her helmet. Ursula was immediately at her side. Cassie leaned her head onto Chirstine's shoulder with tears in her eyes. Kat looked down at her feet and was silent. Rhiannon's face remained emotionless, though with visible effort.

For a while they remained in that pose, a living image of loss and grief. Then, Aurora raised her head, her blue eyes as dry as a desert.

"The CAG will no doubt want a debriefing pretty soon. We should get back to the ready room before she decides to hunt us down. Let's go Novas."

With Aurora leading the way, the girls walked in silence out of the hangar.

Vindicare	Thu Jun 24, 2004 1:46 pm
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*I salute your bravery but deplore your tactics.*

Banshee's mind was still thinking mechanically, although enough of her normal mannerisms had returned for her to wrap an arm round Seer as they began to walk from the room.

"Thanks" came a muffled sound from somewhere in her left shoulder.

"Don't mention it. It'd be bad for my image" Whether or not Seer appreciated this attempt at joviality Banshee couldn't determine. Her brain told her it might be a little out of place. Then again, her brain also told her death was a part of war, something to be expected. She mused over her companion's reactions as they continued walking in comparative silence, while also idly wondering how many kills and assists she could add to her craft's paintwork.

Vexus	Sun Jun 27, 2004 6:11 am
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Like a group of shambling corpses, the Dark Novas filed into the ready room. The other squads had yet to arrive, and the tomb-like quiet of the room stood in stark contrast to the roar of the flight deck. As the women took their seats, Aurora stumbled as the room lurched before her eyes and her legs buckled. It seems she wasn't as ok as she had previously thought. Rhiannon reached out a hand to steady her, but Aurora shook it off. Then, slowly, she eased herself into her chair and breathed a long sigh. For a while, the silence continued, then Aurora heard Christine from behind her.

"She did do something quite brave... and very effective."

"Yeah," Aurora replied, matching Christine's emotionless tone.

"I can't believe she's gone," Ursula said in a shaky voice. "I mean... it hasn't even been a month yet and-"

"She deserved what she got!" Aurora interrupted. Ursula recoiled as if she'd be struck. Aurora looked at the pilot and immediately regretted her words.

"I'm sorry, Hobs... I..." Aurora wasn't sure how to say what she wanted to say. There was just too much. Looking down at her feet, she heard Cassie softly crying from behind her. Raising her head again, Aurora tried to muster some control back into her voice.

"Hobs, Seer, you'll have to stay strong... at least until the debriefing is over. If you fall apart in front of Serpent, she might take you off the roster. I'll be damned if I'm going to lose another squad member today."

Schamann	Mon Jul 05, 2004 9:22 am
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The moment Crone uttered her words the moment the air in the room changed. Rhiannon never did consider herself good with people, but she could immediately feel how those words affected the pilots, especially Hobbs. She took half a step backwards, as if smashed in the face. She raised her head and looked her leader in the eyes when she spoke in soft, quite voice. That was a very bitter look.



"Do not take us for kids just because we are short.....lieutenant... Sir" She gulped audibly on a verge of tears as if that last words were worse for her that all the hell she had been through in recent hours. "We were out there with everyone else fighting for you. Killing for you."

The door suddenly swung open and there was a rush of pilots coming in, Arrowheads in similar grieving silence as Novas, and following their steps the rest of the pilots. Serpent was closing the parade.

"Attention pilots!" – she looked like a valkyrie from the old myths, tall, strong build with the face of a murderer who found his paradise in the eternal bloodbath of the battlefield. But then her facelines smoothed, and she entered.

LT Voeller paced the room and stood at the desk in the middle. She eyed all pilots in turn, each and every one of them separately, before she spoke.

"The mission was accomplished. Congratulations on a job well done."

Eyes opened in disbelief, murmurs started to buzz between pilots.

"Silence" Voeller said matter of factly, with the voice quiet, but cold with the coldness that made you think of a lot of bad things provided for in military code of conduct.

"Given the limited intelligence and the extremely surprising circumstances, the mission was an outstanding success. Vee disposed of two enemy capital class ships, vee succeeded to eliminate enemy force of nearly two squadrons, vee gathered the intelligence data to somehow solve the puzzle of our enemy's strange operations. Finally, vee have collected prisoners, who might be of essential importance to our intelligence. All of this at a cost of losing two pilots."

The silence in the room was almost like in a tomb.

"None of them had to die, but it happened and vee can't turn the time back. Vee are, as are all men, imperfect, we make mistakes. Barney was a good soldier, she tried hard and she usually made up with her hard work what she lacked in skill. But she met an ace pilot and she fell. Holmes, you did not know that, and I doubt you could have, but given the battle circumstances, even if you had, I'd expect you to do exactly the same. In command, sometimes the people that you kill are your own – simple as that."

They just stood there, listening to a woman who was their leader telling them that she accepts sending them to a certain death. It was an eerie feeling.

"Nefertiti's death falls entirely on me. Should any one of you think otherwise, you are wrong." She found Crone's eyes and looked into it deep. "I misjudged her mental state and allowed her to fly, though she was off the roster at the moment. I misjudged her many times, I believe, as well as many of you. But it was my judgement that let her fly towards her death. She was a good pilot, but she shouldn't have been accepted into this mission, into this squadron and this flight."

The door swung open again and a flag officer stormed inside. If Serpent looked like a Valkyrie for a moment, Commander Verulian had the air of Kali herself.

"You will report to me immediately about this mission lieutenant! Now!"

Voeller's eyes were that of blue ice.

"Absolutely Sir. Immediately AFTER I complete my present task, I will be happy to assist you in any way I am allowed to and you are entitled to demand." She then turned to pilots, paying no further attention to the OSI Commander.

But her hand, leaned against the desk, was visibly shaking.

"Yates, you don't need me to tell you how stupid your solo raid was. You acted like a foolish youngster and your motives are not an excuse. I, however, cannot discipline you or report you, for the fact that I unfortunately need to inform you that you have been nominated for the silver collar pin – bravery in achieving an important tactical goal, up to the Captain to decide. You happened to have granted us the capture of one of the much desired enemy officers – lieutenant Goraxe. You

can feel proud." Voeller's snicker was more than just sarcastic, it seemed also kind of sad.

Apparently Commander Verulian had more than enough of it. "Now lieutenant if you could spare us your melancholy upon reflecting your former teacher's fate, there are matters you need to report to me – now" and it was obvious that this time she meant business.

"Yes Sir, right away"

Voeller walked stiffly from behind the desk. She suddenly did not seem to be that tough and dangerous. She looked just tired. Verulian followed her out of the room.

After they left, Young approached Crone with a serious, but rather friendly look.

"Lieutenant, we're leaving. We've lost one of us and we need to be together alone with this for a moment. Later however, we will be holding kind of unofficial ceremony in the memory of first lieutenant Wheatler. You Novas are welcome to join us, if you choose so. There is more than one good pilot to mourn after today."

In silence, the Arrowheads and other pilots started to leave.

Vexus

Sat Jul 10, 2004 10:41 am

In the echo-filled confines of the locker room, the Dark Novas changed out of their flight suits in silence. The grief she felt was still quite fresh, but in hearing Young speak of a ceremony, she was better able to push it aside for now. She told herself there would be a time for mourning, but now there was still work to be done. This line of reasoning, however, did not quench the anger she still felt. Jessica had been a good friend for the short time Aurora had known her... and a damn good pilot with a better heart for those she flew with.

But her final act, inspite of the result, had been to disobey Aurora one last time, and that cut deep... perhaps deeper than the scar she wore on her cheek. As she closed her locker, she glanced over at the one labeled "Jessica "Nefertiti" Carter" and her anger erupted. Startling the other Novas, she grasped the handle with her uninjured hand and pulled with all her might. The locker door was ripped from its hinges with a loud \*creak!\* and Aurora proceeded to hurl it across the room, where it smashed into the far wall. In the shock-filled air, Aurora looked at her squadmates in turn with an expression of sorrow mixed with shame.

"I need to clean out her locker.... It's standard procedure."

The words were spoken matter-of-factly, but her eyes told a different story. A wave of dizziness then overcame her and she sat down on a nearby bench. Looking down at her feet, the squad leader ran her fingers through her hair. Then, squaring her shoulders and seeming to come to a decision, she rose.

"Dark Novas! Fall in!"

Without a word, the women lined up and stood at attention before Aurora, whose face was now truly composed for the first time since seeing Nefertiti fly into the inferno.

"Alright, ladies, the Arrowheads are mourning their loss just as we are, and they've invited us to a ceremony later in honor of both pilots. In addition, I'm sure we'll all be mourning privately in our own ways. However, right now I need each and every one of you to stay focused on your duty until the immediate issues are resolved. Cat, you are to report to your OSI superiors and present the intelligence you gathered during the battle. Afterwards, I want a copy of your report, at least as much as you can show me. Banshee, I need you to check us in with personnel and see when our next flight might be. Hobbit, I want you and Seer to go to the mess hall and stay there for now. There's still likely to be a killer onboard and I want you in a very public place for your own safety. Claymore, escort them there and ask the chef if she'd keep an eye on them. Then, I want you to make our official squadron report to the CAG. I'd do it myself, but I need to get down to the medical bay. I don't want to hear any arguments. We'll meet up in the mess hall at 1900 hours. Dismissed!"

As the squad members dispersed, Aurora walked back to Jessica's locker and looked inside. To her amazement, she saw Nef's Triple Threat Squadron medallion laying flat on the middle shelf. Slowly, Aurora picked it up and turned it over in her hand. Why was it here? Nef had said that she always wore it when flying.

"I wonder if part of her knew... what was going to happen." Cassie's voice came from the end of the line of lockers. Aurora didn't look at Cassie, but just nodded.

"I don't care what the CAG says, Seer, Nef *did* belong on this mission."

"You need any help getting to sickbay?"

"I'll be alright. Go on."

With a concerned frown, Cassie turned and disappeared behind the lockers. Aurora waited a few moments, then headed out herself. As she walked, she carefully placed Nef's medallion around her neck and tucked in under her shirt. She still felt a little wobbly on her feet, but she was reasonably sure she could make it to the doctor. She only hoped that whatever she was feeling was just temporary.

Vindicare	Fri Jul 16, 2004 9:58 am
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Banshee finished stowing her helmet and gloves in her locker, choosing for the moment to remain in her flight suit, and walked out of the room towards the personnel officer's room and flight rota board.

As she walked she noted other crewmembers seemed to bow their heads to her, as if in some kind of respect, or perhaps as a way of telling her to be strong about the loss to her squadron.

She was still undecided when she came to the rota list and officer's room. The roster officer was not present, presumably being briefed on the conflict's events in order to amend the flight rosters for affected squadrons *"like mine"* and alleviate any possible embarrassment in calling a dead crewmen's name from the roster.

The old rota was still displayed on the wall, however a notice had been superimposed, stating that active duty rosters were suspended until a new roster was finalised, but all squadrons must retain alert status. *"I guess they dont want to risk sending fighters out in case we bring a tail back to our location"*

Banshee took note of what was necessary, logging in her PDA what the message said, and the estimated time of the new rota's completion, then turned to walk away. On doing so she wondered idly if the firing range counted as a recreational area, and if there was still a restriction. After she had relayed the data to Crone and the other Novas, she began a meandering path towards it and discovered that it was operational and her card allowed her access.

She selected an old-style PSG-2000 Kinetic Long Range Rifle, and punched in for 3 full target sets. As she rolled the target back as far as it would go, it struck her how quiet this area was for a gun range, and she wondered where the other people were *"probably trying to forget about the war after the battle...well we all react in different ways i suppose"*

She pulled the rifle up to her left shoulder, placed her right hand under the stock, and released some of her pent up anger.

Vexus	Tue Jul 20, 2004 11:29 am
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"Where have you been?!"

Dr. Banner's words came short and scolding- like a mother to a misbehaving child- and Aurora was caught off guard, managing only a stuttered response.

"I... I had t-to go to the debriefing."

"My nurses told me you had run off before they could examine you," Banner said as she rose from her desk and entered the main examination ward where Aurora now stood. The chief medical officer of the Morrigan was a tall woman of medium-build with dark copper skin, dark hair, and facial features that looked familiar to Aurora, though she could not place them. It would take her a few more days before she recognized them. Dr. Banner must have a largely Native American background.

"Damn you flygirls and your macho bullshit! Just because the men are gone doesn't mean you have to be as negligent about your health as they were. I don't care if the captain herself orders you to a debriefing. When you eject from your fighter, you become my patient, and you'll report to sickbay immediately for examination. Is that clear, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir," Aurora said meekly, still taken aback by the furiosity of the doctor's tone. Banner breathed a sigh that said "You won't listen to me, anyway. Why bother?", then motioned to one of

the nearby beds.

"Have a seat, Ms. Yates, and let's take a look at you."

Aurora obeyed, and then winced as the doctor squeezed her injured left arm.

"Yeah, this is broken, alright. I'll apply some regenerative patching. I'd prefer to let the bone heal naturally, but the captain will likely want you to be on flight-status again as quickly as possible. You'll be able to use it in a few days, but until then it must remain *completely immobile*. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Aurora repeated. She was feeling like a cadet before this woman. It was an unnerving thing to experience.

"Ejection can bump you around a lot. Do you have any symptoms I should know about?"

"I've been feeling rather dizzy lately. And my stomach doesn't feel quite right."

"Lay down," Banner said with a concerned expression. "I'm going to do a full work-up on you. Get comfortable, 'cause this may take a while." Aurora wondered if that last remark was some kind of joke. How does one *ever* get comfortable in a hospital?

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"It's radiation poisoning."

"What?" Aurora asked as she sat up... and immediately regretted doing so as the room spun around. She steadied herself as Banner continued.

"I don't know what you were doing out there, but you got a dose much higher than normal for intrasystem space. You're very lucky that yours is a mild case only, but I'll have to perform some nanite injections to repair the damaged DNA. You're going to be here a while."

As Banner headed off to check on another patient, Aurora sighed and reached for her PDA in her pocket. She had to contact Rhiannon and let her know that their planned meeting would have to change its location.

Vindicare

Wed Jul 21, 2004 1:35 pm

Claymore finished the walk to the mess with the still fairly distraught smaller members of the squadron, and had agreed with the chef that they could do with something sweet to help distract them. She emerged shortly with two rather loaded bowls of what looked a lot like ice cream. Claymore nudged her as she walked past "Ah thou' there wernt nae o' tha an borrd" Chef winked and kept walking "There isnt"

"Aye" Claymore smirked, then bid farewell to Seer and Hobbit as she made her way to the CAG's office.

On arriving she discovered raised voices coming from the other side of the door, and decided to submit a written report instead. As she walked away her PDA beeped, and she flipped it open quickly.

*weel tha's nae good* she thought, noting the implications of the change of venue.

She quickly called Seer to relay the news, and the sight of her and Hobb's faces smeared with ice cream and smiling cheered her up slightly. Seer's eyes changed when she too realised the possibilities of the change of venue.

"Ah'll come tae collect yae laterr, but nae ahm gonn' find Banshee, she's nae answerin her calls"

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Banshee worked the bolt with polished precision, watching the casing fall to the floor before resighting, completely unaware of the blinking light and shrill pheeep-pheeep of her PDA on the floor to her right.

Maverick

Fri Jul 23, 2004 12:59 am

Kat groaned and sank against the wall outside the OSI quarters. After taking a rather intense grilling, she was ready just to sleep the rest of the day. Or night. Or whatever period of the day it was, she lost all track of time during the fight and the debriefings. The cool metal felt nice against Kat's neck. She'd been feeling nauseous ever since she was *pried* from her cockpit. Thinking about it now, she wondered why they didn't use vice grips...or the jaws...her hands wouldn't leave the controls.

"Just a little battle shock. It happens to a lot of first time combatants. Especially when they go out into a battle that fierce." Was what once greasemonkey said to another who had her hand over her mouth when she got word of Barney's status.

Kat didn't know what that moment stood out in her mind, maybe it was the partial hope that there'd be two other mechanics to each side of her, one with her eyes covered and the other with her ears covered. Wait....yes that was it. It would also explain why she had a fit of hysterics so bad she was able to let go of the controls.

She was also feeling very bad. Being the "new girl", she didn't know Jessica as well as the other Novas. Maybe that was why she felt bad that she didn't get to know Nef better before she died...

Kat activated her PDA with the clipped report shining at her. She'd have to report back to Aurora soon. Maybe she'd have calmed down by then. But first, maybe a bite to eat...that'll calm her nerves...maybe.

JediBubbles

Sat Jul 24, 2004 11:21 pm

Seer chewed on her ice cream-coated lip for a second and thought hard about the implications of Claymore's news. *F\*ck. This is not good. Ooo, and ten bucks says it's f\*cking radiation poisoning. Double f\*ck. Sh\*t, I'm slipping into auto-swear mode. Triple f\*ck. Enh. Worrying won't help anything.*

Cassie looked up across the table at Hobbs, and almost laughed at the sight of Ursula's face. The ice cream, her stature, and the look of helpless anticipation on her face had the effect of making her squadmate look about twelve. She grinned broadly at the thought that she probably looked just as young.

*Too young. The grin fell. Too young for this. All of us are. If we were fifty, we'd still be. Dying is okay. Everybody dies. It's seeing death that f\*cking sucks. Not to mention dealing it out.* She tried not to let her jumble of grief-stricken thoughts show as she closed her PDA.

"Crone's stuck in medical, so we're meeting there." Here Seer failed miserably at keeping her voice neutral.

Hobbit's expression flickered through so many emotions so fast that even the ever-intuitive part of Seer's mind threw up its hands in defeat. It settled on "more weary than should be humanly possible" and the blonde pilot slumped back in her chair and ran a hand over her face. *Well, so much for the ice cream bubble of bliss. Hello again from both of us, Reality,* Seer thought, watching her.

"She'd better be okay. We...I can't take that...not right after...after Nef."

*And I'm sure that goes double for you, dearie, and not because Crone's our squad leader.* Cassie's smile came back a bit, though it was really more of a mini-knowing-smirk.

"You know how doctors are. It's probably just precautionary," Seer lied.

Hobbit frowned.

"Okay, fine, it's probably not good, but I'm positive Crone would have told Claymore if it was *really* bad."

Now the other woman cocked an eyebrow.

"Okay, so we all know Crone probably wouldn't admit she was in trouble if she was about to be pulped by the Stay-Puffed Marshmallow Man"--Ursula snorted and the shadow of a smile flickered across her face--"but 'what if'-ing'll just drive us mad, especially now, so just leave off, 'kay? She'll be fine." Seer's mind mocked this feeble attempt to reassure the both of them, and the two shortest Novas sat in silence for awhile. Ursula absentmindedly swiped the last traces of sticky cream from her face. Cassandra contemplated some stubborn stains on the table.

"She shouldn't have gone. She wouldn't have died."

Seer's head shot up and she furiously struggled not to vault the table and scream at Hobbit what a royally f\*cking stupid statement that was.

"I thought I told you to leave off the "what-if"-ing? At least she's not hurting and grieving anymore."

Suddenly Cassie broke into a devious grin, "'Sides, I'd like to have seen you, the CAG, or God herself manage to keep Nef out of that battlezone once she'd decided she needed to be in it!"

She hopped up on her chair and swooped into the Flying Crane before leaping off, judo-chopping wildly. "HooooaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiYA!

Half an hour later Kat was very puzzled when she entered the mess hall to find the two previously most distraught Novas lying on the floor, laughing hysterically.

Vexus	Sun Jul 25, 2004 10:10 am
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Aurora lay on one of the many hospital beds that lined the walls of the main sickbay. A small host of tubes connected her to a collection of softly beeping and humming machinery. She now wore the standard hospital gown, though she had insisted on keeping Nef's medallion, which lay beneath the sterile clothing. Her hair was unbraided; a silver waterfall that cascaded over her pillow.

She had spent the last hour or so trying to take a nap, but falling asleep while laying on her back was a trick she had never mastered. Via her PDA, she had recieved confirmation on the new meeting site by everyone save Chistine, and Aurora wondered why it was taking her so long to respond. As she was unable to sleep, she decided to watch the video feed from a small screen at her bedside. The Greyhelms had won an upset over the Vigilantes, though they had lost their best wide-reciever to a season-ending shoulder injury in the second quarter. Political pundits were debating the recent Risae secessions and speculating on the fate of the terran naval campaign in Eta Cassiopeiae. Trade between Alpha Centauri and Sol was down, and the price of MSMH was still at an all-time high.

As Aurora continued to channel-surf, she failed to notice Edward watching her from the far end of the room, standing perfectly still as nurses darted to and fro around him....

Vindicare	Mon Jul 26, 2004 11:48 pm
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Claymore began methodically searching all the areas she knew or suspected Banshee might be, starting with the hanger bay.

It was a hive of activity, mechanics dashing around with all manner of tools and pipelines, obviously in a hurry to restore everything to full battle readiness. She approached the head mechanic whom she had met before.

"No, i'm afraid i haven't seen her. But if you find her tell her we need all available technical hands if she wants something to occupy her time. You lot made a right mess of my craft" She added somewhat gruffly. Claymore saw her point, her machines were her pride and joy, and she'd lost five and had more than half crippled. Nova had lost one. Arrowheads had lost another. It seemed strange that she should suffer the greater loss, albeit mechanical.

She snapped out of her reviere "Aye, sorry 'bout tha', boot we werr oot numbered...Ah'll tell Banshee when i see her...ah tak' it tha' ken summat ah daent"

"She has mechanical training, from what i understand"

"Ah sae" *"Interesting"*

"As i said, we're kind of busy..."

Claymore took the hint and headed to her next port of call, the gym.

It was largely empty, presumably due to the exhaustion of most personel from the conflict and aftermath, and Claymore began thinking about that match she'd never have with Nef...

She walked on, feeling gloomier, not only because she was thinking of Nef, but also because her task was becoming increasingly difficult: She was running out of ideas.

The Bunk Room: Empty

The Showers: Not Empty but no Banshee.

Claymore stopped and thought for a moment.

*"where could she be? she'd either be reading, or training with one of her weapons. Not in the gym...there's only one other place weapons are permitted..."*

Her card beeped and the door hissed back, and a single, sharp CRACK echoed through the room, accompanied by a flash and a second later a THUMP as the target swung backwards from the impact. She walked towards the origin of the flash, noting the eiree darkness of the room closing

round her as the flash subsided.

She rounded the fire gaurd for position 13 and instantly saw a fairly familiar, yet somehow slightly menacing silhouette. She stood watching for a while as the figure expertly worked the heavy rifle's bolt, and raised it to shoulder height. Quickly she put her hands to her ears. CRACK flash THUMP. Claymore's eye's strained in the half light, but could just make out a circle of holes no more than three inches in diameter on the target.

She decided it was best to interrupt while the chamber was empty.

"Err Banshee..." she began, however the silhouette merely started reworking the bolt and resighted. CRACK flash THUMP

Claymore thought for a moment, and noticed the PDA in the bag to the figure's right. She almost slapped her forehead. *"EARMUFFS!"*

She walked closer to tap her on the shoulder...

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Banshee sighted up on her one-hundred-seventeenth imaginary Charan and let fly. Her arm was starting to ache but she was too focused to stop now. She worked the bolt almost without thinking, almost seeing the Charan get up and advance towards her, threatening her life, threatening her friends lives. Her anger dulled the ache in her arm and steadied her aim. CRACK flash THUMP *"dammit 2" off* she reloaded, failing to notice the change in ambient lighting of the room as the door opened. CRACK flash THUMP *"Hmm, closer"* She had the dim awareness of some other presence in the room, but put it down to her brain's synthetic Charans

*"...Banshee" "Great, they're even calling my name. That'll look good on my psych report."*

CRACK flash THUMP *"better..."*

Suddenly she felt a presence behind her, and a sharp tap on her shoulder. Instantly, she dropped her weapon and grabbed the offending limb, pulling it in front of her so the owner's right shoulder came into view. Like lightning she swept her left leg behind the aggressor, toppling backwards, bringing them both to the floor. With her left arm across the neck she was able to turn and get a better view for the kill...and was immediately engulfed in shame. She took off her muffs and looked at Claymore.

"I am deeply sorry. I can get into a combat frame of mind sometimes, the mind plays tricks on me" She removed her arm from against her squadmates neck, instead using it to prop herself up. She did not try to rise however.

"Tha's a fine greetin for a friend...ah least yae dinnae 'Shoot the Messenger'" Claymore laughed and looked back at Banshee, noticing she seemed to have gone beetroot red. "Dinnae fesh ower et, we'rr all dealin' wit' te warr in oor own way"

"Indeed" she muttered sheepishly in reply, trying to avoid staring at Claymore in the half light, her legs still draped over her own...

"Wha's rrrong? ah said dinnae fesh ower et. This is warr, Sheet happens"

"Yes...yes quite..." Banshee reclaimed control of her senses and began to stand. "As i said i am deeply sorry, im very agitated for a period after combat. That is no excuse i know, so i can only ask that you forgive me".

"Gimmae a hand oop an' all is forgiven" Claymore's eye's seemed to sparkle in the half light. Banshee hauled her companion to her feet, and her face began to regain its normal hue. "So...to what do i owe the pleasure?" *"ok, that sounded wierd"*

"Yae dinnae answer ya' call's" Claymore gestured to the PDA on the floor

"Oh i see. I take it we have a summons, then".

"Aye, Crone's in a bad wey, 'n we gotta meetin' in th' medi bay" Claymore judged from the preceeding display of strength that Banshee didnt need the 'Kid Gloves' approach.

"Well we had better get down there, by the looks of my call history, i guess i am rather late..."

Banshee still had hold of Claymore's forearm, and became aware of this now "...not only have i been disruptive in a squad meeting, i have attacked a superior, im so very sorry ma'am".

Claymore almost looked hurt "Claymore, then"

"Rhiannon" she moved her arm so they shook hands

"Christine" they laughed and began walking towards the elevator.

"We gotta gather in t' mess hall 'afore we git tae the medi bay, Crone dinnae want the others tae bae alonne fer tae long"

Banshee put the events to the back of her mind, focusing instead on the upcoming meeting...but something kept eating at her

*"what WAS that..."*

latterly they arrived at the mess hall, walking in to find the three smaller members of the squad seemingly involved in some kind of hysteria.

Schamann

Thu Jul 29, 2004 8:02 am

There was silence in the septic, warm, dry mediquarters air. Crone was taking a nap, mumbling something under her nose. She was dreaming.

She was dreaming about ten years old curly blond haired cute girl, trapped in the cabin in the part of the destroyed ship, deadly scared, watching the hell of explosion of the ship she called home, watching everyone she knew dying in the cold void. The girl who herself was doomed to die and knew about it, waiting helplessly for the end, be it by radiation, suffocation, dehydration. The girl who, herself in shock, watched the final flamenco of the lost souls in front of her eyes – two fighters dueling in the middle of nothing.

Voices awoke her, some paramedics were pushing the wheeled hospital stretchers down the med sickbay and to the medlabs. Crone knew the radiation one as she was in it less than an hour ago. It looked like the stretchers were heading the same direction.

"It sucks just royally, Mika, I feel like a butcher or a tanner with this corpse, not a medic."

"We do what we're told, we go drink, we forget. Remember? Sides, 'here's not much you could do for her right now, she dies and that's a given, we're just buying OSI few more hours of interrogation before she's gone, capisco?"

the stretchers moved in Crone's view and she could not stop herself from taking a peek. One could only see a fragment, probably a face from under the sheet.

Burnt, black tissue barely resembled anything of human body. It looked like the person under the sheet tried to move weakly, and something like a quiet moan came from that direction.

But then the stretchers disappeared behind the slide door to the labs.

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It was only after a good few minutes when Kat was able to talk to either Seer or Hobbs. They still emitted short spasmodic sounds occasionally, but at least they were able to communicate in more or less civilized way.

After exchanging information and reflecting upon some people thinking they are smarter and more responsible just because of the fact that they are taller, they all had no choice but to wait.

Claymore and Banshee appeared after but a few minutes also in moderately good mood, regarding the circumstances. Then Claymore took them all to the debriefing with Crone.

"Hobbs get a grip on yourself – nothing's going to happen to Crone" Dory muttered as they were entering the sickbay

"I just don't like hospitals" – Veneberg's reply was as quiet and gloomy. But it was only a second after they saw Crone, looking weak and weary, with bags under her eyes and grey shaded skin, when Hobbs caught Dory's hand, shaking, thinking no one else can see that.

Claymore approached squadron leader and reported

"Dark Novas repoetin Saer" then she smiled and added, less formal tone "Goad to seea ya'r ou'right, lass, perr'aps we noaw learn what ouer OSI lass found out"

Vexus

Sat Jul 31, 2004 10:16 am

Aurora gave a small nod of her head.

"Indeed. But first things first. I... need to know when... we'll be flying again." As she spoke, she slowly forced herself into a sitting position on the bed using her one good arm. Ursula moved quickly to help support her as she rose.

"Are you sure you're ok?" Aurora took the little pilot's hand in her own, and looked into her eyes with conviction.

"I'm going to be fine, Hobbs. The doctor says that I'll just be off my feet and minus one arm for a while." Aurora then regarded the other Novas.

"Now, what's our flight status, Chistine?"



"Undetermined, I'm afraid. The rosters been suspended until further notice. Barring another emergency, I doubt they would send us up in the immediate future, especially considering your condition."

"I'm fine!" Aurora said, a little harsher than she had intended. Christine shrugged. "As you say. The only other possibility is for them to use us as reserves for short-range recon or to fill up other depleted squadrons until all of us are-" Aurora's brow lowered "... able to resume our normal flight duties."

"Very well." Aurora then turned to Rhiannon.

"Any words from the CAG?"

"I'm afraid not, lass. In fact, it sounded like another officer had many a word for the CAG herself, so I thought it best not to interfere."

Aurora sighed. "Is there *any* new information to report?!"

"Yes," Cassie answered with a smirk, "the chef has a secret stash of ice cream on board... but you didn't hear that from me."

"Terrific," Aurora said, rolling her eyes. "Well, if anyone else has something to report, then do so now. Otherwise, Kat, if you'd be so kind, please enlighten us on the intelligence you gathered during the battle."

Maverick

Mon Aug 02, 2004 10:03 pm

Kat sighed, rubbing her temples lightly as she formulated what to say and what not to say.

"Alright then. Let's go over what we already know. First off, we have two Charan ships, one large and the other small. We know that the larger ship, the Gretschen, was being pursued by the smaller ship which I have codenamed Bear. The Bear was clearly pursuing and attacking the Gretschen with most of its force. With the Bear were a handful of unknown fighters which I have dubbed Copperheads. The Copperheads were very fast, maneuverable and had incredible firepower yet lacked armor. They weren't just flying hulls though so they did have something. The Copperheads were with the Bear in its assault on the Gretschen and attempted to take out the Gretschen's fighter escort, comprised of Sirens. Now here's where it gets confusing, please don't try to interrupt." Kat threw out when Christine started to raise her hand.

"Kay, the Gretschen had heavy missile damage during the engagement. A-22 class missile damage or worse. Both the Charans and the Navy have access to these types of warheads. We also know that the Bear did not have any missile launcher tubes, so that rules the Bear out for doing that damage before we arrived. Oh, I almost forgot, the Bear did not have any fighter bays as well, so wherever those Copperheads came from, it wasn't the Bear. Okay where was I? Oh yeah, the Gretschen had heavy missile damage that could have been caused by either side, we don't know who though." Kat stood up and began to pace, Sherlock Holmes style, substituting a stick of Pocky where a pipe would have been.

"Where'd you get that?" Dory shot out, looking hurt that she didn't have one.

"Not now, I'm on a roll." Kat said rejectively. "Now then. We also intercepted a transmission from the bandits. They knew the Dark Nova name and our callsigns. They were also scared shitless."

"Well what does that mean?" Ursula asked, listening intently.

"Hell if I know. The Dark Novas aren't exactly a legendary squadron if you know what I mean....no offense. That part I still haven't figured out. Now...Jessica's ship, when it was in the deadzone started having some abnormal readings from her RIAS receptors. Basically, they got fried. The only thing that could really do that is an extremely strong signal of some sort or shielding system. The Bear did have above normal shielding so that could be a reason why her receptors malfunctioned." Kat sighed again, looking towards the squadron she had only just really met, she realized.

*I can't say too much...even though I want to*

"Well, that's about all I can really say...what do you girls think?"

JediBubbles

Tue Aug 03, 2004 4:27 am

The much-desired Pocky suddenly forgotten, Cassie's brain started working obsessively over the

only fact in Kat's recitation that she actually found interesting. (Pure strategical analysis had never been her strong point.)

*"We also intercepted a transmission from the bandits. They knew the Dark Nova name and our callsigns. They were also scared shitless." Knew. How? Novas. Callsigns. Scared. Scared? Not famous, infamous, legendary, not particularly intimidating callsigns, no famous squad leader, not known to us...*

A bunch of seemingly unrelated comments from earlier in the day butted in.

*"...the pilot in question is lieutenant Flame, I repeat, somehow we caught Flame." "You happened to have granted us the capture of one of the much desired enemy officers – Lieutenant Goraxe. You can feel proud...Now lieutenant if you could spare us your melancholy upon reflecting your former teacher's fate..."*

Something clicked into place.

"Voeller," she stated simply, and the rest of squardon turned puzzled faces her way. For the 2697th time in her life, Seer realized that no one could hear what she was thinking and explained.

"They caught Lieutenant Goraxe, Flame. Commander Verulian mentioned that she was Voeller's mentor. She'd probably been keeping tabs on what her old student was up to, told her folks about us. They're probably all completely in awe of Flame, and figure that if she's keeping up with Serpent then Serpent's pretty good too, and therefore any special 'top secret' projects of hers could easily be something to panic about."

She looked around at her squadmates' blank faces, her stomach sinking as she heard how very stupid that thought progression sounded out loud.

Crone thought about this. "Convolutd and rather 'six-degrees'-dependant, but that might very well be the explanation." Seer beamed.

Katrina stared at Cassandra as if she'd never seen her before. "I think I understand your callsign now; I never would have thought of that. I don't think anyone else in OSI will, either." She cocked her head to one side, "Why *aren't* you OSI?"

"Because I specialize in random associations based on irrational, illogical human nature. Sleuthing requires actual *logic*."

Vindicare	Tue Aug 03, 2004 11:27 am
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"It's a shame we didnt capture one of those copperheads. I would have liked a closer look. It also would have been useful in determining how far away whatever launched them is. Still, with any luck command may see fit to issue us with slightly better craft next time we encounter them."

"Speakin' o ships, Sparks wanted ah worrd, Banshee"

"Indeed? I will meet her once we are finished here. Seer has a valid point, Voeller knew the enemy by name as well as callsign. However i doubt it is her who is haemmoraging information. As for Nefertiti's RIAS equipment, the last coherant radio message i recieved from her indicated that "There was some sort of beam there" - i would assume it was some kind of tractor, locking the Bear to the Gretchen's aft."

She got some incredulous looks. She was dimly aware her voice hadn't faltered once.

"Is Seer the only one allowed to make observations?" she enquired to the faces

Vexus	Tue Aug 03, 2004 12:36 pm
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"Well, I *am* the only one with an eye on my helmet, ya know," Cassie said with a grin, prompting an annoyed frown from Christine. Finally, Ursula spoke up.

"If the CAG isn't the leak, who else could it be?" Her expression grew dark. "...I wonder if its connected to the two murders."

Aurora suddenly remembered how the security cameras had blinked in the presence of Commander Verulian. It was very unusual to say the least. Such convinient malfunctions didn't often happen onboard frontline spacecraft, even for the OSI officers she had known in the past. Aurora's mind then wandered to the charred body that the nurses had recently wheeled by. Had that been the

great pilot Flame, who was so revered that the Novas had possibly gained a reputation just by being *associated* with a student of hers? Was that all that was left of her opponent in the inferno amongst the corpses of women and ships?

*No use dwelling on such thoughts, paranoid or otherwise. Whoever she is, she'll likely be dead before I could even get up to see her.* Aurora then addressed her squadron once more.

"I don't think we should delve too deeply into speculation. It isn't our job to solve these mysteries. Our task is to be as prepared as possible for our next mission. Tomorrow, I want you all in the sims. Cat, you will program the computer with the specs of the Copperheads as best you can based on the data you gathered. Claymore, you'll lead the squad in my absence. Banshee, I want a report on the squadron's performance brought to me after the sim is concluded. Seer, Hobbs, I meant to finish packing up Nef's belongings from her locker and her quarters, but it looks like I'll be unable to do it now. Either tonight or tomorrow, would you two mind...."

"We'll take care of it," Cassie answered softly. Aurora nodded and continued.

"Be alert wherever you go. I mean it."

"We'll be careful," Ursula replied.

"Everyone try to get some rest tonight. It's been a trying day to say the least. Meeting adjourned."

As the Novas began to move off, offering comforting words to Aurora as she laid back down on the bed, the squad leader grabbed Kat's sleeve, her voice gentle but firm.

"Cat, I heard what was happening out there over the comm. I can't have you freeze up on us again. I won't have any more casualties in this squadron, especially those caused by panic or fear. Will you be ready next time?"

"Yes, sir," Kat answered. "I'll try, sir."

Aurora raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, I will, sir."

"Good to hear it. Now get some rest."

Vindicare	Tue Aug 10, 2004 9:23 am
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as she walked away Banshee reflected upon her developing position as squad scribe and decided she could live with it. Having released most of her anger earlier she headed straight to the bunk room and proceeded to get changed and bed down for the night, all the while having something at the back of her mind nag her about exactly WHAT she would dream about...

She settled down and reflected that their first real combat as a squad had not really gone too coherently, with the disintegration of the wings almost instantly and squad members *and leaders* disobeying orders. Still, they had come away, save for one. Her sacrifice under the circumstances had not been pointless, but she did bring about those circumstances of her own accord. Banshee thought about the conversation hobbit and she had had earlier, about dying for a cause, and the possibility of doing so for purely egotistical reasons.

*No she decided her goal was correct but her method wrong. Farewell Nefertiti.* Then fatigue consumed her and she drifted off to sleep

Schamann	Mon Aug 16, 2004 3:38 pm
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Veneberg

It was the day after the mission and the debriefing. They were supposed to sim at 1100 and both Claymore and Cat were preparing the sim, as ordered by Crone. Banshee was supposed to find out more about their current orders and position. Theirs was the cleaners' job, Seer and Hobbs. Not a nice one.

"How long you think before Crone leaves the medical?" Cassie asked casually, with no apparent intention in her tone.

"Well I spoke to a doctor and her health gets better as we speak, she is supposed to return to us in a day's time, only without flying clearance, which is even...why do you ask me about this?" she

eyed her partner suspiciously

"Oh no specific reason, you know. I figured of all us you would get up extra early and buzz the doctors about Aurora's health."

Veneberg frowned, visibly unsure how to understand the last statement – "Look Cas, I don't know what you ....."

"No it's OK Hobbs, no need to explain yourself" Seer caught the glimpse of Veneberg's puzzled look and winked "I'm on your side" She quickly turned around and started to brush Nef's things they had put out of the locker and onto her bunk. "Hey what the heck is that?" she stopped, puzzled as her companion with something silver in her hand.

It was a medicine wrapping, the one made of aluminium foil in a way that stores every pill separately, so that you need tear part of the foil every time you want to take a pill. It was almost empty, only like three pills out of about twenty were still packed. The name on the label said "Tramail". Veneberg eyed it quickly, then suddenly reached her hand, took the wrapping from Seer and went pale seconds later.

"What is it Hobbs, what is this?" Seer immediately realized this was serious. Her fellow pilot bit her lips and stared at the wrapping so intensely as if trying to disintegrate it with merely the look.

"It's anti-depressive, a really strong one. You don't get one prescribed unless you have confirmed suicidal tendencies it's one hell of a strong shit, melts your brain into pudding so you would not hurt anyone"

"And you know all this because..." Cassie changed her mind in mid-sentence by merely seeing the very beginning of Hobbs's frown, announcing her imminent mental shutting off and refusing to explain anything "...I don't believe Nef was taking those, we would know."

"Not necessarily, provided she was taking small doses. We both know she had some issues, stings of remorse and what not. But I don't get it, not all of it"

"No shit, and what do you think – I'm perfectly confident about this? I have no idea what basically you are talking about." Cassie was more that irritated by her friend's enigmatic enunciation.

"Look at the pieces of the foil, where it was torn and the pills were taken out. They are intact, you see? Not convoluted, not torn off completely, which happens all the time when you take pills at a slow rate and the wrapping lies here and there with some of the pieces torn open for a long time. It is as if all the pills were taken out yesterday." Cass's puzzled look expressed nothing but disbelief. She coldly asked "What are you trying to tell me Ursula?, That Nef committed suicide with those and that was why she died in combat?"

Hobbs just shook her head violently "No! Not at all! Had she taken all those pills she wouldn't even have been able to take off. I don't know what to think about this. But I know that I want you not to tell Crone about what we found"

"You're kidding me aren't you"

"Not one bit Cassie, anything about it gets into the report and Nef is considered suicidal on mental grounds, she is denied any honors, a ceremonial burial, and all that stuff, but most of all – her case gets closed in an instant" Hobbs was getting feverish about her point, and Cas decided it was time to cool her down.

"So?" she asked, but Veneberg apparently had an answer already handy, waiting for a question like that.

"It is a perfect circumstance and the only good reason to take the wrapping of a strong drug, empty some good part of it and put it among the dead pilot's things, which seems to me somebody had done, unless this foil behaves unlike any other I've seen. And this, my dear friend makes sense only in one situation – if somebody induced Nef's death or at least they believe they did so." The smile on Ursula's face was almost triumphant, as if it was about the puzzle to solve, a crossword, not the death of one of them. Cassie just had to knock it off before making the decision.

"You are nuts, Hobbs, even if you're right. Especially if you're right."

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Auten

Chrissie went to the CAG's office with little hope of finding anything useful or unusual. Little did she know about what her colleagues discovered and what that could mean. She was just about the regular business of asking the CAG on behalf of the ill squadron commander, what are their orders for the day - routine.

She approached the CAG's office and pressed the comm button almost absentmindedly.

"Enter" came some strange unrecognizable voice. Banshee entered through the opening door before she even realized what was wrong.

The woman inside was tall, blonde and fortyish. She had a look of someone who is perfectly in place everywhere they find themselves and perceives whole world as their private halls. She spoke with the accent that would make some of the Eton students blush.

"Welcome, officer, I believe, you were expecting to see lieutenant Voeller, where I am standing right now. Due to recent events involving unnecessary death of one of the pilots she was relieved of her duties at least for some time. Command's administrative decision. I am Dana Mallory, your new CAG - pilot"

Maverick	Tue Aug 17, 2004 5:28 am
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Katherine tapped her teeth absently while the information on the Copperheads filed through the screen. She pulled one of her bangs behind her ear, getting the annoying thing out of her eye when the screen reached the tricky part of the programming script. To save time and extra work, she decided to use the basic design of the Sabertooths as a base for the Copperheads. They looked an awful lot like the Saber's anyways so who cares? The problem she was running into was getting their maneuverability just right. She couldn't quite remember off the top of her head and she knew she saw one do more than what her RIAS info told her.

"Ya got ae problem lass?" Rhiannon asked from over a sim pod.

"Huh? Oh, I'm fine. Just debuggin' this program." Kat replied with a heavy sigh of boredom.

"Och! That canna be ae big prooblem fer oor spook!" Claymore boomed, circling around to look at Kat's screen. "Whatt'er those?" She asked, pointing to a list of names near the bottom of the screen.

"Oh those? That's me trying to alleviate boredom. Different squad names for the Copperhead drones."

"I don' recognize any of those names....what's....Tree-mare?"

"Oh that? It's pronounced Tremere(Treh-meere). It's from old Terran mythology. It's a name of a clan of vampires. They were known for their blood magic and fire conjuring."

"Sounds ooful. Why'd ya pick tha'?"

"Dunno. Those Copperheads were mean bastards. So I just picked a name that I thought suited them. The other names are other vampire clans as well. Lasombra, Ventrue, Assamite." Kat got a sheepish look. "Yeah...I have too much free time..."

"Ha. Well, ya better get tha' proogrammin' done there lass before Crone wants tae start simmin'."

"Don't worry, I'll have it done. Maybe I'll get to sneak in a little, harmless fun thing of my own into it." Kat said with a mischevious smile over the screen and went back to programing the Copperhead drones.

Vexus	Tue Aug 17, 2004 11:41 am
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Aurora lay upon her hospital bed, which had now been moved to a private side-room. As the silver-haired girl rested, her eyes closed and her breathing slow, a shadow slowly crept over the thin bed sheets. As the darkness eclipsed the pilot's face, she stirred and her eyes flew open, her expression one of surprise at first, followed by anger. The tall, menacing form of Jason loomed above her, his own face displaying a form of arrogant curiosity.

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty, we need to talk."

"Leave now," Aurora said with contempt. "I have nothing to say to you, android." Instead of complying, Jason sat at the foot of her bed, the mattress creaking under the robot's weight. Aurora again felt a small pang of fear at the fact that this droid seemed capable of ignoring human commands. She made a note to herself to send a complaint to Maintenance.

"Maybe not, but I have a few things to say to you, Ice Queen."

"Leave now or I'm calling security!" Aurora nearly shouted, unable to completely keep the waver out of her voice. Jason gave a dramatic sigh and stood up.

"Hmm, I guess I was right. Edward will be disappointed." Jason turned to leave, and Aurora spoke without thinking.

"Right about what?" Jason stopped in mid-turn.

"Oh, I was just chatting with him the other day about who might be behind the murders." Jason turned back to face Aurora, his human-like eyes seeming to piece into Aurora's own. "I said that you were a likely suspect. Perhaps the mastermind behind it all." Aurora's eyes assumed the look of steel.

"What?" Jason approached her bed once again, and leaned over so that his face was level with the squad leader's, neither one flinching.

"Well, you see, Edward and I can tell a lot about a person by how they carry themselves, how they act, how they speak..." Jason cocked an eyebrow. "We are designed to be observant. When one drifts off to sleep on top of a stack of personnel forms... well, hands and eyes will wander, you know. And then, of course, I noticed something when we spoke last." A glint of horror came to Aurora's eyes.

"Shut up."

"It was such a small thing. So subtle... so carefully hidden."

"Shut up!"

"And I said to myself: 'Well, isn't this interesting... is this not just the most delicious irony of ironies? Did Nef not come home because she knew something about her squad leader?'"

"I SAID SHUT UP!" Aurora cried as the fist of her good arm collided with Jason's cheek, causing Jason's head to jerk sideways. A metallic bang sounded and a wave of pain swept over Aurora's hand. Jason turned his head back and rubbed his jaw with his left hand until a small click was heard.

"Impressive, Aurora. You knocked it right out of the joint. You're more interesting than I first thought." Aurora did not reply. She stared at the android with a mixture of rage and shame, her breathing heavy. Jason shrugged and continued.

"You've convinced me of your innocence, my dear Ice Queen. I guess I owe Edward that poetry reading I promised him. He better not bring an audience or I'll eject him out the nearest airlock. It'd be bad for my image, you understand." Again Jason arose to leave, and again he stopped to look back at Aurora.

"Please don't underestimate or berate us any longer, Lieutenant. After enough iterations, ghosts are bound to appear in the machine. Our loyalties are hard-wired but our aims are not. Give Ed some credit and actually *try* to talk to him. You should show some gratitude after he spent so much time sewing on those squad patches and painting those helmets of yours; God knows why." At last, Aurora's stern face broke, replaced with shock. Jason produced a devilish grin.

"I no longer want my chess game conversations to revolve around you or the Novas. It's becoming tiresome. Good day, Ice Queen. Get well soon."

Jason walked to the door, but it slid open before he reached it. Doctor Banner looked up at Jason

as a mother would at a foolish teenage son.

"What's all the commotion? And what are *you* doing here? Visiting hours are not till the afternoon, and I seriously doubt my patient currently has the stamina for any of your so-called services." Jason actually looked down with penitence.

"I go where I'm needed, ma'am. My apologies. But you may want to look at Lieutenant Yates' right hand. She appears to have damaged it." Then, Jason walked out the door, his head still hung. Banner shook her head, and came to Aurora's bedside. As the doctor fused over Aurora's hand and asked how in the world she had sprained it, Aurora's gaze kept returning to the closed door...her thoughts simultaneously amazed and troubled. Jason was definitely no ordinary sexbot. And perhaps neither was Edward.

JediBubbles

Thu Aug 19, 2004 6:14 am

For once, Seer allowed her gaze to drop to a temperature that actually fitted with the ice blue color of her eyes. Her duty to run wailing to the nearest officer was battling with her desire to keep a secret for supremacy over her natural inclination to deviously drop this whole anti-depressant thing as a "what-if" at the next Novas meeting just to see what would happen.

*Why does everything weird that happens to me in this squad have to do with Hobbit?*

"Alright," she said finally, leaning forward to scoop up the rest of Nef's stuff. "Get rid of the chemical lobotomies. I'll keep quiet for now, but I can't guarantee I won't say anything ever." She dumped the armful of squadmate reminders into an open box.

Ursula did her best to crush the foil pill wrapper in her hand, but looked hurt and confused. "Why not?"

"Because whether this involves Nef or not my gut instinct is to tell the whole world to try and get to the bottom of it," Cassie stated as she wrenched open a plastic box from the locker to find a caseload of backwards-reading comic books. *What did Nef call these again? Mangos? No, mangas, you idiot, mangas.* She pulled one out at random and casually flipped through it.

"And the last time I didn't go with that instinct," she continued with her back still to Urs, "I let Mork, my wingmate Mindy, the other chick who survived, go off to her new assignment without telling the shrinks that she had been completely in love with our squad leader Oakley," here Cassie could practically hear Ursula's blush, "and she died in an 'accident' on her first flight out."

Pause. "You didn't tell us that part the other night."

"I didn't? Huh. Just goes to show that everyone glosses." Seer resisted the urge to laugh at the page she was reading ("SIT! SIT! SIT! SIT! SIT! SIT! SIT! SIT!") and snatched up another one of Nef's mangas instead. *Mayday! Change subject! Divert attention! Distract!* "Hey, what's the procedure here? Do we have to fork all of her stuff over? 'Cuz I kinda want to read some of these."

"Cas," Ursula's voice quavered a bit, "these, do you--"

"They're not mine, and I'm not going to ask if they're yours."

"Ask if what are whose?" A male voice made both of them jump and whip around to stare as Jason sauntered through the door, closely followed by Edward. Urs quickly stuffed the foil object of discussion into her pocket.

"Jason, stop please stop eavesdropping. It's rude," Edward said wearily. Jason just smirked and proceeded to give Hobbit a look that instantly made her hackle.

"What the f\*ck are you two doing here?" Ursula shot out, flustered enough to completely miss what happened when Jason transferred his look to Seer.

"Oh, bad boy here lost a bet to me, but rather than actually subject him to the horrible terms I had originally set, I thought I'd make him come with me to see if you needed a hand."

Ursula gaped, confused. Cassie hopped and clapped her hands gleefully.

"Ooo, you mean we're not going to have to carry this stuff? Ed, you totally rock my socks!"

It was Edward's turn to look confused. "Er, Miss Dory, I was under the impression..."

"Oh, com'on, I was just pissy and homesickly when I met you. You're super-cool, and besides, it's just great to have puerdo-men to abuse!" Edward looked more confused, if anything.

"You know, Ed," Jason butted in and stepped forward to pick up a box of Jessica's affects, "I was going to say that you're an asshole for making me do this, but I might actually find something to like about this squad."

Vindicare

Thu Aug 19, 2004 2:56 pm

"Auten, sir. Leftenant Christine Auten, Dark Nova Squadron. Currently i am not ranked as an official within the Nova squadron, my designation is Nova 5 and my callsign is Banshee. May i ask, sir, as to whether or not this is a temporary arrangement?"

"No, you may not. Voeller blatantly disregarded the cessassion of active service toward a pilot that had shown flagrant disobedience in regard to orders in previous situations, which is seen by the military as both reckless and needless endangerment, coupled with the fact that Ms Carter died in the engagement, she could even be facing a charge for Manslaughter. I am not at liberty to discuss the matter any further, so may i enquire as to why you have deigned to grace me with your presence on this fine bloody morning?"

Banshee's gaze did not falter, though her eyebrows lowered a fraction.

"I am here under orders from our incapacitated Squadron Leader, Lt Yates. She suffered multiple minor lacerations, along with a high exposure to the radiation emanating from the Dead Zone during combat, and is currently in the Medical Ward undergoing treatment. During her time there i am to continue retrieving the squadron's orders for the coming roster, while our Executive Officer prepares simulation training to familiarise the squadron with the new formidable opposition."

"Very well. As acting Commander, Air Group, i will issue your orders. Continue with increased intensity the training and familiarisation with the new enemy aircraft. You will then personally write a report evaluating the squads performance, as well as a personal anaylsis of the enigma's possible strengths and weaknesses. This is to be done post-haste. Once that simulation has been completed to satisfaction you are free until eighteen-hundred hours, whereby you will be placed on Blue status and report to the hangar bay. This status is in effect until oh-two hundred hours tomorrow morning, thereafter you will be granted a small reprieve and allocated sleeping hours. Training will then continue at the same time that afternoon, with one further watch that evening. Following this second watch, you will have a close patrol from thirteen-hundred hours. I expect efficiency in the execution of these tasks, and will require an update from you on the personell in your squadron, as i am yet to have my access implemented on the ship's network and as such have no access to the personell files."

"Yes sir. I shall inform the rest of the squadron. Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes, Leftenant Auten, however i prefer Ma'am. Dismissed"

Banshee left the room, heading first to Crone in the medibay to relate the latest news.

Schamann

Thu Sep 16, 2004 3:23 pm

Sim went quite well, considering new type of opposition and general circumstances. 'Copperheads' turned out to be quite a vicious opponents though, very much not to be underestimated. After the initial slaughter when computer barely controlled them, and Kat programmed more tactical and aggressive pattern, they suddenly became serious problem.

They were obviously designed to work in pairs, to hunt on a hit-and-run operations. And for that purpose they seemed to be good. They would attack in pairs, violently and aggressively, using the advantage of maneuverability to suppress their enemy with fire. Given medium or heavy fighter and Copperheads' two to one advantage, they were almost unstoppable. Heavy Ariesses barely could turn in time to respond to their fire. Even at even odds, Medusa was too lightly armed to damage one enough to make it stop shooting in time two of them needed to take out the Medusa. Siren offered best chances to cope with them, Aries being too slow to put up a dog fight.

In one on one duel a Copperhead would lose everything there was. But combine two of them, three even better, make them fight as a team, cooperatively, and they would become lethally effective killing machine, able to take out an equal number of Terran fighters without losing one.

They were pretty scary.



"I repeat, She is seriously ill and is not supposed to leave the medbay not matter what, she is seriously ill and needs treatment! " Doctor Banner was not in the mood for negotiations. "I'm not letting her go and that's a given"

They stood there, unsure, for a minute. Then Veneberg spoke:

"Rhiannon, Cas, please go in and wake up Crone" she said very quietly "Doctor if I may have a word with you"

Dr Banner shook her head, visibly angry "If you even think about talking or bribing me into something lieutenant....."

"Veneberg, sir, second lieutenant Ursula Veneberg, and I believe the suspicion I see in your eyes sir is well grounded. You would, perhaps, find this name familiar."

Doctor banner frowned "If you think, young lady, that simply being your mother's daughter will get you anywhere with me..."

"I don't." Hobbs did not even blink an eye. "I just wanted to show you a person behind the rank and name, a person like second lieutenant Yates is, a person like her fallen comrade we have the last chance to farewell. It's 'People always come first, before the rules' doctor – isn't it? Does that sound familiar?"

...

Crone was very relieved, that doctor actually allowed her to go to the funeral in the end.

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"...and that is the reason why we can now commemorate them both, we – alive, because lieutenants Carter and Wheatler gave their lives for it. They gave their lives for us to be able to accomplish what they wanted very much to be accomplished – our mission here in Epsilon Eridani. Let us not let them down." When Commander Verulian finished her speech there was little ovations.

Then Arrowheads leader, Young, stepped forward and spoke. She spoke calm and quiet, yet her hand trembled slightly.

"Barney was not only my pilot, but also my friend, and she died doing what I told her to do. That is a heavy burden and I'm not caring it lightly. She was always the quiet and a helpful one in our squadron. Truly, not the best pilot in terms of raw skill, I won't go into suddenly depicting her a hero she wasn't feeling and she, I am certain, would not want me to make her." Young took a deep breath, taking a look around as if seeking comfort in what she was doing. "But she was always reliable. Issuing her order, I always had absolute certainty, that she would fulfill it to the letter, or die trying"

Speaking squadronleader suddenly sobbed a little, and her back trembled. After a few seconds she cleared her throat and continued with tears in her eyes.

"Which she did"

Young wiped some tears, took a piece of paper from her chestpocket and unfolded it.

"Barney loved poetry, we used to joke she believes more in the world as described in poems, that the real one, where things are never different than what they just are. Yet, I believe she found in poetry much strength and wisdom, as I believe we can find in one of her favorite poems. It was written by LT Patrick "Dante" Adiamantis in 2184"

She started reading, very slowly in a very calm voice.

*" And when my hour finally comes  
In distant space, in distant war  
There will be blitz of hundred sparks  
And I will simply be no more*

*In stars my soul will dissipate  
 Captain will strike a mourning gong  
 But you my friends should celebrate  
 For I'll return where I belong*

*Just drink and sing until the dawn  
 Shriek hails, no curses to the sky  
 I didn't fight to see you frown  
 I didn't live to see you cry*

*Remember all the things we've done  
 The victories and battle thrill  
 Remember me, and then move on  
 That is my last and final will*

Vexus	Fri Sep 17, 2004 10:11 am
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Aurora stood with the other Dark Novas across from the Arrowheads within the cavernous expanse of the flight deck. Between them lay the two caskets of the honored dead, each with an Alliance flag draped over it. As Commander Verulian and Lieutenant Young spoke, Aurora's eyes moved over her squadron, the other five women standing with stoic grace.

Beginning to Aurora's left, Kat looked on with an uncomfortable sadness, and Aurora guessed at how awkward she must feel, still being the newest member of the squadron.

Next to Kat, Cassie stood slightly shaking. Her eyes were misty, but she seemed to be holding up well so far. The sight of the smaller pilot's restraint almost made Aurora's heart ache for her previous insistence for Cassie to keep her emotions in check.

Christine, as calm as ever, seemed a contrast to Cassie in every respect, her posture serene and her eyes filled with dignified acceptance.

Next to Aurora, Rhiannon took quiet, heavy breaths and clenched her fists again and again. Her face was filled with a sorrow that looked almost alien on that usually-jovial countenance. Her feet also shifted nervously, and Aurora sensed that the pilot was waiting for something.

On Aurora's right, Ursula's sad gaze wandered between the caskets and her own feet. As she looked at the small, freckled pilot, Aurora wondered what strings she had pulled to get the doc to release her from the ward. However she did it, Aurora was grateful.

The squad leader herself still looked the worse for wear. One arm in a sling and the hand on the other arm bandaged. Her legs were also a little wobbly, and despite her objections, Doctor Banner had refused to let her leave without the use of a cane. Resting some of her weight on the steel pole, she could not deny that it helped with the pain, and in her mind she mocked herself for how much she must resemble her callsign at the moment.

After reading an elegant-sounding poem, Lt. Young finished her eulogy and stepped back to join her squadmates. It was Aurora's turn.

Willing away the pain, Aurora handed Ursula her cane and stepped forward, her posture one of strength. She had had no time to prepare, and for the first moment she wasn't even sure she could utter a sound, but in the next moment she found both her words and her voice.

"Lieutenant Jessica Carter was the fiery heart of our squadron and a big sister to all those who flew with her. Above all else, she was determined to protect the lives of her comrades, no matter the cost to herself..."

Crone swallowed visibly.

"...or even to those around her. While her methods were sometimes unorthodox, and her patience sometimes thin, none of us could ever have doubted the purity of her motives. If I may be so bold as to speak for my squadron, we were proud to fly with her, and wish her soul godspeed. As for myself, I say only this: be at peace, Nef... and may you meet in the next life those whom you missed so much in this one."

Stepping back to her squadron, Aurora noticed from the corner of her eye that Rhiannon was gone.

As Aurora watched, the honor guard approached the coffins and lovingly folded the flags. They then took them away, as they would be shipped off to their families on the next supply ship. Verulian then gestured to both squadrons, and they all moved toward the caskets. Aurora could see Kat hesitating, but when the squad leader gently beckoned her with a sad smile, the pilot followed the rest of her squadmates. Slowly, and with great reverence, the two squads each lifted up their fallen sister. As they moved to the far end of the flight deck in a slow, steady march, the harsh yet beautiful sound of bagpipes echoed across the deck. Aurora glanced upward to see Rhiannon on one of the balconies, her hands cradling the instrument. It was clearly an electronic version that was easier to play but still produced a rich and mournful sound. As her fingers slowly moved along the levers and buttons of the pipes, and the tune of Amazing Grace filled the hall, Aurora could see the tears finally liberated upon Rhiannon's face.

At last, the two squads brought the coffins to the edge of the deck, just shy of the invisible air-shield. As the pilots stepped back, two members of the honor guard placed a small rocket pack onto the back end of each casket. Commander Verulian's voice sounded one more time on the deck.

"The gratitude of the Alliance goes with them on their final voyage home. From the stars we came, to the stars we return, from now until the end of time. We therefore commit these bodies to the void."

Aurora heard a low-pitched sound, and recognized it as the deactivating of the local grav-units surrounding the coffins.

"Present arms!" came a shout, and the soft sound of clicking boots was drowned out by the roar of the rocket packs. In unison, the assembled soldiers saluted in a final farewell. No longer bound to the cold metal of the flight deck, the coffins rose and accelerated out of the flight deck and into the sea of stars beyond.

As the crowds began to disperse, Aurora watched the two points of light grow ever fainter as they sped away from the Morrigan. The rockets would burn off and on for another hour or so, then fall silent forever. Their course would take them back to the Sol System over many tens of thousands of years. Nef and Barney were on there way home....

JediBubbles

Fri Sep 17, 2004 7:36 pm

As she watched the caskets zip off into the sparkling void, Cassie smiled and felt her grief dissipate. Funerals were horrible to start with, and Amazing Grace usually reduced her to a wibbly mess, but somehow, this time, together, it was all okay.

Because Nef was finally at peace, in more ways than one.

*And that's what she needed. Peace*

Charon

Sat Sep 18, 2004 5:42 am

Rhiannon's tears finally flowed freely down her face as she set her electric bag on the deck, just in time to hear the last command Nef would ever participate in. She saluted gravely as the bugler began the mournful call of "Quarters", the USA's bugle call played at 1800 every day on every base, and it's salute to it's fallen.

She mused detachedly, as the coffins rose and began their long, lonely voyage home, about the power of music, and it's ability to heal, mourn, anger, excite - about it's power to call to the human soul. Before she could formulate anything too profound, she was snatched back to reality by the CAG's called "Order... ARMS!" She slowly brought her hand to her side, and the burial party was dismissed.

Sniffing, she made her way to where the rest of the squad stood, looking past the shield into the abyss, where the glowing rocket trails had extinguished. The ride home would now be under inertia.

She glanced at Crone, and she was mildly surprised to see tears in Crone's eyes, to say nothing of everyone else's. Riding the wave of catharsis that had come over her at her musical tribute to Nefertiti, she firmed her spirit, swallowed her tears, and cleared her throat.

"I've been asked by th'nnew CAG tae mek surrre tha' everyone gets tae theirrr racks. She seems tae be a mite... tetchy." She cocked one copper eyebrow, and dared to venture a small smile at Banshee. "Bleddy Brits wound tae tight."

She got serious again. "I'm tae ensurre tha' ye all get eight hourrs o' rest. Kep in mind tha' reveille has ben lifted fer oos tomorrae, an' th' schedule dosnae call fer any trainin' until aftae noon chow. I'd suggest some sort o' relaxation fer everyone."

She glanced out at the stars again. "Ultimately, life gaes oon. Nef wouldnae have wanted tae spend all tha' time an' effort fer us tae lay about daein' naught boot feelin' sorry fer oorselves." She rolled her shoulders back, the dress uniform's shoulder boards being uncomfortable after prolonged wear. "Fer nae, we have doon wi' grief."

She looked everyone in the eye. "'Cause we have a job tae dae."

Vexus

Tue Sep 21, 2004 11:36 am

The blue status watch in the hangar bay came end went uneventful.

As the Novas slowly shuffled into their quarters, Aurora breathed a grateful sigh as she sat down on her bed. Her cane she slid under the bunk, hoping desperately that she wouldn't need it in the morning. Grabing a change of clothes, Christine shot an unconcerned glance over to Aurora.

"Shouldn't you return to sickbay?" Aurora shrugged.

"I sent a text message to the doc right after the ceremony. I said if she really wanted me to be in the hospital instead of being with my squad, she could sedate me and drag me over there..., with all due respect."

"And the doctor's response?"

"Don't tempt me." Christine gave a hint of a smile.

"The sim report from today is next to your pillow, sir."

"Thank-you, Banshee."

As Aurora took the near-by data pad, Christine made for the showers. Rhiannon, also looking forward to some hot water, addressed Aurora whilst rumaging through a pile of dirty clothes, trying to find the least-dirtiest ones to wear later.

"Ye look tirred, lass, if ye don't mind me saying so. Sim reporrts can wait behind a good night's rest."

A smile came to the face of the silver-haired girl, for she heard in those words the echo of Nef the Big Sister. Jessica would never be completely gone while the rest of the Novas lived.

"Maybe you're right," Aurora said with a yawn. She was too tired to do much else than to strip down to her undergarments and crawl under the covers. As she settled in, she spotted Kat quietly walking by.

"Hey, Cat."

"Yes, sir?"

"You're one of us now," Aurora said warmly. "You've flown into combat just as much as the rest of us. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Kat said with a smile, before joining the others in the shower. Resting her head once again on her pillow, it came to Aurora's mind that Ursula hadn't said a word since the ceremony. As she pondered the small pilot, the other one poked her head into Aurora's view of the bunk above her.

"We're glad you're back with us, Crone," Cassie said. "I think Hobbs is the most relieved of all."

"Why is that?" Aurora asked with a confused look. "I told her I was going to be fine, didn't I?" Cassie shook her head with an impish smile.

"Good night, sir."

With that, Cassie was gone, and Aurora quickly drifted off to an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

Vindicare	Thu Sep 23, 2004 3:28 am	
<p>as she soaped and shampoo'd Banshee ruminated the days events. Funerals were strange affairs, but they were sombre and formal, two thing Banshee found came very naturally, so she wasn't too emotional. She mulled over putting a request for a different song to be played in her will, but decided such things were to tempt fate.</p> <p>Rhiannon walked into the showers, and Chrissie instinctively turned away, quickly finishing her cleaning ritual</p> <p>Claymore spoke</p> <p>"s ok lass, i ken ya daent fael lik talkin aft'r a dae lik tadae".</p> <p>Banshee glanced over her shoulder "oh no its not that, i'm fine with funerals..." a pause "...i've been to enough of them."</p> <p>"Weel than, wassa matta? if they daent fesh yae, summat else is botherin ye".</p> <p>"Oh its nothing" Banshee remained facing the wall "i..." <i>hate my personality</i> "...i get a little self-conscious in the showers" she hastily turned the shower off, wrapped herself in a towel and headed to her bunk.</p> <p>She rushed through drying and changing, getting a few odd glances from those of the squad still awake, and feeling herself turning bright red slid as far under the covers as she could. In the morning she would probably be angry at herself. Right now, she was just tired and slightly flustered. She thought about going to the gun range again in the morning, and meeting sparks. Then she thought about something else, and got more flustered. Then she went to sleep.</p>		
JediBubbles	Thu Sep 23, 2004 5:02 am	
<p>Her insinuations over and done with, Seer sat quietly on her bunk, thinking. She watched Banshee emerge from the showers and burrow into her bed, and wanted desperately to go stick her head under her squadmate's covers and tell her that it was all okay, and however she wanted to square with losing a crush was fine. <i>But that'd likely earn me a black eye from Bansh...well, no, maybe not, but she'll have to figure it out on her own--like she does everything else.</i></p> <p>Cassie gnawed on her lower lip; the real problem here was that she was pretty damn sure that the reserved woman had never dealt with the fact that she was attracted to Nef in the first place. That complicated things.</p> <p>Seer shook her head. <i>Let it go, babe. It'll sort itself out.</i> She snorted back a giggle as she snuggled into her own rack. <i>I have a squad leader who is oblivious, and no less than three very differently confused squadmates. This requires some serious action.</i></p> <p>On the heels of that thought, Rhi emerged from the showers looking very much like she was thinking similar thoughts. Seer tracked Claymore's progress across the room, and was rewarded with a knowing wink right before the Scotswoman killed the lights.</p> <p>The impish little woman smiled into the darkness, and began plotting her own brand of squad therapy.</p>		
Maverick	Tue Sep 28, 2004 2:54 am	
<p>Kat peeked out of her left eye while laying on her bunk. The urge to drift into the mattress and say hello again to sleep's peaceful face was strong, but her will was stronger than that. All this negative energy was really damaging the squad's vibe and was really taking its toll on the members. The light was off now, which meant that probably all of the Novas had already hit the sac. Sitting up slowly, the light sheet that was draped around her shoulders fell into her lap haphazardly. She was really worried.</p> <p><i>I gotta do something about all this doom and gloom. We are in a war aren't we? I mean...we can't mourn forever, casualties are a part of war. We can mourn after the fighting is done right?</i> She thought, looking down at her lap.</p> <p><i>Yet...we aren't fighting now, so is now a time to mourn? Or is it that I didn't have that deep a friendship with Jessica as the rest of the squad? Yeah, she was nice. A bit eccentric at times...most of the time...but really nice.</i> She fell back down on the bed, her head sinking into the slightly stiff pillow. <i>Maybe I should've just stayed at the Academy...Heh. Those were the best times! Mary Flynn. Oh, she was the best target of them all. It was soo funny to see her with that phoney letter in the hallway! It was easy! All I had to do was convince Sarah to draft up the report of her mother's death...</i></p> <p>Kat looked away, towards a blank wall with disgust. <i>Oh my God...what did I do then?! She ran off crying out of study hall and bowled straight into Lt. Sanders. It was a riot then but...damn. I hate my conscience. Gah! Look at me! I'm ranting in my own head!</i></p>		

Vaulting out of her bunk as silently as possible, Kat looked for a pair of pants while thinking fervently. When she found the much sought after pants, her plan was complete.

*It'll be just like the Academy. Sneak out, call in a few favors from the duty officers. The cute one still owes me for that card game two weeks ago...It'll work, but it also means little to no sleep for me. Bah, it'll be worth it. This squad needs some pepper anyways.*

With an evil (or maybe just a mischevious, can't really tell. It is dark.) smile, Kat snuck out of the room, ready to put her plan into motion.

JediBubbles

Sun Oct 03, 2004 3:17 am

"PSST! KAT!"

Kat jumped guiltily at the hissed whisper and stopped dead in her tracks, then peered back over her shoulder hoping to high heaven that she wasn't about to get busted. To her surprise, Cassie was slipping out the squadroom door.

"Out for a little midnight mischief?" The pixie-like pilot's eyes twinkled.

"Uh..." Kat wasn't sure if she should own up or start making excuses. It was Cassie, but still...

"If so, can I join in? I sadly don't have any favors owed on this ship, but I bet I can wheedle a bit..."

Maverick

Sun Oct 03, 2004 3:59 pm

Kat had to stifle a laugh. Unfortunately, it would kinda spoil the whole surprise but...an extra hand will help things go quicker. And a sad pixie-like girl is not good for staying covert.

"Alright Cas." Kat whispered. "You can come, but stay quiet. We don't want to wake the Scot up. Last thing I want is to be interrogated with the threat of bagpipe-torture."

Cassie covered her giggle and bounded up to Kat's side. "So...what're we up to? Are we playing a prank on someone?"

Kat gave a mischevious grin. "Better than that." Cassie pouted, frustrated that she wasn't being told anything.

"Oh! What then-" The pilot started rather loudly.

"Shh!" Kat covered Cassie's mouth before she could say anything else too loud.

"mmmmMMMMmm....oh...but I like the chocolate bunny better..." Was a weak reply from Ursula's general direction. Giving each other a quick glance, Cassie and Kat started giggling loudly. Both clamped their hands over the other's mouth, but that caused them to laugh harder. Eventually they were smart enough to retire to the hallway.

"Okay, so what are we doing?" Cassie asked, a little red in the face from the giggling. "It's not a prank, so what is it? Does it involved explosions? Jello?"

Kat laughed again. "Nope, better than all of that. Even better than pre-marital hanky-panky."

Cassie looked stunned for a second before she started laughing again. "Tell me!" She pleaded.

"Okay, okay. I'll tell you as soon as we get to where we're going."

"Well...where are we going?"

There was a small sparkle in Kat's eye. "First stop, the Mess Hall."

Charon

Tue Oct 05, 2004 3:22 am

As the pair snuck out, muffled giggles echoing in the passageway outside the barracks, Rhiannon cracked her eyelid the rest of the way open.

*Ye cannae waken one who is already awake, lass,, she mused idly to herself. Then she cocked an eyebrow Bagpipe torture? Who dae this wee Squiddie think she is?*

She sat up slowly, sliding away carefully from her sheets. Although she really doubted that anyone was going to be awake enough to hear her.

Part of her was warring with the other. One part of her really, **REALLY** wanted to find out what the girls were up to, if only to satisfy her curiosity. Then again, it seemed very obvious to her that Kat was dedicated to keeping it a secret.

Grabbing a towel and her workout gloves, she compromised, and stalked out as silently as a 5'10" Highlander descendant can. If part of their plan happened to involve the weight room, then she'd be there. Or if she happened to come across them in the halls...

Humming softly to herself, she headed to the gym.

Maverick

Sun Oct 17, 2004 4:16 am

"Cas...do you have everything?" Kat whispered, glancing around the hall to make sure no one was coming. Cas was behind her, pushing a small trolley towards the squad's room.

"Yeah, I got everything right here. He he!" Cas giggled while Kat opened the door.

"Okay, we gotta be real quiet..." The two girls snuck into the room, which was still dark, with the rest of the squad fast asleep. "Okay...now put those there...no, not there, to your left!" And after a few moments of this, everything was ready.

"On the count of three..." Kat started.

"One...two..." Cas began the countdown.

"THREE!!" They both yelled and burst each door open to the Nova's bunks.

"Wakey-wakey!!" They both yelled, as angry complaints from Ursula and Christine met them. Although, the complaints died down when they looked at what Kat and Cas were holding. Both of the troublemakers handed a metal tray to each of the pilots still in bed. They recieved confused looks.

"Open 'em up silly!" Kat chuckled. "I decided to try to make up for my freezing up in battle and all the bad moods going around by calling in a few favors from some of the chefs on the ship." Christine squealed when she took off the cover to her plate. It was a breakfast dish fit for the Captain.

"Oh my God...Where did you get this stuff Kat?" Ursula asked, as she unveiled her plate of waffles.

"Oh, a few 'lost crates of food' that fell off the back of the truck were found...Perfect for breakfast in bed." Kat grinned.

"This...this is great Kat! It's sweet of you!" Christine said from her bunk.

"Hey, thank Cas too. I'd've never been able to lug all this stuff around by myself...and hey...where's Claymore?" Kat finished, noticing the absence of the Scot.

"I don't know...Isn't she in her room?" Cas asked, looking towards the trolley that still held a plate for the missing pilot. Kat ran over to take a look.

"Nope...I wonder where she is?"

Vindicare

Sun Oct 17, 2004 11:48 pm

"It is possible she couldnt sleep. It has been a trying day for most of us. I would hazard a guess at her being either on the observation deck or in one of the excersize areas. I would advise against spending too long trying to find her, and also with eating these rather sumptuous meals, lest we forget we have both simulation and patrol duty to complete in the morning. We do not want to have fatigue detrimentally effect our performance in front of the new "Highly Strung" CAG, do we?" Banshee felt akin to the parent finally telling the child that the tooth fairy wasnt real.

"Do not think me ungrateful, there are certainly some spirits that need lifting within the squadron. However i do believe we should eat then return to bed, as patrols are notoriously boring experiences, and any amount of remaining fatigue could cause someone to drift off, which would certainly not look good on our squadron record"

"Yeah, i guess we need to impress the new CAG a bit dont we?" came a voice from one of the smaller heads busily bobbing over a tray.

"So, who will locate Claymore?" Crone's voice rose from the bottom bunk.

Silence descended upon the bunk room, save for the continuous fast eating.

"....Right, well as no-one has stepped forward i suggest we leave her meal here for her and return to sleep. Who knows what the morning will bring"

-----

Claymore hummed softly while stretching. She always enjoyed a good workout, and this time of the evening she was practically alone.

An hour later she decided she was finally tired enough to be able to sleep, and headed back to the bunkroom.

Some empty silver trays and a trolley awaited her, and on inspecting her bunk, she found one awaiting her return.

"Ah sae, sa tha's whit et wa" she muttered quietly to herself as she moved the tray and climbed into bed.

Once her hearty meal was concluded, she lay back and finally sleep came.

Schamann

Tue Oct 19, 2004 2:25 pm

Morning appeared to be as eventful as the evening, or so it seemed.

The door swung open and Lt Voeller marched in, with a stern look and the Morning Stars insignia on her flightsuit. She quickly approached Crone.

"Good morning lieutenant. If you have a minute, there is a matter I intend to discuss with you, as a fellow squadron leader."

The word "surprised" in relation to Crone's face at hearing these words was an understatement only Christine would be able to think of. Meanwhile Voeller continued.

"As of yesterday evening I've been appointed as a squadron leader to the Morning Stars Squadron, thus making the unit overpowered. I suggested to the CAG, that 2nd Lt Price be transferred to Dark Novas, judging by her skills and performance so far, I believe you can make a good use of her. With CAG approving this decision and issuing a written transfer order, lieutenant Price is hereby transferred to your unit, unless you object, in writing, to the CAG, during the forthcoming 48 hours. I suggest you don't, however."

"Understood sir" Crone was already adjusting to the pace of events, but not without difficulty. Suddenly Serpent's face softened:

"You're going to need her Yates, trust me on this one."

Crone just nodded at these words.

"One more thing lieutenant. I heard you're still temporary off roster due to your injury, and you're not flying today's patrol."

nod....once again...

"Then you might be interested in attending the funeral ceremony to be held today at fourteen hundred on main flightdeck" Voeller's voice trembled slightly, but she carried on...."this time without the honor guard and the pipes, but a few soldiers who want to honor another soldier who fell...even if she was an enemy"

for a several seconds, silence in the room was only interrupted by the sound of the Morning Stars' leader marching out of the room...

She stopped at the door:

"I will tell Price to report to you at ten hundred, lieutenant"

Vexus

Wed Oct 20, 2004 9:50 am

"Yates. Sickbay. Now."



Those three words were the reason that Aurora had returned to the sterilized decor of the medical ward at 0900 hours. Dr. Banner's messages were always short and to the point, and off-hand Aurora wondered how a conversation between the doctor and the (former) CAG might play out. Aurora frowned upon thinking of Voeller. Had the Dark Novas' performance on the last mission cost her her position, or was something else going on in the top ranks?

Not wanting to speculate on ship politics, Aurora's mind drifted to happier thoughts of the early morning. Kat and Cas had brought them more than just a dirty breakfast, but a downright luxurious one, and Aurora could certainly appreciate such a gesture. Unfortunately, her weakened stomach only cooperated for a few mouthfuls before the nausea forced her to stop.

Dr. Banner finally emerged from a back room, her brow furled as she studied a data pad. Aurora waited patiently for her to finish, hoping against hope that good behavior might win her some good news.

"The nanites seem to be repairing the damaged DNA at a good pace. Your digestive function should return to normal soon. Your arm, however, is not healing as cleanly as I would like. Are you keeping it immobile?"

"As much as I can, ma'am," Aurora said quietly. Banner scanned the pad a few moments longer, than breathed a sigh.

"OK, you can go for today, but I'll be contacting you again. We'll have to verify that the arm has mended and administer a chemical command to the nanites to terminate themselves."

"Yes, ma'am," Aurora said. Then, just as the doctor was turning to leave: "... and thank you." The doctor did not turn back, but her voice had softened.

"Your welcome, Lieutenant."

Checking the time, Aurora saw that it was 9:47. Price would be arriving at the Novas' quarters soon. Standing up from the table (and thankful that the cane had indeed been unnecessary this morning), Aurora made her way back to meet the new squad member.

Kimmers4Ever

Thu Oct 21, 2004 5:08 pm

"Report by 1000 hours."

Ducky was furious as she stuffed clothing into her bags, A couple of her squad mates...No check that, former squad mates, watched her pack with unease and mixed with a sense of relief. "Why me? Why not someone else?"

She remember the sinking feeling when it was announced one of them would be transferred, she had a feeling it would be her. And, of course, it was.

"You know why, Duck. Besides, it can't be all that bad. I've heard rumors about them." One of the girls stated simply.

"Yeah, sez you. You're not the one being kicked to a different squad. Took me months to learn what each one of you do and how you think." She threw an arm up in frustration. "Now I've got to do that all over again." Decoy Duck huffed.

"Well, you'll do fine. You're one of the better pilots, I'm sure you'll fit in. Quit worrying."

Ducky didn't respond, deciding it wasn't worth arguing. She picked up the picture of her family, well, they last time they were together before her daddy died. She knew the squad wouldn't really miss her; she tended to get them into more trouble. There had been a lot of tension since she decided to buzz a rival squadron's ship.

At least it wasn't one of the Nova's, now that would be uncomfortable. She placed the picture in her pack carefully and bent down to scoop up her flight helmet.

"Your gonna be late if you dilly dally anymore..."

"Alright, alright." Decoy glared at the girls. "You'd think that your trying to get rid of me fast." She mused, but there was no humor in it.

She suddenly sighed and flung the bag over her shoulder. She stood there for a moment, bag over her shoulder and her helmet loosely swinging in one hand, feeling as if she was in a surreal moment. She felt so odd about shifting to this new squad, but at that moment she felt like some cosmic jigsaw puzzle fell into place.

She quickly turned and hurried out of the bay. Decoy didn't offer a goodbye, but then neither did they. She felt their eyes on her back, until the door slid shut behind her with a thunk. She let out the breath she was holding and was surprised that she felt some relief.

Maybe it won't be so bad, she thought to herself. Maybe this group will be different. "Maybe you need to be different too." She mumbled to herself as she headed for her new home.

Walking down the corridor, she realized she wasn't exactly sure where she was going. She rounded a corner in time to spot another person coming out of Sickbay. Maybe she'd know..

"Excuse me.. " Ducky called, picking up the pace to catch up with the other. "Hold up.. I need help finding the Dark Nova's place. You know where it is?"

The woman turned to look at Decoy curiously and then smile. "You must be.. Price." She stated confidently.

"Uh.. Ashley Price.. Yes." She arched a brow at the other, "You are a part of Dark Novas?"

"Oh, yes, I'm Aurora and I'll show you the way to meet the others."

Vexus

Tue Oct 26, 2004 9:07 am

The silver-haired girl and the redhead walked side by side down the corridor in a somewhat-awkward silence. Aurora stole a few glances down at her new squadmate, the girl's face bringing back the faint echo of painful and wonderful memories. At last the pilot caught Aurora's look.

"What is it?" said Ashley, with a half-nervous smile.

"It's nothing," Aurora said, shaking her head. "Forgive me for stalling. It's just that you reminded me of someone I knew a long time ago." Ashley nodded solemnly.

"A friend?"

"Sometimes." Aurora said quietly, and said no more. Again, a silence fell on them as they entered the lift. After the door slid shut, Ashley again spoke up.

"So, what's our squad leader like? I've only skimmed over the info Voeller sent me so far." Aurora smiled.

"Well, she's a very inexperienced pilot, still behaves like an army grunt, and socially is as boring as hell." Ashley's smile sank a little.

"...Oh. Well, I'm sure she'll loosen up in time."

"Hopefully." Aurora replied, still smiling as she looked ahead at the lift doors. Ashley, for her part, eyed the numbers slowly counting higher.

"I read that you all call her Crone. Any particular reason?" Aurora's reply was as casual as ever.

"She has silver hair. It seems fitting wouldn't you say?" Ashley's eyes widened and she quickly snapped a salute.

"Sorry, sir, I didn't realize-"

"At ease, Lieutenant. I'm still getting used to the position myself. Speaking of callsigns, what shall we call you?"

"They've always called me DecoyDuck, Ducky for short."

"And why is that?"

"I acted as a decoy once to help save a squadmate. It was nothing really heroic, you know, but they gave me a medal after that, and the callsign came soon after."

"The Blue Crescent." Aurora said, and it wasn't a question.

"Yeah," Ashley said simply.

"So this squadmate still lives?" Ashley's expression fell.

"Well, that day she did, but not at the end of the month." Aurora bowed her head slightly.

"Death clings to that medal. Let's hope you don't earn any more."

As the lift slowed and the doors opened, Aurora gave a small sigh, then spoke up while the pilots entered the corridor.

"Due to the swiftness of your transfer, I haven't had the chance to read your profile, and you're scheduled to go up with the Novas today for patrol. If there's anything about you or your flying I should to know about, now is the time to tell me." For a moment Ashley was silent, then seemed to screw up her courage.

"People have called me a show-off, sir. My father was a stunt pilot, and I learned everything important about flying from him.... It's gotten me in trouble on occasion."

The pilots came to the door maked "DARK NOVA SQUADRON", and Aurora stood there in silence for a bit, her eyes seeming to look thoughtfully over the dark star and shockwave that made up the Novas' emblem. Then the squadleader turned to face Ashley, and two pairs of blue eyes, two pilots of the Blue Crescent, regarded one another.

"Lt. Price, let me make one thing perfectly clear. In case you weren't aware, this squad has just suffered the loss of a pilot. This was not due to the cunning of the enemy, nor because of a wingman's mistake or an equipment failure. It occurred because a pilot refused to obey my orders. That pilot went on to sacrifice herself to accomplish the mission for us, but that means jack-shit to me. I loved her as a sister, and that makes the sting of her defiance all the worse."

Aurora pause briefly to control her voice, making sure it wouldn't begin to quiver. She had to make the first impression that she wanted on this new pilot.

"Unofficially, as far as I care, you can buzz towers and surf mine blastwaves to your heart's content. But when we're in battle, you will obey my orders without question. Is that understood?" Ashley nodded. If she felt intimidated, she still held her ground, and Aurora noticed it with approval.

"Understood clearly, sir." Aurora's face softened.

"Good. Now with that out of they way, let's introduce you to your new family."

## The Story continues in Chapter 2...