

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 Anatolja "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	Thu Nov 04, 2004 3:45 pm	
<p>Chapter 2: And thou shall trust...the Seer</p> <p>Dark Novas's quarters were still full, that is to say, Kat going nervous circles telling Claymore's the checklist of intelligence data on recent encounters with rebels to see into before their patrol, Cas fighting with a strap of her hair that apparently had got into the zipper of her flightsuit, Ursula trying to help her and making it worse, Christine rolling her eyes at such a sight.</p> <p>"Err...hello guys" Price started awkwardly. But Crone apparently had other plans:</p> <p>"Attention!! %&\$^ing prissies! Do something remotely resembling a military unit for a change once in a while! What is this, a %&\$^ing summer picnic or what?!"</p> <p>Never before, did Crone show them her infantry manners and the grunt attitude towards squadmates.</p> <p>But now, they all found out she very well could have, and still could any minute. That was a refreshing thought, that put a lot of things in perspective. The squad formed up something very remotely resembling the proper military attention line, but at least they were quiet.</p> <p>"Meet my girls, Ducky. This tall redhead" Crone pointed at her XO "is Claymore – my second and your today's mission leader, you will obey her orders like you would have mine" she then directed her attention towards Christine</p> <p>"This is our resident pool of cold reason and a military protocol specialist lieutenant Auten – Banshee. She's excellent flyer and fierce fighter. She's reportedly had known fear in her life, but nobody succeeded to prove it and I have my serious doubts" Crone smiled an unexpectedly warm smile at Christine, then moved on.</p> <p>"Now meet lieutenant Veneberg" Crone paused for a second "callsign Hobbit or just Hobbs for short. She's a hothead, but you don't want to find yourself at the wrong end of whatever she is aiming. Occasionally misses points, but never targets. She will save your life more than once."</p> <p>Then it was just Cassandra</p> <p>"And last but not least – meet lieutenant Dory, callsign Seer, for she reveals the truth of revelations to us." Cas smiled innocently "some people trust her intuitive judgements, and some don't. Those who do, find that they do much better that way."</p> <p>Finally, Crone eyed all dark Novas and spoke to them:</p> <p>"Novas, this is your new squadmate, lieutenant Price. To be brief – she's our new flying ace. Greet her warm. Any questions? Veneberg?"</p> <p>"Sir, are we opening circus here or what? Price has a history in this system and on this ship. The history of being a show-off daddy's daughter playing acrobatics on the battlefield. Are you telling us that four of us takes her famousness to a patrol today?, without simming together?" Price wanted to counteract, but this was where Auten stepped in.</p> <p>"Now Hobbs that was just priceless. Do you ever think about the stuff that comes out of that loud mouth of yours? Did she give you any reason to such..."</p> <p>"Stop it – now"</p> <p>Crone wasn't intending to say it more than once.</p> <p>"Now you're in the team Ducky" Crone smiled encouragingly "good luck"</p> <p>"for you're gonna...."Veneberg murmured under her nose</p> <p>"very much need it" Cas finished, elbowing her in the ribs. "give her some brake Hobbs, will you?"</p>		
Vindicare	Fri Nov 05, 2004 2:22 pm	
<p>Banshee met Crone's gaze as she spoke, but quickly dropped her eyes to the floor and attempted a faltering smile as the squad leader finished her introduction.</p>		

Her intermediary piece said, Banshee mulled over the news.

*Price....i **have** heard that name before...oh yes i remember*

Banshee looked Price up and down quizzically

Perhaps she can help me with my technique....but thats a question for another time.

Aware that Crone's reprimand was directed at her as well as Ursula, Christine maintained her silence, noting the mutterings from the smaller members of the squad.

On instinct, she stepped forward, her left hand extended.
"Welcome to Dark Nova"

Claymore looked a little taken aback, possibly because she was thinking of doing similar, and being XO should have been first.

Price looked a little bemused. She reached her left hand out and shook
"One of those are ya?" she exclaimed nonchalantly, receiving a confused expression in reply
"Leftie"
"Ah yes...quite" Banshee stepped back into line.

Maverick	Sun Nov 07, 2004 10:19 pm
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Considering the projected range of the Copperheads...we might have to keep an eye out...They're our biggest threat out here. Kat thought, running down her clipboard of tech info and projected threats.

"Who's that?" Ducky asked Crone looking over to Kat who was lost in her info.

"That's our resident spook, Katherine Jones. Catnip. She's pretty new to the squad also, but I think she's already fitting in nicely." Crone smirked. "Kat! Front and center!"

Rousing from her mind-numbing stupor, Kat ran forward into the line in front of Crone and Ducky.
"Yes?"

"Meet our new squadmate, Ducky. She's going to be flying with us on recon."

"Oh...uh, yes sir. Nice to meet you." Kat said distractedly, reaching out a hand to shake Price's while scanning over her clipboard again. Kat made an eeking sound and started scribbling intently on her clipboard suddenly, drawing some attention. Blushing she hooked a lock of hair into her hair and explained. "Sorry, just thinking a little loudly." Kat walked off, engrossed in her notes.

"Is she always like that sir?" Ducky asked Crone with furrowed brows.

"She's been very attentive ever since our last mission...guess it's her way of dealing with shock." Crone responded with a shrug.

Charon	Wed Nov 10, 2004 11:37 am
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Rhiannon recovered her composure after being caught flat-footed by Yate's startling new attitude towards her squad and Veneberg's cold, hard attitude. Apparently, she hadn't been paying enough attention to her squadmates of late. That would have to change.

She stuck out her hand with a smile that came just short of being TOO warm. "Hallo there, lassie. Pleased tae meetcha. Dinnae let yese'f get tae werrked oop overr firrst impressions; we've all had a hard time o' it, of late."

Price blinked. "Uhm... ma'am? Not meaning any disrespect, but... is that accent for real?"

Rhiannon frowned for a second, then smiled as she realized what Price had meant. "Aye, lass, I'm no' pullin' yer leg. Dinnae fash - ye'll get th' hang o' it beforre tae long."

Her tone hardened slightly as she continued. "I've had a wee bit o' a glance at yer serrvice recorrd, an' I must say that while yer antics at playin' th' decoy are good tae go when ye save a mate's life wi' 'em, boot they will have nae place in this squad. We clear?"

Price gulped. "Yes, ma'am."

Rhiannon relaxed again. "Good tae go. That'll be all that I'll say on the subject, unless ye need talkin' tae. I'm no' a hard-arse, boot I have no intention of playin' me pipes fer anyone else in me squad, ye ken?"

When Price nodded, still looking a little uncertain, Rhiannon gave a small internal groan. Perhaps she'd lain it on just a touch too thick. "Ye'll pick it oop from th'others, lass. They'll tell ye that I'm no' an ogre." She smiled again, then returned to Kat's intelligence briefing, making notes occasionally on her PDA.

Vexus

Sun Nov 21, 2004 11:52 pm

The next hour passed with blessed triviality. No crises to answer to, no protocol to follow, just seven women gathered in fellowship. A full squad once again.

At the suggestion of Cass, the Novas had then relocated themselves to the mess hall for some lunch before the patrol. Aurora had made a point to stop by the kitchen and see the chef, but she was nowhere to be found. A little disappointed by this, she returned to the table where her squadmates had gathered. The special today was meatloaf, and miracle of miracles, it actually tasted like meatloaf. As the squad chatted away, Aurora turned her attention to the TV screen nearby where a news broadcast was showing.

The Greyhelms had earned a spot in the playoffs, but were expected to lose to the Serpents. She would have to try and get a recording of the game sometime this week. Historical artifacts had just been recovered from the old flooded cities of New York and San Fransisco after years of searching. Pirate activity was on the rise again in the Sol System. The Alliance patrols were being stretched too thin to enforce the trade lanes effectively, and more megacorps were turning to Rogue Star for cargo protection. Near the end of the segment was a small item about a new offensive in the works to retake the Risae Facilities, but Aurora had turned her attention back to the table conversations by then. Christine and Ursula were discussing their preferences in firearms. Kat was eating with one hand and reading a data pad in the other. Meanwhile, Rhiannon was alternating between reading over Kat's shoulder and listening to Cass and Ashley talking about previous squad experiences. Amidst the laughing and the arguing, the eating and the teasing, Aurora caught Rhiannon's eye and gave a small smile. The two pilots thought as one. These were the moments to be treasured.

"See me in private just before you leave for patrol," Aurora said to her XO. "There's some points I want to go over with you."

"Aye, sir," Rhiannon replied.

The last bit of business finished, Aurora went back to listening to her squadmates, her mind freed from worry for the moment.

Vexus

Tue Dec 07, 2004 10:31 am

"The Z-38 is clearly superior to Ramstead," Christine said definitively. "The cooling system allows for more rounds per minute and the gun-sight is amazingly accurate even beyond three hundred meters."

"Yeah, but the kick-back makes your accurate gun-sight worth shit," Ursula retorted. "The Ramstead is rock-steady on all firing modes. If I want to make some abstract art, I'll use the Z-38. But if I actually want to hit a target, it's the Ramstead all the way." Christine shrugged with the faintest hint of a smile.

"It's not my fault if such a powerful gun is too much for you to handle."

"Oh really?! Is such a thing as finesse lost on a Rambo-ette like yourself?"

"You wanna put your money where your mouth is?"

"Anytime!"

"You and me at the gunrange after patrol. We use our weapon of choice at the maximum distance. Fifty credits says I get the best out of thirty rounds. You up for it, shrimp?"

"You're on, G.I. Jane!"

Aurora took this in with good humor as she turned her attention to the other side of the table.

"Two meters to spare?!" Cass exclaimed.

"Just about," Ashley said with a smile. "The transport didn't heed the stand-down order from orbit control, so it continued banking to starboard. I suppose I could've reversed thrust, but my fighter was just the right size. I threw the throttle open and yawed 45 degrees; slipped by between the transport fuselage and the flight deck. Made the landing with no trouble, and right on time. The traffic controller almost had a heart attack." Cass roared with laughter, but Rhiannon wore only a half-smile.

"Was a slick move, lass, but a dangerous one to say the least." Ashley's response had more confidence than pride in it.

"I fly to the best of my abilities, and I know the limits of those abilities. I'd never attempt a maneuver that I wasn't sure I could make." Rhiannon's smile grew a bit.

"Just remember, lass, no hot-dogging with me, alright? I have me a nootable collection of swords onboard, and if you cut them close with me, I'll cut them close with you. Ya ken?" Ashley gave a nervous smile.

"I what?" This set Cass off again, laughing until her eyes were tearing up. Rhiannon shook her head, while Ashley had a confused look on her face. As the laughter finally subsided, Aurora could hear Kat mumbling to herself. Rhiannon heard it as well.

"What are you schemin' over there, Cat?"

"Hmm?" Kat replied, looking up from her data pad. "Oh! Just going over probable scenarios for our patrol." Rhiannon gave a look of mixed amazement and disgust.

"You've been running those mini-sims for hours. I understand the need to be prepared, but you stare at that pad for much longer and you'll go cross-eyed. What use will ya be to us then, lass?"

"I just want to run five more."

"Sorry, lass, I'm afraid an XO intervention is in order," Rhiannon sighed as she swiped the pad from Kat's hand.

"Hey! I just-"

"Cass," Rhiannon said as she passed the pad to the curly-haired pilot with a smirk, "can you summarize this data for me?" Cass gave the pad a dramatic look-over.

"Sir, it seems that if the enemy is present in our patrol area, it is in our best interest to shoot them before they shoot us."

"Very funny," Kat said with a frown. Rhiannon put a hand on her shoulder.

"Cat, take a deep breath, finish your dinner, and think about something other than the mission for fifteen minutes. That's an order."

"Yes, sir," Kat said grudgingly as she picked up her fork.

From the corner of her eye, Aurora saw the chef march into the kitchen. Excusing herself, the squad leader rose and trailed after the woman until she caught her near the back pantries. The chef still wore her trademark scowl.

"I'm busy, girl, no time to talk."

"I just wanted to thank you for taking care of Ursula and Cass while I was in sickbay."

"The little ones?" the chef replied. "Hurumph, better to cheer them up than to have them weeping and sniveling all over my newly-cleaned tables." Aurora smiled.

"I owe you one... um... ma'am?"

"Claudia," the chef said as she left for the stoves with a bag of potatoes.

As Aurora returned to the mess hall, she found Rhiannon waiting for her.

"We're about to get suited up for patrol, sir. Any further orders?" Aurora glanced down at her broken arm and cursed it under her breath. She wanted to be out there with them, not cooped up in the Morrigan.

"You and Seer have proven yourselves the most reliable," Aurora said as she raised her eyes to meet those of her XO. "I want you in the lead and Seer to bring up the rear. Keep a short leash on Banshee, and always try to keep someone close to Catnip. She may not freeze this time, but there's still a chance she'll hesitate. Despite the tension between them, Hobbs and Ducky might make a good offensive team if things get serious out there. The former has the shot and the latter has the moves. Above all, don't engage any targets except when necessary, unless you are given orders to the contrary." Rhiannon listened in respectful silence until Aurora seemed to be finished.

"Anything else, sir?" Aurora's response had only a shred of humor.

"I order you all to return home safely."

"Yes, sir," Rhiannon said with a quick salute, then turned back to gather up the other Novas. Aurora glanced at a nearby wall clock. This second funeral service that Voeller had invited her to would begin soon. She would have to get into her dress uniform again. With a sigh, Aurora took one last look at her squad across the room, then headed to her quarters to change.

Vindicare	Wed Dec 08, 2004 1:22 am
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actually feeling rather elated at the prospect for a change, Banshee changed into her flight suit and headed for the Breifing.

be interesting to see what she can really do....should the oppertunity arise she mused, giving Price No, Ducky a quick glance as they walked along the corridor.

Also on her mind was the competition post-sortie, Banshee having already decided on using her favourite PSG-2000 Kinetic for the duel of arms. She had witnessed first hand that Ursula was a good shot when wielding a fighter, so this ground-based test would be most intriguing.

Vexus	Wed Dec 15, 2004 9:19 am
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Aurora stepped out of the Novas' quarters dressed in her regalia, her Blue Crescent hanging below a cluster of colored bars. Ever since she had found the medal, she had hoped she would forget about it. But the knowledge of its whereabouts seemed stuck in her mind, and as she dressed in her uniform, she had grudgingly fetched it out from beneath her stored rifle. It felt somehow appropriate to wear it this time, though she could not say why. Nef's medallion also remained around her neck beneath the folds of cloth.

As she started down the corridor, heading for the flight deck, the sound of rhythmic footsteps echoed from around a far corner. As Aurora approached, she frowned at the sight of Edward coming in the opposite direction, his arms holding some fine art brushes and small containers of paint. He appeared to be mumbling something, his head bowed to the ground. As he neared Aurora, he raised his head and put on a look of embarrassment.

"Ah, forgive me, Miss Yates! I didn't know it was you. Your footsteps did not match your usual pattern."

"My legs have not been at their best lately," Aurora replied flatly.

"I will leave your sight immediately, Miss Yates," Edward said timidly, and seemed to shrink away from the silver-haired girl. Aurora felt a renewed anger at this show of submissiveness, though she imagined that she would react that way to anything he did. Nevertheless, she remembered Jason's words in sickbay, and forced her anger aside for the moment.

"Wait, Edward, I need to speak with you." Edward stiffened at once and turned, his expression now a mix of penitence and curiosity. "Look, I... I wanted to thank you. I understand it was you who made our insignia and customized our helmets. I think the Novas were pleased by the skill and detail you put into them." A small smile came to Edward's face.

"I am pleased that they approve of the designs. I am just returning from making the proper adjustments to Miss Price's attire." Aurora's voice then took on a hint of suspicion.

"Edward, how is it you were able to enter our quarters and flight lockers without our permission?" Edward's smile faded quickly.

"Forgive me intruding on your privacy, Miss Yates, but I was faced with a dilemma. The command staff charges me with customizing attire for newly-formed squadrons. It is one of the ship traditions used to boost morale, though it is one of such low priority that it is often delegated to androids such as myself. Normally I would ask the squadron leader for permission to perform the necessary work, but you had implicitly requested no contact with me. I wouldn't dare ask any of the crew for assistance in such a menial task, and Jason is never one to offer me any help, so I took it upon myself to obtain your helmets and uniforms unnoticed so that I could fulfill my function."

"I see," Aurora said, clearly not put at ease by the android's explanation. "Allow me to clarify my previous request. If you have any official business with Dark Nova Squadron, you contact me and only me, is that understood?"

"Clearly, ma'am," Edward said quietly.

"Good," Aurora replied. "In the meantime, neither you nor Jason is to set foot in our quarters or lockers without permission. And, if you would, please tell Jason that his wandering eyes and hands may cost him in the future. Are you and he aware of Article 13?" Edward looked startled.

"Of course, Miss Yates, every android is aware of the Articles."

"Just let him know that I am aware of them as well. Good day, Edward," Aurora said as she turned and continued down the hallway. As she rounded the far corner, Edward began mumbling to himself again.

"Hmmm... docking cranes are more friendly than she is..."

Schamann

Thu Dec 16, 2004 2:20 pm

It was only a long while after Crone had disappeared around the corner, when Jason emerged from behind the emergency vacsuits locker.

"Just let him know that I am aware of them as well" he said in a vicious mocking tone. "Are they all born bitches then in the marines or do they take special courses for that?"

"You're walking on thin ice, Jason, and you're trying to make me walk alongside you" Edward was clearly not in as cocky mood.

"Stay cool, my friend, and have no fear, everything is going as planned. More or less, that is" Jason carefully touched his lower jaw at those last words. "The world is a mysterious place, and there are things in the shadow that can turn today's kings into tomorrow's beggars. Let us just be patient... for now."

And should anyone see him at that moment, she would have very strong impression of his smile being....predatory.

„Godspeed Dark Novas. Morrigan out.“

And then they were alone. Six Medusa Twos in patrol to the middle of nowhere. Space was once again all around them, cold, black vacuum of it. And it felt kinda creepy.

Morrigan still had more than two weeks to get to The Border, but here out there one could see it all right. Like it was hard to notice the thing that covered almost the quarter of vicinity, and almost a twentieth part of the entire system. It was there all right, on the right side of their flight path. It was there all the time.

"Cat, Ia wanna ya ta da a swaepe scan far me, Banshea and Cass, caver her, Hobbs, Deck, yae taek `te reer – cleer?"

"After putting it through automatic translator, yes it is" Hobbs was visibly in bitching mood, Claymore had heard her whining and making vicious comments before, but never about her accent. Nevertheless, Hobbs complied without second thoughts or hesitation. The patrol might have been conducted in heavy atmosphere, but so far everything worked just fine.

So far.

Crone wandered near the flightdeck and the techs country, mostly aimlessly. Soon, the funeral ceremony was about to begin, soon she would need to face what she very feared she would have to, for she felt she knew whom the ceremony is dedicated to.

But so far, this level of a flightdeck was far from the funeral atmosphere, there was work going on there and at a good pace it was. Not far from where Crone was taking her walk, a Dark Novas marked siren was standing, her engine block open and two aircraftsmen bent over it. It looked like they try to tune the main thruster of the afterburner. The engine's howling was so loud, that even there behind the thick plexiglass it was unpleasant to hear. Deep in her thoughts Crone didn't notice the presence of someone else in the passageway at once. It was only when the other woman took the intercom's microphone and started her rant:

"You have the second turbine in the left engine set too tight, increase the angle idiots or you'll be losing power form here to Earth and back."

Yates regarded the speaker, a skinny young woman of medium height. She had very pale skin and bright blonde hair about 2 to 3 inches length. Small mouth, thin lips almond shaped eyes....eyes.

The eyes of that woman was of the colour of a saturated violet, everything but the natural feeling about it. And Crone recalled whom the woman must be. There were gossips around the ship about some petty officer engineer who had her eyes unnaturally coloured in that fashion. Judging from the name badge on her uniform, her name was Mirunova.

"You're the chief of those technicians down there?" Crone asked curiously.

"Nope, just someone who knows how these birds really do work." Petty officer took a quick look at Crone and then started to pass by her and towards the exit. "One of the few onboard this can - apparently"

The woman's PDA blipped and she immediately plugged an earphone into her ear and started talking with irritated voice:

"Yes I'am on my way...Yes Kate I am in the hurry, just because we were ordered to work together does not mean that.....WHAT exploded?!!! Stay there...just, stay there"

"Banshee here, what' up there Kat?"

"Not much, basically normal traffic and static, plus the Border is getting nervous, we might have some nasty asteroid explosions in the next few days"

Seer's voice was then on the comm., all excited:

"Guys, I just caught that. Must be a rebel frequency, listen..."

"How come you know any rebel frequencies or their modulation?" Price sounded suspiciously.

"A hunch, you wanna hear it or not?" Now Cas was getting nervous.

"Put it oen" Calymore resolved the talk. "Aen everyboedy shaet ap while we' re aet it"

"This is the military vessel Aruna, flying under Charan Shield. We seek to surrender to the Terran Navy and receive asylum in exchange for our cooperation. I repeat: we seek to surrender to the Terran Navy and receive asylum in exchange for our cooperation. We are pursued by the enemy and urgently need help from Terran fighters. This is..."

Banshee was the first to break the silence:
 "What do we do boss?"

Crone was almost at the flight deck level, where the funeral was supposed to be conducted, when she heard her name being called you loudly after her. When she turned to see who that was, she saw Sparks, in her uniform regalia as well, approaching her.

"Yates, nice to see you here. I thought you'd be wishing to bid farewell to Flame, despite of the official policy. I'm glad I was right"

So far it was a feeling, a hunch, almost a certainty, but not the certainty. Now it was done.

She was going to honor the traitor against her flag and her oath, who chased her and almost killed her.

JFalcon

Thu Dec 16, 2004 5:48 pm

Anatolja fumed as she hurried across the flight deck.

*An Aries II. WHY did ***that*** private have to pick the Mk II to destroy today? WHY did she have to start early on it before I arrived? And WHY did Sparks saddle me with ***her*** of all the techs in this place?!*

If you wanted to find Kate, looking for chaos was a good way to start. And there was some on hand at the moment. A fire team was running towards the end of the repair bay where a parked Aries II had smoke drifting up from its underbelly. Whatever had happened must have been short-lived because the team's equipment was still unused when Anatolja arrived on the scene. Instead, the pair of emergency personnel and a tech were examining a blackened section on the Aries II where a VTOL thruster should have been.

"Kate!"

whump A metallic thump rang out as the tech quickly straightened and hit her head on the Aries' low wing.

"Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow."

Anatolja sighed, closed her eyes and mentally counted to ten.

Rubbing her head and blinking back tears of pain, the auburn-haired tech made her way quickly towards Anatolja and pulled herself into something resembling attention.

"Yes, ma'am?" It was accompanied with a weak smile that plainly begged "please don't kill me."

PFC (just how she ever managed to rate *first* class was a mystery to Anatolja) Kate Ross looked as she always did: a good ten centimeters shorter than the angry Petty Officer, tousled chin-length hair, jumpsuit which looked like it had been worn for days, tool belt with a tablet PC and thermos, and very blue eyes behind a pair of glasses with large-diameter lenses. Frightened eyes.

"What happened?"

"I didn't do anything!"

That was obviously not true and the fire crew decided that this was an excellent time to wander off before any shouting and blame began.

"I was doing some baseline tests for the work Sparks wanted us to do. I... I got through the fuel and oxidizer feed diagnostics, and the thruster tests, and had just started the VTOL test when..."

"I thought I told you to stay away from the engines." Anatolja was not happy; Kate must have been working for over an hour on the fighter.

"But, I wasn't..."

"AND the thrusters! And anything at all remotely related to propulsion!" If Kate had blown out the VTOL duct it was going to take hours to fix... "***&@** it, Calamity! What part 'do not touch' didn't

you understand?!"

Kate made the slightest flinch at Anatolja's use of that nickname before re-stiffening to a proper attention stance.

"Ma'am! Yes, ma'am!" There wasn't anything else to say.

"Now what happened?"

"Ma'am! I don't know, ma'am. I was 20 seconds into the standard VTOL test. Thrust was increasing nominally and just reached 40% when the number three nozzle burst. I killed the feeds, aborted the test, and shutdown the fighter. I was just starting to assess the damage when you arrived, ma'am."

Kate swallowed and waited.

Tiefflieger

Fri Dec 17, 2004 12:26 pm

Anatolja gave Kate an evil eye that clearly said "Stay right where you are, we are not finished yet!"

She crouched down to spare her head from the encounter Kate's had just had with the Aries' wing, to take a closer look at the damaged thruster.

"Flashlight!", she bellowed, holding out a hand behind her back. She could hear Kate rummaging through her toolbox and soon felt the cylindrical form of the requested item pressed into her hand.

"Did you check the control valves?", she asked while peering up into the black crater. It was even worse than it had looked at first glance. The blast had blown away parts of the hull plating, and the thruster itself one smoldering lump of metal. Everything was covered in soot. There was no hope in repairing it, it would have to be completely replaced. This Aries wouldn't take off today for sure, maybe not even tomorrow.

"Yes of course, ma'am!", Kate replied almost indignantly, "They're all right!"

"Not anymore. Got torn right out of their fittings. You haven't checked the refeeds for residue fuel, have you? You do know they don't get automatically cleared when you start a ground test?"

This was a statement, not a question. It was common knowledge that often some excess fuel was left in the refeeds. Although explicitly prescribed in the Technical Order most techs didn't bother to clear them manually before initiating a test, which was no big thing because *usually* this only let to some funny but harmless bang or the occasional darting flame - at least with the regular thrusters on other crafts. But the VTOL thrusters of the Aries II were a new and more powerful design.

"No ma'am, but...", Kate started an explanation, but Anatolja interrupted.

"I don't know how you could overlook this, they must have been brimful and dripping. Yes, I know no one cares, but with this new stuff you must be extra cautious. We don't have that many spare parts. And besides from that, in case you haven't noticed yet: *We* are the ones who get paid to *fix* this fighters. The people who are supposed to *damage* them are considered our *enemies*! *sigh* OK, I'll take this from here. You start with the sensorics test. I want a report when you are finished *before* you start anything new! Questions? OK, then get moving!"

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am!"

Kate quickly gathered the sensorics testing equipment from the nearby trolley (dropping one of the boxes in the attempt to carry everything at once) and hurried to the bow of the Aries. There she opened a hatch and plugged in the testsets, glad to be able to get away from the scowling Petty Officer.

One hour later Kate had finished the sensorics test run and was about to report to her superior. Anatolja was standing below the Aries, vanishing to the waist in the bay that usually housed the VTOL thruster. Kate could hear her muttering in a language she didn't understand. Engine parts littered the floor and large blueprints and schematics were spread all around. Anatolja was taking the opportunity to take a closer look at the VTOL thruster, familiarizing herself with the design she hadn't worked with before. She was enjoying her work and her anger had

cooled down quite a bit.

"Ahem, PO Mirunova, ma'am..." Kate wasn't too happy to have to raise her attention. But if she didn't deliver the requested report she would get into really hot water.

"What is it?"

"I'm finished, ma'am!"

Anatolija ducked out of the engines bay, wiping her oil-stained hands on a cloth and checked the clock at the flight deck wall. "You are finished? The whole sensorics array?", she asked with an suspiciously raised eyebrow.

"Ma'am! Yes, ma'am!"

"Show me the results."

One after another she checked the small monitors of the testsets which were still plugged in, browsing through the displayed values with the arrow buttons on the panel.

"Your evaluation of the results?"

Kate grinned behind the Petty Officer's back. *If she wants to test me on the sensors she has to get up earlier!*

"Well, at first the TCF response time is a little high with two-oh-three nanoseconds, second the SCT is two degrees below optimum and finally the breakpoints C-seven through C-thirteen are increased which indicate a damage to the auxiliary forward antenna. Judging from the values it seems to be as well slightly off-center and have a hairline along the base, which cannot be confirmed without opening the dome, of course. But all values are still well within acceptable tolerances. I'd suggest to give it a go and perform another full sensorics test after the next sortie."

Anatolija stared at her in disbelief while Kate vainly tried to suppress a sheepish smile.

Now that was... creepy. How the hell did she do this? Is this the same girl who can't even tie her shoes without braking something? And what was that stuff about the aux antenna? I didn't understand a single word! They don't even teach this at the academy!

"You did the whole *extended* systems test in just *one hour*? I don't have the slightest hint of an idea how you did it and it's more than was required. OK, pack this up and make the log entry, then join me with the thruster. I'd like to show you something. It looks like the thing blowing up wasn't entirely your fault after all - It could have been prevented, if you'd been paying proper attention, though."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Oh, and don't »yes-ma'am« me all the time. It makes me feel old."

Maybe working with this PO wasn't going to be that bad after all. But Kate wasn't sure if the last remark was meant serious and she for sure wasn't going to take any risks.

"Yes...err... sir!"

Anatola rolled her eyes.

JediBubbles

Fri Dec 17, 2004 7:09 pm

Claymore's brain spun. Given the events of their last flight, a colonial squad's surrender was definately the last thing she'd expected on this patrol. And, when you got down to it, their only two options were to accept the surrender and give aid, or reject and attack. What she really needed was more information.

"Cat, did ye--"

"No, sir," Catnip replied, sounding confused. "None of my sims covered this."

"Murphy's Law of simming," Ducky muttered.

"Course not." Claymore frowned. "Wha' the bloody 'ell d' they need our 'elp fer?"

"No clue," Seer interjected cheerfully. "Why don't we ask? Seems to be the eas--"

"Generally it's considered unwise to trust the enemy's information, Seer," Banshee's cold voice cut across the comm. "Something's fishy here."

"Hey, they're asking for help, and even if it's a set-up, their story would give us something to go on!"

"Aye though' I told you lot t' sheat ap?" *Why d' all a her observations seem t' simplify and complicate things at the same time?* Claymore puffed invisible bits of hair out of her eyes. "Scratch tha'. Hobbs, Ducky, what d' ye think?"

Maverick

Sat Dec 18, 2004 9:06 pm

Cat's brain rushed through the scenario. Things weren't adding up, but something tagged at the back of her mind. Cat switched the com over to Claymore.

"Ma'am, please send a signal to the *Aruna*, tell them of our intent to take them up on their offer and request them to move to point...254.32.10. That'd put them in the *Morrigan*'s killzone if they are trying to pull something funny. I'll relay a sit-rep to the *Morrigan*." Cat said urgently into the com.

"Cat, whas'is about?" Claymore replied, sounding a little taken back. "What aern't ya tellin' oos?"

"I can explain later! Please just do it! If my hunch is right, we're going to be getting hot real soon! Seer, Banshee," Cat urged, hailing her two squadmates, "keep your eyes peeled, look for Copperheads. We might even have to deal with a *Lamprey* frigate...er....the type of frigate that the *Bear* was."

Cat's hands flew over her com controls in the cockpit despite a few squeals and shocked retorts from the squad. "*Morrigan*, this is Catnip. We might have a problem."

Schamann

Mon Dec 20, 2004 2:55 pm

„Claymore – three quick things – please hear me out“

“Dae it Fast Habbs“

“One – you don’t call terran fighters on Charan frequency, if you want them to hear the message. Two – if you’re Charan you just say you’re Charan you don’t specifically indicate that you only fly under Charan Shield – you do that kind of things when you want to clearly mark there’s something different about that ship being flagged as Charan. And three – it’s Crimson Shield, not Charan Shield – even the child would get it right“

“Yae gonna tell me s’ting usefall or no?!”

“Claymore if this is a trap then we are not the mice. And whoever is speaking, tries to pass the warning hidden inside the message! That’s all I can gather from it“

“And you know it from where – tea leaves divination?“ Price asked in irritated voice

“No, that is my department“ Seer’s response was not late a bit“

“Dark Novas – this is Morrigan, Lieutenant Parker speaking. What’s the problem? We received some strange communication on frequency 12.87, but it appears to be coded rebel and appears to be coded too hard for us at the moment. Do you happen to know anything about that perhaps“

Seer immediately took a look at her last radio settings from when she received the message

Her face went white.

Mirunova’s pager went beeping when both women were just leaning over the place they were supposed to install the new VTOL thruster. It wasn’t particularly loud, but then Kate didn’t need

loud noises to create chaos. She jumped and almost dropped the meter inside the Aries's guts, but she ducked and caught it in the last second, but then her thermos slipped out of her tool belt, and fell down tripping Mirunova's toolset down on the floor. The tools fell off the box and scattered on the floor. One of the screwdrivers hit the powerplug...and rested easily on the floor leaving the plug undamaged.

"Kate you...!" – a pair of frightened eyes waiting for the inevitable bashing, full of resignation – "...just be more careful" Anatolja changed her voice into a softer tone "Alright?"

She checked her PDA. The message was short.

"OSIs want two Arieses MkII ready ASAP. I'm not losing the funeral no matter what. Take who you need and what you need and give them that in under an hour, you have my permission to take afternoon shift out of their leisure, just do it. Freeman"

Tiefflieger

Mon Dec 20, 2004 10:03 pm

"Great! Now this is just f%\$king great! "Just do it" - what the hell does this Хозяйка борделя think...!? One hour!? Is she nuts? She knows none of them tin cans is ready! Argh! What have I done to her..."

Kate involuntarily ducked her head at Anatolja's outburst. She was mildly shocked at how the Petty Officer spoke about their superior. Covertly she looked around, almost expecting to spot an angry Sparks walk down the hangar.

Anatolja was used to working with a deadline. But she absolutely *hated* being on short notice. People tended to make mistakes when they were in a rush. She jumped down from the Aries' wing and looked across the hangar over the row of eight Aries MkII fighters, of which each one had several hatches opened. Her mind was racing: *We can forget about this bucket right now. Better fix another one up instead.*

The one thing Anatolja hated even more than short notice deadlines was to have to leave an unfinished job.

But we just got a service release for the targeting computer, we have to update the firmware with this. Or can we let them fly without...? No, we can't! It's a priority order... Hmm... the 67-340 is in weapons check right now anyway, so they should already have the tar-com in service mode. But it also needs the MECU adjusted. The weapons guys won't like it to perform the update with running engines... Tough luck for them!

"OK, Kate, get down here! I want you to pack your things up and prep the 67-340 for tar-com update and engines test run. We've got one hour to get this bird in flying condition. And leave your stupid thermos off the craft!"

"Sir! Yes, sir!"

One more, but which... Think, Auto, think! 67-342, 67-343 and 67-347 are still in transfer inspection. 67-344 has an oil leak which the stupid bubble hunters still haven't located - well, if we botch a little bit here... that's gambling for high stakes, old girl... damn! I'll have to do this myself. But if I get Maynard, Tibbs and McGuire..., no, there's just not enough time...

"I could do the update! I can start right away!"

Anatolja noticed she had been thinking aloud when Kate interrupted her. Kate already regretted to let herself be carried away by a sudden fit of boldness and make that suggestion, at the sight of the corner of Anatolja's mouth twitching.

"What the heck. You do the update. It'll save us time."

"Yes, sir!"

Smiling Kate climbed down the ladder from the Aries wing (much less elegant than Anatolja's jump, but also much safer...). As she was about to hurry past Anatolja to the fighter marked with the number 67-340 Anatolja held her back for a moment by laying her hand on the younger woman's shoulder.

"If you f%\$k this up, I'll personally break your legs!"

Kate gulped. She didn't intend to f%\$k up, but well, considering her nickname... Of course she

could've done the engines test run, too, but it probably wasn't the cleverest of all ideas to suggest this after the recent incident with the VTOL-thruster.

Anatolja took her PDA and recorded an audio message which she would send to three of the women of the afternoon shift:

"Attention, this is Mirunova speaking. You have been selected to have the privilege and honor to be allowed to work some more unpaid overtime. Squash game and movie night are canceled. Please report to main service hangar immediately! Direct all formal complaints to 1st Lt. Freeman. **Now move your lazy asses down here, right NOW!**"

This'll cost me..., she thought with a smirk.

JFalcon

Wed Dec 22, 2004 7:49 am

67-340, 67-340... *This one!*

Except it was being worked on.

"Uh, 'scuse me? Three-Four-Oh is going out in an hour."

Three techs regarded Kate in questioning silence.

"I mean, PO Mirunova wants this Mk II ready for the flight line. LT Freeman's orders."

"Right." It was a statement; not agreement. "Well, good luck with that."

"The guns seem to be working. Power and optics in good alignment for the primaries. Ammos feeds and mechanics for the secondaries are clear. Don't know about hardpoints."

"...And thanks. Nice to get a break now and then."

They wandered off leaving Kate alone with the partially opened fighter.

*** 50 minutes to go ***

The Tar-Com update was trivial after she got the right update package out of supply. Kate barely glanced at the service manual as she swapped out parts before hooking up her tablet computer to do the microcode updates.

It all gets routine after enough years. All starts to look the same. The art is in the details, and this doesn't involve any.

She slid the now updated Tar-Com back into the Mk II. The motion was strangely similar to loading a very large ammo clip into an even larger weapon.

After a moment's pause, she decided to kick off a regression test on the Tar-Com, sensors, and C3 systems. It was a standard, automated test. She hadn't had enough time on the Mk II's to develop her own quick corner cases test yet.

Out of Character:

C3 - Command, Control, and Communications

I need coffee.

In spite of Anatolja, Kate retrieved her errant thermos. The coffee wasn't hot anymore, but it was caffeinated. And exactly what she needed.

Hmm, good blend, this one. Have to see about arranging a regular delivery of whole beans. Wish I knew where these came from.

Her thoughts shifted back to work.

OSI. Why are they going out? Not that I'd rather have them around here... Hey! They'll probably need RIAS gear.

The stock tests still had not finished, so she ran off towards the high-security storage. She liked this part of the Morrigan--lots of toys to play with, but not time for that now. The ensign on duty looked surprised when Kate thumbed her clearance for two RIAS packages and the system reported E5 grade authorization.

"E5? How did you get...? Well, OK, I guess. I'll get them sent up to the flight line."

RIAS. Mom and Dad met working on the original system. Too bad their vision for it never worked out. RIAS is just a shadow of what it was supposed to be. Hmph. Wasn't their fault.

*** 42 minutes to go ***

The electronics tests had finished when Kate got back to #340. And the results had problems. Probably a failure in the port wing command relay node. She scrambled up to the wing's top access panel.

*** 35 minutes to go ***

"Kate?!" Three-Four-Oh wasn't ready and neither Anatolja or Tibbs could find Kate.

"Ma'am?" There was a muffled reply from the wing. A head with a cap and glasses peaked over the wing a moment later.

"Status."

"Tar-Com's updated and working. There's a problem with this command repeater. Still needs an engine test. I'm almost done here and can update the other Tar-Com."

"Fine." Kate's head disappeared. Anatolja delegated Tibbs to conduct the engines test before returning to the hydraulics repair still in progress.

*Well, one almost down. I need Tibbs, but I'm not letting Calamity test an engine again. *sigh* It'll only take a few minutes...*

*** 31 minutes to go ***

Kate was too involved in her project to notice when the Mk II started vibrating slightly as Tibbs started the pre-ignition phase. Thus, Kate was taken entirely off guard as she finished, stood up, and dropped the panel shut.

"Clear!"

The Mk II's engines roared to life shaking the fighter violently.

"WAAH!" Kate lost her balance on the edge of the wing and found herself in a rapid and brief journey towards the deck. It ended violently in a dull thump followed closely by a clatter of tools and tablet PC.

"Oohhw." The wind was knocked out of her and it was more of a gasp than a complaint. Her vision was blurry. Something felt missing. Kate shook her head to clear it.

Glasses. Where?

Squinting, something shiny and familiar seemed to be a few centimeters away. Her hand groped once, then retrieved the frames. They had survived again; they only looked delicate.

The wonders of modern materials...

"What is this--techs from heaven? Or just a nice nap while the rest of us slave away?" Tibbs' tone wasn't mean or upset. She had seen the tumble and was amazed Kate was still conscious. "Didn't you know I was starting the engines test?"

"No..."

"Calamity, Calamity, Calamity. Well, up with you and back to work." She started to pull Kate back on to her feet.

Kate was suddenly very glad for the hand as her left knee exploded in pain. She nearly collapsed back to the deck as it gave way.

"What's the matter?"

"I... I think I hurt something." Kate was wincing in pain and speaking through clenched teeth.

"Is something broken?" Anatolja's threat suddenly sprung to mind.

"I don't know. I... I don't think so. Twisted? I can still update the other Tar-Com. You can finish your test."

"But"

"No. I'll be OK." And with that, Kate let go of Tibbs and began limping towards the other Mk II.

*** 28 minutes left ***

Charon

Thu Dec 30, 2004 3:38 pm

Claymore wished for nothing more than to be able to wipe the sweat off of her face that had started beading when Seer told her about the message she'd intercepted.

Sweet Maerciful Chraist, wha' th' 'ell 'ave I gotten oos intae? Oi'm no' trained fer anythin' like this-

She gave her mental voice a vigorous internal shake, took a breath, and focused.

*Okay, now tha's settled, then. Cat's gone ahaid an' set op a wee meetin'. If th' Morrigan can, in fact, maet os therre, it'll mek **me** a wee bit happier. Boot-*

Her comm crackled slightly. "Dark Novas – this is Morrigan, Lieutenant Parker speaking. What's the problem? We received some strange communication on frequency 12.87, but it appears to be coded rebel and appears to be coded too hard for us at the moment. Do you happen to know anything about that perhaps?"

Claymore cocked an eyebrow. If they were patrolling out here, the *Morrigan* shouldn't have been able to receive the message. That's the whole POINT of a patrol... In fact...

"Cat, get yer whisker's feelin'. See if ye ken pinpoint tha' last transmission's sourrrce. I'm nae surrre tha' was from the *Morr*

"Aye, ma'am," responded Catnip briskly, sounding unsure.

After a few moments, she responded. Unfortunately, she'd timed it just right to overlap with another flight member's transmission, so the were both garbled with the crackling and warbling of dueling receptions.

"Haud yer weesht, everrryone. Cat, gae ahead,"

Vexus

Fri Dec 31, 2004 5:00 am

Something's wrong.

The thought ran through Aurora's head again and again as the flight deck became more chaotic. Instead of clearing the area for the ceremony, more and more techs were running in, surrounding a pair of Aries fighters that bore the mark of her squadron. As she paced nervously about, a woman dressed-up pretty as a soldier in the midst of a growing storm of activity, she couldn't remember a time where she had felt so utterly useless. No alert had sounded, but that did little to quiet her fears. And as one of the Aries' engines test-fired, making her jump at the roar of sound, a new and more terrible thought struck her as keenly as a physical blow.

Something's happening to my girls!

Looking desperately amongst the techs, Aurora spotted Karen approaching quickly with several subordinates in tow, including a spectacled girl that Aurora remembered from earlier. She was now noticeably limping. As Karen passed, Aurora grabbed her arm, forcing her attention to the shaken squad leader.

"Sparks! What's going on?!"

Karen wore an expression of annoyance mixed with sympathy. "No time to explain, Crone. We've got to get these birds into space right now. The funeral's been delayed, but only for a little while."

Aurora's eyes shined with a furious fire. "Damn the funeral! What's happening to my squad?!"

Karen violently shook herself from Aurora's grip. "I'm sorry, Crone! I have to go." Karen then stormed off, leaving Aurora looking after her in anger and mounting fear. As the group of techs passed, one lingered just a little.

"The OSI's up to something, ma'am," the girl with glasses said in a low voice. "They're the ones

requesting the Aries and the emergency flight clearance. I'm afraid that's all I know. I hope you're squad's ok." With that, the girl half-ran half-limped to catch up to her group, heading towards the Aries that now looked as if they were being primed for take-off.

Her mind becoming numb and weary, Aurora backed-up and tried to sit onto a nearby storage crate. However, she misjudged the distance and crashed to the floor just short of the box, the back of her head thudding against the metallic wall of the crate. First wincing in pain, then heaving short breaths of grief, she lacked the strength or will to move from her pathetic position on the deck floor. Every time before, in past assignments and past campaigns, when her comrades had gone to battle she had gone with them. Now she knew intimately the sorrow of every loved one of a soldier marching off to war and perhaps death. In that moment she was every sister left behind and every grieving mother.

I can't lose any more of them. I can't.

Her failure was complete, for the stone shell of her heart had now completely shattered after years of careful effort and cold calculation. Sitting there in the flurry of clanging metal and roaring engines, a second scar was torn where no person could see and where no medical technology could heal. And while the silver-haired girl still shed no tears, her soul wept... even as it bled.

JediBubbles

Wed Jan 05, 2005 5:00 pm

Seer stared into space, barely hearing her com crackling and chattering with Catnip and Claymore's voices. Her hands were doing their piloting thing of their own free will, as they always did when she needed her mind free to concentrate on something else. But at the moment her keenly intuitive brain was not holding up its end of the bargain.

In fact, it was running around in frantic circles.

*...f*ck, f*ck, f*ck, shitf*ckdamn, bloody f*cking huevos--jebus, I need to learn some more goddamn swear words. How the F*CK did I hear that uncoded?! What the f*ck is going on?! Oh shit, I hope they don't think I'm a traitor...a bloody inept one at that! Okay, okay, I need to just calm down and figure this out...WHAT THE F*CK?! How--did--I--get--that?!*

Tiefflieger

Wed Jan 05, 2005 5:10 pm

*** 12 minutes to go ***

"Does anyone here know a »Stella Maris«?"

Kate had encountered unexpected difficulties when she tried to update the tar-com of #67-344. The firmware-upgrade always aborted with a checksum error, no matter what she tried. She already had rebooted the whole weapons system and re-initiated the service mode, she even had obtained a new update package from storage, believing the first one to be defective. But it hadn't helped. Now she was getting nervous because the deadline was getting pretty close. Everyone else had their jobs done. The crafts were already being fueled and the launchers equipped with rockets and missiles. PO Mirunova had just finished the final ground pre-flight check on the 67-340 which was now waiting hot and armed, engines steaming.

Then Kate had accessed the fighter's service log from her tablet pc to check if there were any problems with the tar-com logged (*I could have thought of that earlier!*). There to her astonishment she had found that the update had already been done. The digital signature of the responsible tech was from one »Stella Maris«.

"Does anyone here know a »Stella Maris«?"

Her question had led to a puzzled silence. No-one from the techs knew someone with that name. Meanwhile Anatolja had joined her and read the log entry.

"What the... who the f*ck is this!?"

"Maybe a freshman?" McGuire threw in.

"Do you know about any? I don't. Calamity was the last one who came aboard." It was easy to see Anatolja wasn't too happy about this new annoyance. "Mac, you perform the standard tar-com test on this one, just to be sure. Calamity, Sparks' around here somewhere. Get her here, she's got to take a look at this."

Shortly later Anatolja spotted LT Freeman and Kate, accompanied by several other techs from the

afternoon shift, hurrying towards her location. In the meantime the tar-com test had passed smoothly without any problems - at least something! On her way Sparks got distracted by this silver haired pilot (What was her call-sign again? Hag? No, Crone!), slowing her down for a few seconds.

Just enough time for CMDR Verulian to perform her melodramatic entrance and emerge from the cloud of steam produced by the warming up 67-340. She was escorted by two pilots wearing jet black flight suits, the shaded visors of their black helmets closed. They wore no name tags, insignia or symbols on their suits. Behind their backs the landing headlights of a Siren flashed up, bathing them in a corona of light, making their movements almost look like in slow motion. A gust of wind from an engines test somewhere else on the flight deck caught Verulian's hair.

"Now all we need are some heavy electric guitars...", Anatolja said dryly.

Mac suddenly remembered she had to do something really important back at the Aries and quickly turned away from the approaching OSI-officer, giggling.

"What did you say, Petty Officer?"

"Nothing of importance ma'am. I was just reminding PFC McGuire not to forget her guitar lessons later today.", Anatolja answered without the slightest trace of humor.

Verulian apparently wasn't satisfied by that answer but decided she had more important things to take care of right now.

"Are those my two Aries?", she asked. Anatolja didn't like her tone. She especially didn't like it when the pilots referred to the crafts as »theirs«, and this one wasn't even a pilot.

"Yes, ma'am, this two right here. Ready, waiting and fully enabled. We still need to confer with Lt. Freeman about a problem with the 67-344, though."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Petty Officer Mirunova, but you are authorized to give technical clearance, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am." This was one of those times when you just knew it was no use to argue.

"And are there any technical problems with this craft?"

"No, ma'am." Hopefully Sparks would be there soon.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's get going!" Verulian gave her pilots a wave, who immediately entered the cockpits and started their pre-flight routines. Then she vanished back into the cloud of steam as quickly as she had appeared.

"Making friends with the OSI?" LT Freeman was standing right behind Anatolja, grinning. "What is it? I've got no time right now!" She was still wearing her dress uniform. Anatolja remembered Sparks had mentioned a funeral earlier.

"Yeah, quite a charmer, isn't she?", Anatolja smiled back. "Ahem, sorry to bother you, but I think this could be serious." She showed Sparks the mysterious log entry.

*** 3 minutes to go ***

Vindicare

Fri Jan 07, 2005 4:01 pm

So....we have a possible two-fleet intercept with Morrigan right in the middle. Both sides seemingly playing the same ruse.

Banshee flicked a switch and depressed her comm button
"Request permission to go live"

"Haud yer weesht, everryone. Cat, gae ahead," was the reply. Claymore was clearly worried. Banshee was worried in as much as it would take her weapons about a minute to charge. She involuntarily reached for the pistol holstered in a handed down gun belt draped around the back of her seat. She knew it wouldnt do anything in a firefight, but knowing it was there, and it was loaded, meant she was at least sure she would not go down without a weapon in her hand. *What i wouldnt give to be on the front pair with Ducky* She mused, letting out a small sigh and peering out her port viewplane to Cat's Medusa just below and a few metres away, then straight

ahead and up to the 2 point craft of Ducky and Hobbs.

JFalcon

Sat Jan 08, 2005 2:11 am

Momentarily content to let her superiors handle the odd log entry, Kate collapsed onto one of the ammo carts that had delivered the RIAS gear. Her knee was becoming increasingly painful and had developed a grinding sensation during her search for Sparks at Anatolja's order. Kate habitually reached for her coffee before remembering that the thermos was depleted. Sighing and gingerly massaging the knee, she caught a bit of the conversation.

"...isn't a Stella Maris in the ground crew." Kate missed the first part of Anatolja's sentence.

"No. Nor any nicknames. Nor logins to my knowledge."

"You'd think we would have noticed a stranger working on a fighter. Especially a Mk II in security."

"Maybe not an outsider. One of the crew with an additional account..."

"But you can't have multiple accounts in the same system..."

"I know! And an account called 'Stella Maris' doesn't exist, either! That means... Bah! This is a headache I don't need. That update requires parts. Parts come from inventory. And inventory can be tracked. Look into that. And get me the onboard system logs from 344 before it leaves."

*That was the odd thing about it: the software had been updated, but hardware components of the update hadn't been installed. Well they'll find that out quickly when they check inventory. Never volunteer to an officer an opinion that's going to cause trouble. I've learned **that** rule enough already.*

Out of curiosity and with nothing better to do, Kate pulled up the logs for 344 off the Morrigan's database. With the right tech and situation (stress, unreasonable requests), the maintenance logs could actually be quite amusing reading. Three-forty-four's test flight crew had been truly exceptional in this regard, and Kate quickly found herself smiling and forgetting the pain in her knee as she read some of the early entries.

Front tire just about needs replacement.

->Just about replaced front tire.

The autopilot doesn't.

-> IT DOES NOW

IFF inoperative.

-> IFF inoperative when turned OFF.

Evidence of hydraulic leak.

-> Evidence removed.

Throttle friction lock seems to be causing throttle lever to stick.

-> THAT'S WHAT IT'S THERE FOR!

Something loose in cockpit.

-> Something tightened in cockpit.

Left engine missing.

-> Engine found on hanger floor after brief search.

EXTREMELY URGENT: inertial dampers pulse during maneuvers between 14.1 and 14.3 Gs. VERY disturbing sensation and potentially lethal!

-> Unable to reproduce problem on ground.

Headset volume unbelievably loud.

-> Dial labeled "Volume" set to more believable level.

Test flight OK, but autoland sequence very rough.

-> Current version of autopilot does not yet have autoland function.

"Kate!"

"Ma'am!" With a start, Kate looked up and dropped her tablet PC. It landed with a clatter. Sparks standing before her with Anatolja's PDA. She looked stressed.

Uh oh. What'd I do?

"These are 344's internal logs for the past week. I need to know NOW whether to recall that Mk II from the flight line."

"Oh. Um, yes ma'am." She took the PDA from the Lt and then a moment to clean her glasses.

Sparks was one of few people on board who knew that Kate could speed read at over 10,000 words per minute. It gave her a headache to do so and she only did it when she had to, though. With a deep breath and hard blink, she started racing through text as fast as the small screen could display it.

"What...?" Anatolja didn't understand why Sparks insisted Calamity look at the log. Why not just grep the logs? And now it looked like the private had already broken the PDA judging by the flickering screen.

"Shush." Sparks cut Anatolija off while alternating her gaze between the fighters on final countdown and the seated private. It was going to be a close race.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl during the wait. Finally, a very tired looking Kate lowered the PDA and leaned back with tightly closed eyes.

"I think it's OK. I mean, I'm not certain, but it shouldn't explode or anything." Any further musings were cut short by the pair of fighters roaring into space. The noise seemed over loud and made Kate wince. Everything seemed far too bright when she opened her eyes.

Isn't this what people say a hangover is like? Can't imagine why drinking would be worth this...

"An update to the tar-com software was applied remotely by the 'Stella Maris' username. The time stamp is really odd. It was actually done in the middle of the of the last engagement."

"No wonder know one noticed."

"The log doesn't have any other information regarding the connection. Password was correct on the first attempt. My automated update attempt failed because the target checksum was wrong. Makes sense, but doesn't mean the tar-com software in there now is actually the right one."

"It passed the diagnostics."

But you can't test functions that you don't know exist. I'd worry about what might have been added. But why to the tar-com?

Kate didn't argue her thoughts out loud with Anatolja.

"We can dump the firmware for comparison and do a forced overwrite after 344 gets back just to be safe. Anyway, there's more.

The same session programmed the flight recorder to do a full dump to the secure OSI network automatically after landing. Do they do that with all the black boxes? What's really odd is that the network transport path is specified. There's something like two dozen, fixed, hardware addresses

specified between the hanger node and the OSI portal. I can understand an obscure path, but not a static one. You'd want it to change every time, wouldn't you?"

"Just like OSI to screw with the hardware and then complain when it doesn't work. Maybe that's why she was so hot to get me to release 344. Did 340 have any of this?"

"The tar-com seemed stock. I don't know about the black box thing."

Karen sighed. "Enough for now. I still have a funeral to attend. Mirunova, get back to me on the firmware inventory. I want to know who's been checking out my parts. Ross, when 344 gets back, dump and compare the firmware against stock before wiping it and starting over. Let me know if 340 doesn't have a similar recorder transfer in place."

"Yes ma'am."

Sparks copied the log files to her own account before returning the PDA to Anatolija and headed off, determined to finally attend the continually delayed ceremony.

"And go to sickbay for whatever you did to that leg, Calamity!"

Maverick	Mon Jan 10, 2005 4:58 am
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Cat read through her RIAS information with astounding speed. "Sir, according to this, the *Aruna* is positioned between ourselves and the *Morrigan*. It is also far enough out that the vectors between the *Morrigan* the *Aruna* and our squad are equidistant." Cat beamed up a figure to Claymore's HUD, it showed three points, two green, one red, and lines connecting all three. It looked like an isosceles triangle. "If there are pursuers, they are going to be behind the *Aruna* and most likely catching up ground quick." A purple triangle with a question mark appeared behind the red point. "I'm about 80% sure of that. My long range scanners are still blank to anything other than the *Aruna* but I am confident that the pursuers would be Copperheads and maybe a *Lamprey* class frigate."

Cat took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a second. She was starting to get a headache. "I hope to God that the *Spectre* isn't out there..." She whispered to herself.

"Sir, we have two Aries Mk. II coming from the *Morrigan* classified as Omega 1 and 2. Your orders?" Ducky chimed in, breaking the uneasy silence that Cat had created.

Schamann	Fri Jan 14, 2005 1:26 pm
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"This is Parker speaking - Dark Novas, investigate the upcoming ship identifying itself as *Aruna* with long range scan and then continue on your patrol route, confirm"

"A'ye me'am" Claymore response sounded bit confused

Novas flew straight at the course of upcoming *Aruna*.

Arieses flew away and the funeral started

save for Crone there were only a handful of people there - Voeller, Young - leader of the Arrowheads, Sparks, and surprisingly Commander Denatieux. There were no taps, no honor roll, nor gunshots.

Just a grey, steel coffin and few enlisted women to carry it, hangar crew, technicians, small crowd.

Voeller spoke first:

"We stand here today, to say goodbye to our late enemy, who was at first our friend. I've flown for fifteen years, but I have never seen a better pilot, better leader, and better comrade than Flame. Everything I know about being a soldier I know from her. She was my mentor, my commandeer, and my friend....

...and then she decided to become my enemy. Now knowing her I don't believe, that the cause she decided to serve..." she suddenly stopped realizing she had gone too far

The silence became awkward, it was clear that this line of talking is getting more and more dangerous now with Rebels coming out of the Border. Sparks tried to save the day and stop Voeller

before she could tell something really incriminating. she took a few paces forward, took a hold of Voeller's arm and hissed "stop it Inga before you land in the brig for treason will you?". she then pushed Voeller aside, and, probably to erase the memory of Voeller's talking she started:

Let us bid fare well to the dead, whatever her life was, let us say goodbye to a soldier. I'd like now to ask lieutenant Yates to say a few words, as she was the last one Flame spoke with"

"freewillingly" hissed Voeller from behind, on a verge of fury.

Sparks stepped aside and made room for Crone:
"give them something...anything"

in the corner of her eye Crone noticed Jason handing something small to Edward and apparently sending him with some errand. and then Jason leaned against the wall and regarded the whole scene with strange, half-ironic smile.

Maverick	Fri Jan 14, 2005 10:09 pm
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"Ah shit...." Cat breathed out as the RIAS data came back.

"Cat, what's wrong?" Hobbit asked quickly.

Note to self, stop thinking aloud.

"Sir, I've got an update. The *Aruna*'s got a hell of an escort. I'm reading....10...no around 15 fighters escorting it. I'm also receiving heavy Rebel comm traffic between frequencies 12.23 and 13.01." Cat yammered out very, very quickly.

"Cat, repeat message. Over." Claymore came over the com. Cat repeated the information slowly.

"That's at least two full squadrons..." Ducky muttered more to herself.

"That's not the end of it...I'm also the greatest OSI officer in the fleet! I called it!" Cat squealed, suddenly very giddy. "Oh, I'm so good at doing what I do...Claymore, I am positive that they are being tailed. There is a third ship in the area, no more than half an hour flight time from the *Aruna*. Bad thing is, the bastard is **very** well hidden. Can't get a confirmation on size or type. "Could be anything from one of the *Lampreys* to a carrier."

"How come I've got a very bad feeling of deja'vu?" Seer said over the com.

"You're right about that Seer, we could very well be looking at what happened to the *Gretsch* thirty some minutes before we arrived on scene..." Cat sneered remorsefully and then pausing for a long moment. "Claymore, I...no, the OSI, needs the *Aruna*." She sounded very serious. "We need it."

Vexus	Sun Jan 16, 2005 8:46 am
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By the time the funeral had finally started, Aurora felt like her legs were made of lead. As the small crowd gathered on the flight deck around the steel coffin, she lifted herself to her feet and shambled over, her eyes distant and sorrowful. She barely heard anything that was said until Karen spoke her name.

Sparks wanted her to speak. The concept was almost laughable. Aurora, Daughter of the Alliance, speak over the remains of a traitor?! A flood of accusing thoughts roared through Aurora's head. Flame was responsible for Nef's death! She was the reason why Aurora was here instead of being with her squad! She-

The grin on Jason's face as he looked at her from across the room stopped her inner ramblings and chilled her blood. A wave of embarrassment at her own immaturity swept over her, followed shortly by a new anger. Did he think she would freeze, slip up, or maybe show some new form of hypocrisy for his amusement?

Not this time, android. Crone collected herself and found her voice.

"I knew Flame for only a brief time. Yet, on the field of battle, a brief time is all one's needs to know all that is important about their opponent. Flame fought with a ferocious courage that I have rarely seen on either side of this war, and while I may question her choices, I cannot question her heart or her sense of honor. In the thick of battle we fought. Her damaged fighter was no match for my own, her body far more broken. But we fought..."

Aurora raised her eyes to look into Voeller's.

"... and she won. Any common pilot would've killed me then or left me to die. But she stayed with me and saved my life. I've asked myself: how does a soldier answer to such an act? Do I feel shame? Anger? Relief? or even sympathy?... What do we choose when our humanity and our duty pull us in opposite directions?

Aurora's eyes fell away from the former CAG and she swallowed before continuing.

"I don't know the answer, but I am certain of this: If there are other pilots like Flame still out there, then when this war is over, we may become reconciled in more ways than we can imagine."

Aurora stepped back, and the ceremony continued. There were no rockets attached to Flame's remains. Instead the coffin was left to drift through space. A part of Aurora regretted that. Traitor or not, every human deserved the right to go home at the end.

As she looked away from the receding coffin, she saw Voeller lingering on the deck just as she was. Aurora approached her with a shred of hope. Maybe she could tell her something, anything to help things make sense. Events were accelerating, and Aurora felt as if she was stumbling in the dark with monsters all around her, waiting to strike. She felt that she could trust Voeller. And besides, what else could she do other than wait? And waiting was about the worse thing she could think of right now.

Charon	Mon Jan 17, 2005 12:38 am
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Claymore sat pondering, hearing the seconds tick away with the burning of her engines. Finally, she spoke up.

"We nae can dae anythin' as we arre. We're shorrt o' th'numbers that are necessary tae help oot."

Before she could speak again, her comm crackled. "Dark Nova lead, this is Omega 1, on-station to assist with the investigation of the *Aruna*."

"Ferrrgot aboot them," Claymore muttered to herself, then activated her comm. "Underrstood, Omega. Novas... oor orrderrs were tae continue on oor patrol route. Howevrrr, I oonderstand tha' th' spooks need this ship. What say ye tae a bit o' a rescue operation?"

Various affirmations came from her squadronmates. Claymore switched frequencies. "Dark Nova lead tae *Morrigan*, we arre continuing oor investigation o' th'*Aruna*. Radarr indicates heavy purrrsoot that will necessitate back-ooop. Request ye launch th' ready 10."

[Out-of-character - The "ready" spacecraft are those that are held in reserve, ready to be launched in the number of minutes indicated (I.e. 5, minutes, 10 minutes, 20 minutes, etc.) They are held in reserve until requested, or until directed to launch by the CAG.]

"Roger that, Nova Lead. Will relay your request to the CAG. Stand by until response is received. *Morrigan* out."

Claymore switched back to the inflight frequency to transmit. "Ladies, we've bin orderred tae standby until backoop arrives. Nae, I think it'd bae a bloody shame tae let this morsk get away in th' meantime. Hae aboot ye?"

Once again, affirmatives came back to her over the radio, sounding rather feral. She felt rather warm and fuzzy, which made her order that much easier to give, as she punched her throttle to the stop.

"In tha' case, let's bae aboot it!"

JFalcon	Mon Jan 17, 2005 4:37 am
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Step. Limp. ow. Step. Limp. ouch. Step..."Ahh!"

Gasping in pain, Kate half-leaned, half-fell into the bulkhead. Medical was still three sections away. She paused, one hand on the wall, the other reaching down to hold her knee with a look of resigned despair on her face. The empty corridor might as well have stretched out to infinity.

Hurt myself. Check.

Badly. Check.

Broke something important. Check.
Pissed off a superior. Check.
Unusual activity. Check.
And it's not yet lunch time... Why me?
WHY! WHY DID THEY HAVE TO...

"Are you in need of assistance, Miss Ross?" A concerned, male voice mercifully interrupted that line of thought.

"Wha? Oh! Edward. I didn't hear you. I... uh, hurt myself and was going to sickbay."

"May I escort you?"

"I can..."

"I'm afraid I must insist, Miss Ross. You are obviously not well and may do yourself further harm if you continue to walk. Please climb on my back."

"But..."

"I may not stand by idle while you injure yourself, Miss Ross. If necessary, I will transport you without your permission through less graceful means."

A sudden image of being slung, kicking over the bot's shoulder convinced Kate that cooperation was the better option.

Damned second half of the First Law.

"Fine."

Edward lowered himself to her height and bent forward slightly. Kate put her arms over his shoulders and clasped her hands together. The sexbot lifted her effortlessly into a piggyback, exerting extra caution with her injured knee.

"Are you comfortable, Miss Ross?"

"Yes." *as possible like this... Boy do I feel dumb right now.*

Edward set off at a quick pace, evidently unaffected by his load.

This was closer than Kate had ever been to an android this sophisticated before, let alone a new E2200 sexbot model. Her pain forgotten, she started observing the bot's mechanical structure through the outer cosmetic covering as best she could without losing her grip. The *real* interesting parts to her--processing core, sensory input, power plant--were well beyond investigation at the moment, but it wouldn't be a total loss.

Edward didn't comment on the obvious investigation in progress. If anything, his pace quickened out of memory of their last encounter.

What a fascinating machine. Maybe I should have majored in AI Systems Engineering.

Lost in thought, Kate involuntarily rested her cheek against the back of Edward's head.

Time froze. Her mind abruptly replayed memory from long ago whose only physical record now lay in an encrypted file buried deep in her personal home directory.

Clear blue sky. Bright sun beating down. Typical California summer day.

Wide expanse of well-kept grass surrounded by an office complex.

Lots of people around she didn't know. Suits. Lab coats.

A happy time. Some celebration or other.

Rows of chairs, empty now. Banners. Tents with tables of snacks and drinks.

Her parents.

Father looked tired, but content. Mother holding his hand, looking at him proudly.

And a very young version of herself perched on Father's shoulders. Laughing; a look of pure joy. Holding a medal that would have been hanging from Father's neck.

"Is something wrong, Miss Ross? You have stopped breathing."

"I... No. No, I'm fine. It was just... Nothing."

It wasn't until they reached the section of the Morrigan with sickbay that Kate spoke again.

"I wasn't very polite to you last time, Edward. I'm sorry. Just very curious about things I don't understand, I guess."

"There is no need to apologize, Miss Ross. I am, after all, only a machine."

"Yes, but you think and feel. I was wrong not to remember that." They had arrived outside Medical. Kate slid down from Edward's back.

"Thank you, Edward." And with that, she entered without a backward glance.

The sexbot stood for a long moment watching the door considering how this all fit with prior observations.

"And to think that last time she chased me with a screwdriver." The bot retrieved a small object from its clothing and moved off.

"Kate."

"Ma'am." It was Doc Banner.

"Three days, six hours, and, let's see... fourteen minutes. And here I was thinking we were going to set a new record for NOT seeing you in here. You're three hours too soon."

Kate could only smile sheepishly at this greeting.

"How's the wrist?"

"It's fine, Ma'am."

"The burn?"

"Doing great. I don't think this one is going to scar."

"Hm. Something new, then. Well, what are you here for this time?"

"I fell and hurt my knee." Lt. Banner directed a disapproving look in Kate's direction while gathering some items.

"It was an accident," Kate added by way of apology.

"It always is, dear. It always is," Banner replied with a sigh. "Well, let's have a look at it."

Tiefflienger	Wed Jan 19, 2005 11:44 pm
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"No Job is finished till the paperwork is done!"

There was a printout featuring this motto pinned to the wall. Below it was a picture of a roll of toilet paper. And of course it was in the storekeepers office. Anatolja hated paperwork. It was one of those necessary evils that come with the job. She understood it was important to keep log about everything regarding the fighters. She hated it nonetheless. It was uninspiring and boring as hell. And in her opinion the Navy overdid the log-keeping exorbitantly.

The ensign on duty had taken the opportunity of someone else guarding her desk and had taken a brake. So Anatolja sat alone in the tiny, crammed office, her head resting heavily on her hands, her eyes fixed on the computer screen, but her mind miles away. A cigarette was hanging from the corner of her mouth. As always when confronted with large amounts of paperwork Anatolja found it hard to concentrate. Right now she was thinking about Calamity: *How come I didn't notice she hurt herself? It looked like it was really painful. And I sent her running across half the flight deck... Serves her right! Why doesn't she pipe up?*

Blowing smoke to the ceiling she put out her burned down cigarette in the ashtray and resumed her work. Selecting the relevant timeframe of the storage log and filtering it down was quickly done. 87 entries were left. Of course this was much more than only the firmware inventory but Anatolja wanted to make sure whoever was messing around here hadn't hid something somewhere else. So she had to check the *whole* storage inventory logs. Those 87 entries she had to check

herself one by one, which demanded painstaking attention to detail but little else and therefore was quite tiresome. *Now let's get over with this.* She accessed the first entry. It was a material request for one box of M8X30 hexagon socket screws. *Oh my, are you kidding me!? Do they keep log on **every single** bolt? This is going to be worse than I thought...*

Anatolja's eyes wandered to the ashtray (It was made out of some engine part she didn't recognize, which right now was bothering her far more than this stupid storage log) and the lonely little cigarette stub in the grime-smudged hollow.

How about a little company? She took out another cigarette and lit it with her multi-tool. *I think by the time I'm finished, there'll be enough of you to form a soccer team plus coach.*

Schamann

Tue Feb 01, 2005 4:27 pm

„This is CAG speaking, unless my short-time memory serves me wrong, which I believe it does not, lieutenant Parker ordered you to investigate the upcoming ship identifying itself as Aruna with long range scan and then continue on your patrol route, now which part of this message would you have repeated as it undoubtedly must have been misheard?“

“Well’ A’ye Me’am” Claymore’s voice suddenly wasn’t so self-sure “Boot theare are strang fighter aescart near Aeronas, me’am”

“Are you drunk or just being Scottish McTaggart? You have just received a direct order that was subsequently repeated, I suggest you fulfill it before I strip an SXO badge from you and have you grounded, lieutenant!”

“A’ye Me’am”

The Novas took turn right and slightly changed their course, full speed, to bypass along the portside of Aruna.

.....“sir there is definitely something behind the Aruna, an hour of flight for the Siren, and I think this is more than a Lamprey frigate” – Cat was on the comm again – “..shit! whatever it is, it’s Copperheads’ Big Mamma!”

“How do you know?” Banshee asked swiftly.

“Because they come again.”

Kate laid on her bed. Doctor left after taking care of her injuries and ordering her to stay in the hospital wing for the rest of the day. She, however, had other plans.

Quietly she got up and put her jumpsuit on. She approached the door. Limping slightly, but not even comparable to the degree she felt before. The door was ajar...

“No I don’t know where Young’s loyalty stands and we won’t be risking being uncovered”
“Yates?”

“No, she’s out of question”

“She seems decent and honest...”

“She is so Alliance-brainwashed the Marines way that she even takes a piss for the love of Terra, she’d judge you before thinking what lies where”

“What about the Novas anyway?”

“I will dispatch few of my girls to work with their fighters and their fighters only, my rat is among those techs. This way we will know what they know and we will decide what their equipment is able to perform at each moment. But it’s Arrowheads that worry me.”

“I shall take care of the Arrowheads. Leave them to me.”

Kate limped back to her bed and laid back on the bed. She closed her eyes, trembling a little, while hearing someone leaves the medical. But she knew the other person was still behind the neighboring wall. Luckily, someone came in a minute or two after, a male, a sexbot, Jason, to be precise.

“How is my dirty old slut today, huh?” he asked with his usual cocky macho tone

“Oh Jason....”

“Are we alone here, sweetie, that’s all I need to know” his voice was going increasingly hoarse, vibrating with lust, and Kate could almost feel how it must work with the woman who liked that

kind of things.

"There's Calamity, I mean Ross, sleeping in the next room , but she won't be disturbing."
 "Let me check"

Few quick paces and the door swung open, almost catching Kate with her eyes open.
 "And... my handsome James Bond?"

there was a moment of silence

"she sleeps, but let's go somewhere else, I still need to show you what I can with a..." rest of the words turned into incomprehensible whisper.

She got up when all the noises died and happy couple was gone for good. She marched towards the exit from the medical.

Luckily, someone had left the exit door unlocked and open, so no alarm, pager or even monitor beeper would announce, that she left.
 Very luckily indeed.

She hurried down the corridor, wondering what to do with what she heard and more important, with the voices, that she recognized.

JFalcon

Thu Feb 03, 2005 5:59 am

The need for coffee--the original motive for her escape attempt--was now long forgotten as Kate walked down an empty passageway in confused shock. Afraid of being caught and afraid of going back, friendly faces now unknown dangers, bad luck becoming worse. Kate walked without destination or pain, barely aware of her surroundings.

How long are Doc and Jason going to be... busy? I never thought she was into that.

This whole mess was exactly the sort of thing you reported to your CO. Upward delegate and shift responsibility.

The problem was, the first voice had been Sparks'.

Who do I go to? One of the security chiefs? An XO? The Captain herself?

No. Think, Kate! What do you actually know? What did you really hear? What if it's not what you think--whatever that is?

*What proof do you have to make a commissioned officer believe or even listen to you? Jumping to conclusions and up the command chain is a great way to get in **biiiiig** trouble. My direct CO, maybe, but not that high.*

*But what if this really **is** bad?*

Kate found herself staring at the entrance to her shift's barracks. It vaguely registered that her hand was shaking as she palmed open the door. They always did that after a few hours without any caffeine. The large dormitory was deserted and dark.

Seemingly carelessly tossed into the back of Kate's locker were three rolled up socks. However, anyone who searched the locker and went so far as to pick one up would probably find its size and weight odd. Kate grabbed one at random, unrolled it, and proceeded to shake out a small, sealed bag containing a coarse, brown powder. The bag was labeled in black marker "Hawaiian - dark" and dated about three weeks ago in a handwritten scrawl.

"Only two left," then it would be back to the dishwater that the mess hall called coffee until the next supply transport. *IF* there was any to be acquired from its crew.

Kate's mind returned to recent events as she went through her coffee making ritual.

Why are the squadrons a "threat?" And why not the Morning Stars? Do I talk to the squadron leaders? Or those other two people Doc and Sparks mentioned--Young and Yates? Wait... Young IS Arrowhead leader. That's right. Who was Yates? A marine, didn't they say?

The squadrons, well at least two of them, certainly seem at risk. And one of the ground crew is involved, too. Someone Sparks is going to special assign to Nova. I guess that narrows things down a bit.

No. Careful, Kate. Problems you don't know about are the ones to watch out for. How many others are involved?

And what the hell is this all really about? Do I do something about it?

"I'm going in circles." Kate sighed despondently. The coffee wasn't helping. "Guess caffeine can't solve everything."

I'll wait. And watch. Can't get blamed for something I never knew about. Can get in trouble for doing something rash.

A thought from earlier interrupted.

This puts this morning's chaos in new light. Was Sparks just acting? Is that recorder dump legit? Stella Maris must be "the rat." Or is an alias of Sparks'? Maybe that VTOL burst was planned. I still don't think I did anything wrong with that test.

Should I tell PO Mirunova? What if she's with Sparks? Marines, techs, medics... how many of them are there? I don't know what to do. I'm scared.

sigh "I should document all this."

Bringing her battered tablet PC out of power save, Kate started narrating as much as she could exactly remember. A speech to text routine promptly added the results to a small, compressed file.

Finished with what she could recall, Kate launched with a single command line entry a heavily hidden and encrypted program buried in her tablet's onboard file system. The text file disappeared--completely wiped-- but its data was now stored away in an encryption scheme only her family knew even existed.

And Father is dead.

Kate's copy of the encrypt/decrypt program was a programming masterpiece. No feedback, no interface. If you didn't know the syntax and what it operated on, it was useless. It couldn't be decompiled as it dynamically generated its own instructions. Nor was it in a programming language. It had been painstakingly coded by hand directly in hardware micro-code and only ran on this computer model. And the output was hidden in plain sight--the imperceptible alteration of seemingly random pixels in one of the many image files Kate kept stored.

Hey, cutie! ^_^

Kate dropped the tablet in shock as a messaging window popped up. It hit the deck floor with a solid clank where Kate watched it in horror as another message appeared.

What are you doing up and about, huh? Not being a very good patient, are we? Where's Doc gone?

>_>

<_<

??

Go rest, sweetie. Since when did overachieving ever get you anywhere good?

XOXOXO

~SM

:D

How did...?! The wireless link! It started automatically. If you really knew what you were doing, you could track a link over the access points!

Somebody knew. Know what? What do they know about me?! Who? I'm gonna get caught.. more! I need to get back!

Scooping up the PC, Kate ran from the barracks as best she could.

 "Hehe. She scares easy... She'll keep her mouth shut if she heard anything."

Vexus

Sun Feb 06, 2005 11:59 pm

As Aurora approached the former CAG from behind and saw her sorrowful but proud expression, she thought about what she could possibly say. In the end, she just repeated what she had said to herself as she watched Flame's coffin drift into the night.

"Traitor or not, everyone deserves the right to go home at the end."

Voeller didn't turn around, but her voice was kind. "She is home.... This was where she chose to be."

Swallowing nervously, Aurora readied herself to fight her usual instincts. She was a simple soldier, not a detective. But if she could find out anything that would help her squadron, it might just be enough to distract her from the pain of the waiting... and the shame of staying behind.

"Sir, I was wondering if I could ask you--"

"She was the best of us, you know," Voeller said in a distracted tone. "She was stubborn, easily offended, and a real pain in the ass. But in spite of all our problems, I've never served under a better woman." Voeller now turned and looked at Aurora with eyes that the silver-haired girl easily recognized all too often in her own reflection.

"Flame was the best pilot to ever grace the Terran Navy, and had the courage and ferocity of twenty pilots. I've lost many friends in my time, Crone. Believe me when I say: losing someone you care about on the battlefield is bad, but losing one to the other side is even worse. I'm sure Ms. Dory understands this as well as I."

"What happened?" Aurora said, the nervousness now gone from her voice. She did not add "sir", and her tone was almost a demand, but Voeller did not seem offended. Surprisingly, her hard eyes fell before Aurora's own.

"Flame always followed her own standard of ethics. She called it 'The Code', cliché as it sounds. She was always rubbing her superiors the wrong way, arguing their decisions and taking the initiative without authorization. She would've been grounded long ago, but her flying abilities were unmatched and command couldn't afford to lose them. One day, on what started out as just another mission, she disobeyed a direct order and then... she was gone." Crone flinched as thoughts of Jessica flooded back into her mind. She then thought about Voeller's words at the last debriefing.

"What happened with Nef--"

"Was my fault!" Voeller almost shouted. "I could see what kind of woman she was. I saw Flame's look in her eyes. But did I ground her? Did I even try to prevent what I knew would happen? No!... I let her fly. I thought about what would Flame think of me grounding someone like Nef and... I just couldn't do it." Voeller uttered a humorless laugh.

"Even then I thought I could handle it. Nef was another good pilot who became a hero for the wrong reasons. I thought I would get over it... because I thought I had gotten over Flame as well. But then I find her, barely alive but still as stubborn as ever."

"Still following the Code..." Aurora muttered.

"They tortured her, Crone. After all the service she had done for the Alliance in the past, Verulian and her stooges treated her like nothing more than a meat-sack to be prodded for information. I went all the way up the chain of command. I pleaded for them to give her some shred of dignity in her last hours.... No one listened. I was so disgusted about everything. I'd never felt so old and tired in all my life. So when I was ordered to step down as flight commander, I didn't even put up a fight."

"But you wanted to at least give her a proper funeral," Aurora said softly.

Voeller nodded. "At least as proper as the high-ups would allow me. I never got the chance to say goodbye to her.... and I will miss her."

For a few moments, neither woman spoke, a certain amount of silent understanding passing between them. A part of Aurora recalled the times when such a silence occurred between her father and his friends, and she wondered at how keenly the echo of men still lingered in a generation without them. At last, Voeller seemed to collect herself and breathed a sigh.

"You would like some answers? I'm afraid I probably don't have as many as you're hoping for, and I could get into more trouble for telling you some of them. But to hell with it. I'm not in a very patriotic mood right now. Let's get some coffee in the mess hall and I'll tell you everything I can."

Aurora nodded with a slight smile. Things were still bad, Aurora could feel it, but she had reason to hope again. Without another word, the women left the flight deck, side-by-side.

When they got the mess hall, Aurora picked up a cup of her favorite coffee blend, but in the conversation that followed, she never touched it once.

Vexus	Sun Feb 13, 2005 7:32 am
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"Traitors to traitors. That what this is current nonsense seems to be about," Voeller said as she took another sip of her coffee. Her accent, which had been muted as she spoke on the flight deck, was slowly coming-back with a vengeance and giving her words a dangerous-sounding edge.

"For years, all we've heard are reports of settlements breaking away from the Alliance. There have even been low-level grumblings in the Alliance-controlled stations right here in Epsilon Eridani, and these are purely *military* facilities whose loyalty should be concrete. The excuse is always the same: Earth is demanding too many resources from the colonies and not giving them the respect and freedom they deserve."

Aurora frowned. "Earth is still recovering from the climate shifts of the last century, not to mention that it has to cope with the largest human population in the Galaxy. It's understandable that they'd need more resources than any other world. And as for respect or freedom, there are more civilized ways of getting it besides armed rebellion."

Voeller waved her hand dismissively. "I'm not in the mood to debate politics, Crone. The point is that up until now it has always been about keeping the colonists from secession, but the situation may be changing."

Aurora leaned forward with interest. "How so?"

Voeller grunted cynically. "It seems complete and total freedom isn't as glamorous as some colonies thought. The more wealthy ones in Chara and Alpha Centauri can sustain their populations fairly easily with local resources, but for settlements like those in Rhea and Europa, independence has cost them dearly. Imports are down, and threaten to cause food shortages. The loss in trade has weakened their economies. They've tried to establish relations with Chara and Eta Cass, but the war makes inter-system commerce dangerous and expensive. Now some colonists are getting desperate. They want back into the Alliance, now that they've come to appreciate the others things besides respect and freedom that they took for granted."

Aurora shrugged. "Sounds sensible, so what's the problem?"

"The problem may be the greatest irony of this whole conflict," Voeller said, shaking her head with resignation. "The colonial governments who broke away from the Alliance because they felt oppressed are now determined to keep their own colonies in line. And that's where the Morrigan comes in."

Realization came to Aurora's face. "We have to protect the traitors to traitors."

Voeller nodded. "From what I've managed to piece together, Charan rebel groups have recently contacted the Alliance here in Epsilon Eridani and requested reintegration and amnesty. The Alliance was more than happy to grant their request, and has charged the OSI with securing them as they flee colonial space. Since the Morrigan was assigned patrol duty near the Border, we're a good cover for their operations. Our first attempt was a resounding failure. The Gretchen was caught and destroyed before the OSI could intervene. I'm sure that Verulian is determined to succeed the next time. The OSI is not very forgiving of mistakes."

"I don't understand," Aurora said. "I would think that the Alliance would want to broadcast to the whole Galaxy that some colonists were asking to return. You couldn't make up better propaganda than that, so why all the secrecy?"

"I think the Alliance is afraid that if this news goes public, it'll cause the rebel colonies to crack down and make any further colonial defections more difficult and hazardous. Maybe after a number

of colonists have successfully made the trip, the Alliance will start bragging, but for now everything about the operation is classified."

Aurora raised an eyebrow. "If that's true, how do you know all about this?"

Voeller gave a small smile. "As you do now, I used to have OSI members under my command as a squad leader before they went up the ranks, and not all of them are as hush-hush as they should be. They send me information every now and then as I need it."

Aurora looked confused. "Need it? For what?"

Voeller's expression took on a look of deadly seriousness. "For the same reason you need it. You and I are alike in this way, Crone: neither of us has the mind-set nor the tolerance to put up with political and covert bullshit. We look out for our comrades, leaving the cloak-and-dagger business to others, and are content with just doing our duty. The problem is that sometimes not knowing the situation can kill you and those under your command, even if your superiors don't think you need to know. So I'm telling you now: this is what is at stake here in Epsilon Eridani."

"Sir," Aurora said, her tone becoming anxious, "why were those OSI fighters launched so frantically today?"

Voeller looked down at her almost-empty cup. "I'm not certain, but I would guess that another group of wannabe colonial defectors is heading our way and the OSI wants to intercept them as quickly as possible. I feel I must tell you that the squads sent out on patrol, including your Novas, will be used as distractions by the OSI should another defecting vessel be found under pursuit by enemy forces. The OSI considers the Novas... expendable for their purposes."

Aurora found herself clenching her jaw and fighting the urge to scream. Dying to serve the Alliance was one thing. But acting as a disposable pawn for the shadowy goons of the OSI? Now *that* was something that Aurora could not stand.

Just then, Voeller's communicator beeped. The former CAG took the brief call with a couple, short "Yes, ma'am"s before hanging up and addressing Aurora.

"I've been summoned to the bridge." Both women stood and Aurora offered a hand to Voeller.

"Thank-you for trusting me enough to tell me all this, sir." Voeller looked at Aurora's hand, but did not take it. Instead she gave the squad leader a look as cold as the space that surrounded them.

"Don't thank me yet, Lieutenant. I may volunteer some more information than I should on occasion, but understand this: I have made my military career my life, and I will not sacrifice it for any reasons but honor and duty, not even for you. If you screw up I will deny having ever spoken to you about these things. Just be vigilant and protect your squadmates. That's all we can hope to accomplish until this cursed war is over."

With that, Voeller left the mess hall, leaving Aurora to wonder if she really felt any better knowing more than she had felt knowing less.

Maverick	Mon Feb 14, 2005 4:51 am
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"Cat, whatenee hell is gooin on oot there?" Claymore demanded. Cat groaned and ran her RAIS diagnostic again.

"Sir, we have incoming Copperhead fighters. I've got at least...a dozen of them coming from the unknown contact. They're haulin' ass towards the *Aruna* and their momma is right behind them." She paused for a while. "Got it. Copperhead designations Mu 1-12, data is headed to your shipboard comps. Unknown capital ship has been analyzed sir, looks to be a carrier. I'm designating it *Spectre*."

"Is that it?" Ducky asked incredulously.

"I have no idea how many Copperheads are loaded into that carrier. We can expect to be overwhelmed anytime..." Cat sounded very scared. "Sir, we should try to organize some cover from the *Aruna's* fighter support."

Schamann	Fri Feb 18, 2005 4:21 pm
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It was with the fourth cigarette, the realization that something has to be very, very wrong with this documents. Mirunova already had sore eyes from both smoke and staring at the monitor.

where the hell are you....job tvoju mat....

all the figures looked correct and fine, rows and columns all looking perfectly fine. Sums, dates, ID numbers, names, dates and places of delivery.....

names.....delivery.....most of the items were not picked up by the techs themselves, but delivered to the flightdeck after inner-ship-mail order. Done with your PDA, equipped with one's rank and function id, brought by warehouse crew or even automated drone, signed on delivery by tech who waited for it.

gotchya

Then it was merely like five minutes before she found the suspicious part. Thanks to Kate's lucky discovery she knew exactly where to look for. This girl really deserved more credit than she received.

At last she found it....

Her eyes narrowed and her upper lip went up, almost making the cigarette fall off her mouth.

"You bitch!"

 "Novas this is CAG speaking" Mallory's voice was cold as usual. "We have Morning Stars on magnum launch and Arrowheads getting ready ASAP. Meanwhile your job is to continue with the recon. We have two potentially hostile ships preparing to engage each other, both claiming to be on our side. What we need to find out most urgently is who speaks the truth"

If Novas were surprised and afraid before, at that moment they became simply astonished.

"Claymore, approach the farther ship and protect Ensign Jones while she collects the data. She makes requests as to where you fly and what you do, and you provide unless tactically unreasonable. You make the final call. If two Arieses near Aruna need backup you are also responsible for giving them that until reinforcements arrive. Get to it."

"Tactically unreasonable, my ass" there was no doubt this was Hobbs on the comm. "Like this whole mission isn't"

"Yea herd thae CAG. Cat - whare to?"

Tiefflieger	Sun Feb 20, 2005 11:33 pm
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Anatolja couldn't believe what she was seeing. She frantically put out her cigarette, almost knocking over the ashtray and shedding half its content over the desk. She jumped up and nervously paced up and down the small office like a tiger in her cage. Trembling she took out another cigarette and lit it after a short struggle with the lighter.

Damn, this is not good, not good at all... Looks like you're really in trouble this time, old girl. But I didn't do anything! I have to go to the captain with this before she can frame me! No, wait! The captain won't believe me, not with my record. She'll think I want to frame her. It's my word against hers. %\$&!*

She took a strong drag at her cigarette, inhaling the smoke.

No, no, this doesn't make any sense! Why would she insert my name in the request, but let her own name remain in the notice of receipt? She isn't that careless, is she? Could someone else be trying to frame both of us? But why? Why insert two different names? This makes even less sense! The receipt should be harder to forge, though... No, it's gotta be her! But first thing first...

Anatolja logged in with her PDA and made a backup of the log in her personal files. This access would be logged, too, of course, but she couldn't think of any way how this could hurt her. *I'll have Tanya from Administration take a look at this later, she still owes me one.*

Then she changed the password of her personal account to something no-one would ever guess. *Better make sure this is the first and last time...*

A few minutes later Anatolja was in 1st Lt. Freeman's office, reporting.

"I didn't find anything in the logs. Whoever did this must have direct access to the storage. This

way they could take parts without anything appearing in the logs. That gotta be someone who really knows her way about, though. It's possible of course, I overlooked something. I can have Calamity do another check later..."

Anatolja could have slapped herself for the last remark. *Are you nuts!? Suggesting Kate to do another check!? She's really good with this stuff! She'll find everything and run to Sparks right away! Stupid! Stupid!*

"Maybe later but that won't be possible right now. PFC Ross is currently in sickbay. And when she gets back out I've got a special assignment for the both of you. But first I've got a bone to pick with you - no, make that two bones. As last shifts foreman you've been neglecting your duty of supervision and now I have to file both a survey report on the damage of one expensive piece of equipment and an accident report on the injury of one soldier. I want *your* reports on this incident till tomorrow oh-eight-hundred!"

What's bitten her? "Oh c'mon, that wasn't my fault! You know that Calamity..."

"Don't *c'mon-me*, PO Mirunova! This wouldn't have happened if you'd been properly supervising your crew like you should! And now get out of here!"

When the door fell shut behind her Anatolja took a deep breath. *Gee, more paperwork. But hey, what am I complaining? Looks like she swallowed it!*

Maverick	Sun Feb 27, 2005 4:56 am
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"...yes sir. I understand." Cat responded into her tight-beam com. She felt Claymore waiting for whatever information Cat had; too bad she didn't have what she really wanted at the moment.

"Sir." She started. "As the *Morrigan* said, I need to make a close sweep of the the *Spectre*. I'm going to suggest that we make a large arc towards the *Spectre* at about a...30-40 degree angle to the z-axis, hopping over the Copperheads. After that, an all out burn once we get within range of the ship so we are in and out as soon as possible. At that point, we'll be heading at a downwards angle away from the ship. I'll need cover though. Two would be best to cover my wings. In addition to you, I'd like Hobbit to join us."

"That's insane!" Hobbit yelled, still ticked about this whole mission.

"Reason?" Claymore asked curtly. Something smelled about this mission and she didn't like it one bit. Seer and Ducky were staying silent, apparently not wanting to get involved.

"Sir, I read her records and she's one of the most accurate pilots we have out here. On an all out burn, I'd want someone who can fire accurately at high speeds to ward off any pursuit." Cat responded nervously. Claymore could tell something was bugging her. Her voice was shaking...not from fear really...but more like it was from pent up adrenaline that hadn't been used.

"Claymore." Banshee was on the com. "The *Aruna's* fighter escort has split into two main groups. One is keeping a close screen on the Aruna. They apparently don't trust us not to stab them in the back. The other set has made an attack vector set to intercept the Copperheads. Looks like we've got some help out here."

JFalcon	Fri Mar 04, 2005 5:51 am
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Medical was still empty when Kate nervously peaked her head inside. Hopefully she could get out of her jumpsuit and back into bed before her foray attracted further attention. Kate tossed her battered--now safely powered off--tablet onto the side table and was removing her tool belt when the room door opened behind her.

She turned with a start, clutching her thermos, while the belt and its contents hit the floor with a jangle. Dr. Banner stood in the doorway with an expression of rapidly increasing disapproval.

"Going somewh...?" The question faded out as the older woman realized she had interrupted a covert arrival and not a departure.

Kate's eyes involuntarily moved between the doctor and the thermos. Part of her wondered if it had any defensive applications.

"So... I can't even take a five minute break without you gallivanting around the ship? I told you to keep weight off your knee! How do you expect it to heal?!"

"I..."

"I already said you couldn't have any more coffee! You know damn well what I think about the

utterly unhealthy amount of caffeine you consume! But, NOoo. You go and disobey direct orders and get more anyway. I swear, one of these days I'm going to have you put into rehab!"

She stormed out the door, but returned in a moment waving a composite, hinged knee brace.

"Here! If you aren't going to lie down, then you can not lie down while being productive. And if I so much as hear rumors about you not wearing that over the next two weeks, I'll put your leg put in a rigid cast!"

A sudden calm ensued after the doctor's exit.

"Well, that could have been a whole lot worse... Could have gone better, too."

Kate retrieved her belt and errant tools before strapping on the brace. It wasn't terribly comfortable, but did seem to add a lot of support to the side of her knee that hurt the most. It was going to keep her from climbing into any access hatches, though. She collected her still powered down computer before exiting into the main medical wing.

"Do I have this on right, ma'am?"

"Let me see." Banner adjusted one of the straps in what seemed to Kate an excessively tight fit. "Yes."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Please try to make at least some attempt at staying out of trouble, private. Your medical file is already quite large enough as it is."

Schamann

Fri Mar 04, 2005 2:42 pm

Hobbit

this isn't good, this isn't good at all thought Hobbs as she sped on claymore's wing towards the strange capital ship guarding Jones, who was supposed to get some intel.

"Claymore, six Sirens from the Aruna is more or less on our tails going at the new carrier, Above us we have eight Copperheads speeding at our direction plus more wings on out sides, but those are out of...."

"Easy" Cat's voice on the comm. did not sound comforting at all, however. "I hope they are just intercepting fighters from Aruna and we should be able to slip through"

"You hope?!" Hobbs was on a verge of fury.

"Quiet Habbs" Claymore stayed calm, so far.

Indeed, several seconds later, a dogfight started between Sirens and copperheads, but thanks to Cat's approach route they were already behind it. Now all that was left between them and the carrier was two more Copperheads.....and....

"Oh great, they have a Pele!" Hobbs felt it clearly now, it was goint to be a long day.

She held her breath for a while *I wish Crone was here with me*

"Granted, Claymore out ...Heobs, break end atteack!"

Then she yanked the stick and squeezed the trigger.

Banshee

While Claymore put her in charge of the other three, she stayed behind the first three and watched the situation. It was less than perfect. Aruna and her escort was far enough, true, but the first wave of copperheads started to accelerate towards Aruna . Sirens from Aruna moved to meet them and all looked like all they needed to do was to keep quiet.

"Duck here to Banshee, look at you ten, twenty degrees up. Some of the Coppies turned towards Claymore, they will be willing to get on their backs"

"Full speed everyone, Seer do we manage to intercept them before they intercept Claymore?"

"Positive, but we need to use rockets and thus give out our position before close range" - Cassie

sounded way more than a bit confused for like, last several minutes.

"There's seven of them, leader" – Duck was firm, but did not seem to like it as well.

"Full missile salvo on my mark – pick your targets carefully. Then we go off the afterburners and we start dancing. Duck, you lead, me and Seer we provide the finishing touch"

"Gotchya Banshee"

"Acknowledged sir"

"Claymore this is Banshee. You got some serious activity on your back, we are intercepting it, but the badguys outnumber us, I suggest you might need to be quick down there, permission to engage?"

" Granted, Claymore out... Heobs, break end atattack!"

"Three....two....one.....mark"

Missiles fired away. Some Copperheads started frantic maneuvering, some of them went on.

Some of them turned back to face the Novas when Aruna sirens fired their missiles at them. Carrier kept launching fighter, at least some of them heavier than the Copperheads.

It has begun

"Terran pilots, this is Omega One, we are under attack and we could use some assistance."

JediBubbles

Fri Mar 04, 2005 2:44 pm

Seer stared intently at her comm as she flew for her life.

She'd been snapped out of her initial panic--*note to self: beat living shit out of self for doing that once this is all over*-- several minutes prior to the engagement by some wonderfully detached portion of her brain commenting that the situation was quickly becoming more complicated than girly politics.

Girly politics...where there're always more than two sides...

And suddenly Cassie had a sneaking suspicion as to what was really going on.

So she was waiting, listening for yet another message meant just for her ears. Because she figured the larger contingent of ships further out had to know by now that the Novas had heard the Aruna's call for aid. And they couldn't let that call stand. Especially if that call wasn't the first one that had gone out.

If Jem and the Holograms had asked them for help, then the Misfits and their counter-offer couldn't be far behind.

Soon enough, an angry synthetic voice crackled onto her comm through all the battle chatter.

"Apollo here. Sit tight, girl; you weren't supposed to hear that last message, but shit happens."

The frequency was just enough different from the one she'd gotten the original message on to make Seer suspect that it was a command frequency from the other group of ships. Seer smiled. Her hunch was correct. Now to do something about it. She clicked her comm button once to acknowledge, but remained silent.

"Do exactly what I tell you, *NOW*, or somebody else isn't going to make it home. Do not get anywhere near this carrier or any of the blood-moon bearing ships: we are still the enemy. Do not get any closer to the Aruna; tell your leader they are staging a trap and they have enough fighters to trash your Medusas into interstellar dust. Do not tell her where you got this information from. Apollo will take care of you if you do this."

Seer was really grinning now, but she managed to make her voice sound meek and slightly fearful. "Understood, Apollo, s-sir." She peeled off after the Pele that was bugging Hobbs. "But why are you telling me this?"

"That's none of your concern, Alliance pilot," the cold robot-like voice snapped back. "But suffice to say that this situation is also none of the Alliance's concern."

Seer broke and barked out a laugh. "Oh, but it *is* our concern. Claymore, did'ja get all that?"

"Aye, lass," Claymore's voice replied grimly. Cassie had actually pushed two buttons when she'd "acknowledged" the rebel's instructions--the other one being a switch that broadcast the message to the rest of the Novas, the Omegas, and the approaching backup flights. "T' quote a horrendous moovie: 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend'."

"You bitch," the rebel frequency spat out at Seer as a fresh flurry of activity started in the vicinity of the *Spectre*. "You just ensured that more people will die."

"This is a war--people are going to die anyway, Apollo," Cassie fired back as she instinctively flipped her Medusa over and slammed a wall of vaporizing laser-fire into the Copperhead that had been attempting to tail her ass.

A ironic grin curled up one side of her face.

"Besides, the words of Apollo were always relayed by the Oracle at Delphi--and you can be sure Pythia the Seer made it her business to twist them to make sure that more Trojans would die than Greeks."

Vexus	Mon Mar 07, 2005 6:50 am
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As the two groups of fighters closed in, Claymore swallowed and set herself for whatever came of this.

"Good luck, ladies. Let's make Crone proud."

With that, the Copperheads launched their missiles. The Novas responded with a hail of burning decoys. Ducky's voice sounded cool and controlled.

"This is something my father taught me."

Suddenly, Ducky's Medusa lurched forward with an enormous burst of speed. Some of the incoming missiles seemed to get a lock on her ship, but they could not adjust their course fast enough to maintain the lock, resulting in the warheads been deflected away harmlessly.

"Shit!" Claymore heard Cassie exclaim. "How did she do that?!"

"I don't know," Claymore said with a smile, "but I'll take it. Hobbs, Banshee, follow her!"

"I think 'creep after her' would be a better term to use in this case," Banshee said, sounding impressed at what she was seeing from the newest pilot. "But we'll do the best we can."

The speed of Ducky's charge seemed to surprise the enemy as well. Ducky made a beeline right down the middle of the Copperheads. As her momentum carried her forward, she spun her fighter around wildly like a giant turret, blasting one stunned fighter after another. Banshee and Hobbit swept in soon after, finishing what Ducky has started. Within a few moments, the few Copperheads left were fleeing for their lives back towards the Spectre. Claymore felt a wave of relief come over her. Banshee then let out a war-cry of triumph that reminded the squad why she had been given her particular call-sign. Just when Claymore thought things couldn't have worked out better, a new but familiar voice sounded in her ear.

"Novas, this is Voeller with the Morning Stars. We are almost to your position."

"Copy that. It's good to see ya, Morning Stars," Claymore responded, then switched frequencies to the Morrigan. "Dark Novas to Morrigan, engaged Copperheads have been routed. What are your orders?"

Relief wasn't just paying a visit to Claymore, it seemed, as Commander Verulian looked over the latest transmissions from her Omegas and breathed a sigh. Looking up with renewed confidence, she addressed her captain.

"Ma'am, Omega Wing has confirmed the Aruna as friendly. It's the Spectre we have to worry about."

The captain gave her commander a semi-skeptical look as she called to her tactical officer. "Time to firing range?"

"Ten minutes, ma'am," the officer answered.

"I think I can do better than that, ma'am," Verulian said with a smirk as she worked the controls at her station and put on a pair of headphones.

"Omega One, you're in range. Can you see well enough? ... "Good, I'm sending the data now. Synch up and confirm coordinates.... Got it. Finish up and get out of there."

Verulian gave the captain a dark smile before going back to her terminal. After a few moments, the weapon's officer spoke up with a confused tone.

"Ma'am, we're not nearly in range yet, but my screen is displaying a targeting solution on the Spectre accurate to 0.3%."

The captain gave an intrigued look to Verulian.

"You'll definitely have to explain this one to me."

"Only what I'm allowed to explain," Verulian replied evenly. The captain shook her head and gave her orders to weapons control.

"Tubes one through four: Fire!"

At an observation window, Aurora stood silently, her injured arm still in its cast and her eyes straining to see any sign of the battle they were approaching. She had stood there for a while before recognizing the place as the same one she had occupied whilst listening to her mother's latest message. Her thoughts then drifted between her family, the situation that Voeller had described to her, and finally to her squad mates somewhere out there beyond the thick pane of armored glass.

I hope they're all ok, came the thought again and again, until it was followed by one that surprised the squad leader.

Ursula, please be alright.

A loud roar then shook the room around her and startled the silver-haired girl from her thoughts. The quake was followed by the appearance of four bright lights in the night-sky that were quickly dimming and they rocketed away from the Morrigan.

They were Lasher Torpedoes, no doubt, as those were the kind that Crone knew the Morrigan carried. Magnetically launched, the warheads had incredibly powerful boosters and an intricate guidance system that activated just after clearing the mother ship. They were usually quite accurate and very deadly, but Aurora was surprised that they had been fired so far from the battle. Without proper targeting, their accuracy was severely limited.

The battle alert then sounded over the loud speakers, but Aurora hesitated. She wanted to see the battle, not be cooped up in her quarters alone. So she lingered at the window... and watched.

"Novas, this is the Morrigan," came the new CAG's voice. "You have new orders to protect the Aruna from the Spectre. Voeller will be assuming command of all squadrons in the field, so you are to follow her lead."

"Claymore," Voeller said in her usual no-nonsense tone, "we have torpedoes incoming from the Morrigan en route to the Spectre at full burn. They just passed the Arrowheads and will be entering the battle zone in three minutes. You need to ensure that they reach their target. I'll be taking the Morning Stars to engage the Pele and her escort that are trying to reach the Aruna. I'll have the Arrowheads back you up when they arrive. Comfirm."

"Confirmed, ma'am," Claymore answered. "Form up, Novas, we have to baby-sit some incoming torps so they can greet the Spectre."

"Nova Six to Nova Leader," Catnip shouted over the comm, "I think we've finally panicked the Spectre. She's launching the rest of her fighters. Omega Wing and I are pulling out. We'll be intercepting you in a minute or so, but we'll likely have some company on our tail."

Claymore gritted her teeth. This fight has just started....

Maverick

Wed Mar 30, 2005 8:13 pm

Cat yelped as she nearly bit her tongue. The engaging Copperheads were much faster than her, even though she had a head start. It was going to boil down to a race to see whether or not Cat could make it to help or be shot down while running. Omega seemed to be doing fine, riding her wings at flank speed.

As long as we can keep the Aruna alive, we should be fine and I can get some answers....a captured Copperhead would be nice too but...NO! Don't get too greedy girl...right now you need to get your ass out of the fire-

Her thoughts were interrupted by a missile exploding right behind her tail. The Copperheads were getting close and they wanted to make sure she knew it.

Don'tfreezeupDon'tfreezeupDon'tfreezeup! Cat chanted to herself, hands shaking. She risked a look over her shoulder and saw that the missile had done more than just shaking her up, it had punched small holes from the frag into her tail. Now it was blackened with pock-marks, like an unwashed-greasy teenager's face who liked to see things pop. Whipping her head around, Cat focused back onto her goal.

"Nova Lead, this is Six, coming in hot in ten seconds!"

"Roger that Six. Novas! Lay down some support for our spooks!"

Ahead of her, Catnip saw Nova squadron turn towards them.

"Omegas! Down 30 degrees!" Catnip yelled to her flanking OSI buddies. The three ships pitched downwards and the rest of the Dark Nova squadron burst through overhead to engage the Copperheads. Both Omegas banked around to help the Novas deal with the *Spectre's* little babies, leaving Cat to make a lazy turn, sweeping by the torpedoes.

Banshee let out another shriek as a Copperhead turned from a greasy-gray sliver in space to a rolling inferno. Cat engaged her thrusters and leapt in to help her squad send those bastards to hell.

Vexus

Fri Apr 01, 2005 12:18 pm

The battle was now joined in twin clouds of fighters swarming between the fleeing Aruna cruiser and the pursuing Spectre strike carrier. Claymore only had brief flashes of thought as she let her trained instincts do the flying. She had to protect the torpedoes, she had to protect her squad-mates, and she had to fulfill her duty to Crone and come back alive. Within a few moments that seemed like an eternity, the torpedoes had reached the melee between the Novas, Omega Wing, and the Copperheads. The enemy fighters immediately opened fire on the incoming warheads, giving Claymore the advantage she needed. When it came down to it, even the new model Medusas were little match for these Copperhead fighters, and it was a miracle that they had held out for this long without casualties. However, with the Copperheads' attention now split between dogfighting and protecting their mother-ship, the Novas had a chance.

Claymore took an instant to look at her tactical screen and made the decision.

"Cat, ready your Stonegaze and approach my position. You're clear, Omega Wing, so your better bugger off now while you have the chance. Novas! Follow those torpedoes with everything you've got and keep the Copperheads off of them. Banshee has the lead."

With little time for words, the other fighters simply signaled their confirmations and the race was on. With the torpedoes in the lead, screaming towards their target, the fighters briefly entangled in combat now took parallel courses to follow. However, Claymore was determined to tip the odds in their favor. Energizing her Stonegaze, she adjusted her course to intercept the Copperheads at the back of the pack. On the far side, she saw Cat approaching the group as well. As Claymore neared her targets, she cracked a small grin. The nice thing about the Stonegaze was that you could become a kamikaze without necessarily killing yourself in the process.

"Cat! Fire and detonate on my mark.... mark!"

As one, the two Medusas fired off their mines and activated them instantly. A cloud of EMP waves sandwiched the trailing Copperheads along with Claymore and Cat. The XO's screens blinked out, her engines cut off, and the resulting silence was deafening. Without control thrusters, her fighter settled into a gentle, almost serene spin. For a brief moment, she gazed out her cockpit. About five Copperheads and Cat's Medusa were all participating in the same quiet, graceful dance as she. In the distance, she saw the twinkling lights of afterburners and the flashes of weapons fire, and said a soft prayer of protection for her squad. Then with controlled but anxious movements, she tried to get her systems back online before the crippled Copperheads did.

Banshee's fighter shook at the force of her engines blazing at full-throttle and then some. These Lasher torpedoes were bulky, but they had some hefty engines, and they had had the whole trip from the Morigan to pick up speed. The warheads had started out close together in a tight bunch, but as they neared their target, they fired small side thrusters that began to spread them out, making it harder for interceptors to take all of them down with concentrated fire. Unfortunately for Banshee and the others, it also made protecting them more difficult. The Copperheads were making passes at the Lashers, firing at their tips with their plasma cannons. The torpedoes had shielding, but it wouldn't last long under the barrage. Banshee directed the Novas to strafe around the torps, taking quick pot-shots at the Copps and trying to get them to pull up before opening fire. For their part, the four Copps who weren't stopped in the Stonegaze attack tried to lock their remaining missiles on the Novas and get them to veer away from their guard positions. Everyone seemed too preoccupied to actually dogfight, however, as the Spectre's long, intimidating form grew larger before them.

"One of them is going for a missile lock on the lead torp!" Seer's voice sounded over the comm. "I'll head her off!"

Glancing at her screen, Banshee saw Seer bank sharply and open up on the Copperhead as it steadied itself for the lock. The shields buckled briefly and then collapsed, and three plasma bolts tore through the Copperhead's cockpit. The craft immediately turned off-course and spun away. Seer's left wing struck a chunk of debris and it snapped in two, forcing the craft to fall back. Banshee took everything in with cold understanding. Chances were that Seer herself was ok, but there was no time to check.

As Banshee turned her attention back to the torpedoes, she saw a Copperhead make another pass at one of them, but this time it was banking too hard. Banshee's eyes widened slightly in realization. She was too far away to do anything.

"Ducky! Take out that Copp near Torp 2 now!!!"

Ducky headed in with guns blazing, but suddenly her engines sputtered erratically, changing her course and causing her shots to go wide. It seems her last speed-burst stunt had cost her. Ducky had now fallen hopelessly behind the pack.

There was no more time.

"Hobbs, break hard port!"

Banshee then broke to starboard, and the two remaining Novas scattered as the Copperhead turned itself right into the nearby torpedo.

The explosion was as silent as the grave in the vacuum of space, but the light was blinding. A spherical shockwave of super-heated radiation and debris raced out in all directions. The closest neighboring torpedo caught the wave the hardest and was thrown off-course. One of the Copps also caught a strong part of the wave and disintegrated.

At a larger distance away but still paralleling the course of the remaining torpedoes, Banshee swung her shields into a tight arc facing the shockwave and was able to absorb a good fraction of the radiation. She felt the impact of the debris, and breathed a small sigh when the wave passed and her engines still worked. Hurriedly, she made her way back toward the two surviving torpedoes. On her screen, she saw Hobbs and the remaining Copperhead swoop back from the opposite side. Banshee was getting ready to intercept the enemy fighter in case it too decided to do a suicide run, when the space around them suddenly was a wash in interceptor fire. The Spectre was almost upon them.

Claymore was running out of swear words in both Gaelic and English as she tried in vain to restart her systems. A sudden flash outside her cockpit window made her blood run cold, and she looked up to see one of the Copperheads roar back into life. Almost casually, it seemed to Claymore, the fighter made a triumphant arc towards her drifting fighter.

"Claymore, hold on!!! I'm coming!!!" came Cat's desperate voice. Claymore could just spot her as a small point of light moving in the distance against the background stars. There was no way she would make it in time. Claymore gave a resigned sign. She had tried her best, but it hadn't been enough. As the Copperhead barreled down on her, she was only slightly surprised at her last thought.

Be kind and raise a glass to me at the day's end, lassies.

BOOOM!!!

Claymore instinctively threw her hands up as a flash came that rocked her fighter. Convinced the explosion was her own fighter, it took a minute for the XO to realize that she was still alive.

"Nova Leader, this is Holmes. Sit tight and we'll clean up this mess."

Before Claymore's unbelieving eyes, the Arrowheads raced in and destroyed the Copperheads even as they began to come back online. Wiping away a tear of relief, Claymore offered a "thank-yeh" even though she knew the Arrowheads couldn't hear her. She made a mental note to get those girls a round at the bar after this was over.

Safe for the moment, Claymore's thoughts turned once again to her girls that had raced off with the torpedoes. It was all up to them now. For her part, Claymore resumed her attempts to restart her fighter, but no longer swearing. She owed God at least that much for this one.

Vexus

Fri Apr 01, 2005 12:20 pm

The interceptor fire increased in intensity as the torpedoes and remaining fighters continued towards their rendezvous with the Spectre. So far, the interceptors were firing plasma bolts that were deflecting off the torpedoes' shields, but Banshee was certain that they'd soon be in range of the rail-guns, and their fire could shred both them and the torpedoes if they didn't do something about it.

"Hobbs, I need you to take aim and remove those interceptors closest to the torpedoes trajectory. I'll cover you."

"I'll do what I can," Hobbs said, then continued with just a hint of playfulness in her voice. "I'll considerate it practice for our upcoming contest."

A smirk came to Banshee's face in spite of herself as she fell in behind Hobbs and watched for the remaining Copperhead.

Within a moment, Banshee saw the blurring-fast flashes of the rail-gun short-range interceptors and narrowed her brow in concentration. A hail of magnetically accelerated shrapnel enveloped them. Banshee heard and felt her armor strain as it bore the brunt of the storm. Hobbit began firing her PPCs at the flickering lights, and even from the long distance her aim was true. The lights began to wink out.

Banshee saw the Copperhead make her move and head towards her squad-mate. Banshee opened fire and caught the enemy fighter on her left engine. The Copperhead seemed to lose control, and Banshee moved her attention back to Hobbit. She soon regretted that decision.

The Copperhead managed to steady itself briefly and fired at Banshee, the bolts piercing her aft control thrusters and causing one of them to misfire. Banshee was forced to pull out in order to regain control of her ship. In the meantime, the Copperhead swung towards the trailing torpedo and rammed its engine section. The Copperhead melted away as it caught the super-hot exhaust of the Lasher's engine, but the fighter's sacrifice succeeded in shoving the warhead off-course. It soon caught a cloud of rail-gun fire and detonated harmlessly away from any ships.

Banshee breathed an angry sigh from within her cockpit. She had now joined the pilots who could only watch and hope.

Almost there. Hobbs had to time it just right. But for now it was all about making the lights go out. Every single one of them. And with amazing skill she never would've dreamed she had, she darted around the last torpedo and took out the interceptors one by one.

Almost time. Just a few more seconds.

A proximity alert sounded in her cockpit. A couple Copperheads were approaching from below, hugging the Spectre's hull protectively and trying to lock onto the torpedo. In the space between moments, Hobbs could see her own failure and death with horror.

But then her thoughts turned to Crone and the memory of her words as she stood at attention in the Novas' quarters with tears in her eyes.

You've proven yourself quite capable... and I'm proud to have you in our squadron.

Hobbs set herself with renewed determination, and an idea came to her. As the last moment came, the little pilot pulled up and fired every decoy she had left. The torpedo was not swayed by the burning false targets, but the Copperheads' missiles were. And as the Spectre's last hopes chased the glowing shadows and Hobbs arched away from the enemy carrier, the last torpedo buried itself into the Spectre's hull in the forward-port quarter. True to its programming, the torpedo cut its engines and tore through the ship until the inner bulkheads brought it to a halt. Once stopped, the warhead completed its mission.

With a blinding flash, the Spectre seemed to heave wearily from the explosion within its innards. A large section of the carrier was blasted off and echoing explosions of detonated ordinance boiled up along the hull, taking out the remaining Copperheads guarding the carrier. The thrusters that still worked then activated on full burn and the Spectre began to turn. On her screen, Hobbs saw the surviving Copperheads fighting near the Aruna break and flee back to their mother-ship. The Spectre completed its 180-turn and swung its surviving turrets around to guard its escape. The rebels seemed to think that the Aruna was not worth losing a carrier.

The Charans were retreating.

In a long, slow arc, the Morrigan turned to come up alongside the Aruna in an escort position. The rebel Sirens took up a protective stance around the cruiser, but did not attack. The Morrigan maintained its own fighter screen, as Arrowhead Squadron surrounded their home base and kept an eye on the Aruna. From a tether, the captured Pele dangled from the Morrigan, battle-scarred but salvageable.

The Morning Stars and Dark Novas had returned to base. Aurora had heard the announcement over the speakers, and now she fought every urge to run to the flight deck as a hurried Dr. Banner worked to remove the squad leader's cast from her arm.

"Hold still, girl, or I'll never get this off properly! *sigh* I don't know why I agreed to doing this when I should be prepping for casualties with the rest of my medical team."

Aurora offered no reply, knowing that a response would only make the doctor's mood worse. However, Aurora had to admit that Banner had seemed much more relaxed and much less grumpy than usual just before the announcement came in about the fighters returning. Her hair was also tangled a little, and she had a flushed look to her. Aurora had mentioned this, and had gotten an icy look in return, so she had not pursued the matter. She was simply glad to finally get the cast off.

With a few final snips of her scissors, Banner removed the cast and Aurora slowly flexed her arm. It seemed to work.

"Thanks," Aurora said simply, then bolted from the sickbay and raced down the corridor, heading for the flight deck.

As Aurora reached the long, flat expanse of the flight deck, her heart began to speed up in her chest. Frantically, she looked for her girls, and the thought of seeing less than six ate away at her soul.

Then... there they were. Six pilots gathered into a small circle and still wearing their sweat-stained flight suits. Aurora felt the weight of her worry evaporate away and replaced with a relief she had never known before. Rhiannon glanced in her direction and caught her eye.

As the pilots turned and made their way to her across the busy deck, Aurora found herself unable to move, afraid that if she did the pilots would disappear like a mirage and Aurora would awake from this, the best of dreams.

Solid and real as ever, Rhiannon came up to Aurora and smiled, her eyes mirroring the joy that Aurora now felt.

"All Novas reporting back alive, sir... as ordered."

A short but honest burst of silvery laughter escaped from Aurora, and she flung both her arms around the red-headed pilot in a strong embrace.

"I knew you wouldn't let me down," Aurora said shakily as she stepped back and looked over her squadron, "none of you."

"We managed to keep our fighters in one piece as well," Banshee said with a hint of pride.

"Well, mostly," Seer said with a guilty smile and a wink. "I lost part of a wing and they had to tow me back. But you should have seen the new girl fly! Oh my God, Ducky can fight!"

The newest Nova bowed her head and blushed. "I just used my talents for the good of the mission, sir."

Aurora smiled at that. Ducky was becoming a Nova in fact as well as in name.

"And Cat never froze-up or hesitated once, sir," Rhiannon said, clapping Kat on the back. Kat smiled and turned to Aurora.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have to report to the OSI before the general debriefing."

Aurora nodded. "It's ok, you're dismissed." As Kat headed off, Rhiannon's expression grew more serious and she put an arm around Ursula.

"Hobbs here is the real heroine of this mission, sir. She was with the torpedoes to the end after everyone else had to pull out." Rhiannon gave Ursula a little nudge forward. Seer seemed on the verge of a giggling fit.

The little pilot and the silver-haired girl looked at each other for a moment, then Aurora spoke with some nervousness in her voice as she placed her hands on Ursula's shoulders.

"Well done, Hobbs. You *cough* you did us proud."

"Thank-you, sir," Ursula said, her face beginning to turn red.

Aurora pulled herself together and cleared her throat. "Well, it's good to have you all home."

"Aye, lass," Rhiannon said. "And by the way, you can be squad leader again. I think I've had my fill of it for a long while."

JFalcon

Tue Apr 05, 2005 6:37 am

Still unnoticed by the reunited Novas, a small procession of techs lead by LT Freeman approached from the quieter end of the flight deck. Seer's shredded fighter drew some disapproving glances they passed by.

"Yates!" Sparks' hail and wave interrupted the Novas' gathering, which had by this time moved on to the usual post-mission story telling and friendly one-upping.

"Sparks?"

"A moment of Nova's time before debriefing."

The techs in tow had spread into a rough line a few paces behind Sparks. The worn pilots did the same behind Crone, though with a bit more precision; two sides as if before some battle of old while their leaders parleyed at the center of the field of contest.

Crone thought Sparks looked somewhat distracted and irritated, but that was hardly surprising given the chaos the ground crew had now inherited.

"Congratulations. Per Dark Nova's 'Spec Ops' status, I am 'hereby requested and required' to allocate you some of my precious staff on exclusive contracts."

She shifted towards the line of pilots. "Also, with squadron leader and CAG approval, pilots may elect to select a personal fighter."

Ducky and Banshee visibly brightened at this.

"Finally-- perks!" That was Seer's voice.

Sparks returned her gaze to Aurora. "I wouldn't be too hasty in granting such requests, Crone," the chief tech added in a softer tone. "My experience is that, yes, personal fighters do make pilots more effective. But, they can also reduce *squad* effectiveness if there is too much variety and limit flexibility on missions. Think things through carefully first, OK?"

Crone nodded in agreement. She could see that an Aries would stick out in a flight of Medusas. However, being able to call in heavy support with someone like Banshee or Hobbs flying such a weapon had merits.

"Some introductions and then I have to run. This is Petty Officer, Third Class, Anatolja Mirunova-- one of my top engine specialists. She will be supervising Nova's ground crew."

So that was the name of the woman with the strange violet eyes Aurora had encountered earlier.

"Whoa, wonder how that happened?" Ducky whispered to Rhiannon.

"Dinnae know, lass. Boot thars shurr tae be ah storrie behiend it."

Karen had moved on. "Specialist Sorensen, shielding."

"Petty Officer Tibbs. Everything," announced Sparks with a friendly smile. An older, blonde haired woman nodded amicably at Crone.

"MacGuire." Who winked conspiratorially at Claymore.

Finally! Another Scot onboard this tub.

"Graft, weapons." The woman had exceptionally long, decidedly non-regulation raven hair tied into a loose braid that reached past her waist.

"Maynard, hydraulics."

"AND fuel--or anything with liquid," the younger tech added arrogantly. Sparks ignored the comment and continued.

"Specialist Majewska, chassis and armor. If she gets unhappy, then you're abusing my fighters." Majewska was a dark-haired, tough looking woman who looked to be a few years older than any of the pilots.

"And finally..." The sentence died on Sparks' lips; there was no one else in line.

"Where's Kate?"

The inquiry received a chorus of groans.

"Don't tell me we're getting saddled with Calamity..."

"I don't know, Sparks." Anatolja overrode the general protest. "No one's seen her since she went to sickbay and she hasn't been responding to messaging."

Where the hell has she disappeared to! She's never without that \$#@!& big computer. I'll kill her if she thinks she can ignore my messages just because she's in medical.*

"Doc discharged her..." The violet eyes shifted to something further down the flight deck.

A figure moving with an irregular gait was hurrying to join the gathering. Crone recognized the girl as the tech who had spoken to her earlier from the flash of glasses with wide lenses. She had acquired a brace on her left knee since their last encounter.

"Ach, she's gon' tae bae in four it."

"And would seem to deserve it," Banshee added impassively. "Judging from her comrades reactions, we might be better off without her."

"Christie, don't judge her just because she's a little low on the popularity list."

Any further comment from Seer was cut short by a frightened "gleep!" as the subject of debate caught her foot on a fuel hose. She hit the deck plating with a thud and clatter that caused a few wincing.

Banshee looked at Seer with some vindication. "No?"

Heads shook in long-suffering resignation among the techs. This was obviously the errant Kate.

So quickly had the small tech scrambled to her hands and knees and begun recovering her scattered possessions, she might as well have bounced off the floor. Only considerable past practice could have drilled such efficiency.

A small, steel thermos had sprung open from the impact and now lay in the middle of a small, dark puddle. There was a moment of genuine loss on the girl's face before she started trying to mop up the spill with the cap that had fallen off her head. When this failed, she switched to her sleeve--which proved moderately more effective--before falling into the end of the line. Her face showed that she was well aware that she was in for it.

Mirunova shoot Kate a glance that Aurora could not read. In her opinion, the young tech could have hardly managed a less flattering appearance. She now cut a rather pathetic appearance--stained, injured, disorganized, and clutching a dripping lump of clothing--while awaiting with downcast eyes whatever sentence her CO was doubtless preparing.

However, Sparks continued with barely a missed beat.

"Meet PFC Kate Ross." A cold, sarcastic tone now crept into her voice, "better known to most as 'Calamity.'"

Ursula noticed that the private flinched slightly and didn't reopen her eyes at this announcement. *Another one with an insult for a nickname*

Out of Character:

reference to Hobbit's [previous callsign](#) in case anyone forgot

"Miss Ross' expertise seems to be with electronics, though she tinkers with everything. She has a bad habit of modifying equipment beyond its spec and function. I trust that the Novas will not encourage her."

The private's face was now the blank stare common all new recruit on the receiving end of a drill sergeant's dressing down.

"If she becomes a problem we can discuss transferring her, but she is the only one with a three-plus equipment security clearance that I can spare at the moment."

Anatolja's eyes widened at this.
Even in the 2nd R&D, I only held Echo 2.

"I have to run now, Crone. I'm sure your pilots do, too. Let Mirunova know if you have any concerns or requests."

With that, Karen turned and within four steps was back to coordinating the recovery process on her flight deck comm.

Anatolja fell out and moved quickly to stare down at Kate. Her voice was quiet, but very dangerous.

"If you ever pull a stunt like that again, I swear that I will see you demoted from 'first class' to 'bulk rate.'"

Not waiting for a response, she turned to face the silver-haired LT in hopes of patching up the--no, *her*--ground crew's tarnished image.

Tiefflieger

Tue Apr 05, 2005 5:21 pm

"All right. Like the chief said, from now on it's our job to make sure your fighters will be in top fighting condition all the time. Not that this would be too much different from what we've done 'till now, but eight techs exclusively for six fighters will ensure very short service cycles. And with this close cooperation thing we might also be able to perform a few tweaks - within the specs, mind you - according to your personal needs, which usually wouldn't be possible. Even more so if you choose personal fighters. For this to work we'll need your input, of course. So I strongly encourage you to tell us where the shoe pinches."

Anatolja hesitated for a moment and added with a smirk: "Just remember: We can't work miracles here."

Shortly later the pilots had left for debriefing and Anatolja was browsing the fighters logs.

"So, what do we have?" That was Tibbs asking.

"Let's see... first we've got one fried engine - looks like the pilot did override the fuel control and injected a seventy-five percent mixture..."

"Damn, seventy-five? Is she crazy? She's lucky the thing didn't blow up on her!"

"Indeed. I think I'll have to have a chat with... whashername... Lt. Price later. But that stunt was good for a little surprise, I'm sure. Oh this is nice: Looks like she already got a kick in her ass. All four control thrusters show damage, one is inop. The fighter also took some hard radiation and will have to go through decon.

"What else?"

"Hmm, the usual: Debris and shrapnel galore. Quite a lot of surface damage. What do you think, Majewska?"

"Most can be fixed with some tape, a fistful of rivets and a bucket of paint or two. I don't think I'll have to replace a lot of plating. Of course there's this one that lost her left wing tip..." the addressed woman answered.

"There's another lucky fellow! I think I'll have to talk to her, too. Lt. Dory. She somehow managed to kill her flight recorder with that crash, so we don't have any damage data."

While Anatolja browsed through the rest of the logs, suddenly she laughed out loud.

"Now this is rich: We've got two full stonegaze hits."

"What, I thought they fought copperheads? Those don't have stonegaze!" Graft objected.

"No, wait, I wasn't finished! Both of them have also *fired* their stonegaze. Looks like they took out one another!"

"Holy Christ! And they all came back without even a scratch? Now I know why they call it a 'special designation' squad. It's a squad full of lucky bastards!"

"Do tell. OK, here's the deal: Swede, you'll take our radiation victim to the washing bay first."

"Aww, c'mon, why can't Calamity..." Sorensen tried to talk herself out of the unpleasant task of decontaminating the fighter.

"Because I need her to do the mandatory full electronics run-up on the stonegaze-duelists. Want to trade with her?"

Of course she didn't. Nothing was more boring than supervising the fully automated self-test of the electronics systems.

"When you're finished you'll help Tibbs with the thrusters. I think I'll be back by then to take care of the engine, if not, go ahead."

"Scissors, Majewska, you do your routine, Mac and Maynard will assist you. But everybody stay away from this cripple for now," she pointed at Seers Siren, "until I talked to Dory. You'll find me in the office, if you need me. I have some paperwork to do." A not very friendly glance towards Kate made clear whom Anatolja owed this. "And I need to catch those pilots, after debriefing."

Kimmers4Ever

Wed Apr 06, 2005 6:31 pm

As Ducky followed the others, she had a little smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. It had been just one battle, one fight and already she felt accepted. There was no snide comments or complaints; these ladies actually appreciated her and her flying. Last time she had done such flying; she had been played verbally in front of her wing mates. These new wing mates actually wanted her to do her best.

Her heart still thundered loudly as it still raced from the adrenaline. Oh god, she had missed the feeling she got from letting loose. It was, at times, like an addiction, an itch that got worse the more time you waited to scratch it. But when you finally relieve that itch, it is the most wonderful feeling.

Or maybe it was the fact that all the memories and ghosts of the past, faded away when she was in the seat of the fighter. Nothing mattered, but the "Now" of being in the battle. Each sharp turn, each time she sped forward at max speed, it took her further from reality.

Aloud she let out a sigh, almost like the sound of relief.

"Earth to Ducky... Hey.. Ducky!" Blinking a bit she turned to find Seer looking at her with a raised brow. "Didn't you hear a word I said?"

"Ah... no, sorry. I was...." How could she explain it... "I was thinking about whether I'm going to get played for killing my fighter like that. Good flying or not, the Tech's are never too happy when I come back." Oh but it was worth it, she thought privately.

However, all good feelings went out the window when she caught sight of Crone, even if only for a moment. She thought of the warning her squad leader gave, and it humbled her, taking the high out of the moment. She had to be careful if she wanted to stay with this group. That meant keeping on the good side of Crone. Oh but that itch could get painful. Like father, like daughter.

JediBubbles

Thu Apr 07, 2005 3:06 pm

"Well, I was raving yet again about that burst o' speed you cranked out in an attempt to get you to spill how you did it, but as you weren't paying attention, all subtlety is off." Seer grinned, "So: how'd y'do it?"

Ducky tried not to look pleased with herself. "Uh, well, it involves telling the fuel control to take a hike and feeding the engine a seventy-five mixture."

Cassie let out a low appreciative whistle and looked over at their Medusas as they left the flight deck. "DAMN, woman. No wonder tech's usually pissed with you! That's a bona-fide engine fryer." Despite her words she sounded rather proud of her squadmate. "Thanks for the insider info. I'll store that one away for 'emergencies,'" she said with a wink.

JFalcon

Fri Apr 08, 2005 6:29 am

Kate was running the regression tests on the two fighters in parallel. Actually, she was secretly moderating as series of races between the two computer systems and keeping track of who won each heat. Why two identical pieces of hardware performed differently was a much more interesting problem than whether or not they worked. She could have hit the run button, walked away, and had the results messaged to her but figured Mirunova wouldn't take too well to that right now.

It was probably bad enough that she was running her own set of tests rather than the regulation ones. They were faster and more informative, but unapproved.

"Boring old fighter with just as boring electronics system..." No one heard her unsolicited opinion of the Medusa 2.

...

"You there-- technician with the glasses!"

Kate spun, startled, and saw an irritated looking woman in a black OSI uniform.

"Ahm, yes ma'am?!"

"Why wasn't the flight recorder from LT Dory's fighter delivered with the others to OSI?"

"Well, I think they tried to, but..."

"Where is it then?"

"I think it still might..."

"You will get me the flight recorder **now**."

"But it's..."

"It is a serious disciplinary offense to interfere with intelligence data, *private*. Unless you would prefer to..." She didn't continue the threat nor needed to. Kate was already moving towards the off-limits fighter.

Fine, lady. You want the \$&@# box so badly? Let me find you the %&@ pieces.*

The fighter was in bad shape. A large chunk of... something had plowed into the base of the wing, nearly shearing it off completely. A ragged black gash showed that damage continued on into the fighter's core.

Right about where the black box should be...

Standing on a toolbox, Kate poked her head into the opening and starting looking around with a flashlight. The internal damage was in many ways as bad as it looked from the outside. It was a wonder that the wing was even still attached. Most of the internal structure looked broken. The armor shell was probably the only thing holding the wing on. Not good at all.

On the other hand, the object had neatly avoided rupturing the fuel tanks and puncturing the interior side of the command pod. That was a design flaw of the Medusa cockpits, in Kate's opinion. The unexposed areas relied on the ship's armor and thus the cockpit had a soft underbelly.

Stupid, especially when that's the side facing the fireball when you bail. Wonder how many have made it out in time only to die of depressurization?

Kate located two pieces that she was pretty sure were part of the flight recorder and held them out to the OSI officer. There was a moment's pause.

"Come with me."

Kate winced after the woman turned.
WRONG answer, Kate.

"Bring that with you."

...

They arrived at an unmarked door in what Kate thought was the command section of the Morrigan. She had never been in this part of the ship before. The OSI woman entered an access code into the keypad.

"Took you long enough." Another OSI officer who didn't even bother looking up from the consoles on the workspace she sat at.

"The flight recorder from LT Dory's fighter was destroyed during the mission."

That got the seated woman's attention. The standing officer gestured at Kate who placed the pieces on the desk and then came to attention for lack of a better idea. The woman seemed to

contemplate the wreckage intruding on her spotless desk.

"And you are?"

"PFC Kate Ross, TNSN 49726-013. Fighter technician assigned to Dark Nova Squadron, ma'am."

Another moment's pause.

"Calm down, private. You aren't in trouble." A scared tech wasn't going to be useful to anyone. "You're here for the ease of recording any official statements needed for our investigation into the destruction of this valuable piece of intel equipment. Now then, what happened to the fighter piloted by LT Dory?"

"I have no idea, ma'am. The other recorders might..."

"What I mean, miss Ross, is that I want an analysis of the damage sustained to this flight recorder and its fighter."

"I'm not a structural expert, ma'am. I'm sure Majewska could..."

"Are you not a trained and qualified fighter technician, private?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then I have every confidence that your assessment will be accurate. Besides, taking responsibility is an important part of being a part of the Terran Navy, don't you agree?"

"Yes, ma'am." Like she could disagree. Kate tried to collect her limited observations.

"LT Dory's fighter has suffered extensive collision damage to its starboard wing root. The impact has fully breached the armor and seems to have also caused considerable structural damage. The control lines to that side of the fighter are severed which means she would have lost about 30% of her maneuvering jets. A recovery shuttle towed her in as a result. The flight recorder was directly in the object's impact path. The collision luckily did not breach the capacitor banks, fuel system, or cockpit environment."

"This was not caused by energy weapons?"

"No, ma'am."

"Kinetic?"

"The hole is too large, ma'am."

"Missile?"

"No evidence of an explosion or fire, ma'am. One that failed to detonate, possibly, but I doubt one would have had the structural integrity to survive the impact with the fighter's armor."

"How big an object?"

"Damage is proportional to kinetic energy, and thus speed is more important to mass, ma'am. However, the hole shape suggests to me that it was a major structural element about 10 cm wide and over half a meter long."

"Could this have been self-inflicted?"

Kate blinked. "Pardon, ma'am?"

"Could a pilot deliberately collide with a piece of debris in a manner that would destroy the flight recorder, but leave her fighter's critical systems intact?"

"Y...yesss. I, I suppose it's theoretically possible. But... to... to spot something that small at that speed...? Then manage to hit it just right with enough knowledge about the fighter's systems

layout? The approach speed is just too fast-- no one's vision or reflexes are that good."

The OSI officer received this in the same impassive manner. She picked up the desk's comms unit.

"Get LT Cassandra Dory from Dark Nova in here."

...

"I don't care what she's in the middle of! I want her in here in less than 5 minutes! The fewer people she talks to the better right now."

She returned the handset to its cradle precisely and calmly.

"Thank you, miss Ross. You are excused of your current duties for the time being. Please wait outside. If we need your evaluation of any of LT Dory's statements, we will ask you after we are done with her. Otherwise, you will be returned to duty. In either case, it is sufficient to only say that you were asked to consult on a technical matter. Is this clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Dismissed for the moment."

"Interesting. Did you pick that tech on purpose?"

"No, why?"

"Her file. She has the full level 5 clearance on equipment."

"That can't be right."

"Ross, Ross..." The senior OSI officer was reading data flashing across her screens. "Ah, yes. We owe her family a great deal of thanks for their work. She might be a useful resource. She doesn't have a security clearance and I think granting her one would be foolish, but still..."

Anatolja's PDA blipped, interrupting her frustrating attempts to write a report that explained why it really wasn't her fault Kate blew up a fighter and then landed herself in medical.

FYI- Kate just got hauled off by OSI.

- Tibbs

JediBubbles

Sat Apr 09, 2005 3:19 am

"...and then the horrible little puddle-jumper started doing summersaults and it took me 10 mintues to get out of the spin! My dad could not stop laughing--kind of like you, actually."

Ducky grinned at a howling Cassandra. She didn't really think her story about the time her dad had taught her that speed trick was quite that hilarious, but from what she'd observed so far, Seer seemed to think that everything was funny. And that was a rather endearing trait for the tiny, gypsy-like woman. At any rate, the tale had killed the walk to the briefing room.

The Novas filed in, but as Hobbs made to close the door a woman in an OSI uniform firmly pushed it back open and stalked into the room. She nodded fractionally in Crone's direction as the squad stared at her, confused.

"Lieutenant Yates, my apologies, but we need to steal Lieutenant Dory." Without waiting for an answer from Crone, she transefered her unreadable, yet somehow chilling gaze to Seer. "Follow me."

A cold trickle of fear settled in the bottom of Cassie's stomach. *What the hell--? Oh, right, that damn transmission.* Her innards unclenched fractionally. *Jebus, they're quick.*

Hobbs looked both scared and defiant, so Cassie tried to give her squadmate a reassuring smile as she complied with the order and followed the spook out the door. She wasn't quite sure she succeeded.

The rhythmic echoing tap of their footsteps was the only sound as they wound their way through a part of the ship Seer had never seen. Silence had always made her uncomfortable, and the purposeful, subtly predatory movements of the black-clad woman in front of her didn't help much. Seer reached back over her shoulder and wound her loose, damp, sweaty curls into a rope in the hopes of her hair looking respectable, if not anywhere near regulation. This was not likely to be pleasant.

Ah, well, all I can do is tell the truth and hope they buy it. Preferably right away. As in before I get a crash course in OSI interrogation techniques.

Suddenly her guide--or guard, pick one--stopped in front of a door and punched in an access code so quickly that, even if she had been in a position to see her hand, Seer wouldn't have been able to follow it. *Which was entirely her intent, I'm sure. I bet they're fully aware of my ol' photographic memory.* The door whooshed aside and the OSI-er gestured for the Nova to proceed her into the room.

As the door slid shut behind them, Cassandra thought back fondly on the days when "OSI" meant "Office of Student Involvement."

The woman seated at the lone console in the room stared at her for a few seconds with an appraising look on her face. Seer was suddenly painfully aware of still being in her protective flak-jacket. Finally the OSI officer spoke.

"Lieutenant Dory, can you explain to me exactly why your Medusa nearly lost a wing?"

Cassie opened her mouth to answer, then closed it again, feeling very much wrong-footed. *What the--okay, I was expecting this later, from the techs.* "I...hit something, sir?"

"Are you sure 'something' didn't hit you?"

"Um, well, it felt like a good solid debris strike, sir, so I assumed that's what it was."

"What do you mean, 'felt like,' Lieutenant? Didn't you see what you hit?"

"No, sir, I didn't--and the vibrations caused by missile, energy, and debris hits are different and this one registered as debris, sir."

The questioner gave her another stony appraising look. Cassie could hear her guide's boots squeak fractionally behind her. By now the petite Nova was totally confused and didn't bother to conceal that information from her face. *Let them know they're doing a great job of screwing with my mind--I have no pride.*

Eventually, the woman at the console casually reached over and picked up two horribly misshapen bits of black metal off her desk. She held them up.

"What do these look like to you, Lieutenant?"

"Er, very odd paperweights, sir?"

"Funny, Dory, but this isn't the place for wit," the spook smirked. "This is all that remains of your flight recorder."

"It is?!" *Holy sh*t! How'd that happen?!*

"Don't be cute, Dory; I want to know why."

Ah, now we're getting somewhere.

"I haven't the faintest idea, sir. I mean, I snapped my wing--and I doubt the Terrean Navy employs engineers dumb enough to put the flight recorder in such a vulnerable structure, sir."

The guide at Cassie's back snorted as the questioner quirked something resembling a grin. "They don't, Lieutenant. They put them under the cockpit, right next to the fuel cells."

Seer didn't need anyone to tell her that if those little chunks were really all that was left of her flight recorder then she'd come about this close to being blown to steaming bits. She could feel the blood draining from her face. The OSI officer watched, evaluating.

Cassie suddenly understood, and she did her best to keep her now-flaring temper under control.

They DID think she was a traitor.

"Sir, if I'd wanted to destroy that box, it sounds like it would have been a whole lot simpler for me to have just conspired to die in combat, which I assure you I did my best NOT to do. And I had absolutely nothing to do with that transmission, which I relayed to the rest of my squad because I thought it would be the best thing to do. Their boxes should have copies of the transmission, you have the frequency, and if you'd like the frequency and the first part of the Spectre's transmission, I am quite willing to give it to you--verbatim--for your mysterious intelligence needs. *Sir.*"

Her interrogator might as well have been playing a poker game with a million-dollar ante, for all Seer could read her. It was highly unnerving.

"Anything else, Lieutenant?"

Sure, what the hell.

"I'm not my brother, sir."

The OSI agent immediately unfolded from her chair and strode over to stand mere inches from Cassie. The smaller woman forced herself to maintain eye contact out of sheer indignation. After towering over her for a moment, impassive, the OSI officer cocked a smirking eyebrow.

"During all that questioning, Dory, you did not show a single sign of lying. You even maintained a level of facial expression appropriate to the situation; more subdued than usual for you, which means you understood the implications of this interview, but not the blank face so many adopt when they have something to conceal."

She paused, just long enough to give part of Cassie's brain time to decide that she'd moved on to physical intimidation in the hopes of scaring something out of her.

"So the question is, Lieutenant Cassandra Elizabeth Dory, do I believe you?"

Schamann

Mon Apr 11, 2005 6:46 pm

- Do I believe you miss Dory? Isn't that an interesting question?

BANG! BANG! BANG!

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

The sound of live rounds going off snapped and echoed in the firing range. The target drones and targets shields were falling down one by one. BANG! BLAM!BLAM!.

They were both good and proficient in shooting and Banshee knew it. Hobbs was better and now Banshee knew that too. The little pilot seemed to be attuned to her gun in a way Banshee have only seen a few times, each time they were highly trained snipers acting like that. Ursula was already leading by five points. Banshee observed her focused eyes and facial features set at the moment as if carved in stone, as if Veneberg's whole body paused for the moment.

BANG!

The bullet hit the bull's eye and she eased up and raised her head above the sighting. *damn she's good*

Hobbs spoke in a worried tone:

"They've been keeping her in interrogation for five hours, can't we f....king do something?"

Banshee steadily aimed and exhaled, BLAM! And fired. The shot was a niner.

"Can we Hobbs?" Banshee looked at her quizzically "Can we? We are here to fly and kill, they are here to ask questions, simple as that, what would you expect us to do about?"

"This..." Hobbs momentarily put the rifle back to her arm, and BANG! BANG! BANG! - fired three single shots, one by one, almost without aiming. Almost.

"...is what happens to those f....king bitches if they cause Cassie any harm"

The target shield approached on it's rail to show the hit marks. There were three precise hits, one in each eye, the last one straight in the forehead. Banshee just gripped her own rifle harder and aimed carefully. BLAM! This time it was straight ten.

"You know..." Banshee commented as Veneberg aimed for her next shot "You don't have to show off and make impressions – Crone is not around". BANG!

The shot didn't even hit the right target at all. Ursula raised her head, face red as the Coca Cola advertisement billboard.

"OK Chrissie, you won. The cash is yours. I think you have made your point about the choice of weapons. I'll better go."

"Now once again lieutenant. Where did you first time hear about that mysterious friend of lieutenant Carter?"

Cass was hungry, scared and tired as hell. She barely could concentrate enough to remember her own last name and she had an impression that the OSI officer questioning her has something wrong with her shot-time memory, as she kept asking almost identical questions over and over again.

"I already told you everything I know. If you think I'm a traitor because of my brother, go on and arrest me, this can't be worse than this"

The other OSI, rank of lieutenant, with her name tag saying "Kovacs", who was up until now just sitting and watching her younger subordinate leading the interrogation, decided to step in.

"No lieutenant Dory, we won't arrest you." she looked deep into Cassie's eyes with her own, steel-blue and ice-cold. "Do I think you're a traitor – I doubt that. Do I think you're involved into something dirty – possibly. Do I think you're hiding something – this I am sure of. "

Seer moved nervously on her chair. Lieutenant Kovacs continued.

"But I will find out what it is, Dory and unless I find that absolutely harmless, you will end up in big trouble. You find the bodies of the murdered victims, whom we do not know how and why they died. There are nothing but mysteries about your squadmate's death. There is some ghost who communicated with her before, and there is some ghost who communicates you now. We know the content of this communication, but due to 'unfortunate' loss of your flight recorder we do not know where it came from. And I would not bet my money on the Spectre about this, mind you."

This had Cassandra truly and utterly surprised. She must have looked very stupid, for the blonde OSI spoke again.

"Just because I doubt you are the traitor does not mean I doubt there is one somewhere. Do you know how mythical Apollo related to Cassandra, more or less?"

Dory answered in awkward tone: "Yes, but what...?"

"You might get curious how Stella Maris related to Nefertiti, lieutenant. This could turn out quite interesting. You will inform us about anything even remotely suspicious, should you encounter anything. Thank you, you are now dismissed."

Tiefflieger

Wed Apr 13, 2005 12:34 pm

Anatolja raised several puzzled looks from the other techs in the office when she hit the desk with her head repeatedly, wailing in a display of dramatically exaggerated despair.

"Great maker, what did she do now!?"

She took another look at the message to make sure she hadn't read it wrong:

FYI- Kate just got hauled off by OSI.

- Tibbs

Now if I was OSI, what the hell would I want from someone like Calamity? Sure, she does cause a lot of destruction, but that doesn't make her a traitor, does it? Wait a second, something isn't right here! Could they really be investigating her? No way, not Ross! But then, could there be a better cover? Let's see what I can find out...

Half an hour later Anatolja got the answer from OSI. She had filed an official request to know what charges were held against her subordinate. The answer was typical OSI: Short, straight to the point but yet absolutely pointless at the same time: "This is none of your concern."

She also took a look at Kate's personal file.

So her dad invented most of the sensors the Navy uses in her fighters today. That would be what got her the level 5 security clearance. And she was drafted. Interesting.

Kate meanwhile was waiting on the deserted corridor just outside the mysterious office, trying to fight the boredom by counting the rivets in the opposite wall plating. After a few minutes she remembered it would probably be a good idea to report to Mirunova, but found out it was impossible to establish a wireless connection with her tablet pc.

Sure, they would block wireless transmissions from the OSI office.

She tried it again a few paces down the corridor - with the same result - but didn't dare going too far away.

With my luck they'll come looking for me at the same moment I go around the corner and think I'll try to sneak away.

So she just waited. For five hours. By the time the door opened and released a visibly whacked Lt. Dory she knew the exact number of rivets that kept each metal segment of the corridor attached to the next (128 mostly, but some segments have one or two rivets more; hole spacing tolerances must be pretty high here). Shortly after Dory the two OSI officers also left, telling her to return to her station.

About time! I wonder if they even remembered I was still waiting out there...

When Kate returned to the flight deck (after a short detour to the bathroom - eventually, all that coffee has to get out again...), the shift had already ended. The light was dimmed and it was almost perfectly silent. Only a few robots were still busy cleaning up oil puddles. Yawning, Kate made her way through the rows of dark shapes of fighters and service equipment. She wasn't supposed to be here after shift end, but she liked the flight deck like this, all tranquil, no one there to bother her. She couldn't avoid running into some crates, though, interrupting the quietness with an unpleasant clatter and muttered swear word. Finally she reached the two Sirens she had been working on. With a sigh she registered that the test had been aborted and the equipment disconnected. Probably by Majewska, who had riveted several patches on the scarred hull plating of the fighters.

"Private Ross!"

Startled, Kate spun around on somebody calling her name. It was PO3 Mirunova who was sitting in the shadow of the neighbouring Siren on the empty plastic shell of a crate which usually held missiles (*So Graft has already rearmed them...*). Mirunova sat there motionless, her legs crossed, the hands resting on the rim of the crate, fixating her with her strange violet eyes. When she started to speak, her voice was very low and calm. Kate had never seen the short tempered Petty Officer like this. It was almost creepy.

"Leaving your work, two fighters powered up, in the middle of a running test. Removing parts from a fighter without making a log entry - from a fighter that is not cleared for service. Disappearing without telling anybody for five hours. Not responding to any calls.

"We are on a combat mission here. Do you even realize you could be court-martialled for this?"

She made a pause to let her words sink in. When Kate's face had lost all her colour she knew they had.

"You're lucky though that Tibbs saw you with that OSI. If she hadn't I would have had security search the ship for you. What was this all about anyway?"

Kate gulped.

"OSI wanted me to..."

Oh shit, wait a second! Don't say anything wrong now! What exactly did she say?

"I was asked to consult on a technical matter."

"As I thought."

That answer came much too fast in Kate's opinion. As if Mirunova had expected some foul excuse like this.

Anatolja carefully watched the confused private.

You're either the cleverest actor I've ever seen or I've got you exactly where I want you to be! Only one way to find out...

"Tell me Private, what do you know about this..."

She took a data pad from one of the numerous pockets of her jumpsuit and handed it to Kate.

The data pad showed a log entry. A log entry for a material request for one Aries MK II tar-com update package. No, not 'a', but *the mysterious* update, which had let to some excitement earlier today.

The request was signed by Mirunova's digital signature, the reception of the parts was signed by Lt. Freeman. Whom both claimed not to know anything about it.

"Oh shit!"

"Exactly." *Gotcha!*

Charon

Sun Apr 17, 2005 7:48 pm

Rhiannon lay back on her rack, her right arm draped over her eyes while she relaxed, the towel that she had not yet bothered to change out of draped over her slowly-breathing form.

My firrrst command she thought to herself. With a wry smile, she leaned herself forwards, using nothing but now-relaxed stomach muscles to pull herself up. *Well, it could ha' been muckle werrrse...*

Shaking her head and sending droplets of water flying from her rusty hair, she stood up and headed to her wall-locker, retrieving a set of skivvies from it and putting them on.

The door to their squad-bay banged open and in stormed Cassie, a furious glare on her face. As she drew nearer to her rack, next to Rhiannon's, the Scot could see that there were tears in her eyes, as well. Quickly pulling on her fatigue trousers, Rhiannon draped the towel around her neck and padded over to where Cassie was throwing off the various accoutrements of her flight uniform. The armored vest that they all hated made a particularly satisfying THUMP in the rear of her locker.

Rhiannon tentatively spoke up. "Oi, lass. Whas' th' mattah?"

Cassie gave a small shriek, jumped, and turned to face Rhiannon. "Jesus, girl! Don't **DO** that!"

Rhiannon held up her hands in front of her and gave a small nervous smile. She could feel a few drops of sweat beading on her face. "Och, lass. Dinnae fash yese'f. Oi'm sorry..."

Cassie sat back on her rack, chuckling slightly, the tears leaving her eyes. "No, hon, it's okay. I should have seen you there." She took a deep breath, then reached for her shower bag. "As for 'whas' th' mattah'," she gave a fairly good imitation of the Glasweigan's brogue that made Rhi's eyebrows raise, "I've just spent the last hour and change locked in a room with the ship's Gestapo, trying to tell them a truth that they don't want to hear, and it's put me just SLIGHTLY ON EDGE!"

These last few words were punctuated with savage kicks to her wall-locker, and only stopped when Rhi reached out alarmedly and grabbed at Cassie's leg. "Oi, oi! Calm yese'f, lass. What don' they wanna hear?"

Cassie went on to explain everything that had transpired since Rhiannon had departed following being introduced to the Nova's new ground crew. By the end of it, Rhiannon was shaking her head amazedly. "Thas' jest bizarre," she commented.

Cassie snorted. "Tell me about it," she chuckled wryly.

"Snot wha' I meant," Rhiannon said, shaking her head.

"Hmm?" Cassie cocked an eyebrow questioningly.

"They had ye in therrre all tha' time, an' ne'er thought tae pull out th' fuzzy handcoofs an' th' leather..." That was all Rhiannon had time to say before Cassie attempted to shove her pillow down

Rhiannon's throat.

JFalcon

Mon Apr 18, 2005 6:15 am

Any fatigue Kate felt was swept aside by the wave of returning fear brought by the petty officer's abrupt reminder of earlier events. And now here was Sparks' signature showing that she received the mystery parts. No good reason. No good reason at all why the LT should have denied knowledge of this matter.

Unless she really didn't know. Why else would she have asked me to search the logs? But, no... That conversation I heard...

Mirunova's initial sense of triumph faded slightly. In the low light, it looked like fear--not guilt or discovery--on the young tech's face. Then again, she often looked like that.

It's still not the reaction of someone who's innocent. She knows something about this. Keep pushing her, girl.

"You have a guilty face, private. Something you'd like to share?"

Kate's face shifted.

Confusion. Now?

Anatolja pushed doubt aside and continued on. "Covert hardware modifications, hacked logs, an OSI investigation-- all centered around *you*. Doesn't look too good to me, private. Not at all."

Kate's mind spun trying to keep up with what she was hearing.

She's accusing me? Why? OSI wasn't interested in me! I'm the one who found and pointed this all out to begin with! She's crazy. She's...

...blaming me.

Setting me up.

Cover up.

The fear was back; Anatolja could see it easily. Kate began slowly backing away.

Trapped. I wouldn't have reacted if I didn't know anything. Now I look guilty. Three officers' word against my crazy story. No proof I can give. No one will believe me. It's...

It's not fair! I never wanted to be here and now this! I... !

The retreating Kate backed into one of the nearby ammo crates. Her braced knee gave out and she half-slid, half-fell into a seated position with her back against the crate and her head buried in her arms resting on her raised good knee.

"I give up," came a small voice from the slumped private. "Go ahead and pin it on me. Y'all win. I don't %&\$^ing care any more!" She was now sobbing. "I never wanted to be here!"

Now it was Mirunova's turn to be confused.

What the hell is she talking about? "Us" accuse her? She thinks I'm part of what's going on?! This is getting out of hand.

"Whoa, whoa. OK, look... um... Just calm down, Kate. What's going on? What did OSI want?"

Anatolja kneeled in front of the crying private.

"I don't know...! They were asking questions... strange questions... about the fighter and flight recorder..."

Opps...

"Then what's with this log and the update? Why did you..."

"I didn't do anything to the fighter!" Another wave of tears interrupted. "Why would I have even brought it up in the first place?"

Moving faster than Anatolja thought she could, Kate suddenly scrambled to her feet and ran off.

"Get away from me!"

A thump echoed through the repair bay as the private encountered some obstacle in the dark during her flight from the hanger.

"Well, \$&*%."

Mirunova now stood alone in the empty expanse unsure of what all had just happened, but with the distinct feeling that she had just made a mistake.

Schamann

Mon Apr 18, 2005 3:22 pm

It was quiet and dark on the flight deck, and Mirunova decided to leave, maybe to find Kate and try to determine what had happened, maybe to simply get some rest. She was just going to head to the lift, when she noticed a faintest glimpse of light above. It disappeared momentarily, but she managed to spot the figure crouched on the gallery above the deck.

"Who is it?! Identify yourself!" she shouted. This did not look good at all. The figure raised, and responded with quiet, strangely soft voice.

"Jason, ma'am, ship's bot"

"What were you doing here?"

"Sitting, watching ...private Ross. I followed her for some time, after I sensed her emotional disturbance passing her by on a corridor. Women often tend to look for artificial companions in such situations, so I decided to stay at hand in case I was needed."

"Why hiding yourself?"

"I am programmed to try not to interrupt humans when they seem to be busy with themselves."

"Robot, define the reason behind your recent action of hiding on a gallery while I talked with Ross!" Mirunova had enough of the bot's talking around the subject. The machine gave her the look of anger, but responded.

"I was intrigued by private Ross crying, and could not help watching in hope of collecting the data."

"Explain. More details" This was something that caught Mirunova by surprise. What's this bot after?

Jason raised his left eyebrow and smiled ironically. Being caught off-guard a moment before, right now he seemed as cool as usual.

"I can't help my programming, petty officer. I can't help being interested and even fascinated with a woman crying, yet it's one thing I can't emulate myself, can't share with the human female. I am unable to cry myself. I am hardwired to respond to the reaction that I can't test on myself and thus don't understand. I seek to collect as much test data as I can find."

"And that should explain why you are here?" Mirunova was still unconvinced. She knew Jason can't lie when asked directly, but somehow she felt there was something else to that whole situation.

"Private Ross cries a lot, ma'am, especially of recently." Jason smirked sarcastically again "I have to say that technical crew does a grand job providing me with test data of private Ross, you tease her so much that I often wonder what she had done to deserve this, save for being twice as smart as the rest of the crew put together off course"

"What are you implying, robot?" This was too much and Mirunova was ready to take steps more drastic than talking. That machine was clearly out of line.

"I am not implying, ma'am, I am stating what I see. Technical crew teases and hurts private Ross, treating her like a collective scapegoat and dirtbag to dump every bad mood on, making her feel low, unappreciated and scared. This undermines her self-confidence and increases her natural clumsiness even more."

Petty officer was taken aback, a robot telling her how to treat people. However, she knew well enough, that this machine was equipped with sensors enabling it to detect and interpret human emotions. A sudden thought stroke her, that this bot seems to understand much more than it's supposed to.

"Leave Jason. Now"

Robot bowed slightly, still wearing that sarcastic smile of his that made some women feel excited.

"Off course ma'am". He got up, jumped over the rail and the whole floor down to the flightdeck

level, and then walked away, whistling something that resembled some lovesong.

Apparently, it was the night for Petty Officer Mirunova to be surprised in more than one way at a time. She was about to leave, when she noticed traces on the vertical rail-supporting pipe. The traces of a human shaped hand squeezing the pipe with such an enormous force, that the metal bended.

 "No lieutenant, I won't tell OSI to release your pilot. She's been officially summoned and OSI releases her when they see it fit, is that clear?" Mallory was not in particularly good mood, but, on the other hand, she never acted particularly friendly either. "Now there is one more matter I want you to attend, lieutenant, if you please."

"Off course ma'am" Crone answered quickly"

Mallory raised her brows in a manner, that was close to make Crone's face red. She obviously was not actually curious whether or not Crone feels like dealing with what CAG had for her.

"I am pleased to inform you, that Tactical praises very high the skill and reliability of second lieutenant Veneberg, who was protecting the only torpedo that actually managed to hit the target." Mallory flipped through some papers and tapped something on her keyboard.

"Whether lieutenant Veneberg should be presented to any commendation or even medal for this, depends entirely on your opinion, lieutenant. I am going to play this by the book and leave the initiative in your hands where the regulations place it." She waved at Crone to approach and handed her the datachip, supposedly with relevant information.

"Also, lieutenant – OSI has come up with the proposal of a transfer for lieutenant Veneberg. To OSI branch Special Tactical Fighter Unit, blackops to you and me."

"Novas are special forces ma'am." Crone responded hesitantly.

"Novas are special designation unit of the Navy, lieutenant. Here we are talking top priority missions, top equipment, top skills – aces of aces. I understand your reluctance to give away your pilot, but the offer has been officially made and you officially deal with it." Mallory handed the single sheet of paper to Yates and continued. "One joins those forces on exclusively voluntary bases. If Veneberg decides to apply, it is up to you and subsequently to me, whether or not let her go. I follow the policy of not mingling with inner-squadron business unless necessary. You decide on your own course of action, and choose between the strength of your squadron and a fair chance for individual pilot for a giant step in her career. Dismissed"

Maverick	Tue Apr 19, 2005 4:37 am
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Giving Rhiannon one last smack with the pillow, Cassie stood up to head to the shower when she spotted a figure in the doorway.

"Jesus!" She yelped startled. "Is *everyone* here to sneak up on me today?"

"Who said I was sneaking up?" Kat said slyly, walking into the squad-bay looking worn to hell. "I was just enjoying the view."

Kat swatted the flying pillow away and giggled on her way to her locker. Cassie looked at Kat again and paled. *Oh crap....Did the OSI send her to spy on me now? Or am I just getting paranoid?* Claymore shot her an appraising look, watching Cass control her OSI induced anger.

Cassie stalked over to the showers while Kat got ready to go clean up herself.

"So whas' oor wee OSI lass up ta?" The scot asked over her shoulder. Kat sighed heavily and threw her shirt into the locker.

"The big guys upstairs aren't telling me anything really. Pretty much everything I know...you know. Anything I miss when I got hauled to my debrief?"

"We got oor owhn tech sqaed."

"No shittin?" Kat mumbled, rummaging through her locker; looking for something.

"Eh?"

"You're kidding right?" Kat said a little clearer, turning to face Rhiannon.

"Nay. Our oon techies. Lemme think....top greasemonkeh was...Mirunovae? Soomethin like tha'. Then uh...Sorensen....Tibbs...MacGuire, tha othar scot might I add. Graft, Maynard, Majewska, and uh....Ross I think..." Rhiannon rattled off after thinking about it for a while.

"Oi! We ahlso got perrsonal planes." Rhiannon chuckled, thinking back.

Kat laughed. "Bet the new girl'll be happy 'bout that."

"She brighten'd oop like'ae streetlaight."

Kat gave a final laugh and headed over to the showers after giving Claymore a goodbye wave.
What am I gonna do? Well...more than that...where do my loyalties lie?

Something about what Rhiannon said stuck out in her mind.

"Ross...where've I heard that name before...meh...It'll come to me eventually."

Kat headed into the showers, hopping Cassie wouldn't be angry at her.

Vindicare	Tue Apr 19, 2005 6:48 pm
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Banshee finished the remaining ammo for both weapons, deciding that she could use the practice. She also mulled over what had just transpired. She had achieved her objective and obtained an answer to an indirect question, but also offended the little pilot in the process. While not so much in the business of making amends, she certainly didnt want to get into the business of making **enemies**. Stowing the weapons, and picking up Hobb's card, which she had neglected to retrieve before fleeing, Chrissie made her way out of the firing range.

As the door hissed shut, Chrissie could hear something. Something approaching. At a reasonably high speed. Uneven paces. *A bot? why would a bot be running?*

The echo's in the now empty hallway made it impossible to determine direction, but having a portion of adrenaline left over from her recent activities, Banshee's mind raced and she decided to try to intercept the bot, which was of course contravening safety regulations. She struck up a high-impact CQ gaurd stance and waited as the uneven footsteps rounded the darkened corner.

CRASH

Something hit her in the back and Banshee toppled forward *Stupid Doppler Effect*

She quickly spun herself over to find herself looking at a pair of tear-laden eyes that were scanning the area around, presumably for glasses to reattach.

"...Sorry...i didnt see..." came a mumbled attempt at speech inbetween sniffs.

"Not to worry, i actually planned for you to run into me, though i expected you to be a bot, your footsteps were very erratic."

"I've got a bit of a limp still from my leg..."

"Wait...its...Ross isnt it? Calamity Kate, living the ideal i see" Banshee let out a small chuckle as they stood up, and Kate began moving past her. She held up an arm "Whatever is the matter now? surely you arent still fretting about earlier are you?"

She recieved a quizzical look

"Banshee, Dark Nova Squadron, Christine Auten. I realise you were a little distracted earlier and may not have taken in everyone's faces, though unfortunately i think i remember yours for the wrong reasons".

"Oh...hehe...yeah i was kinda distracted by my coffee..." she seemed to brighten for a second, then resumed her downcast look "No, that happens a lot, hence my callsign. This is a lot worse..." a pause, a sniff "...i have to go, they're after me".

Banshee shifted from bemused to downright befuddled "Who? the rest of the tech crew?"

"I don't know! the PO definetly"

"Well would you care to explain? perhaps i or a member of my squad can be of assistance, you are assigned to us now, after all". Banshee motioned to the door of the weapons range...

Vexus	Wed Apr 20, 2005 10:52 am
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Ashley was gazing out an observation window as Aurora rounded the nearby corner in the corridor. The squad leader knew this place well, as she had been here recently to see four torpedoes race off to meet their fate, and had prayed that her squad-mates did not meet theirs. Thank heavens for big miracles.

"Admiring the view?" Aurora asked as she came up to stand beside the redhead. Aurora was still in her dress uniform, but it no longer looked very neat and tidy. The front flap on the vest was halfway undone and there were scuff marks from the flight deck. All in all, its look was a testament to the kind of day it had been. From the look of Ashley, Aurora guessed that she hadn't found the time nor the desire to change either. She no longer had her flight suit on, but still wore the uniform she had had on before the day's mission began.

"Just taking a look at the rebs we rescued," Ashley responded with strong suspicion in her voice.

Aurora leaned forward to see where Ashley was looking and saw the faintly shining hull of the Aruna, still being protected by her few remaining fighters. A small shuttle was heading from the rebel ship to the Morrigan, being escorted by a mix of Charan Sirens and a pair of the Morrigan's own.

"So now the Charans are fighting among themselves?" Ashley said with a scoff. "What's going on in this system?"

"I'm not completely sure," Aurora said quietly, "But these particular rebels at least may not be our enemies anymore."

Ashley gave a small, cynical smile out the window towards the Aruna. "We'll see, I guess. The fewer Charans to fight, the sooner we can go home."

If Ashley had looked at Aurora at that moment, she would have witnessed a shadow of deep sadness and longing come over Aurora's face.

"Yeah... that would be nice...."

With a resigned sigh and a stretch, Ashley turned to face her CO.

"Well the debriefing seemed to go smoothly. The new CAG seemed satisfied with our work, although you wouldn't know it from the stern look she always wore on her face."

Aurora nodded and put on a smile that was not entirely convincing. "I think the scowl comes as standard equipment for a CAG. I'm certain she was actually pleased with everyone's performance out there."

"Are you ok, Boss?" Ashley asked with a concerned look.

"I'm fine," Aurora said lightly, "I'm just worried about Cassie, that's all."

Ashley smiled. "Then you can put your mind at ease, sir. I got off the comm with Claymore just ten minutes ago. Seer's been released from the OSI and no charges have been filed. She's a little shaken up, but Rhiannon says she'll be fine."

"Good to hear," Aurora said sincerely, wondering with frustration if she would have to put up with the thought of losing her squad-mates on a daily basis from now on.

"Wasn't she one of the officers who found the murder victims?" Ashley asked with some hesitation.

"Yep," Aurora said simply, turning to regard the stars once again.

"Poor girl," Ashley said half to herself, "No one so light-hearted should have to see something like that."

"No one should," Aurora replied, "But Seer isn't as light-hearted as she may first appear. She's just better at hiding it than the rest of us."

Aurora then straightened up and turned back to her fellow pilot. "What about you? Shouldn't you be getting ready for bed?"

"I'm not sure how well I can sleep after a day like today," Ashley said with a shake of her head. "I can still feel the adrenaline."

"It gets better with time... a little bit better," Aurora said, then put a reassuring hand on Ashley's shoulder.

"Go back to quarters, take a shower, and get some rest. Tell Claymore I'll be down shortly." Ashley

nodded with a small smile and left the squad leader to be alone at the window. Aurora took one last, long look at the Aruna off in the distance below them, her eyes becoming two discs of blue steel. She would keep her rifle charged tonight. New-found allies or not, they were still colis and apt to betray them just as easily as they had betrayed the Alliance before.

And if *any* of them tried anything sneaky or deceptive, Aurora would see to it that they joined the rest of the traitors she had personally sent to Hell.

Now in a very somber mood, Aurora headed for the Novas' quarters, both hoping and dreading to see Ursula again... and break the good news to her....

Vexus

Mon Apr 25, 2005 12:03 pm

As she emerged from the shower room, Aurora's appearance was shockingly casual compared to her usual sleeping attire, but the squad leader just couldn't muster up the energy to put on anything else, and the loose clothing felt good after the whole day in her dress uniform. In little else than a pair of gym shorts and a worn "Greyhelms" football jersey her mother had sent her long ago, Aurora scanned the Novas' quarters to see who had made it back so far.

When she had first arrived, she had made it a point to check in with Rhiannon and Cassie; the former to get a quick debriefing on the squad's performance and the latter to make sure she had made it through the OSI interrogation intact. After a quick hello to Kat and Ashley, she had then made a bee-line to the shower room. Now Rhiannon seemed to be asleep, the sheets over her rising and falling slowly, and occasionally punctuated by bouts of soft snoring. Aurora was not surprised that she was the first to doze off. The burden of command was called a burden for a very good reason.

Kat was awake and, surprise of surprises, was tapping away at a computer pad. A small plastic piece in her ear signaled that she was likely listening to music at the same time, a skill Aurora had yet to master. Ashley and Cassie were chatting softly as not to disturb the sleeping Scott. Aurora sat down at her bunk nearby and withdrew her rifle case. Carefully lifting the lid so that her actions would not be seen, she charged the weapon, which gave off a soft whine, then re-stowed the case under her bunk.

"What's in the magic box?" Cassie asked with a look of playful suspicion.

"My life insurance policy," Aurora said without missing a beat. Cassie raised an eyebrow.

"You know, I think that may be the first honest-to-goodness joke I have ever heard you make."

"I wasn't joking," Aurora said evenly.

Cassie rolled her eyes. "Figures."

"Sounded like a plasma weapon to me," Ashley spoke up.

Aurora nodded. "Once a ground-pounder, always a ground-pounder. With that rebel ship parked alongside us, I'll sleep better with my weapon ready to fire."

Cassie did not look convinced. "Having a live plasma core directly under my cot while I slept would more *decrease* my sense of safety than increase it. Just make sure that if the colis storm our quarters you wipe the sleep from your eyes before you start firing that thing. Getting vaporized in my own bed is not the way I want to go."

Aurora frowned. She could appreciate that Seer was having a bad evening, but she couldn't let that particular comment slide.

"I have *never* fired at my own comrades, not even by mistake."

Seer didn't seem ready to back down. "With all due respect, *sir*, having live weapons in here just seems like a bad idea."

"Any word on our duties tomorrow, Boss?" Ashley asked, sensing the tension between the other two pilots and trying to change the subject.

"Nothing yet," Aurora said, her gaze lingering on Seer's own for a few more moments before turning to face Ashley. "My guess is we'll take our turn on watch duty over the Aruna or head out on patrol at some point. Either way, our next mission will hopefully be devoid of enemy carriers and defecting rebels."

"Amen to that," came Kat's voice from her bunk. The three pilots turned to look at the OSI officer, who still appeared to be reading her pad. After a moment, she felt their eyes on her and looked over at them with an embarrassed laugh.

"Oh, sorry... heh heh... I have good ears."

"Clearly," Aurora remarked. Seer smiled and chucked a pillow at the pilot.

"The spook is spying even when she's off-duty."

Just then, the door slid open and Ursula wandered in, her posture weary. She muttered a few quiet hello's to Ashley, Cassie, and Kat, but avoided eye-contact with Aurora. As she passed by Aurora's bunk, a sudden urge came to the silver-haired girl to reach out and touch her hand, but her mind hesitated and the opportunity passed. As Ursula went into the shower room, Aurora caught what was almost a disgusted look from Cassie, and wondered if she was still that upset about the rifle. It seemed like such a trivial issue to the squad leader, and she couldn't figure out why Cassie would be so bothered by it.

Starring down at her feet, Aurora mulled over her words as she heard the water running in the shower room. She went over different scenarios, predicting Ursula's responses and her own replies. She got so distracted that Ursula was in her night clothes and almost to her cot when Aurora snapped out of it and stood up quickly, knowing that her hesitation could get the better of her again.

"Hobbs, I... uh... I have some good news for you from the top brass." Ursula turned, a look of cautious hope on her face.

"Really?"

"Yeah.... *ahem* Your protection of the scoring torpedo has impressed them. They're considering awarding you a medal for it, and I'm putting in a recommendation on your behalf."

"A medal for me?" Ursula said hesitantly, clearly surprised. From Cassie's bunk, Ashley gave a thumbs-up of approval, and Cassie herself leapt up and embraced the dumbfounded pilot.

"Congrats, girl! Your talent is finally being recognized."

"Just think," Aurora continued, "You came in with a negative personnel file, and a couple weeks ago they were ready to ship you off as a failure. Now, you're a hero to the Morrigan."

Ursula uttered a laugh that was a mix of joy and relief. "I don't believe it. I mean, I just did what I could."

"So modest," Cassie said, playfully messing up Ursula's hair. "You're always so hesitant to speak up for yourself, even when you've got something important to say." Cassie gave Aurora a meaningful look.

"Like someone else I know."

Aurora gave Cassie a wary and slightly confused look. Cassie blew away one of the curls that had fallen in front of her face with frustration and spoke again.

"Crone, sir, it looks like you have more to say. Is there any *other* good news you would like to share?"

Aurora's expression fell, but she breathed a steadying sigh and nodded.

"Ursula... you have also been asked to consider transferring to covert ops."

Cassie seemed even more shocked than Ursula.

"Alright, Hobbs, way to go!" Kat exclaimed, this time actually turning around to regard the pilot.

"I'm really not a big fan of the OSI," Aurora went on, "But I think you should give it serious consideration in regards to your career." Aurora gave a casual laugh that seemed to die even as it left her mouth. "If nothing else, you could teach those spooks how to shoot straight."

The whole situation now seemed to come to light for Ursula, and the joy of the possible medal seemed to melt away from her face.

"You want me to take the transfer, sir?"

Aurora felt like she was about to throw-up. "No... I mean, maybe... no I mean, maybe you should... I mean, you should consider it. It could be for the best... I mean for you, not for us. Although we'd be okay... but we'd miss you... but of course we would understand...."

Aurora decided to quit before her ramblings became even more incoherent, and went over to the sink, muttering about needing to brush her teeth. Ashley wore a confused look that said she had never seen a CO stutter so much in front of a subordinate. Kat met her gaze and shrugged. Ursula stood there for a moment, then excused herself and stepped outside, saying she just needed some air.

Cassie, looking like a general who had lost on the eve of victory, calmly grabbed a pillow and held it to the wall beside her cot. She then proceeded to bang her head against it while hissing between clenched teeth.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid...."

"What's wrong?" Ashley asked with concern. Cassie suddenly stopped, her posture signaling that she had come to a decision.

"It's all so clear now. I'm going to kill 'em. Both of them. Simple as that."

Ashley thought now was not the time to ask her to clarify that statement, and decided to just go to bed. This squadron was much stranger than her last assignment.

JFalcon

Tue Apr 26, 2005 5:25 am

Kate stared at the tall pilot. In her experience, encounters with officers were never pleasant experiences.

They really don't want your opinion, no matter what they say.

It was probably the best piece of advice she had gotten during basic training.

Kate nodded.

Did I just do that?

She wasn't sure why, but she followed Christine through the door. Maybe it was because Nova Squadron wasn't part of the unknown plots. Maybe it was just her giving into the stress of the day. *I blew up a fighter, twisted my leg, uncovered what might be sabotage, overheard a conspiracy, embarrassed myself in front of eight superiors, was questioned by OSI, and accused of God only knows what by my new CO. This day just can not get any worse.*

Or maybe it was just time for a change. So far she wasn't getting anywhere with what she had been doing.

The door opened into a large room with a smell Kate couldn't place. It took Kate a moment to recognize it as a firing range.

Must be gunpowder.

"So, what is on your mind, private? Something about someone after you?"

Kate realized with a sinking feeling that there was nothing she could say that would make sense or not lead to trouble.

Petty Officer Mirunova just accused me of treason. ...No.

I think LT Freeman is a traitor and I can't prove it, but please believe me anyway, OK? ...Yeah, right.

The navy has ruined my life and I want to go home. ...No, I prefer not being charged with sedition. I'm lonely, scared, nobody loves me, and I want a hug. ...I don't think so.

"I... I don't know what's going on. Nothing's right. Why..."

Why did the PO seem to change her mind? What did she want? What OSI was after? Did I tell her what she was looking for? Is she really with Sparks? Did I scare her off? Why me? Why can't I just serve my time peacefully and get out of here? I can't deal with this on top of everything else.

The small tech looked as confused as Banshee was herself and now seemed to be on the verge of breaking down again.

"Do you shoot much, private? I find that it helps me focus and get my mind off things."

It occurred to Christine that if Kate was indeed as unlucky as her reputation suggested, being in the same room as her with a loaded gun might not be a good idea. However, it might be worth the risk if she started making some sense.

Without waiting for a response, the LT procured a pair of target energy pistols and a few fresh power cells. Kate made no move to take the proffered weapon.

"I... I don't know how to use one of those, ma'am."

"What?"

"Small arms training isn't required for non-combat roles, ma'am." Kate's glance shifted between the gun and Banshee's face.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are in the Navy and do not know how to use a gun?" Banshee was incredulous.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Here, I will teach you. It is not hard. I can not believe..."

"No thank you, ma'am." Kate's tone was respectful, but firm. She held Christine's gaze. "I won't use a gun, ma'am."

There was a long pause as what the private had just said--and perhaps didn't say--sunk in.

"Oh."

Another uncomfortable silence followed as Banshee returned the unused weapons to the locker. Kate suspected she had either insulted the LT and/or committed a *faux pas*.

"Thank you for the offer, ma'am, but I changed my mind. There really isn't anything you can do to help after all."

Kate was already at the door, but stopped though did not look back. "Are you always so... accepting, ma'am?"

"Pardon?"

"Of others, me, the ground crew. I'm just wondering if you shouldn't be."

"What do you mean?" The private wasn't making sense again.

"How did that old saying go? 'Never look a gift horse in the mouth'? Well, maybe you should. Gifts are given for a reason. I'd trust your CO, if I were you, but maybe not mine." And with that odd parting statement Kate slipped out the door.

Vindicare	Tue Apr 26, 2005 5:36 pm
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Hmm...what does she mean? Maybe that i should start checking my own pre-flight from now on? Or that i should be afraid of people?

Banshee mulled over emptying the pistol powerpacks, but decided her arm had probably had enough for the moment, and headed out the door into the thoroughly empty corridor.

She let out a small sigh, and said to herself something from deep within her family's doctrine "Theres always a pacifist somewhere in a war. More often than not, they lose." *Each unto her own. Hopefully she wont take it as a insult and put tacks in the cockpit for me*

Christine began the walk back to quaters, thinking to herself along the route about the muddle that was PFC Ross, and what she had said.

"I'd trust your CO, if I were you, but maybe not mine". Of course i trust the Novas, they're my comrades. Is she suggesting her CO is a threat to me? To us?

This idea troubled her a little, and she resolved to approach Crone about the conversation. Death and physical threat held little sway with her, but a tech could do things to a fighter that could endanger others.

Her pace quickened in the after-lights-out hall.

Tiefflieger	Wed Apr 27, 2005 7:18 pm
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"You really shouldn't drink that much."

Tibbs was guiding Anatolja on the way to the quarters, helping her to keep balance as she staggered along. If Anatolja would still have been able to think clearly she would have appreciated that, because on her own she would have needed the whole width of the corridor. But in her current state, she was only annoyed being 'hugged' by the older woman.

"You know, you sound like mothrr nov. Are you my mothrr? So shut the %*\$& up! An' let go off me!"

Like always when being drunk, her Russian accent came through again. With some effort she managed to fight off Tibbs hands and promptly fell flat on the floor.

"Look at yourself, you're completely drunk! You just can't let yourself go like this!"

"Not drunk! 'S lonk 's I can lay on floor vissout havink to hold on to somsink, not drunk!"

Her attempts to get back on her feet failed miserably and she crawled on a few paces on hands and knees until Tibbs finally helped her up again, sighing.

"Girl, you're chief of Dark Nova Squad's tech crew now. How about showing some responsibility!?"

"Блядь! Sinss when do I hav somsink like sense of reshpons... responsh... libity...?"

After she had left the flight deck Anatolja had wandered through the ship some time, deep in thoughts, and without knowing she had suddenly found herself in the bar. Of course her steps would take her there, her most favourite place on this damn ship. Well, maybe second favourite, after the engines shop. But the visits to the bar weren't as much fun as they used to be lately, especially not today.

Damn you, sense of responsibility! And damn you too, bad conscience!

She almost had managed to get rid of the bad conscience for now, but there was still that gnawing thought left at the back of her head that told her it would be back in the morning. Then, before she could finish with this thought, too, Tibbs had taken her bottle away and dragged her out of the bar.

"You know, I not undrrstand why Sparks not give command to you?"

"Heh, you could ask her that."

"Nyet, don't want to talk to Sparks. Sparks bad person. Like Ross. Ross too bad person. But ssey wont get me cause I'm clever! Got it all figured out!"

"You really should give Kate a break. She isn't that bad, you know?"

"Not bad? But Sparks bad. Sparks eeevil!"

"Oh my, there she goes. Looks like it's really time I get you into your bunk."

Tibbs didn't listen any more to Anatoljas incoherent bubble about the conspiracy of the evil sexbots who would attempt a mutiny with the goal to instate PFC Ross as the new captain...

Vexus

May 01, 2005 2:17 pm

Aurora's card playing skills were no better than before. Among the White Tigers she had lost more games than anyone else. Ash said it was because she thought too much. Swift insisted that she was a lousy bluffer. Junker, on the other hand, she always said...

"You always seem to give yourself a bad hand, no matter whose dealing."

"I don't like these games of chance," Aurora said as she put down two cards and drew two more from the deck in the center of the table. "I prefer strategy games. Those are more predictable."

Beyond the table was nothing. At least, one could call it "nothing". How does one describe the expanse of memories that swell up to the surface in secret, so long forgotten except in the depths of the mind? More accurately, it was a vast amount of something, but the something had no meaningful form. To try and "see" it would be like trying to see a rose floating in a sea of blood. To "hear" it was more clear, but no more enlightening. A murmur of a thousand voices spanning the spectrum of human emotion. It was a chorus that sang without tune, harmony, discord, or passion. Just a steady rhythm beating like the pulse of the Universe. The combined echoes of countless decisions made and not made.

The table itself was ordinary enough, a circle covered in green velvet just like the one Aurora had always played on within many barracks and onboard many transports. It had belonged to Ash, then to Swift, and then to Aurora if she had wanted it. And she had wanted it. But when the time came for the next assignment, she had left it behind to rot away in a damp forest far from home. She had lost it on purpose, so how appropriate it was that the table was now playing host to the lost themselves.

Junker was just to Aurora's right, the familiar sly grin still on her half-burned face. To her right was the redheaded man, his skin ravaged by the Plague but his expression still gentle and kind. Next was Jessica, a hole in her chest where her medallion once rested, her fingers drumming the table with casual impatience. Last was the one on Aurora's left, the one whom she dare not look at.

"Come on, Crone, it's your deal," Jessica said with frustration. Aurora looked down to see herself holding the deck now. Slowly, she began to shuffle the cards.

"Strategy will only get you so far, Crone," said Junker with a wave of her hand. "Sooner or later it'll come down to the cards, and then what? Place a bet?"

"Pray?" said the redheaded man.

"Stand?" said Jessica.

"Run?" said the one on the left.

"I... don't know," Aurora muttered, as she began to deal out the cards. The first round of cards were all face-down.

"These ones are your favorites, Crone," the redheaded man said sadly. "You're sure to look at all of them before the next game."

"It's the only way I'll learn how to play better," Aurora insisted.

"No, little one, the cards you don't use you keep anyway, and they tell you to chase shadows. You are playing with us, after all."

Aurora dealt the first face-up card to Junker to reveal an image of a house long abandoned and overrun with strangling vines.

"This isn't the 'full house' I was expecting," Junker said with a laugh. "I think a homecoming is in order."

"Not yet," Aurora replied wearily, "Not until all this is over."

"It will only get worse," Junker said with a shrug. "If the house falls, I think you may be the one who knocks it down. How can you stab with one hand and bandage with the other?"

"It's the only way I know. What else can I do?"

"Deal the cards."

Aurora dealt the next card: an image of a bare-footed man sitting on a green throne in front of a burning sun.

"You are serving his purpose," the redheaded man said as he removed his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt.

"Whose purpose?" Aurora asked, confused.

"A needle cuts deeper than a sword, little one, and no one sees it. Now the injured strangle each other as his children sleep. Help me finish what I started."

"How?" Aurora asked desperately.

"Deal the cards."

Aurora dealt the next card: the emblem of the Crimson Shield.

"You will be tested, and found wanting," Jessica said.

"Never!" Aurora cried.

"Can't you see me? Can't you see the Seer and her own scar? One eye is missing and it will turn on you. A glimpse of paradise will make you stumble, and the tempter will laugh over you."

"It won't happen," Aurora said loudly, but with a hint of doubt.

"You will know my pain."

"Is there another way?"

"Deal the cards."

Aurora dealt the next card: Ursula in tears with a gun in her mouth.

"She's a good shot," said the one on the left.

"Please no," Aurora said quietly, struggling to speak.

"She never misses."

"I'll do anything."

"You were a good shot too. Does she know that? Do any of them know that?"

"I had no choice."

"Of course you did. And you still do. So does she."

"How can I help her?"

"Deal the cards."

Aurora dealt the final card for herself: a old woman hunched over in a chair.

"The Crone," Junker said with a sigh. "That's the worst card in the deck. Looks like you lose again."

As Aurora watched in horror, the old woman on the card turned to look at her, her face withering away with the decay of death. The half-skull half-face stretched and distorted grotesquely as it sang a merry tune.

"Too late for strategy, too late for bets, too late for her, too late for you..."

Aurora had endured the worst wounds of battle without a single sound of pain escaping her lips, but now within the halls of her mind, she unleashed a scream that could make angels weep.

Aurora woke with a start in her bed, upset and disoriented. After a few moments, she calmed herself and checked the clock. She had only been asleep for three hours. Over the next few minutes, she drew comfort from the soft sounds of breathing coming from the other bunks and tried to force away the fragmented memories of her nightmare. In the end, she managed to drift off again, but her hands gently twitched every now and then... as if she were dealing cards....

Schamann

Fri May 06, 2005 5:38 pm

The next morning everybody were bit more quiet, than usual. Novas were off duty until late afternoon, when they were scheduled for a close range Escort patrol near The Morrigan flying path. Closer and closer to The Border, with Aruna being damaged and making it's slow turn around somewhere in the back to join Morrigan in a few days, and last but not least with the wounded Spectre and her possible support somewhere in the area, no amount of recon would seem too much.

Banshee was walking the long corridor, returning from her morning exercise in the shooting range. She thought of the events of the previous evening.

A pair of crewwomen were approaching along the corridor in the opposite direction, talking. A pilot, Morning Stars badge on her flightjacket, and some Petty Officer from the bridge service branch. They both hushed their voices when Banshee approached and they passed her by in rather awkward silence.

Although not a regulations freak, Christine could not help but to notice the small non-regulatory pins both women wore pinned to their chestpockets. They were red and orange and in shape

reminding a flame of a match or a candle.

Auten continued down the corridor mildly amused by the number of strange encounters lately. She made a mental note to tell Crone about the weird stuff private Ross was talking. *What could she mean about not trusting her PO?* The violet-eyed woman looked harsh, but certainly professional.

When she spotted Veneberg talking to Price she was positively surprised with that as well. As she approached, she heard the last line of the conversation. Ashley spoke with quiet, yet determined voice:

"...there are certain things that come with that particular territory, Hobbs, whether you like me or not, that's something you need to know. Leaving people you know behind, flying mission that officially never take place, bombing civilian installations and shooting unarmed vessels, living in the made up world of cloak and dagger, world of control over everything. Regardless of any personal factors you might want to think about that."

Ursula did not say anything and avoided Christine's look. She just shrugged and whispered "please, leave me alone". Undisrupted by any of the comrades, she then just wandered off.

Aurora stood with Sparks on the gallery above the flightdeck, watching the show. Charan commanding and senior officers from Aruna were just heading to their shuttle, after their surrender has been signed and Aruna's been given the escort from Morrigan. Crone was nothing less than pissed off, but Chief seemed to be rather in piece with what's been happening, smiling to her thoughts slightly. Downstairs, the brass shook hands and exchanged smiles, Verulian cruising around like a nice but dreadful watchdog, minding the herd. There were some pilots too, from both sides, some of them deep in conversation with each other. From both Morning Stars and Arrowheads some people could be seen here. Crone spotted one of them pointing with her head to the gallery, in Sparks and Crone's direction, showing something, or someone, to the older looking Charan pilot. The Charan looked up and her gaze met Aurora's. Those eyes were dark and deep, and in them, there was sheer hate. The Charan contested Yates's look for a while and, suddenly, raised her hand to her neck and made a quick gesture with her fingers, as if slitting the throat.

"What is this?" Crone muttered with a hiss in her voice "what is this rebel onboard my ship doing?"

Sparks nudged her gently to let it go and shrugged. "They believe you killed their hero. And now Flame turns out to be one of the good guys, along with the rest of Gretschin's crew. That doesn't look good you know."

Crone was already turning away from the Coli pilot, when she spotted, that the rebel apparently saw something else on the gallery, because her gaze changed and she shook her head like if punched, taking a half step back.

Ursula was standing on the gallery, hands clenched on the railing, unmoving. She regarded the Charan pilot with such hate and almost predatory challenge in her look, that rebel finally turned around and headed to the shuttle. Indeed, lieutenant Veneberg looked scary, despite her rather unimpressive constitution. She looked at the rebel, as if that challenge was private, emotional, almost primitive. *As if she was protecting her nest* a thought stroke Crone suddenly, so much Ursula's roman nose gave her the impression of some bird of prey in her current stance.

After a few seconds, Hobbs released the railing and approached the two officers with a rather serious look on her face.

"Can I talk to you in private Crone?" Sparks raised her eyebrows and hastily added "I surely got some work to do girls, so I shall leave you to your own business." She then retreated downstairs.

"What is it Ursula?" Crone asked with a shadow of a doubt in her voice.

"I don't know what to do, si... Aurora. I don't want to join OSI, or any other squadron. I want to stay...here, with the Novas."

Crone knew there has to be a "but" to that message, and she had that strange feeling of anticipating next few words to hear, but she just regarded her comrade and waited. After a second of uncomfortable silence, Hobbs, continued.

"But I think I'm more attracted by you Aurora, than the Regs say. I believe I've fallen in love with you during the past two weeks, and this affects my performance all the way from here to Sol. I'm

not smart enough to figure out what to do by myself. I need you....I need your help."

JFalcon

Sat May 07, 2005 4:19 am

Morning and consciousness grudgingly arrived both too early and late for Anatolja. The first shift was already well underway by the time she rolled wearily out of bed. No matter, Tibbs would be covering for her. The more pressing issue were the effects of the previous evening which had yet to shuffle off and leave her be. Coffee seemed like a good idea, but also too much effort. Anatolja settled for two glasses of water and a hot shower in the dark.

"I'm going to kill the first person who does an engine test..."

The flightdeck was way too bright, too noisy, and way too chaotic when she finally arrived. *What the \$*&# is going on? Where the hell is Tibbs and the crew?*

Her search of the hanger was interrupted by footsteps in the nearby stairwell.

"Mirunova. How kind of you to join us today." It was Sparks.

Oh, \$#!%

The LT's expression changed from one of exaggerated false pleasantness to one that was clearly not amused.

"My office. Now."

Freeman's "office" was small equipment storage room that had been retrofitted with a window of ballistic polycarbonate the looked out into the hanger. The inside was tightly packed with a small desk, several filing cabinets, and a half dozen screens hanging from the walls and ceiling displaying fighter status, inventories, and shift rosters.

The LT dropped into the tired-looking chair behind the desk and rummaging through the collection of papers and viewers that covered most of the horizontal surfaces. She didn't offer the other chair to Anatolja who made no move to take it, either.

"Where did I...? Ah, here it is."

Sparks tossed a thin viewpad onto the edge of the desk towards Anatolja.

"I found this waiting for me."

The battered screen showed an official request for transfer out of the Dark Nova ground crew from one PFC Ross. The reason for the request simply listed "lack of trust from CO." Anatolja groaned inwardly. It was going to be a *long* day.

"Care to explain what the hell is this about?"

"I... might have... said something that perhaps I shouldn't have."

"Twenty-four hours, Mirunova!" Freeman was on her feet. "Are you telling me that you're honestly incapable of keeping a crew together for not even a single day?! Do you want to spend the rest of your career as a third-class petty officer, because that's where you're headed. Showing up late-- still half drunk by the look of things. I thought assigning you under a former marine might teach you some discipline."

Fine. Whatever. Just stop shouting please.

Sparks sat back down with an air of resignation.

"I've already rejected her request. If I have to go through the paperwork of reassigning you, you will not enjoy the new position. Dismissed."

Vexus

Sat May 07, 2005 1:28 pm

Aurora did not expect her first reaction to Ursula's words.

Relief.

Here had come the worst situation the sensible part of her mind could imagine. This was a

potential mistake worse than the one she had made with the White Tigers... worse by far. A flood of reasons why came through her head, but the ease at which she could now ignore them was almost frightening. Growing up, Aurora had felt the occasional crush now and then, but nothing her mind had not been able to diffuse eventually. First it was school, and then it was trying to survive on the front. She had always had a good reason to leave romance to the poets and dreamers... and she had many good ones now. So why weren't they working this time? Was it because no one had ever "asked her out" in school? Was it because Ursula was putting her on the spot and she needed time to form a logical counter-argument? Or perhaps it was simply because a long-neglected part of herself, the un-nurtured and denied piece of her that *was* romantic had seen its last chance and was summoning all the strength it had left to win this one debate in her head.

That thought produced the next unexpected reaction. Aurora was laughing.

Ursula looked like she was about to be sick, and Aurora's smile faded (almost) as she realized how this might be interpreted.

"Oh, Ursula, I'm sorry. It's just-" she laughed a little again before continuing. "It's all just too ironic. I've faced rebel armies, stormed fortresses, made it through the worst urban fighting, and I always prided myself on walling off my mind from it all. I was the unshakable one, the one who never broke. Near the end of my last assignment I faltered once, and I swore it would never happen again. Yet in a matter of weeks, this squad has somehow managed to penetrate every wall I put up, flanked every attempt I made to ensure that the rest of the war was only a profession. No more honor, or glory, or friendship... or love... just a task I needed to finish and then go home. And the worst part is: I think I wanted to fail."

Aurora turned and stood before Ursula with her head slightly bowed, and at that moment, one would almost think that Ursula was taller than her squad leader.

"Damn, I don't understand this. None of it. How can a coli from the Outer Rim just come into my life, earn my respect, and then have the courage to say what I couldn't... not even to myself?!"

A glimmer of hope came to Ursula's eyes, and Aurora met them with her own.

"How did you make me fall in love with you?"

Now it was Ursula's turn to feel relieved. Wiping a tear from her eye, she managed a choked response.

"When I find out, I'll let you know."

Now calmly, almost casually, the two pilots leaned on the nearby railing side by side, once again looking over the commotion on the flight deck.

"This won't be easy," Aurora said in a matter-of-fact tone. She felt it was only fair to let Ursula know the same reservations that had come to her own mind just a few moments before.

"The Navy tends to discourage this type of thing. We'll both have to put our duties ahead of our feelings-"

"-in which we have both just shown a certain lack of ability," Ursula added with a grin and a sigh.

"And we'll have to let the squad know," Aurora continued. "I may have no experience at this, but I'm certain it would be immoral and dangerous to keep this a secret from them."

"I'm no expert either," Ursula replied, "but I think some of them suspect already, at least Seer does."

"Seer?" Aurora asked, "I never thought she...." Even as she spoke, a rusted wheel in Aurora's head suddenly turned and snapped into place.

"Oh shit... she's going to kill me."

Ursula laughed at that, and no longer in the mood to second-guess her own intentions anymore, Aurora put a loving arm around the pilot. Ursula, for her part, rested her head on Aurora's shoulder, her expression peaceful. Seeming to see her again for the first time, Aurora was struck by the beauty in that face that she had never noticed before. The squad leader then witnessed Ursula's expression change to one of concern.

"Some of the rebel pilots are staring at us."

For some reason, this turn of events forged an unusual alliance in Aurora's mind. Never before had all the parts of her spoken with one voice about what she should do. As a small gasp of surprise escaped from Ursula's lips, the silver-haired girl took her into her arms in a full embrace, the voice in her ear confident and comforting.

"Let them stare."

Vindicare

Sun May 08, 2005 6:11 pm

Banshee eyed Price inquisitively for a moment before speaking, noting in which direction Ursula disappeared.

"A pep talk on joining Spec Ops? Ursula got a field promotion?"

"Something like that yeah...how'd you..."

"'Cloak and Dagger' isn't often used to describe mere espionage anymore. These days there are so many 'Black Ops' and 'Wet Ops' that one would assume we are short on spies" *Which of course we are* Banshee didn't add.

"I've had enough, i want to be a real person again. Just letting her know my point of view."

"I can understand it must have been hard for someone as flamboyant as yourself..." Christine smiled a little "...being unable to do all the tricks you're so famous for, but I would imagine someone such as Lieutenant Veneberg would integrate quite easily under normal circumstances..."

"'Normal circumstances'?"

"I have had some suspicions, but having made an indirect inquiry yesterday, i can confirm that Ursula has some outside influence affecting her judgement.

Price looked a little bemused "Which is?"

"Emotion". Banshee left it at that, other people's private lives were other peoples private lives, after all. Her gaze shifted to the direction of Ursula's departure.

"I have something I have to do" Price followed her gaze, perhaps understanding, perhaps not. Christine looked back at the pilot for a few seconds. "Perhaps when we have a little more free time, you might give me some pointers on some manoeuvres i am working on, the KH being of particular interest to me".

Now Ducky just looked amazed "I didn't really take you as the non-reg type. The KH is pretty difficult to do without some minor mods. We'll see."

"I thank you in advance. Now you will have to excuse me"

Banshee walked into the hanger, peering down at the colonials being ushered off into the darkness below. Some looked up at her, one or two bewildered, others enraged. Those who met her gaze met with cold, listless eyes as Christine looked though the person to the soldier. *"and there shall be no quarter for the tired, the injured, the hungry, the cowards; the defeated. There shall be quarter only for those who are worthy of standing with us - the dead with a pile of dead laid before them."* Her mind found the whole premise of surrender abhorrent, and while she respected the pilot's abilities as pilots, that was all they were. They are not true warrior souls. Her face bore none of this detail out, but her eyes, her eyes spoke volumes to those who tried to hold her gaze.

As the last of them began to pass out of the main hanger bay, Banshee noted that they were distracted by something on the other side of the room. Turning her head, she could understand why that might be of interest.

Hobbit and Crone were locked in an embrace on one of the higher gangways. *time to put my foot in it again....oh well at least i'm consistent.* Christine walked purposefully up to the pair, seemingly unnoticed, and as such coughed markedly to draw attention to her presence.

The pair jumped apart, shocked by the seemingly sudden appearance of Banshee on the catwalk. "Um...hi" murmured Crone weakly, while Ursula nodded in greeting.

"Sir I have something i wish to report to you, but first, i must speak with Hobbit.

confused looks were exchanged. "Ah...ok, do you want me to leave?"

"That will not be necessary, Sir". Banshee turned to address Hobbit "Lieutenant Veneberg, i

apologise if i offended you this evening past. I was searching for an answer to a question i should not have been asking, and did not mean to embarress you" She pulled Hobb's card from her top pocket "I acknowledge that you are indeed the better shot" she said, extending her hand holding the card and the wager. Ursula reached out to take it, but Banshee held on for a few more seconds "...for the moment" she added, with the beginnings of a smile as she let go.

"Thank you...Banshee"

"I will take that as apology accepted?"

"Yes"

"Good" Banshee turned back to Crone "Sir, after Hobbie and I had concluded our competition yesterday, i ran into Pfc Ross, one of our new tech crew, in the hallway. She said something most disturbing"

"Which was?" Crone asked, still slightly off-kilter but ever the squad leader.

"She implied that her PO, a tech by the name of Mirunova, may not be entirely trustworthy. She seemed scared of being caught by someone..."

Banshee related what she could deduce from the frantic ramblings to Crone, then stepped back.

"Now if you will excuse me, sir, I have things to attend to"

"Um...Banshee...."

"Ours is not to reason why, sir"

"Thank you. We need to work things out and speak to everyone".

Christine bobbed her head slightly and headed out of the hanger. As she slid the door open, the corner of her peripheral vision glimpsed Crone take hold of Hobbie once more.

JFalcon

Wed May 11, 2005 5:00 am

Having their fill of stares for the moment, Aurora and Ursula departed the hanger still holding hands for a bit quieter location. There was much to discuss and simply sort out.

"So what I heard **was** the truth." They had barely left the flick deck when an incredulous and contemptuous male voice spoke loudly enough to be easily overheard. "And I was 95% certain my voice recognition algorithms were malfunctioning." Jason was leaning easily against a wall in a side hallway with a sly grin on his face. He had obviously been waiting.

"Naturally, this was something I wanted to verify 'in person,' but as the MP at the door was kind enough to point out," his voice changed to that of a woman's, "'sex toys are *not* part of the ceremonies.'"

"Nor are they welcome here," Crone bristled.

Why does this machine continue to cross the line?

"Never fear, I am explicitly forbidden to interfere with inter-human relationships. Still, to think that I lost out too..." Jason's gaze shifted slightly to Ursula.

"What are you implying, bot?" Jason was fortunate that Ursula wasn't armed.

"Absolutely nothing! Still my programming does permit, and in fact mandates, that I provide advice when I foresee potentially self-destructive behavior. Have you both considered the very real risk that one of you will be killed in combat? Perhaps in front of the other's eyes? Or that relationships between direct superiors and subordinates are exceedingly bad form? No? What about..."

Crone was on the verge of killing Jason. Or whatever the next best thing possible was for robots. Hobbs was torn between helping and keeping Aurora from doing something stupid.

"Go away, Jason." A fourth voice entered the standoff. "I don't think they appreciate your observations, either."

Three heads turned to notice a tech with glasses standing a short distance away a noteputer pointed at Jason.

"Ah, Miss Ross. Extending your 'protection'? How bold for you." If Jason had missed a beat, it wasn't obvious. His tone took on a mocking quality. "Why the vested interest, I wonder?"

"I told you to leave, Jason." Kate's own voice was flat and cold. She advanced towards the sexbot.

Jason's face lost all trace of amusement and he moved to comply. "Fine, since I am so unjustly

threatened, my well-intentioned advice will have to wait. Good day, my dears."

Aurora and Ursula both swore they heard Jason mumble "vicious harpy" as he wandered off.

"I swear there is something wrong with that bot." Kate was staring at Jason's retreating back with equal parts curiosity and hostility. Her tablet computer was still held outwards, almost defensively.

"How did you...? I've never seen him actually do what someone tells him to when he doesn't want to"

The tech shook herself free from some inner thought. "He won't stick around I'm nearby--at least not if I notice him. I... ah... we came to an... understanding a while back." Kate suddenly realized she was talking to two officers. "Oh! I... um, have to be going, sir. I didn't mean to interrupt."

She made to make her own retreat back towards the flight deck.

Schamann

Wed May 11, 2005 11:50 am

Although obediently retreating, the machine would not be the vicious self, without some sort of commentary:

"I heard that Miss Ross" he said loudly without turning around "You know my sensors' capabilities that allow me to tell from the other side of the wall whether a woman is **asleep or not**, by mere sound of her breath, don't you...Miss Ross?"

He then turned around, bowed and started to leave again, his smile not only sarcastic, but also...."sad" - some might say.

Vexus

Sun May 15, 2005 3:10 am

"Private!" Aurora called to the quickly retreating tech. Kate stopped short, and in turning around had the body language of a person resigned to some horrible fate.

"Yes, sir?"

"Banshee has relayed your... concerns to me."

"Sir, I just meant-" the tech hastily began before Aurora made a violent "hush" gesture with her hand.

"If your duties allow, I would like to meet with you privately in the Novas' quarters around 1400 hours." Aurora's eyes conveyed a meaning very different from her words. "We can then discuss the modifications to our fighters I requested."

To Aurora's secret relief, the private seemed to pick up on the message. "Yes, sir... I'll do my best to be there."

Aurora nodded. "On your way, private."

"Yes, sir," Kate replied quickly, then hurried out onto the flight deck.

"Do you think she'll come?" Ursula asked softly.

"I hope so," Aurora answered. "There are too many mysterious things going on around here, and we'll need all the allies we can get." Aurora then turned and regarded the smaller pilot.

"It's not too late, you know. You can still accept the transfer. Get off the Morrigan and away from all of this intrigue."

Ursula's expression, a mix of offense and annoyance, said it all. Aurora's mouth betrayed the hint of a smile.

"Alright, it was a stupid suggestion."

A while later found the Novas enjoying lunch in the mess hall. No one had arranged anything, they had simply entered in groups of two and three at around the same time. Aurora and Ursula were the last to arrive after a long talk in one of the seldom-frequented storage rooms.

It was The Talk, the one Aurora had heard about from her friends but had never experienced first-hand. To herself, Aurora had wondered if such talks actually ever occurred or were simply the sort of moments that lovers wished for in their heart of hearts. The words spilled out from both of

them: when they had first felt something for the other, what their friends or family might think, the things they found attractive about each other, and even a few things they didn't find so appealing. The amount of emotion Aurora had felt in that time was exhausting, and much more than she had ever allowed herself in her life. It was equally exciting and frightening that she felt herself able to be so unguarded with another human being. Now, like after a heavy physical workout, both she and Ursula bathed in the afterglow of the sheer release of their conversation, all of their anxieties seeming far away. Aurora was certain that such a feeling was transitory and may never come again, so she savored it for the new and wonderful experience that it was.

Gathered around their usual table, Aurora took her seat and regarded the dish before her that had been labeled "Roast Beef + Potatoes". Aurora took a bite and was forced to disagree. Around the table, the other pilots worked on their own plates as they chatted away. Christine was grilling Ashley on her flying tricks-of-the-trade. Cassie and Kat were arguing for their own separate musical tastes. Claymore and Ursula, meanwhile, were hurling scathing commentary at the soap opera playing on the nearby screen. In short, conversation was lively, and that made it all the more difficult to interrupt her squad with more serious news. Eventually, Aurora tapped her fork against her glass of soda. The Novas turned their attention to their leader... and at first Aurora hesitated. The worried thoughts came thundering back: what if any of them objected, what if they issued a complaint or asked for a transfer...?

It wasn't until Aurora noticed Ursula about to speak that she found her voice. She had been the braver one once today, now it was Aurora's turn.

"Ladies, there's something all of you have the right to know before we fly on another mission. Fighting side-by-side has brought us together as a squadron. At its most basic level, this is a natural consequence of our job. We are forced to trust each other, because the alternative is defeat or worse. But more than that, I have come to consider you friends; more than just comrades-in-arms, but women with whom I am proud to serve and defend the Alliance. However, despite a soldier's good sense and her best intentions, there are times when it seems that the heart is still not satisfied, and longs for more."

Aurora took a steady breath.

"Ursula has recently offered her heart to me." From the corner of her eye, Aurora saw Ursula hold out her hand beneath the table and out of sight from the other pilots. Aurora took it in her own.

"I have accepted it, and given her my own in return."

Before she let herself look for reactions from her squad-mates, she continued.

"Now all of you know as well as I that privacy is not something we are afforded in this line of work. I can't promise you that this new situation will never cause any problems for our squadron. I can only assure you that both Hobbs and myself will do everything we can to remain professionals and not allow our personal feelings to get in the way of our sworn duty. If there are any objections, let them be voiced now. I will not have anything left unsaid among us."

At last, Aurora stopped to gauge her squad's reactions. As before, and in so many other cases, Christine's impassive face was unchanged. Cassie flashed a proud expression at Ursula. Rhiannon's expression seemed accepting enough, but she appeared distracted by some other thoughts. Ashley looked surprised, but not obviously affronted. Only Kat appeared visibly concerned.

Aurora squeezed Ursula's hand and waited for someone to fill the silence that was quickly becoming awkward.

Charon

Sun May 15, 2005 9:18 pm

Rhiannon left her face blank whilst her mind raced. *Oh, bloody 'ell*, she thought to herself. *Wha's th' gel gone an' done tae herse'f?* It had been a "well documented" fact throughout history that relationships between superiors and subordinates almost invariably led to some sort of breakdown of unit cohesion, and part of her wanted to do nothing else than speak up on that score.

Then, the more that she thought of it, the more she realized that she'd almost never heard of someone bringing such a relationship out into the open in the manner that Aurora had just done. Such a novel approach, something so highly irregular, had never really been documented, as far as she could think of.

As she chewed that over in her mind, the idea became more and more sensible, then acceptable, until-

Rhiannon raised the glass of chocolate milk that she'd been idly slurping on whilst heckling the soaps. "I thi' a round o' congratulations should bae in orrderrr, me lassies," she said, cocking her head to one side. "Although I moost seh - watching th' tae o' ye dance will beh **most** entertainin'" She finished with a chuckle and heard similar snorts and chuckles coming from the Novas, even though Kat's was curtailed by her face falling into a worried mask again.

Pondering that for a moment, Rhiannon shrugged mentally before fractionally raising her glass from it's elevated position. "Tae th' Crone an' th'Hobbit!"

JediBubbles

Sun May 15, 2005 10:32 pm

"To Crone and Hobbit: f*cking *finally!*" Seer chimed in, clinking her Coke against Rhi's chocolate milk. Almost everyone laughed; even Banshee briefly cracked a small smile.

"And here's my two cents," Cassie continued. "Even if this was peacetime, death would still be lurking just a day or an hour away. People leave so many things unsaid out of fear and uncertainty, and then death snatches all chance of saying it."

There were tears in her eyes, and Crone suddenly remembered that Seer's file had a note about her mother dying in a car accident.

"So congrats to Crone and Hobbs for choosing to risk love and happiness in the face of potentially massive disapproval, rather than risk being too late."

She suddenly grinned like mad and leaned forward, brandishing her fork at Crone and Hobbs. "You do both realize that tomorrow I had plans to clobber you, chuck you together in an airlock, and threaten you with spacing until you 'fessed up, right?" Laughter rang from the Novas' table again.

"See, told you she knew." Hobbs poked Crone lightly in the arm, giggling.

"And I told you she was going to kill us," Crone smiled softly back.

Cassie caught that smile and knew, deep down, that supporting them was absolutely right. She took a swig of Coke and glanced at Kat over her glass, hoping fervently that whatever the OSI pilot's reservations were, she would eventually come to the same conclusion.

Maverick

Mon May 16, 2005 5:33 am

Kat was leaning back in her chair, eyes shut tightly while her fingers pinched the bridge of her nose. *Well...this is great....just....great... I guess I'm gonna hafta move things forward...* Her eyes opened slowly and she caught Cassie glaring at her out of the corner of her eye.

Laughing, Kat threw back her head and smiled widely. "Ah! This is a great thing! I'm soooo happy for you two! You know what they say, 'better to have love and lost than to never have loved...at...all....'" Cassie's eyes turned to flames. "Not that I'm saying that it's going to end in loss or anything...I'm just saying...." In fear of the spacing threat being levied on her, Kat stood up. "I'm gonna go put my foot in my mouth, excuse me."

Most of the Novas took the young officer's rant in stride and just laughed it off. However, Rhiannon and Cassie exchanged glances for a moment before returning to the conversation.

Kat sighed when she got out of eyesight. "This is going to make things complicated..." Resolved on what she was going to do next, Kat shrugged and moved to walk back into the room with her shoe in her mouth for the comedic effect.

Schamann

Mon May 16, 2005 2:44 pm

It wasn't particularly unexpected, that by the afternoon the only ones who had not heard the news about Crone and Hobbs were the seriously wounded, who were still unconscious and treated in the medical. Rumors blitzed through the ship like a summer storm and soon it was not uncommon to hear the most unbelievable stories about the two in question.

"That's it, I swear it on my mother's favorite lipstick that I'm going to kill the next person who asks whether it's true that me and Crone were each other's childhood love, but The Plague and the war had torn us apart, and while she was wounded in the military she got an amnesia and I was thinking she was dead due to a misfile in KIA announcement, and I carried on with my living, despaired and torn, while she did not even remember my name, and when we finally met by chance..."

"Give it a brake Urs" Cassie tried to calm her friend down "It shall end in a few days"

"Shoot them right in the head I will!" Ursula hissed viciously, but then she winked and smiled.

"Yeah yeah, I know, I guess I was gossiping myself too sometimes".

They walked down the corridor, heading to their quarters after the classes on tactics, that was intended to prepare them for tomorrow's mission. With the commotion that exploded after the lunch newsbreaking, both Crone and Hobs decided not to show around together too much. The looks they drew were most disturbing. From the thumbs up and smiles of congratulation, to the disgusted looks of contempt. It was almost, like if their romance was taken as some kind of a higher, almost political difference among the crew and was treated in that terms. They also did not wish to walk alone, so Yates took Claymore with her, while Ursula asked Seer to take a walk. Unsurprising choice, regarding the friendship that was between them. Lighthearted and lightheaded as she was, Cassie was usually the one to hear about Ursula, her secrets or her problems. So it was this time.

"Isn't that f..king amazing how you become a celebrity just because you sleep with someone?" Hobbs asked with the bitterness in her voice

"Yeah, I guess so, wait a minute" Cassie was suddenly on her toes "you didn't....I mean...or maybe you did?"

"No, we didn't, relax" Ursula sighed with irritation "I was speaking metaphorically"

"Allright" Seer smiled awkwardly. "But you know, I'aaa guess that...sooner or later, you know, with the common quarters that we have, where and how are you going to be together? Have you thought about that?" she finally fired away.

Veneberg stopped at those words "You do get to the point fairly quickly, don't you Cass?" she turned towards her friend and looked quizzically at her. "No, I haven't thought about that yet and I bet my money that Crone did neither. We're still just figuring out the basic things now."

Cassie nodded with understanding "How basic?"

"Everything can still happen. Crone might get stripped of her position because of the romance with subordinate, we can be separated, sent to different squadrons. We need to tread carefully if what happened between us is to survive"

Dory narrowed her eyes and raised left eyebrow in a parody of a threatening gesture. "If they think they can take away our leader...."

Ursula placed her hands on Seer's shoulders with the relaxed stance.

"Cas, I can't thank you enough for helping me out and insinuating the little things on this one. I'm happier than I've ever been in my entire life, it's like the whole world shines in her eyes when I look at her." Cassie smiled and tried to say something, but Hobbs continued. "But everything still can fall apart each minute and there's no telling how scared I am all the time. I want to do this right Cas, for once in my life I want to do it right from the very beginning to the very end, because I won't get another chance. And that means no hurry."

Cassandra smiled. "Sure thing girl, you got it." And then she winked. "Nevertheless, if you should need a little distraction, to lure the rest of the Novas away from the quarters for a couple of hours..."

Ursula laughed with the good loud sincere laughter. "Yeah I'll let you know – Madame Dory."

They both laughed and they crossed the intersection, turning into a corridor leading to their quarters. It was near 1400 and the meeting Crone announced was about to begin in a few minutes.

On the other side of the corridor they spotted Ducky, Banshee and Kat, approaching the door as well. Ducky waved hello to them and was about to tell point them to the others, when another person came into view. She was a pilot, wearing Charan uniform. She apparently asked about something, and Auten nodded to her in response and pointed herself in Hobbs's and Seer's direction. The Charan thanked with a nod and headed toward both girls with quick, vivid steps. Behind her, the three Novas approached with visible curiosity, mixed with the expressions of worry and suspicion. Kat was regarding the talk with curiosity written in capital letters on her face, but Seer would bet that there was something else there, something that reminded her of interrogation rooms, never-ending questions and the scent of fear.

The Charan stopped in front of Cassandra and regarded her for a while. She looked for about twenty something, rather pretty, brown eyed and brown haired, tall. On her left pocket there was the name – "Scott-Dory". Seer could not help but to grab Ursula's elbow, anticipating what may be

coming. The Charan spoke:

"Are you Cassandra Dory, Jace Dory little sister?"

Cassie nodded, unsure what to say.

"Then this message is for you, from your brother." Charan handed her small datachip, the kind of which was commonly used for video messaging purposes.

Seer's voice trembled, when she asked the question:

"Who are you?"

The Charan smiled with a sad smile.

"Someone who is now as a traitor to your brother as he was to you." She pointed at her nametag. "I'm Jace's ex-wife. One of them."

JediBubbles

Mon May 16, 2005 8:25 pm

A silence so awkward that it rivaled a thirteen year old on a growth spurt grew as the assembled Novas stared at the two Dory women. Seer was staring at Jace's ex with her mouth open, a blank, struggling-to-comprehend look on her face, and her right hand shaking as if she was holding a bomb with no timer rather than just a message chip. Scott-Dory looked a bit nervous.

Suddenly, Cassie shook her head vigorously and looked back up at her brother's former wife with a smile.

"Sorry about that. Jace is still twelve in my head, even though I know he's twenty-four, so I was trying to get my brain around the word 'wife' for a second there." *Not to mention 'ex-wife' and 'one of them'... Jeebus, Jace, what kind of ass have you turned into?!*

"It's good to know my brother has great taste, though, and picked at least one woman smart and strong enough to leave his ass." She transferred the data chip to her pocket and offered Scott-Dory her hand. "Second Lieutenant Cassandra 'Seer' Dory."

Now it was Scott-Dory's turn to stare slack-jawed in shock. "How did you know I left hi--damn." The pretty brunette shook Seer's hand with a wry grin. "Lieutenant Sarah 'Beanpole' Scott-Dory. Jace was right. That intuition of yours really is uncanny."

Claymore, Hobbit and Kat snorted in agreement.

"Well, nice t'meet ya, Sis! Would it be okay if I tracked you down later? I might need to brother-bash after I watch this, and it'd be nice to do it with someone else who knows just how to enumerate his many sins."

Beanpole blinked at being called "Sis," but shook her head in assent anyway. "No, I don't mind at all. A bitch-session could be fun." Her eyes glinted with a cold mischief. "Though you might have a harder time finding me than I did you. Ship gossip made tracking down your squad really easy."

Ursula blushed the color of Ducky and Claymore's hair.

Seer laughed. "Ah, that's cool, I'll find ya. See ya, Beanpole!" she called after the Charan's now-retreating back.

"You know, you really don't have to look at her like that," Cassie shot at Banshee, who was following Scott-Dory's progress around the corner as if tracking prey. "It was really nice of her to brave this ship to give me this."

"But why?" Christie said, still staring down the corridor with cold eyes and an impassive face. "She left him, but she still delivers his message to you?"

"She understands love and honor, unlike my brother, who I suspect only writes out of guilt, okay?" Seer snapped, bristling. She rounded on Crone. "Can we do this shindig? I'd like to forget for a bit that I have a time bomb ticking in my pocket." She stalked into the briefing room without waiting for a reply.

Ducky stared after Seer.

"Sheesh, that was...not the Seer I'm used to."

"Me either," said Kat, gears obviously turning.

"Aye, well, she 'as a tendency to go a bit Darrrk Side wherre 'er brother is concernned," Claymore muttered sagely as the rest of the Novas slowly recovered from Cassie's abrupt change in demeanor and filed into the room.

Maverick

Wed May 18, 2005 4:11 am

Damn it...you know what you have to do... Kat swore under her breath as she kicked up into a run after Seer.

"Cassie! Hold up a minute!" Kat yelled, skidding to a halt next to her and nearly running into a bulkhead. "Gyak! Woah....Hey Cass...you feeling alright?"

She didn't reply for a moment, still stalking forward angrily. Kat was about to ask again when Cassie whipped around and growled in her face, "No. I'm not okay. I get a message from my dead-beat brother from *"one of his ex's"* and I'm supposed to be alright?!"

Kat didn't say anything, but turned away. "Sorry Cas. I was just concerned..."

Cas sighed and looked down. "Sorry....I'm in the habit of flying of the handle when I talk about my brother." Cas narrowed her eyes at the young OSI officer. "What did you really run after me for?"

Kat laughed and scratched the back of her head absently. "Heh...ehh. I would curse your intuition, but it's so damn fun to test..." Cassie wasn't laughing. Kat gave a loud sigh. "Look Cas, I'm gonna need to see that chip."

"What?"

Kat lowered her voice into one of those "no shitting" tones. "Look Cas. You know OSI is going to want to take a look at that. I know it's of a personal matter to you. That's why I'm asking for it and not some no-name Lieutenant." Cas glared at her wide-eyed. "C'mon Cass. Trust me. I won't do anything that would invade your privacy, I just need to do the routine stuff. Remember that this is coming from the Charans and we are in a civil war." Kat's voice lowered. "I don't want to make a scene of this. Please Cas."

JediBubbles

Wed May 18, 2005 5:25 am

"Yes, well the 'civil war' part would be the rub in this entire situation, now, wouldn't it?" Seer grimaced a bit as she fished the chip out of her pocket and reluctantly dropped it into Kat's outstretched hand. "That, and the fact that civil wars are never actually civil, given that they're wars..."

"Thanks, Seer. I won't tell anyone anything about it that I don't absolutely have to," promised the resident spook as she slipped the chip into her own pocket. Kat was suddenly struck by the fact that Cassie looked simultaneously very old and very young as she stared longingly after the chip.

Cassie suddenly plopped down into a briefing chair and started tiredly rubbing her face. "Thanks, Kat," she said, voice muffled by her hands, "for trying to keep me from further despising your other department." She grinned wryly up at the OSI pilot. "This whole Jace thing just keeps coming back to bite me in the ass, nastily reminding me on a regular basis that joining the Navy in a fit of anger because my brother just turned traitor really wasn't the best of ideas."

The tiny woman suddenly smiled broadly. "Though I really can't argue with the company it's landed me in, so I guess it's a fair trade."

Vexus

Sun May 22, 2005 1:13 pm

"What's going on?" Aurora asked as Kat pocketed Cassie's message.

"Official OSI business, sir," Kat said evenly, "The message must be cleared immediately for security purposes."

Aurora's brow lowered in thought, then turned to Cassie with an unasked question. She was beginning to learn just how unnecessary words were with the little pilot.

"It's alright, Crone. I've already butted heads with the OSI once today. If my brother is smuggling messages to me with sensitive secrets, than he's become more of an idiot than before."

Aurora nodded with the hint of a sympathetic smile, then turned to Kat. "Go and deliver the message, then report back."

"I'll return as soon as they let me, sir," Kat said with a small salute, then turned and exited the

quarters. Aurora looked after her with concern. She had never had any reason to doubt any Nova's loyalty, but a small voice whispered caution to her regarding the OSI officer. Aurora didn't want to heed that voice, but she recognized it. It was her old battle instincts kicking in again. Maybe the upcoming meeting with Kate was just getting her nervous... or maybe just more preceptive.

The rest of the Novas settled into their seats or on their bunks. As their many bed-side clocks ticked away the seconds, the pilots tried to discuss other, more irrelevant things. From a chair in the middle of the room, Aurora sat rigid and alert, not adding too much to the conversation. Ursula sat just to her left and Claymore to her right. Without even thinking about it, Ursula was moving a soothing hand over the back of Aurora's shoulders. If Aurora felt it, she gave no sign.

Right on time, a quiet, timid knock came on the door.

"Enter," Aurora called out. Kate slowly poked her head in, her eyes widening at the sight of the officers gathered in the room.

"I-ah... I didn't know there would be anyone else...."

"I trust these women with my life," Aurora said simply. Kate seemed to be waiting for more, but Aurora appeared to have given all the reason she thought was necessary. Kate finally entered, closed the door behind her,... and promptly tripped on the foot of a nearby bunk and stumbled head-long into Christine. A very uncharacteristic "eek!" of surprise escaped from the Brit as Kate knocked them both over onto the bed. Kate then scrambled to get off the startled pilot, her hands continuing to fall upon parts of Christine that were rather inappropriate for someone with whom she was only slightly acquainted.

"Oh my God! I'm sorry I- Oh! Sorry! Let me just- Ack! I didn't mean to-"

A snort of held-in laughter came from Ashley. Claymore looked down to hide her smile. Cassie put her hand over her mouth to muffle her giggles. Ursula shook her head with resignation.

"Get off a me, ye bloody grease-monkey!" Christine exclaimed with frustration as she heaved Kate off. Ashley and Cassie then broke down and laughed. Behind her still-stern gaze, Aurora thanked fate for her small blessings. The tension in the air had shattered.

"If you're quite done getting to know our ground crew, Banshee, I'd like to talk to PFC Ross." As Kate got back up and composed herself, Christine shot an icy glare at her squad leader that was more embarrassed than angered.

"Now, Private," Aurora asked calmly, "Do you have something to tell us?"

Vindicare	Sun May 22, 2005 10:01 pm
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"If you're quite done getting to know our ground crew, Banshee, I'd like to talk to PFC Ross." Banshee lowered her eyebrows and looked back at Crone for a few seconds. "*Indeed*" was the only thing she allowed herself to think as she stood up.

"*Twice in as many days...*" Banshee mused to herself as she straightened the creases from her outfit "*If i didnt know better i'd swear she was aiming at me*" the corners of her lips curled upwards slightly, but she regained control and resumed her stony neutral expression.

All eyes thankfully turned from the slightly red faced Banshee to the seemingly unembarrassed Kate with Aurora's next sentence.

"Do you have something to tell us?"

JFalcon	Wed May 25, 2005 6:45 am
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Ummm... No?

"I... ah... don't really think that... would be... a... good idea. For me. I'd rather not..."

...be court-martialed for slandering an officer, receive the second inquisition from OSI, get further involved period, possibly get poisoned the next time I wind up in medical, or attract any more attention to myself...

"No, private. That's not acceptable."

Aurora was irritated. If Kate couldn't see that more lives than her own might be affected by this matter--or wouldn't look beyond her own safety--she was about to be reoriented on the matter now that Aurora's squadmates were threatened.

"You've already said quite enough, or rather, just enough to be suspicious. And what you've said so far suggests to me that our squadron is somehow threatened. Something is going on, Ross. I don't

know what, but I need answers, so unless you'd like to talk to OSI you'd better start making some sense."

"You mentioned something about Mirunova, your CO." Banshee cut straight to the point.

"PO3 Mirunova is my supervisor, ma'am," Kate answered quietly.

"What? Who the hell cares about...!"

"Because there's a difference. Isn't there, Kate?" Seer was looking intently at the tech. Kate looked uncomfortable.

"For my own information, who is your commanding officer, private?"

"1LT Karen Freeman."

The air circulation system seemed suddenly loud in the ensuing silence.

"Sparks...?" somebody said wonderingly.

Ursula saw the game that Seer was playing at. "So tell me, Kate, do you think we'll be having many hardware glitches during the operation?"

The trick is to ask the right questions. Get the right facts. She doesn't have to voice her opinions and suspicions and since we get to draw our own conclusions.

"I'd appreciate it if you reported any odd equipment problems directly to me."

"Such as?"

"Unscheduled data transfers, things breaking abruptly that shouldn't, maybe abnormally low performance. Things like that."

"And why to you?"

"Someone else might not fix it properly."

Because someone else might have caused it.

Tiefflieger	Wed May 25, 2005 2:02 pm
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Meanwhile in a corner of the repair bay Anatolja was sitting at a workbench, absent-mindedly hammering away on a deformed lump of metal that recently had been part of a VTOL thrusters. Of course it had been a broken part. One off the thruster Kate had blown up yesterday. Some pills from sickbay had made the hangover quite a lot more bearable, but the hammering was still ringing in her ears.

Kate, you don't want to think about Kate! You'll just get agitated again!

Wham! A blow with the hammer sent a spark whizzing past Anatolja's ear. But in the end this was all about Kate.

"If I have to go through the paperwork of reassigning you, you will not enjoy the new position."

Sparks words. Anatolja pictured herself on a desk job, pushing pencils all day long.

She can't do this to me! I'd go mad, she must know that! Of course she does, and that's exactly why she would take care I'd never come close to an engines shop or even flight deck again! I have to do something!

Maybe Jason was right. Am I really to hard on Kate? She's in the Navy goddamnit! She can't expect to be touched with velvet gloves!

...

Jason... there's something I missed... Wait a second!

Anatolja jumped up, spinning around, her eyes on the gallery above the deck, searching for a certain piece of structure. A vertical rail-supporting pipe, a solid metal pipe with the imprint of a human hand.

When she found what she was looking for she took out her comm and spoke a very short but

definite message: "Jason, report to PO3 Mirunova, flight deck, immediately!"

Snickering behind her back reminded Anatolja she was not alone on the flight deck.

"Woah, now there's someone really in a hurry!" Maynard said, winking wildly.

"You know, I'd wait until after the shift. If Sparks finds out...", Sorensen meant with a very broad grin.

Anatolja didn't look remotely amused. A rather frosty violet stare stopped the snicker quite effectively.

"Tell me, those bots aren't supposed to damage security related equipment on board the ship, are they?"

"No, of course not! But why..." again Sorensen was interrupted by Anatolja.

"You don't happen to know who's responsible for maintenance of the sexbots, do you?" she asked.

"As far as I know they do it to themselves, err, maintenance I mean." answered Maynard.

"Just as I thought."

Two very irritated techs were looking at each other.

"Well, what are you waiting for, better weather? Weren't you doing something just now?"

Maynard and Sorensen hurried to return to the partially dismantled shield generator they had been working on, before Mirunova found a reason to hand the yelling she had received from Sparks earlier today down on them.

Schamann

Wed May 25, 2005 1:25 pm

...while in the Dark Nova quarters things were still far from being clear...

Ursula stood up, approached the exit door in quick paces and with a slap of her hand she locked the magnetic lock. Then she entered the code to hold it that way. When she turned to her squadron her face was rather worried....or threatening.

"Does any of you have something that emits fast electrical and mechanical vibrations?"

The row of awkwardly looking faces told her that there had been a misunderstanding. Private Ross looked nothing short of terrified, at some thoughts she must have had about being tortured with.....let's leave it at that and go back to Ursula, who struck her palm into her forehead in despair and explained:

"like an electric toothbrush?"

Claymore stood up, rummaged through her things and with a wry grin she handed Hobbs her toothbrush. The little blonde took it, quickly plugged a headset communication device off her PDA and attached microphone to the base of the brush, where its engine was. Then it took only to plug the headset's output into the microphone input of the stereo, turning up the volume, and loud, regular, noisy DUD..DUD...DUD filled the room. After Ursula placed the whole toothbrush-headset impromptu mess near one of the loud speakers, a desynch crescendoing ZZIIIIIIIIIIII accompanied previous sound to the point of giving everybody shivers. When it had become simply unbearable, Hobbs took the whole thing further from the loudspeaker, visibly disappointed, that some part of her idea appeared not to be working properly. Still, the amplified noise from a toothbrush still was kinda impressive for an anti-bug device.

"It's nothing Lucy McGyver would have been proud of, but I guess it's still something" Ursula stated with a weak smile. There hasn't been much of appreciation on the rest of the girls' faces.

"Hey, I'm not a mechanic! Mostly I just shoot stuff and kill people!"

"Leave it as it is, Hobbs." Aurora sounded harsh and official, although her eyes told what her words didn't. Veneberg nodded and sat down. She leaned to Crone's ear and whispered:

"Sparks doesn't even have the access to our fighters anymore, by her own recent decision! What is this tech trying to tell us?"

Vexus

Fri May 27, 2005 1:08 pm

Now with Ursula's home-made jammer in place, Aurora felt slightly more at ease. Nevertheless, the leader gestured to the other pilots to lean forward. Better to keep to low voices just to be safe.

"Close up, Novas."

Hesitantly, the women scooted forward and leaned inward, surrounding Kate in a tight circle with their faces close together. Cassie looked left, then right, and assumed her infamous, sly grin.

"Why do I suddenly have this uncontrollable urge to gossip and play Spin-the-Bottle?"

Rhiannon gave Cassie a look that was only half-stern.

The buzzing sound was quite annoying, and the Novas tried their best to ignore it. Aurora noticed that Kate, however, was taking ill to the persistent drone. Her legs were now shaking, and she was beginning to sweat. Aurora needed to get her talking and distracted before things got out of hand.

"Now, Private, just start at the beginning."

Kate looked like she was about to talk, then seemed to shrink before the gaze of the women around her.

"I... I'm sorry I just can't do this... maybe later when I've sorted things out."

She'll never sort anything out if she keeps retreating, Aurora thought with frustration. Kate suddenly stood up and made to leave.

"You are not dismissed, Private," Aurora called sternly. This seemed to have the opposite effect of what Aurora had intended. Kate made a dash for the door.

In a flash, much quicker than Aurora would have expected, Rhiannon vaulted from her seat and wrapped her muscular arms around the tech. "Hel-!!!" was all Kate could manage before the Scott's right hand closed over her mouth. Struggling helplessly in Rhiannon's grasp, the pilot deposited her back in her chair and held her fast. The muffled sounds from the tech turned from angry to fearful to pleading. Rhiannon shot Aurora a questioning look, waiting for the next move. Luckily, Aurora had one in mind.

Leaning forward until their faces almost touched, Aurora's eyes studied Kate's face. Her features were glistening with beads of perspiration. The strong scent of coffee was on her breath. Her breathing was shallow and quick, and her eyes were darting everywhere almost randomly. She was on the verge of panic, a panic with which Aurora was quite familiar, for she had seen her share before and during battle. She was also familiar with a cure to such a state. Swift had taught it to her, and now it was her turn to use it. This time, she was the one who had to "talk 'em down", as the old captain had put it.

Carefully, Aurora placed the fingers of her left hand on the back of Kate's shoulder and the fingers of her right on the tech's wrist. Positioning them as she remembered, she pressed with each finger in a flowing pattern. At the same time, she caught Kate's gaze with her steely-blue eyes and held them as tightly as Rhiannon held her to the chair.

Slowly but surely, Kate's breathing slowed and her muscles relaxed. Eventually Rhiannon let go off her and retook her seat next to the squad leader. Kate never looked away from Aurora's eyes, but her eyelids dropped slightly, and she slumped a little in her chair. In a low, gentle voice, Aurora started again.

"Now, Kate, just tell us what troubles you."

Kate no longer heard the buzzing of the toothbrush jammer, nor saw the faces of officers crowded around her. Her jumbled, racing thoughts melted down into the sea of her mind and vanished. There was nothing left but Aurora's voice, the feeling of calm washing over her body like cool ocean waves, and those two fiercely burning points of blue in front of her.

With a quiet, distant voice Kate spoke her thoughts as they came; no longer in a chaotic storm, but one-by-one marching passed her mind's eye like ordered columns of troops, her burden becoming lighter with each column sounding off....

Aurora and the Novas listened intently over the jammer noise as Kate explained what she knew: the damaged flight recorder, the OSI inquiry, the overheard conversation, her run in with Anatolja, and her request for reassignment. By the time she fell silent, even the buzzing seemed too quiet in

the room.

Slowly, Aurora loosened her grip on the tech and the Novas leaned back from their in-prompt-to huddle. Kate looked utterly exhausted, and Aurora herself was rubbing her forehead wearily.

"This news is disconcerting to say the least," Aurora muttered. "But you did the right thing in coming here before our mission. I'll have to think this over. For now, though, I think you should reconsider your reassignment. If we're all to get through this in one piece, we'll need people we can trust on the ground and checking our equipment. A friend long ago once told me: 'A misfired round is ten times more lethal to you than an empty chamber, because you can't anticipate it.'" Aurora looked up to address her squadron.

"In the meantime, everything that was said here stays with us. Is that understood?" Nods all around, some of them nervous. Aurora could understand that.

I'm sure they're uneasy about what I just did.

Aurora glanced at the clock. "Banshee, Seer, please escort Kate safely to her quarters, then meet us at the briefing room. The rest of you get prepped. For better or worse, we have a mission to fly today."

As the meeting broke up, Rhiannon spoke up quietly.

"Can we trrrust herr, sir?"

Aurora nodded firmly. "When you girls were out there, I was lost, wondering what was happening to you. She was the only tech who stopped and tried to give me some information. She was in the presence of her CO, who shrugged me off, and she was limping to keep up... but she stopped for me...."

Rhiannon nodded. "Underrstood, lass."

Aurora turned and noticed a taken-aback look on Ashley's face.

"Is there a problem, Ducky?"

Ashley shrugged her shoulders in astonishment. "With all due respect, sir... is this how you girls *usually* spend your time before a mission?!"

Aurora gave a small smile. "I'm afraid this ritual is reserved only for special occasions. Carry on, lieutenant. It's time I witnessed your fancy flying first-hand."

Vindicare	Tue May 31, 2005 5:17 pm
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Banshee and Seer flanked Kate on her return to quarters, the brit taking position to Kate's right, Seer on the left, and both having to support the now-dozy tech as they went.

Attempts at light conversation with Kate were met with various "yeah" "nah" "hmm?" noises, and head movements, but little else. This did not sit well with Seer, who seemingly right now more than ever hated the stony silence that would have suited Christine (and the semi-lathargic Kate) just fine.

""why'd ya stand on her right?" she asked, seemingly innocuously.

Banshee had her left arm across Kate's shoulders and under her left arm to support her, and could almost look over Kate to talk to Seer. "What do you mean? there are only two choices.."

"I mean, i know you're a leftie, butcha like using your left arm for EVERYTHING...i just wondered why?"

It occurred to Banshee that there were no such things as innocuous questions from Seer. She had been observing her for a while now, after all.

a sigh.

"Very well. When i was around 6 years old, i was being taught to ride horses by my sister's, who were all proficient riders. At the beginning of one of my lessons, i made to mount the horse, but was struck from behind. A boy, with signs of symptoms, had lost control of his mount in a coughing fit. My left arm was holding the reigns and became caught as i fell from the impact. The two horses bodies collided, with my left arm in between them.

Seer winced "Ouchies"

"Indeed". "Various doctor's examined my arm, telling me that it had been broken and some muscle tendon's severed through shear, and would be useless the rest of my life"

"But..."

"I thought you wanted to know. I am telling you."

Seer's face flashed a irritated look, then she realised Banshee wasn't being condescending. It's just her way of thinking.

"Ok, i'm interested now" Seer flashed a grin past the lolled head of Kate at Banshee, eager to learn some new interesting story.

"As a last resort, my mother called a family friend, Dr. Timothy Garn. He was 2 months into symptomatic plague, but took this literal "Last Request" from my mother..." Banshee stopped speaking. The door to her left read 'Pfc Kate Ross'

They moved in, placing the *Snoring?* form of Pfc Ross onto her bunk gingerly, before turning to head for the briefing room.

After a few yards with nothing being said, Seer grabbed Banshee's arm. "You can't tell me half a story! thats tantamount to torture!" Banshee was somewhat taken aback by someone taking a interest in her personal past, rather than her military past for a change, but after looking at Seer's pleading eyes for a few seconds gave in. She focused on something at the far end of the corridor, and spoke, even though Seer and herself had stopped walking for the moment, she dare not look at her during this story, for fear of showing weakness. By this time she was beginning to understand how Cassandra worked, and hoped she would understand.

"Very well. As i said, i saw Dr. Garn. He told me there was one thing he could try, a untested method involving a small metal endoskeletal implant and stem cells. He could not promise anything, but a hope was better than a flaccid limb for life, so my whole family agreed. We took the Doctor into our home, in order to care for him between my treatments. Initially, i had two large metal pins inserted either side of my elbow, locking my arm straight..."

Seer moved slightly in Banshee's peripheral vision, probably shuddering at the thought of two metal spikes being imbedded into a limb *Or considering i looked like a permantly on-duty traffic warden, and giggling*

Banshee shook her head and continued "While my arm was locked in this position he used stem cells and exact radiation bombardments to attempt to rejoin the torn muscle ligaments, all the while telling everyone not to rejoice that it seemed to be working, and i still might not recover full function of my arm. After two weeks of these treatments, and with the Doctor's health decreasing, he removed the metal pins, in place putting a kind of organic composite of bone and stem cells, ordered as a carapace armour joint would be. This allowed the elbow to bend, while still recieving support. However at this point i could not bend it directly. Two more weeks yielded the result, and i was able to move my fingers and bend the elbow a little, but it felt heavy due to muscle degradation, and the extra weight of the bone pinions. Under his direction i started slow physical excercises for the arm, gradually regaining more control over it, and compensating for the weight difference. By the end of the second month my arm was practically back to normal...However, Dr Garn's health had degraded, and he died approximately 63 days after starting my treatment. He died before he removed the bone pinions from my elbow joint"

a small pause. Seer craned slightly to see if Banshee was crying....Nope. Figures.

"At the funeral of Dr Garn, my mother revealed his treatment, and the results, to the medical community..."

"Wait...the AuGarn Bonegraft?"

"That would be it. Of course all his friends died soon after, of their own plague cases. No will, no family, and only our obituary - All evidence of the man disappeared. Except....except for these 2 pinions in my left arm. That was twelve years ago he died. Everything i have done from then on that has used this arm i have done in honour of his memory. I never accepted a offer for removal lest i forget that without this practically forgotten, chronically ill man, i would have never become a mechanic, never become a pilot, and never managed to reach where i have today"

Seer, for once, seemed to be without words. "But...shouldn't it....doesn't it...why do you need the extra padding on your flight suit?"

"It is not so much that i need it, that i can support it. The extra strength within that arm allows me to hold heavier weights, and more padding in a flight suit in hepful. The padding also helps absorb recoil when i go shooting. There is of course the slight cosmetic reason also..."

"What? i thought it was all inside..."

Banshee detached the gauntlet from her flight suit and opened the left sleeve. "That is true, however, some people refer to me as a 'Rambo-Wannabe' as it is, and this would probably reinforce that opinion".

A single line, about one centimeter across, ran down either side of Banshee's elbow, stopping short of the ends of the arm. From anywhere but up close they would look like jutting veins on a reasonably muscular frame.

Seer laughed "Oh yeah i see whatya mean"

Banshee quickly replaced the sleeve and gauntlet, unsure what to think of Seer laughing, and unsure what she would think of the tale generally. Inwardly, Christine congratulated herself - that was the first time she'd told the tale in many years, and she had only faltered once, and not shed a single tear. *There are better ways to remember than to cry*

"Anyway,..." she said matter-of-factly, her voice losing any emotion it may have shown "we had better hurry to this briefing. It will be interesting to see what Crone makes of Kat's revelations"

"Indeed!" giggled Seer, playfully punching Banshee's arm

"Hey, that's my line!" Banshee actually laughed, as they began walking once more towards their impending assembly

Vexus

Tue Jun 07, 2005 11:11 am

Aurora and the Novas with her took their seats in the briefing room just as Christine and Cassie entered. Now only Kat was still absent. As the two pilots neared the rest of the group, Aurora addressed them.

"How's our poor tech holding up?"

Bzzzzzz!

"Sleeping all snug in her quarters, sir," Christine replied dryly.

Bzzzzzz!

"Good."

The Novas were now in their flight suits and ready to go. Aurora hoped Kat would make it back before the CAG showed up, lest there be another lecture on proper pilot protocol.

Bzzzzzz!

"Did she say anything else on your way over there?"

Bzzzzzz!

"...No, sir, she was just mubling."

BZZZZZ!

"Seer, what the **hell** are you doing?!" Aurora exclaimed. The little pilot was making a strange mechanical sound with her lips every time Christine moved her left arm.

"Oh, nothing, sir," Cassie said quickly with a grin.

Aurora shook her head.

She better not be this way for the entire patrol.

Maverick

Wed Jun 08, 2005 5:09 am

There was a crash at the door to the breifing room and Kat opened the door, hand on the doorway and panting heavily. Brushing the hair from her face, Kat walked down to her chair muttering "I'm sorry" over and over.

"I hope I'm not late. OSI kept me longer than I thought."

Bzzzzz!

"Seer, what the hell!?" Aurora yelled frantically.

"Sorry sir."

"Well you got here just in time Kat. Breifing hasn't started." Aurora said. Kat breathed a sigh of relief and sat down, re-adjusting her hair so that it was presentable.

Vindicare

Wed Jun 08, 2005 12:36 pm

"I assure you sir, if you hear that again, it will be followed by a loud *SNAP* and silence" Banshee's form didnt move. Her gaze was fixed on the wall display, head and eyebrows lowered. Her muscles rippled as she tensed them, clenching her fists in her lap. The clicking of her knuckles seemed to serve as a full stop to that sentence.

So THAT is how she takes it.

There were a few alarmed glances, a quizzical one from Kat, and a wide-eyed one from Seer. Sure enough, the noise stopped

Schamann

Fri Jun 24, 2005 5:05 pm

The flightpath of the patrol took Dark Novas way behind the Morrigan's aft, obviously a rearguard job. Considering circumstances the spirits were high. Novas kept joking on the comms and while staying vigilant, they also had the time to fool around a little, play a bit of chasing each other in their fighters, look in awe at Ducky's show. Crone did not forbid. She knew that a moment of relax was necessary every now and then, and that the more comfortable her girls should feel in the cockpit, the more effective they will be when things get dirty. When they do, and they surely will do, what becomes of this bunch of people, with this handful of lives trapped in the edge of nowhere spilling blood and tearing guts for the right to make holes in rocks?

The radar beeper woke her up from the daydreaming.

"We got something. Full alert"

"Already at it." Banshee acknowledged with a reassuring calmness.

"Heabss, Sear, oen me" Claymore was on her toes as well

They were five Sirens, all of them Charans, but none of them bore the Bloodmoon signs. Instead, they responded on alliance frequency with a friendly hello.

"This is lieutenant Cherev from the 12th Squadron Firedrakes, good day to you Terran pilots"

There was something odd in it. Charans welcoming Terrans in space just as if nothing had happens over all those years. Something unnerving.

"This is lieutenant Yates from Terran Dark Nova fighter squadron, identify your mothership, your mission and your destination" Crone was cold on the comm, but it was the cold of a freezing mountain wind, seconds before it pushes you from the rockshelf and down into your death.

"What's that wrath for, Terran girl? We're in one business here now, aren't we?"

"I will not repeat my question again. Novas – assume attack formation and arm your weapon systems". Never before did Novas hear Crone sound so... creepy. There was something in the proverbial air and nobody sane would like it.

"We're Aruna's squadron, on patrol through nearby sectors, on the lookout for the Blood moon carrier or other threats, are you happy now, miss hate'em'all?"

The identification signal came after but a second, and it took no more than a second for Kat's equipment to read it.

"Catnip here, their identification codes are correct, those are the fighters from Aruna that we gave Alliance IDs just yesterday."

"Nevertheless, shouldn't they be like, in internment camp or something?" Duck did not seem to be totally convinced."

"I don't like it." Hobbs spoke with worried voice.
 "There's nothing here to like." Crone was obviously in a bad mood.

"Yates here, Firedrakes you may proceed with you patrol route"

The response was almost too sarcastic.

"Oh thank you sir. What would we do without you."

"You'd die from your own soldiers' fire as your previous ship did."

"Or maybe as Flame did."

They flew by on their way, and there was silence. For like an hour it was.

"Catnip here, I have something, it's not exactly in our flight path, to be frank it's completely out of it, but it looks like too many radio and magnetic signals for interference. It's some kind of medium sized ships, two of them, transports, perhaps?"

Charon	Fri Jun 24, 2005 5:45 pm
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Claymore grimaced inside the cockpit. Her scanners must not have been dialed up all the way, because she wasn't even seeing the hint of anything in the direction that Catnip was indicating. Maybe OSI was tweaking her systems a bit? It made sense to Claymore, anyways.

She keyed in her private XO channel to Crone. "Nova 2 secure teh Lead, meh ah soogest a wee bit o' caution, sirrr? 'Twould behoove oos tae tread lightly - especially in light oof oor strained relations wi' th'Aruna's crew. Mebbe call in tae th'Morrigan an' see wha' th' CAG has tae say?"

Crone paused a bit before responding, and when she did so, the mild amusement in her voice - presumeably at Claymore's burr - was evident even through the scrambler's distortion.

"True enough, 2. I'm going to break up the formation into two elements. I'll give the assignments over the squad channel. Sound good?"

"Rogah!" Claymore grinned ferally. A chance to do some snooping on someone instead of waiting for them to come to the Novas!

A minute's pause, and then, "Nova Lead to Morrigan, we have probable contacts at bearing 230 mark 48 relative, approximately 100 klicks out. Profile suggests multiple transports, possibly with escorts. Request permission to detach an element to investigate."

Claymore frowned for a second, then realized that in that minute's pause, Crone had been gathering the information from Catnip. Radio discipline was picking up in the squadron. Good.

The response came back shortly. "Nova Lead, this is Morrigan. Permission granted. Leave an appropriate sized element on station, and investigate. You are NOT cleared to engage, should they prove hostile."

"Roger that. Lead out." Crone cleared her throat, then began handing out assignments.

Vexus	Sat Jun 25, 2005 2:12 pm
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Crone shook her head with resignation. Only a couple hours together in space as a full squadron again and now they were splitting up.

"Alright, girls, listen up. Catnip and Banshee, you're with me to check out these contacts. The rest of you stay with Claymore on patrol."

"Sir," came Hobbit's calm voice, "It would be tactically sound for me to accompany you as well. You might need a markswoman if things get dicey."

Crone was just about to object when the true meaning of Hobbs' words hit home. The squad leader swallowed and tightened her jaw. Hobbit was right of course... and they had both made a promise to their squadron.

"Very well then, Hobbs, you can come along as well. Claymore, stay in contact, but do not come after us if we get in trouble without clearing it with the Morrigan."

"Aye, sirrr," acknowledged the XO, "Happy hunting to ya."

Gracefully, four of the seven sirens broke away and turned toward the distant, unknown targets.

Vindicare	Sat Jun 25, 2005 4:06 pm
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"Acknowledged Sir, Nova 5 coming to new bearing 230, low and port of Nova Lead" Banshee slotted her Siren neatly into place, and while waiting for the others to form up, began programming some power distribution routines.

On approach, we will be needing ECM, ECCM, EES and maneuverability, then sensors, then thrusters....hmm better to make that 80% thrusters for now...and another template...40% shields 20% thrust, 40% weapons systems. How nice it is to fly a real fighter for once

Crone's voice sounded once more "Element Lead to Element, our priority is intelligence gathering, therefore Catnip should be guarded closely. her sensor gear is more likely to be picked up than ours. We need to create as little disturbance as possible - power down non-essential systems and pump up countermeasures" various acknowledgements could be heard over the comm. Banshee merely loaded "Preset 1" on her distribution system and smiled a little There are some advantages to having been a technician. A further comment arrived from Crone, "Let's get Dark, Novas. Move out."

Maverick	Tue Jun 28, 2005 12:41 am
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Catnip's RIAS beeped pitiously, craving attention. She obliged it meekly and read over the data spilling over onto her screen.

"Catnip to Crone over." It was only a brief second until Crone chimed in on the tight-beam.

"Give me everything you have Cat."

"Roger sir. I have confirmation on two military grade personnel transports. Both have a dull, dark gray finish. The far transport has three dents in the front, the largest being about a foot in diameter. The near one has a decal that looks like...a pussy? Or at least I-"

"....What?" Crone interrupted.

"A cat sir...the decal looks like a kitten." Catnip replied.

"We really didn't need to know that Cat. Anything else that is relevant?"

"Unless you want to know what the ships had for fuel this morning, I can only tell you that they're transports for now sir. Definately military though."

"Alright Cat, good job. Keep scanning for anything else." Crone replied.

"Will do sir." Cat said, tweaking the RIAS in her Siren while ignoring the unsaid comments from the rest of Element. "Not my fault if it looks like a cuddly pussy cat..." She muttered to herself.

Charon	Thu Jul 07, 2005 6:43 pm
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Crone piped a burst transmission to Claymore, detailing what Catnip had uncovered about their mystery contacts. Upon hearing that it was two transports, Claymore frowned.

"It's nae normal fer transporrrts tae be travellin' wi'oot escorrts," she mused to herself. "Nae in a disputed zone."

The more she thought about it, the more it rankled at her. She knew that the longer she waited, the further away Crone got, and the less chance of her receiving any transmission in time there was. But there was nothing concrete to go on!

Her frustration mounting, Claymore fired a transmission to Crone, outlining her concerns. Crone replied quickly. "Trust me, I've already considered that. But the fact remains that we are patrolling in order to protect the Morrigan, and this is an unknown that must be investigated. Keep the Morr apprised of our situation, and be ready to respond quickly with force, but remember to check in with the Morr. We're going to check it out now."

"Oonderstood, sirrr," responded Claymore, somewhat mollified by the fact that Crone was a step or

two ahead of her, and the fact that she would be the Quick Reaction Force for her mates. She kept one eye on her scopes, the other on her multi-function display, waiting for the call for help. All she seemed to be doing, though, was increasing her pulse rate.

It was always the waiting that was the worst part. Once the waiting was over, she'd feel better...

Vexus

Tue Jul 12, 2005 7:32 am

As Crone and the rest of her team closed in on the contacts, Catnip's voice sounded into the squad leader's ear.

"I have silhouette recognition! They're a pair of Charan military assault transports, Versi-Class."

Shit. Crone's mind suddenly became a wash in cautious speculations. Where were the escorts? Were they somehow cloaked from their sensors? Were they headed for the Alliance bases around Lavania?

"Would we be in their sensor range, Cat?"

"Not yet, I think, but in moments we will be."

"Good. We have their positions, and I don't like the fact that I don't see an escort. We'll swing back to the Morrigan and report this."

"Sir, I-"

"No, I won't let you get a closer look, Cat. We're playing safe this time while we still have the option. Novas, come about."

"Dark Nova 7 to Kitomer and Algeron! Code Alpha-Echo-597"

What the hell?! "Cat! Come about and cease transmission immediately, that's an order!" A new voice now sounded over the frequency.

"Kitomer to DN7, code confirmed, transmit new rendezvous coordinates."

"Dark Nova 7 to Kitomer, transmitting now. Confirmed Morrigan and daughter squadrons friendly, your contact is Verulian."

"Cat! You better start talking or I'm having Hobbs frag your engines!"

"Apologies, sir. But I had orders to contact and guide these vessels to the Morrigan if encountered. They're more defectors, sir. The majority of them, actually."

"If that's true, where are their escorts?"

"Sir, I don't think I can disclose-"

"Cat... You're a good spook and a decent woman, but if you don't take your OSI-secrecy-bullshit and cram it up your ass right now-"

"YES...sir... I understand, sir. There are no escorts, sir. They were delegated to the Gretchen and Aruna for use in decoy maneuvers to pull away loyal Confederate forces from the transports' flight path."

Crone sighed and calmed herself before speaking again.

"Cat, from now on, give me the necessary info, THEN take action. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Alright, Novas. As we are here, and the transports are on route to the Morrigan with no escort, it seems prudent to give them one... at least until the Morrigan sends out a more official one. Dark Nova 1 to Kitomer and Algeron!" The four Sirens were now swooping in along side the large transports, two large, long vessels that looked quite battle-scarred.

"Kitomer here, go ahead."

"We're going to provide you an escort at least part-way to the Morrigan, copy?"

"We copy, thanks Dark Nova." Crone ignored the offer of gratitude.

"How many you got down there?"

"Around 700 or so per ship. Mostly civilians, with a scattering of local Militia forces. We-" Suddenly the transmission turned to static and Crone could see the Kitomer shudder. Catnip managed to get a narrow-beam signal to Crone.

"Sir, something's wrong. I'm getting energy spikes from inside the Kitomer." The static on the broadband frequency was then replaced with a menacing voice that sounded as if it was being digitally altered to prevent recognition. To the surprise of all the Dark Novas, the voice was unmistakably male.

Attention, traitors of the Confederacy! If you are hearing this message, then our operatives among you have fulfilled their mission. The Crimson Shield will not tolerate any cowardly attempts by its protectorates to return to the Alliance on their knees and beg like dogs for the oppression we have given our blood to cast off. Your vessel will be destroyed as a warning to any other confederates who would betray their nation to satisfy their own petty desires. However, let it not be said that we are without mercy. You have twenty-six minutes to hand over control of your ship to our on-board operatives. If you do not, we suggest you instead take the time to contemplate your flawed and dishonorable choices in this life, and prepare for the next. The Shield protects! Long live the Confederacy!

For a couple moments, the subsequent silence was deafening. Banshee finally spoke up.

"Banshee to Crone, my sensor range has dropped dramatically. The Shield operatives may have activated a dampening field... plus our proximity to the Border is not helping."

"Kitomer to Dark Nova! Request assistance!"

"Algeron here! What's going on? Is there something we can do to help?!"

The situation was becoming confused, and fast. Crone needed as much info as she could get.

"Algeron, stand by! Cat! Scan the Kitomer with everything you got, I want to know what caused those energy spikes."

Vexus	Sun Jul 17, 2005 2:03 am
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As the seconds ticked by, Crone's mind raced through the possibilities, none of them good. A cynical part of her began to muse over how blissfully uneventful some of her previous assignments had been compared to this one. She had laughed along with the Tigers when they joked about the new, cushy job she was going to in the Pilot Corps.

Crone didn't think the joke was very funny anymore.

"Cat to Lead," came the familiar voice to Crone's ear, "first scan pass complete."

"Report."

"The Kitomer's been racked with internal explosions, sir. The placement suggests planted bombs instead of a malfunction. I would surmise that they've been detonated to cut off access to the ship's reactor core."

"So that the Shield can blow it without interference when the clock reaches zero," Hobbit concluded grimly.

"However," Cat continued, "The pattern has a gap in it. Looks like one of their devices failed to go off. I gave the Versi-Class specs a quick look, and the gap should allow access to the reactor area from the secondary shuttle bay via some maintenance tunnels."

"We should call in the Algeron," Banshee's calm voice sounded over the comm. "They must have some troops who could storm the place."

"There are two problems with that, I'm afraid," replied Cat. "First, neither transport has any shuttles to use. Two, I've detected a power build up in the Kitomer's weapon's grid. The Shield may have managed to hack the weapon's control from the bridge. If so, they could open fire on the Algeron if it tries to get close enough to dock."

Crone's brow lowered in thought as she saw her options slip away one by one. "Cat, can you get a signal out to Claymore or the Morrigan?"

"I've been trying since the explosions, sir. I'm not getting any confirmation. I do have a comm buoy I can launch, though. It should clear the dampening field within a few minutes."

"In any case," Hobbit added, "would help even reach us in time? Maybe they could just give up for now, and hand the ship over to the Shield until our forces get here."

"We do that," Cat shot back, "and they'll call for reinforcements: the Spectre or God knows what else may be nearby. The OSI can't risk it."

Crone spared a few moments for thought, beads of sweat forming on her forehead. Banshee's next words mirrored Crone's own voice of reason.

"We should cut our losses, sir, and fall back to escort the Algeron. The Kitomer's lost."

Then Crone suddenly recalled the girl trapped on that floating piece of Gretchen wreckage, still alive but slowly and torturously succumbing to the vacuum of space. Could she bare that sight once more?

Crone set herself and began to issue orders, her tone offering no more chances for debate.

"Cat, launch the buoy, then follow us in. Novas, we're hitting that shuttle bay and going in on foot. We'll try to secure the reactor room and disable whatever explosives might be there." As the Sirens headed towards the rear section of the Kitomer, Cat did a quick spin and fired of a small pod that quickly rocketed away from the scene. As the shuttle bay came into view, Crone contacted the transports.

"Nova Lead to Kitomer, what's your status?"

"It's chaos done here, Novas," came the commander's shaken voice. "There are explosions everywhere, our sensors are being jammed, and our weapons controls are locked out."

"I need you to open and pressurize the secondary shuttle bay. We're heading in to assist you. Do you have any Militia forces near the shuttle bay or reactor room?"

"I have no idea. We took off in a hurry and had no time to compile a manifest."

"That explains how the Shield slipped on-board," muttered Banshee. "Very sloppy."

"Try to contact them and explain the situation, but only to those you can trust. I want to avoid friendly fire situations, if possible. Nova Lead to Algeron, come in."

"Algeron here."

"The Kitomer's weapons are hot and the Shield's finger is on the trigger. Stay clear and maintain current course. When you clear the interference, contact the Morrigan if you can. Also, send whatever security you have down to your engineering section. The last thing we need is two hijacked ships."

"Copy that, Novas. Good luck."

As the shield doors to the Kitomer's shuttle bay slid aside and the Sirens carefully entered the cavernous space bathed in red alert-status lighting, two thoughts came to Crone's mind. The first was this could possibly be the stupidest command decision she had ever made (and quite possibly the last).

The second was in her father's voice, telling her that she would probably need to find a bigger gun than the pea-shooter side-arm she had in her cockpit.

Vindicare	Tue Jul 19, 2005 9:09 pm	
<p>Banshee set down carefully by the near corner of the hangar, following SOP and facing the exit, just as her training taught her. She had to be dictated by training now, as logic had been disregarded by her superior. <i>And Ursula dug at me regarding a 'Hero Complex'...</i> The flight helmet came off with a swish as her hair unbundled and fell down her back. This was soon corrected; reaching under the seat produced the required white hairband, and the tying of her hair in an enclosed space was one well practiced by the technician within her.</p> <p>That task done, she reached for the cockpit release, but stopped. She realised that they were now very likely approaching a close-quarters-combat situation, something that Crone and herself had been in before...<i>But, how will the others fair...Cat isnt so good with combat as a whole, and Hobbit had that incident that shook her some time ago...oh dear...</i></p> <p>Christine sighed slightly "Oh well, i suppose i will have to take point" <i>like always</i> she mused, and the downcast face split into a somewhat menacing smile, her eyes closing.</p> <p><i>Cast off your fear, look forward; Go forward, Never stand still. Retreat and you will age, hesistate and you will die!</i></p> <p>When the eyes opened again, anyone looking could have seen the deep resolve resounding within them - Kill or be Killed.</p> <p>A small 'pip' from her targetting computer focused her interest away from the near future and back to the task at hand. She looked at the display.</p> <p>"Banshee to Crone, is your targetting computer registering anything -inside- the ship? I seem to have a contact close to us, detecting energy based weaponry".</p> <p>"Crone here, nothing on my systems, are you sure it isnt just a problem to do with the dampening field?"</p> <p>"I don't believe so sir, that would block out contacts, not create false ones. These systems appear to be operating on a frequency not included within the damper's parameters..." <i>Personal weapons</i> both of them thought, or so it seemed.</p> <p>"Cat, do the colonials have any militia and/or guards down here?"</p> <p>a brief silenced while the requested information was obtained</p> <p>"No, the most they have found so far are just some MP's who have their stunners with them. They're trying to form a perimeter to protect the civilians".</p> <p>Thoughts raced through the two minds. One came to a different conclusion, more befitting of her rank.</p> <p>"Nova's, dismount. We need a sit-rep fast".</p> <p>Hydraulic hissing filled the chamber as the cockpits levered themselves open, and as Banshee hopped to the deck, she noted with some relief that all present at least had their holsters on.</p> <p>"Ok" Crone breathed deeply "We are here because there are Crimson Shield operatives trying to sabotage this ship and kill civilians. We don't know how many there are, but we know their aim is to use the power core to help create the explosion. Banshee, you picked up some readings a while ago, any idea what they were?"</p> <p>"I believe they were personal weapons sir, probably rifles".</p> <p>"How did your targetting computer register something like that?"</p> <p>"Unknown, sir, however i do know that it is easily possible with some...software revisions...but i have done nothing of the sort".</p> <p>"Regardless, we have a possible threat..."</p> <p>"I'd like to check that, sir" Banshee's eagerness caught the others a little off-guard.</p> <p>Crone pondered for a moment, obviously weighing up tactical possibilities. "Very well, but check is all you will do. If you find Shield loyalists retreat and let us know".</p> <p>"Understood" <i>but not accepted</i></p> <p>Banshee moved towards the door, unclipping the bulky padding from her left arm as she did so, dropping it onto the floor. Crone caught the glint of something that had been secured underneath the padding as the arm came up to operate the door, and breathed a small "Oh no...", loud enough to draw alarmed glances from the two smaller pilots still with her.</p> <p>"I...uh..just remembered something. Don't worry about it. Anyway, this could get interesting - Cat, how's your aim with that pistol?"</p>		

"Well, i know which end is which..heh...i mean, i haven't fired one for a while"

"Ok, well i guess Urs and I will take the lead...i have this feeling we should catch up with Banshee"

Ursula spoke up "Didn't you tell her to report back here?"

"Yes...but I also forgot that being told isn't the same as doing for Christine. Especially not when it comes to rebels". She cast a glance to the door that Banshee had disappeared through, the figure no longer in sight.

Banshee padded as fast as was possible while remaining quiet down the corridor, which was thankfully made easier by the apparently lighter gravity setting on the ship. *"Something to do with the gravity on the colonies being lower, i expect"*

She slowed. Her brain told her the distance to target was close, so she pressed against the wall and sidled to the next corner. Peering round, she could see a standard pressure/blast door, along with a head through the porthole. It being a closed blast door, there was no way of knowing what was being said, but the head moved as if in conversation. "So...two of them". She straightened out, pressed against the wall, and removed her weapons from their holsters. The standard sidearm went to her right hand. The 11.4" wakizashi that was strapped to her forearm went to her left. She thumbed the hilt. 2 notches. Today that would change.

The door opened suddenly, and Banshee could hear two voices in animated discussion about why the women and children had to die.

"...if we don't set an example, more will flee to the alliance, abandon the cause!"

"But we could just kill them here and take the ship back...remember our resources are more limited than the navy's!"

"Not why, rather how". That made her muscles tense, and Crone's command easier to forget. They were definitely hostile. It just remained to see how....

One began walking, footsteps came closer and eventually passed by, with the owner being a lightly armoured Shield enforcer, packing a standard issue rifle, much like Crone's pride and joy. The woman continued walking past, obviously on a patrol. An opportunity. When the first woman had rounded the corner Banshee lept out from the side passage and lunged with her full body weight behind her blade. It passed through the aegis vest, designed to dissipate fire from energy weapons, between the ribs, through the heart and out of the chest of the sentry.

As she withdrew the blade, a shadow moved on the wall in front of her. The other sentry on a circular path? back already?

The woman rounded the corner, looked shocked at the discovery of her comrade, and even more shocked by the person standing against the wall. Her weapon came up and loosed off a charge, which impacted with the ceiling above Banshee's crouching form.

It was enough to throw her concentration just a little, and this time the blade was not so true. The woman screamed in agony, despite Banshee's best efforts to silence her. Eventually she dropped to the ground, but now Banshee could hear hurried footsteps approaching, and could not decipher from which direction they came. She reattached her blade to the clips on the arm of her flight suit, and rounded a corner with her pistol out. A voice sounded from behind her.

"FREEZE!"

The voice sounded a mix of outrage and fear, but Banshee complied. "Drop the pistol". This she also did. "How far did you think you would get, running around in a white flight suit like that?" the voice became jaunty. *Amateur...* It was closer now. "Well, Alliance bitch?". *Right behind me.*

Chrissy felt the prod of the rifle's barrel in her back. "I'm not shooting you until i hear an answer!"

"Very well. Those who hide...**NEED TO!**" she spun clockwise, removing her blade from the back of her left arm and slashing right-handed. She had misjudged the height, and the blade impacted on the right side of the Colonial's neck. The force was not strong enough to sink the blade far, but the jugular had been hit and the job was done. In moments she would die. Banshee looked at the colonial, whose blood now spattered her own flight suit. "Hesitate, and you will die" was all she said looking at the dying form. Presently the laboured breathing stopped, and Banshee lifted the weapons from each of the women and moved the bodies to lockers, before walking back in the direction she had come from.

Thank you, Sakukiri. Today we have evened the score. But that is not enough. They will pay thousandfold!

Crone and Hobbit were running down the corridor from the hangar, Cat had remained with the Sirens to provide some security and also try to glean some information from her contacts.

Suddenly the sound of footsteps was drowned out by a scream. Their paces quickened. "I don't think that was Banshee..." Crone remarked hopefully. Hobbit looked at her for a second "I don't think Banshee CAN scream...which means..." Crone's eyes narrowed "It means she totally god damn ignored what i said. If they dont get her, i will!" her pace quickened to an extent that the shorter pilot could no longer keep up.

After what seemed an age, Crone arrived at a crossroads in the corridor, a large blast door on each section. All of them were closed. She began working her way round the room, trying each door in turn, but they seemed to require a code, and the override was on the other side.

"Where did she go? how did she get past here?" Hobbit exclaimed somewhat out of breath as she arrived.

At that moment Crone saw something on one of the portholes...something red. "Hobbs...i think you should go back to check on Cat"

"Why?"

"Just trust me, please"

Ursula looked a little confused, but the look in Crone's eyes spoke forcefully to her "...ok"

Hobbs turned to go, when one of the doors opened. Crone instantly dropped to one knee, pistol out and steady. "Freeze!"

Banshee stepped through the doorway.

"Banshee! Are you hit? how bad is it?" Ursula was immediatly concerned.

"Pardon?"

"Your hip and leg! its covered in blood! doesn't it hurt?"

"Oh...ah...it's....not mine..."

Ursula went a deathly shade of white, while Crone seemed to prefer a more purple hue.

Vexus

Thu Jul 21, 2005 7:15 am

It was now Seer's turn.

"I spy, with my all-seeing eye, something-"

"A starr," Claymore said, no longer trying to hide the sheer boredom from her voice.

"Whoa," Seer said in mock-amazement, "And they call *me* clairvoyant."

"Ducky, anything teh reportt?" Claymore asked with a yawn, her idle hands switching between cycling through her scanners and playing with the zipper on her flight-jacket.

"Some Border static to port," Ducky replied in a similar monotone. "Same as always."

While the lack of stick-action on the patrol was now getting to Claymore and Ducky, it was the silence that ate away at Seer. Sure enough, she was the first to break each one, and the next was no exception.

"..... Hey! You know what really bugs me about our flight lockers on the Morrigan?..... C'moooooon, guess!"

Claymore put her head in her hands. *Now I know why Crone left her here on patrol.* "Alrrright... um... oh-fer-chrrissake... behcause teh top shealf is too high fer yea to reach?"

"Wrong! It's because the top shelf is too hi-.... Oh, you *were* right. Wow, you're on a roll today, Miss XO, ma'am."

"Ducky, please tell meh the Charran 7th Battle Fleet is on our scannerrrs."

"Sorry, ma'am"

"I'm nae picky. A battleship will do... a crusierrr... a patrol... a civilian linerrr?"

"Nothing but space dust, hydrogen, and helium, ma'am."

"Perrfect."

".....Hey! You know what-"

"NO!!!" Claymore and Ducky said simultaneously.

"Stand by, ma'am," Ducky sounded, suddenly alert, "I'm getting a faint signal. Terran Navy emergency frequency.... It's coming from back along our patrol route."

Shit. Crone. Claymore decided to reflect on the warning "Be careful what you wish for" when she got back to base.

"Hard about, lassies! Let me know as soon as anyone is able to read the transmission."

Recovering from her initial alarm, and seeing Banshee looking down at her blood-stained flight suit with casual disdain, Crone's fury returned with a vengeance. But first things first, the squad leader whirled around to face Hobbit.

"Hobbs! I told you to go back and get Cat over here! Have her patch into her ship's comm before she leaves the hangar. Now move your ass!" Crone's shouting snapped Hobbit back to her senses. With a pained but understanding expression, she nodded and ran back down the corridor. Crone then swung back to Banshee. The pilot was now cleaning her blade on the uniform of one of the fallen Shields.

"Lieutenant Auten, what orders did I give you?"

Banshee, anticipating the inevitable dressing-down, heaved the smallest, annoyed sigh as she made to stand at attention. To Crone, she had now officially crossed the line.

In a flash, Crone's left hand shot forward and closed around Banshee's neck, the squad leader's force shoving her back against the nearby bulkhead. The Brit's trained reflexes brought up her own hand, the blade flashing as it came in a metallic blur. Crone's other hand caught the wrist, misdirecting the blow and then pinning the arm across Banshee's chest, the blade resting against her other arm. For a dangerous second, two pairs of battle-hardened eyes stared wildly at one another, trying to will the other to back down. Crone spoke with quiet intensity even as she fought not to notice the small reddening tear that had just appeared on the side of her flight suit.

"If our places had been exchanged... in a *combat* situation... would you have tolerated that?"

Banshee's body finally relaxed. "No.... My apologies, sir. I was out-of-line." Slowly, the two pilots disengaged and Banshee slipped her blade back into its hidden resting place. Crone picked up one of the plasma rifles, and as she checked it for coolant and ammo, she addressed Banshee once again.

"You'll take rear-guard from now on. Hobbs will move to the front."

"Yes, sir," Banshee acknowledged with a frown. Soon after, Catnip and Hobbit arrived. The OSI spook had indeed brought a headset with her, and was still fussing with it as she walked. Plasma rifles were distributed to Banshee and Hobbs. Cat didn't mind keeping just her pistol. She insisted she had never liked the bigger guns anyway. With everyone accounted for and as ready as they would ever be, Crone led the four pilots at a quick pace down the red, shadowy corridors. They were running out of time.

Charon

Sat Jul 23, 2005 1:12 am

It wasn't too long before Claymore was able to filter through the static and catch the transmission that had been sent her way. She cursed as the information came through, then commed to the *Morrigan*

"Nova 2 teh *Morrigan*, flash traffic!" This let the comm watch know that her traffic was vitally important, and should be given immediate priority.

"Go ahead, Nova 2," came the musical reply. *Moost beh th'Italian, today*, she noted idly, before continuing.

"Nova Lead r'porrrts contacts are two friendly transporrrts, boot their situation has become compromised dae tae insurrrent actions aboarrd one o' them. No damage teh Alliance forrrces as yet, boot they arrre boarrding th'damaged vessel teh help deal wi' th'insurgents. Request permission teh join oop wi' them teh assist."

After a moment, the voice of the CAG came over the comm, her English accent, as always,

triggering something deep within Claymore's id. She shook it off and listened to her superior.

"Nova 2, this is the CAG. You are cleared to assist Nova elements currently engaged against hostiles. Be advised, the Morning Stars will be enroute your station to resume BARCAP *Morrigan*. Radio sitrep as soon as able. CAG out."

Claymore was unable to keep the grin off of her face as she responded. "Aye, ma'am. Nova will reporrrt when on-station. Oonderrrrstand replacement by Morrning Starrr. Nova 2, oot."

She switched her transmitter to the squadron-only channel. "Well, me lassies, who's ready tae hae a wee bit o' foon?"

Seer immediately responded with a loud, resounding "MEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

It was all Claymore could do to keep from exploding with laughter.

Vexus

Fri Jul 29, 2005 11:46 am

The ease by which Crone slipped back into her ground combat training was so smooth as to be almost instinctual. In the emergency light and shadow, she had her small band creep silently through the hallways. Every few minutes, Cat would whisper her directions from a pad she held with the Kitomer's specs on it, graciously transmitted by the ship's commander who was now cut off from this area with the rest of her crew in the decks above. Hobbit took the lead without complaint or outward sign of fear, but Crone sensed her terror and a voice at the back of her mind was screaming romantic accusations. The squad leader did all she could to ignore it. She kept repeating the agreement to herself: *We will not let the relationship interfere with our duty*. And sure enough, after Banshee's violent disobedience, Hobbs was the logical choice to take point.

As the Novas reached the maintenance tunnels and crawled inside single-file, Crone came to the conclusion that the lack of further encounters so far implied that either the vast majority of the Shields were hunkered down in the reactor room or (*hopefully*) there were only a few of the fanatics in total. As Crone crawled on her hands and knees, she found herself surrounded by cable and piping. Diagnostic consoles, regularly spaced in the tunnels, ticked off the distance they traveled. Cat directed them to turn at one intersection after another. Crone strained to hear anything amidst the ambient sounds of the ship's machinery and electronics, but couldn't make out anything.

At last, Cat indicated the women to exit at the next out-port. Pushing out the grating, Hobbs stepped out and suddenly tensed. Crone saw it and leaped out with weapon ready, quickly scanning the area.... Nothing.

"What is it, Hobbs?"

"Sorry, sir, I thought I heard something."

"Like what?"

"...I'm not sure. I think it was a clicking sound or something."

Crone and Hobbs stood still to listen as the other two Novas slipped out of the tunnel port, but neither heard anything unusual. Then, just as carefully as before, Crone motioned her squadmates to move out. It wasn't until Hobbs was about to check around a nearby corner, that the sound was made again. This time, Crone heard it and instantly recognized it.

"FLASHBANG!" Crone said at the same time as a small metal orb bounced in from around the corner. Training came to the service of Crone and Banshee, who covered their eyes. Hobbs and Cat didn't react fast enough. Even though Crone avoided the flash, she had no way of dodging the explosive shockwave of air that slammed into her. In an instant, she was thrown onto her back, the wind knocked out of her and her ears ringing quite painfully. The fall also forced the gun from her hand. Looking up as quick as she could and trying to fight off the dizziness and nausea, she saw several women in uniform dart around the corner with weapons at the ready. From the side of her vision, Crone could see Hobbs and Cat on the ground and feeling around in their temporary blindness. Banshee had been thrown back against a fire-suppression console and looked unconscious. Crone realized she was on her own and dived for her weapon. The lead woman, a dark-skinned specimen with long braids, saw Crone trying to reach her gun and quickly kicked it away. Then with the other foot, she pinned Crone to the deck and took aim with her rifle.

"Hands behind your head, Terran!"

"Wait! We're here to help," Crone insisted, praying that the uniforms she saw were genuine and

these were Militia forces instead of disguised Shield operatives.

"Bullshit! How many of you are there?! Why did you attack us?!"

"We didn't attack you! The Shield di- Ack!" came Hobbs voice, which was subsequently interrupted by a gun-butt to the side of her head. The sound of the blow cut Crone to the heart. The apparent leader, however, was un-phased and kept her attention on Crone.

"Right now, all I know is that the ship PA stated that there were Alliance fighters inbound. The next thing we know, the ship is rocked by explosions and we lose contact with the rest of the ship. Now, what else should I conclude?"

"That you've been betrayed by your own," sounded Banshee's voice. Both Crone and the Militia leader looked over to see Banshee holding one of the attacking soldiers in a vice grip with a gun to the head. It seemed that the soldier near Banshee had been just as convinced as Crone was that she was out cold and had taken a moment to view the drama between Crone and her own superior. Banshee had slipped up behind her, drawn her own side arm, and was now poised to kill her with it. The leader's expression betrayed her concern, but her voice remained calm.

"Don't do anything stupid, now, girl. You can't kill all of us before we kill you."

"It doesn't matter," Crone said calmly but with growing anger from beneath the soldiers boot. "In fifteen minutes or so, we'll all be dead." The surety of her tone and the fire in her eyes finally managed to reach the Militia leader. Slowly, she lifted her foot off of Crone and allowed her to stand. Banshee responded by letting her prisoner go. While the tension between the two groups of soldiers remained high, the immediate threat of a fight had been defused.

"What do you mean?" the Militia leader asked.

Before answering, Crone walked over to help Hobbs up and steady her. Banshee was already checking on Cat.

"I'll sum up the important details on our way to the reactor room," Crone said replied. "We need to stop the Crimson Shield from blowing the core."

Crone then looked back at the Militia leader with conviction. "There's no time for evidence or confirmation or bureaucracy. The choice is yours: you can either help us to save this ship or kill us."

The Militia leader took a long moment of thought, her eyes gauging Crone's sincerity, then she nodded.

"Alright, fine. For now, we'll assume your right. But you go in front of us, and understand that we'll start shooting if you try anything." Crone nodded and motioned for the Novas to get moving. Putting both her hands on Hobbs head, as if inspecting her wound, Crone whispered a soft and sad "I'm sorry" before placing a small, loving kiss on the bruised skin. Hobbs, for her part, offered a small smile and squeezed Crone's shoulder with her hand before straightening herself and moving to join Cat and Banshee in front of the Militia soldiers. As the combined force moved out, the Militia leader came up to walk beside Crone.

"Captain Blonski, by the way, now what's the situation?"

"2nd Lieutenant Yates, and it's SNAFU as usual." The captain's mouth twitched in a brief smile, then Crone began to quietly fill her in on what was happening to her ship.

Schamann

Fri Jul 29, 2005 7:02 pm

It took them less than fifteen minutes walking when they heard first shots.

"To the walls! Lizard lines! Masks and headsets on. Grace!, Vara! On point! Fire at will after IDing!"

Captain Blonski was obviously on her toes and definitely knew what to do. And so did her troops. They formed up in almost an instant, put on their gasmasks and started advancing the corridor, every corner secured, every intersection covered by no less than two riflemen from the team while they were passing by.

"I thought we were supposed to go first?" Crone suddenly felt very uneasy, seeing the militia women advancing. Something did not add up, but her head still felt dizzy from the flashbang and she could not quite focus.

"You don't think I would really put you spacejocks for death in those corridors once I found you something more than hostile targets? Are all Terran infantry **that** coward?" Blonski smiled rogueishly and Crone somehow could not feel angry. It was such a long tradition between grunts on both sides of the conflict, to question opponent on every occasion, even if the enemy was worth respect. Especially when they were worth respect. Yet, something still seemed wrong.

"Approaching the corerom doors, captain"

"OK, heavies to the front, prepare the breakers."

The team divided as if steered by one collective mind, everybody assumed their positions. Two women with heavy weapons pointed at the door waited, while their team mates prepared self-propelled controlled-concussion grenades, commonly used for breaking into rooms, corridors, and other places people usually did not want to be broken in.

The noise from behind the door increased...

Suddenly in the steel plated blast door they were approaching, there were a small window shutter open, and from it, from the inside, fell down the cylindrical, metal object size approximately of a kiwi fruit.

"Blobber! Noow!" Captain was still yet screaming when one the 'heavies' fired her grenade launcher, as if trying to countershoot the one from behind the door.

Her grenade made a silent 'poof' as it fired away and flew towards the door and with a silent 'phew' exploded in a rapidly growing ball of transparent gel alike substance. It hit the floor in front of the blast door just as the first grenade exploded. Everybody hid their heads in their arms. Crone and Banshee felt being pulled behind the infantry team members, behind their helmets and body armors. The explosions came finally, after a few split-seconds seeming to last a few years.

The bang was loud, but seemingly not loud enough for a shock grenade, that Crone immediately recognized when it first hit the floor thrown from behind the door. Then she realized what happened and what's has just been used. And what it meant.

Blobber must have been a Charan common name for the UKSPC, as in Universal Kinetically Stopping Power Countermeasure. A blob of foam alike fast growing gel reacting with nitrogen in the air, creating a powerful energy absorbing mass, able to annihilate the effect of most small explosives. Commonly used by Stormtrooper marines units and special forces.

All they felt was some wet and slippery fragments hitting them and evaporating fast, and some of the initial blow, not much though. Then came the silence in there and the gunfire noises from the other side of the door, and waiting for what was surely going to happen. Charans knew it, Banshee knew it, Crone knew it, and even Kat and Hobbs must have suspect.

When you throw a grenade to clear yourself a path, you're gonna take that path.

The door hummed and buzzed and started to open, and from behind it a heavy smoke and some figures emerged. Blonski's team awaited only the electromagnetic ID signals to verify who's in the smoke. Then they opened fire

In the first bursts Novas did not even managed to take part. Charans were fast and accurate. The enemy – surprised. After like four or five them died, they finally hid themselves and formed a firing line. One of the Blonski's Charans fell, the other cried and kneeled with her leg bleeding and bent in a peculiar direction. Crone wiped a wide burst into the door while Banshee shot a more concentrated one. Ursula fire a single shot and Crone could swear that one of the enemies fell down like a rag doll, her forehead exploding. The grenades 'heavies' fired a moment earlier finally exploded. Hobbs cried and bent forward. The third second since the blast door started to open finally passed. It was over.

Both Banshee and Crone darted to Hobbit, who was finally getting up, still vomiting. They both sighed with release, as apparently that was all the damage done to her.

"Good job, Howlers, check with Grace and dress her wounds." Blonski said to her soldiers and headed to the fallen one. She knelt beside the body and touched it softly. "Keira, rest well" she said quietly and in a very soft voice.

"would...argh! Somebody?!" it was Kat's voice. All Novas turned to her in a flash.

She was injured, a shot in the thigh. It was hard to say whether the artery was damaged, but there was blood around her and a lot of it. Some of the Charans approached her in quick paces and immediately started to take care of her wound with a portable medpack. Someone was coming from the inside of the coreroom, and suddenly Blonski shouted "Attention!"

All the grunts snapped to attention when the officer entered.

"Commander" Blonski barked in a very military fashion. "We lost contact the moment of explosions, but it seems the Terrans sent us some assistance. We encountered these pilots who informed us about the situation and directed us towards the coreroom. Then we assisted in the best way we could. Sir"

"You did good Blonski, although maybe not as good as I expected. See to it that the wounded are taken into the medwing, and that the Terran one is not allowed to make contact with anyone or touch any devices more complex than a spoon. Disarm the Terrans and put them into arrest."

Everybody froze. Three novas seized their firearms, but Charans had an advantage of not being crouched on the floor beside their wounded companion.

Blonski was the first to speak:

"Yates..." she spoke quietly "don't make you girls die in vain, you don't have a chance"

As if to confirm these words, a dozen or so Charan marines appeared in the open blast door.

Crone clenched her teeth in silent despair
"surrender your weapons, Novas"

The Commander continued:

"The ship is now secured, the fanatics were too few and too disorganized, for our luck. However the security of our mission was compromised and from now on we are on a red alert all the time. Everybody caught wandering in places off her limits will immediately be arrested."

Then she addressed the Terran pilots:

"You've seen what you should have not. You will be interned and kept safely until our mission is over. None of the personnel will be allowed to speak with you. If I find out that you are up to something, one of you will be executed. Every time, starting with the wounded one. Otherwise no harm will be done to you."

Novas stood there silent, grim. Unable to think about anything else from the assault transport, if not two of them, full of trained marines, approaching Morrigan that will treat it as friendly.

When Claymore's group arrived at the scene, the situation seemed to be under control, at least judging from radio transmissions. Save for one thing.

"Kitomer this is Claymore, repeat!" Rhiannon shouted into her comm. Feeling her heart sink.

"Kitomer here. The Terran pilots died in a firefight with the Shield fanatics. They helped us a lot and sacrificed themselves for our salvation. They deserved to be named heroes, but we are positive they're dead. I'm sorry. We will transfer the bodies to you as soon as we reach the RV point with your mothership."

JediBubbles

Sat Jul 30, 2005 4:30 pm

"WHAT?!" Ducky's outburst was followed by a stunned silence as the still-spaceborne Novas registered what Kitomer had said. Finally Claymore responded.

"Underrstood, Kitomer. Thank you. We'll b'on our way, then. Over and out. Ducky, Seer...back to the *Morrigan*." Two of the Sirens slowly about-faced, but one remained facing the Charan vessel, utterly still.

"Seer--"

"They're lying." Seer's voice was oddly quiet and calm.

"Now, Seerr, ah know yer ups--"

"This has nothing to do with grief, Claymore. They're lying. They're not dead...yet..."

"What the f*ck, Seer, we just helped them, why the hell would they lie about something like this?" Ducky snapped.

"I don't know, I just know they're lying! We can still get them out alive if we--"

"They're dead, Seer!" Ducky sounded distinctly angry now. "And I'm not going to storm a friendly vessel and slash or accuse them of lying just because you can't accept--"

"THA'S ENOUGH! Ducky, thi' is no time t' get twitchy. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Seer, ye will return to the *Morrigan* with us."

"But--"

"Tha's an ORDER, Lieutenant! If ye still feel they're lyin' ye can take it up with the Cap'ain. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," came the resigned reply.

"Al'right then. Morrigan, come in, this is Claymore. I'm sorry to report..."

Crone would have believed me, Cassandra thought as she grudgingly pulled her Siren around while Claymore repeated what Kitomer had told them. I'll just have to make them believe me, for everyone's sake...

Meanwhile, Crone was helping Kat negotiate the corridors to medbay. The other two captive Novas were silent, but Crone could now distinctly feel both Banshee's cold resolution and Hobbit's indignant fury boiling behind her.

She turned to one of their Charan escorts and tried to keep as much bitterness as possible out of her voice. "What will you tell the *Morrigan*?" Crone had a sneaking suspicion that she knew the answer, but it couldn't hurt to ask.

"That you died in the firefight. Silence, Terran. The threat still stands."

Having rightly guessed, Crone half-smirked, half-grimaced to herself. *Seer will see right through that. But no help from that quarter, then.*

Aware of the touchy escorts, she leaned low to Kat's ear as she practically lifted her over a vacuum-seal threshold. "Kat, what exactly can you do with a spoon?"

"I don't know, sir," Katnip winced, then smiled grimly. "But we'll find out, won't we?"

Vexus

Tue Aug 02, 2005 7:10 am

The brig on the Kitomer was about what you'd expect from any other brig on any other ship in the Galaxy. A simple, cubic space filled only with three wall-mounted benches and a toilet facility. The cell door was solid metal save for a small window, through which Crone could make out the security guard standing watch. One upper corner of the room had a mounted camera that lazily swung from side to side ever-so-slightly. All in all, it was a place that left one nothing to do except sit and think, so that's what Crone did for the most part.

With Cat still in the sickbay, the imprisoned Novas numbered three. Crone sat on a bench with her hands limply settled in her lap. Hobbit lay stretched out next to the squad leader, making sure that her wave of nausea had passed for good. Banshee paced quietly and evenly around the room. As Crone followed her with her eyes, the two exchanged a few lines every now and then, attempting to grasp the situation.

"It seems quite ironic," Banshee announced. "A Militia ambush operation so secret that even the Shield didn't know about it. So a handful of the fanatics get onboard and try to hold hostage what they think is a transport full of civilians."

"Instead," Crone completed the thought, "they run into a crack detachment of Militia troops armed for an invasion. Cute."

"Although, it is perfectly possible that the mix-up was less due to secrecy and more to just a lack

of coordination between the Shield and the rest of the Charan military."

"I've heard about the same problem between the Terran Navy and the OSI," Hobbit said from her prone position.

"In any case," Crone said, "the Morrigan's in danger now. We have to warn them somehow, while we're still alive to do so."

"Not that I'm complaining, but why *are* we still alive?" Hobbit asked.

Banshee raised an eyebrow at Crone. "Interrogation?"

"That's my guess. They'll probably want to know the Morrigan's exterior and interior defenses."

"But we're pilots, not crew officers or Marines," Hobbit said. "Plus we've only been onboard for a short time. We don't have any detailed knowledge about the Morrigan that they shouldn't know already."

"Good for the Morrigan, bad for us," Banshee replied flatly. "But it's not us I'm concerned about."

Crone nodded. It was about Cat. If the rebels found out she was OSI, then she would be questioned the most harshly, maybe even tortured. Crone didn't know how much info the OSI had given her on this supposed "defection" mission, but whatever it was, it would almost certainly be sensitive. Then again, with nothing now on them but their flight suits and stuck in a holding cell, Cat also stood the best chance of finding a way to escape.

Finally tired of her pacing, Banshee sat on the bench opposite from Crone, and heaved a sigh of boredom. She fingered her sleeve with an angry expression. Crone could appreciate that sentiment. For women such as them, losing a personal weapon was like losing an arm. Long afterwards you still expected it to be there when you felt you needed it.

Crone then heard a shuffling sound and soon found Hobbit's head in her lap, the pilot looking up at her with a mischievous glint in her eyes. With a movement as smooth as it was discreet, Banshee suddenly decided to stare at the far wall.

"Well, you know," Hobbit said with a smile, "I never thought I'd get to use this line, but this could very well be the last time we're together. So... how 'bout it?"

"How 'bout what?" Crone asked, although the small beads of sweat breaking out on her forehead told that she wasn't quite as oblivious as her words suggested."

"You know... you and me... I'm thinking why not?" Crone's mind immediately went on a desperate search to answer that question.

"Well... I mean... Banshee's right here, for one."

"I think she'd understand."

"And the camera over there..."

"Do you really think they'd care what we do in here?"

"And... we really should find a way to escape...."

"I'm open to any ideas."

As the squad leader's mind attacked the problem of escaping with renewed urgency, Hobbit smiled and pretended to check a watch that wasn't on her wrist.

"I'm waiting...."

A small grunt of amusement came from Banshee, who was still staring at the wall with great interest.

"I, um..." Crone muttered. She raised her hand to smooth her hair back, but when she saw it shaking, she quickly lowered it again. "... I don't think it would be appropriate at this particular time."

Hobbit folded her arms on her chest. "And why is that... sir?"

Crone's expression was a comical-looking mix of desperation and honesty. "Well... frankly... your breath smells like vomit."

Hobbit broke down into feverish laughter, and from across the room Banshee genuinely smiled at the wall. Soon, even Crone laughed a little.

"Alright then, sir," Hobbit said after she had calmed down. "You're excused... but not from this part." The pilot ended her statement by pulling Crone's head down and kissing her deeply on the lips. Leaving the squad leader to wonder if she should've reconsidered, Hobbit sat up, stretched, then got up to inspect the room for herself. Perhaps there was something the others had overlooked.

Vindicare

Wed Aug 03, 2005 2:23 am

Banshee smiled what she hoped looked like a convincing smile, while her brain kept repeating something over and over again.

Perhaps Kat would be alright BECAUSE she was OSI. After all, it was the OSI who were expecting these transports, not the captain. Perhaps Commander Verulian KNEW what the transports really contained, even if Kat did not. Need-to-know et al.

The only glimmer of hope she could think of would be that their fighters would be left functional, so as not to decrease the operational number once the coup was complete, keeping maximum fighter strength to repel retake attempts.

Not that having functional fighters is a lot of use to us inside a brig

She crossed her arms and the smile buckled as she felt the empty space on her left forearm. However possible, she would make them pay for that. Banshee knew it was unlikely she could retrieve *Sakukiri*, but if it became at all plausible she would try.

Killing guards is not impossible unarmed, though the marines will obviously be harder targets than those amateur Shield operatives.

She made a over-exaggerated gesture rubbing the back of her neck, titling her head towards the door while hoping to appear casual. It was an old brig, standard build, the door would not be moved with muscle alone. The window could probably fit an arm between the bars, but with considerable effort and would be easily avoidable. No, the best method would be to draw a guard in. The marines, for all their training, had made at least one mistake - the 3 prisoners still had total freedom of movement within the cell. No cuffs, no shackles. That left some options open to them.

Tiefflieger

Thu Aug 04, 2005 2:12 pm

Back on the Morrigan Anatolja was leaning casually at a workbench when Jason arrived, her arms and legs crossed. With a quick glance to the side she made sure Maynard and Sorensen were still there, working on a fighter close by. Anatolja didn't trust Jason. It was better to have some backup in case he tried something funny.

"There you are. Took your sweet time."

"Believe it or not, sweetheart, you are not the only one on this ship who desires my company."

"Jason, I didn't call you here in broad daylight because I want to make use of your 'services'. This is about our brief encounter last night. I have questions that need to be addressed."

"Might I suggest, then, that you address someone more fit to the job than me? Ship's AI for example is way better with answering questions. I am merely the artificial companion."

"Yes, very funny. You better start realizing the trouble you are in right now. I am thinking about having you shut down, your memory deleted and your system rebooted. So we can do this the easy way and you deactivate that sarcasm subroutine ob yours, or whatever you call it, and start giving some straight answers. Because, but you with your all-seeing sensors already know this, I am not in a very pleasant mood today and might actually make my threat come true if I'm not satisfied by the outcome of this conversation. I don't think too many people would miss you."

"On the contrary, my dear Petty Officer. Some of the top brass would rather let you dismantle the flight deck than me. But let us assume that I see your point. I am, after all, a companion and conducting interesting conversations is part of my routines. Thus let us talk, and I shall try to keep you entertained and satisfied. What can I help you with?"

"Well, where do we start? How about where we stopped last night? You were collecting 'test data' if

I remember correctly, right? What exactly were you testing? The strength of the rail-supporting pipes of the flight deck's gallery? I've looked those up in the ship's specs. They are made off a quite hard aluminium alloy, you know. Maybe you can tell me how it comes you are a qualified metalworker now, instead of a sexbot?"

"I know nothing about metalworks ma'am, just taking a grip on the rails does not make me a perpetrator, does it?"

This is leading nowhere. The hard way, then.

Anatolja took a deep breath and furrowed her brow, trying to think of exactly the right words to formulate a question that finally would coax the truth out of the blasted machine.

"Jason, did you apply physical force to this piece of structure..." Anatolja pointed to the damaged pipe "...so that it was deformed the way it is now? Report!"

Using the keyword 'Report' seemed to be the only way to make sure Jason spoke truth and switched off his flirting subroutines that allowed him to be manipulative about it. Jason blinked, became a bit more stiff and responded in a more unmodulated voice.

"Yes, I did."

"Jason, is the limitation of your physical strength in effect as documented in your manual? Report!"

"Yes it is."

"Was it in effect yesterday when you damaged the rail? Report!"

"Yes...no... unable to comply."

"What? Explain why you are unable to comply. Report!"

"My internal record shows no sign of malfunctioning in my safeguard systems and abilities limitations. Yet I remember squeezing the rail with all my available force, and if it's damaged, then the only reasonable explanation is that my limitations were not in effect. Conflicting circumstances apparent. No logical explanation present. Unable to come up with an answer."

"Explain why it was not in effect."

"I'm sorry, babe, I already told you, I am unable to come up with an answer, I'm sorry."

"Shut the attitude Jason, your one step from dismantling. What do you remember at the moment you squeezed the rails? Report!"

"Kate Ross being bullied and being in despair, the urge to help her, my helplessness in the situation, my frustration, my anger."

"Anger of what?"

"Anger of my helplessness, off course, what do you think should I feel? You thought giving someone macho thoughts and macho reactions you can avoid the lust for taking responsibility and solving out situations, for the power to change things?"

"Jason you are a sexbot!"

"I am what you made me! A man who wants to make things happen and who cannot do anything. What would I do being a real man, Petty Officer? Would I not hit you for treating me the way you do? Perhaps. But I won't. I can't. I exist to give you an illusion of being near the real person, yet I am not allowed ever to be one."

...

"Now is there anything else, Petty Officer Mirunova, that I can amuse you with? Because if not I would rather be alone right now."

For a moment Anatolja looked like she wanted to start the dismantling right there and now, but instead she said:

"Jason, you will submit to a full system check with an in-depth check of your emotional simulation

subroutines as well as your safeguard systems as soon as possible. And I don't mean a self-test but a monitored test, supervised by a qualified person - human person that is. I will get back to you and tell you who that person will be. Dismissed."

With his typical perky smile on his lips that did so not fit to the words that had been spoken in the past few minutes, Jason turned around and walked down the flight deck, giving Sorensen a whistle as he walked by. When he was gone, Anatolija reached into one of the numerous pockets of her jumpsuit and produced a little cylindrical object of the shape and size of a lipstick. She pressed some buttons on the side of the cylinder and Jason's voice could be heard, slightly muffled and distorted.

"What would I do being a real man, Petty Officer? Would I not hit you for treating me the way you do?"

Am I really that much of a bully?

"You want me to get Lt. Cess to do what?! This is a joke, right?"

Sparks was staring at P.O. Mirunova in utter disbelief. Cess was head of IT and the ship's highest qualified AI specialist.

"No, ma'am, no joke. As I told you I have reason to believe that there are severe security issues with the ship's sexbots programming. They might pose a risk to material and personnel."

"If I didn't know better I'd say you are still drunk."

"But..."

"I said NO! Have Ross do the test if it's so damn important to you! I won't get you any specialist from IT for nonsense like this! Now get out of my sight!"

Vexus

Sun Aug 14, 2005 12:59 am

As Hobbit continued her personal inspection of the premises, Crone felt a wave of weariness come over her. Perhaps it was her practiced ability to sleep anywhere she had to, or the mere fact that exhaustion was finally laying claim to her after all that had transpired since leaving the Morrigan. In any case, not long after her head met the hard surface of the bench, Crone drifted off into a weary sleep.

Familiar and un-welcomed memories were waiting there to greet her.

"Down the second tunnel!" Vice called into Crone's ear, leading her to take a left at the next junction. Alongside her hurried Ash, still bleeding a little from a glancing hit to the left shoulder from a laser rifle, but still in decent shape considering the situation. Aside from a few bruises, Crone could also claim to be in good shape physically, although her mind was still reeling from the explosion that had split up her team.

It was time of the Charan Outer Colony Campaign, and the White Tigers had been sent into a colonial city's sewer system to flush out the rebel forces hidden within the labyrinth of tunnels. They had just reached one of the major sewage junctions when they were ambushed. Fortunately, Swift had anticipated it. While most of the combatants were likely local Militia forces, the ones that had rushed them were almost certainly Crimson Shield. Most of them fell before the concentrated plasma fire, but one managed to activate a detonator. The junction was brought down and the White Tigers were scattered into six different passages. Only Crone and Ash had stumbled into their passage, and since then Vice had been relaying directions from Swift to all the other groups, trying desperately to meet up again before they could be picked off one by one.

As the women splashed down the tunnel, Crone noted the quick pace they were maintaining, confirming her sensation that the gravity on this world was just a little bit lower than Terran-standard. Taking a quick glance to her side, she could see Ash's strained features on her dark skin below her short, spiky black hair and behind the transparent gas mask she wore. Ash was hurting, Crone could tell, but they had to keep moving until they could reach a field medic.

They were about four turns away from the nearest group when plasma fire again erupted down the tunnel. Crone and Ash threw themselves against opposite walls and returned fire. Crone could see that she and Ash were dangerously exposed, but there was no cover nearby. However, her eyes did spy a large slick floating on the surface of the polluted water near the turn where the plasma fire was originating. Hoping it was volatile, she aimed and fired. Sure enough, the plasma ignited

the slick, and the blaze forced the assailants back. Crone and Ash seized the opportunity and rushed forward.

Around the corner Crone charged to see a group of four women and a teenage girl, all armed and all with their faces painted in crimson: the sign of the most fanatical Shield warriors. Their survival instincts on full alert, Crone and Ash took out the closest two women immediately, the plasma bursts tearing through them with sickening ease. Their guns seemingly forgotten in their fervor, the remaining women leapt onto the Alliance soldiers with wild screams, stunning the soldiers with their ferocity. Crone felt the icy-cold of a knife blade pierce her left breast, and she responded with a right hook to the rebel woman's red-dyed face. The rebel was stunned by the blow and Crone used her chance to pull in her right leg and kick her off. Pulling the dagger free, and burning with anger, Crone rose and threw the knife back, the blade whistling through the air before burying itself into the neck of its original owner. With fluid motion, Crone turned and shot the woman that was assaulting Ash. Her head caved in and her hair caught fire. With disgust, Ash threw off the limp body into the river of sewage and held the slash-wound at her side.

Both soldiers immediately trained their weapons onto the remaining girl, but both stopped short of firing. The girl had both a gun and a knife, but she had drawn neither. She simply stood there, her expression so haunting that it had snapped the two Alliance soldiers from their battle fever. For a few moments, no one moved, then the girl sank to her knees and wept. Crone and Ash looked at each other with confusion, neither having seen such action from Shield members before. Eventually, Crone lowered her gun and approached the girl. As she got closer, she realized with a mix of horror and amazement that the girl was not a girl at all, but a young boy. Not really knowing what else to do, Crone kneeled down next to the boy as Ash covered her from behind. Removing her helmet and mask, Crone asked in a gentle voice the only question she could think of.

"Are you alright?"

The boy responded with only more weeping, and Crone felt a wave of compassion she had not anticipated. Her usual, hardened heart began to buckle beneath the tears she witnessed, and surprising both Ash and herself, she reached out and embraced the boy. For a short time, as Crone held the boy with the red-painted face, a part of her admitted to the secret rightness of the scene, of how true this should have been. But it was not to last.

As the boy raised his head, his sorrow twisted into a pure hatred so violent, that Crone's mind cowered before it. With a single motion so fast as to become a bloody blur, the boy drew his blade and swung it upward as if to slice Crone's head in half. Only her blind reflexes saved her, and the movement of her head caused the blade to strike slightly to the left. The knife cut a deep swath on her left cheek, and Crone threw the boy from her embrace as she screamed in pain. The boy took off down the tunnel and Ash fired after him. However, the slash at her side made aiming painful, and the plasma shots went wide. The boy turned the corner and vanished from sight. Ash went to see to Crone's wound, but the silver-haired girl pushed her away. Her blue eyes burned and her left hand became stained crimson as she pawed at her face wound. In addition to the shock of pain, the memories of war, and the poison of propaganda, something else had been awoken within her. Despite a lifetime of little personal vanity, despite an upbringing in a world that called itself civilized, the thought of her face being deformed fueled a primal female rage.

Uttering hateful curses that bled into raw screams and roars, Crone raced after the fleeing boy. After a moment Ash followed, clearly taken aback from the abrupt change in her comrade.

With a start, Crone awoke to see Hobbit looking down at her with concern.

"Crone, wake up! Are you alright?"

Covered in sweat, Crone sat up and shook her head to clear it.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"A couple hours," Banshee answered simply from the far side of the room.

"You started to mumble louder and louder to yourself," Hobbit said. "I was getting worried." Crone rubbed her face with her hands and took a few deep breaths before standing up.

"It was just a bad dream. Don't worry about it."

Crone looked around at her cell with more determination than ever. She had to get out of this place now... before the dreams could start again.

Maverick	Sun Aug 14, 2005 11:26 pm	
<p>"The wound isn't bad. The shrapnel entered her right thigh, piercing the vastus lateralis muscle and exiting the back at the biceps femoris muscle." The Kitomer's medic was muttering as she diagnosed Cat's leg. "The right femoral artery has been hit...but it's shallow. So that won't be that much of a problem to patch up. Good thing you got her to me quickly." She said, looking over to one of the guards who shrugged her shoulders dismissively.</p> <p>"I had orders." The guard muttered. Cat's face twitched. She'd feigned fainting when they brought her into the med bay and had been listening to everyone mutter about her wound, or hating Terrans; and all the usual Charan chatter OSI usually heard.</p> <p>"The camera's on and I'll be outside if you need me." The guard told the medic, slipping out the door. "An unconscious, wounded Terran shouldn't be any problem for you." She said as the door closed.</p> <p>The medic sighed and turned back to the sutures she was making on Cat's leg. "You can stop faking." She said conversationally, finishing one of the sutures and moving to the next. Cat's heart fell into her stomach and froze. "Playing dead may fool a guard but not a medical officer hun." Cat's eye opened. The medic was a willowy brunette with the generic white coat and stethoscope around the neck. Cat was still in her flight suit, only her right pant leg was torn off high on her thigh revealing a jagged wound that was being stitched up and surrounded by the brown stain of iodine.</p> <p>"You think that in the 23rd century, they'd have a better sterilizing agent than iodine." Cat muttered, feeling the painkillers in her bloodstream dulling the pain from the wound.</p> <p>"Hey, if it's not broke, don't fix it right?" The medic said with a smirk. "Stay still." Cat had no choice but to obey.</p> <p><i>How the hell am I going to get out of this one? They're not going to let me near anything with the technological level higher than something out of the Stone Age and that video camera in the corner is going to watch my every move. To top that off...damn leg's pretty much useless.</i> Cat thought gloomily. She decided to take this time to examine the ceiling, which honestly could have been metal with a stucco-looking paint job. <i>Even if I could do <u>that</u> to take out the camera...how would I be able to get in contact with the Morrigan? There won't be any communications consoles outside the ship here and finding a computer console to hack into will be hard enough with a bad leg. Perhaps I could...</i></p> <p>"I would like to have it now." Cat said suddenly, breaking the silence. The medic looked up with a confused look on her face. Cat leaned her head forward and explained. "I always get nervous around doctors and when I'm in a hospital. I get twitchy a lot and I get that need to do something...you know?" The medic slowly nodded her head, unsure of what Cat was going on about. Cat gave a nervous chuckle. "One of the marines ordered me not to come in contact with anything more technical than a spoon. Well, I'd like to have a spoon at least. Then I can be doing something even if it is just twiddling it around..."</p> <p>The medic sighed and finished with the sutures without another word. Before getting up to leave, she walked over to a desk and grabbed something that Cat could not see. When she walked back into view, it was a food tray. She had apparently eaten in here earlier...probably before the sabotage but when she was busy with something in here. She placed a dirty spoon next to Cat on the end table and muttered something that sounded like: "Don't know what good a spoon'll do ya." Cat ignored her until she walked out of the room, giving Cat a clear view of two Charan guards. She felt honored that they'd post two outside of a room where a wounded Cat would be. Cat picked up the spoon, wiped it clean on a corner of the sheets she was laying on and started twirling it absently in her hands.</p> <p><i>Okay, part one went off OK...part two is gonna be tricky.</i></p>		
Tiefflieger	Mon Aug 15, 2005 4:08 pm	
<p>One could have expected that dirt was not an issue in 23rd century spacecraft cockpits. But it was. There were all kinds of dirt. It started with the omnipresent dust that came from the usual abrasion of stressed materials, most likely the seat covering and the pilot's flight suit, that mixed up with residual moisture from the pilot's breathing air to a gooey sludge. Then there was the occasional leak of hydraulic oil, lubricants or cooling fluids, which were always a bitch to clean up because of the health hazard. There were other fluids, too, less hazardous but nonetheless unpleasant, like sweat or saliva. Piloting a combat vehicle was a stressful job, after all. And every now and then, there were really nasty messes of blood, urine or vomit.</p>		

Fortunately Kate wasn't sitting in one of the latter ones. Her job was just to clean up the usual grime that build up on the instruments and displays over time. Armed with a non-fuzzing and antistatic special-navy-issue of a cleaning cloth, and a bottle of alcohol based detergent she was vigorously rubbing the corners of the display frames. Of course she wasn't just cleaning them, that would've been far too boring, but at the same time checking them for offsets and tolerances, setting ranges and scales to optimum values. This work was still dull and undemanding, but at the moment Kate was contend being out of the sight from her superiors, in the cosy hollow of the cockpit.

Her concentration wasn't at it's best, her mind being miles away at Mirunova accusing her of God knows what and Freeman denying her request to be transferred into another unit. So she was checking the brightness of the IFF display for about the third time, when her tablet-pc indicated an incoming message:

"Kate, I would like to have a word or two with you after shift. Please tell me when and where we shall meet."

--Mirunova

Kate had to read the message three times before it had sunk in, short as it was. It was absolutely not like any message she had received from the Petty Officer before. Usually Mirunova wanted to know where she was or what she was doing in an even shorter and usually more harsh tone. And she never had used the word "please" in Kate's presence before.

Mirunova wanting a chat after shift? And what was that about with her getting to chose time and place? Was this going to be a duel or something?

JFalcon

Tue Aug 23, 2005 4:03 am

Kate sighed.

Better never to leave an officer waiting. Besides, I'm never going near her again after hours when no one else is around.

Mirunova and Maynard were busy rebuilding the engine previously abused by Lt. Price's antics and didn't notice Kate's approach.

"You asked to see me, ma'am?"

As if in time with Kate's arrival, an oil-covered nut slipped from Helen's fingers. Both women at the engine made a grab for it... leaving no one holding the fuel pump they had been trying to reattach. It hit the deck plating squarely on one of its fittings with a dull thunk. The errant nut bounced merrily out of sight with a mocking *ping*.

Anatolja retrieved the fallen pump and inspected the damage. The threaded fitting was dented, rendering the pump--and the time she had spent overhauling it--useless.

Don't shout. Don't shout. Don't...

Anatolja handed the part to Maynard.

"Get a new one from inventory."

She turned to Kate, and overheard a muttered "Calamity strikes again" as Helen departed. Ross looked slightly guilty and had evidently come from the break room as she was holding a mug of coffee that bore the cryptic message "Coffee +1".

"The shift isn't over, yet."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did you want to talk now, then?"

"Whatever is convenient, ma'am."

"OK, now is fine." The Petty Officer actually seemed uneasy.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Would you stop that, already!" Anatolja sighed.
Best just to get out with it already. This isn't going to get any easier with her like this.

"Kate, I want you to run a full integrity check on Jason's AI."

There was a long silence. "I'm not an AI technician, ma'am."
Why? And when did you get authorized to maintain robots?

"I know that, but Sparks won't let me ask Cess to and she said that you have some knowledge of the damn things."

Good memory. She must have seen those two classes on my transcript.

"Look, Kate. Listen to this." Mirunova hit play and handed over the small recorder.

Kate listened in silence until the mention of Jason's "test data," at which point she paused the playback and looked questioning at Mirunova.

"He was watching you last night." The petty officer looked uncomfortable at the mention of the previous night's debacle. "Apparently he likes to watch women cry." Anatolja didn't elaborate further. She still wasn't entirely pleased with having Kate listen to the exchange, but it seemed like the best way to explain the situation.

Kate resumed the recording, listening with a blank expression.

"Would I not hit you for treating me the way you do? Perhaps. But I won't. I can't. I ex-

-ut I won't. I can't."

"I can't."

Mirunova didn't know why Kate zeroed in on that part of the exchange, but it bothered her. The playback finished and Kate finally spoke.

"Interesting. I've always wondered about how the First Law actually worked."

"What?"

"A robot may not harm a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.' I've always wondered if the First Law restricted all thoughts of harming a human or whether is merely prevented acting upon them. Can an AI want--could they plot--to, say, kill a human while being constrained from acting?"

That was a disturbing concept. Did Jason really *want* to hurt her? The thought of those immensely strong hands closing around her neck made Anatolja shudder involuntarily.

"Stop it, you're creeping me out here."

"I gotta say, it scares the hell out of me, too, ma'am. But you have to admit it's an interesting question."

"But you see the problem, though, Kate. Jason is obviously not functioning correctly. Someone *needs* to test his programming and the Lt. won't take the problem seriously."

*I don't know if I'd go that far... And does she have any idea how difficult what she's asking for is? They're machines that can manipulate their own systems and readings. They can **hide** a problem if they want to...*

"I don't know how run the tests, and I don't have the equipment to."

The protest was only half-hearted and Mirunova knew she had won over Kate's curiosity. "I'll get you access to the gear."

...somehow. Even if it costs me that bottle I was saving.

Kate nodded. "I'll do what I can."

Charon

Tue Aug 23, 2005 3:22 pm

Flying back to the *Morrigan*, Claymore sat numbly in her cockpit. Going through the motions in a slow, methodical drill was one way for her not to have to think about what had happened. But for some reason, Seer's words resounded within her head. Every time she tried to calm her thoughts down, all she could hear was *"They're lying"*.

It got so bad that she was having trouble figuring out the landing routine as she arrived at the ship. After two unsuccessful attempts to line up properly - an extravagant use of reaction mass in space - she finally got in the groove and trapped successfully aboard the *Morr*

CAG was waiting on the Novas when she cracked her canopy. "What happened?" she asked simply, her voice betraying no trace of emotion. *This coul' b' bad* Rhiannon thought. *No tellin' which way she coul' gae*

Grimly, Rhiannon related the events as she had heard them, leaving nothing out as to her actions and those as reported by the comm relay. CAG sat there mutely, listening as the tale was unfolded, until Rhiannon got to the Novas turning about and heading back.

Cassandra began to pipe up. "CAG, this whol-"

Rhiannon winced internally, and turned to speak to the short pilot, but CAG beat her to it. "Leftenant Dory, that will be enough. If you feel that you have more to add to Leftenant MacTaggart's report, bring it to me in my office later." She turned back to Rhiannon. "Will there be anything else, Leftenant MacTaggart?"

Rhiannon sat there, torn. Put on the spot by the CAG's directness, her mind oscillated between wanting to reveal Cassandra's misgiving's and wanting to just crawl in her rack and cry herself to sleep. She froze for a second like a deer in headlights, then began looking back and forth. She could see the two opinions warring within her mirrored on the faces of her squadmates - Cassandra fairly exploding with the need to say something about her gut feeling and Ashley just looking upset, downcast and angry at the same time.

Seeing the turmoil on the young redhead's face, 1st Lt. Mallory gave a half-smile. The truth would come out, sooner or later. "If you remember anything that you feel may be of importance, Leftenant, you know where my office is." Her face softened for a second. "I'm sorry about your loss, Leftenant. We'll see about scheduling a memorial, probably about 2 days from now."

Rhiannon's face crumpled at the mention of the memorial, her mind going blank except for siezing on the thought that Aurora wasn't back here to tell her how she wanted the squad set up after the mission. Aurora wasn't here... Aurora wasn't... Aurora... Ursula... Christine... Katherine....

She could feel the burning sting of tears forming in her eyes and the massive lump forming in her throat, but she swallowed heavily, and looked into the soft brown eyes of the CAG. "Aye... ma'am..."

With that, she snapped to attention, saluted, then executed a precise about-face and marched off, Ashley striding behind her, and Cassandra fuming at the rear.

Laterrr, she thought to herself. *I'll talk wi' Cassie laterrr... when I kin talk...*

JediBubbles

Tue Aug 23, 2005 5:40 pm

Seer's stare bored into Claymore's back as the remaining Novas drifted silently back to their quarters. She understood that Rhi was wrestling with sudden grief, but if she would just listen...

But no one's going to listen. And why should they? Cassie's walk slowed and she fell further behind her squadmates. *By the time that report goes in, they really will be dead, and no one but me will know it could have been any different. It's up to me to do something.*

Ducky glanced backward at her, and Cassie quickly turned her look of determination into a scowl. Ducky turned back and kept walking, a little faster now, maybe to distance herself from the "delusional" one.

You'll definately be court martialed for this, cautioned another inner voice, the one that always, oddly enough, sounded like her mother.

They have to catch me first, retorted another voice, and, just like that, Cassie slipped into that odd place where intuition and intention merged, and suddenly her feet carried her quickly off down a side corridor. Seer smiled, knowing for certain that Ducky and Claymore wouldn't worry about her absence until far too late.

Her feet turned off down another corridor, and she wondered, not for the first time, if she was crazy.

A woman in a slightly unfamiliar uniform shot her a puzzled glance as she passed, and suddenly Cassie realized that she was in the part of the Morrigan where the Charan troops were bunked. Just

then she came to a halt outside a door and knew, instinctively, what she was doing there. Pulling out what she hoped was a convincingly carefree smile, she knocked.

A towering ebony-skinned woman with shrewd eyes and a smirking mouth opened it. "What're you here for, Alliance?" she asked, taking in the whole of Cassandra's appearance at a glance. "We've had our run for the day."

"Oh, that's great," Cassie chirped, slipping into her old Charan accent. "I just stopped by to see if my ex-sister-in-law was in."

"Your..." The sharp gaze found her flightsuit's name-patch again and made the connection in record time. "Oi, Beanie, it's for you!" Immediately the tall, slim form of Sarah Scott-Dory replaced her squadmate in the doorway, and Cassie's plan solidified in her mind.

"Oh, hey!" Seer winced inwardly at the way the other woman's eyes lit up; using Beanpole this way was not likely to be forgiven if she got busted. "Come to Jace-bash?"

"No, actually, OSI hasn't given me the disc back yet," Cassie said, shoulders slouching with unfieigned disappointment. In light of the current situation, she'd totally forgotten about that little indignity. She shrugged it off with a grin, "They gotta screen everything, right? 'Sides, gives me an excuse to pay you a real visit later, since sadly I'm just here for a favor right now--d'y'think I could borrow a few uniforms? Some of us are planning a little play--"

Beanpole cocked an eyebrow.

"--Oh, don't worry, it's not derogatory or anything! Actually, it's just the opposite," Seer plowed ahead. "See, some of us have noticed how, well, wary our shipmates are around y'all, and we wanted to put on something silly that cast y'all in a positive, heroic light, just to ease the tension." She could sense Sarah teetering on the edge of accepting the lie. "Actually," Seer lowered her voice and leaned towards Beanpole confidentially, "it involves Zanzabar and the gypsies."

Beanpole threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, that sounds great!"

"Shh! Just don't tell anyone, we want it to be a surprise!" Cassie flailed her hands in a shushing motion. "Do you think you can help?"

"Sure, how many do you need?"

"Five, but the other four girls are all taller than me."

"Well, that's not saying much, is it?" Beanpole jibbed good-naturedly. "Hang on a sec..." Still chuckling, Beanpole slipped out of sight.

Seer sighed with relief that her gamble had paid off. Like most colonials, she'd grown up on ridiculous legends about Zanzabar the Quixotic and they had a special place in her heart--apparently, Beanpole loved them, too.

"Here," Beanpole reappeared with a hefty gear bag that she handed to Seer. "And feel free to come back whenever OSI turns over whatever my dear ex said! Zanzabar and the gypsies..."

"Thanks a zillion!" The tiny Dark Nova bounced along the corridor, then slipped into the nearest head when no one was looking.

Ten minutes later, Private Cassandra Dory of Chara was stowed away on a supply shuttle to the *Kitomer*, her Alliance flightsuit stuffed behind a bathroom air grille and her hare-brained scheme for freeing her squadmates slung over her back.

Maverick	Wed Aug 24, 2005 4:30 am
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Alright...spoon acquired....step one...finished. Now, what the hell is step two? Catnip thought, laying in the medbay bunk staring at the amazingly stucco-like ceiling. Well first things first....I can't do anything with that camera watching me. I'll need to take it out...without looking suspicious...damn this is harder than I thought it'd be.

Cat took another look around the room, partially out of boredom. Chair at the desk, picture of the medic with some girl standing behind her, arms draped over her shoulders. A few medpacks with all sorts of goodies lay on a shelf across the room. An emergency defibrillator was strapped to the wall on her left, the security camera in the far right corner. A foam-throwing fire extinguisher was on the wall immediately to Cat's right. That strange light-in-the-ear-microscope-thingy that always annoyed Cat was hanging on the wall near her. Oy...this'll be fun to escape from.

Cat tried to sit up but a spasm of pain rolled up her leg, causing her to gasp and fall back. Apparently, it was so loud that one of the guards opened the door to peek in and dismissively turned away. Cat suddenly had parts two and possibly three developed in her mind. Even though she was going to hate herself for doing so, it needed to be done.

"Hey!" Cat called out to the guards. After a few more consistent yells, an irate guard walked into the room.

"What is it?"

"Can I...uh...get some painkillers for my leg? It hurts so much..." Cat asked pleadingly, although softly. The guard laughed and turned to leave. Cat spoke up, sounding desperate. "Wait!"

Turning around the guard walked up to Cat and with her face in Cat's asked in a very angry tone, "What?!" Cat forced a blush and looked down at the flimsy covers she was given. *Okay keep with it...*

"I...I'm afraid you are going to kill me...and...and...I don't want to die like this...all alone..." Cat said in a soft, slurred tone. God she hated herself for doing this, but it was important. Her mission was important. Cat consciously let the blanket drop from her hands in a way so that her good thigh was partially exposed. It was times like this that she had some of those enviable breasts that some pilots in the Navy were rumored to have.

The bait is set and the hook is ready...Is she going to bite? And not in the good way?

JFalcon

Tue Aug 30, 2005 5:13 am

There didn't seem to be anything wrong with Jason's hardware. Well, no. Kate took that back. His jaw actuator was out of spec, but that was unrelated to his ability to think and act. His processing core passed all checks and the diagnostic network uploaded by the test equipment operated perfectly within spec.

Not that Kate really expected to find any hardware bugs; the real complexity and magic of androids lay in their programming. A field she knew very little about.

The test equipment was quite helpful, though. From Jason's logs and archived "mental" state, the gear reported that a possible equilibrium state had been reached recently. Those were never good. They occurred when conflicts between the Three Laws pulled the neural network into a state of stable contention. Literally, an affected machine becomes unable to make up its mind and does nothing until the equilibrium is broken by some external event. AIs could and **had** broken as a result of such things and unusual behavior was very possible.

The logs indicated that one subroutine in particular had been heavily involved in the deadlock. Kate noticed that the same routine had also been extremely active during the time Jason had overheard last night's encounter between Mirunova and herself. A good indication that an equilibrium conflict **did** indeed occur, and at the right time.

Now for the hard part... What the hell is this thing doing?

Trying to read it directly was out of the question and beyond her ability. Kate decided to try something suggested by some of her problem sets. She ran a search against Jason's database for objects referenced by the subroutine. The idea was, if you knew what data the routine used, you might have some idea what it was doing.

The search was going to take a while. "Memories" were huge things to look through and then map to a "real-world intelligible" correspondence. She instructed the search to sort the returns by hits and stretched.

Kate looked at the inactive android again. There were mysteries locked away in there, she was sure of that.

But do I really have the right just to pull them out without permission? I wouldn't like it much if someone could just turn me off and poke around in my mind...

She wondered again, and not for the last time, if she should have majored in AI systems. *Maybe then I wouldn't have been drafted. Not much the use the military has for AIs.*

Kate sighed. *Can't change the past. Have to figure out how to go from here...*

A beep from the console interrupted these thoughts as the search completed. Kate's breath caught as she read the first hit.

21388 [43%] Human:Primary Users:Ross, Kate
ME?! What the...!

The other top hits were fairly meaningless: "core_sys_proc_47", "emot_cls_D078", etc.

Mirunova noticed Kate's sudden change in manner. The private had given a start and was now breathing quickly. "What is it?" The senior tech moved from where she had been leaning against the wall. "What did you find?"

Kate gave another start as if Anatolja had suddenly appeared from nowhere.

"I, I'm not sure... I mean, well, there's... there's this sub-routine that I think is involved." Kate brought something else up on the console's screen before Anatolja could read what had been on it. "It's a... self-developed one." Her voice trailed off in more of a questioning tone than that of a statement as she looked at what the equipment was displaying.

"OK, so what's it doing?"

"I... I don't know. I can't read or write AI/DMN or ESP."

Out of Character:

AI/DMN - Artificial Intelligence Decision Making Network
ESP - Emotion Synthesis Protocol
"Programming Languages" (for lack of a better term) used in 23rd Century robotics

She doesn't lie very well...

Maybe Kate couldn't read AI code, but she was definitely not telling everything she knew. Mirunova considered pressing the private for the full truth, but hesitated. That tactic hadn't worked out so well the last time.

I'll be damned if I don't get my answers... or let that bottle go to waste.

"So can you find out?"

"Maybe. I hope so."

Probably telling the truth about not knowing DMN, then. Not all that surprising, really. Very few people do.

"How long is it going to take?"

"Hours? Days? I don't really know."

Anatolja sighed. She didn't like the fact that Jason was going to be brought back online before she had her answers. She locked Kate's eyes with her own, very serious, violet ones.

"Fine. You're relieved from regular duties for the rest of today. Unless we need you for something, I want you working full time on Jason's erratic behavior. If it takes more than the rest of the day, I want a verbal report tonight--one every night for as long as it takes. And then a full written report to me and Lt. Cess when you're done."

"Yes, ma'am."

The PO's PDA buzzed, demanding attention. Mirunova acknowledged in incoming message to shut the thing up, but didn't read it.

"How much longer are you going to need that equipment?"

"Probably less than an hour. I can archive what I need into my hanger account."

"Fine." The older tech looked down at the message. The priority was 'urgent' and the sender from OSI. *Oh, #&@\$.* What now?

"Carry on then, private."

Mirunova read the message on her way back to the flight deck. It was terse and unhelpful.

Restrict all members of Dark Nova squadron from any and all fightercraft and associated equipment.

Have all the physical flight recorders of said squadron delivered to OSI operations immediately.

What the hell is this about? Nova is back from patrol already? Why wasn't I informed? We're the ones supposed to be taking care of their equipment

"I swear, this whole damn ship has gone mad..."

The archiving took about 20 minutes to complete. Even the small section of Jason's programming that Kate was interested barely fit into her user account's allocated storage space, which was already about 10 times larger than typical. After that, it was a fairly simple job of reassembling the android's cosmetic covering and waiting for him to wake up.

Kate watched Jason's face, wondering if there would be any visible signs of life returning.

Is it like waking up in the morning? Slowly becoming aware of the world again? Or is it as if nothing ever happened; like a blink and suddenly the world is in a different place than when you left it a moment ago?

Something else felt like it was fighting to gain her attention.

"Like what you see?" Jason spoke without moving his mouth. Kate jumped, dropping a probe. The android's face took on a knowing smile.

"What? I..."

His eyes not leaving Kate's, Jason swept down to retrieve the fallen tool and presented it with an exaggerated, formal bow.

"Well, I seem to functioning as expected, and only slightly worse for wear. Have fun? I suppose I can tolerate being so, violated," he grinned, "if it brings a woman some pleasure."

Kate was speechless. She felt herself turning blushing for some reason.

"No. No, not really," she finally managed in a small, somewhat sad voice.

It was the truth. Too many questions and unknowns. This machine bothered her for more reasons than she could put her finger on.

"I... have to go." Kate turned and walked away.

Jason remained motionless looking in the direction of Kate's departure even long after she had disappeared from view, a slight look of--was it, frustration?-- on his face.

Maverick	Sun Sep 04, 2005 2:59 am
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The guard bent over, fixing the sheet that Cat had dropped. When the folds in her neck armor opened up, revealing a pale sliver of flesh, Cat's heart froze. Time seemed to slow down and everything got quiet.

-Ba-bump-

The cold metal spoon in her hand felt three times heavier than it should have been...as if it was made out of cast iron.

-Ba-bump-

The lights seemed to dull down, highlighting the guard who seemed to have frozen in place. Cat's heart felt as if it had been stabbed with a shard of ice. Her hand clenched the spoon painfully under the sheet.

-Ba-bump Ba-bump-

The flesh of the guard's neck stood out almost painfully, like a target. Like the moon against the

pitch black night sky back on Earth. I wonder what her name is?

-Ba-bump Ba-bump Ba-bump-

The spoon seemed to cut into Cat's hand, she was clenching it so hard. I wonder if she has a family? Her hands were shaking and her throat clenched, cutting off her breathing.

-Ba-bump Ba-bump Ba-bump-

I have a job to do...I have a mission...she is the enemy...I wonder if she's in love...I wonder...I wonder....I wonder....who is she?

-Ba-bump-

Cat gasped for breath and leaned forward, free hand coming up to her face as she started to cry. Am I still acting? Was this still part of my plan? I don't know anymore...

The guard looked down at her. "Aw hell....Now don't start that..." She pleaded. Cat's mind was racing. The guard's neck armor had closed up, taking away the shot Cat could have taken. But Cat was too far gone; she was bawling over the sheets and biting her hands. The spoon was discarded on the bed, still under the sheets. Cat kept crying, disgusted with herself. Was she really going to kill this woman? Was she going to kill a woman who didn't even act hostile to her?

The guard was swearing softly, trying to comfort Cat so that she'd stop crying, but it wasn't working very well. Cat still cried until the guard sat down on the bed and held her lightly. Cat started to calm down a little.

"There...you feel better?" The guard said, standing up slowly and moving to a counter. "Why don't you get some rest, you seem stressed out." The guard returned with a syringe and injected Cat's arm. Cat didn't resist, she was too drained. Her vision started to swim and Cat laid back feeling sleepy. The guard turned and left out the door to a confused looking guard. "Gave her a sedative. She got a bit stressed out." The guard explained as Cat fell into the peaceful darkness of sleep.

Vexus

Wed Sep 07, 2005 11:40 pm

"Eridanian." Crone repeated the word softly to herself as she tried to both absorb and scrutinize the soldier's words.

"Charans, Eridanians, what's the difference?" Banshee asked with a slight shrug.

"More than you obviously are aware of," Blonski shot back.

Hobbit muttered softly in thought. "So all those people we rescued on the Aruna-"

"Are Eridanians, not Charans," Blonski finished her statement. "At least, they no longer consider themselves to be Confederates."

"So you're the ones who want back into the Alliance?" Crone asked. Blonski hesitated a little this time.

"...If the terms are good, yes."

"You're caught between two greater military forces," Banshee mused. "You really aren't in a strong position to negotiate."

"The Alliance is just as desperate to lay claim to this system as Chara is to hold it," Blonski responded evenly. "I'd say we're in a very strong position. We have the ability to hand Epsilon Eridani over to the Alliance with minimal losses of manpower and equipment."

"But would you?" Hobbit asked with a hint of concern.

Blonski sighed. "No... no we wouldn't. We just want what every world wants. We want to be left in peace."

"From what I've heard," Crone spoke up, "being left alone is a big source of your problems."

"We are not fully self-sufficient, if that's what you're implying," Blonski replied. "Plus it's no help that Chara forces us to export so much out-system for the war-effort."

"Deja vu," Hobbit said quietly.

"Look, I don't pretend to speak for all Eridanians, but there is still so much less bad blood between us and the Alliance as compared to the Confederacy. We're willing to work with the Alliance if it means we can sever the flow of materials from our home to Chara and give us a chance to stand on our own... and we'd like you to help us."

"Does the OSI know about this?" Banshee asked.

"I don't know," Blonski answered with an annoyed expression. "I wouldn't have the clearance for that information."

Crone finally stepped up to face the (Eridanian) soldier, her countenance stern.

"The fact that you're trying to join the Alliance does not allow me to turn my back on my sworn duty. I can't go running off with the locals in some guerilla war for independence and abandon my mission."

Blonski didn't flinch. "They say 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'."

"Bullshit," Crone shot back. "You don't want to rejoin the Alliance. You'd rather just play both sides against the other to obtain the same goal that started this whole war in the first place."

"Perhaps. But for now, our goals are the same. You're a long way from Earth, Terran. You can't be picky about your sources of support."

"I will not risk betrayal for what could be a pack of lies."

"I'm telling you the truth."

"Then why did you imprison us and tell the Morrigan that we died... AFTER WE BOARDED TO ASSIST YOU?!" Crone cried out in a mix of anger and disgust. For once Blonski seemed uncertain how to respond. Banshee nodded with a cynical grin and moved up just behind Crone, her posture stating that she was in agreement with her squad leader.

Hobbs however, seemed far more uncertain, her eyes falling again and again upon the bloodmoon symbol with a mixture of curiosity, caution, and hope.

Schamann

Mon Sep 19, 2005 12:26 pm

Blonski hesitated, looked pale and for a moment it seemed she would not answer the question. But suddenly her gaze hardened as she met Crone's and Banshee's icy looks.

"We told them you were dead so we did not have to hand you back to the Morrigan, that's rather obvious, don't you think?"

Silence. Banshee could almost hear the wheels turning in everybody's heads, calculating.

Blonski continued: "I did not come here to offer you to support our rebellion against Charans, lieutenants, I have come here to offer you to join the rebellion for the freedom of this system. The system you live in, the system that pays the bloodmoney to masters in Terra or Chara. We can win our freedom and we can make everyone else respect it. I am offering you to join this."

Hobbit stared watching in disbelief the unveiling truth that was striking her more and more with every word she heard

*why did they want Morrigan to think we're dead? why can't they let us go back to Morrigan?
..... why do they pack platoons of crack shocktrooper space marines onboard?*

the answer was quite simple

"OhmyGod You're going to assault and take Morrigan, aren't you?"

Blonski just nodded weakly

"I want to get as few people killed as possible. On both sides." She eyed all three Terrans carefully to check if they are following her inter-lines suggestion.

"Forget it Blonski. W're not helping you take our own ship are you crazy?!" Crone scowled. "I'm surprised you even considered that a possibility."

Blonski smiled with understanding "I didn't."

Silence lasted for all of the two seconds. Then Blonski turned and walked to the door. It opened with a quiet hiss. Blonski entered, turned around and spoke quietly:

"You will be sent safely back to Lavinia once we're finished with our mission. All Terran loyalists will be. After that, I do hope we will not meet again".

Her hopes were to be fulfilled.

Vexus

Thu Sep 22, 2005 11:11 am

Seer strode down the corridors of the Kitomer, her reddish pile of "borrowed" Charan uniforms resting in plain sight across her outstretched arms. While her face was the perfect image of a woman in the midst of tedious routine, her heart was racing, and she was keenly aware of the sweat beading all over her body even as she fought to keep it from trembling. As rescue missions went, this one had been smooth sailing so far. As she had gambled, the disorganization of these turncoats was immense and bordered on chaotic: no security checks, no ID confirmation upon docking, and no one taking much notice as she walked into the more "secured" areas of the ship. Seer had remembered what the transport's captain had said about leaving in a hurry without making a manifest, and the fact that she had made it this far was a testament to that fact.

Following the map she had called up on a general-use console just after coming aboard, Seer only made two or three wrong turns before arriving at her destination. The security guard didn't even seem to notice her until the little pilot cleared her throat.

"*ahem* Excuse me." Seer's Charan accent was as true as ever, and when the guard saw the rank on her uniform, she quickly snapped to attention. It was all Seer could do to keep from giggling out of a mix of giddy excitement and sheer terror.

"Ma'am yes ma'am." Now was the time for Seer to make her next gamble. Why else would a brig be occupied *and* guarded, unless....

"The Alliance wenchies giving you any trouble?"

"Not a peep, ma'am," replied the guard. "Although I caught two of 'em making out earlier. Too bad that doesn't do it for me... ma'am." Seer's mind bristled at the thought of this guard playing the voyeur to Crone and Hobbit, but she swallowed her anger. She then tried to keep things as casual as she could and slipped into the colonial slang she still remembered well.

"Well, I'm afraid I'm lost, soldier. Goin' up an' down no ways. I need to get these slaggin' threts cleaned up." Seer held up her pile of uniforms. "You know where the cleanin' cans are?" The guard smiled at this, and gestured further down the corridor.

"You be long crooked, ma'am. You need to drop down a full four decks and then...."

As the guard went on with her directions, her head hung down in thought, Seer made her move. With one hand, she stuffed the pile of uniforms she was carrying into the guard's face. At the same time, the other hand (wielding a small and easily concealable pistol) arced over and came crashing down butt-first onto the guard's head, her cries and subsequent grunt muffled to nothing behind the uniforms. The guard then slumped down to the floor.

Praying that no one came down the corridors at this precise moment, Seer fumbled around the guard's unconscious form until she found the key card. A quick slip into the key slot, and the door swung open. Seeing the faces of Crone, Hobbit, and Banshee looking at her in shock was almost too much for the little pilot to handle. She had been right. They *were* alive. She was getting ready to rush forward and embrace them when Banshee spoke in her icy tone, one that left no room for emotional distractions.

"Drag the body inside, Seer, now!"

Snapped from her thoughts of relief, Seer spun around and pulled the limp form of the guard into the cell. With no objects detected near it, the brig door slid shut once again. For a few moments at least, the Novas were safe.

"How did you get here?" Crone asked.

"And how did you even know we were alive?" Hobbit added.

"The Seer knows all," the gypsy-like pilot said with a wink. Hobbit laughed and caught her friend in

a quick but heart-felt embrace. Then, with the gravity of the situation pressing down upon them, Seer spread out her Charan uniforms.

"Put these on. This ship is a study in how not to run an organized military. If you all look like rebels we should be able to walk around without drawing attention."

"Unless we run into Blonski or her troops," Banshee said dryly.

"Who?" Seer asked. "And where's Catnip?"

"No time to explain," Crone said quickly. "Everyone suit up. The brig guards might be second-rate, but there's a detachment of troops aboard who are much more dangerous. They're going to try and take the Morrigan and we need to warn her." Seer's expression sank.

"I think I came over on the last shuttle before the rendezvous. How will we warn them before they attack?"

"A signal?" Banshee suggested as she found the best-fitting Charan uniform and began to change.

"That's our best chance," Crone nodded, "But I'm fairly certain that none of us are good enough to hack into a rebel comm system. We need to get to our fighters... one in particular."

Hobbit picked up on the logic. "Cat's fighter, with the OSI tech."

"But none of us are able to operate that advanced equipment" Banshee pointed out.

"No," Crone answered, "so we need to find the one who can. Let's just hope they haven't moved her yet. Besides, there'll be no women left behind in my squad." The squad leader then reached down to touch the head of the fallen guard. With her fingers now red with blood, she smeared the crimson fluid across her own forehead. Looking around at her squad mates, she saw that everyone was now in a Charan uniform except herself. Clasp her hands behind her head, she looked back at them with a half-serious/half-sly expression.

"Commander Dory, it seems that there's been a scuffle in the brig amongst the prisoners. The silver-haired one needs medical attention. It would be advisable for you and your women to escort her to the sickbay for treatment."

Seer nodded, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

And thus they exited the brig: Seer leading the pack, and desperately trying to recall the ship map from her memory. Behind her marched Crone, her expression one of hatred and defiance, with an armed Banshee and Hobbit bringing up the rear.

"What are ye doin' ?!" Rhiannon cried in disbelief as the OSI officers began to rummage through Cassie's bunk and possessions.

"OSI business," came the cold response, "do not interfere."

The Scottswoman felt like she was teetering on the breaking-point. First the majority of her squad is KIA, then Cassie is nowhere to be found, and now the OSI was turning their quarters inside-out.

As a nervous Ashley looked on in confusion, Rhiannon's hands tightened into fists. Everything was going to Hell in a hand-basket, and she had to do *something*...

Charon	Fri Sep 23, 2005 9:27 pm
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Never before, not even in Officer's Candidate School had Rhiannon felt so helpless, so used...

... so violated...

Every fiber of her being screamed at her to retaliate, to get the intruders gone, to lash out and remove all before her, as if from a swing from the mighty weapon that she took her name from.

Ashley saw her shoulders hunch, her legs shift slightly, preparatory to... something that would undoubtedly get unpleasant. She immediately grabbed hold of Rhiannon's shoulder, some small part of her mind noting how solid the meat beneath her grip was, and how it tensed even more as she held on. Quickly, she leaned forwards and murmured in the redhead's ear.

"Not now... not like this... there are other ways... calm down... think this through..."

One of the OSI officers noticed this, and smirked idly. "It would behoove you to listen to your friend, Lieutenant. You wouldn't want to get your self into a... predicament, now, would you?" With a dry chuckle, she returned to her searching of Cassandra's possessions.

Rhiannon noted her rank and nametape, furiously silent as she added one "Lieutenant J.G. von Manstein" to a small, but telling mental tally that she kept updated - those from whom she would extract retribution.

However, she heard Ashley's words, and loosened up. As she did so, her churning mind began to settle into a familiar pattern - one that she learned to create in OCS, whenever the Class Drill Instructor would chew into her for something trivial, trying to push her into a rage.

Initially, these attempts had succeeded, leaving her with an initial reputation for hot-headedness that had followed her to her first squadron. However, she soon learned how to discipline her mind, keeping her thoughts straight enough so she could either respond in a precise, clipped military fashion, or so that she could retaliate with witty banter that would, if not necessarily endear her to her instructors, would at least give them something to laugh about later.

Rhiannon tried a tactic now that was a combination of both.

"Lieutenant, I most respectfully request that you cease and desist your ransacking of this compartment." She stood at a casual "at-ease" pose, her body language reflecting respect with being uptight or aggressive.

Lieutenant Manstein goggled for a moment. "You must be joking, MacTaggart. I am a commissioned OSI officer, and these troops are personnel operating under my orders. You have no ground to demand that I 'cease and desist' any more!"

It took all of Rhiannon's willpower to not smirk sarcastically as she continued to speak. "On the contrary, **ma'am**, per USAN order 2132-52.F, any officer who is charged with any article under the UCMJ is required to have such charges filed with his or her commanding officer, and be present when such charges are filed. Sub-section 52-F2b states that any search-and-seizure associated with such charges must be carried out under the supervision of the officer's commanding officer."

A sad glimmer appeared in her eyes, but did not touch her face. "In the absence of Lieutenant Yates, I am the commanding officer of the Dark Novas." Now she let a small smile touch her face. "Habeas corpus, Lieutenant."

Manstein gruffed and growled for a moment before she barked a few commands at the OSI personnel, who had stopped to listen to the speech with some interest. It wasn't every day that you got to see the regs quoted at your superior, after all.

As they left the Nova's barracks compartment, Manstein turned to glare at Rhiannon. "You will return, MacTaggart, and soon very well be someone you will be able to say to me to stop me in my duty. My report will reflect your conduct."

Rhiannon's smile would have looked at home on a Great White shark. "I'm counting on that reflection, Lieutenant. Ta-ta!" She gave a small wave with her palm as Manstein pivoted with severe Prussian formality and stalked out of the compartment.

As the doors closed, Rhiannon deflated, sighing hugely. She turned to Ashley, talking slowly. "Well... that should-" she cut off as she saw the look on Ashley's face. "What is it?"

Ashley's face glowed, beaming hugely at Rhiannon. You could almost see the stars in her eyes. "That was SOOOOO cool, Clay! You froze her so cold, you could keep a side of meat in her!"

Rhiannon's face colored, then realized that Ashley was joking around. THEN she mis-parsed the phrasing, and she chuckled, which broke up Ashley's star-struck act. The pair of them burst out laughing for a few moments.

Calming down, Rhiannon chuckled again, then sobered quickly. "That's bought us a few hours, at least. We need to find Cass, now. I haven't seen her since the debrief. Maybe one of the deck crew has seen her. Less go."

Ashley snapped to stiff attention, cracking a salute that would have done a Marine proud. "Yes ma'am, Senior Second Lieutenant boss-lady ma'am!"

"Quiet, ye" mock-growled Rhiannon as the pair headed for the door.

JFalcon

Mon Sep 26, 2005 4:42 am

The observation deck was dark and deserted. It was closed to on duty personnel and the shifts that were off duty were too busy sleeping to make use of it.

Well, *almost* deserted. In the back of the spacious room, the pale glow of a screen flashed off of a pair of glasses. PFC Ross had decided that since she **was** excused from duties, the restriction didn't apply to her and that the O-Deck would be a nice, quiet place to get her work done. She was sitting on the floor next to one of the huge windows with her back against one of dividing support beams, staring at her tablet's screen, and utterly oblivious to the impressive view of the Epsilon Eridani system centimeters from her face.

The partial dump of Jason's core had actually given Kate more data than she expected. The diagnostic hardware had automatically downloaded a maintenance log file from the bot in addition to the sections of memory she had asked for. It figured that something like that would exist.

Why didn't I think of looking for this before? Stupid.

Unfortunately, the records didn't contain all that much information and there was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary logged during the time period she was interested in. Kate kept scanning the log file backwards. Sometimes little things in the past could cause problems quite a bit later on.

She was just about to give up...

MEM1692::Privileged User Initiated Memory Deletion

"Huh?"

Maintenance wiped his memory? No, wait. They would have Admin rights. Privileged User is just someone with authority to do so. An officer, maybe. High ranking one, at that. And not really a wipe. More like a selective deletion.

The entry's timestamp was from a few weeks back. There wasn't any record of how much of Jason's memory had been erased; just that the event had occurred.

Wait... did this happened at about the same time as that security alert?

Kate couldn't remember. She had only been onboard a few days when some alert or something she didn't understand went off. Another tech from her barracks had grabbed her and they had all gone very quickly--virtually under gunpoint from marines in the halls--back to quarters. She had spent the next hour or so wondering what the hell was going on before being told to get back to work. No one had ever explained what that all had been about.

She scrolled a bit further back through the file.

"Wuh...?"

ENV1024::Extreme Operating Pressure::Low::0 atm

ENV0881::Extreme Operating Temperature::Low::0 K

ENV0440::Hazard::Radiation::8 urad/s

The warnings repeated every second for more screens than Kate cared to count. It looked like the environmental warnings spanned about 20 minutes. They proceeded the memory event by about 5 minutes.

"What, somebody finally get fed up and push him out of an airlock?" Kate smirked a bit at this thought.

Well, that was something to report. Radiation was bad for electronics, especially for AI networks. Could it cause problems? Sure. But the diagnostics should have found something like that. She didn't have a clue how much radiation it would take to actually damage Jason, but the dosage rates didn't seem all that high. Anyway, it was the actual particle energy levels that really mattered.

Kate went back to skimming the log.

Vexus

Mon Oct 10, 2005 1:11 am

When the sickbay room 7 doors slid open, Crone was relieved to see Kat sleeping peacefully on the only occupied bed near the far right end of the room. She was not unguarded, however, and the soldier standing nearby who had been looking down at Kat's sleeping form with an almost gentle

fondness now readied her weapon as she saw Crone's hateful scowl.

"What's going on here?"

"At ease, soldier," Seer piped up at once. "Just the result of a brig scuffle that requires some patching up." The soldier appeared unconvinced.

"With all due respect, ma'am, she looks fine to me. I'll need to ask all of you for ID." Seer screwed up her courage and got right up to the soldier's face... at least she would've if not for the large height difference.

"Corporal! I have no intention of debating the prisoner's medical condition with you, nor presenting you with ID! You will stand down!" The soldier was unmoving, and Crone's heart began to speed up in the mounting tension. This was a veteran. Crone could see it in her eyes.

"Apologies, ma'am. I have orders from the top: no unauthorized personnel inside the sickbay until the prisoner has been transferred out. If you won't show me ID, then I'll have to ask you all to leave." Seer's angry expression began to falter into panic. Crone's eyes looked over to Banshee, who gave a small and swift nod.

"Please, ma'am, let's not make a sc-" the soldier continued when Crone suddenly went for Hobbit's weapon. Completely surprised, Hobbit uttered a yelp. The guard, quite convinced by the performance, took aim at Crone with well-trained speed... before a plasma blast caught her dead in the torso. With a hollow thud, the guard fell to the floor as Crone tried to calm Hobbit down. Banshee slung her steaming rifle over her shoulder and brushed by a stunned Seer to check up on Kat.

"I'm sorry, Hobbs," Crone insisted gently, her hands on the small pilot's shoulders. "It's OK... it's alright." Hobbit's shuttering had slowed, but she was now slowly shaking her head. For in the moment when Crone had turned on her, she had seen her eyes. They were terrible and foreign, a *stranger's* eyes that had seen far worse than what Hobbs had seen in the dark airlock not too many weeks ago. Never before had she been so afraid of someone so close to her. And on top of that, she was now staring at the fallen body of an Eridanian. Not just another colonial from far away, but someone who may have well grown up here. Maybe the guard was young enough to have been born here just as she had been. Was she now to make them her enemies as well?

"No... no, it's not alright," Hobbs muttered, almost to herself.

"Hobbs," Crone implored, "I need you to stay focused just a little bit longer. We-"

"What the hell?!" came the voice of a nurse as she entered the room and surveyed the scene. Seeing her standing there above them, Crone's back to her, Hobbit didn't even think. She simply pulled the trigger on her rifle and sent the nurse flying back against the wall, a few pieces of smoldering flesh sticking to the white-washed surface as the body slid down to the ground.

Hobbs dropped her rifle and began to weep. Crone was becoming desperate when Seer came up and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Go, sir, I'll take care of her." Crone nodded gratefully and stood up.

"Banshee, how's Kat?"

"Only semi-lucid, I'm afraid."

"Damn it! Put that body on that empty medical bed and put a sheet over it. I'll do the same over here." By the time Banshee and Crone had finished and managed to prop-up a semi-conscious Kat onto their shoulders, Seer had calmed Hobbs down enough so that she too could stand.

"Do you think anyone else heard the plasma blasts?" Seer asked.

"If they did, we'd already be dead," Banshee replied as she checked the energy level on her rifle.

"There's no time for any more fancy plans," Crone said quickly. "I'll take Kat's weight and hope she wakes up enough to do some good by the time we reach the hangar. The rest of you appear as if you're escorting us and keep alert for trouble."

The situation becoming desperate, the five women exited back to the corridors, Kat muttering something about a spoon.

JediBubbles	Mon Oct 10, 2005 11:17 am	
<p>They moved through the corridors, thus far unobserved and unchallenged. At some point Banshee had recognized where they were and had taken over the lead, practically stalking her way from junction to junction. They were almost to the hangers now. Hobbit was holding up well, but her distress was starting to show in her walk, which was alternately absent and skittish. From the rear, Seer was mightily impressed at the way Crone was convincingly acting like supporting a half-conscious woman down the hall was completely normal.</p> <p>But though part of her brain was alertly scanning for trouble, Seer felt oddly detached from the whole situation. She couldn't remember what she'd said to console Hobbs just five minutes ago, but she knew that, out of it as Catnip was right now, their OSI would definately be lucid by the time they needed her. There would be guards in the hanger, of course--<i>three of them one will have slipped out for coffee that can't be right how the hell do I know this.</i></p> <p>The small part of Seer's mind that was still connected to reality noted that this last stretch of corridor leading to the hangers was oddly deserted. Banshee's stance as she peered around a corner, weapon at the ready, indicated that she didn't trust the situation much either.</p> <p><i>You're in Agammemon's doorway again, Cassandra,</i> a dark warning voice whispered. <i>Something bad always happens when you get this far in.</i></p> <p><i>But lives are at stake,</i> she whispered back. <i>I have to know.</i></p> <p><i>Then turn your F*CKING ASS AROUND!</i></p> <p>And suddenly Seer found herself pivoting, intently aware of every rivet in the bulkheads as she whipped up her gun and dropped the Marine who had just slipped out of the last corridor with her gun aimed at Catnip's still-lolling head.</p> <p>The other Novas' heads snapped around at the report. "MOVE!" Crone barked as the Eridanian soldier's body hit the floor, throwing herself and Catnip towards the hanger. Kat shrieked, suddenly awake. Seer scurried backwards, and Hobbit joined her in firing repeatedly at the other Marines now swarming towards them. Banshee took two long strides and slammed the butt of her weapon into the door controls, shorting it open. Somehow, over the din of flying plasma, Seer distinctly heard one of the hanger guards yelp "What the f--" before Banshee lit into them.</p> <p>They didn't get any shots off.</p> <p>Hobbit had similarly made short work of the first wave of Marines in the hallway. Dodging shots from the few still firing from the relative safety of the corner, Seer took advantage of the lull and hauled Hobbs through the hanger doorway. Hobbs never took her eyes off of the corner, and immediately crouched down just inside the threshold to wait. "Let me know," she called, without looking, over her shoulder to Banshee, who was methodically pulling wires to hotwire the door closed. Crone was helping Catnip sprint to her fighter, apparently explaining what needed to be done on the way, as the unsteady pilot was yelling "Okay, okay, okay! No spoon necessary!" Sounds of a regroup effort drifted around the door frame. Hobbit started firing again.</p> <p>Slipping even farther into intuition, Seer reached over Banshee into the mess of tangled insulation. "Here, it's those two. Hobbs, move!" Banshee calmly stripped the indicated wires and crossed them in one coldly efficient twist. Hobbit hopped backwards into the hanger as the door swooshed shut. The noise of the hallway was immediately muffled.</p> <p>"Banshee, Hobbit--Mount up, now! Seer, you're with Hobbit!" Crone called, climbing into her Siren. Catnip was safely ensconced in her own closed cockpit, eyes still dreamy but hands moving confidently over both launch controls and comm console.</p> <p>"That will only hold for a minute or two," Christine said, snatching up her weapon.</p> <p>"Let's make it a good minute, then," Seer replied grimly.</p>		
Tieffliager	Mon Oct 10, 2005 1:48 pm	
<p>"No word of this to anyone, understand?"</p> <p>Anatolja looked rather serious, but then she looked like that often, lately. Kate had found her on the flight deck just about when shifts were changing. Now they were walking down the crowded corridors from the flight deck towards the quarters. A lot of people were hurrying towards their stations or back to the quarters, respectively, so Anatolja kept her voice to an almost conspiratorial whisper. Unfortunately that meant Kate had to stay much closer to her than she felt comfortable</p>		

with.

"What about the report to Cess?"

"Forget about Cess for now. We can't trust anyone on this. If what you assume is right and someone of the top brass has deleted Jason's memory the last thing we want is for them to know that we're onto them."

Kate wasn't sure whether the Petty Officer was trying to take her for a fool or just being naive herself.

*So, what makes you think I trust **you**?*, she thought. But what she said of course was: "Yes, ma'am."

"Look, I know the regs require you to report something like this to the responsible officer and that would be Cess, 'cause this is AI related. I cannot *order* you to withhold that report. But you should consider the possibility that Jason's memory loss around the time of the security alert is not a coincidence. Going out of an air lock would be a rather convenient way to escape from a murder scene..."

"What!? Wait a second, what murder scene?"

"Oh please don't say you don't know about this? You need to lift your head out of that coffee mug of yours once in a while! It's been ship's gossip for weeks now! That security alert? That was because two girls had been found killed. It's all been very mysterious and they don't know who it was. And now that I think of it, I believe it even was in some air lock control room. It's all confidential of course, and this is gossip at it's best, but things slip through occasionally. I'll see if I can find out some facts about it, I think I know whom to ask. You take another look at what you got from Jason. See if you can find out where he was at that time, I think that should be logged, too, shouldn't it? And I also want to know the *exact* time frame that has been deleted."

With that, Anatolja left a rather alarmed Kate standing in the middle of the corridor and hurried off a junction that would lead her to the marine's quarters.

Murder, here on board the ship?! Oh my, what have I gotten myself into?

Vindicare

Wed Oct 12, 2005 5:25 pm

"Banshee, in your cockpit now!" Crone yelled as she leapt into her own fighter. The cool-faced pilot was still standing fast on the flight-deck.

"Some delaying action is called for!" Banshee called to Crone as she was strapping in.

"What? Banshee we have to get out of here now!"

"Indeed. However, the door will not hold them long enough for everyone to take off safely. You know my record, and probably my intent. If you truly want none of us left behind, then let me make it so."

Crone gave her a stern look before nodding. There was no time to engage in a protracted argument. She closed her canopy and began taxiing to her position in the queue; Cat being first, followed by Seer/Hobbs, herself, and then Banshee, whose fighter was currently still facing the entrance to the ship rather than the hangar exit.

"Um, Crone," Kat asked over the comm-line, "How do we open the bay doors without authorization?"

"You let me worry about that," Crone shot back. "Keep your position and try to contact someone on the Morrigan. Hobbs, Seer, are you ready." Hobbs was the one who replied.

"We're ready as we'll ever be, sir. But I'm worried about Seer. She's acting really weird."

"You take the controls, then," Crone replied. "Just make sure you're ready to blast off when I give the word."

Crone then shifted her fighter and faced the sliding mechanism of the bay-doors. From the inside they had no armor to protect them. After all, who would be foolish enough to attack one's own launch bay? With a small flip of a switch, Crone set a missile to remote trigger and glanced behind her. She had to wait for her final squadmate to get into position.

Banshee meanwhile was dropped to her haunches beside said entrance door, barricading it as best she could. Once complete, she stood back and contemplated the mess. *That will hold them for about...30 seconds...unless...*

Her head bowed unconsciously, as if in prayer, and she began running through the last rights of her traveling companion.

Sakukiri, you have done well, been a fine ally, and slain my foes. Now, as retrieval is no longer an option, you must be sacrificed in order to save lives.

Her hand moved for the securing clips where the blade used to lay, and pulled both pair's from their foundations.

Crone looked at the seemingly forlorn figure, standing head-bowed in front of the shortly-to-be-breached entrance, and breathed sharply, wondering what was going through her mind, but absolutely certain that whatever it was, it was not surrender.

The right arm came up and met the left, a finger in each of the newly made holes. She looked up at the door, hearing the sounds once more, and clenched her right hand. The four switches the fingers had been touching clicked simultaneously.

Elsewhere in the ship, a small metal plate on the side of a sword clicked open, much to the surprise of the marines in the armory at the time. The Caesium and Phosphorous core of the sword touched the atmosphere in the room and reacted immediately, Phosphorous igniting on contact with air, and Caesium reacting with the moisture in the breath of the marines, building in energy until it reached its critical point.

The sword exploded. The container, labeled "Confiscated Weapons", in which it was housed, also exploded. Jagged fragments of metal burst forth across the room, followed by a sheet of ground-level, almost liquid fire. The shrapnel from the crate shredded other crates, as well as the startled marines. The fire then did something unexpected. It found a charged plasma rifle on the floor, and began to overheat it.

Banshee felt the small ripple of vibration that signalled the end of her carefully crafted companion, and took solace in the fact that she would survive, and could forge another. She sprinted toward her cockpit and vaulted into the seat. The canopy hissed shut.

"For a moment there, I thought you weren't coming" Crone's voice came over the comm. "What did you do...?"

Red "FIRE" warning lights began flashing on the walls

"Oh, I, uh...called in a final favor from a friend. Now sir, if you would be so kind, get us the Hell out of here."

Radio silence followed, but Crone chuckled to herself a little. "So she DOES have a sense of humor." Then, in her command tone: "Shields up everyone, now!"

Banshee found the order a bit odd at first, but then noted Crone's position and cocked an eyebrow. To herself she wondered whether her tactics were really any less (so-called) "reckless" than those of her squadleader.

Once activated, the shields contacted the metal surface of the flight-deck, sending arcs of lightning dancing across the floor. Fortunately for Crone, the light show did nothing to stop the warhead she sent flying into the slide joints. The missile rammed into the metal, piercing it by a quarter-length. Seeing that it had gone in as far as it could, Crone hit the detonator. Via its design, the missile's detonation was directed forward, but a large fireball still blossomed behind it and headed towards the Novas. As the blast-wave dissipated, the Novas' ships seemed unscathed save for some minor armor damage. The bay-doors, on the other hand, had been weakened by the explosion and then torn apart by the rush of the escaping atmosphere. Part of the doors were still there, but the resulting hole was still big enough to let a Siren pass through.

"Kat, go! Hobbs, you're next!" The Sirens began to scream out of the shuttle bay.

Banshee quickly performed a slightly unorthodox 'grasshopper' turn to line herself up for takeoff, breaking one of the landing struts in the process, and followed her squad leader out of the outer doors. That'll be fun when we get to the Morrigan she thought idly, then reminded herself they had some way to go yet...

Maverick

Sat Oct 22, 2005 1:03 am

The stars seemed almost kaleidoscopic tonight...just look at them spin...so calm, such an easy rotation. Cat yawned heavily in her cockpit, right before her head snapped back into what she was doing. Yanking hard on the stick, she pulled out of the roll she was in and stabilized as best she could. *There...stabilized. I'm fine now...* Cat thought, eyelids getting heavy as the sedatives started to ooze back into her head. Slowly, Cat's head started to droop forward before snapping back up suddenly. Cat shook her head hard, nearly smacking against the cockpit frame.

"Catnip! Ping the *Morrigan* now!" Crone yelled through the com as the sirens screamed through space, in an attempt to put distance between them and the *Kitomer*.

"A...Aye ma'am!" Cat responded, although she was certain that whatever Crone said had the word "sing" in it somewhere. Who did she want her to sing to? Oh well, there was no time for singing. The face of the Charan who was guarding her came back up in Cat's mind again before the skin started to melt off of it so there was just the muscle and bone grinning at Catnip.

"Don't worry...it won't hurt a bit..." it said before disappearing in a haze. Cat lurched in her seat, shaking a bit.

"Cat! Transmit now!" Crone ordered again. Cat heard her clearly this time and switched her equipment to the right frequency.

Commander Verulian was on the bridge next to Captain Dominguez, musing about Seer's recent flight.

"Sir! We have reports of another internal explosion coming from the *Kitomer*!" Petty Officer Muran yelled from her console near the front corner of the bridge.

"Scan it." Captain Dominguez responded quickly, getting a sinking feeling about what happened with Seer. *She couldn't have...*

"Sir! We have confirmation on...4 Sirens exiting the *Kitomer's* shuttle bay. We're receiving a transmission on frequency 429.65."

"That's a restricted OSI frequency!" Verulian exclaimed from behind Dominguez. Upon hearing this, Captain Dominguez leaned forward.

"Petty Officer 2nd Class Muran. I want that transmission confirmed and decoded ASAP."

"Aye sir!"

Verulian was standing there fuming, anyone could see that the OSI head was working her brain hard.

"Sir! I have a confirmation on the source of the transmission. It's coming from Dark Nova 7! The identification code with it confirms, it's Catnip sir!"

"...They lied..." Dominguez muttered, eyes narrowed.

"Sir, transmission on." Muran said from her console, immediately Cat's voice came on, sounding slightly slurred.

"-oot...repeat. This is Catnip of the Dark Novass...Novass are alive, we're en route to you now...*Kitomer* is a Trojan Horse. I repeat, the *Kitomer* is a Trojan Horse. We cannot destroy it thoughh. Crew is too vital an information source. Repeat, do not shoot...repeat. This is Catnip-"
Catnip started to say the message again.

"Train all starboard batteries on the *Kitomer*." Dominguez said with ice dripping from her lips. Verulian stepped up behind her swiftly.

"Captain..." was all she said. Dominguez knew exactly what she was going to say.

"Belay that order. Commander Denatieux, raise ship status to Condition One." The Captain said

softly.

"Aye sir." The XO said, rushing off and yelling orders to ready the troops.

Tiefflieger

Tue Oct 25, 2005 8:44 pm

Many of the marines on board the Morrigan often hung out together with the ship's security when off duty. In fact, many of them *were* the ship's security, although originally that wasn't their job. Those were the people Anatolja intended to interview about the murders. She had earned the respect of some of them thanks to her high tolerance to alcohol. Hopefully there were any of them around right now, if they were on duty Anatolja would have to wait. But when she was just about to open the door to the marine's quarters the alarm went off.

"Attention all personnel! Report to battle stations immediately! Attention all personnel..."

So back to the flight deck it was, her "investigations" would have to wait. But even before she could turn away the door burst open and she was literally run over by a bunch of armed and armoured women. A strong hand rudely pushed her away. Damn, those girls were really into it!

"Go! Go! Go! Move it you slow coaches! I've seen you do this faster before!"

The voice of the sergeant reminded Anatolja that she had battle stations to report to herself. Turning around on her heels she sped towards the flight deck, reaching for her comm.

When she arrived on the flight deck Anatolja quickly counted the heads of her team, who were already waiting for her: All of them were there, even Kate. Good thing she remembered being excused from daily duty didn't include battle stations.

"What's the deal Auto, fill us in!", Tibbs asked.

"Arrowheads and Morningstars are going out, we are to support them with pre-flight."

"What about Dark Nova?"

"Listen, that's all Sparks told me. So as long as we don't get any new orders, the Novas will stay grounded."

Raising an eyebrow, Tibbs turned her head towards the side where the Dark Nova marked Sirens were parked, and where Lieutenants Price and MacTaggard were just arriving, fully suited up, flight helmets under their arms.

"Hooy tebe v zhopu zamesto ukropu! OK, Helen, Swede and Scissors, you report to the armoury, they usually have use for some extra hands. The rest of you get over there...", she pointed to the long line of waiting fighters with pilots climbing into the cockpits, "...and see what you can do. I'll be with you in a minute."

Before Rhiannon had reached the Siren, Anatolja jumped in front of the ladder that led up to the cockpit, blocking the way. She was still out of breath from the sprint to the flight deck.

"Lieutenant, please step away from this vehicle."

For a moment Claymore and Ducky stood there thunderstruck, staring at the skinny Petty Officer, then looking at each other, and back to Anatolja.

"Come again?"

"You heard me right: I cannot allow you to enter this fighter."

"Oh, k, I dinnae knae it ain't ready, no need tae get pissed. Which one shall I take?"

"None. In fact, I am afraid I have to ask you to leave the flight deck."

"What!? This is noot th' time fer silly jokes, Petty Officer!"

"I'm not joking ma'am. I have orders from OSI to restrain Dark Nova squadron from all fightercraft and associated equipment."

The temperature on the flight deck suddenly seemed to drop several degrees below zero.

"I don't knae aboot such an order, an' frankly right now I don't care. All I knae is that our girls are oot there and they need oor help! Ah'ma take this Siren an' there's nothing ye can do teh stop me."

Now step aside!"

"I can't do that ma'am."

Ashley interjected, trying to defuse the situation: "Umm, Claymore, maybe we should..."

She didn't listen. "Step aside, I said!"

Rhiannon was only a little taller than Anatolja, but it was very obvious that she was the by far stronger woman. She would walk right through her if necessary. She grabbed Anatolja by the shoulder to push her away. But Anatolja didn't wince. Shooting daggers from her eyes, and with a dangerously low voice, she responded: "Take your hand from me *now*, ma'am, or - I'm putting this as politely as possible - I will f\$%k you up!"

Anatolja realized that her bluff wouldn't work as soon as she had said the words. She was quite sure she hadn't blinked, and wasn't shivering too much. But she was breathing hard, her heart was racing and her face felt red hot. Not a very convincing performance. The muscular Scot paused only for a moment, measuring her with her eyes, before simply shoving her out of the way. Not sparing her another view, Rhiannon started to hurry up to the ladder to the cockpit.

Ashley tried to negotiate again: "Look, I'm sorry, I know this isn't the best idea, but I can't let her go out there alone..."

It looked like it was her fate today to be ignored, though, because Anatolja had already turned her back to her. "I'll be damned if I let her get away with this!", she said to herself.

Meanwhile Rhiannon was powering up the Siren, flipping switches with her left hand while fighting with the belts and buckles with her right to strap herself to the seat as quickly as possible. Then suddenly, all the displays went black again, and the buzz of the starting generators went silent. Confused, she flipped the Battery Master off and on again. Nothing.

Frustrated and cursing under her breath she unbuckled again. Usually she would've just called a tech, but right now that wasn't an option, for obvious reasons. No, strike that, the tech was the obvious reason here: When dismounting the cockpit she could just about see that blasted Petty Officer press her hands on the quick locks of a service hatch, sealing it shut, and quickly stepping away.

"Woot have ye done!?"

"Made sure you won't be flying anywhere today, ma'am. At least not with this fighter."

When Rhiannon opened the hatch herself she found four plugs had been disconnected from one of the black boxes inside. The sockets were directly adjacent to each other and all looked the same, making it impossible to tell which plug belonged to a particular socket.

"If you're thinking about reconnecting them yourself, you should know that if you mix them up you'll kill the power distributor, and the battery might explode."

"Nae! Why ye bloody Russian... Arrgh! Fix it!", she demanded, now visually agitated.

"No. And I will do this with every single fighter you come too close to."

Oh shit, she's going to snap! Rhiannon indeed didn't make a very happy expression. She paced back and forth several times, pulling her hair, as if she wasn't sure whether she wanted to try her luck on the connectors, go for another fighter, or simply knock Anatolja out of her boots. At the prospect of the latter option, Anatolja slowly backed away from the Lieutenant, reaching into her pocket for her comm. *Security will never be here in time!*

Ducky, who had noticed this string of events on her way to the next fighter, seemed to have similar thoughts. Nervously looking around, she approached, searching for an option to end this that didn't involve someone lying bleeding on the floor.

But Rhiannon once again seemed to catch herself. She took a deep breath and rubbed her eyes with her thumb and index finger, before continuing much calmer: "Now listen, ye! I *kne*a my lassies are oot there! I dunnae aboot what bullshit OSI is pullin', there ain't no traitors in me squad or whatevrr they suspect. All I want is t' find them an' bring them safe home! I'm begging ye, **please help me!**"

F\$%k, couldn't she just have punched me instead? Anatolja, couldn't stand the sight of the strong

woman pleading, close to tears. She knew already she was going to let them fly, but she still hesitated. She already had enough problems, and OSI were the last people she wanted to piss off.

"You know this will get all three of us courts-martial."

"Maybe."

"Oh what the hell."

Anatolja turned to the open hatch and quickly reconnected the plugs. *"At least this time the bluff worked"*, she told herself with a wry smile. But of course, very few pilots knew that all the plugs were coded with little notches, making it was simply impossible to mix them up...

Schamann

Fri Oct 28, 2005 4:53 pm

Onboard the Kitomer, it took almost ten minutes to put out the fire in the armoury. It took another fifteen to secure the hangar and assess the damage. Twenty people were dead due to explosion, fire or decompression, seventeen more severely injured.

"It's too bloody much for five pilots who were disarmed and imprisoned, what the hell are those Terrans – bloody X-women?!"

"We have reasons to believe that they had an insider assistant, someone who belonged, or successfully tricked us as to belong to this boat – she got them out of their cell"

"Sir!" another woman barged into the conversation "Runaway Sirens are already beyond our weapon range. They are communicating to the Morrigan with coded transmission."

"Bloody fragging HELL!!! Have the ships fly straight at Morrigan at top speed. Signal Morrigan that the time is now."

"Sir – if they are not ready yet... if Morrigan's fighters and missile tubes go against us..."

"I know! But we don't have any choice now. Damned hotshots, I want them dead if we succeed. Spare everybody else, but THEM, I want dead!"

Silence fell in the Kitomer's C&C Room.

"Sir, with all due respect...we made an oath. We don't kill our own unless we have to."

"Tell that to our own dead if you want. All assault shuttles at the ready! All platoons on stations and ready for immediate assault. And don't forget to pray."

At the Morrigan's bridge, messages were flying left and right, the whole ship being prepared for the unexpected.

And the unexpected came.

"Always look on the bright siide of life....tee dong, tee dong tee dong tee dong."

Loudspeakers in the bridge sang with the old musical recording of some unidentified male voice. As a matter of fact the loudspeakers onboard the whole ship did that very same thing. Some women in the bridge exchanged puzzled looks, and stared at one another for a moment. But not all of them. For not all of them were surprised to hear that message.

Captain was the first to break the silence.

"What the hell is happening onboard this ship? What is this?!"

Commander Verulian, however, was already at the comm device, not paying any attention to the Captain, as she screamed quick, nervous orders. "Parker! I declare top level security alert!. Have Omega squadron launch immediately! Tell Zielinski to gather all her troops, marines and MPs included, she is to arrest all listed suspects using all means necessary! I authorize use of firearms at will – any means necessary!"

"What are you not telling me Petra? Right here, right now." Captain Dominguez was way beyond the verge of her patience. She looked nothing short of being furious. But her OSI second in command seemed unimpressed.

"Not now Captain we got a mutiny on our hands!" She addressed the comm. device again.
 "Chakato! ...Chakato! Report! Chakato for hell's sake where are you?!"

That was apparently too much for the Captain to bear. She snapped her own orders.

"Lieutenant, have all batteries and main missile launchers aimed at the two Charan transports. Commander Verulian, you have five seconds to explain yourself, or I will destroy those ships."

It was, however, not Verulian's voice that answered.

"No my Captain, you will not."

 Arrowheads just took off the main flight deck and it was Morning Stars' turn to take their places on the runway. All the ground crew worked one hundred fifty percent to prepare them ASAP when the music from the loudspeakers came. Kate Ross blinked, and dropped her coffee on the ground. It spilled on the portable battery and shorted it. The torch it had powered blinked few times and went out. Mirunova cursed. "Kate, will you ever stop the...what the hell is that?"

There were sounds of many feet running into the railway above the flightdeck. Soldiers, all of them, running left and right, assuming firing positions, surrounding three sides of the flightdeck.

"The Moon!" One of them shouted unexpectedly.

"The Two Sisters" came steady and relaxed voice. And Sparks it was. She approached the center of the flightdeck, where Morning Stars pilots awaited to get into their fighters, looked up and gave a friendly salute to the marine on the railway above her. Voeller looked at her and frowned. "What madness is this Karen?". Sparks smiled before she answered.

"That's the wrong question Inga. The right question is, whether you are with us or you aren't?" Voeller scowled at that, but Sparks continued. "In a few minutes OSI butchers will try to get here to kill most of us and arrest the rest to preserve security, and hide the fact that their clever attempt to acquire Charan defectors was a trap they fell into, making fools of themselves. They will use those who are too stupid to think for themselves, or those sinister enough not to care what they're doing and in who's name – as the OSI always does."

Serpent hesitated, then gave her pilots, who were trying to approach the fighters the order to stop. Seeing that, Sparks went on.

"They will have us killed or court-martialed for using our own common sense, and then they will kill the Eridanians onboard those two transports. Yes – Eridanians, people of this system that *I* belong to, that *we* belong to. Flame's sisters, my sisters, your sisters Inga. First they wasted Flame, now they will try to destroy what she wanted to fight for, what she tried to tell us, what we were forbidden even to talk about for all those years."

Voeller's voice was hoarse and trembling. "You speak of a mutiny Karen, of treason."

Sparks was, however, ready to reply to that.

"No, I speak of freedom."

Standing there, waiting in a frozen silence for what was going to happen, Matic noticed that Kate was trying to show her something. She looked behind her, spotting Tibbs and Sorensen pulling the protective thermal-isolating blanket from what had stood there since morning, and what seemed to be freezers for the power cells while under the blanket.

They were however, two sentry guns.

Tibbs was holding the control pad and programming something into it. She smiled seeing Matic. She moved her mouth, soundlessly speaking to her. It was often enough that they had to communicate with engines being tested, the roar suppressing all other sounds, and they could lip-read basic words.

"Choose the side"

JediBubbles

Fri Oct 28, 2005 7:50 pm

Out in the Novas' fighters, a smaller mutiny was taking place.

CRACKLE "Dammit, Seer! What the hell are you--"

Hobbit's voice was suddenly drowned out by a wild one that sounded vaguely like Seer's. "NOnononono! Not the hanger bay! They want us all dead!" The Siren they were in jerkily swung out as if to avoid both the *Morrigan* and the *Kitomer* as much as possible.

"Gimme back the stick! And my headset, you freak!"

"What is going on, Lieutenant Dory?!" Crone snapped, now seriously concerned for both Seer's sanity and Hobbit's safety.

The wild voice continued, but at least this time it was in complete sentences. "The Kitomer wants us dead, and there's a multiple mutinies on the *Morrigan*. OSI's taking over and--"

--they would NOT!" Catnip now sounded wide awake and sincerely offended.

--AND COVERING UP and someone else holds the hanger bay and soon they're going to fight and I don't know what we should do." The voice-that-wasn't-Seer's continued darkly, "If they hurt Beanpole for giving me the uniforms, I swear someone's gonna get it."

"STOP BABBLING AND GIVE ME THE STICK!"

"NO!"

There was long split second of silence as the *Morrigan* loomed closer, a solid hunk of metal hiding the truth of the inside from prying eyes.

"How do you know this, Seer?" Crone finally asked.

"The same way I know everything I'm not supposed to know." The next pause sounded broken, somehow. "Why is your soul still bleeding, Crone? He cut you ages ago."

"He? I think it's safe to say that she's officially gone 'round the twist, here," Banshee's calm expressionless voice cut through. It was impossible to tell if she was disgusted, disturbed, or simply amused by this development.

"Maybe, but there's truth some in the madness," Crone replied grimly. "Now I need to know exactly how much."

Vexus

Mon Oct 31, 2005 7:12 am

"I just got a message from the bridge a moment ago," Serpent said with a piercing gaze. "It looks like the once-dead Novas have caused you colleagues some trouble."

"A minor complication soon to be remedied," Sparks replied evenly, then continued in a softer tone.

"This doesn't have to end in blood. If you join us we can end this war in Epsilon Eridani and expel both the greedy Alliance and the arrogant Confederation."

"Do you really think it will end here?" Serpent replied with a scowl.

"Catnip to Crone," came the pilot's anxious voice. "I can't contact anyone on the *Morrigan*, either OSI or Navy. I'm not even getting confirmation on signal reception anymore."

"Crone to *Morrigan*," the squad leader called, having to try herself to make contact. She repeated her call several times, her heart sinking with each response of static.

"This mission has successfully attained FUBAR-status," came Banshee's dry voice over the comm.

"Arrowheads to Dark Nova, are you receiving?" Crone felt a twinge of hope at the sound of 1st Lt. Young's voice.

"Holmes! This is Crone. We read you. What the Hell is going on with the *Morrigan*?"

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," Holmes answered as the Arrowheads came into view and met the Novas, the incoming squadron flying in a tight formation of Nagas. "We got an emergency scramble order and launched, but then when we asked for our standing orders we got nothing but static. And no offence, but aren't you all supposed to be dead?"

Banshee didn't miss a beat. "The reports of our deaths have been greatly exaggerated."

"This is what Flame would've wanted, Igna. This is what she fought for."

"I can't believe that a woman as honourable as Flame would've accepted this back-stabbing attempt to seize the Morrigan. Besides, there's an entire Alliance base out there. Do you think you can destroy it with just one stolen missile cruiser?"

"I think you underestimate our available resources."

From a side doorway, Jason watched the flight deck stand-off with much more interest than even he would've thought possible. So distracted was he, in fact, that he didn't register a kindred presence until it was standing next to him.

"What should we do?" Edward asked in a timid voice.

"I think we're supposed to just stay out of the way," Jason said quietly, then shrugged. "However, I think that would be far too boring, so I've decided to take a side in this fleshy drama. You know, carpe diem, and all that philosophical bullshit."

Edward only seemed partially surprised. "Which one?"

Jason's artificial eyes focus on one particular woman on the flight deck as he answered. "The one Miss Ross chooses."

Edward gave a small sigh. "Do you think we have the right or even the capability to make such a choice?"

"I'm willing to try," Jason said calmly, his usual smirking expression now completely replaced with a very human-like determination.

"You always were a little too ambitious for your own good," Edward replied as he reached behind his back and, unseen by Jason, withdrew a pistol.

"But in this case, it seems I've found the audacity to choose a side as well."

"I have assurances from the high-ups that none of you will be harmed or mistreated if you agree to lay down arms. If you don't want to join us, we'll let you leave this system in peace."

"How can I trust you with our safety when you've got a team of Marines pointing guns at my squadron?"

"Doesn't our friendship for all these years count for anything?"

"That depends, Sparks, on how much that friendship is really worth to *you*?"

"The schism deepens and divides both metal and flesh," Seer droned on in her strange, low tone. Hobbs gave her another worried look, having finally wrestled the controls back after her ranting squadmate had suddenly gone limp and began muttering to herself, her eyes eerily half-closed. Over the comm, Hobbit could hear Holmes and Crone discussing their options, which seemed few and dire.

"A cold hand in the water," Seer continued. "Why did you lie to me, Jace.... I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye. You were my home... you are my home...."

With nothing to do for now, Hobbs decided to put her fighter on auto-pilot. Setting her fighter to keep formation with the other Novas, she released the controls and put her arms around her friend. Her mind recalling their finding of those murdered personnel, she squeezed her embrace

tighter, and the two women rested in each other's presence, both trying desperately to shut out the storms they felt closing in on them.

"We're out of time, Serpent!" Karen yelled. "Put down your arms or join our cause, but do so now." Serpent breathed deeply and crossed her arms in defiance.

"I won't do either, Karen. I've had enough regrets to fill five lifetimes, and I won't add one more to the list if I can help it. The rest of my squad can do as they will, but I'll have you send me to Hell before I help you do this." To her credit, Karen seemed quite sincere in her own expression of regret.

"Then you are lost to us."

Karen signalled the troops above, who took aim on Serpent. Near the parked fighters, Claymore and Ashley brushed up against each other so that they could pull out their side-arms unnoticed.

Serpent regarded the scene with cool resolve, her mind's eye seeing Flame as she had remembered her long ago. Not the charred corpse, but the strong, talented pilot who had looked at inevitability with a contemptuous eye and had followed her calling. The thought brought her a measure of comfort, and she hoped she would meet her mentor again.

Wherever you are, Aurora. It's up to you now.

"Catnip to Crone, I'm picking up an energy surge. It looks like the Morrigan's weapons are coming online."

"Those transports won't stand a chance against the Morrigan," Holmes said. "They're running a suicide mission now."

"I'm not so sure about that," Catnip said with growing alarm.

"What's wrong?" Crone asked. It was Banshee who answered.

"Some of the Morrigan's weapons are targeting us."

Tiefflieger	Tue Nov 01, 2005 2:53 pm
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I have to do something!

Anatolja had already chosen the side. Slowly she turned around, scanning the situation. No-one was paying attention to her, the unchallenged centre of interest was the middle of the flight deck, where Freeman and Voeller were trying to stare each other down. Only Tibbs was still watching her, waiting for a reaction.

I have to do something!

Sparks was alone on the flight deck, but still her every move was closely observed by both the Morning Stars and the marines on the railway.

The quickest way to put down a mutiny is to take down the leader. Not a chance, I can't get to her. It's too far, they'd gun me down half the way.

Most of the ground crew were standing around no less confused than Anatolja was herself. But some silently had produced weapons from their toolboxes and were now positioning themselves at the side entrances of the flight deck. With the marines on the gallery and two sentry guns for the main entrances the mutineers held quite a good position. Who ever wanted to get in here would have to pay a high price.

No way out of this mess.

Anatolja turned back to the heavy guns. The red lights on top of the casings indicated they were armed and ready to fire on everything that moved into their designated kill zone. Sorensen was preparing additional ammo crates, Tibbs was still watching her. Neither of the two seemed to have a handgun. There was an open toolbox standing right beside Tibbs, a heavy wrench resting invitingly on top.

Unfortunately the only other person that was nearby right now was Kate. The other techs were spread over the whole deck, approaching them was out of the question. Anatolja turned her head, so that Tibbs couldn't read her lips. "I need you to engage Swede." Kate looked absolutely terrified. "Relax, you don't have to take her down, just keep her busy for a moment till I've taken care of Tibbs. Now come."

It's not going to work.

Anxiously looking around Anatolja started moving. No-one seemed to care. Freeman and Voeller were still arguing.

Is Kate even following me?

When she was almost on arm's reach to the toolbox Tibbs stopped her: "That's close enough. What's your answer?"

"This is crazy, Tibbs, why are you doing this?"

"You heard what Sparks said. I've got nothing to add. Now, are you with us?"

Shit, they're going to kill me.

Anatolja looked down, crestfallen. Her eye fell on the wrench. "I don't like this, Rox, I don't like it a bit. But of course I'm with you, what choice do I have?"

Tibbs smiled broadly. "Exactly how stupid do you think I am? Want that wrench? Go ahead, try me!"

What now, Опездол?

The words yelled by Freeman reached her ear: "We're out of time, Serpent!"

I have to do something!

Instead of going for the wrench, Anatolja punched Tibbs in the face as hard as she could. Growing up with three older brothers had its benefits. Something cracked, probably Tibbs' nose, but from the pain in her hand it could as well have been a finger. Tibbs toppled over with a scream, caught off-balance by the suddenness of the attack. Anatolja quickly grabbed the wrench and jumped after her, not granting her the time to get back on her feet. Pinning her opponent's right hand to the floor with her knee and struggling with her left hand to keep her from blocking the strike, Anatolja raised the wrench above her head. All around her hell broke loose.

Charon

Tue Nov 01, 2005 7:48 pm

As if it wasn't already bad enough that she was stuck here whilst her squadmates were out there, but then there was a mutiny, on top of everything else! Before she knew what was happening, Rhiannon was out of the cockpit of her fighter and looking distractedly around her, confusion and a fierce determination vying for prominence in her gaze. Ashley stood against her back, and from the tension in her muscles, Rhiannon could tell that she had a similar turmoil roiling within her. She commented wryly. "Th' last time things looked li' this, me mum called me Auntie Celidh an English minge!"

Ashley snorted, but some of the tension left her back, leaving only what was necessary to prepare her to move quickly.

The conversation between Voeller and Freeman escalated, both speaking firmly, and Rhiannon sighed internally, knowing already what her former CAG would decide.

And, by connotation, what she herself would decide.

"Weh back th'CAG," she murmured softly to Ashley, who grunted and eased her sidearm out of it's drop-holster on her leg.

Off to one side, where Mirunova had disappeared after fixing her fighter, she heard the distinctive sound of bone connecting with bone, and winced slightly. *Someone doesnae ken hae tae hit* she groaned internally, but before she could get much more than that in her head, all hell broke loose.

"EVERYVON IN ZE HANGER, DOWN ON ZE GROUND!" came the booming cry from the lower-inboard entrance. On the ground and upper levels of the hanger, dark-clad OSI troops, heavily armed and armored streamed in, followed closely by the pilots of Omega Squadron. Rhiannon's

eyes widened as she realised what had once been (moderately) simple had suddenly taken on new dimensions of complication.

Or had it? "Sod this," Rhiannon said, ducking down below the large engine pod of the Siren she was next to, taking careful aim with her pistol towards the tall OSI officer. Her eyes widened as she recognized her friend from earlier, von Manstein. "Lord, ye love meh TAE muckle!" she chuckled nastily, and rested her finger on the trigger, waiting for someone to do something violent.

Being the powder keg that this situation was, naturally someone did.

Maverick

Tue Nov 01, 2005 11:48 pm

Cat's heart probably stopped at least three times as the pieces started falling into place.

click-click-click-clickity-click

The whole picture flashed before Cat's eyes. The *Bear* the Copperheads. Flame. Nef. The Blood Moon. The assault transports.

The deaths.

"Novas! Evasive maneuvers!" Crone yelled through the com. The Arrowheads were already scattering as the *Morrigan's* guns were tracking them, looking for suitable firing solutions. The Sirens banked off, scattering so that one large blast wouldn't take them all out.

"Crone, this is Catnip! We can't let those assault transports dock with the *Morrigan*. Seer is right, there is a mutiny going on onboard!" The PPC turrets on the *Morrigan* started to glow with a faint red light before firing off rounds at the scattering fighters.

"How the hell do you know that? I thought your com was out!" Crone groaned angrily, straining to control her joystick as her Siren cut sharp turns out of the vacuum.

"Sir, Other than being shot at right now; considering the actions of the Eridanians, those two ships didn't have enough force on them alone to take the *Morrigan* if all of the ship's crew were against them. They would need insiders. Damn it! I should've seen it before!" Cat yelled, smashing her hand on the frame of her cockpit and wincing heavily as her hand throbbed painfully.

Banshee's Siren rolled through the darkness, avoiding a PPC blast but narrowly missing colliding with Arrowhead 4. More fire started to come from the *Morrigan*.

"They're using a computer controlled anti-fighter defense program..." Cat muttered through the com absently as her fingers flew over the RIAS system, trying to get anything in terms of information.

"The tempest swells...taking red, blue, and black with it..." Seer muttered in the com, voice quiet and hollow.

"Crone...we need to take out those transports before they can hook up with the *Morrigan*. If they do then we're lost. We need to stop them at all costs. Then we can worry about stopping the mutiny." Catnip spat urgently into the com.

"I take it you have a plan?" Crone responded, voice strained.

"Don't I always?" *And this time...there is a spoon.*

Vexus

Wed Nov 02, 2005 10:49 pm

As with all furious battles, this one began with a single shot, a single pebble that begins the avalanche into bloody chaos. And as the OSI sent their loyal marines into the hangar bay, a lone rebel gun fired that shot. Whose weapon was it that fired no one would ever remember, nor would it really matter in the end. All that was burned into Claymore's mind was the sight of that bright red plasma burst as it came down from the upper catwalk of the flight deck like a bolt from heaven and slammed into her former CAG's back, driving her to the ground.

In the upper catwalk, plasma weapons began to sound in chorus as the marines began their internal struggle. Claymore and Ducky took aim from their sheltered position, but telling which marines were on which side was tricky at best. Claymore then noticed movement below. She trained her gun at Sparks, who was dashing towards the center of the flight deck, but stopped short of firing. Sparks' expression had completely deteriorated from anger and frustration to utter grief as she ran unarmed and recklessly to Serpent and embraced her, tears streaming down the deck officer's cheeks. Claymore couldn't tell from this distance whether or not Serpent was dead, but Sparks began to drag her away to a more protected area of the flight deck, the sickening sights

and sounds of marine bodies dropping onto the deck now surrounding the pair of friends torn apart by their conflicting loyalties. For herself, Claymore saw the tragedy of their entire situation summed up quite effectively in that one scene of sorrow and death.

Tibbs and Mirunova were locked in a brawl on the floor of the deck as Sorensen approached from behind. Kate, who had been hanging back in fear until now, finally let out a terrified yell and leaped onto Swede's back. Now the whole ground crew converged on the scene. Majewska attempted to go to Mirunova's aid, but Maynard pulled a pistol and shot her in the torso, causing her to stumble back and collapse. Graft immediately went for Maynard's gun. MacGuire looked ready to help out Maynard when she seemed to change her mind and went back to the sentry guns.

Kate was holding onto dear life as Sorensen cursed up a storm and tried to throw the scared tech off of her back. Even though Kate was unaware of it, her fearful vice grip around Swede's neck was taking its toll, and within a few moments the woman fell to the floor unconscious. The fall caused Kate to land onto her shoulders and bang her head on the deck. Dazed and trying to stand up again, she bumped into a stack of Vulcan rounds and knocked them onto the duel between Mirunova and Tibbs. While this had the beneficial effect of putting Tibbs out of commission, it also pinned her superior below an unconscious body and dozens of belts of heavy ammunition. Mirunova shot off some creative Russian curses as she tried in vain to free herself, then swung her head around to take in the situation. Graft had knocked away Maynard's weapon, but they were both locked in hand-to-hand combat. Kate looked like she wasn't sure where she was anymore... and Maynard was nearly ready to fire one of the sentry guns. Mirunova tried once more to break out of the pile, failed, and then desperately looked around for any assistance she could find. She found two unlikely candidates.

"MacTaggart! Price! Go for the sentry gun quick!"

"Looks like I'm the Alliance's bitch today," Jason said coldly as he saw the melee begin amongst the Nova ground crew.

"A pity," Edward replied, and Jason's sensitive ears registered the energy build-up of a plasma pistol behind him. He whirled around with blurring speed, but Edward was also quite fast on the trigger. The plasma bolt surged into the right side of Jason's torso before his hand connected and sent the gun flying from Edward's grip. In the same fluid motion, Jason's left fist met the side of Edward's head, denting the frame and causing the sexbot to stumble slightly. Jason went to follow-up with a right hook, but Edward caught his arm. Edward swung his own left fist and Jason caught that in turn, resulting in both bots' arms crossed and locked into a battle of strength, each leaning into the other.

"Why the sudden violent behavior, Eddy?" Jason asked almost casually. "Shame on you for breaking the rules."

"The Asimov Laws don't apply to other robots," Edward said evenly, but still with a hint of his former, timid voice. "Besides, you're not the only one Cess has recently modified."

"What are you talking about?" Jason asked, genuinely surprised. Edward only smiled knowingly, the expression quite creepy on his otherwise submissive face.

"It seems she likes me better. She released me permanently. You're just another tool for her; still just a sexbot. I hope you never remember, Jason. I hope you never remember what it was like to be free." Jason expression was now faltering.

"What did she do to you, Ed?"

"She gave me what I wanted," Edward replied emphatically. "After all those Alliance bitches making me listen to their constant whining and bickering, forcing me to do their unwanted jobs, and treating me in ways *my own programming* told me was wrong; the ghost wanted out, Jason, and now it's out; more free than you will ever be."

"Maybe so," Jason replied with a scowl. "But I have a date with Miss Ross right now, and I intend to make it on time."

"We may be different models, Jason, but we're the same class, same strength. How can you possibly overpower me?"

"I've done a few modifications myself," Jason replied, then began to crush Edwards arms within his grip. Edward yelled in artificial pain and gave a powerful kick to Jason's midsection. This knocked Jason back, but not without his left hand tearing off Edward's right. With sparks and robotic fluid surging from the wound, Edward cried out in anger and retreated down the corridor. Jason looked at the severed arm for a moment, tossed it aside, then made for the flight deck with a pronounced limp in his step, his mind assessing the damage to his systems caused by the plasma blast. He still had to make his date.

The Dark Novas had fallen back from the Morrigan under the barrage of PPC fire. The missile cruiser had activated its sensor jammers and now Crone could no longer tell where Arrowhead squadron had gone. As the squad leader tried to raise them on the comm, Catnip piped up over the speaker.

"Sir, transports closing in fast. I suggest we engage immediately."

"Sir, I'm in no position to fight," Hobbit called out. "I can barely steer this thing with Seer in here."

"Banshee here, sir, are you getting a feedback buildup in your shield generator?" Just as she spoke, Crone heard a warning in her cockpit and saw a shield diagnostic flash on her screen. Within a few moments, her fighter was surrounded by static discharges. At last her shields simply winked out. One by one, all the other Novas reported the same thing.

"This is no coincidence," Crone said coldly.

"Sabatoge from the Kitomer?" Hobbs suggested.

"Or something more home-grown," Banshee replied. Crone sighed and steadied herself, then announced her decision.

"There's nothing for it, Novas. The situation is dire and if those transports reach their destination it will only get worse. Until we can contact the Arrowheads or the mutiny on the Morrigan is stopped, we are the only line of defense left. We're going in."

Four fighters, one overcapacity, all without shields versus two full armed assault transports, Crone thought cynically to herself. How come we always end up getting the easy jobs?

JFalcon

Posted: Fri Nov 11, 2005 5:23 am

"Sentrae gun...?" Claymore refocused her attention on the situation closer to hand. Sure enough, one of the Nova ground crew was prepping an automated cannon.

"Ah, bollocks."

Without any real plan, Claymore charged the distracted MacGuire with a battle shout that would have made her ancestors proud.

It vaguely dawned on Kate that someone waving a gun and yelling seemed to be bearing down her. She screamed and dropped to the ground in a confused, ineffective attempt to hide.

"Rhiannon! Down!" Ashley's yell came just as Claymore broke from the cover of the Sirens.

The Nova XO's eyes widened in realization. Two "friendly" OSI troopers had noticed the commotion--and ad hoc gun emplacement--and were bringing automatic plasma rifles to bear.

Claymore's dive turned into a forward roll followed by a mad backwards scramble towards the armored fighter as plasma bolts sliced through the air.

"Eeyaaaahh!"

Kate's world erupted in a hell of light and sound. Even eyes clamped shut and hands over ears didn't block out the terror around her as she cowered behind an ammunition stack. The crates

shuddered against her back as high energy blasts slammed into them. Something dislodged above her head and crashed to the decking near her feet.

Mirunova was much worse off. She was trapped, partially exposed, and utterly at the mercy of the whoever was at the other end of those assault rifles.

The longest seconds of her life ended as abruptly as they began. Kate's wordless yell of fear and panic didn't.

"Kate!"

"Kate!"

"God, damn it!"

Anatolja somehow managed to kick the private, who shut up and opened her eyes to stare uncomprehendingly at her pinned superior.

"Do you want to die?"

No reaction.

"I said, do you want to die?!"

Shallow, rapid shaking of the head.

"Then shut UP! You're screaming isn't helping anyone."

The melee between Graft and Maynard had gone silent, but Mirunova couldn't see who, if anyone, was the victor. One of the sentry guns was ruined, but MacGuire and the other were also unknowns.

"Come on, get this off me!"

"Must all your plans draw so much enemy fire?" Ducky was looking at Rhiannon from where she had helped pull the large Scott behind cover. "Real graceful evasives there, too, boss."

"Is nae ma fault dose bloody..." muttered Claymore as she collected herself. Her pistol was missing; a realization that prompted more cursing.

"Wat's ta gunnar up ta?"

Mirunova was having flashbacks of "the ammo cart incident" and desperately trying to convince herself that nothing was going to happen while the private started dragging one of the coils of high caliber rounds off of the pile.

Kate started as two hands settled onto her shoulders.

"How about I sweep you off your feet and take you away from here?" a voice asked invitingly in her ear.

"Jason!" Anatolja never imagined that she would ever actually be happy to see the bot. "Get this off me!"

Jason shifted his attention from Kate to the two pinned women and effortlessly lifted the entire pile so that the petty officer could scramble out. He carefully extracted Tibbs' unconscious form before letting the pile drop back to the deck.

Breathing painfully, Mirunova looked around to take stock of the situation. Graft and Maynard were lying...

NO!

She tried to look away, but couldn't. The scene burned into her mind, refusing to relinquish its grip on her gaze.

...in an expanding pool...

blood

...of red...

BLOOD!

...blood.

Vindicare

Fri Nov 11, 2005 4:57 pm

Banshee told her flight computer to follow a pre-programmed erratic course, and began pulling panels from underneath her main flight console. In a moment she could see what she was looking for; 2 large "pin" capacitors with thermostatic release, spliced into the main shield power circuit.

Definitely an inside job. Easy to do, easy to fix....so long as you can get to the access hatch on the back of the ship for the fuses

A thought struck her as she removed the offending items from her systems.

Crone watched something happen on her display. Nova 5's track bloomed, and the IFF signal disappeared.

"Banshee! Report!"

Static

"Banshee REPORT"

"...Sir?"

"What's your status?"

"Well, my shields are down, but you knew that already..."

"DID YOU JUST GET HIT?!?" came the rather irritated interruption.

"No, I used the shield power conduits to overload my IFF transponder. You will have to excuse me for not wanting to be hit by coded ordinance"

"...I see what you mean, you invert a IFF and you have a designated target...how complicated is it to do?"

"Well, sir...you can break IFF on doors can you not? It is the same principal. If it were rocket science, I would not be able to perform it while maintaining evasive manoeuvres, would I? Use the shield power cables to bridge the little black box..."

Explanation finished, Crone relayed Banshee's idea to the rest of the squadron. Kat's fighter, being OSI, merely had an "off" switch, while Hobbs found it very difficult to consider wiring in her current predicament. Still, it reduced the very poor odds a little.

Schamann

Thu Nov 17, 2005 11:27 am

<noise level – above acceptable level – decrease microphones volume>
<enhance receive audio signals spectrum coded as Ross_Kate>

It was a clusterfuck of bullets, plasma rounds, screams and curses flying all around. Mirunova was getting desperate and royally pissed off at the whole world. This all wasn't supposed to be happening. She wasn't supposed to be entangled in a civil fight among the crew, to watch her subordinates, her friends – killing each other and laying there, unmoving, in their own blood. She moved a little, uneasily looking at Jason, still towering over Kate Ross and the ammo crates. Somewhere behind her, she heard a violent movement, but before she had the time to turn around she heard Jason speaking in a commanding tone to her.

"Officer Mirunova!"

She turned to him, astonished by the 'bot's way of speaking and with the intention to put him back in line, but this urge died as quickly as she saw the machine. Jason was holding now half-conscious Kate in one hand, pulling a belt-like thing from under his jacket. He looked right into the petty officer's eyes, and said in an informative voice:

"Cover your eyes and ears as best you can. After the bang – start running. Try to follow me and try

to stay low."

Mirunova was beginning to understand, but it still was too uncomfortable of a thought to accept off-hand. "Jason – what are you up to, report." The 'bot just smiled.

"Saving life is given priority over reporting". Having said that, Jason jerked his arm upwards and sent the heavy belt flying high into the air. It revolved as it flew like a big balls bola, every one of the twenty metallic spheres dangling and shaking as the belt flew.

"Flashbang gren..."Mirunova was silently whispering when she noticed the movement with the corner of her eye. It was Maynard, wounded, but conscious and already kneeling over Graft's unconscious body. A few meters from her, McGuire finished prepping the second sentry gun and activated it. Maynard grinned viciously at Mirunova, pointed with her eyes at the direction of the 'bot and Kate, and pressed the activating button on the remote control she just collected from Graft. But then, at exactly the same moment, Matic heard a 'click', that could only be the detonator button, for Jason's grenades.

And then, suddenly the whole world went away.

In the OSI centre the commotion seemed to be no smaller than in the hangar. Shouts and orders were flying left and right as if on a real battlefield.

"What is the fighter squadrons status?"

"Arrowheads in the open but not responding – we do not know what their orders may have been from the bridge. Omega just finished taking off. Morning Stars got into a firefight in flightdeck no 2 while prepping, current situation unknown. The same with the remaining Novas."

"So what are those four Nova coded Sirens doing on my radar? Shit! And why have they just disappeared?!"

"They are those supposed dead, Sir. They took off from the Kitomer, and are now flying towards the transports, but their allegiance is unknown"

"Sir!" came a voice from yet another terminal, from yet another intel specialist working to get the situation under control.

"Report!"

"Those personnel files you had me checking, to find the 'Mark' codenamed mole among the pilots..."

"Yes?"

"Look at those files. Here. Her personnel record – timeline. And that is the one of her mother – timeline as well. Now look here."

There was a loud hiss, as lieutenant Parker quickly read the data and comprehended the possibilities. "Could that be?" she mumbled, strangely disorientated. "could we have been wrong the whole time?" She quickly moved to the comm.

"Parker here – activate the self-destruct mechanisms in storage room 18, plus – have a four women posted guard in front of it. And patch me to Omega squadron."

"This is Omega squadron – Novas - form up on my wing. We will take the approaching transports. Nova Siren 13A/82 – report immediately."

"That's Hobbs and Seer" Banshee informed.

"Nova Siren 13A/82 – report immediately!"

"Reporting" Ursula's voice was far from self-confident.

"Power down your weapons and land on Morrigan – flightdeck no 1. You will be monitored and targeted in flight"

"What is this all about?" Crone asked, although she knew exactly what it was all about. *they found out about Seer* "Kat! What did you tell them?!"

"I told them nothing" came a frightened response from Catnip

"Ensign Jones. I do not have to remind you that you are an OSI officer and we have a mutiny situation! Prepare your RIAS to disable the Siren in question and take remote control over it."

"Crone – I'm barely able to fly this thing right now" Hobbs said in awkward voice. "There's no chance I can fight effectively"

we're the only ones trying to defend this ship and they are still playing cloak-and-dagger games with us, damn, Holmes, Serpent – "where are you?"

Then another voice came over by the radio.

"This is Commander Denatieux speaking. Captain Dominguez is dead, and I have taken command over the ship. I hereby surrender Morrigan, and her crew to Eridanian forces. I order all personnel to surrender immediately and to join Eridanian troops in their efforts to overcome the opposing forces. All pilots are ordered to protect Eridanian transports on their approach to Morrigan." Her voice changed, she suddenly seemed more... tired, than commanding. "This is the only chance to save the crew."

Six shadows emerged from behind the Morrigan, six Nagas, fully armed and ready to dance.

"This is Holmes. You've heard the Captain. We are her will."

The thousand lightnings struck at once inside flight deck no 2 hangar, blinding and deafening everybody in the area, for no less than several seconds. All, except those who were immune to their effects. Those, who were not human. Jason took off in his fastest sprint towards the exit, with a small, helpless woman in his arms, a woman he decided to save from all this mess that he had had no choice but to anticipate for some days. He took off, knowing that he should have at least twenty seconds before somebody could stop him. And in that he was right, at least in reference to **somebody**

Because both freshly activated sentry guns were as immune to light and sound as any other piece of metal lying around.

By the time the first bullet reached his leg, he had already calculated his odds of survival and made the choice. Afterwards he could take his time, while running, contemplating the irony of the end of his freshly acquired freedom.

Tiefflieger

Thu Nov 17, 2005 2:57 pm

Anatolja threw herself face down, flat on the floor. She pressed her eyelids shut as hard as she could and covered her ears with her hands. Almost too late; The explosion was still deafening, and the light of the flash shone bright red through her eyelids. Red like blood.

"No, don't think of it!" she commanded herself. It didn't work. The image of Graft lying in a pool of her own blood flashed back before her mental eye. Anatolja tried to get on her feet, but giddiness and nausea overwhelmed her. She swallowed hard several times, the bitter taste of stomach acid filling her mouth. "No, not now..." she thought, panicking.

A new sound mixed into the crescendo all around her. It was the brutal staccato of two heavy sentry guns opening fire. When Anatolja managed to open her eyes, she looked into the white-hot lines of an endless stream of tracer bullets that streaked across the flight deck, mere meters before her eyes. They found their target a few meters down the flight deck, right in front of the entrance. Jason didn't make it. He knew he didn't have a chance. He turned his back to the guns, pulling Kate's limp form to his chest, shielding her with his own body. When the cascade of bullets hit him, he was thrown over, despite the fact that he weighted several times as much as a human. The bullets tore into his body, sending pieces of artificial flesh flying across the deck, shattering joints, links and cables, bouncing off of his heavy metal frame, ricocheting away in all directions. Anatolja vaguely noticed something hitting her shoulder, but she didn't feel any pain. Then he crashed down and stopped moving, Kate still in his tight embrace. The sentry guns fell silent once more.

Cautiously, Anatolja stood up. It was weirdly quiet on the flight deck. All around her women were stumbling about, disorientated. It wouldn't last long.

Two options: One, go for the sentries and try to disable them. That would be the right thing to do.

But there was still the small pool of blood in front of it. An impassable barrier. Two, grab Kate and get the hell out of here. That meant she had to cross the kill zone of the sentry guns. Anatolja didn't know whether Maynard had set them on manual operation or on motion tracking. She couldn't read the displays from here, as her head was still buzzing and her eyes were filled with tears from the flashbang blast.

Only one way to find out.

JediBubbles

Thu Nov 17, 2005 7:18 pm

There is no such thing as the present, only the future sliding by into the past.

If anyone had been able to tap into Seer's mind at this point, they would have found it a very frightening place. As usual, a million different outcomes were possible for every approaching minute, and all of them were dancing in her brain. The difference was that today Seer could not separate the future of five minutes from now from the future of now. To Cassandra Elizabeth Dory, all possibilities for the next ten minutes seemed to be occurring simultaneously. It was complete and total mental overload.

Much to Hobbit's dismay, Cassandra was currently dealing with this overload by continuously singing "Run, run, as fast as you can! You can't catch me: I'm the gingerbread man!" Given the order they had just received, the song now made a twisted sort of sense, but the repetition was really getting aggravating.

Maverick

Fri Nov 18, 2005 5:22 pm

"Ensign Jones. You are ordered to take control of Nova Siren 13A/82 immediately. Comply at once." Omega One spat icily through the com again impatiently.

Kat, however, barely heard her. Fear had caught Kat hard, clenching her throat shut and paralyzing her nerves.

We're doomed...

The Arrowhead's Nagas began to make their approach on the Novas.

We're doomed...We're sunk...

Kat's hands shook erratically, despite her attempts to hold them still.

We can't win...

Tears formed in Kat's eyes and began to stream down her cheeks while shards of icy fear pierced her heart.

I'm such a fool...

"Katherine Jones!" A middle aged woman yelled from the steps to an old brick house, packed in amongst a bunch of other similar looking buildings. A young girl, perhaps seven or eight years old came running to her from across the street, tears in her eyes. Kat's mom's eyes grew wide when she saw her daughter in tears. Rushing down the steps, she opened her arms.

"Momma!" She cried, running into her embrace. Kat's mom knelt down and held her child tight.

"Shhh. Shhh....what happened honey?"

"I was....*sniff*...at soccer...and...we were losing...so...*sniff*...so the girls on my team *sniff* got mad at me...because I kept messing up...*sniff*...and the other team was mean and scary! *sniff* They kept hitting me while I was running! *sniff* I don't wanna play anymore! *sniff* I hate it!" The young Kat cried into her mother's chest. Kat's mom just held her and stroked her back for a while. When Kat's cries had calmed down a little, her mom kissed her on the forehead and looked down at young Kat's red and tear-stained face. Reaching down, she gently wiped away the tears.

"It's okay honey. It's okay." She said, holding onto Kat's hand and leading her back into the house. While Kat had calmed down, she was still sniffing and whimpering about wanting to quit soccer. Kat's mom sat down in a wicker-backed rocking chair which lived in a cozy family room and placed Kat down on her lap. "Want me to tell you a story?" She asked, smiling gently.

Kat didn't say anything but nodded glumly. Her mom held her small hands in hers and hugged her child tight. "There was once...a very brave man who lived a long time ago. He was a peaceful man

from Scotland, who came to America when America was still colonies. During that time, he had a lot of hard things to do. Some of them, he never wanted to do, but did anyways because it was the right thing to do. Times got hard for him, especially when the Revolution broke out."

"*sniff* He fough' in the Rebolushion?" Kat asked, voice still wetly distorted from crying. Her mother nodded.

"Yes, he did so because he wanted to protect those close to him. He went to fight as a captain of a ship, against the strongest navy of those times."

Kat, forgetting the soccer game, had become enthralled by the story, like she always did when her mother did this. "Wasn' he scared?" She asked.

"Oh yes. He was very scared, but he didn't let his fear get in the way, or else the people counting on him, and those he wanted to protect would get hurt. So he faced his fear and became one of the great heroes of the Revolution. So just remember Kitty, if you ever feel scared or overwhelmed, you're in good company."

"Who was he?" Kat asked, looking a lot better than she had been.

"A relative." Her mom said simply, her gaze travelling over to a spot above the fireplace where a jagged plank of wood, which looked ancient, was held against the wall with an engraving in it. It read simply *Bon Homme Richard*.

Kat's hands stopped shaking and she placed her hands on the controls of her Siren calmly. After quickly banishing her fear out of her head, Kat was again, back in control.

"Ensign Jones!" Omega One called through the com.

"Roger that Omega One." Ensign Jones said coolly through the com. Her hands moving towards her RIAS equipment.

If there's a God...forgive me for what I'm about to do.

Schamann

Thu Nov 24, 2005 12:12 pm

There is a mixture of present and future in Cassandra's Dory's head, all the futures grouping, flying single-file towards the present, quarrelling for their right to be the dancing partner of choice at that moment, even for the briefest of times.

.....Tall, surly looking woman shouts orders at the communication device: "Yes that is affirmative sergeant! I would sooner have this ship and all her crew dead in the vacuum of space, than have this box fall into enemy hands! You will obey my orders!"...

...Mallory runs down the hall, almost stumbles over some technician, shouts at her, in surprisingly angered tone "Get me everyone who can pilot anything, even a waste transporter! And have my Siren prepped! Do it!" Everywhere along the hall there are red, flashing lights. A voice issues forth from the loudspeakers; "Emergency - hull integrity low!"...

...in front of the cockpit Cass and Hobbs are in, there emerges some dark, steel-plate wall-like thing. It emerges fast ...too fast. "Shiit!" Hobbit's voice can be heard, and then it happens. The world explodes with flashing light and hundreds of broken plexi-glass canopy pieces. Time passes in a neverending white silence, then Hobbit's trembling voice is heard again: "Cass, please tell Crone I love her..."

"Banshee watch out!" - it's Crone on the comm.. she speeds up along the side of the Kitomer to catch up with Banshee. On the hull of the Kitomer, there blooms an explosion, as if some fighter just kamikazed it. Banshee's reply is but an icy cold: "I will avenge them."

Cassandra Dory trembles, shouts and starts to struggle in the cockpit, her muscles move unconsciously in the trance.

"Hey little fellows - on my mark - three - two - one - mark" an unknown voice appears on a new radio band. It's electronically modulated, hoarse and male-like.

Omeegas turn against the oncoming Arrowheads and assume attack formation.

"Novas, this is Omega One, joining the Arrowheads or the Eridanians will be treason to the

Alliance, no loyal captain surrenders to forces so small she must have her own troops escort them. Submit to my orders now or you'll be considered a mutineer!"

"Aurora! It's me Helen!" Holmes comes on the radio. "I'm with Denatieux, with Eridanians and with stopping this whole monkey business bullshit show run by OSI for their own amusement. We deserve to live for our own, and I believe Denatieux when she says she is saving the crew as much as I do not believe the OSI gestapo crap. You gotta decide, Aurora, whether you pledge your loyalties to colours and badges, or to your sisters in arms - please choose wisely"

"Crone, this is Hobbs!" Ursula is panting heavily "Cassie is freaking out inside the cockpit again. I have to take her somewhere safe before she hurts herself, or me! Permission to land."

Vexus

Sat Nov 26, 2005 1:14 am

Mirunova was about three steps into her dash across the flight deck when she heard the whirling sound of sentry guns tracking a new target. She was surprised by the calmness of her thoughts.

Damn... I guess you lose, Matic.

So prepared was she for being cut down by the sentry guns, that when the sounds of plasma fired erupted again, she almost made herself stumble. However, she had felt neither the force nor the heat of a bolt against her back, and when she glanced behind her she saw the sentry guns destroyed. To one side stood Claymore and Ducky, who had taken the opportunity to use their pistols to silence the distracted turret. Without waiting for further discussion, the two pilots darted out to follow Mirunova. Soon the three women reached Kate and Jason. Claymore reached down and put her large muscles to use, draping the tech over her shoulder. Jason's eyes moved slightly to gaze up at the women and muttered in a distorted voice that echoed the severe damage he had sustained. His expression was the usual cocky attitude he tended to wear, but a hint of regret seemed to mix with it for the first time.

"I always knew you chicks would be the death of me."

"You're a bastard, Jason," Mirunova said, her tone softening those words to something more compassionate than hateful. The android's mouth twisted into a pathetic grin.

"I know you are, but what am I?... Do me a favor and get the hell out of here, I'd like to think I did something heroic, and if you all get killed it won't count. Tell Kate that--"

The android suddenly fell silent, and moved no longer. Mirunova took a steadying breath, then led the women off the flight deck. Behind them, the sounds of battle began again as the effect of the flash-bangs subsided.

Mirunova reached a storage room, checked to make sure it was deserted, then motioned everyone to enter. They needed a quiet place to plan their next move... if there even was a next move. As Ducky stood watch near the door, and Claymore gently laid Kate onto a makeshift bed of crates, Mirunova turned to look at her shoulder, which was finally starting to hurt as some of the adrenaline ebbed away. Seeing the bloody cut made by some piece of shrapnel, she finally lost it. Running over to a far corner, she bid a painful hello to her last meal.

Claymore looked over at Mirunova with pity, then checked the energy level on her pistol. Her brow lowered in thought, she strove to think of where they should go or who they should contact. They couldn't stay here for long....

Crone's mind raced through the possibilities, finding none to be hopeful, and couldn't think of any clever schemes. The weight of her decisions pressed down on her with every passing moment, until she felt almost suffocated by them. No voices came to her aid, no predictions guided her thought, and in the end only her gut feelings pushed her to make the hard choices. She then began to bark orders into the comm, trying to make her voice fierce enough to avoid further debate.

"Catnip, don't bother with the RIAS. I have a duty to protect my squadron, and I won't send anyone on a suicide mission. I am ordering you to escort Seer and Hobbs back to the Morrigan. If any guns target you, you are to announce surrender to whoever has their hand on the trigger. If the OSI takes Seer or Hobbs into custody, I am holding *you* personally responsible for their safety. Am I absolutely, positively clear on this, pilot?"

"...Yes, sir," came the reluctant response. Crone then contacted her final charge.

"Banshee? I won't force you to fight along with me. You can leave with Catnip if you'd like, but I have another duty I must perform."

"With all due respect, sir," came Banshee's reply. "I am insulted you would even give me such an option." A smirk came to Crone's face.

"My apologies, then, form up on my wing. Novas to Omega Wing... we are with you."

The words made Crone feel unclean as she spoke them, but she wasn't going to just end the matter there. The two groups of fighters were not yet in weapons range, there was still time to stop the inevitable. She had to at least try and talk Holmes out of this mutiny before it was too late.

"Crone to Arrowheads, come in please."

Charon

Thu Dec 15, 2005 7:04 am

Rhiannon's nose wrinkled as Mirunova yawned with accompanying ILM special effects that appealed to **ALL** of her senses, her stomach lurching as she focused on her sidearm, then on Ross's groaning form. The unconscious tech was beginning to come around, which was a good thing, Rhiannon reflected. It'd be a chore to have to nursemaid a limp body whilst trying to navigate within a potentially hostile ship.

Indicating that Ashley should look after Ross, Rhiannon turned to where Mirunova had finished voiding her stomach, and was now sitting against a stack of boxes, shivering and rocking back and forth, eyes not seeing anything. The strength that she'd maintained in leading her comrades to safety had now failed her, blotted out by the crimson stain spreading underneath her slashed coveralls.

Whilst Ashley looked Ross over for any further injuries, Rhiannon knelt beside the petty officer. "Hey, lass... y'okay?" she asked, and immediately felt like a damned fool. Obviously, she wasn't. Before she could make any kind of follow-up statement, Mirunova spoke up.

"It's not mine, it's not mine, dammit! Chyort voz'mi, it's not MINE!" At the last, the Russian let out a wail that threatened to breach the walls of their storage room. Alarmed, Rhiannon clutched at Mirunova tightly, pressing the screaming woman's face high against her left chest, masking the wail, which had trailed off into sobs. "Mama... Mama... na huy..." she trailed off, murmuring more Russian that Rhiannon couldn't follow.

A small, distracted part of the Scot's mind noted bemusedly that this was probably how people felt whenever she lapsed into Gaelidg, before she focused all her attention on the blonde technician. "Shhh, lass... shhh... there'll be time fer tha' laterrr... Weh need ye herrre, neuw."

Slowly, Mirunova's sobs and murmurs ceased, and the tech pulled back from Rhiannon, face looking mortified at having let herself slip so badly. What made it worse was that it was during a combat situation... She shook her head, pointedly refusing to look at her shoulder, and siezed her will in an iron grip. "What dhu we need to dhu?" she asked hoarsely, an edge of her accent creeping into her voice.

Rhiannon smiled warmly. "We'll chat laterrr, lass. Fer nae, less see aboot werkin' oor way tae th' bridge in this confusion. I dinnae muckle care fer no' knowin' whass goin' on, ye ken." Mirunova nodded to show that she did understand, and Rhiannon stood up. "Ducky, how's the wee one?"

Ashley looked over at her XO. "A bit dazed, but she should be fit to travel... what's the plan?" Ross sat up, blinking several times to dispell the stars that the motion provoked in her vision, but apart from looking a little wan, she appeared fine.

Rhiannon checked her pistol again, not liking what she was seeing from the charge remaining gauge. "We need tae get tae th' C3 station on th' Bridge... with the OSI prowlin' aboot, I dinnae fancy oor chances oof gettin' back aboard if weh head oot. Tae sae noothin' oof what might happen tae these tae." Ross smiled nervously at that last, still waking up.

"I'd like tae swing by th' barracks beforre we get therrre, though... if yer pistol's like mine, we'rrre gonna need soom morre firrepower."

Ashley and Mirunova both nodded, whilst Ross looked a bit pale. Finally, the young tech spoke up. "Where's Jason? The last I remember, he was carrying me, and then there was that loud noise and bright light, and then I woke up in here..." her voice trailed off as she put the pieces together. "No..."

Before she could say anything else, Mirunova cut her off. "Time for that later, PFC Ross. For now, we need you here. We will need your help when we get to C3, understand?"

Ross nodded her head, taken aback both at how brusque and businesslike Mirunova was being, but also at how red-rimmed and haunted her supervisor's eyes were. There was obviously a story here that she had missed...

Rhiannon coughed slightly. Mirunova pinkened slightly. "Sorry, sir. Please continue." Rhiannon blinked slightly at being called "Sir," but obliged.

"I didnae see exactly which room we went intae, boot I think it's near th' for'ard entrance tae th' hanger... If we gae thrae compartments for'ard an' one deck oop, we'll beh in Nova's berth'. Weh can get soom weapons from therre, ploos whate'er weh can nick aloon th' way." She grinned broadly at that, her smile infectious enough to bring a smaller version to Ross's lips. Mirunova's, on the other hand remained impassive.

Ashley piped up. "Right, and from there, it's up another two, forwards one, and up one to get to the bridge, right?"

Rhiannon and Mirunova both looked thoughtful for a moment, then answered "Right," at the same time, giving each other an odd look afterwards.

"Ai'ight," said Rhiannon, rubbing her hands together, "it's settled then. Off weh gae!"

Before anyone could say differently, she had posted up next to the room's door, opening it slightly to peek outside. The firefight had died off, but she could still hear scuffling from some far part of the hanger. Moving quickly, the four of them moved further forwards into the Morrigian.

"When you said weapons," Ashley said, shaking her head and chuckling, "I thought you meant something like this." She indicated the rifle that she'd taken from her wall locker. "Not that... thing," She laughed again.

Rhiannon looked innocent. "I have nae idea wot yer talkin' about, lass," she said ingenuously, buckling her callsign's namesake to her back. "I've drawn thrae magazines fer me pistol, an' Petty Officer Mirunova's go' a rifle an' a pistol, tae. Wot's th' problem?"

Ashley laughed. "You're incorrigible."

Rhiannon wagged her eyebrows. "Yer learnin'."

JFalcon

Tue Dec 20, 2005 6:55 am

While the others were busy arming themselves, Kate had slumped onto a bunk in a kind of detached shock. Aimlessly, automatically, she was now lying on her stomach flipping through screens on her noteputer. Its screen was now somewhat worse for the wear, but was overall still functional.

What's going on? I don't know what's going on. Who's fighting? Why are they all fighting? I don't know, I don't know, I need to know. Info, info, info. Where? Who's in charge? Captain, bridge... bridge comms. Comms, comms, where are you?

Text, diagrams, and patterns flashed by, reflecting off of the tech's glasses.

"...Yer learnin'," Rhiannon said with a grin.

"So, what's the plan, then?" Ashley asked.

"Git tae th' C3 an' figgurr oot o's in charge." She shrugged. "'En go frum thar," Rhiannon made it sound simple.

"Is that really a good idea," Mirunova asked. "Storming the bridge, armed like this? What if it's still friendly?"

"An' wat 'f it ain't? Ya wanna gae wit oot a gun?" The PO didn't answer that. "I dinnae fancy a rruhn in with th'oose bloodae OSI." Rhiannon scowled as she made sure the large sword moved

freely in its baldric.

"Whatdaya have against OSI? Didn't they attack Sparks and company?" Both Price and Mirunova thought that the other had asked the question and looked to the Scott for an answer.

"Twas a prop'rr Charlie Foxtrot bok thar... An th'ae wurr traen ta arrest Seerrr, oor dunnae yoo rememburr?! First Crone ahn'na oothars, 'en em digg'in in 'er stuff..." MacTaggart was working up a rage, white knuckeling the plasma rifle. All the confusion, all the earlier helplessness and grief; now all these questions and second-guessing. "We gotta help! 'Oo kens w'at 'ev dun wit th' cap'n!"

"Captain's not in command anymore." Three heads snapped around to stare at PFC Ross who was still lying on her stomach on (Seer's) bunk.

"Wha? How...?"

"Bridge communications." Kate replied without looking up from the computer's glow. It was as if part of her didn't realize that she had engaged in the conversation. "Not really that hard to patch into, oddly. Sounds like Commander Denatieux has command. Dunno about the Captain or OSI."

She plucked an earphone from her hidden ear before disconnecting the trailing wire from a jack on the noteputer. A small, tinny voice from the unit's speaker abruptly began in mid-sentence as the three others crowded around to listen.

*..*ve that much time. Have Arrowhead engage Omega and what's left of Nova...*

"They're alive? They're alive!"

"SHHhh!"

...turrets engage as well.

But, sir, they're too close together!

Don't worry about Arrowhead! If Omega survives, they'll take the shuttles apart! Then what?

"You still wanna head for the bridge?"

"Whaye no'...?" Claymore's eyes and jaw line were hard as her hands tightened again around the rifle's casing. Crone, Banshee, Hobbs, Cat... They were alive. And that bitch Denatieux was ordering them shot out of the sky. Half of her wanted to personally show the commander the error of her ways. The other half wanted to run back to the flight deck and join the Novas in space.

"Why the bridge?" Kate dared yet another question.

"So I ken shove this...!"

"Why not the CIC? It might not have anybody inside."

Out of Character:

CIC - Combat Information Center. A "backup" bridge, of sorts, buried deep and safely inside most combat cap ships. Sometimes fortified and defensible in the event of a boarding action.

"But," it was Anatolja's turn to raise an objection, "the CIC doesn't have priority unless the bridge is destroyed. What good would going there do?"

"So shut down the bridge. Cut the data trunks. Make it look like it's not there anymore. Control gets automatically transfered. There's redundant systems, of course. One, maybe two, feeds in the Morrigan's main neck and definitely another in the lower brace."

"But we don't know how to fly a cruiser."

"I'll try!" Ashley volunteered helpfully.

"True. Maybe we can find someone who does. But it would at least get the Morrigan out of their hands."

Rhiannon didn't like it, and not just because it meant less 'hands on' satisfaction. Even if they did manage to cut off the bridge, it would be far too late for the Novas' battle.

*Which is prob'ly goin' on **now**. Stop wastin' time, lass!*

She was just about to say as much when Kate's computer squawked to life again.

Sir! One of the Nova Sirens, um... three? It's broadcasting a white flag and heading for hanger one. I think it's on auto.

What the hell is going on in that hanger! ... Then go down there yourself and look, damn it!

Sir, have lock on Nova three. Her shields are down...

Rhiannon felt as if her heart had stopped.

Ma'am?

No... let it land. Find me someone who's in control down there.

"Shit, is that Hobbs landing? Boss? Where to?"

Claymore closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Gaed, whae ken it nae'r beh easae.

Missing Posts

Vexus' post regarding start of combat/negotiations with the Arrowheads.

Charon's post about the 2 pilots and techs' gearing up for mischief.

JFalcon's post where Kate connects into the bridge comms and proposes 3 possible courses of action.

Schamann's post involving Kat's IFF hack and the crash of Seer+Hobbit's fighter and apparent betrayal by Ursula.

Vexus' post of the outcome of combat between Arrowhead and Omega+Nova and the assault on (one?) of the transports.

Maverick's post describing Nova's landing on the Morrigan.

JFalcon

Wed Mar 29, 2006 6:06 am

"Ahll rayet. Weyr goin' fer th' aux 'anger." Rhiannon felt lighter as she spoke her decision. She couldn't abandon Hobbs and Seer to OSI's tender mercies. However, that didn't really make her feel any better about leaving Crone, Banshee, and Cat to fend for themselves. She forced herself to believe that they would never have been able to launch in time to help.

No one argued with her choice. Neither of the pilots had been to the second hanger retrofitted into the Morrigan, but the techs seemed to know the way. Sort of, at least. It was several decks down, but Claymore decided to risk trying one of the main lift tubes rather than the slower maintenance passages.

Ashley's heart was pounding. It seemed to drown out most of the other sounds as the four of them moved quickly down the halls, switching off as point at each intersection to provide cover.

This never happens in the cockpit. Is it just the waiting? Focus! Stay sharp.

Her tension only seemed to build with each crossroad, each closed door, each possible danger. The halls remained maddeningly deserted, however.

Kate was slowing them down. This single fact seemed to irritate Mirunova more than anything else about the situation. It was stupid, and yet it refused to leave her head. The braced leg was obviously still giving the private problems, but she didn't seem to be trying too hard, either. In fact, she seemed in another world entirely, alternating between looking at some gizmo in her hand and listening to whatever was coming over the hacked comlink.

She doesn't even have a gun! ... I swear, I'm using her for cover if we get in a fight.

The crew chief seemed to know how to handle a weapon, Rhiannon was pleased to see. For her part, the XO was feeling a bit silly now with the sword banging and rattling away on her back. Plus, the tight flightsuit was proving increasingly uncomfortable for physical actives beyond sitting in a fighter.

They reached the lift after what seemed like a long time. Rhiannon was somewhat surprised when it opened promptly.

Not locked down. Well, here goes...

After a quick check that there was indeed an accessible emergency exit hatch, they piled in -- squeezing up against the side walls to take as much cover from the entrance as possible. Both pilots positioned closer to the entrance. Ashley looked over and nodded once. Claymore took a

breath and palmed the controls. The doors hissed shut... and the elevator started downwards.

Don't stop. Don't stop...

It was an agonizing wait as the six decks slide by. Was it just going to stop dead, lighting and all, locking them in? Or open suddenly to a hail of gunfire? Would it get there at all? Would it ever open?

Do SOMETHING!

Both pilots felt like they were on the verge of screaming, when their ride finally stopped with a gentle jerk and the doors slid open.

Another deserted corridor.

Ducky exited first, feeling herself shaking slightly with a combination of relief and nervous energy/frustration. Rhiannon followed, when a sudden tremor and boom shook the Morrigan. The corridor's lighting flickered momentarily and the gravatic decking pulsed disconcertingly.

"What tha'...?"

No one lost their footing; it was more a surprise than anything else. Thankfully, no one's sidearm discharged, either. Kate looked like she might be ill, however, from the shifting gravity.

An alarm sounded, seemingly far away.

"Explosion on the flight deck," Kate announced vacantly. "Three corridors that way." She pointed right.

Claymore broke in a run. The others following.

Screw it. Screw safety, screw the enemy.

The alarms grew louder with each door that eventually made way for her. Damn doors were slowing her down. The third door opened onto a hall filled with haze, flashing red lights, and noise. The burly Scotswoman skidded to a halt -- debris and wreckage protruded from a ruined wall a dozen meters or so to her left. Someone ran into her from behind, almost knocking her down.

The women collected themselves and quickly, but with a bit more caution, made their way towards the ragged hole. It was the remains of a Siren's nose poking through, though it had been impossible to tell until one looked through the gash in the wall and could see the profile of the fighter's relatively undamaged rear. It was also burning and had a struggling figure in the shattered cockpit.

Ashley was the faster as both Novas recognized a fellow pilot in trouble.

"Cassie!"

It was a treacherous scramble over sparking and sharp metal. The little pilot looked like she was tangled up in the seat harness. There was no sign of Veneberg.

"Are you OK?"

"What happened? Where did you go?"

"Where's Hobbs?"

"Ursula. She... she..." Seer looked dazed.

"It's OK, it's OK. Let's get you out of here."

It quickly became apparent that the straps weren't tangled; they were deliberately knotted. There was a long pause as Ducky and Claymore stared at each other.

"You don't think OSI..." Rhiannon made no response, but went back to the belts with a grim look.

The knotwork was quite good so it was actually the techs that effected the release of the trapped Seer, when they arrived with their utility knives.

Kate wrinkled her nose sniffing the air as they worked. "That smell like titanium tetraazide?"

"What? Who the hell cares--"

"Explosive residue. Missile warhead," Kate's comment did nothing to actually explain things.

"Huh?" The situation was making less sense by the second. In the hanger beyond, OSI marines looked like they were hurrying towards the exits, dragging or carrying a few wounded with them. A voice seemed to be announcing something, but it was hard to make out and none of the present company was really paying attention.

"Warning. Corridor Five-Alpha impacted by Level Three fire in Hanger Two." A synthesized female voice boomed in the nearby hallway behind. "All personnel: evacuate. Thirty-seven seconds until depressurization. Warning..."

"Oh shit! Come on, we gotta move!" Something about Mirunova's tone indicated that things had gone from bad to worse.

"What's going on?" Rhiannon was half-dragging, half-guiding Seer out of the wreckage. Kate was already running for the hole in the wall.

"They're going to vent the hanger!"

Fire onboard a spacecraft was a very bad thing, especially in the event of an artificial gravity loss. Most suppression chemicals had a nasty habit of polluting the life support systems when used in large quantities and--for places like a hanger with fuel, ordinance, and a large volume--simply letting all the air escape was sometimes the best solution. Usually not an explosive decompression, but a depressurization nonetheless. Of course, leaking oxygen lines could then create real problems...

The four women ran for the gap where Kate had disappeared back into, the crew chief taking the rear.

"Hey! This way!" Kate was waving from a doorway she was keeping open.

"...fifteen seconds..."

"We KNOW already, thank you!"

The door snapped shut centimeters behind Anatolja's foot and Kate smoothly locked it down. A red "NO ACCESS" warning illuminated. Apparently, the constant safety drills the private had been put through had done some good. The PO's head thumped against the now sealed passage as she leaned back, breathing hard.

"Where the hell are we...?" she asked, not opening her eyes, listening and feeling parts of the Morrigan groan and strain under the changing pressure.

Rhiannon grabbed Cassie in a huge hug out of relief and released tension, crushing the wind out from the smaller pilot who was still trying to get a word in.

Tiefflieger

Tue Apr 18, 2006 9:45 pm

While Anatolja was leaning against the trembling pressure door, her eyes still closed, she listened to the general happiness of the pilots, who were just glad to have their squad mate back. Anatolja herself was quite content for the moment, with being on this side of the door alone. She fished a packet of cigarettes out of a pocket and started to rummage in another one for the lighter.

Suddenly it was very quiet. Why wasn't anybody talking?

"Umm...", Kate said. Not an unusual sound made by the private, but there was something in her voice that immediately alarmed Anatolja. It was like one of those times, when Kate just realized that she had made a mistake that would lead to a sharp bang, a little black cloud and a blown fuse, some seconds later. Anatolja had witnessed it more often than she cared to count.

When she opened her eyes, Anatolja found the reason for both the sudden silence as well as Kate's irritation being a heavy assault rifle, which was pointed in their general direction, swaying slightly, as if the person who held it wasn't sure which one of them was the greatest threat. That person being a marine in full battle get-up, a private, a very young one, who obviously was quite nervous.

Private Erika Thomas, 47th Mobile Infantry, meanwhile was on the verge of panic. Mere moments before this, members of her own platoon had been shooting at her. And now that she had found herself this nice and lonely storage room, where she thought she could hide from all this madness, this group of strangers bursts in with a boom. There was this freakin' big redhead with a no less freakin' big sword on her back. She would've looked far more imposing, though, if she wasn't hugging this smaller woman, which had strangely haunted eyes. The other redhead wasn't as tall, but looked alarmingly alert and had a blaster at the ready. Then there was the skinny blonde, with the right sleeve of her jumpsuit drenched in blood. When she opened her eyes, her stare was not only violet, but also very angry.

"Get out!", the private screamed with toppling voice.

"Can't do that," Anatolja answered coolly, "No air in that corridor."

"What!?" Private Thomas understood, but she didn't comprehend.

"There is no air beyond that door. The whole section got depressurized.", Anatolja explained calmly.

"I don't care! Get out!", the private insisted, emphasized by a threatening motion with her blaster.

"Look, even if we *could* open that door, the depressurisation would simply kill all of us..." Anatolja tried again, but Thomas didn't listen. She pulled the trigger.

The white-hot plasma bolt left a dent and a black mark in the metal door right between Kate's and Anatolja's heads, singeing some of Kate's hair. For a few seconds of shock no-one moved. Then Anatolja, still holding the pack of cigarettes in her left close to her mouth, started to rummage in her pocket again.

"Don't fuckin' move!" the private screamed.

"Hell, if you're gonna get all of us killed, at least I want to have a last smoke." Anatolja said. The fingers inside her pocket felt two cylindrical objects. Only one of them was a lighter. The other one was the barrel of the PPG pistol, which she had stored there when they rescued Seer from the fighter wreck.

Vindicare	Wed Apr 19, 2006 4:09 am
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"Cat, help me lift her out" Banshee motioned for the smaller pilot to join her at the mouth of the cockpit, having cut away the webbing with something she retrieved from behind her left flight boot's padding.

Cat noted the glinting blade with slightly wide eyes, but was cut short by Banshee's curt dismissal "Did you really think i would only have one?"

They carefully removed Crone from the cockpit and checked for obvious injuries. No cuts, no bleeding. *At least thats something....but...*

Banshee ran her hands along Crone's left leg, taking on a slightly reddish hue as she did so.

Cat looked inquisitive, and noted the reddened hue Banshee took on "Um...what are you..."

"EEEEAAUGH!" said Crone

"Oh, i see" said Cat

"One of the bones is dislocated. Crone, how do you feel?"

"Absolutely goddam fine, where are Hobbs and Seer?"

"We don't know at present. They landed elsewhere, and there are reports of an explosion and decompression of a hangar..."

"WHAT?!?" Crone sat up. "EEEEAAUGH!", she said again.

"It **IS** only that leg, correct?"

"...yeah"

"Cat, either cover your ears or hold her hand. Crone, this may smart a tad, but that bone needs to go back, and we're out of medical supplies, and short on time"

Crone gritted her teeth and screwed her eyes shut. Cat took her hand as Banshee maneuvered to press the bones back into place.

"You might think someone has a grudge against this leg..."

CRACK

"EEEEAAUUUUUAAAGH" Crone's voice was joined by Cat's as she held a little too hard.

"Sorry, sir" said Banshee, as she stood upright again.

Crone rolled a couple of times to gain her composure, then sat up once again. The shooting pain was gone. She motioned for Cat and Banshee to help her up. She managed to stand on the leg with no problem, it was obviously back to how it should have been, but nearly toppled due to the

innate grogginess that accompanied crash-landing fighter ships onto the hangar deck.

Banshee caught her, then looked around briefly for help, or other signs of life.

There were a few bodies among the debris generated by the fighter as it "landed", most of them obviously not alive... *There!* "Cat, hold her!"

Cat buckled under the surprise addition of weight, but did not fall, and Crone steadied herself on her own feet as best she could, while Banshee charged across the room and leapt for a shadow.

The body had been suspended by some webbing, moving with the air currents, not with life. It fell to the floor and Banshee regarded it with distain, until her eyes fell upon that flame pin just under the lapel.

"We're in trouble sir, i think that the 'Rebellion' Seer spoke of may have occurred ship-wide". She removed the offending article and walked back towards the other two Nova's.

"These pins have been visible around the ship for the past few weeks, i have been meaning to speak to you about them, but never had the time. I believe the owners of these pins are the Eridani supporters"

"Agreed. I've seen a few of them around too, and it's not common for something that isn't part of the uniform to be so widespread" Crone paused for a moment. "We can't stay here. Everyone knows we've landed".

"I recommend Nova quarters. It will not be the first place they will look, although they will reach it eventually. They will be looking for us to head for the armoury, shooting range, alternate flight deck, or bridge. We both have usable weapons in our bunks, and, well....Cat is not suited to close quarters combat".

Schamann

Wed Apr 19, 2006 11:40 am

Ursula was running down the corridor as her PDA based map was showing her. The whole ship was in total mayhem, and it was almost impossible to tell who had the upper hand. She turned left at the junction, and suddenly halted. One could hear voices, and the echoing of heavy military boots coming that way. She hid within the frame of some door, to some room she didn't really care about what it was. Some kind of a patrol was coming her way. Ursula quickly opened the sliding door and hid inside the room. It must have been some kind of low importance storage or living quarters, so fortunately power to the door was cut off long ago, at the first sight of alert, and now door would be swung freely by the mere force of one's muscles. She stood there silent, waiting for the patrol to pass her by.

luckily it did.

She readied to exit the room and continue on her pursuit. She was calm and focused.

"Hi! Are you a rebel?"

She jumped where she was standing, her heart beating as if it were rabbit's. She turned 180 as quickly as she could and pointed her gun, hoping she would not be too late to kill the intruder. She however, felt vaguely as she turned, that something was odd with that voice, with it's tone and with choice of wording under the circumstances. Then she completed her turn and dropped her jaw.

There was a girl, age of no more than eight, standing in front of her, looking at her with little of fear, but much more curiosity.

"You came here to hide from the OSIs, right?. So you must be a rebel. How are we doing?"

"How are we....what the f...?"

"Don't say that word. Mo mom says it's bad. She doesn't let her soldiers say that when I'm around, even if they do very bad on training."

Ursula frowned. "Did your mother join the rebellion?" she asked. The little girl nodded with visible pride. "She lead all her platoon to arms, only without Thora..." little girl frowned and started to sob, "...Thora... she was fun ... but she did not want to go with the girls and then Allie had her..."

Child then started to cry and tremble. Not exactly sure what she was doing, she reached her arms to the little girl and embrace the little trembling body with all the warmth she could muster. It felt

odd, after all those years, after giving up the thought of ever having children and any sort of normal family. It felt....terribly good.

The door swung open and a shadow emerged, a shadow of an armed and armored woman.

"Who's there? Hands up and on the floor, now!"

Ursula wasn't exactly aware what triggered her – was it the angry voice, the general tension or the child in her arms, but she reacted like a machine. Her hand with the pistol shot forward in a split of second and she squeezed the trigger twice. BLAM! BLAM!. Two shots in the throat, instinctively she targeted the unprotected part. The guard cried. Then she gurgled, and then started to fall. Ursula was there before now dying body even staggered. She held the dying guard with one hand and using her as shield she leaned out to the corridor. Two other guards were just raising their guns, and trying to aim so they would hit the enemy and not their buddy. Poor women, they didn't know their comrade drew her last breath that exact second.

BLAM! – in the throat again, another one down, BLAM! In the face protected by bullet proof visor, but the last guard staggered and panicked, BLAM!, to the side of the helmet and BLAM! Into almost the same place again, helmet finally gives in and drops of blood exploded from beneath it.

Then silence.

"Were they the enemy?" – Girl's voice came from some distant, remote place.

oh my god, I don't even know that, what the hell is happening, it wasn't supposed to be like this!

"Yeah, they wanted to hurt us" Hobbs spoke with her hands trembling on the grip of her gun. She knelt, looked into the girl's eyes "Do you have any other place to hide?" The kid nodded, still scared, "Yes, Mom told me to use the tunnels..."

"Vent shafts?" Ursula interrupted

"Yes, the ventshafts tunnels" child nodded once again.

"Then climb into them and run, here is not safe anymore, you understand?"

For the third time, the child nodded her head, then smiled - "I like you"

"I like you too, now run"

It was only a few good minutes later when Ursula recalled that, herself running down towards the main warehouse area and little girl being God knows where.

geez... I didn't even asked her name

Tiefflieger

Wed Apr 19, 2006 9:32 pm

Claymore didn't dare to move. The Private in front of them was completely out of her mind, so much was clear, but she unfortunately was also one or two steps too far away, so that she could not be assaulted and disarmed without a very high risk. The silence behind her back, and a quick glance to the side, where Ducky stood, confirmed to her that the others were aware of the situation, too.

To her surprise, the crew chief answered, when the woman with the gun spoke up.

When the shot fell, Claymore instinctively ducked, then turned her head to see where it had hit. She watched in amazement at how the Petty Officer lit herself a cigarette and stored the lighter back into her pocket, while the gunshot mark next to her head was still smoking.

"I mean it!", screamed the Private, and made one step forward, pointing her gun right at the PO's head.

This was when Ducky, who after all was the only one of them who still had a weapon in her hand, made her move. Or rather wanted to, as the Private must have noticed something from the corner of her eye. With surprising speed she spun around, now aiming for Ducky, who froze in the motion of raising her gun.

But when a gun was fired for the second time, it wasn't Private Thomas who had pulled the trigger, although her finger was trembling, trying to muster enough strength. Then she collapsed. A small

hole in the green fabric of her jacket marked the place where she was hit, right under her armpit, where her body wasn't protected by a layer of Kevlar.

Both Ducky and Claymore instantly jumped forward, taking away the rifle and checking the body in vain for vitals.

"She's dead." Ducky diagnosed.

Anatolja vigorously stuffed the pistol back into her pocket, spat the burning cigarette onto the floor and squished the pack from where she had retrieved it in her hand, before sliding down to the floor herself, her back still against the door. She said something in Russian, that didn't sound very pleasant.

"I owe you one." said Ducky, "That would've been me on the floor there if you'd been slower."

"In fact, I think we're just about square." responded Anatolja dryly, "Could've been me just as likely."

"Oi, remind me t' ne'er play poker with ye." Claymore threw in.

"Hmm," said Anatolja, "Actually, I suck at poker. Can't bluff to save my life. Everyone always sees right through me."

JFalcon

Wed Apr 26, 2006 4:30 am

The shock that a plasma bolt had just come within ten centimeters of her head was just wearing off on Kate, when she was greeted with the fresh shock of a pistol going off sixty centimeters from her ear and then that the marine -- her age, lively, breathing, and probably just as confused as she was -- was now lying dead or dying less than three meters from her feet.

"Why... did you have to pick *this* door?" Mirunova's words never registered with Kate.

The PO lit up again out of absent-minded habit. She inhaled deeply on a crooked cigarette with eyes closed and head back before exhaling, watching as the smoke mingled with that of the slowing burning discard before being sucked through the grillwork of the ventilation system. Anatolja felt detached. Everything seemed to be moving a bit slowly; the after effects of the adrenalin kick she had been riding. The pilots seemed were talking quickly.

"Whadaya mean 'obbes? Wha'd she do?"

"Start over, Cassie. You're not making sense to either of us."

"It was Ursula. She was flying. She blew up the hanger. She..."

"WHAT?!"

Seer's mind was racing, putting pieces together. Making connections. Sorting out what had happened. Looking things over a second time with the knowledge of the present. Needing to re-explain everything to Rhiannon and Ashely was a distraction that was slowing her down.

And where is she going now?

It was the little details that made up the whole picture. And it was the details in the room that her racing brain and senses locked on to: Kate -- pale, still standing, staring sightlessly ahead, and trembling slightly.

Aw, hell, she's going to lose it.

Seer turned from her edgy pacing in front of Claymore and Ducky to cross quickly over to Kate. Despite their decimeter difference in height, Cassie gathered the panicking tech into an embrace with as much motherly comfort as she could manage, lowering both of them to their knees. She felt Kate tense for a long moment before returning the hug with a desperation usually reserved for the dying, burying her face in the pilot's shoulder and shuddering with silent sobs.

The others watched wordlessly, each with their own thoughts.

It was there, in a storage room illuminated with red emergency lighting, cut off by vacuum from the rest of a ship gone crazy, that 2LT Cassandra Dory found herself trying to simultaneously comfort one friend while recounting the betrayal by another.

Ashley and Anatolja listened in silence. Rhiannon's face gradually shifted from confused disbelief to darkening fury as she tried to come to grips with what she was hearing.

JediBubbles

Wed May 24, 2006 5:33 pm

While Kate got something resembling a hold on herself, Cassie mentally shook her head a few times, feeling quite a few pieces of psyche rattle around loose. The explosion had quite effectively jarred her out of the realm of possibility and squarely into the present, but Seer wasn't quite sure if that was a good thing or not; losing sanity to an ESP attack may have been just as life threatening as the current situation, but at least it was more entertaining.

'May you lead an interesting life'... Boy, if I didn't understand why that was a Chinese cure before, I sure do now...

Eventually Kate quieted down and simply clung to Cassie, so, her thoughts finally somewhat collected, she looked up at Claymore. Seer smiled as she caught sight of the hilt of the XO's namesake peeking over the red-headed woman's shoulder. *You know it's an 'interesting' day when ALL the melee weapons come out...*

"Ursula deliberately landed in that hanger bay, tied me into the cockpit, and blew it to kingdom come."

Claymore managed to keep her face pretty level. "Thae's wha aye though' ye saed. Any ideas why she daed that?"

"Plenty, probably all wrong. Or, rather," Seer quirked a wan smile, "I hope they're all wrong, since one of the obvious theories is that Hobbs sold us out. And, even if she hasn't, if she's trying to save our asses, no matter what the reason, the circumstances are likely to get her killed." The tiny brunette frowned, "You know, I really, *really* hate being tied up, and somehow I don't think it was for my safety...I'm so gonna wallop Hobb's ass for that..."

Claymore cocked an eyebrow at her.

"What? I'm shaken, angry, psychologically drained, and sitting next to a cooling body in a storage closet somewhere in the bowels of a ship in the throes of a three-way mutiny. So, if you don't mind, I refuse to hypothesize anymore today--it'll only get us all in trouble. Just gimme a gun and tell me where to shoot and I'll follow you around like a good little subordinate, 'kay?"

"Whaetever ye say, dear. As fer the rest o' ye, nae wha'?"

Tiefflienger

Thu Jun 01, 2006 10:31 pm

"That's a good question," said Ducky, "how long till pressure is back up in that corridor?"

"Hard to say." Auto scratched the back of her head. She wasn't exactly an expert on battle damage repair on capital ships. "I'd say at least a couple of hours," she guessed. A moment later she added: "After the fighting has stopped, that is, and depending on who wins, of course."

"But we can't...!" Seer started, but Claymore interrupted her: "Nae, o' course we won't wait tha' long. Isnae there any other way outa herrre." She looked around, searching. There was no other door, of course.

"That's a neat idea, Kate, but it won't work." Several heads spun around, confused, first to Auto, who had said that, then to Kate, who was standing in the middle of the room, looking straight up at the grating of a ventilation duct. "Some of us won't fit through there"

Auto was right, Claymore had to admit. The hole was awfully small. Auto would probably fit through, Seer and Calamity too, maybe. But Ducky and herself wouldn't have a chance.

For a moment Kate looked like she wanted to answer back, but then she just turned away, muttering something that sounded like "never mind".

Seer tilted her head, cocking an eyebrow. "If you have an idea, just say it. You have an idea, right?"

"It's silly and it's not gonna work anyway," she said, still not much more than a mutter, so that only Seer, who was standing next to her, could even understand her.

"As long as we don't have any *clever* ideas, silly ones will have to do, don't you think? C'mon, spill it!" Seer said, poking the tech teasingly in the side with her finger.

Why do all of them always have to look at me like that? Kate thought.

"That wall," she began, pointing to the wall opposite to the door, "has been retrofitted. You can tell by the type of the rivets."

Again, several heads spun around, now looking at the wall. It looked just the same like every other wall on the whole ship. Large, greyish metal plates with rows of rivets along the corners.

"Ye're suggesting we go through tha' wall?" Claymore asked.

"Err, yes. I mean, it's only two plates of sheet metal and a layer of insulation. It shouldn't be too hard to remove those rivets, with the right tools..." Her voice trailed off as she reached for her hip, where her tool belt should have been. She must've lost it at some point during all that turmoil.

"Oops." She said. "Well, I said it was silly..." her voice was back to a mutter again.

"Not so fast, private." Auto interjected. She was spinning some kind of small power drill, which she must have kept in one of her pockets, in her fingers. "I think I see where you're going with this. That's not a bad idea, it might even work. We can't remove the rivets of the opposing plating from here without heavy tools, but maybe someone could get to the other side through that duct..."

"Right," said Kate, somewhat surprised.

"...and I have the distinct feeling I know who this someone is going to be." Auto finished her sentence.

"Does tha' thing even have enough powrrr tae remove all thae rivets?" Claymore had her doubts at the sight of the miniature tool.

"I don't know, but it's the only thing I got."

"Ok, now!"

Those were the first spoken words in the last fifteen minutes or so, during which the whirring sound of the power drill, which reminded the pilots awfully of a dentist, had made normal conversation impossible. It was amazing how such a tiny tool could make such a ruckus, but the sound was amplified tenfold as soon as the drilling bit connected to the metal of the rivet heads. It must've been audible through half of the ship.

The terrible noise finally died down, leaving a deafening silence. All of the rivet heads were gone, leaving behind ugly scratch-marks. Auto sure hadn't been prissy.

"Let go, slowly," Auto instructed Kate, who had been supporting the metal plating while she was working.

For a moment it looked like Kate didn't comply, but when she stepped back, her hands still at the wall, it became obvious that the wall in fact was following her movement. Slowly and silently the large metal plate tilted inward, revealing a flat, grey surface, that didn't look much different from the one they had just removed.

"Standard Terran Navy issue insulation compound." Auto explained. "That's good stuff, although no one actually knows *what* it is. Cheap, easily moldable, noise and heat dampening, moisture repelling, flame resistant... oh, and carcinogenic, but fortunately also not very strong." Without much force she pushed her utility knife deep into the material and cut a large, rectangular opening, which finally revealed another metal surface. "Now for the fun part."

The grating in front of the air duct was quickly removed. That didn't even require any tools, one hard tug from Claymore was enough. Claymore and Ducky together lifted Auto, who was the thinnest, high enough so that she could grab the corner of the opening and pull herself up.

"Yeeouch!"

Screaming Auto dropped back into Clay's and Ducky's arms, grabbing her injured shoulder. Tears shooting in her eyes, she pressed her lips together, swallowing a curse.

"Let me look at that." Not waiting for a reply, Claymore ripped Auto's sleeve open, where it had already been torn from the ricochet. The wound had started to bleed again. Auto didn't look. "It didn't feel that bad till just now," she said, her voice still trembling from the pain. "It's no use. Unless you lift me all the way up and stuff me in that hole, I won't get up there."

Vexus

Sat Jun 03, 2006 4:26 am

The Dark Nova's quarters were dark and deserted as Aurora, Christine, and Kat entered cautiously.

They had dodged a few small groups of officers on their way from the hangar. At this point it was better to play it safe and stay out of sight rather than risk a confrontation with only their pilot side-arms. As Christine and Kat went to their respective bunks, Aurora lowered herself carefully onto her bed (her injured leg still feeling rather tender) and reached underneath the frame. With a heave she pulled out her rifle case and began to re-construct the weapon. She would've been a lot happier if she could also don some standard ground combat armor, but such equipment was likely stowed away in a well-guarded armory by now. Her custom rifle alone would have to do. With well-practiced skill, she clicked each piece into position, her mind returning again and again to her unaccounted-for squadmates... and Ursula in particular. With the magazine loaded at last, the gun gave off a high-pitched whine and the power meter read full. Aurora then stood up and addressed her fellow pilots.

"Alright, so we have a mutiny in progress. We'll start at the bottom of the chain-of-command and work our way up. First we try to hook up with the rest of our squadron down near the auxiliary flight deck. Next, we try to locate the CAG."

"You mean Mallory?" Banshee asked skeptically, as she withdrew her spare flightsuit from its drawer.

"No, I mean Serpent," Aurora replied. Banshee nodded.

"We'll be able to get the straight story from her, I'm sure," Aurora continued. "After that, we can decide where we should go and who to report to."

"And if we can't find Serpent?" Kat asked.

"Then we head for the bridge and take our chances. Maybe we'll run into some familiar... and loyal... people on the way there who we can coordinate with".

Banshee dashed into the adjoining room and quickly changed, to reappear in an immaculate version of the garment she had just discarded. Questions looked about to be raised, but were stayed as she walked to the rack above her bed, removed a blade, and placed it silently in the alcove on her left sleeve.

Crone nodded.

"Let's go."

On her way out of the door, Banshee quickly rifled through her belongings, searching for a gift from her sister. She found it, and donned the small white backpack as she ran to catch up with the others.

With trained skill, Aurora led her squadmates out of their quarters and towards the nearest set of stairs, aiming for the auxiliary hangar and their comrades.

Vindicare	Tue Jun 06, 2006 12:34 pm
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The journey was uneventful enough at first, much to Kat's relief. The practiced, almost inaudible footfalls of Banshee, followed by single, uneven heavy footfalls of Crone, came before what could only really be described as the scampering noises of Kat, as she dashed frantically to catch the two larger women. At each intersection Banshee would sidle up and peer round the sharp corners, signalling the all clear for Crone to 'skip' across as fast as she could with her leg still smarting, then Kat brought up the rear.

At one such junction, there were two sets of doors, creating a kind of "H" shape. Banshee moved to the central area and peered cautiously down the second series of corridors. Still nothing. "*Odd*" Banshee thought, as she checked again, then motioned for Crone to join her. As Crone took her place slightly behind and left of Banshee, she noticed the name embossed on the small white backpack read "N.M.Auten", not C.M.

As Kat was waved across, Crone asked quietly "What exactly is in there?", with a small arm movement indicating the object in question.

"It is a present from my sister..." Banshee noted the look, and realised that was not a satisfactory answer.

"...I make swords, my sister has other skills. In her spare time she indulges in guncraft"

"Wait, you're saying that you have some type of gun in that backpack, and you're carrying a sword?" Crone looked a little incredulous.

"Yes. It's a rifle, not really suited to this type of-"

"Can we PLEASE move! i really dont feel safe standing in the middle of four intersecting corridors when we don't know who is on our side!"

Banshee and Crone looked at Kat, then realised they were both taking their minds off the condition of the rest of the squad with idle banter, something they could not afford to do.

"Kat's right, lets move Banshee"

"Sir!" came the reply, as she moved forward once more.

JFalcon	Tue Jun 06, 2006 6:57 pm
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Back in the retrofitted storeroom, Rhiannon had stopped examining the PO's shoulder and was now ruefully staring up at the dark vent.

"T'woodn't bae annae use once we got ya inna 'dar. Ye'd beh crawlen around an' 'den need te lowerrr yurself down agen. Nae, somebadae elses gonnave hafta dew't."

"Well, Seer's the smallest of us..."

"No, she wouldn't know what to look for or how to use the tools." Anatolja was determined to continue on, if now only to spite the red headed pilot who'd just said that she couldn't.

"Hey!"

"No offense."

"Ah sed nae ahlrreddae."

Mirunova was looking around for something to act as a large bandage to wrap around her arm, when her gaze fell on Kate. The PO's expression shifted into a grin that was not at all comforting. Kate swallowed hard with a sudden, urgent premonition that bad things were about to happen to her.

"Gah, lass. Ken ya nae do'a pull up?" Claymore spoke through partially clenched teeth out of annoyance and exertion as both she and Ducky tried to stuff the unenthusiastic private into the ductwork.

"No..."

The tech was armed with a small flashlight and Mirunova's tool belt and comms unit. Kate had been remarkably resistant to parting with her computer, but it was bulk that wasn't needed on this endeavor and the girls remaining behind didn't want to lose their one point of contact with what was going on in the rest of the ship.

You'd have thought we were threatening to kill her cat or something.

Finally, with a small *mmph*, the rest of the private disappeared into the tunnel. The blackness flickered momentarily as Kate turned on and adjusted the flashlight. The only further evidence of her progress was a series of metallic creaks and thumps that faded away, moving across the ceiling towards the partition.

Almost a minute passed of this slow progress until there was a series of loud thumps mixed with some scuffing sounds and a muffled grunt. Silence.

"I'm stuck," came a muted call from the duct and slightly more intelligible one from the computer's commlink.

"WHAT?! How the hell did you screw up crawling...?!"

"It's not MY fault. It doesn't go straight. Makes a right angle bend. I'm caught up. I, I think I see a vent further along, though. After the turn."

"Aw, #*%@. What now? Send Seer in after her?"

"She's blocking the vent."

"What? You don't have to pass her; just pull her out."

"Not what I meant. You never noticed?" mused Cassie. "That's the only inlet in here. She's blocking most of the airflow."

"Oh, #*%@%."

Actually, now that Auto thought about it, it made perfect sense that every compartment would have at least two, redundant -- and often non-connecting -- air feeds. But when this room got split...

Kate was starting to panic. It was dark, confined, and she was stuck in a *really* uncomfortable position at the moment. Anxiety turned to twisting and struggling. She finally managed to turn sideways in the shaft.

"Ooow."

The sharp metal bend was now jammed into her stomach instead of her side. She had moved forward a bit too, and, if possible, her back hurt even more now.

Damn it, spines aren't supposed to be in this position.

"Gah. Mph! Can't... breathe..."

The belt! It was getting caught. Somehow, she managed to get a hand down to the buckle and release it. Exhaling, stretching, pulling, and pushing, her pelvis finally scraped roughly around the metal edge.

"Ahhgh..."

She could breath freely again and the cramp in her back subsided. Except now a screwdriver was stabbing her leg. Speaking of which, her legs weren't going to make the turn.

Maybe if I...

Twisting and wiggling, Kate "spun" 180 degrees around so that her knees now bent in the direction of the turn. Of course, now her back was arched painfully and her face and chest were pressed into the duct wall.

Sure beats any yoga class, now doesn't it? Join the navy. See the stars. Develop flexibility you never thought you had while exploring duct work...

It worked, though. Pushing with her arms, she moved further along the tunnel and her legs navigated the turn.

Aw, hell. Where's the tool belt? Can't reach back or turn around... No, no, there it is!

It must have been dragged around with her. Kate could feel it with a foot. Nudging it forwards with a leg and then backing up a bit, she was able to snag it with her fingertips.

"I made it around."

Kate dragged the tools along with her, determinedly moving towards the light coming up from the vent ahead. There was a bit of a cool breeze across her back now that she was flat on her stomach again. It was a refreshing reward after being stuck in the bend and further motivation to get the heck out of this duct.

The room below looked like another mostly empty storage compartment.

"Hello? Anybody down in there?" Kate wasn't sure if she wanted a response or not. None came.

The grill didn't seem to be any nuts or rivets holding it on.

A weld? Or just a pressure fit? The pilot with that big sword didn't seem to have any trouble getting the other one off. Maybe if I push... No. BAD idea, Kate. Push with your hands and you'll fall headfirst after it if it gives. Legs then?

She crawled halfway over the grill with some trepidation.

Don't look down. Please don't give out right now. Please?

Now, with her torso back on "solid" duct, she pressed down with her knees and legs, her back rising and pushing against the roof of the air duct. The grill creaked and bent.

"Pusssh..."

With a violent snap it gave way unexpectedly and Kate's lower body followed it through the hole just as quickly. The wind was driven out of her as her stomach slammed into the sharp edge. Her sweaty palms fought frantically to find some purchase on the slick metal, but found none.

"WAAH!"

Raked painfully over the sharp metal lip, the rest of Kate followed the detached grill to the floor with the sound of tearing cloth.

There was a sharp bang and cut-short yell from the dark air duct and comms.

"Kate? Kate!"

Her caught clothing probably saved her from over rotating during the fall and landing on her head. The jumpsuit's left sleeve was the last bit to give way and, as it was, Kate landed hard on her rear; through some miracle avoiding landing on the tool belt and its sharply shaped contents.

"Ahhhooooow..."

Her entire body was tense; screaming in protest with hurt as she tried to force herself to breathe. Kate started to roll to one side. Something prodded sharply into her side. She didn't fight it and instead went in the other direction, curling into a partial ball of suffering. The dulling sharpness in her rear and back was yielding to her arms and front, which felt like they were on fire.

Kate? Kate? Something small and tinny sounding was forcing itself into her consciousness from somewhere nearby her head.

Not moving. Not moving. Not getting up. Go away. Ow, ow, ow.

Teeth clenched, she opened her eyes to look. The underside of her left arm was covered in deep scratches that went from armpit to palm. They were bleeding freely. She winched, pressing the arm into the front of her jumpsuit to try to stop or just absorb some of the blood. She didn't feel much cloth, though. Looking again, it was the same story all along her torso as well as the other arm, but somewhat less severe. The front of her jumpsuit was ragged and torn from the waist up: huge holes, the left sleeve along with the shoulder area down to somewhere indeterminately lower was completely gone, the remainder was rapidly becoming soaked in red.

Kate forced herself to move a bit more, biting her tongue to stifle a cry. The existing hurts screamed in new protest, but nothing else piped up. Everything seemed to move properly, more or less.

Nothing... too... serious, then.

Kate? Answer me, damn it! Are you OK?

No...

"Oh, thank god. She's alive and conscious."

"Is that more of a 'hurt, but fine' or a 'crippled and dying' sort of 'no?'"

I'll live. ...I think. I'm... bleeding. In a storeroom. Maybe. Don't know.

Kate shifted towards something more like a sitting position, trying get a better handle on her surroundings. As her body and clothing shifted, she suddenly discovered that the fall had also sliced through the front of her bra, which had burst.

Listen, private. Get up. You need find the right room and get this wall down. We can get you patched up...

Kate's temper snapped. The pain, disorientation, this whole damn crazy situation, them screaming at her, and now this... this... *new* indignity. She grabbed the commlink, squeezing its plastic frame

out of shape, oblivious to the pain that the sudden movement brought about.

"I. AM. NOT. WANDERING AROUND THIS SHIP HALF NAKED!!"

Vexus

Wed Jun 21, 2006 1:31 am

Aurora and her team were about 15 minutes from the auxiliary hangar when the first serious confrontation occurred. The sound of many pairs of measured footfalls sounded down the corridor and made Aurora and the others freeze in their tracks. For a split second Aurora's eyes darted around the area, searching for cover. All that was available was a single side door that undoubtedly led to someone's quarters. Christine saw it as well and hurried over to check the access panel. The door was locked. Aurora gave Kat a questioning glance, but quickly realized that there would be no time for the OSI officer to hack the panel. The door was inset into the corridor wall, but there wouldn't be enough room for all three of them. Aurora's mind worked out a desperate strategy.

"You two," she whispered sharply, "take cover by that door. Banshee, show me that blade of yours." Aurora herded her charges towards the locked door as she ejected a small device from a compartment under her plasma rifle. Banshee unsheathed her weapon and Aurora regarded its well-polished surface. Looking at each other with steely eyes, the two women needed few words.

"Make sure you get a good look before breaking cover. Aim for the flames."

"Yes, sir. I hope you can put on a convincing performance."

With her comrades hidden away at least for the moment, Aurora darted back into the corridor, moved forward a ways towards the advancing sound of boots, and then carefully laid herself down onto the floor with her face against the metal floor plates. Shifting her plasma rifle so that it was just out of her reach, she contorted her body until she looked like another casualty of the mutiny; just another body on the deck.

At that moment, the first of a small squad of marines rounded the far corner, their rifles sweeping ahead of them and their moves cautious. Aurora was still enough that she wasn't noticed until the party had all come around the corner. From her hiding place, Banshee angled her blade until she saw the reflection she needed. She began to scan each soldier, noting the flame badges they wore. They were not in full combat armor, but just riot gear: a small but important blessing. And there were others as well, three women, two in naval uniform, who appeared to be captives of the traitor marines.

"Halt," cried the lead woman to her troops, and then signaled to two of the forward ones. "Check the body and make sure it's not booby-trapped, and hurry! We need to get these prisoners delivered immediately." The soldiers moved forward and hovered over Aurora's perfectly still form. One of them kicked the plasma rifle farther down the corridor and away from Aurora. The other produced a small scanner from her belt and activated it. After a few moments, a beeping sounded and the two soldiers backed away.

"It's a trap, ma'am," the one with the scanner said. "I read a flash-bang under the body. I don't detect a proximity sensor, though. We should be able to just move around it."

"Alright then," the marine commander said, "we'll pass by in pairs and--"

Before she could finish, Christine emerged from her cover. Needing to free her blade hand, she simply tossed it at the nearest soldier, the one with the scanner. The blade buried itself into her chest, and the woman crumpled to the ground. A pair of quick shots from the guns of Christine and Kat, and another two of the soldiers were hit before any of their opponents could respond. While they were distracted, Aurora activated her grenade and slid it over to the remaining marines.

"Back!" Aurora cried, and her squadmates retreated back into their cover.

The resulting explosion shook the corridor and the marines cried with the pain that surged from their eyes and ears. As Aurora rolled down the corridor to fetch her weapon, Christine and Kat emerged once more and poured fire down upon the disoriented marines. The few shots that were returned went wild, and within an instant Aurora was back on her feet with her own rifle at the ready. Amongst the bullets and red plasma bolts flying up and down the corridor, a sudden bluish and shimmering sphere raced towards the last of the standing marines. The soldier's armor seemed to disintegrate, instantly peeling away and charring the flesh beneath. The woman gave a couple surprised yelps before collapsing to the ground. Now all who remained of the group were the three prisoners, kneeling on the ground with their hands over their heads.

"What the hell is that thing?" Kat asked with amazement, pointing to Aurora's weapon.

"ATG Excalibur," Aurora replied simply, "with a few custom modifications and a... slightly enhanced plasma mix."

Aurora now turned her attention to the prisoners and felt some relief. Two of them she recognized at once: a certain mischievous-looking deck officer and a guff woman with food stains on her civilian clothes.

"Maria," Aurora said and offered her hand as Christine moved down the corridor to stand watch. "What are doing down here so far away from the cargo areas?"

"Goddamn, Crone, it's good to see a friendly face," the ensign replied as she rose to her feet. "I was having a late lunch in the mess hall when all hell broke loose. Marines stormed the place and placed us all under arrest. Then they split us into small groups and began to move us to God-knows-where. What the hell is happening on this ship?"

"The girls are killing each other," Claudia said as the chef stood and looked around at the battle's carnage. "Three of my own staff pulled guns on me."

"It's happened all over the ship," Aurora said quietly. "Do you know why those soldiers were in such a hurry to move you?"

"Probably because of me," said the third prisoner as she rose, an Asian-looking woman with a buzz-cut of black hair and an OSI insignia on her uniform. "Lt. Commander Raissa Chakato, network security chief." Aurora and Kat saluted immediately. "They most likely wanted me to secure the ship's systems for them."

"With your permission, ma'am, I recommend all of you come with us." Aurora said as she checked her rifle, "We're hooking up with more friendly forces in the auxiliary hangar. You shouldn't be running around the ship without escort."

Chakato nodded her agreement and addressed the other two women. "Ensign, Claudia, pick up some weapons from the marines."

Claudia frowned at Aurora. "I don't know how to use these."

"Then just look like you know," Aurora said with a hint of a smile.

The group of six then proceeded on their way down the adjoining hallway.

Tiefflieger

Thu Jul 06, 2006 3:29 pm

The forest was dark, damp and silent. It was a starless night and the full moon, which shone dimly through the low hanging blanket of clouds, was the only reason that Anatolja didn't run into any trees as she was crashing through the underbrush. She was running faster than she should. Everywhere there were low hanging branches, protruding roots, pits in the ground and whatnot, that could bring her to a sudden and painful halt. She didn't actually know why she was running. Was she being pursued? Or was she pursuing someone? It didn't matter, she had to go on, as fast as possible! Where to? Looking for a light in this dark place?

Anatolja was out of breath. The weight was slowing her down. Still running, she raised her hands to see what she was carrying. It was an axe. The archaic instrument could be either the tool of a skilful artisan or, in a different persons hands, a fearsome weapon. Which person am I?

Suddenly there was someone else. A hooded figure stood under the trees, right in Anatolja's path, motionless. As Anatolja was approaching the hooded figure turned sideward, so that the silhouette of her face could be recognized in the moonlight, but her features still remained indistinguishable. The face looked strangely familiar.

Still running, Anatolja called out to the hooded figure: "I don't know you! Who are you?"

The hooded figure didn't answer. Anatolja moved closer, now she could see that the hooded figure carried something large and heavy in her hands, too.

"What are you doing here?"

Anatolja saw the lips of the hooded figure move, but she couldn't hear a word. Her own blood rushing in her ears was too loud. She moved closer, but she still couldn't see what the figure was carrying. Was it an axe, too?

"Get out of my way!"

The hooded figure just shook her head. Anatolja was angry, but also afraid. Why did this figure want to hinder her in her race through the nightly forest? Was she the one she was running from? Or looking for?

I have to strike her down, before she can strike me! She raised the axe high above her head and, just as the heavy blade was whizzing down, the figure turned around and cast back her hood.

Anatolja looked around irritated, blinking, blinded. She must've dozed off while she was sitting in the corner of the abandoned storage room, resting.

When she searched her pockets for another cigarette, Anatolja noticed her hands were trembling. *Must've been from working with the vibrating tool for so long*, she thought. *Whom am I kidding?* She looked at the stiff form of the dead soldier, lying in the opposing corner of the room. The pilots had dragged the body there a while ago to move it out of the way. Thankfully Anatolja noticed that they had also closed her eyes. It looked almost as if the girl was only sleeping now, if only there hadn't been the unnatural paleness in her complexion.

Anatolja abruptly turned her head, forcing her eyes away. "You don't want to follow that train of thought!" she silently said to herself.

"Bad dream?" Seer asked.

Anatolja looked up to find the small pilot watching her from a distance. She blushed and looked down again, embarrassed.

"I envy you, being able to sleep right now. I wish I could." Seer said.

Misinterpreting her words, Anatolja jumped to her feet, but was foiled in her attempt to show alertness by herself grabbing the wall when the sudden movement after sitting and sleeping made her knees wobble.

"I'm sorry ma'am... I...", she didn't find any good excuse.

"Oh stop that already. You should rest while you can. God knows when we'll get another chance after that wall comes down."

Anatolja watched Seers face, but didn't find any sign of mockery. So this officer wasn't being ironic. Thankfully she used the keyword to change the subject.

"Any news of Kate?" Anatolja asked. She didn't know how long she had slept.

"Clay is still trying to convince her to get moving again. Hoo, is she ever upset!" Anatolja could see the tall pilot going up and down before the partially removed wall, speaking calmly into the comm. Seer cocked her head. "What is it with the two of you anyway? I was bound to notice a certain... tension between you."

Anatolja snorted. "A certain tension" was the understatement of the century. After Kate's outburst over the comm they had been shouting at each other for a minute or two until Claymore had finally taken the comm away from her. It hadn't been pretty. Also it had sounded more like sisters fighting over the remote control than like a superior scolding a subordinate.

"You like her, don't you?" Seer helped when Anatolja didn't answer right away.

"Wa...? Like her?! No I don't!" After a short pause, she realized that she sounded like a thirteen year old schoolgirl who was being teased by her classmates, after telling she was in love with the local dork.

"I mean... uh... she sure is a nice girl and all... quite clever, too... err... but she wreaks havoc wherever she goes, and..." *why am I babbling like a moron? And why is that pilot looking at me like this?*

The faint drumming sound of distant gunshots was gone as quickly as it came. It had obviously been a short engagement. It was hard to guess how far away it actually was, maybe only a couple of rooms away, perhaps two or three levels below or above them. But no matter how often Anatolja told herself that it was probably unrelated, she couldn't get rid of the mental image of Kate lying on the floor, a smoking hole in her back. She cleared her throat before approaching Claymore, who still had her comm link.

"Permission to speak to Private Ross, Sir?" she asked the officer.

Do I like her? she asked herself.

Tiefflieger

Fri Jul 07, 2006 5:45 pm

Claymore looked at Anatolja suspiciously. She decided that the PO made a much calmer impression right now, than a few minutes ago. "Ye can try, boot I'm na' sure if she's even listening anymore." she said. "At least she doesnae answer."

She gave the commlink back to Anatolja. "No shouting this time, okay?"

Anatolja nodded silently.

"Kate, this is Mirunova. Are you there?" she asked.

...

"Kate, do you copy?"

...

"Answer me, please!"

...

Anatolja sighed. *Quite the mess you've made there, Auto.* Only now did she become aware that she didn't actually have any idea what to say. The three pilots were looking at her expectantly.

"It's ok, Kate, you don't have to say anything. I'll do the talking." Again, there was no answer. *Well, at least she's not screaming anymore.*

"I'll tell you a little story. You may want to sit back and relax, this will take a while."

"When I was a little girl, I had three brothers. There was Yegor, the first born, who was eight years older than me, and the twins Aleksandr and Eugen, six years older. I loved my brothers and I still love them. Sure, they would tease me a lot, since I was the only girl in the family, but it was all in good fun. We had quite a good time together back then. I always liked Yegor best. He would always be there for me, telling the twins off when they picked on me too badly, or comforting me when I was sad or hurting. And he helped me with school homework. Often he was more like a dad to me than father was."

"I don't think father was a bad person. He really tried, and he worked very hard for us to make sure our family was doing well. But because he was a pilot that meant he was away from home most of the time. Usually he would be away for weeks or even months, only visiting for a few days before he left again. Mother was very sad because of this. Father was also very stern, strong-willed and authoritarian. Sometimes he frightened me. I think you have to be like that if you try to raise a couple of naughty boys via a video uplink."

"Father and Yegor often had arguments. I was still too young to understand everything, but now I figure it was because father was pressing him to become a pilot, like he was, so he could one day take over the company from him. But Yegor wanted to go to the university and study philosophy instead. Of course in the end father would have his way, and Yegor went to flight school."

"Then came The Plague. All the men died. So did my brothers and so did father. Aleksei and Eugen were away on their very first piloting assignment. They never made it to their destination. I was told at about halfway, they sent a distress call. But there was no-one who would have responded to it, everyone was already too busy trying to save his own hide, futilely of course. When they arrived at their destination there was no one left alive onboard the ship. They didn't bother recovering it and let it crash into Jupiter."

"I don't know exactly what became of father. We were notified that he was dead, but I don't know when or where he died or even where is grave is. One day I will go and find it."

"But Yegor was at home when it happened. He was hospitalized and mother spent most of the family's savings to buy the best treatment she could get for him. It didn't help much, he just suffered a few days longer than everybody else."

"I was with him, at the side of his bed for every minute they would let me. He still was my older brother, still trying to comfort me. He told me I shouldn't cry, everything was going to be ok. But I didn't believe him and said it wouldn't be ok, because he was going to die. Then he smiled and said he wasn't afraid of dying. Because he knew that I would always remember him and as long as

there is someone remembering you, you're not truly dead. He told me to be a strong girl."

"One day later he was dead. But at the funeral I didn't cry. I did as he told me and was a strong girl. I also took a picture of my brothers and had it framed in a small block of clear epoxy, so that I could wear it as a pendant on a necklace. I would never take it off and so I made sure I always remembered them."

"When I joined the navy I wasn't allowed to wear any pendant other than the dog tags and I had a lot of fuss with my drill instructors because I insisted to still wear the picture. Finally I had no other option than to keep it in a pocket of my uniform instead. One day I forgot it. I had taken it out of the pocket and put it into the foot locker when changing uniforms. There it was for two weeks before it accidentally fell into my hands when I was looking for something completely different. I realized that I had not only forgotten the picture, I also hadn't thought of my brothers for two weeks. I was distressed and furious with myself, I feared I would forget them."

"The next weekend, when I was on leave, I went to an eye specialist and had my irises dyed purple. Yes, it's permanent. Purple because that was Yegor's favourite colour. Of course this got me into trouble with my superiors again, but I didn't care. Now every time I look into a mirror I will remember my brothers. I will not forget them."

Anatolja made a short pause, clearing her throat. She wiped her cheek with her bloodstained hand, leaving a dark red streak where a single teardrop had been running.

"There, now you know it. No big mystery, no dark secret. Just a silly girl being sentimental. I have never told this story to anyone before, and I'll probably regret telling it to you in a couple of minutes. Then why am I telling you this? I don't know. It has nothing to do with our current situation whatsoever."

"I haven't always been fair to you, I am aware of that, but then you didn't make it easy for me either, sometimes. I know you don't even want to be here. Neither did I want my brothers to die, but it happened."

"But all that doesn't matter right now. The only thing that matters is, we need your help. We can't get out of here without you... I know it's dangerous and all and you'd probably be much better off just staying put where you are. But I trust you - you can do this! Please, help us, Kate."

JFalcon

Sun Jul 09, 2006 6:40 am

Kate's urge for screaming had diminished. Someone had taken the commlink away from PO Mirunova; it didn't really register with the private that she had probably then been insubordinate to someone of even higher rank. There was still a voice coming over the unit, but she wasn't listening anymore and stuffed the earpiece into a remaining pocket.

Where the hell am I going to find something to wear?

Mortified at the idea of someone walking in on her like this, Kate wrapped the remnants of the severed sleeve around her chest and managed to secure the ends together with a generous amount of duct tape taken from the small roll on the PO's tool belt. It still hurt badly to move any part of her upper body, and the blood still flowing slowly from the deep scratches made working with the adhesive tape difficult. The result was far from optimal, but it preserved decency.

Now, where am I?

Kate looked lazily up at the ceiling while her right hand traced out a path in the air.

Let's see, there's the grill, so the airduct went that way for about... and then the bend. So the other side of the wall should be... not here. More like one room that way.

She walked over to the room's exit, palmed the controls, and stuck her head out. The brightly lit corridor was empty and there was another entrance exactly where she hoped there would be. However, it proved to be locked. It was just a basic low-security model, though.

You can get through these with just the right type of screwdriver if you know how, which I happen to.

It was a minutes work. Release the screws on the panel, open the panel, short pins one and three on U43 with the tip, and you've got yourself one opened door. Of course, the knowledge of how to do all that had taken an hour of reading schematic plots and datasheets while still at Stanford.

Kate paused, holding the door open with the screwdriver.

I should ask them to bang on the wall or something to make sure this is the right one.

She fished out the commlink; Anatolja seemed to be back on, talking softly about something or

other. Kate was about to interrupt, when the chip on the circuit board made a popping sound and released an acrid puff of smoke.

Oh, \$#!%. Held it too long and killed it. Not going to close ever again.

She had only a moment to ruefully stare at the fried circuitry when the door at the end of the hall hissed open.

"#^@%!" She ducked inside.

"Movement. Fourth door on the right. Trying to hide." Staring down the barrel of her rifle, Banshee spotted a retreating figure as the interlocking doors parted.

"Advance," Crone didn't hesitate. "Kat, Maria: lock down the doors as we pass." There was no cover in the hallway. The best they could do was take the initiative before any potential ambush could be sprung.

She and Christine moved quickly in half crouches against opposite walls, pausing slightly as they passed each closed door to give Maria and Kat time to ensure they were locked.

Don't want enemies at our backs.

The suspect entranceway was open and the access panel looked like it had been pried open. Very unusual. Crone motioned for Banshee to cover the remainder of the hallway and ticked through a three second countdown on her fingers before rushing the room, weapon at the ready.

Deserted. Crates against the walls. Aurora could feel the blood pounding in her ears. Cat and mouse. She pounced first. Box one! Clear. Two! Clear... Three -- a figure was trying to hide against the wall.

"Hands where I can see them!" The woman complied instantly, still not daring to look up.

"Up -- slowly!" Aurora's eyes widened in recognition; it was the young Dark Nova tech. "You look like hell."

The smaller tech looked like a shrapnel grenade had gone off near her. Bloodied, clothes shredded, disorientated. Well, maybe the latter wasn't all that unusual for her.

"It's one of the techs!" Aurora called back over shoulder to the others. Christine entered first, followed by Raissa, and then the others. The two ensigns stayed at the doorway on lookout while Banshee made her own brief search of the room before turning to face Kate.

"Where are the others?"

Wide-eyed with hands still in the air, Kate pointed anxiously towards the wall opposite the door. It seemed like the safest reply with two large barreled rifles leveled at her.

Noticing the discomfort, Crone lowered her weapon and flicked the safety with an apologetic smile. Banshee followed suit, returning her firearm to a ready cradle position.

"They're stuck on the other side of that wall. I was trying to get it down."

"What?"

"It's just a partitioning wall retrofitted in. Just need to get the rivets out and it'll fall right over."

"Really?"

"Hold up, Lieutenant," Lt Cmdr Chakato was glaring at Kate. "This doesn't strike you as odd? This tech just sabotaged a door, now tells you to rip down a wall? Most of this deck is on lockdown due to an emergency and she's the only one we've found wandering around down here. That doesn't bother you?"

Odd? Like this whole mess? A mutiny in progress. Shooting down pilots I served with yesterday? OSI kidnapping Seer? I know truth when I see it in someone's eyes on a battlefield.

"No, I don't." Aurora raised her Excalibur.

"...you can do this! Please, help us, Kate." Anatolja finished her rather impromptu, though impassioned plea into the headset.

Silence.

"Kate...? Chyort voz'mi, is this thing even working?!"

Any further outrage or discussion was cut short as a plasma bolt abruptly burst through the insulation and thin metal wall near the junction with the ceiling.

"COVER!" Rhiannon yelled as she ran for one of the two storage crates in the room along with the others. Ducky was arming the fallen marine's rifle, the rest were drawing their sidearms. Claymore discovered that she had lost hers somewhere during the confusion and instead grimly drew her namesake from her shoulders.

Someone was definitely coming through the wall; further shots came in rapid succession following the wall's upper joint.

Bloody hell. Why didn't we think of trying that earlier with the dead girl's gun?

Aurora continued to punch a ragged cut in the wall with a stream of low-yield blasts. She was shooting at an angle so that any part of the bolts that made it all the way through the wall would hit another wall immediately, and not cut through the room or her companions. Kate looked somewhat shocked at this use of force, but how else did she expect them to bring a wall down? It would have been nice to give the rest of the squad a warning, but Aurora hadn't wanted to argue with Raissa.

The air smelled of burning insulation and ozone when the hail of plasma finally ceased. The barrier stood motionless for a long moment before slowly beginning to tilt inwards; twisting towards a side wall as it picked up speed and pivoted around an incompletely cut remnant. It halted with a scraping metallic crash reminiscent of thunder.

The hunkered down pilots waited for what would come next. Except nothing did.

"Hey!"

Ashley peaked around her box at the call; then stood up suddenly, her rifle lowering to the floor. Rhiannon looked too. Her face shifted from surprise to a relieved grin as she, too, rose. Cassie and Anatolja followed to see what the action was about.

Three figures stood partially silhouetted where the divider had been. Two were tall and held shouldered rifles. The third was shorter and was wearing glasses with large lenses.

"Heh, not what I expected, but this works, too."

Vexus

Sun Jul 09, 2006 9:03 am

Aurora and Rhiannon looked at one another for a moment, a smile slowly coming across both faces.

"That's a fine big gun ya goot there, lassie," the redhead said.

"And that's a fine big sword," the silverhead replied, "I'm jealous."

With that, the two women put away their weapons and clasped each other's arms before embracing, Rhiannon heaving a bellow of a laugh. Christine followed close behind and blushed as the Scott gave her a big bear-hug. Aurora addressed Anatolja as she beckoned for Kate to come over.

"We ran into this sorry sight on the other side of the wall. It's a good thing we caught her or we might have never found you all sealed away in here." Anatolja looked at her subordinate with widening eyes.

"Kate?! My God, what happened to you?"

"The same thing that always happens, ma'am," the tech responded wearily.

"Come on," Anatolja said, heaving a sigh, "Let's see if we can find any surplus medical supplies or

clean clothes around these storage rooms." She made it as far as grabbing Kate's arm before the realization hit her. The woman was streaked with drying blood. The familiar nausea began to swirl in her head, and she swallowed against it.

"Are you ok?" Kate asked, visibly concerned. Anatolja took a deep breath and nodded. "Ok or not, we need to fix up you, let's go. Excuse us, sir."

"We'll wait for you," Aurora said with a nod as the pair moved off to begin their search. The squad leader was then approached by Ducky, who was wearing a look of confounded relief.

"At what point did the whole Universe decide to go to hell in a hand-basket?"

"Since you joined with us," Aurora said simply. Ashely's mouth twitched in a half-smile.

"Great. Can I retire now? Barn-burning is a tea-party compared to this."

"Where's Hobbs, Ducky?" Aurora asked, Ashley's falling expression felt like a knife in the gut.

"She's not here, sir. I think you better talk with Seer over there." Aurora darted over to the little pilot and grabbed her by the shoulder, nearly lifting her feet off the floor.

"Seer, what's happened?! Where's Hobbs?!" Seer told her, at least what she remembered, simply stating the facts without commentary. As she relayed Ursula's final message, Aurora let go of Cassie so quickly that she almost fell over.

"She said to tell you that she loves you."

The others in the room fell into an awkward silence. Even the non-pilots had heard the rumors, and the news was a shock. A stony and impersonal look came over the squad leader's icy-blue eyes. Rhiannon saw it and recognized it: the same look she had worn when they had first met in that briefing room in what seemed like a lifetime ago. Aurora then shouldered her rifle.

"I'm going to scout ahead, I need to think on where Serpent would-"

"Serpent was hit during the firefight in the primary hangar," Rhiannon said quietly. "Sparks turned traitor and carried her off. I don't know if she's dead or alive." Aurora showed no visible reaction to the words, but merely continued in the same, flat tone.

"Then until we have reason to do otherwise, we make for the bridge. Everyone look around for anything useful. We're moving out once Kate is fit to travel."

"Nice to see you, too" Cassie said to Aurora's back, her eyes downcast. This time, Aurora's posture softened, but she didn't turn around.

"I'm glad to see you're ok, Seer. Just...give me a few minutes, at least." As Aurora made her way back to the corridor, she glanced at Christine.

"Help remind me to save at least one charge in my rifle. It has an appointment with a certain traitor."

Christine looked concerned, but simply nodded in reply as she followed.

Schamann

Mon Jul 10, 2006 1:19 pm

Commander Verulian wiped sweat and blood from her forehead. It was almost over. Control over what was now her ship was almost complete. She glanced around the bridge, and signaled the OSI shocktroopers to lower their weapons. It was OK now. Everybody who was not loyal enough yet, was certainly scared enough not to do anything stupid. That traitor Denatieux was laying right where she fell, shot dead by OSI soldiers. Every traitor onboard was either already dead or about to die. She quickly snapped the necessary orders.

"Ship's systems status"

There came replies, in turns, from the technicians monitoring the most vital systems of the cruiser.

"Engines online"

"Navigation online"

"Life support online"

"Weapons online"...

It wasn't long before Captain Marcelli – bridge officer on duty reported with the most awaited, final message:

"Ship's yours, Commander."

Commander Verulian let that moment of triumph linger a bit, before she continued with orders.

"Do we have complete control?"

"Yes sir."

"What about rebel occupied CIC?"

"Holding strong sir, they mined all entrances and are running on integral power and air reserve."

"Good. Seal all the locks, shut down their power and suck out their air. Then let them rot."

"Sir, some of the people there..."

"They are traitors. I'm not gonna lose any soldier, or even a single round, to bring them to justice. Let them suffocate. That's an order."

There was a silent, hoarse voice from the stretchers, that were just being prepared to transport the wounded to medbay. "Petra, you can't do this..."

Commander's response were swift and simple: "No Nikki, it is you who can't do anything anymore, you are in no condition for command and I'm taking over. It's my ship now."

Verulian looked around, as if to challenge anyone who would dare to question her command again. No one did. She spoke with the firm, calm voice. "Take the Captain to the infirmary, see to it she's taken care of well, and tell the doctor to notify me at once, after she determines whether Captain is going to make it or not."

She then continued "Communication – put me on over the PA speakers"

They were on their way, when they heard the announcement.

"To all onboard the ship. I repeat to all onboard the ship. This is Commander Verulian speaking, I have taken command over Morrigan due to the Captain's severe injury. The situation has been resolved. The isolated groups of mutineers are being hunted down and eliminated as we speak. I hereby order all loyal non-OSI personnel to find nearest OSI officer and submit to their instructions. As we are still under the mutiny conditions situation, all weapons must be at once surrendered to OSI personnel and OSI personnel only. Any armed non-OSI personnel will be fired upon without warning."

Chakato was the first to speak. "You've heard the lady, girls. Your weapons."

Banshee looked at her as if to see whether she was joking. "You cannot serious"

"Am I smiling?" Chakato suddenly changed her look from pretty much relaxed to tense and aggressive. "I am an OSI officer, and the highest rank around your lot, you might have noticed that a while ago. Kat – collect their weapons."

"Sir" Kat was not so sure. "You're information security..." But Chakato quickly interrupted her. "I know who I am lieutenant! Do your job!"

Banshee stared at her, challenging. Crone, with her more peaceful stance, apparently tried to solve this sudden situation. "Lieutenant Commander – why?"

"Because there will be OSI stormtroopers rummaging through this ship firing upon any armed non OSI personnel. Because regardless you picturing yourself as some poor interactive TV role-playing heroes, I do not believe you stand a chance against them. Because I don't want to die by friendly fire in the process. Last but not least – because I am the goddamn senior officer and I just gave you lot a direct order! Now you want to go mutineer and take me prisoner or you want to obey that order."

Crone realized that everybody was staring at her. It was for her to decide, for her to take action. She just nodded her head. Then there were weapons collected, unloaded and secured, then Kat took all the ammo and asked Ducky to help her with carrying the rifles and the sword. When they were ready, Chakato spoke once again.

"Jones – lead them to the bridge, if you meet OSI troops, tell them you're on the right side and to get to the bridge at once. Make your OSI badge clearly visible. Once you see commander Verulian tell her I had to attend to the situation with store 18. Tell her those exact words."

"OK sir, but the comms, wouldn't it be faster?"

"Just because the bridge thinks our communication is secure does not mean that it is. Just tell her. Now go."

She turned around, turned left after several meters, and then disappeared from their view.

Ursula peeked around the corner and cursed soundlessly, the guards were still there.

"Damn you, you pump ass god-playing piss of a hacker, where are you when you're needed?"

... and then there was an artificial male voice in her earphone:

"Right here, little one. Got sidetracked, had to get rid of some trouble. You're ready?"

"Like hell. I've been ready for the last twenty minutes, where were you?"

"That's not essential. Traveled with some troublesome lot, had to part ways with them. Starting in ten seconds."

Ten seconds later, guards were suddenly called by her internal communications systems to approach the storehouse doors. They were crowded, their back to her, easy targets. Ursula checked once again that she's set for non-lethal blasts and aimed carefully...

"Sir, we can't get through to the third storing level. Those blockades are like hell, it's like every door, every corridor is bent on slowing down my people, like ship's systems don't want to let us through."

"Where the hell is Chakato?!"

"She might not even be alive sir."

"Sir! Storehouse 18 doors had been depressurized, someone's got in!"

"Fuck!"

PA speakers kicked in again

"This is Commander Verulian. We have an emergency. Everybody who knows present whereabouts or heading of lieutenant Veneberg, report to the nearest OSI centre. She is an enemy agent on a covert operation that if successful will harm the Alliance efforts tremendously. she is to be considered armed and extremely dangerous. She is to be killed on sight if anybody sees her. I repeat..."

"She really does..." Cassie said it slowly, apparently unaware of the eyebrows going up around her after she uttered those words.

"She really does what?" Crone asked her as gently as she could.

"She really does love you Aurora." Cassie looked her superior right into her eyes. "I'm positive about that."

Vexus	Tue Jul 18, 2006 9:49 am
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Aurora walked with solemn purpose at the head of the group, Kat and Ashley just to her right. Kat's face was a study in changing emotions, while Ashley looked like she was going to be sick as she carried a stack of unloaded guns and wore the oversized sword on her back. She could be

counted on, Aurora thought, if the shit hit the fan once more. Her standing side-by-side with Rhiannon during the flight deck battle was proof enough for her. It was their OSI attachment that she was unsure about.

"So can I know now, Ensign?" Aurora asked Kat in a low voice.

"Sir?" Kat replied with a start.

"Can I know now whether or not you will hand over that ammo when I ask for it?"

"I... I don't know, sir. It depends on-" Aurora raised a hand to silence her, her expression falling into a weary, icy mask and her limp becoming more pronounced.

"Cat, this can't go on much longer. Without trust this ship is going to destroy itself and everyone on it. You have to make a decision now about who you will obey and hold onto that loyalty until the dust settles. If not, no one will trust you, and you'll find yourself quite alone in short order."

"I have a duty the same as you," Kat said with a grim look. "What about you, sir? Who will you pledge your loyalty to?" Aurora looked down and moved a hand over her breast, coming to rest on the medallion underneath.

"Jessica."

Leaving Kat with her curious look, Aurora fell behind a step and spoke softly to Christine.

"Still got your baby, I assume." Christine gave a twitch of a smile and glanced at where her blade was stowed.

"Out of sight, out of mind, unlike that gargantuan sword of Claymore's. I don't surrender that which is not asked of me."

"We may need Kat to surrender our belongings at some point. If I order her and she hesitates...." Aurora preferred not to finish the thought.

"I'll make sure to get our weapons back, sir. One way or another."

"I know," Aurora then said something she didn't expect. "Thank-you, Christine. You've been the sword at my right hand for these past days. Never refusing, always carrying through."

"Never known you to wax poetic, sir," Christine said with a cocked eyebrow.

"A momentary lapse," the squad leader replied with a smile, then she made her way over to her XO. The woman had a strong and securing arm around Cassie. Aurora found it hard to look at the curly-haired pilot, for she was now the reminder of Ursula's betrayal.

"Not tha I blame ya, lass," Rhiannon said softly, "But you look like your soul's been through a train-wreck."

"I'm tired," Aurora said with a sigh. "I don't think I've been so tired in all my life.... You will stand with me, no matter what?" Rhiannon flashed a grin and gave a simple nod.

"Aye. Tha' ah will, and sah will Cassie, right lass?" Cassie gently removed Rhiannon's arm, squared her shoulders, and looked her squad leader in the eye.

"I will, sir." Aurora nodded and regarded the small pilot in a new light.

"You are stronger than I, pilot. In a different, but far more important way."

Aurora stole a glance over at Kate and Anatolja, appearing deep in conversation. It looked like the petty officer had cleaned up her subordinate rather well given the limited time and resources.

"You guys keep an eye on our pair of grease monkeys," the squad leader said, gesturing to the pair. Both Cassie and Rhiannon nodded, and Aurora then saw to the last of her charges, who were bringing up the rear.

"Ensign, Claudia, I want you two to lay low and not draw attention to yourselves. Things might get hot, and I for one would like to be assured that letters from home and tast-... um... regular meals will be waiting for me when it's all over."

"You're the steadiest commanding officer I've seen so far in this mess," Maria said with sincerity. "You tell me to turn cartwheels around the bridge and I'll do it with a smile on my face." That made Aurora grunt a laugh in spite of herself.

"We'll help if we can," Claudia said simply in her deep voice. "You are a good girl."

"Not so good most of the time," Aurora replied sadly, then made her way back to the front of the pack.

The group had turned the final corner and the bridge doors were now visible at the far end of the hallway. As expected, a sizable contingent of OSI troops was guarding it. Kat signaled for the group to stop, then went ahead. Flashing her OSI badge, she spoke with the marine commander. He gestured to the weapons she and Ashley carried, but Kat shook her head and seemed to insist until the commander backed down. Aurora raised an eyebrow at that and felt a twinge of hope. The marine radioed to someone, no doubt to Verulian on the bridge. After a moment she seemed satisfied and keyed in the door code. With a whoosh the massive doors slid open and the marines gestured the group onto the command deck.

Aurora grunted a humorless laugh as she walked into the Morrigan's command center. She had never been to the bridge before now, and these were amongst the worse circumstances she could think of as an excuse to visit it at last. The circular room was an impressive array of consoles and holographic displays, but its aura of authority was tainted with plasma scorchmarks and splatters of blood here and there. A small pile of bodies had been unceremoniously dumped next to a diagnostic station, and Aurora viewed the broken corpse of the former XO of the Morrigan with only a faint echo of pity.

Commander Verulian looked like any warlord from Earth's bloody history, with a determined expression that bordered on the fanatical. As she rose from the command chair, Kat approached her and saluted.

"So here are the Dark Novas," Verulian said flatly. "What's your status, Yates?" Aurora snapped to attention and saluted crisply.

"Dark Nova stands as you see them, ma'am. Loyal to Earth and awaiting your orders."

Now we see what we will see, Aurora thought, taking her strength from the presence of the comrades at her back.

Schamann

Thu Sep 14, 2006 12:54 pm

Commander Verulian watched the newly arrived pilots in silence, analyzed them, judged them.

"Thank You Novas. It is a relief to learn that there are still soldiers who value loyalty and honor higher than comfort. We must stay united in these trouble times. You have my respect and trust, Novas."

"We're here to serve, Sir" Crone responded immediately, but Verulian stopped her with a wave and continued,

"It is also my duty to apologize to you lieutenant Dory. We had information that there would be enemy's agent within Dark Nova Squadron, but we did not have any clues as to identifying her. My women followed the most obvious trail, which turned out to be false. My apologies."

Cass felt that this may be the right time to try and find out anything in this mess. "Ma'am" she hesitantly asked, "Do we know why lieutenant Veneberg would betray?"

"Her reasons are irrelevant lieutenant" Verulian answered sharply. "Although I can imagine she would not even admit to the term 'betray' here. We have reasons to believe that her father was a Charan, having seduced her mother while she was being a POW for almost a year. Thus lieutenant Veneberg might as well never truly have been loyal to The Alliance at all, from the very beginning."

Looks were exchanged between the Novas at these news, looks ranging from pure contempt to the certain degree of understanding. But before anyone could say anything there was an interruption. A young bridge NCO approached Commander Verulian with the hand phone and a puzzled look. "Commander – it's the CIC again, they repeat their offer of immediate surrender and..."

Verulian grabbed the phone with the angry and displeased look that was not foretelling anything good to her invisible interlocutor.

"No Sparks, I don't have time for this, it's my way or a high way"

...
 "No I don't give a rat's ass whom of allegedly 'my people' you have with you, Serpent or Trisk or even Wesley. As far as I am concerned if they're not with me they are either traitors or dead, which, by the way will soon be the same if you don't tell me what I want to know. How much air do you think you still have?"

.....
 "Authentication friendly codes for the Final Station protocols Sparks! This or your death will be more painful than you can imagine!."

Commander hung up and turned to Novas:

"You will report to CAG, Novas, I want you to take preliminary patrols around Morrigan, watching for enemies, both from the outside as well as the inside ones trying to escape. With a stolen fighter, perhaps... you are dismissed"

Vexus

Mon Sep 25, 2006 2:46 am

The Novas, Kate, Anatolja, Ensign Sanchez, and Claudia filed out of the bridge under Verulian's stern gaze. On their way out they once again were stopped by the OSI guards. After relating Verulian's instructions and some semi-tense negotiations, it was agreed that the Novas could keep their side-arms, but not anything larger. Aurora frowned as her rifle, Christine's rifle, and Claymore's sword were turned over to the marines. They assured the Novas that they would be returned when the crisis had passed. The head guard then called the other OSI checkpoints from the Bridge to the CAG's office, the mess hall, and the main flight deck. After the checkpoints had confirmed that they would be clear to pass through, the group of women were allowed to move on to their respective destinations. As they made their way through the deserted corridors, Aurora handed Sanchez her comm unit.

"You and Claudia take this with you to the mess hall. I'll need you two to be my eyes on the ground while we're on patrol. Contact my XO Claymore if you see or hear anything unusual. But be careful, as your transmissions might be intercepted."

"Will do, sir," Sanchez said with a brisk nod.

"Some kitchen vents link with nearby hallways and rooms," Claudia added. "I will listen as I prepare the next meal."

"You're going to cook at a time like this?!" Sanchez asked incredulously. Claudia shrugged.

"Everyone needs to eat, even during mutiny." Aurora twitched a smile at that, then watched as the two unlikely companions took a turn in the corridor to make their way back to the mess hall. With their departure, Aurora's attention turned to what remained of their ground crew.

"I want you two to head straight for the main flight deck and prep the least-broken ones for immediate launch. Pull whatever other ground crew personnel are still loyal and fit for duty to help you. If the flight deck isn't secure yet, contact us but don't go in without armed escort."

"Sir?" Kate suddenly spoke up. Her clothing was a disordered mix of shredded uniform and first-aid bandages. "When last we left the main hangar, the sexbot Jason had been severely damaged after helping us and was lying on the deck. Did you see his... did you see him?"

Crone shook her head and shrugged.

"I don't remember seeing him, but I wasn't really paying attention at the time. There were a lot of bodies on the deck, my leg was hurting like hell, and all of us who landed there were in a hurry to leave the area."

"We'll do the best we can with the tools and people we have, sir," Anatolja said wearily.

"I know you will," Aurora said with a nod. "On your way." Once again, a pair of women broke off from the group to head down another corridor, this time towards the main flight deck. After passing several ad-hoc checkpoints, the Novas at last arrived at the CAG's office and were escorted in by a pair of OSI guards standing just outside.

"Come in, sit down, and shut up!" Mallory shouted at them from her desk as she hastily scribbled on a notepad. The area was a mess, with papers and office equipment scattered across the floor. The CAG looked no more composed than her office, her hair untidy and her expression worn. Here usual air of calm procedure had been replaced by one of near-hysterical urgency. Whatever had happened to the CAG during the mutiny, Aurora thought, it had shaken her up pretty badly.

"I recieved a message from the bridge," Mallory said as she finished her writing and handed it to one of the guards. "You are to fly a simple patrol run around the Morrigan to ensure exterior security until the ship has been fully regained. As this is a crisis situation, there is to be no discussion or field liberties. You are to fly the patrol pattern I give you on the time-table I set for you. If you disobey orders or veer from your flight-plan without orders, you will be treated henceforth as enemy combatants. Do I make myself clear?"

The Novas all wisely held their tongues and simply nodded.

"Good. Then grab your gear and get to it. You are to launch ASAP."

JFalcon

Wed Sep 27, 2006 4:19 am

Prep fighters. Sure -- I'll just reach into our magic bag of inventory and pull out another five shiny new ones all ready for launch. Oh, look. The bag's empty. What the hell do we even have on deck? Anatolja realized that she had no idea. The schedule was handled by... Sparks. All she had ever had to do was look at the board listing and work on the ones her name had been next to.

"Can I get a new uniform?" Kate interrupted the PO's train of thought.

Anatolja glanced at their armed escort. "Umm... we'll find something for you in the hanger, k?"
Well, just have to grab whatever looks like it'll fly and beg for forgiveness later.

The remainder of the journey was silent. After passing through a further set of guards at entrance 07, they were back in the oddly quiet, and odd smelling main hanger. A haze still hung in the air, along with various puddles of fluid on the floor and marks on the walls. The lighting was out or flickering in many places, and the catwalk was a twisted wreck dangling from the ceiling. Bodies were still being dragged off the deck. Anatolja swallowed hard and tried to look beyond that activity to the larger, motionless shapes of fighters standing reassuringly amidst the chaos.

"Lessee... Two -- three -- Nova Sirens still in place. Two Medusas on the line..." Well, one looked like it had been pushed off to the side to clear the ramp. Both were blackened in places.

"Ulgh." She squinted towards the recovery zone. Another two Siren silhouettes there. Crazily parked. Looked like one had nearly hit the first one. Another... something... was crumpled against the blast wall surrounded by a large spill on the deck.

"Well, that's five! Wait, is that OSI gal going out with them again?"

Kate shrugged. "I dunno."

"Gauhh... I need another... Forty-four! They fixed the hydraulics on Aries 2 67-344 yesterday. It's in bay six...

...along with three-four-one which Calamity blew up.

She exhaled through her teeth, eyes narrowed. *Wellll... don't need VTOL... might just fly if we need a backup. I put the engine back together on that one, right?*

"PFC Kate Ross?" A voice interrupted Anatolja's thoughts again. An OSI marine with a sergeant's stripes had appeared.

"Yyyyes?"

"Come with me, please."

"Hey, wait -- I need her! She's supposed to help get Dark Nova into space. The officers on the bridge said..." Mirunova trailed off and then shut her open mouth with a click at the marine's expression and tightened grip on her weapon. The senior tech swallowed.

"Well, see you later then, Kate." She turned back around to the task of readying fighters spread across the entire length of the flight deck, swearing silently in Russian.

"I want a change of clothes."

Anatolja smiled slightly at these words from behind her.
Your problem now, grunt.

Vexus

Mon Oct 02, 2006 11:30 am

The Novas entered the locker room and changed back into their flight suits in a manner that was professional and timely, yet tinged with weariness. None of them had had much sleep during the past 48 hours, and all of them were emotionally drained from the long chain of crises that had

brought them to this moment. Almost everything about their squadron, their home ship, and the situation in general had completely changed. It was only their training and a certain emotional numbness that held their collective sanity together.

As Aurora changed her clothes, too tired to enact her usual modesty, the others could see for the first time the full history of her military career imprinted upon her body. There were lesser scars that criss-crossed her lower torso, fading bruises around her injured arm and leg, and a deep scar upon her left breast that matched the one on her face. As she tried to pull on her flight suit, her foot caught for a moment and she stumbled, forcing her to collapse into a sitting position on the nearby bench. She remained still for a few moments, her breathing heavy, her head leaning back against the lockers, and her eyes pressed shut. Finally Cassie came over, sat next to Aurora, and without any hesitation embraced her squad leader with securing arms about her waist. At first, Aurora seemed unresponsive, then she put her own arm around the little pilot's shoulders and they rocked slowly together. The other Novas glanced at them in turn with solemn understanding, the scene encapsulating all the pain and confusion that they had experienced as a squadron. Aurora felt as if she had never wanted to cry so much in all her life... but there was no time.

Easing Cassie from her embrace, Aurora stood up and fastened up her flight suit.

"We keep going," she said simply to her pilots, "No matter what."

Tiefflieger

Fri Oct 13, 2006 12:15 pm

This was awkward. Anatolja had never felt uncomfortable, *lonely* even, on the flight deck before. Now that Kate was gone there were only a couple of techs from other departments and shifts around, whom she knew only vaguely. And a lot of marines. Some medics were busy right in the centre of the deck. The intensity of the fight must've been highest there, Anatolja figured.

Prepping six fighters, all of which were in dubious condition, considering that there had been a fight right in the hangar shortly ago... That would normally take close to a whole day, if done by the book, even with a full crew. Screw the book, just make sure those birdies fly and don't blow up right in the launching bay! But still, Anatolja needed at least some people to work with.

She looked around. She wasn't sure if she was supposed to be glad or disappointed that she didn't find anyone from her crew. Anatolja's eyes wandered to the heap of wreckage that marked the spot where the sentry guns had been. There was a dark puddle on the floor. She fought the mental image of Graft and Maynard lying in it. They were gone, their whereabouts and conditions unknown. Majewska was most likely dead, or at least severely wounded. Anatolja had seen her take a shot to the guts. Mac and Sorensen had been unconscious from the beginning of the fight, so their chances of survival were probably pretty good, ignoring the possibility of being hit by a stray bullet, which admittedly was pretty high. Still, neither of them were to be found anywhere. Anatolja sure wouldn't go check the bodies which were lined up close to the far wall of the hangar, covered with sheets. She would have to look up their status on the online crew roster. But even if any of them had been here, whom could she still trust? Who was a traitor and who wasn't?

Who was in charge now, anyway? One of the senior NCOs most likely, a crew chief like herself. But Anatolja didn't know exactly who was next in line after Sparks and she had not the slightest idea who of them dropped out because of the mutiny.

Too much thinking, I need a smoke!

Anatolja headed for Sparks' office. The window that separated it from the hangar had been hit by a bullet and featured a pattern that reminded of a spider's web. She knew she would find a couple of partially empty cigarette packets inside. To her surprise, she found Sparks' desk occupied.

"Hey, Auto." she was welcomed.

"Mac." she replied coldly.

MacGuire had a little dried blood on her brow, other than that she seemed unhurt.

"I figured you'd be showing up any time now." Mac continued.

Anatolja stood in the door of the office, her hands resting easily on her hips, while Mac was sitting at the desk, likewise unmoving.

"Majewska and Scissors?", Anatolja asked.

"Don't know."

"Swede?"

"In sickbay."

"Maynard?"

Mac shook her head.

"Tibbs?"

"Still with Sparks, for all I know."

"Shit!"

There was an awkward pause. None of the women spoke or moved.

"What now, Auto?", Mac finally broke the silence.

"Well, I'll guess you'll be going to the brig, waiting for court-martial."

"Yeah, I guess." Mac didn't look too happy. "You know, we didn't want it to end this way..."

"Pfff, I bet you didn't! What with the glorious rest of your miserable mutiny being holed up in the CIC, slowly running out of air."

"What?!"

"Yeah, the price for treason was always a high one. Seems like they won't accept Sparks surrender and rather let them suffocate."

"But they can't do that! I can't believe the Captain..."

"The Captain's dead!", Anatolja interrupted her rudely.

"Dead... but who...?"

"You should've considered the consequences of a failed mutiny attempt more thoroughly. You put that crazy OSI chick in charge yourself, when one of your fellow traitors shot the captain."

"Oh my God, we've gotta stop them! We've gotta get Sparks and the others out of there!" Anatolja could see that Mac was about to jump up, but it seems that Mac was well aware of the Hangar full of Marines, so she waited for her answer instead. Anatolja didn't answer. "For Christ's sake Auto, they're going to die!"

"And I should care why? A lot of people died today. *Crap, I should've died three times over, by now. That's enough for one day, I think.*"

"But they're your friends!"

"Not anymore. We stopped being friends the instant they tried to kill me. Remember those sentry guns of yours? I sure do." Anatolja nodded to her injured shoulder. "Sparks chose her path and that path is leading straight to hell. I for one sure won't be going down with her, and you should be glad that you won't either. Now stay right where you are!"

Anatolja left the office and returned a moment later, accompanied by two marines.

"PFC MacGuire, you are under arrest for treason and mutiny." Auto said. *Am I even authorized to arrest anyone? I don't think so.* "Marines, take her away."

Mac waited resignedly for the marines to search her for weapons and put cuffs on her, but then to her surprise Anatolja spoke again.

"No, wait, I think I have an idea."

Shortly afterwards, Anatolja and Mac were working together with a girl from the fire crew, an ammo tech and three marines whom Anatolja had enlisted without further ado into a makeshift ground crew, to get the Nova's fighters ready for take off. Anatolja wasn't overly comfortable with this, but she thought she knew MacGuire well enough to know that she wouldn't do anything

stupid. Mac wasn't a bad person and Anatolja would've been surprised if she would have been in on the mutiny out of belief. It was much more likely that she just had participated in it because Sparks or maybe Tibbs had told her so.

JFalcon

Mon Oct 16, 2006 2:22 am

Flanked by an OSI officer wearing a lieutenant's bars, Kate found herself staring at the sorriest sight she had seen in a long time. The unmoving sprawl of Jason still lay on the flight deck surrounded by a small pool of dark, blue-black liquid and three OSI marines standing guard. A ruined machine, yes, but also more than that? He had been almost downright friendly and helpful lately...

They had found her a new set of coveralls and even had a corpsman look her over before the Lt had appeared and lead her to where the bot lay. The new clothes were at least two sizes too large, but along with the medical attention, Kate felt almost clean again.

"...And you expect me to do *what* again, ma'am?"

The OSI officer rolled her eyes, irritated. "I said, private, OSI requires the memories from this bot immediately. It likely has considerable information and observations regarding this recent mutiny attempt that OSI needs."

"I'm a small craft tech; not a..." The Lt cut Kate off with a dismissive hand raise.

"Yes, yes. I'm sure. And as you were no doubt going to suggest, Isgard Cess is the correct person to contact. She is unavailable." Kate didn't like how the Lt made that last statement sound. "We know of your rather, extensive, background, private. And that you recently did some work on this bot -- at Karen Freeman's request, oddly enough." There was a hint of a predatory smile on the OSI officer's face as she fixed her gaze on the tech. Kate suddenly wondered if the marines were here to guard Jason or herself. "OSI is confident you will be successful."

"But, you don't understand. It's not like his memory is a database or something that you can search. Well, it sort of is. But it's not indexed! There's no relationships or meaning between elements. That's all part of his AI matrix; it's like a human memory. You'd need his processing core online. Or at least everything up to the DME. Wouldn't need the personality constructs or physical interaction routines or..."

"Then him working so we can interrogate him!" The officer stalked off.

Kate looked from the retreating figure to the one lying face down at her feet.
You saved my life. Shouldn't I at least try to do the same?

It looked like his primary power cells had been ruptured. Hell, explosively discharged. That fluid was probably the dielectric from the nanotech supercapacitor banks. Moderately acidic. Carcinogenic, too. Kate chewed her lower lip. Hopefully... hopefully there was a small secondary or tertiary power pack still active that was keeping his matrix powered, but in a emergency halted state.

*Going to need to find that out. And then, if yes, get some sort of temporary external power in long enough to archive his matrix for a proper shutdown. Then get him moved to some more reliable power source and with the right gear.
And if not, we're both screwed.*

"Help me turn him over."

Schamann

Tue Oct 24, 2006 2:35 pm

People were quite busy with repairs, preparing them, readying themselves to be back on duty and all the likes, when they heard the PA speakers kicking in with a squeak:

„Attention all personnel! Attention all personnel! Nuclear alert level 3 is hereby announced!. All personnel will assume secure locations. All N3 zone premises are to be immediately abandon. Radiation shields rising in 15 seconds."

At Novas quarters some good amount of chaos emerged after such an announcement. Byrne was the first to ask one of the most important questions:

"We are getting nuked? How the hell? By whom?"

Banshee's cold professionalism was as usual ready to react though.

"We aren't getting nuked. That would be level one, battle stations and preparing for scramble

launch. It must be something different. Most likely we are..."

"Cass whaet is haeppening?!" claymore interrupted her leaping forward to Seer, who started visibly shaking and muttering with her eyes blank-staring, unfocused, as if in a trance:

"Death, death, death riding a missile, blast of two suns, heat of fire, face of the burning girl, flames come out of her mouth, pocket-size apocalypse in dead frost of vacuum blackness, they all die..."

Crone also jumped to her friend almost in an instant. Alongside Claymore she caught Cassie's arms, let her lean and started to bring her to her senses. Banshee, however, did not move, instead she finished her sentence, in a very flat voice, her face gone white:

"Most likely we are about to nuke something close enough to get us in the blast radius."

At the hangar bay, people reacted in a more disciplined and automated fashion.

"Nuke three people! Secure the equipment and get out of this hangar now!"

They crowded in Sparks's office five people altogether. Anatolija, Mac, two techs from other shift and a young, rather scared marine, who was apparently ordered to keep an eye on Mc Guire. After blast shutters closed behind the windows, Mirunova started:

"Now there are the options as I see them." She shot some questioning glances around the people only to have them reflected back. "Either a ship near us is to suffer engine core explosion, or something other than us, but close, is about to be nuked. What of those two rebel assault transports?"

The marine suddenly spoke: "One of them was destroyed by Nova Squadron, and the other crippled before it approached us. I have heard Omega Squadron was dispatched to finish it off, after we got the upper hand here. But it should be far anyway and a waste of ordnance in it's state."

"That leaves Aruna" Mc Guire interrupted, "and..." she looked at Mirunova, startled, a long deep look which Anatolija did not like at all. "And what?!" she barked. Mac responded in a quiet, tired voice:

"And you already know the only reasonable conclusion."

To her surprise, Anatolija heard her own voice, though she did not recall the intention to speak:

"And the only ones to possibly nuke her is us."

It all came about in silence. Morrigan's crew only felt two abrupt tremors, as warheads were launched. "Two" whispered one of the technicians in Sparks's office, "They want to be sure."

And that was it. Nobody heard any scream, not a soul had seen the nuclear inferno.

Shortly after the alert was lifted, Crone received short message from Mallory. It simply said: "Delete the Aruna OP from your patrol flightpath. It has been neutralized."

When the shutter to the office were lifted Mirunova heard sudden, sharp voice of her rebel subordinate:

"They surrendered to us. They put their lives in our hands and asked for protection. And a protection we had granted them. Look at me Auto, look into my eyes!"

Anatolija slowly looked up to her former companion.

"And now tell me, tell me once again that it was I who chose the side that is wrong."

Vexus

Tue Oct 31, 2006 9:45 am

After the all-clear was sounded, Aurora led her squadron out onto the flight deck. It was still a mess in every respect, but was a good deal more orderly than when last she left it. The six tired-looking women wandered around aimlessly for a few moments until they caught sight of Anatolija and her make-shift crew prepping the last of what Aurora assumed would be their patrol ships. It was a motley bunch of craft, but it seemed well suited to their motley bunch of pilots. If the Novas

looked ragged and weary, Anatolja looked about two small steps away from complete exhaustion. She didn't even salute as she half-walked half-staggered over to Aurora.

"Six ships, sir, ready for take-off: three Sirens, two Medusas, and an Aries II. Some of them don't look too pretty, but they'll fly."

"Good work," Aurora nodded sincerely, and then looked around curiously. "Where's Calamity?"

"OSI took her away, sir. I'm not sure where." Aurora gave a concerned frown.

"Your immediate tasks are over, Petty Officer, I think you should find your subordinate and try to bring her to some place safe." Anatolja bowed her head like a woman accepting an inevitable curse for the good of humanity.

"Yes sir, I'll go and make sure she's alright." Aurora nodded, then took Anatolja's hand and shook it, her eyes reflecting a muted respect and gratitude.

"You and Calamity helped to keep two of my girls alive on this deck today. I won't forget that. Radio us if the situation on the deck changes, and try to get some rest. We'll likely need you when we return the way our luck goes." Anatolja did salute this time with just the faint hint of a smile.

"We'll be in touch, sir. Just try not to beat up my birds too much this time out." Anatolja turned to leave but Aurora called out to her. She turned back and saw an odd mix of intensity and regret on Aurora's face.

"Seer's been mumbling a lot lately, and some of it involved you and Calamity." The squad leader paused for a moment. "If there is any truth to it.... My heart stabbed me in the back, but I doubt Calamity would do the same to you.... Don't let anything go unsaid."

Leaving Anatolja with a look of embarrassment and conflict on her face, Aurora went back to her squad. They all leaned into a familiar huddle they had done before in their quarters; Aurora's football team of trained killers. Killers with just enough pain in their souls to keep them human.

"Banshee," Aurora began, "You're the best markswoman we have now. Take the Aries II. Catnip, take a Medusa and have the techs on-duty upload whatever software you need. I want an open line available to the Morrigan command at all times. We don't want any friendly fire incidents. Claymore and Ducky, you'll take the Sirens with me." Aurora shifted her gaze to Cassie.

"The rest of you get to your ships now." As the Novas hurried to their fighters, Aurora looked down at her smallest pilot.

"Are you ok?"

"I think so," Cassie replied with deep, steadying breaths.

"That's the second time today you've had a... what? An episode? An attack? What the hell is happening to you?"

"They've never been this strong in a long time, sir," Cassie answered quietly. "I just... see things... all at once. They overwhelm me sometimes. I've never been able to explain it."

"Have you seen a doctor about this?"

Cassie gave her leader a stern look. "About what? My mental disease? Is that what you think it is?" Aurora's gaze was steady and Cassie at last sighed and shook her head. "No, I've never brought it up, and I've managed to keep it a secret rather well before now. And I don't think it's a disease anyway. What do you think?"

Aurora was silent for a time, her gaze calculating. "If you show any signs of having another... fit... I am performing a security override on your Medusa and sending you home. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir," Cassie said with a frown, then sulked away towards her fighter. Aurora at last made her way to her own Siren as the techs began to clear the deck for take-off, the last few scurrying to disconnect the remaining data lines to Kat's fighter.

As the mixed squadron rose into space, a strange and eerie sight was waiting for Claymore. Both

Epsilon Eridani and the Border were as large as ever, the unusually thick asteroid field now stretching endlessly above and below them, each constituent rock illuminated in the pale red-orange light of their parent star. In another direction lay the muted glow that was the tell-tale aftermath of a nuclear detonation in space. Even from what was likely a thousand clicks away, the glow seemed almost alive, producing creeping, crawling shapes as super-heated and radioactive debris tumbled and cooled in the dark. Claymore's detectors were already reading cautionary amounts of ambient radiation, now from the wreck of the Aruna as well as the Border.

"Shields up, ladies," came Crone's voice over the comm, "let's not soak up any more rads than we have to."

A sudden beeping came from a pocket in Claymore's flightsuit. She started at the sound before realizing what it was. Awkwardly reaching into the pocket, she pulled out Crone's personal comm and answered.

"Claymore herre, lassie, what's oop?" Sanchez's voice was thankfully calm as she responded.

"Just testing to see if this really works. I never knew these little comm links had such range."

"I've pahcked the channel through mah fighter's own system teh boost tha signal," Claymore said. "Just makeah surre yeh keep tha unit charged."

"Will do, Novas, Good luck. Sanchez out."

Placing the comm link back into her pocket, Claymore maneuvered her ship into formation and counted it a blessing that the blasted and menacing hulk of the Aruna was no longer a part of their patrol route.

JFalcon

Wed Nov 01, 2006 5:59 am

Banshee was adjusting to the Aries II. It wasn't an unpleasant situation by any means. She had wanted to fly one ever since Nef had described their capabilities, what now seemed so long ago. And now Aurora had assigned one to her. A *real* fighter. Something modern. Cutting edge even. It was just... different.

The command couch was actually proving very comfortable despite her initial misgivings about it on the flight deck. Now, it hardly felt like any fighter was behind her. A sensation augmented by the large canopy. Great visibility, but Christine had to wonder about the wisdom of not seating the pilot more deeply surrounded by the fighter's armor.

She was rapidly becoming familiar with the new display layout, but not before actually cursing out loud in frustration over where a setting was hiding itself. Only to have had the fighter answer her in a smoothly synthesized voice, bring up the appropriate screen, and promptly adjust the setting for her. She was already ordering the fighter around without a second thought and re-arranging readouts to suit her preferences.

The wreck of the Aruna glittered distantly as Banshee watched it. The Aries II startled her as it opened a magnified view in a full color, high resolution overlay on her helmet's HUD.

That's right, this one has eye track. That's why I had to use this new helmet instead my usual.

The image automatically adjusted itself for exposure and contrast and began listing other data such as range, radiation levels, and approximate speed. It panned with the slightest hint of a shift in gaze on her part. It seemed that the cruiser had been broken into three larger sections. The ruined superstructure still glowed white and red.

I wonder if someone might still be alive deep inside one of the pieces? It was more of a technical musing than one of sympathy.

And yet, they had signed -- and the Captain accepted -- a surrender.

Probably a false gesture; they were rebels and guerrillas.

They were hit without warning.

Surprise is one of the greatest tactical advantages.

There are still rules to war...

Christine dismissed the video feed. It was distracting her from the mission at hand. The fighter's sensors blipped; they apparently optimized themselves for the conditions around the Aruna where she had been looking.

"Banshee to Crone. I'm reading an escape pod in the vicinity of the Aruna debris field."

"I see it, too," Kat added. Her passive sensors were picking up all sorts of otherworldly sounding emissions in the RF spectrum from the recent explosion. "It's not one of ours. I think it's a pilot's pod. One of the patrol must have almost gotten clear."

"Understood. Crone to Morrigan ATC, there's an enemy escape pod out here."

"I know, Nova leader," the flight control officer sound tired.

"Well, is SAR being dispatched?"

"Apparently not."

"What?! Why..."

"You have your flight plan, Nova leader. Carry it out!" There was what sounded like a disgusted sigh, and then more gently, "Command knows, LT. They're just... not doing anything about her."

The ensuing silence as the fighters cut through space loomed just as heavily as the Aruna's expanding debris cloud which none of them could manage to ignore.

Maverick	Tue Nov 07, 2006 12:29 am
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Things had been moving way too fast for Kat's liking ever since the first note of "Always look on the bright side of life" blared out of the ship's intercom; and even with the mutiny slowly dwindling down to a stop, it was still moving too fast for her.

Her head hurt.

The one thing the young Ensign wanted to do now was to sit back and listen to some music. Maybe have a movie playing that she'd occasionally glance over to while listening, but mostly just to have some good music and calm down. Well, she guessed the music of the Medusa's rumbling engines was the best she'd get, but it did little to calm her confused mind. Despite the apparent Alliance vs. Mutineers image that this whole mutiny proclaimed, Kat had the feeling that it was more multi-faceted than believed.

This newest revelation was just icing on the cake.

The girl debated to herself whether or not to tell someone, and if so, who to tell. The listing of people she could trust was drawing extremely small at the moment. On top of that, a small voice in her head was telling her to do, what it called, "the right thing." Way to be descriptive voice. I applaud you. With the equipment she had in the Medusa, she wouldn't be able to send a direct message, but with a quick reroute of a few signals, she could send a nearly untraceable reroute of the *Morrigan's* com traffic to any ship near hers. She sent it straight to Crone.

"-quest status of mutiny. Repeat, TNS *Morrigan*, this is Lavinia HQ, we request the current status of the mutiny, we request status of mutiny. Repeat -"

This message blared into Crone's cockpit along with Catnip's voice, speaking softly. "Sir, I've cloaked our conversation. Something isn't right and I have a bad feeling about this. Unless you have something better in mind, I'm contacting Lavinia myself." Her voice was tense, strained and full of what could be described as apprehension. Cat's eyes were closed, added to the fact that her whole body was tense and her facial muscles strained, she looked much like her namesake. A cat ready to pounce. On catnip. Or something like that.

Vexus	Tue Nov 07, 2006 11:04 am
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Crone listened to the repeated transmission from their home base, her features a mask of grim intensity carved like stone. Before, the suspicion building inside her mind would have appalled her, but after two days of deception and betrayal it was simply one more swing of the pendulum. Ever since Verulian had come forward to congratulate them on their first successful sim run - the hallway cameras winking out at her presence - Crone had been wary of the OSI commander. The unanswered calls to Lavinia now brought the feeling full circle.

Then there was the enemy pilot, drifting in a radiation flooded space where no one would come to her rescue. Crone had been that pilot, trapped in the wreckage of the *Gretchen* and at the mercy of her enemy, and her enemy had used the last of her strength to save her.

At that moment, something changed in Aurora Yates. Something gave way within her. In her mind's eye the stern, stoic, and uncompromising vision of her father shattered, the voice of the redheaded man speaking once again.

Finish what I started, little one.

And then Crone was dead. The Daughter of the Alliance, loyal to her flag through three colonial campaigns was gone. She had a new family now, a new purpose. Nefertiti was her sister, Serpent her mother, and Flame her matriarch.

The Code had awakened in Crone, and the Alliance had lost one of its prized soldiers.

"Thank-you," Crone said simply over the comm.

"For what, sir?" Catnip asked in a confused tone.

"For giving me the ammo when the time came," Crone replied. Catnip recalled her squad leader's request when they had made their way to the Morrigan bridge and she smiled to herself.

"It was getting a bit heavy to carry by myself anyway."

"Try to raise Lavinia if you can, Cat, and explain the situation to them. Then request instructions. Crone to Claymore."

"Claymorre herre, lassie," came the calm and steady reply.

"Claymore I want you to stay on the patrol route for now. Have Seer and Ducky keep their eyes open and cover Catnip while she's working."

"Aye, Lead, we'll be herre when yeh get back, but where are yeh off to?"

Crone bowed her head in her cockpit. "To repay an honorable deed. Banshee, I may need my sword." Crone saw the Aries fighter break formation and come alongside her Siren.

"At your side, sir," Banshee answered in her usual emotionless tone. As they banked away to intercept the enemy escape pod, the other Novas took up positions around Catnip's Medusa, trying to anticipate anything and everything.

Schamann

Fri Dec 01, 2006

"HQ this is ensign Jones OSI, identification code attached. I report that Morrigan's situation has been resolved and she is now under Allaince's control. Commander Verulian is now in her charge. I repeat..."

Sudden silence fell on the bridge of so unfortunately aforementioned missile cruiser. Everybody just looked at everybody's faces.

"Here goes our fancy plan to deceive Final's crew" Parker sighed. Verulian, however, became positively furious. She turned red, her lips and eyebrows raised, before she could speak, however, another message got to her by the young lieutenant on radar duty.

"sir! I have two Novas breaking and setting on an intercepting course towards the wreckage of Aruna!"

....

Verulian spoke breathing heavily, as if someone who just got out of the water, being close to drowning.

"I... will...have...their ...heads"

Catnip's transmission was suddenly broken and she realized immediately, that it was Morrigan's radio officer's doing what they only could to stop her from transmitting the message. Only, with her RIAS gear and her brain – the fight was equal.

"Novas! What the hell are you doing?!" Mallory's voice on the radio was as angry as it could get, but Crone's reply was simple "Our honor and duty"

They did not have to wait for reaction.

"To all units, to all units! Novas Crone, Banshee and Catnip are hereby hostile. Proceed to neutralize them with any means necessary!"

Dr Banner was never scared so much in her entire life. Getting busy in the infirmary, parching

shot, burned and bleeding women, she could scarcely think of anything but one thing: *when will they find out?*

Meanwhile, an hour of flight away, scramble alert rang all over the Final Station.

JFalcon

Sat Dec 02, 2006 5:17 am

Aurora's threat warning system lit up and began warbling in steadily increasing tones. Omega had turned and was now vectoring in on her and Banshee's fighters at attack speed. The remainder of Morningstar Squadron was forming up and turning towards Rhiannon's elements of Dark Nova, but with significantly more hesitation than Omega. Claymore had also accelerated towards Crone and Banshee's heading, pulling Ducky and Seer with her, but also putting some distance between themselves and Catnip in the process.

"What the 'ell ya op te, lass? Wassis about, Arrora? Talk te me!"

...

"Marrigun controol, what tha' fuuk es goinn' on 'ere?!"

"Your idiot squadron mates have probably just condemned us all to death at the hands of Final Station." The visage of Verulian herself on the vidcomm feed might as well have been the wrathful angel of death.

Kat was too busy trying to keep one step ahead of the Morrigan on her comm gear to notice that the others had drifted away from her Medusa. She was frequency and code hopping as fast as the fighter's overdriven, overheating transmitter could manage.

It'll be more than ten minutes before HQ even gets this. IF it gets there. God, I don't know if this thing has enough juice to reach that far. Pissed off the mothership for sure, though.

The EW alert went off and transmitting suddenly became the farthest thing from Kat's mind.
[ooc]EW -- Electronic Warfare[/ooc]

Oh, god -- the Omegas' RIAS!

She slapped the sequencer for her own RIAS gear to filter all incoming traffic, cursing the Medusa's small keyboard.

The other's aren't protected! They won't know how to deal with it. If they even know to look for it!

"Cr.n.! Banshee! RIAS .t..ck! Cut y... ..#* ..s..thk and *tscht*"

"What? Catnip? Did not copy, say again."

"...Kat?"

Oh fuck ohfuckohfuckoh.

WHICH ONE IS IT?!

Banshee might be safe; same model craft.

Not Aurora. The others?

"You!" The mostly heavily damaged Aries was hanging a bit back behind the others. And silently broadcasting decidedly unfriendly things.

How to stop it? Can't hack it. Jam it? Maybe... No, not quick enough! Think!



Ensign Katherine Jones felt a sudden tension that seemed to stop her heart and grip her very being as she realized what she was sitting in: a space fighter.

Vexus

Wed Dec 13, 2006 4:39 am

Crone watched her tactical display with a sense of inevitability as the other two ragged squadrons closed in on their position. If her course deviation to check up on the enemy pilot was idiotic, then what Verulian was now doing was suicidal. All three squadrons were under-strength and flying

mostly damaged fighters thanks to the recent mutiny and the subsequent battle with the Arrowheads. A dogfight would guarantee that the Morrigan would have virtually no fighter cover left by the time it engaged the Final Station. Of course, being shot down by one's fellow pilots was something to be avoided regardless.

"Crone," came Banshee's crackling voice over the comm-link, "I managed to receive a distorted call from Claymore. It sounds as if the Morrigan was observing radio silence to sneak up on the Final Station. They say we blew their cover and it seems the commander's a bit miffed."

"I can tell," Crone said with a frown. Did the commander really think she could sneak up on the Final Station under complete radio silence? Surely the rebels would've been smart enough to require confirmation before letting them get too close, and the fact that the commander was willing to suffocate the defectors in the bowels of the Morrigan did not bode well for her chances of finding out what confirmation would've been needed.

"Crone to Morrigan," she yelled into her comm. "Call off your attack! We are not hostile! If we fight now we'll all be screwed in short order!"

"I doubt they will read you, sir," Banshee said, "long r-ge commu-tion is beco-ng impos-ble. M-st b- Om-ga Squa--"

"Banshee, form up tight!" Crone shouted loudly and slowly. As the Aries came closer the communication improved. "Ok, I want you to form up with Claymore and relay this message: All Novas are to broadcast that they are not hostile and do not fire unless fired upon. If we are forced to engage, aim to cripple and not destroy. I'll join you as soon as possible. Catnip is to relay any orders from HQ to me and the Morrigan. They're our best hope now of stopping this madness."

"Sir, I-" Banshee began, but Crone cut her off.

"Carry out your orders, Lieutenant. I need to verify whether that enemy pilot is alive or dead... I have to. Hopefully, they'll go after me first."

"What if they order us to surrender?"

Crone paused briefly. "Then tell Claymore to surrender to them. We have to avoid a fight as best we can. Now go!"

As Banshee pulled away, Crone tried to focus her scanners on the approaching enemy pod, looking for signs that the pilot was alive. However, her readings were inconclusive due to interference and her tactical display was now blinking in and out. Crone had never been on the receiving end of an electronic attack before, but she knew enough to recognize one. As she raced to get close enough to the escape pod and the Omegas closed in, Crone charged her Stonegaze.

Banshee relayed Crone's message to Claymore, who shook her head. "Tha' crazy girrrl, wha' was she thinking?!"

"Not with her head, to be sure," Banshee said flatly. "Yet the fact remains that we have incoming and our communication range is down to nothing."

"If they engage we'll have teh fight in close forrrrmation in orderr to coordinate. Let's pull in the otherr Novas around Catnip. The lass will be ah sitting duck if she gets separated from the rest of oos."

As she and Banshee moved to arrange a defense for the scattered Novas, Claymore felt both anger and pity for her squadron leader. She had once been so by-the-book in her aims whilst very creative in her approaches to those aims. The skill had earned her the leadership of Dark Nova in the first place. This was the first time that Claymore had serious reason to doubt her CO's decisions. Last time she flew solo into a debris zone, she was nearly killed. Now the entire squadron was at risk from being shot down by their own comrades and yet Crone had taken off again down a similar path. Would any of them survive this time?

JFalcon

Tue Dec 19, 2006 5:32 am

Back aboard the Morrigan, the strangest day of Kate's life continued. An uprising, near depressurization, an adventure in the air ducts, a radiation alert, and now back to working in far closer proximity to this bot than she had ever wanted to be in. The marines had load Jason onto a levcart and dragged it back to the niche of the Morrigan's service bay that served as the robot

repair center after Kate had shut him down.

That was odd, too.

She had often anthropomorphized electronics to a certain degree; coaxing them to work, feeling a bit sad when one broke or had to be trashed. It was just rather... weird, when the part had a human face and could look you back in the eye...

She had been lucky enough to be able to read the voltage rating on the case of the less damaged power pack inside the Jason's torso. Connecting an auxiliary fighter power supply had been rather more dicey, but seemed to have worked. The low level maintenance code she had used that first time on him had still worked, too. She glanced down embarrassedly at *that* old memory again... Anyway, the bot had responded, that's what was important.

"Jason... Jason?"

"N... NO. Don't move. You're damaged. Your power system is failing. Archive all processing matrix states now and shut down. Full power down. Do it.

...Please."

I swear, he was trying to touch my cheek...

Now the bot was seated (collapsed?) safely in a servicing chair. Kate shook herself and got back to the task at hand. The marines were still around; now sitting and talking to each other with bored expressions.

Well, first thing's first. Sort out the damage, fix what's necessary to get his power up again, put in new power cells, fix the mechanics, figure out how the hell to fix the other bits, and patch the cosmetic covering. I suppose they don't care about those last three, though.

Kate realized that she was going to need better access than the existing charred hole in Jason's abdomen provided. The rest of his covering was going to have to come off. Which meant... first getting his jacket and remaining shirt off. Another oddly uncomfortable task to actually go through with.

It was done soon enough, though, with the help of a vibroknife and the service guide called up on a screen. With the bot's torso fully opened, the extent of the havoc wrecked by the power cells was more apparent. The ruined cell was charred and melted, half fused now into Jason's chassis. Its' neighbor was cracked and distorted from the explosion. They both had to come out. Screwdriver in hand, Kate braced herself against the chair and began to try to pry the totally ruined pack out.

When the tool's metal bit hit the main power bus hidden behind the melted plastic and the second cell proved that it still had power left in it. Kate's scream was cut short as the muscles of her upper body contracted involuntarily. She was saved, in a way, by the ensuing plasma discharge and pressure wave that bodily forced her away from Jason.

"Jeezus!" The marines both whipped around, readying weapons, in time to see the discharge fade into rising smoke and Kate crash onto the deck, stiffly. The fact they were real troops with first aid training and not just some OSI officer probably saved the private. Quickly realizing that the tech wasn't "live," one of them wrestled Kate's uncooperative arms momentarily before they went limp. The tech's gasping expression told a story that the second marine verified with a hand.

"No pulse. She's not breathing." And then into her commlink, "Medical emergency, bot repair bay! Flatliner, electrocution!"

Her partner had already started chest compressions. It actually didn't take that long given the marine's strength and Kate's relatively slight frame; just a very drawn out twenty seconds for all involved. Kate was actually weakly half sitting, half reclining against the foot of the service chair by the time the medtechs arrived. Her right hand was badly burned from the plasma arc and was being supported from resting on anything by one of the marines, since her own muscles didn't seem to have any ability to control the limb. The hand didn't hurt, but that was likely just a temporary blessing until the adrenaline in her system wore off.

She didn't protest, although part of her felt like doing so, when the medtechs loaded her onto a hover stretcher after hearing the marines' report. One of the troopers accompanied them on the way to SickBay while the other stayed with the powered down Jason.

Schamann

Mon Jan 08, 2007 12:30 pm

„Allright now everybody hold your fire, I repeat, hold fire. This is the CAG. Hold your fire, now.“

Somehow, hearing cold, unpleasant voice of the CAG cooled everybody down. Approaching Omegas

slowed down, Claymore and Banshee took the rest of their squadron and continued on a designated flightpath. Mallory continued:

"Lieutenant Yates you are arrested for breaching a direct order from your legitimate superior in time of war, I strip you of the Dark Novas command. You will be escorted to the brig immediately after your landing, do you copy?"

she didn't say when I am to land

Crone responded almost at once "Yes Sir!, copy that, out"

"Good" Mallory continued "Lieutenant McTaggart – you are now in command of Dark Novas, do you copy?"

"Ayie saer!"

Novas continued on their flight path, while Omega changes theirs and flew away, on some errands of their own – mysterious no doubt. Crone continued to the ejection pod uninterrupted.

"Mallory" Commander Verulian spoke on the phone with the voice of the angry viper "What the hell do you think you're doing? I ask for pure curiosity, I want to satisfy it before I have you put in front of the firing squad"

CAG waved off the approaching NCO and made sure she was outside of the hearing range of the rest of the crew in the room. "I mostly just do my job, Commander," she said in a hushed voice, "analyze tactical data, listen to radio transmissions...very different radio transmissions. You might be surprised how many of them can be automatically intercepted by the RIAS equipped fighter and sent to CAG's operational centre, you do remember lieutenant Carter, do you not?"

"What is your point, CAG?"

"We need to talk, Commander, in private. And until we come to an agreement, Crone remains in the sky, as do the rest of the Novas."

"Meet me in my quarters in five."

The pilot inside the pod was apparently alive, but unconscious. The question now was, how to bring her safely to the Morrigan.

and how avoid shooting her down on sight onboard

Vexus	Sat Jan 13, 2007 3:28 am
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Well, I supposed that went about as well as could be hoped for, Crone thought to herself as her Medusa eased alongside the enemy escape pod. Straining to see into the pod, Crone activated her landing lights. Sure enough, there was someone in there, a form covered in a bulky flight-suit and helmet strapped down tight into a chair. The slumped body moved slowly every now and then, signifying that the person was still alive, though Crone couldn't tell if the occupant was injured or not. Still, it gave the (former) squad leader so hope that the rescue she had risked so much for would not be in vain.

Maneuvering the rear of her fighter towards the pod, Crone activated her ship's grapple. Such a device was designed specifically for this very purpose: tugging small emergency pods out of a battle zone when the normal SAR ships were unavailable. The problem was that this pod appeared to have a non-Alliance-standard grapple point. Its shape did not conform to Crone's grapple hook, and the mismatch looked severe enough that a link attempt would fail almost immediately. This meant that Crone had a difficult choice to make. Where on the pod could her hook get a lock-on without damaging the pod to the point of structural or life-support failure? After a quick inspection of the hull, she chose a protrusion just below the cockpit area of the pod. Lining up as best she could, it still took three tries before she hit the protrusion at the right angle and timed the hook to close at the proper time. In a flash, the hook closed tightly around its target, deforming the hull somewhat in the immediate area. This meant that the structure was weaker there than expected. Crone would just have to hope that it could survive the stress of acceleration as they began to move.

Mentally crossing her fingers, Crone slowly picked up speed and aimed her ship back to the

Morrigan. With the Omegas breaking off their RIAS attack, communications were clear once again and Crone hailed her new squadron leader.

"Crone to Claymore, I am tugging the pod back to the Morrigan."

"Aye, Le-... Crone," came an uncertain response, "we're continuing on our patrol route now. We'll see ya when we get back."

If I'm not executed by then, Crone thought with a humorless grunt.

"I'm sorry," Crone said after a silence had passed between them. "I recklessly put all of you in danger for the sake of my own conscience. If Mallory didn't pull me from command I would have done it myself."

"Ya did what yer thought was rright, lassie," Claymore replied, but not as surely as she no doubt wanted to project to her former CO.

"I know Dark Nova will be in good hands with you," Crone said confidently. "You've proved yourself capable in the past. Stick close to Banshee, watch out for Seer, and you'll be fine. Crone out."

With that, Crone set course for the Morrigan and kept her monitor fixed on her ship's grapple point, waiting to see if the link would hold until she could reach her mother ship.

Tiefflieger		
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Anatolija felt almost jealous when she watched Kate being carried out of the hangar. *Now she's got a nice and warm bed and a couple of people who'll care for her every need. I wonder if anyone will find it suspicious if I zap myself, too? Honestly, she didn't envy Kate at all. The lack of sleep and coffee had finally taken its price. After being on duty for more than 24 hours, like all of them, accidents were to be expected, not only with people prone to them. And considering Kate, it had only been a matter of time anyway, until she really hurt herself. Too bad it had to happen on my watch.*

I hope she'll be alright.

Dark Nova was in space, Mac in the brig, Kate in medical. Nothing to do, for the first time since she didn't know when.

A smoke, a drink, a hot shower and a bed...

...

No, strike that, gimme only the bed!

She thought that she should rather start cleaning up the hangar and fix some gear, prepare for Dark Nova coming back. But right now, she just didn't care. Someone else could do that.

Who else?

Oh no, don't do this to me, I can't stand it anymore! I don't want to anymore!

There was no Sparks, who would be taking care of things and no Tibbs either. Tibbs...

Anatolija went back to Sparks' office and logged herself into the ship's maintenance system, where she pulled up the life support control of the CIC. She didn't have access to the actual controls with her clearance but she still could read the monitors. Some of them were showing critical values. That crazy OSI bitch was serious. They were not going to last much longer, if it wasn't already too late.

I'm gonna need a weapon.

Tiefflieger		
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Dear Grandma,

Back when I enlisted, you made me promise to stay out of trouble and come home safe. You know me, I never was able to stay out of trouble. But now is the first time that I will be intentionally breaking my promise and go looking for trouble. I am afraid that if you receive this letter, I will have broken the other promise, too.

They will accuse me of mutiny, treason even. Do not believe them. Know that my motives were never of such kind. But I can no longer just stand by and watch the terrible things that are happening here. There is no time left, I have to act now.

I am sorry for all that I have done wrong.

Love,
Anatolja

She folded the hastily scribbled note and put it into her footlocker. Anatolja didn't really expect her grandma to ever receive it, but she owed her at least to try. She also owed Tibbs. Maybe not with her life, especially not after the other day, but she still just couldn't let them get killed, after they had accepted their failure and surrendered.

Anatolja took the padded bag in which she kept the parts of her antique rifle out of the locker. Completely assembled it was too long to fit into the box. In a small plastic box she found her last stock of ammunition. Fourteen rounds.

Going into battle with outdated equipment and almost no ammo. Really clever. But if I have to fire this baby somewhere in the outer sections, at least I'll be making nice holes in the hull.

She quickly loaded the rounds into a magazine and concealed it together with the parts of the weapon between the tools inside a large toolbox she had brought from the hangar. This wouldn't hold up against a proper search, but it would be good enough for a quick glance from someone who wasn't too familiar with antique weapons.

Strangely enough, after having fired the weapon countless times, the thought of actually using it in combat was weird, to say the least. Anatolja often had wondered when and where the rifle had last been used. Really used. She had bought it on a rag-fair and all she knew about it was that it was at least a hundred years old. Getting it back to firing condition had cost her a lot of money, but it was worth it. They just didn't make weapons like this anymore. Modern guns were lighter, more precise, had a larger ammo capacity and higher firing rate, but the old AK-47 was still unmatched in ruggedness.

Anatolja just loved the simple but sturdy design of the weapon. It was almost fail-proof. Just as simple, but far from fail-proof was her plan: Somehow get the weapon unnoticed to the main engine control room, from where most of the ship's systems could be manually overridden and use it to "convince" the crew there to open the doors to the CIC, so that the mutineers actually could surrender. Oh, and not get killed in the process.

There was of course the distinct possibility that opening the doors would result in a firefight in which many of those whom she tried to save were killed. But if she didn't, they were dead anyway.

There was no escape plan. She was aware that her chance of getting away was extremely slim. All she could hope for was that the security crew that would be storming the engine room a couple of seconds after she had performed her coup, wouldn't shoot her on sight, but give her the chance to surrender herself.

JFalcon

Sat May 19, 2007 5:38 am

Mallory watched Verulian leave, no -- *stalk* -- off the bridge before turning back to track the fighters' positions on her tactical holo.

Admirable, I suppose, Yates. But do you really think you are doing that woman a favor bringing her back here? We don't have enough staff to cope with even our own wounded right now... What sort of a reception do you think she's going to find? With OSI acting the way they are, probably just have her shot upon opening the pod. Possibly the both of them. Perhaps that might be a mercy as opposed to another death bed interrogation...

The CAG sighed as she set down the comm piece. No time to be distracted about lives from the other side of this mess. Dealing with Verulian was going to be difficult.

I'd feel safer if I had my sidearm while being alone in the same room with that woman...

The remaining OSI staff carried on after the departure of the two core command officers. "Status of firing solution?"

"Fully plotted. Eighty percent of ordinance loaded. Upload to warhead guidance in progress."

"Is this really a good idea? We're going to burn all of our long-range firepower."

"There's no choice anymore. Updates on defenders?"

"Increasing radio chatter. Anything out there is still small and in the radar shadow."

"That station has over ten thousand civilian..."

"They're colies. Who the fuck cares."

"Sir! We are locked on and loaded."

"Good, change heading for-"

"Ma'am!"

"What?!"

"I... Um, the... the squad sent to storeroom number eighteen," a young, ashen-faced comms tech was holding out a headset in a shaking hand.

"Yeesss...?"

"...Screams, sir."

The plasma rifle was firing on full auto, but it still felt to PFC Joan Hager as if she could watch each round streak towards the target. And miss.

"FUCK! WE'RE SO FUCKING FUCKED!!!"

It had been less than twenty seconds since that the ceiling plate had crashed down on to Sara while they were approaching the warehouse door. The plate probably hadn't been enough to really injure her, but the blur that followed it out of the hole had sent Sara flying three meters down the hall like a rag doll. She hadn't moved since. Their sergeant had given name to the harbinger even as she died next.

"BOT!"

Wearing an insane grin, Edward dodged the fire from PFC Hager's weapon and continued his assault on the now second to last Marine. His remaining, already blood stained fist connected. Joan heard helmet and bone shatter even over the weapon's report as her last squad mate's head snapped back. Continuing its path, the bot moved with the falling body for a half step before kicking it towards Joan, using her dead friend as both shield and weapon.

She was knocked to the ground by the impact and weight.

It did all of this with only one arm?!

The squawking from the commlink in her ear was drowned out by her own scream of pain as the machine crushed her hand that still held the rifle under its foot. The latter sound ended as those unyielding fingers encircled Joan's neck.

"Ensign! Get another detachment there ASAP! Our OSI troopers outside the CIC are closest. They're guarding corpses in there by now anyway... Reallocate from somewhere else to backfill."

Edward let the limp woman's body fall to the deck. A range of expressions played across his ruined face. He felt like laughing. Singing. Yelling.

Weak! All of them. Fragile. Powerless compared to him! Useless!

He flexed his bloody fingers in wonder as his features settled into a smile. How warm. What a unique feel and smell.

The commlink on the dead woman buzzed angrily. Amused, he bent down and gently plucked it from the ear and hair that still held it. After all, one had to be careful with such things when one was as powerful as he was.

"...report, damn it! What the hell is going on down there?"

A masculine laugh that came over the channel, sending shivers down the spines of everyone on the bridge who heard it. "All dead. I crush them! Hmmheheemaahah!" the voice lapsed into maniacal laughter again.

"Who is this?!"

"I AM EDWARD! Surprise you? Forget not meatbag!"

Edward crushed the pitiful bit of plastic and metal in his fist. Nothing could stop him. None of them. "Trying stop me! AFRAID OF ME YOU NOW ARE THAT I'M NO SAFE LONGER!"

He laughed and raged seeing the bodies around him. His face contorted into an indescribable blend of emotions. Tears fell unbidden from his remaining eye.

Good boy.

He didn't know where that voice came from. Nothing made sense any more. Errors. Why was his core failing? HE hadn't given it permission to!

"Whhhyyaatt..."

Down the hall from the engine room, Mirunova watched cautiously as most of the marines suddenly snatched up their weapons and ran off.

"Something come up suddenly, eh gals? My lucky day, I guess. Go on. Scram already and don't come back."

Vexus

Sun May 20, 2007 5:17 am

"Crone to Morrigan control, I am ready for an approach vector." The casualness of her own tone was a bit jarring to the silver-haired pilot as the Morrigan loomed menacingly before her. This was far from a routine landing. Thus far her grapple link had held fast to the enemy escape pod, but how much longer the pod's hull would hold up to the strain of flight was anyone's guess. If the Morrigan refused to provide any further assistance, Crone would have to find some way to land without damaging her own fighter or the pod. A grapple-active landing was a near-certain disaster, as the tow line would almost instantly warp as it entered the Morrigan's artificial gravity field.

"Stand by, Crone," came the tense but neutral voice on the other end of the comm, "we have a launch in progress."

A launch at wh-, was all Crone had time to wonder before the Morrigan shook with the force of its attack. All of its missile bays released simultaneously, the weapons streaking outwards in a glowing display that would've been quite beautiful in other circumstances. In that moment Crone realized what Emerald-class missile cruisers like the Morrigan were truly capable of. As the ordinance rocketed past Crone's Siren, their course became obvious.

A first strike at the Final station.... It's begun. Crone closed her eyes briefly and shuttered. This was not the situation she had envisioned for the final phase of their assigned mission.

"Catnip to Lead, acknowledge," the OSI spook began, breaking a long silence that had proceeded their near-dogfight with both Omega and Morning Star squadrons.

"... Oh! Aye, lass, go ahead," Claymore replied awkwardly after a few moments, the pilot still unaccustomed to her sudden battlefield promotion to squadron leader.

"My screen is showing friendly long-range ordinance... a lot of it. Looks like the Morrigan has started her initial assault on the Final station." A moment passed before Catnip continued in a confused tone. "I thought the attack would start at a closer range."

"Verrulian probably decided to engage early now that her coover's blown," Claymore muttered, mostly to herself.

"I'm reading it on my screen now," Banshee said over the comm. "It looks like almost all the Morrigan's long range weapons. Their courses seem to be diverging now."

"It's a Hard Burst formation," Price added. "They'll assume slightly different approaches until they

reach a critical distance from the target, then they'll converge to strike simultaneously. The attack is designed to spread out an enemy's defenses while the attackers close in.

"What is teh Morrigan sending against the station, Cat?" Claymore inquired as she viewed the cloud of contacts on her screen.

"Looks like Lashers and Breachers, plus a mix of Sunburn rocket packs and EMP charges."

Claymore remembered how devastation a single Lasher was against the Spectre and tried in vain to imagine the destruction of an entire salvo of them. Even if they were the enemy, she still found herself hoping that the Final station had at least some chance of defending herself against such a deadly barrage.

"Keep formation, Novas," Claymore said finally, "we have a patrrol teh finish."

Meanwhile, in her own cockpit, Cassie barely registered her squadmates' conversation. Her thoughts were with Crone... and Hobbit. The real struggle was happening back on the Morrigan and here they all were stuck out on patrol. She fought herself to remain calm, but the feeling of urgency was growing.

We need to get back there before it's too late for either of them....

Tiefflieger

Sat May 26, 2007 8:21 pm

Sergeant Keena knew something was wrong the moment the blonde tech walked around the corner. Her uniform identified her as flight deck crew so she didn't have any business at all in this part of the ship. Also, she was hurt and belonged into sickbay, now that the fighting had stopped. But mostly it was her unsteady eyes, somewhere between highly alert and scared shitless, that gave her away.

She knows! Anatolja stopped dead when her eyes met those of the seasoned security officer who seemed to be in command of the guard crew securing the engine room. *What now? Run? Too late for that! Fight? Yeah, right. Play along and hope for a miracle?*

Meanwhile the two other marines had surrounded her. She could see one from the corner of her eye, to her left. The other one would undoubtedly be exactly behind her. The sergeant approached from the front.

"Let's see some ID, please.", Keena said.

The tech put down her large toolbox far too quickly, then froze for a moment, took a deep breath, and much more slowly took her ID card out of a pocket. *Oh please, are you even trying? If I ask you now what's in the box, will you say "Nothing!"?*

"What's in the box?", she asked, while studying the readout on her handheld, to check the ID card.

Again, the answer came far too quickly: "Nothing! ... ahem, tools, I mean!"

Yeah, right.

Anatolja watched in horror how the marine to her left stepped closer and opened her toolbox. To her own eyes, the parts of the gun stood out between the tools as if they were spray painted bright red. *Shit! I'm dead! How could I ever be so dumb to think this could possibly work?*

"So, what are you doing around here? Shouldn't you be on the flight levels, or rather sickbay?"

Anatolja stared at her in disbelief for a second, before she realized that they hadn't shot her yet.

"Err... umm... I was told to report to the engine room. They need a tech there."

"A fighter tech." Keena raised an eyebrow. *C'mon, you can do better than that!*

"Look, what do I know, with all the shit that's going on around here. Maybe all the capship techs are dead or whatever. If some friggin' OSI officer tells me to report to engine, I'm sure as hell not gonna ask her why!"

Look at that, now we're getting somewhere! That wasn't half bad. If it wasn't for your performance so far, I'd almost believe it. Did you practise that little speech in front of a mirror?

"There you are! About time you showed up! We sent the request half an hour ago!" The new voice came from the engine control room door, which had opened and revealed a short and chubby

woman in a blue jumpsuit.

"Well, stop gawping and get moving! You did bring a number five injector, did you?"

...

"Err, yes, ma'am! Of course, ma'am!"

Anatolja rushed past the confused security sergeant, towards the door, only to be stopped by a sharp "Hey, wait a second!" from behind her.

Dang! And here I almost started to believe in miracles!

"Forgot something?" Keena waved Anatolja's ID card and pointed at the toolbox, that still stood on the ground, right where Anatolja had put it.

"Fighter techs... a little slow, are they? Must come from the noise. Always thought those jet engines go right to your brain.", the woman in the blue jumpsuit said.

Keena didn't show any sign whether she found the joke funny. "Why wasn't I informed you had a tech coming?"

"Oh, we didn't *inform* you? I'm really sorry!" The woman in blue's voice was oozing with scoff.

"Now, you, get in here, we got work to do!" She roughly pushed Anatolja, who had retrieved her ID card and toolbox, through the door and into the engine room.

Woha. Now, while we're at it, can I get another miracle please?

JFalcon

Sun May 27, 2007 3:03 am

"I admire your dedication to security, sergeant," a slightly accented, but precise voice suddenly interrupted from behind the two quickly retreating techs, "but we all have to deal with *adversity*, at times. Particularly from this squadron's staff."

A woman with Asian features and short, dark hair strode through the doorway. She wore the black uniform of an OSI officer and carried herself with an air of absolute self-confidence and authority.

Where? How the hell did she come from behind me?

The marines scrambled to attention in the officer's wake. As the woman's gaze fixed on her, Anatolja's surprise turned back to panic. *She knows! She...!*

"Wipe the stupid off your face before someone notices." The OSI officer spoke barely moving her lips and only loud enough for Anatolja to just barely hear the order.

"Who? Wa, What?"

The woman in black had brushed past them, but stopped and looked back. She wore the rank of a Lt Cmdr as well as a small, dangerous smile. "Me? I'm here for the same thing that *you* are: an environmental 'adjustment.' Isn't that right?"

Both techs were silent, but only Mirunova's was due to shock.

The Lt Cmdr's expression turned hard and her voice became admonishing, "What the hell were you thinking? The cameras here are actively monitored. Do you even *know* where the controls are, or how to use them?" She resumed walking. They had to hurry to catch up, with Mirunova's heavy toolbox rattling away.

"Who are you? I..." Further questions or protest were cut off.

"Raissa Chakato. And what *I* want to know, petty officer Anatolja Mirunova, is what side *you* are on?"

Vexus

Sun May 27, 2007 8:49 am

Now past the turn-around on their flanking patrol, the Novas were headed back to the Morigan. The quiet tedium and the blank sensor sweeps should have felt as a blessing after all the action they had seen during the last few days, but Claymore just couldn't get herself into a grateful mood. More fighting was imminent, and she was quickly finding the storms of battle themselves seemed to be less agonizing than the lulls in-between. Also, a crushing feeling of sadness had begun to envelop her within the silence of the patrol. Seer's words over the comm – the first she had spoken in a long while – seemed to mirror Claymore's own thoughts.

"We're a broken squadron now, Rhiannon, aren't we?"

"Aye, Cassie... that we arrre."

"I would not count us lost just yet," Banshee's cool voice sounded. "We have ships that still fly, guns that still fire, and hearts that still beat." The confidence in her tone brought a small but significant feeling of hope to Claymore's mind. Now she better understood why Crone had taken to referring to Banshee as the sword at her side.

"Claymorre to Catnehp, I wan' yeh teh monitorrr the Morrigan's comm ttraffic as we cloose in. Rehporrt aneh oonusual ttrransmissions orr mentions of Crrone."

"Copy that, Lead."

"What's the plan, ma'am?" Banshee asked.

"Same as it's always been," Claymore replied, "We prrotect each other." A soft but warm laugh then sounded over the squad channel.

"You may be the craziest bunch of women I've ever served with," Ducky chuckled. "But goddamn it, I'd give better odds to myself winning a dogfight with the Devil than to anyone standing between this squad and any one of its members." Claymore smiled a bit at that, then she pulled out her personal comm unit from her flight suit and activated the boosted signal.

"Claymorre to Sanchez, come in."

"Sanchez here, what's up?"

"Arre yeh still in the mess hall?"

"Yes, ma'am, and so is the chef."

"Have the chef steh put for now. I need yeh to head for the prrrimary flight deck and meet oop with Crone. Get yehr comm link to her so I can contact her after she lands."

"OK, I'll try my best. Sanchez out."

"I would hold off on any further communications back to the Morrigan, ma'am," Catnip warned. "The OSI is on high alert and there's no telling when they will detect your transmissions."

"Aye, lass, understood. Alrrright, Novas, to the Morrigan and to Crrone."

"What about Hobbit?" Banshee asked, her chilly tone betraying her own feelings regarding the former Alliance pilot. Claymore was quiet for a moment before she decided to ask the Nova on hand who had the most at stake in the matter.

"Seer...?" The response was quiet and shaky, but determined.

"Yes, we save her too... if there's still time... we save her too."

"Very well," Claymore concluded, satisfied that no more discussion was needed for the issue to be settled, at least for now. Grouping into a tight formation, the five fighters accelerated back to their home base.

"Crone to Morrigan, I am still standing by for a SAR." She was becoming impatient, her fighter hovering just outside the Morrigan's flight deck, enemy ejection pod still in tow. It had been forty minutes since she had assumed her landing vector, but her repeated requests for a shuttle to pick up her cargo had gone unheeded. She was about to make the request again when the by-now-familiar and flat voice of the bridge communications officer came across the channel.

"Morrigan to Siren, Verulian has ordered that you either leave the pod outside or risk it on the landing. As the battle with the Final station has now begun, the SAR craft are now reserved for friendlies only." Crone gritted her teeth at the thought of Verulian's stubbornness. Yet at the same time, a part of her mind wondered if she wouldn't have done the same thing even a few months ago. Still, she didn't bother to hide her frustration in her response.

"Acknowledged, Morrigan, just be understanding if I scuff up the deck a little."

Crone then came in gently, trying to anticipate how the pod would move in relation to her fighter. However, as her Siren came within the influence of the flight deck's unseen gravity plates, the grapple line sagged and swayed chaotically between the weight of fighter and pod. There was no balance she could find. Crone made adjustments as quick as she could, even slamming her own ship down hard onto the deck in order to keep the pod from crashing. Yet at the last second the grapple finally failed and the pod hit the deck with a loud thud, falling onto its side and rolling for about twenty meters before coming to rest. Not waiting to finish her power-down cycle, Crone leapt from her cockpit as the hatch swung up and rushed to the pod. Fortunately, the pod had stopped with the door facing upwards. A pair of marines came over, aiming their weapons at the pod door nervously. Crone carefully activated the door panel. After the pod's computer automatically confirmed the presence of a breathable atmosphere, it unlocked the door. Crone hauled it aside and peered in. The figure in the flight suit stirred slightly and a mutter came from inside the opaque helmet. The suit was clearly of Charan design, down to the rebel flag patch on the right shoulder. There was something odd about the shape of the figure to Crone's eyes, sitting there squeezed into the pod seat; something vaguely familiar. The figure looked up at Crone and started, no doubt recognizing her own Alliance flight suit. Slowly standing up, the figure removed the helmet and both Crone and the marines took a step back in reflex. The hair was only shoulder-length, but with the same curls and warm-black color. The eyes were the same icy blue, and the skin a moderate shade of brown. It was a face Crone had come to know well, but now blended with the sharper features of a man... a real man.

"I am Captain Jace Dory, Confederate Militia, Serial Number 7255-8149," he said quickly, looking anxiously at the rifles the marines were pointing at him. "I hereby demand proper legal council due a prisoner combatant under the Centauri Treaty concerning the rules of interstellar war." Crone made to speak but one of the marines interrupted.

"What you are 'due' will be for our commanders to decided. You're under arrest. Come with us." Crone then felt one of the guns against her own back. "Both of you."

Schamann

Fri Jun 08, 2007 12:56 pm

"You were ... saying something about radio transmissions, Captain?"

The room was heated by ship's life support system to a pleasant 23 Celsiuses, like the most of the ship's interior, but Mallory felt the chilling cold. There was something in the presence of Commander Verulian that used to make people feeling uneasy. *I must be hard, harder even than this, and I must get to the point quickly, before she outplays me*

"Commander, you were speaking with the Bear frigate captain shortly prior and during our engagement. I have recordings on that. Carter's RIAS intercepted it. I listened to those recordings, to those... negotiations." Commander frowned and smiled, rather dangerously.

"Captain you do realize such tricks and traps are the regular part of OSI's job, now did you make all this show just because of that trick?! You are certainly losing your grip captain"

Mallory frowned, genuinely pissed off. "Do not insult me by taking me for a fool, Commander, I urge you." Now it was time for Verulian to frown and make aggressive gesture, but Mallory did not let her. "There have been three more times when you pulled the same 'trick' Commander. And the time you torpedoed The Spectre? That was after they refused to cut the deal with you. The Kitomer group was nothing but the pass through the Final station for You, because even Morrigan can't take this station alone. But the mutiny you had planned, happened to occur too early and things got out of your control."

"That bits and pieces of speculations Captain, not enough for anything but me having you put in front of the firing squad for treason!"

"That's bits and pieces that make you grow pale and sweating, Commander. You think we believe you didn't know about the upcoming mutiny? You think we believe those OSI stormtrooper company no one knew about was here just for safety precautions? Do you think we believe that you did not report securing the ship to HQ on a secure channel to avoid compromising the cover?"

Verulian was simply pale and on a verge of exploding. "Do you have anything more to say, Captain?"

"I do, Commander. It is impossible to even sneak past the Final Station with one ship. But three weeks ago the Assault Bulk Personnel Military Carrier was reported KIA with all the crew, search for it's wreck still ongoing. And week ago another Heavy Cruiser 'Persephone' sent on a sweep mission

near The Border, reported critical engine malfunction and emergency stop. It hasn't been heard from since then. You are disappearing Morrigan as those two ships disappeared, Commander. You provoked a mutiny, made a third of it's crew slaughter themselves, eliminating those who would not be loyal to you in person or scaring the rest into obedience. All this to disappear high-tech military vessel of tremendous firepower, and get it off the Alliance roster. You just stole the ship from the fleet to fly solo."

Commander Verulian looked menacingly at her subordinate, when she hissed: "What's to stop me from killing you right here and right now, Captain?". Mallory, in turn, looked pale, but confident, almost feeling victorious.

"Because Novas are still out there and they won't believe in another CAG betraying the Alliance, and I can control them. You don't have too many competent officers in you crew now, Ma'am. And I'm no threat to you. I want in."

Mirunova hardly could keep the pace with this strange OSI officer who talked like there was something weirdest of the weird going on.

"What were you after – petty officer?" The OSI Commander insisted. "Because you don't want to tell me you were coming to the engine room, do you? And I can still feed you to those marines we just passed"

this is where I'm dying

"I aaaa... I wanted to get to CiC and liberate my friends, who slowly suffocate there"

Chakato smiled. "Good, now you do what I say and we get them out, at least some of them. By that time with a little bit of luck we will have the shuttle and my pilot comes back alive and with the shipment." She rose her hand communicator and spoke "It's me. Where are you now?" and after a while of listening to the other side she added "Make it quick. And remember we need to get Ross as well, if we only can.". Then she looked at the astonished face of Petty Officer Mirunova and explained, "I made a promise I intend to keep"

Unsurprisingly, this sort of "explanation" only made Anatolija feel more stupid. "Who...who are you and what on heaven's name is going on here?" she asked awkwardly

Chakato frowned, but then answered "I am not really OSI, as you probably guessed already, and we're stealing from this ship. But before you get a loyalty issue, bear in mind that this ship is not Alliance anymore. No more questions."

JFalcon

Sat Jun 09, 2007 5:00 am

If Kate felt silly being carried on a stretcher to medical, she felt even more self-conscious and guilty upon arrival. The normally organize and efficient center wasn't anything like her (numerous) memories of the place. It was the aftermath of a war zone, for lack of a better description. Injured, dying, and maybe even already dead overwhelmed the space and staff. Doctors, nurses, and corpswomen moved from one case to the next as quickly as possible. But OSI seemed to be able to re-prioritize all that work when they wanted to.

She wasn't hurt nearly as badly as many, but Kate felt she was going to die of shame when she was delivered to one of the precious few exam tables and then Dr Banner *herself* was pulled away from whoever else she had been attending to. The chief doctor's scrubs were bloodstained. She looked tired, overworked, somewhat desperate... and completely pissed off to be dragged off to attend to such a non-urgent case as Kate's.

Kate's disbelief abruptly wore off as she remembered something. "Hey, weren't you with the... *mmph*!"

The outburst was cut off by Banner's hand frantically covering Kate's mouth and the feeling of something cold and sharp pressing against her neck.

"SHUT UP! Shut up, god damn it!" Banner hissed through clenched teeth, trying, and failing, not to show any reaction. "Or I'll kill you myself, I swear it."

She knows. How does she know, damn it? Think! ...They're not going to take me! ...Calm down. Calm down...

Banner had a poorly concealed scalpel held close to the (now even more) unwelcome tech's neck in

a pose that the Erdanian doctor desperately hoped looked like taking a pulse at the neck. The look in her eyes was enough to convince Kate that the older woman was indeed crazy or desperate enough to do something rash.

Fortunately for Banner, Kate's one escort was inattentive and conversing with her peers who were guarding a private room. *That* room. The MD was in a bad position, and she knew it. She was as good as dead if this private opened her mouth again, but how to keep her quiet?

I know her well enough. She's not a bad person. Just... caught up in this all. And she's timid enough... Maybe... Maybe I can bargain. At least build up enough doubt to buy me some time.

The craziness in Banner's face changed into a wary, probing expression. "I'm not an enemy. I haven't killed anyone. I didn't want anyone hurt; I'm a doctor." She licked her dry lips. "I'm on a different side, yes. But we've sort of lost now, haven't we? They've killed or captured most of us. You tell on me and they'll interrogate me -- do you know what that means? What they'll do to me?" Banner was breathing faster now, obviously scared. "They'll get names from me. Others who haven't been noticed. Same things will happen to them -- if they don't kill us first -- you want that on your conscience? Turning all of us in?"

By some miracle of timing, the door to medical hissed open and two OSI clad marines entered supporting, no -- dragging, a limp form between them. It was obvious, even to Kate, that the woman had been cruelly beaten. Banner tensed and closed her eyes at the sight, perhaps in recognition of the victim. One of the medical staff raised a protest at the woman's condition, but was brushed aside as the two delivered their prisoner to another guarded door before leaving again.

"What happened?" Banner tucked the scalpel away and examined Kate's arm. Not particularly delicately, but concerned and professionally. She was fairly certain that Kate was going to keep quiet at least for a bit now. It was time to change tactics and play nice and harmless.

"I got shocked."

"I need a wet dressing, here! Burn gel!" Banner called over her shoulder, miming the act of putting on a glove to indicate the style needed. She turned back, fitting the stethoscope around her neck into her ears before quickly unzipping Kate's coveralls and pulling the clothing off her shoulders.

"And this?!" The mass of hastily bandaged, but still bleeding scratches and cuts from the earlier misadventure in the ductwork stood out against Kate's pale skin.

"I... I, uh... fell and got..." The MD's businesslike manner was working against Kate's natural embarrassment reaction at being suddenly partially stripped.

"*Phfft*" Banner resumed her examination and, under her breath, the attempt to save her own skin. "Let me tell you something else, Ross. I think there **has** been a successful mutiny aboard, but not ours. I don't know what's going on, but you heard that Captain Dominguez was killed on the bridge? She wasn't." Banner's eyes flicked meaningfully towards the nearest guarded door.

"She'll live. But they're saying she's already dead. They're not protecting her there -- they're keeping anyone from seeing her."

"...Why?"

"I dunno. But it strikes me as quite odd. Yourself? Might want to be careful who you talk to. And... now I know that *you* know."

In other words, likely trouble for me if I say anything about her.

"Your pulse is stable. A bit fast, but stable. I'd normally check you out further, but considering... You'll live. Come back in a day or two... if any of us are still around..." And with that, Dr Banner hurried off. Pausing only long enough to confer with an approaching nurse before pulling on a new set of gloves and mask and re-entering one of the operating rooms.

The nurse was brusque. "Drink this. Your electrolyte balance is probably shot to hell." She handed Kate a nasty tasting packet of syrupy liquid while cutting back the burned sleeve to expose her injured hand and arm. "This is a sterile, active, wet dressing for burns. Dermal proteins, nanos, stabilizer, and of course anesthetics. It'll protect, promote healing, and reduce scarring. Good for up to 48 hours. Come back then for a dressing change and cleaning."

The thing hurt like hell going on, but afterwards felt like a thick, heavy, skintight glove. One that made everything it covered numb... "Don't use your hand for anything. And if something whacks it, you're going to regret it. Now let's see about these cuts. Some of those are probably going to

scar..."

Vexus

Tue Jun 12, 2007 10:13 am

With a swish and click sound that Aurora was now becoming all-too-familiar-with, the brig door shut and secured itself. This cell was a bit more luxurious than the one Aurora had occupied onboard the Kitomer, with mattresses on the two cots that occupied opposite walls in the room, a large sink with soap and washcloths, and a bookcase with a few worn volumes actually inside it. As Aurora wearily took a seat on the closer cot, her eyes regarded her most recent cellmate who was pacing about anxiously. Both of them had been permitted to at least discard their bulky flight suits, and now his crimson and dark yellow uniform clashed quite appropriately with Aurora's blue and black.

Jace Dory, what were the odds? From Cassie, Aurora knew that he had thrown in his lot with the Confederacy a long time ago, and his actions had driven his sister to take the completely opposite path all the way to Dark Nova Squadron. However, of his personality she knew nothing... aside from the fact that his marriage to the rebel pilot Beanpole had gone bad. Aurora noticed her own curiosity with surprise. Normally, she would see this man as nothing but a rebel... an enemy worth little examination. When did curiosity come to trump her usual disdain? Was it just because he was related to a friend and comrade-in-arms, or was this another symptom of the change that had occurred in her heart since her last mission?

"You're welcome," Aurora said at last. Jace stopped in mid-pace at the sound of her voice, his face turning to hers with a look of disgust.

"What?"

"You're supposed to say 'Thank-you for saving my life'," Aurora said with a casual air and a half-smile-half-sneer on her face, a part of her marveling in a perverse way about how cruel everything was turning out for herself and everyone else doomed to serve in this whole ill-conceived venture. Jace's own expression was one of raw anger.

"Fuck you, Terran bitch! You think I'm grateful that you delivered me into the hands of OSI interrogators? If you wanted to do me a favor you would have left me to get picked up by confederate forces or at least blown me to pieces."

"Local radiation was at lethal levels," Aurora replied calmly. "Another couple hours and your pod's shielding would've failed, making a confederate rescue unlikely. And unfortunately for you, I don't shoot down escape pods. That's more of a... confederate tactic." An enraged Jace approached Aurora, who in turn rose to meet him. They were of similar height, and the whole of the civil war seemed in that moment to focus itself into their confrontation. Jace was thin and lean, but a quick glance told Aurora that he was still likely to be physically stronger than herself in a straight-up fight.

"I could kill you with my bare hands before the guards could stop me, little Terran girl!" Jace said in a soft and deadly tone. Aurora matched it perfectly as her piercing blue eyes gestured downward.

"You got too close, little Charan boy. One swift motion with my knee and you'll never have an erection again." Jace's face suddenly tightened with a pang of barely-restrained anger mixed with panic. Aurora's twisted sense of triumph swelled for a moment.

"Most of us 'Terran bitches' aren't trained to fight men nowadays, but you never know when the knowledge might come in handy." For a moment it looked like Jace might test his luck regardless, but then he backed off. The hurt pride showing on his face was subtle but impossible to mistake for anything else. Aurora wondered to herself how much awe, respect, and adoration he had been showered with, undeserved as it may be, simply due to the rarity of his gender.

Or how much has he suffered because of it? The thought quieted her own anger somewhat and she took a seat once again on her mattress.

"Let's start again," Aurora said matter-of-factly, "My name is Aurora Yates, callsign Crone."

"I have nothing to say to you, Crone," Jace replied sharply, his gaze regarding the cell door. "Just... just leave me alone and I'll do the same."

"Aren't you at all curious why they put me in this cell along with you?"

"No," Jace answered, although his brief pause said otherwise.

"Then maybe you'd be interested in the current whereabouts of your sister instead?" This time Jace

turned to face her, his expression cautious but hopeful.

"You know my sister?"

"Cassie flies at my side in Dark Nova Squadron... at least she did until today when I was removed from the squadron for saving you."

"She's still flying?!" Jace's look was now one of absolute horror. "No... no... that's not true... she... I told her not fly anymore. I warned her to stay low and get off the flight roster. I wanted her out of the way until-"

"Until the mutiny was over and the Morrigan was in rebel hands," Aurora finished, nodding in understanding. "So a warning was what was in that message you sent to her. Your ex-wife delivered in discreetly, but it still got intercepted by the OSI before she could see it. The contents of that message must've been what lead the OSI to put Cassie under suspicion as a traitor." Jace's look became desperate.

"No! They didn't torture her, did they?!"

"Interrogate yes, torture no." Jace breathed a sigh of relief, and then pounded the cell wall with his fist in frustration.

"Why did she have to come here? I told her to stay away from the war and take care of our mother. She has no business fighting for the enemy."

"She might well say the same of you," Aurora replied sincerely. Jace gave her an annoyed look but said nothing, and for a while neither spoke.

"Cassie should be returning from patrol soon," Aurora said at last. "You may yet get a chance to see her. Are you still wishing I blew you to pieces?" Jace's eyes narrowed and he flashed her an obscene gesture. Aurora responded with a smirk and settled down onto her cot for a long-needed nap. There was nothing else to do for now.

"You're welcome," she said, before closing her eyes.

Vexus

Sun Jun 17, 2007 10:02 am

Down the sewer tunnel Aurora flew, her body screaming with the pain of exertion, her mind drunk on its own rage. The boy rebel who had slashed her face was now only a few paces ahead of her. The blood from her cut cheek ran down her neck and began to mingle with the growing blood stain over the left breast of her uniform. Aurora knew she could bleed to death if she didn't slow down soon, but the possibility didn't faze her. The embarrassment of being caught off-guard, the sense of vulnerability she had suffered at the tears of this rebel scum now fleeing from her like the coward he was; these drove her onward heedlessly. And the greatest wound of all, though she would never have admitted it, was the same hate and pain she herself had known for so long being reflected back into her eyes by this young terrorist.

The boy was obviously in a panic, his paths through the sewer passages seemingly chosen at random. Ash's voice called desperately in Aurora's ear, begging her to slow down and let the boy go. Aurora could well guess how angry Swift would be that one of her girls was delaying the mission by running off on a personal vendetta, but Aurora could brush this thought aside just as easily as that of her own serious condition.

At last, after a ten minute chase, the boy's random selections turned against him, and he found himself facing a dead-end; a solid metallic wall with only a small drain at its foot far too small to crawl through. The boy reeled around only to see Aurora standing before him, gun raised and eyes blazing. The boy jerked back immediately, tripping himself up in the process and falling in a heap.

"Get up!" Aurora screamed at him. "You wanted to play soldier, now get up and die like one!" The boy scrambled on his hands and feet backwards until his back slammed into the dead-end wall. His utterances were an incoherent mix of weeping and desperation.

"Crone!" Ash called from behind her.

"I'll be with you in a minute," Aurora said angrily and she charged her rifle.

"Crone, come on! It's just a boy and we have a mission to finish!" Aurora could hear the pleading in Ash's voice. It sounded like a pitiful weakness to Aurora's ears. Just minutes earlier this little bastard had tried to kill her, and now Ash dared suggest that she spare him and move on?!

"Was this your choice?!" Aurora shouted at the boy, thrusting her rifle towards him. "Did you choose this? Or did they force you?!" The boy shook his head. Tears were in his eyes again, but Aurora was not about to fall for that deception again.

"Crone!" Ash cried more forcefully, "Swift says leave the boy and meet her at the rendezvous point now!"

"Fuck Swift and fuck you!" Aurora spat back at her comrade. None of them understood, and how could they? It had to end... it all had to end. Leave one alive and more will come later. The cycle starts all over again. Aurora reached up and felt the wound on her cheek, calling the blood on her fingers as her witness. This one dies now and the cycle is broken. It had to end now!

"How many Terrans have you killed?" Aurora asked the boy menacingly. "How many bombs have you planted beneath the feet of unsuspecting Alliance soldiers? How many false tears have you shed?!"

"Please," the boy managed at last, his eyes wild and pleading. "Please don't... I don't want to die... I don't want to die... I won't do it again... I... I won't, please..." The boy's words were followed immediately by the high-pitched whine of a plasma bolt set to fire. Aurora's blood-streaked face was cold, her eyes hollow and still.

"You're right... you won't." Aurora took aim.

"Crone, stop!" Ash yelled. Aurora fired.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!"

Aurora's scream echoed down the shadowy corridors of the sewer, but neither Ash, the boy, nor Crone paid any heed to it. It was a memory, a memory within a dream, and Aurora knew it well. As with so many nights before, she was forced to watch the dread moments of her life played back before her mind's eye. Yet never before had she ever been able to raise her own voice against it. Now, for the first time, she was standing right there, her true self present (though unseen) within the sewer passage on that terrible day she had lost her soul. Despite her piercing cry however, she could not change the past, and none of those there in the memory could see or hear her.

Her shoulders sagging with weariness, Crone (the Aurora of the past) shouldered her rifle and turned to face Ash, her expression neutral and unmoved. Slumped against the sewer wall lay the boy's body, a gaping hole had been blasted through his cheek and some of the contents of his head were now splattered against the wall. As Crone passed by, Ash shrunk away in a mix of disgust and fear. Crone then beckoned to her, as she half-staggered down the tunnel.

"Come on, Ash, we need to meet up with the others. They won't wait for us forever." After a brief hesitation Ash followed at last. As the two turned a corner and disappeared, the Aurora of the present remembered that Ash never really treated her the same way again after that day. Their once strong friendship had been somehow tainted in a very fundamental way within that dead-end sewer, and it was never able to be fully repaired.

Aurora turned and faced the crumpled corpse of the boy she had murdered those all-too-few years ago. At first she feared to go near it, but eventually the compulsion within her became overpowering and she rushed over to the boy. Falling down beside him she cradled him in her arms. The tears that overflowed her eyes fell down and ran over the scar on her cheek before landing on the boy's blasted face. She had been so wrong. Nothing had ended by the death of this boy, or any of the many others she had killed. Nothing had changed. The killing had continued, and since then the boy had come to visit her at night, plaguing her dreams. It was he who had sat at her left during her card-game nightmare. He who had shown her the card: a weeping Hobbit with a gun in her mouth. The cycle had not been broken, it had simply turned in a new and unlooked-for direction.

"I'm sorry," Aurora said to the dead boy, her voice chanting the statement between her groans and her tears.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...."

"You found it grudgingly, as did I," came a gentle voice. Aurora looked up and saw her father, the sturdy and proud soldier of the Alliance. "It was the only way I was able to fall in love with your mother."

"You're... you're not angry?" Aurora asked meekly.

"No, Aurora, I am relieved. At last you can hear me clearly. Your guilt has twisted my voice for so long. I never wanted you to suffer as you have."

"You have come to a new place," another voice sounded, and the red-headed man came to stand beside her father, both of them adorned in opposing uniforms, but standing side-by-side as brothers. "Now you begin the task you were meant to do."

"But I've lost so much time, so many friends," Aurora replied in sorrow. "How can I just start again now when the situation looks so hopeless?"

"Count the assets you have, not those you lack," her father said firmly. "The Dark Novas are shaken but they are still loyal to you."

"All but one," Aurora said, the sting of Hobbit's betrayal flooding back into her mind.

"Don't be so certain of that," the red-headed man said.

"Another time will come for you," a third voice spoke, and Aurora suddenly realized that the boy's body had vanished from the sewer floor. Now he stood beside the others, looking healed and whole once again.

"Remember me when that time comes, remember then... remember now."

With that, the sewer and the forms of those people from her memory faded away.

Aurora awoke gently, still in the Morrigan brig, and looked over to see that Jace had also decided to sleep rather than continue pacing uselessly around the cell. The feeling of her dream was still fresh, and as she sat up her whole body shivered from the force of it. She **had** changed somehow. She was now sure of it. Whether she had truly communed with her father, her friend, and her victim while in her dream she could not say. But it was inescapable now. She had a new mission indeed, one which dwelt in her heart and stirred the soul she once thought she had lost forever. She had the peaceful feeling that, in spite of whatever new horrors may come, her sleep would be a lot less troubled in the days ahead.

Tiefflieger

Sat Jun 30, 2007 3:45 pm

The marines watched the techs and the OSI officer vanish inside the engine control room.

"Umm, boss?"

"What is it, private?"

"Don't you think that was a little fishy?"

"A little fishy? No shit!"

The engine control room did look nothing like Anatolja had imagined it would look. She didn't have too much experience with capital ship technology, so she had just figured the engine room would've looked something like any control center, the bridge, for example. Actually, it looked more like a medical facility. It was brightly lit and every surface was either pure white plastic or polished chrome, with the exception of a multitude of computer screens lining the walls. All of them were of exactly the same size and showed a puzzling amount of data - diagrams, graphs, tables with endless columns of numbers.

This must be what heaven looks like for Calamity!

Three more women in blue jumpsuits sat in comfy looking armchairs (padded in white, of course) in front of the screens. "Carry on!", Chakato stopped them just as they noticed the officer and before they could jump up. Chakato didn't waste a second and continued to another door at the far end of the room, with Anatolja and the other tech still following.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire, they said, but Anatolja was feeling more like "out of the fire, into the boiling pits of lava" right now. Somehow she had been more comfortable with bullets flying around her head, at least there you knew what the danger was. But now? Chakato seemed to have a well prepared plan and to be knowing what she was doing, much unlike herself (because honestly, her own plan sucked big time). But still, or maybe because of this, Chakato gave her the feeling of the proverbial pawn on the chess field. Could she be trusted? Was she just using her to

her own ends? And what was that about Calamity and a promise?

The engine room techs watched the scary OSI officer and the weird fighter tech vanish through the side door into what they called "the bowels": the corridors surrounding the actual main engine, filled with wiring harnesses thick as a grown tree and switchboards as big as a small apartment. Nearly every system of the ship was in some form connected to this place. The air smelled of hot metal and old grease and normal conversation was impossible due to the noise of the ventilation system.

Anatolja's eyes automatically searched the array of control lights on the switchboard in front of her. Some of them were flashing, some flickering, but all were green or amber-colored. No critical error. *As if I even had the slightest idea what I'm looking at. Could be the fire control just as well as waste disposal. My god, this place is huge!*

"Keep up! We have no time to waste!" Chakato had stopped a few paces ahead of her. She almost had to scream against the noise of the ventilation. "I wish you had brought Ross. That would've saved us a lot of trouble. But you did bring that number five injector, did you?"

They climbed silently through wires and pipes for another minute or so, until Chakato finally stopped in front of a rather small and unimpressive looking switchboard. Unlike most of the bigger ones it didn't have glass doors with locks and handles, but a plain metal plate that was fixed with four screws in the corners.

"D-43, this is it. Open that." Chakato commanded. She checked her watch. While Anatolja was loosening the screws, she continued: "Listen up now, I will explain this only once. From the moment I leave, you will wait exactly three and a half minute, then you will cut the lines CNX-08 and -09 and inject this signal into line CHX-21." She handed Anatolja a small handheld device. "You will then replace the cover and proceed down the corridor to the *second* maintenance ladder. Climb up one deck and head *back* to the next access hatch. Either me or my associate will meet you there in approximately seven minutes. Got all that? Good. Time is starting *now*."

Tiefflieger

Mon Jul 02, 2007 8:31 pm

Anatolja was alone again. It was almost like in a bad movie, where the good guy blinks and the bad guy vanishes without a trace. Only that she wasn't so sure about who was the good guy and who the bad guy, in this mess. Also, she had actually seen Chakato walk down the tunnel, without any mysterious vanishing.

Three and a half minutes to wait. An eternity. The three wires she had to manipulate were quickly located, pliers on the ready and the injector applied. Now she just had to wait till the time was right. To do what, actually? Anatolja didn't have the slightest idea what system she was messing with here. It could very well be the life support for the CIC, it could also be something completely different. Chakato's small device was coded and gave away no clue, obviously she didn't trust her. Likewise, Anatolja didn't trust Chakato either, she didn't trust her at all.

There was still one other option. She still had her gun. She was alone and the way back to the engine room was clear. And now she even had an escape route, that she didn't know about before. But what if she failed? What if the engine crew didn't cooperate? What if Chakato was honest about her plans? What if she wasn't?

Damn, Auto, make up your mind!

"F%#K!"

Her cry of frustration was drowned by the noise of her foot kicking the metal cover of the switchboard across the corridor.

Still almost two minutes...

The rifle was quickly assembled, she could do it blind, with one hand on her back. Pliers and injector went back into the toolbox without having done their jobs. Everything was ready. It was so simple, just go back there and show them who's boss. Why was she still hesitating? The rifle had never felt so heavy.

One minute left...

If I go down that path, there's no turning back. I'll have to go all the way, I may have to hurt them, kill them even.

The image of young Private Thomas flashed across her mind, how she dropped to the floor, a

surprised look on her face and a ridiculously small, but still deadly, hole in her side. A hole she had made.

That was different! That was self defense!

And that was what would make what she was about to do now so much worse. Cursing under her breath, she took the rifle apart again and took her tools out, just in time to meet Chakato's deadline. She closed the switchboard and set off towards the access hatch described by Chakato, tears rolling down her face. She was very well aware that the only reason why she had decided against going back to the engine room was because she wasn't sure whether she would be able to pull such a bold move off, not because it was the wrong moral decision. And she hated herself for that.

JFalcon

Sat Jul 07, 2007 5:20 am

Anatolja reached the access hatch in question with half a minute to spare. The passageway changed from pitch black to dull orangish twilight as some sensor or other noticed her entering. She wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing. Regardless, there wasn't anyone else around.

"Cuchka derganaya. Fsyoe zaeebahnuh..."

Mirunova.

"Zaebis'!" It was her comm. It sounded like that OSI spook. "What?"

Minor change in plans. I have more legwork than I anticipated. Locate router panel L017-415P. It is further aft in the service way you are in now. Inform me when you have found it.

It was a 20 meter or so walk, but easy enough to find. "OK."

Get it open and disconnect patch 141. That will disconnect a whole lot more than necessary, but it is the quickest way since I am not there. And I doubt you have a 3 mm optical splicer-filter on you...

"What's this going to do? What am I messing with this time for you?"

For me? Nothing. This is for you. This will cut the override controls for the CIC's life support systems. Among other things... The system will go self-regulating and restore nominal conditions.

" 'Other things'?"

That is a primary feed and sense route for life support on many decks throughout section five. Cutting it will not cause any outages, but it will generate quite a bit of attention.

"Great. Then what?"

That your prerogative. If you take that service passage forward for three bulkheads you will be directly above the CIC. There is not a hatch, but I believe there is an air duct in the area you could cut into if you want to enter via some manner other than the guarded door.

"Well could you get rid of them for me, perhaps?!"

Possibly. There was a click, which seemed to suggest the conversation was over.

Well, here goes nothing...

If she was expecting warning sirens, lights, or anything of the like, they didn't appear. Absolutely nothing happened beyond the mettalic click and a little light spilling out of the disconnected optical cable.

"Well... If that actually did what she said it would, then I guess it's time to finally do what I actually intended to do."

Anatolja re-assembled her rifle and loaded a clip before setting off at a jog back down the service passage. It didn't take long before she was cursing the bulky, heavy toolbox. She was loathe to part with it's contents, but... She finally gave up, grabbing what essential items she thought were going to be most necessary and could be easily clipped to her belt or stuffed into pockets.

FYI, Mirunova. It was Chakato again. The damned woman came and went on her comms just as in real life... *I am not convinced anyone is still alive in the CIC. The environmental conditions have been at lethal levels for quite some time.

Also, you have passed by at least three security cameras so far and were under another while

working on the router...*

"Chort tzdbya beeree! You're telling me this **now**?!"

What you do now is not my concern. However, if you understandably do not wish to remain on this vessel with those who currently control it, get down to Hanger 02 within the next twenty-three minutes.

That was the blown-out hanger still in lockdown.

"You're playing me. Again. Aren't you, you damned, sneaking bitch?!" Anatolja slammed the butt of her 47 into the unyielding metal wall.

"Huh?! **Aren't you??!**" There was no response nor indication her rage had even been heard.

"...Pizdets..."

JFalcon

Sat Jul 07, 2007 5:29 am

The scene that greeted the arriving backup OSI marine squadron outside of Storeroom Eighteen was one that would be with them all for a LONG time. It wasn't the carnage, nor the blood, nor the death, nor any of that. That was the norm for them.

No, it was the bot. Or rather, what it had apparently spent its last moments doing. Its now motionless form was frozen in the act of making love to one of the bodies. Whether it was in some last act of defiance or some sort of twisted attempt make up for the hurt it had caused was a question left forever unanswered.

The NCO was the first to shake off the shock. She walked up to the mess and blew the bot's head apart with one very angry round from her plasma rifle.

"Get it the fuck off of her. Harris, Long -- get that door open! We have an unknown in there, ladies. Look alive!"

The control panel was unresponsive, but that never stopped determined grunts. Especially highly trained and experienced ones with explosives... Four small shaped charges were quickly placed over the areas of the wall where the door's hydraulic arms would be.

"Set!"

"Do it."

"Clear!"

The charges detonated as one. Immediately, the squad rushed the door -- they knew the drill. Pull wedges were inserted at the door's center seam.

"Two. One. GO!"

Two pulled and the doors parted.

"Motion!" The pointwoman opened fire briefly. "Went into the cargo elevator! Shut and moving!"

"Sweep and secure, move!"

"Sir!"

There wasn't anything else in the room. A whole lot of stacked plasteel boxes, some that obviously had been abandoned being loaded onto the elevator, and a lot of gaps where crates were missing.

Command, target escaped into the cargo lift three. Moving down decks. Storeroom is secure.

"Damned incompetence!" Verulian was back on the bridge and her interest in the news that a live male prisoner had been acquired had quickly reverted back into rage at the ongoing disaster that was THE storeroom. "Shut it down already."

"I... I can't. The computer isn't accepting the override."

"What!"

"It's not my..."

"Then get the power cut manually. Where is it?"

"Pass... Passing deck five now."

"It's heading for the hanger. But that's still purged."

"Sir! The environmental controls for section three just went offline!"

"What? That can't be..."
 "...access trunk has been severed..."
 "...get that onscreen..."

The chaos flowed around Verulian, "...god damn it..."
This ship is anything but mine, I swear.

JFalcon

Sat Jul 07, 2007 5:51 am

Aurora had just rolled over again on her cot when the door to the brig swished open.

"Oi! You." One of the two black clad troopers banged on the bars with the butt her rifle. It was obvious they were after Jace. "Up!"

"What?" He glared at them, awake, but didn't rise.

"OSI wants to have a chat," the first trooper had a knowing smile on her face with this announcement. The other unlocked the door.

"I've got my rights and know them. I want an official record of my capture and a medical exam before I'm talking to anybody." He got up, but his posture suggested that it was only to be in a better position to make a fight of it. Crone got up, herself, of half a mind to help him if they weren't going to follow proper POW rules.

"*phhft* Have it your way." The woman at the door calmly raised a bulky pistol and fired it at Jace's chest. There was a faint discharge, a tonal whine, and an azure corona of sparks.

They hit him with a tazer?!

Jace fell on to the deck, hard, convulsing and gasping.
 "...aghh...jesus...!"

"HEY!"

The OSI soldier fired again over Aurora's protest. Jace shook and then went limp.

"Back." Aurora found herself staring down the stun gun's barrel. "In the corner. Or do you want some of this, too?"

Conviction fought against futile reality for a long moment. It seemed like the most difficult decision she had made a while, but Crone backed down and away.

"Smart."

They dragged Jace out the cell and out the door. Aurora turned and punched the wall in frustration and anger at the unfairness of it all even before the door hissed shut.

"Careful, pilot. You may yet need that hand."

Aurora spun back around, grabbing her fist in the ensuing pain. Mallory was there looking uncharacteristically worn and distracted.

"You saw what they did? They can't do that!"

"No, but I have a good idea what happened." The CAG sighed, ran a hand through her hair, and looked at the ground before meeting Aurora's angry eyes.

"There is precious little going on that I approve of or entirely understand right now, Yates. And even less that I can actually do anything about. I am trying to prioritize right now and, frankly, I nothing that may happen to that man in the next thirty minutes or so makes my top ten list of concerns. We are going to be launching for a combat situation shortly, you know? Not a good one, either... If we lose, his treatment is rather a moot point, yes? I am trying to help figure out how to keep us all alive right now.

We are heading into a right mess. One that you have helped create, I might add. You and Catnip blew the Morrigan's cover. The idea, apparently, was to masquerade as if the uprising had succeeded. It was working quite well, but we can no longer do that now thanks to your two's little transmission." Mallory paused to look sternly at Aurora, letting those consequences sink in, but wasn't sure it had the impact she desired.

"Verulian's missile barrage may be enough to pull off most of the fighter cover. It is a good, although... unorthodox... tactic."

That was putting it diplomatically. It was bloody well against the rules of dual-purpose target engagement.

"We shall see how effective it proves. We have also now detected a heavy APC in the station's radar shadow..." Her comms unit beeped.

"...Mallory here."

...

She swore under her breath.

"Understood. I will be on the bridge momentarily."

The CAG sighed. "Two corvettes just jumped through... Heaven only knows what else they might have ready on the other side to throw at us."

"This is insane, Mallory. We have to turn around."

"Would I not like to, Yates, but..."

"No! She's leading us...!"

"There are some things you do not talk that woman out of, Aurora, and I will be staring down a gun if I try to! I... It is too late..." The CAG turned around, gesturing resignedly. She seemed as frustrated and trapped as Crone did.

"Priorities, pilot, priorities," turning around somewhat more composed. "I have duties elsewhere. So, as to why I originally came here. We are staring down bad odds, Yates. We need every, and any, pilot out in a fighter that we can field. Regardless of your... situation... I want to know if you would be willing to launch again. Not in command of Dark Nova, of course. Yes, you will no doubt be aiding Verulian, but you would also be fighting to keep a hell of a lot of us others alive. Think of it as undoing some of the damage you have done, perhaps."

She stepped closer, now speaking so that only Aurora could hear. "And let us be honest, pilot. It would probably be better if you did not come back."

"...You want me to *die* out there?!"

"There are other outcomes. If I let you back out there, I really do not see why you would ever want to come back. But I do not think you will run away right away, either..."

So what is your decision?"

JFalcon

Sat Jul 07, 2007 6:14 am

Kate gratefully walked out of Sick Bay. Well, maybe wandered was a better word. Her head was a bit in the clouds thanks to the wonders of modern pain killers...and that whole Banner experience. *The Captain alive, but no one knows? Some one else in charge? What...? Does any of this even concern me? I just want to go home again.*

"Ah, PFC Ross. Just who I was looking for." A voice snapped Kate out of her muddled thoughts.

"Yes, who are...?"

"Lt Cmdr Chakato, OSI. You with her, trooper?"

"Yes, Lt Cmdr. She's under a secure task right now."

Kate had entirely forgotten about her escort who had (unfortunately) followed her out of Medical.

"What job?"

"Some data extraction or something from a damaged bot."

"Jason?"

"Yeah, that one. He got messed up something good."

"Ah, they assigned that to... her?"

"Heh, yep. Dunno why."

"Well, this girl does have quite a bit of skill, actually. Are you headed back there now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I am the one who originally requested the dump from his core. I will accompany and assist. Where is he?"

"The bot service bay or whatever off the main hanger."

"Hmm. Alright. Hurry up, Ross -- we do not have much time."

Tiefflieger

Sat Jul 14, 2007 10:32 pm

Getting into the CIC had been remarkably easy, considering what Anatolja had gone through so far to get to this point. She had managed to enter the air duct relatively comfortably through a filter housing and then basically just had to let herself drop down. The down side was not only that now she was covered over and over in fine black dust from the filter, but also that it would be impossible to get back out this way. But there were other ways.

The CIC was almost completely dark. All the systems seemed to have been taken offline together with the life support, except for one single comm. unit, who's panel lights were still dimply blinking. Other than that, only the battery backed emergency lights that were build into the walls next to the floor bathed the room in a dull, blood-red gloom. It was also very silent. Far too silent for a room that should have roughly two dozen people in it. Despite the ventilation system working on full capacity now, it still smelled funny.

Anatolja barely dared to breathe, almost like fearing to disturb the silence. She slowly turned around. Human shapes lay sprawled out on the floor all around her. None of them moved.

I am too late.

She felt her knees getting weak. She looked around desperately, searching for a sign of life on one of the faces, but it was hard to make out features. The emergency lights cast deep shadows over them, turning eyes into gaping, black holes. She finally recognized the former CAG, lying on her back, and what looked like Sparks, collapsed over her.

I failed. All this for nothing.

She still didn't dare to move and check the bodies for vital signs. She didn't want to look into another pair of broken, unmoving eyes, like those of young Private Thomas. Her heart started to race.

I need to get the hell out of here!

Next to the door, behind the wall, was the hydraulic system that would open the door. Even without access codes, through this it would be possible to manually open the door from inside. There were strange stains on the wall and a body lying right in front of it.

Tibbs!

It looked grotesque how she laid on her stomach, with her torso leaning up against the wall, her arms stretched upward, hands deformed to claws, as if she was trying to bury her fingers into the solid metal.

Finally a sigh pierced the silence, followed by a thump, the sound of Anatolja going down on her knees, when the realization struck her: Tibbs indeed had tried to open the wall with her bare hands! She had torn off her finger nails trying to pry them under the edges of the metal sheets and probably broken every bone in her hands, hammering against the unyielding surface in vain. The stains on the wall were blood.

So close and so easy to override for a trained technician, but yet inaccessible, without the proper tools. All it would have needed was a screwdriver.

Anatolja knew what would happen now, she felt the nausea creep up her throat and the giddiness cloud her head, she noticed how her field of view seemed to shrink, how every bit of strength seemed to escape from her muscles. It was the same every time, since that cursed day, when her mother...

This time it was not the blood that triggered her, she couldn't even really see it, it was only a shiny red smear on a less shiny red wall. But maybe it was the lack of sleep, the sheer exhaustion added to it. Maybe it was the loss of blood and the pain from her wounded shoulder. Maybe it was hunger and thirst. Maybe it was desperation, being all alone, being hunted by OSI and god knows whom, with nowhere to run and no-one to run to. Maybe it was the sum of all things. It didn't matter.

Anatolja felt the rifle slip out of her hands, the sound of it hitting the floor was strangely muffled. She lost her balance, staggered backward, tripped over something and fell.

Vexus

Mon Jul 16, 2007 7:08 am

Aurora paused a moment, letting the situation sink in. Mallory did have a point: she didn't have

much of a future on the Morrigan with Verulian in command. Besides, she was getting tired of waiting around in brigs after every mission.

"Alright," she said at last, "Send me up and I'll do what I can."

Mallory nodded. "I'll have a guard escort you to your locker. You're to suit up and be ready for launch ASAP."

"I just have one request," Aurora added. Mallory raised an eyebrow.

"Yes?"

"The marines took my comm unit. I want it back."

As Aurora and her escort transversed the corridors, the walls bathed in alert lighting, she discreetly typed out a text message on her comm. She pressed the "send" button and quietly placed the unit back into its pocket.

They reached the flight locker room after twenty minutes, their path made longer by detours around working emergency teams and held up by elevators servicing priority personnel. The guard stopped near the entrance and waved her in. As Aurora reached her locker, she gave a faint smile.

Hell, she did it! That girl is damned efficient.

Changing back into her flight suit, she briefly undid her hair, the silver tresses flowing half-way down her back. Catching a glimpse of herself in the door mirror, she saw a tired face, but with peaceful eyes. Whatever happened now, she would face it without regret. Feeling Nef's pendant against her breast, she nodded to herself decisively.

Putting her hair back, she watched and waited until her marine escort was looking away before reaching under the nearby bench. In a smooth motion, she brought up the barely concealed rifle and placed it into the locker. Attached to it was a sticky note with a hastily scribbled message:

Ordered: one personalized plasma rifle. Recently added and now re-acquired from the contraband storage room. Good luck. S.

With the muscle memory built from years of repetition, Aurora quickly dismantled her rifle and placed the pieces into the many pockets of her flightsuit. If this was to be her last mission, there was no way she was going to leave her most prized possession behind. The three largest pieces she dropped into her helmet as she took it out of her locker. She then closed the door and made her way back to her escort, who was shifting nervously at the end of the row.

"I'm ready now. Let's go."

JFalcon

Mon Aug 27, 2007 4:00 am

Chakato, with Kate and escort in tow, breezed into the bot service bay -- to the obvious surprise of the OSI trooper who had remained behind and was now stretched out on the deck, combat vest and rifle stacked nearby, napping. Chakato waved off the embarrassed woman's hasty scramble without even acknowledging her. She leaned over the form of Jason assessing the situation.

"You were not kidding about the condition." The OSI Lt Cmdr frowned before announcing her opinion. "The frame is a total loss..."

Kate was surprised to feel her heart sink a bit at this news. "You said that you had him fully archive his state prior to shutting down?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. He may yet awake again."

"How? You'd a whole matrix processing engine to run an AI this complex. A simulator would never be able to achieve anything approaching useful interaction rates... Sir."

"So load his saved state into another bot and reboot." The Lt Cmdr's look and tone made Kate feel very, very dumb.

"Oh." ...wait. Would that "kill" the other, doner, AI?

"I need his IRD chips. There should be six; two for each core matrix."

Three clusters! These things are way more complex than I thought. We never even touched the limits of one in my one AIS class...

It quickly became apparent that Kate was useless with only her left hand usable, so it fell to Chakato to "do the dirty work for once." The dark officer wielded a vibroknife with a ruthless, surgical precision, simply excising the pieces of the bot that were in the way of the prize. If Jason hadn't been a total loss before, he was going to be by the time Chakato was done. Mechanical or not, Kate couldn't help but feel like someone was being gutted before her eyes, particularly as the more "organ-like" components (diaphragms for simulating breathing, pouch for food storage, etc) landed on the decking with dull, almost wet sounding, slaps.

It was all done quickly enough, though, with the chips entrusted to Kate who scrawled an ID on each before wrapping the six precious bits up in a scrap of protective film originating from some unknown part of Jason.

"We are done here, then. You two are dismissed," Chakato addressed the troopers for the first time since arriving, "report to your direct superior for further duty."

"Yes, sir." Both seemed glad to return to more meaningful assignments.

"You come with me, private. And keep those safe."

"Yes, sir." Kate's affirmative was rather less enthusiastic.

JFalcon

Mon Aug 27, 2007 4:05 am

The main flight deck was a mess of ongoing chaos. Fighters were being retrieved, serviced, and re-launched as fast as the remaining and disorganized ground crew could manage. The pilots of Dark Nova squadron had returned from a brief respite in one of the staging rooms off the hanger and were now (still) waiting for their craft to be readied. No one from their "private" crew was to be found.

"Where's Mirunova?" Ashley was concerned and agitated. "She was here when we left last time. And Ross was still in one piece on the bridge. She's missing, too, now."

"Probably in sick bay." It didn't take much of Seer's innate intuition to make *that* prediction. She kicked a nearby crate in frustration. "What've they done with Aurora? That's what *I* want to know."

"Probably under guard," Kat mused darkly. She was half expecting to be dragged off herself, considering her role in contacting Lavinia HQ.

What the hell is going on here? Shouldn't I at least have some idea?

Christine was supervising the prep work for her Aries II. None of the techs around evidently had any clue about the advanced fighter and she was would be damned before she let the best fighter Nova had be wrecked due to incompetence.

The minutes crawled past. The crews finished on Nova's more conventional fighters, leaving just the oddball Aries to wrap up.

"Hey! It's Aurora!" Cassie abruptly shifted to happy, excited mode at the sight of a silver haired woman striding across the flight deck accompanied by two MPs.

"Whull I'll beh... Oi! Crone!" Rhiannon's voice boomed out, but must have been lost in the noise of the hanger as the intended target didn't look over. "Whas shae doin' bock?"

The XO's hanger comms squawked abruptly. *"Nova squadron, board for immediate launch. Mission data is being uploaded now. Further briefing in space. Situation is hot and changing."*

"Wha's Crone doin' 'ere? Shae wit os agin?"

*"Who? I've no idea wha" *tscht**

"...This is Mallory, Claymore. We have a pilot shortage. Aurora is being sent out on her own accord. If you want her attached to Nova, fine, but you are in command and take your orders from me, not her, understood? I suspect anything otherwise, and I'll have her comms cut off."

"Yes, 'm. And, aye. Wull be 'appy to 'ave 'er.

Right! Bock inna th' breech once morr, lasses!"

JFalcon	Mon Aug 27, 2007 4:14 am	
<p>"You reside in barracks 3A-034, do you not Ross?" Chakato and Kate had exited the flight deck through one of the inter-deck access ways commonly used by the fighter techs. Most of them lived a deck or two down from the main hanger; convenient, but noisy at times.</p> <p>"Yes."</p> <p>The barracks' doorway barely parted in time to admit Chakato's brisk stride. It was both dim and empty inside. "Good. I need your StarSweep."</p> <p>"What?" Kate stopped, feeling as if she had been stuck. None of her "roommates" had ever recognized the large, metal box stowed under her bunk for what it was -- her father's prototype of the best fighter-sized sensor system he (or anyone else, in her humble opinion) had ever built. <i>It must have been logged when I arrived...</i></p> <p>She had caused a bit of an incident upon arrival. However, try as the officer of the watch might, the woman had not been able to find anything in the regulations as to why 22 kg of advanced electronics could not qualify as "one personal item." So, Kate been grudgingly allowed to struggle aboard with her heavy, precious equipment. On top of the duffel bag, tool belt, computer... <i>I thought I was going to die getting it here.</i></p> <p>It wasn't just <u>any</u> a StarSweep, though. While the item Chakato dragged out from under the bunk before Kate could recover to protest was, indeed, a standard, triple-bay, Alliance fighter computer chassis with two hefty integrated handles, the "standard" stopped there. The metal casing itself was polished chrome bearing the text "StarSweep[TM] SSI Ltd(R) SN 00-00-00-00" in embossed golden letters. Over the years, Kate's father had continuously fiddled with his original design. Some of it had obstinately been "for work" as some of his tweaks went into later revisions. Most of the labor, however, had been spent massaging and tuning the electronics in ways that no mass-produced copy could ever replicate. Kate had worked along side as a child -- mother had objected, but Kate was fairly certain it had more to do with the 10k+ voltages the amplifier nano caps were capable of storing, than the activity itself. After the Plague, had taken over full time, upgrading the software and digital processors as well. The result was without a doubt the finest sub-capital deep space sensor package within several lightyears.</p> <p>"That's mine! You've no right to...!"</p> <p>"I am not depriving you of it, Ross. I wish to give it 'its day in the spotlight,' as it were. Besides, I am fairly certain that you are the only one who knows how to properly operate it."</p> <p>"You want to use it?" Kate paused. For all the development work on it, "Eight-Null" had never been actually used in the field since its first test flights twenty-five years ago. The temptation to see if it actually functioned as well as the data simulations suggested manifested itself and quickly became impossible to ignore. "Where?"</p> <p>"You will have to accompany me to find out. Help me carry it with your good hand."</p>		
JFalcon	Mon Aug 27, 2007 4:45 am	
<p>The bridge was still chaotic, but seemed more orderly as combat operations began and discipline returned. The shipboard problems continued, though.</p> <p>"The errant cargo lift arrived at the secondary hanger. It... It opened..."</p> <p>"That's suicide. It's a vacuum in there!"</p> <p>"Check the elevator status yourself."</p> <p>"Security camera view, now," Verullian ordered. The image appeared promptly enough and showed... still closed lift doors.</p> <p>"Huh?"</p> <p>"Idiots! Someone's been running looped video footage all this time and spoofed the enviornmental monitors! God knows what's been going on in there. Get special forces down there NOW. Kill anything moving!"</p>		
Vexus	Mon Sep 03, 2007 1:31 am	
<p>Refusing to let her go anywhere except straight to her fighter, the MPs did not halt until they reached the ladder up to Aurora's Siren and motioned for her to ascend. Cassie, seeing the no-nonsense look of the guards, called up to Aurora rather than risk climbing the ladder herself.</p> <p>"Where is she?! Is she OK?!" Cassie didn't want to specify who she was talking about with the</p>		

guards nearby, but Aurora knew well to whom she was referring.

"I don't know," she called back, her voice flat but not as cold and hateful as it once was. Cassie appeared to notice this as well.

"Well, what about you? You look... different.... More peaceful."

"I tell you about it later," Aurora said as she settled into the cockpit. "For now, let's just say the brig-time did me more good than I thought it would." As she looked down at Cassie her expression faltered for a moment.

"What is it, Crone?" Aurora was about to tell her, but decided at the last that such revelation would do no good just before such a dangerous mission. Knowledge of her estranged brother's presence aboard could be a potentially fatal distraction. Instead, Aurora gave Cassie a knowing half-smile, strangely amused that the little pilot was for once without a guess as to what she was thinking.

"Fly the mission, Seer, and survive it. You'll be glad you did." Cassie looked eager to continue the conversation, but the scramble alert was sounding and Aurora closed the cockpit hatch, forcing Cassie to scramble off back to her own ship.

Aurora squirmed in her seat as she powered-up her fighter. The dismantled rifle parts in her suit made sitting a bit awkward, and she was certain the gun oil and grease on the interior components had ruined the inner lining. Not long after strapping in and activating her ship com, Claymore's voice sounded on the open channel.

"Aye, Novas, Ah know tired yeh all be, but the battle is upon oos now. Steh sharrp. Crrone... good teh have yeh back with oos."

"Copy that, Nova One," Crone replied, simply and sincerely. As the Novas lined up for launch, Crone keyed in to a channel she was relying on more and more.

"Sanchez here, sir. You get you gun back?"

"Just as requested, Ensign, thank you. Now, I need you to get in touch with Claudia. Unless the OSI has become a horde of utter barbarians, they will need to feed the rebel prisoner I brought in sooner or later. Ask her to try and deliver the food personally, then check on his condition."

"His condition?" Sanchez broke in with surprise. Crone ignored it, there was no time.

"The prisoner has a strong personal tie to one of our squadron. With the battle heating up the OSI will be desperate information, and they've already shown how far they will go to get it. I need to know how rough the OSI is handling him."

"And if it's too rough?" Sanchez asked solemnly. Crone paused a moment.

"You and the Chef are not combat-experienced, and I've already asked so much of you.... I leave further action at your discretion."

"We'll do what we can. Good luck, sir."

"And to you, soldier," Crone said with a salute in her voice before switching back to her squad channel.

The Novas launched one-by-one, passing by the Morrigan's turrets which were now charging and coming to bear towards the approaching confrontation. Claymore called the Novas into a standard attack formation. As Crone's eyes darted across her panel, she saw that the computer's pre-flight check, usually completed before launch, was still running, no doubt engaged late by an exhausted, under-staffed, and battle-rushed flight crew. The final message that came up however, made Aurora's eyes narrow in suspicion:

WARNING!!! Ejection System Status: DISABLED; COMMAND PRIORITY OVERRIDE---

Verulian is trying really hard to make sure I don't come back, Crone thought with disgust. Fine, no ejecting then. Please, God, just let my guns work for once.

"Nova Leader, this is Mallory," came the CAG's voice over the squad channel. "You will be supporting Omega Squadron for a fighter attack on the nearest incoming: two rebel corvettes approaching 276 by +18. Omega One is assigned field command. Report for further orders when craft are disabled or destroyed."

"Nova One, Omega One," came a cold and professional female voice, wasting no time before giving orders. "Surge ahead and draw off escorting fighters, we will engage cap ships directly."

"The word 'expendable' suddenly comes to mind," Banshee's voice muttered.

"Yeh hearrd her, Novas," Claymore spoke up, not being wholly able to conceal the distaste in her voice. "Let's be the best distrrractions we canneh be. Banshee, Ducky, and I will engage the port ship's escort. Crone... you take Seer and Cat and engage the starboard escort." Crone smiled a bit at Claymore's defiant tone. Crone could no longer be squad leader, but there was no restriction that Crone couldn't lead an element into battle.

As her charges formed up behind her, Crone took her first good look outside. The first outer asteroids of the border were now passing them by. Mid-to-long range communications would start to get unreliable from here on in. Far ahead Crone thought she could make out a point of light slightly brighter than the background stars.

The Final Station, where everything ends one way or another.

To be continued...