

A woman with brown hair in a ponytail, wearing a Star Trek uniform with a gold and white collar and a gold rank insignia, looks upwards. The background is a futuristic cityscape with blue buildings and a tall, blue, mushroom-shaped structure. The sky is blue with some white clouds.

STAR TREK

BANSHEE SQUADRON

JAY P. HAILEY'S

OUTWARDLY
MOBILE

Jay P. Hailey's

**BANSHEE SQUADRON
OUTWARDLY MOBILE**

written by Jay P. Hailey



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I - Fly Girl

1. The Pomona Fair Grounds, 2361

The sun was warm. The air was fresh. The lemonade was sour but refreshing.

The cheerfully burbling music was a constant background.

The animals smelled odd to city folks. Some wrinkled their nose. To people who knew animals it smelled natural.

The petting zoo held domesticated animals that put up with the touches of children and adults with good nature.

The elephant was popular and enjoyed making new friends.

The zebra was cranky, but stayed calm.

The Hypatirian land mollusk gingerly felt the happy mammals with its fore tentacles and was extremely careful about the placement of its huge tree-trunk-like rear tentacles. It ate some seaweed and seemed genially puzzled at the attention. Wasn't there a plow somewhere that needed dragging?

Cotton candy. Clowns, the safe daylight kind. There was a puppet show.

What three-year-old Alexandra Dalton couldn't get enough of were the kites.

Hanging buoyantly in the hard blue sky, balancing on wind and string, moving as if with a mind of its own. Each an artwork of its own.

Alexandra imagined being up in the sky with the kites. She reached out and for the first time understood the implacable, impersonal oppression of gravity.

Being in the sky made you pretty. Being in the sky made you free.

The images of the kites in the sky dancing on the Santa Ana winds would color Alex Dalton's dreams for the rest of her life.

2. In the Air Over the Mojave Desert, 2366

Alex pushed the stick as far to the right as it would go.

The flyer slowly, slothfully rolled fifteen degrees and hung there, refusing to go any further.

She pushed the stick back to the left, as far as it would go. Slowly, weakly, the flying machined rolled the other way and stopped at three hundred and forty-five degrees.

"What are you doing, Honey?" asked Dad.

Richard Dalton was tall, thin and generically handsome. An architect, he approached his daughter with tolerant, slow love but affection as deep as the Marianas Trench. He'd let Alex go ahead for a bit and then ask questions.

It was actually starting to annoy her, although she couldn't explain why. She returned the flyer to vertical flight and then, saying nothing she pushed the stick forward as far as it would go.

The flyer pitched forward to the same safe, sane, boring and pedestrian fifteen-degree limit. It did pick some speed as it descended but soon came upon a safe, sane speed limit, and obeying its carefully designed safe, boring and stifling control module, it adjusted itself to go no faster.

After waiting a moment to make sure the flyer would not pick up any more speed, Alex pulled the stick back sharply to its limit.

The flyer slowly, grudgingly nosed upwards, and again stopped at its fifteen-degree limit.

The flyer almost thought about picking up speed, but decided in a sluggish and far, far too conservative a fashion not to.

Flying nose up, the flyer climbed, slowly, gently, implacably, safely.

Alex sourly took her hands off the controls.

"It's been nerfed, Alex," Richard said, cutting to the end of a socratic question and answer session that he dimly sensed would have Alex shrieking at him.

She glared at him. "What does nerfed mean?"

"Made so safe that it's boring," Richard said sadly.

"Can we get an un-nerfed one?" Alex asked immediately.

Richard scratched his chin "They have safety protocols for a reason, Pun'kin. Tell you what, you keep your grades up and I'll try to find something."

It was all Alex could do not to hurl herself from the family flyer screaming. "Okay, Daddy."

3. March Air Field, 2366

An air show.

Parked in row after row was every type of flying machine you could imagine. Mostly they were shuttlecraft owned by civilians. Experimental, customized or very old preserved spacecraft.

Among them were older machines, skiffs, lifters, cargo fliers and some even older than that.

A replica Spitfire, an authentic F-16. Even a replica Wright Flyer.

Alex looked at it intently. A kite you could ride.

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The airplanes buzzed. Alex watched entranced. Matched red propeller driven planes, six of them. They were flying so close together. She could see them seem to bob in relation to each other.

Her eyes were glued. These people were **really** flying. The impression of speed was intense. They made a soft whispery buzz as they flew. It was the propellers carving through the air.

Six airplanes carved through the sky, swooping and diving within inches of each other.

The show was a little less than an hour.

After a big, spinning group loop, the red airplanes climbed away.

The Alex realized that she was thirsty, that her feet hurt and that she had to go to the bathroom.

She looked up at her dad, to find he was watching her.

"You liked that, huh?" He grinned.

Alex bounced up and down. "That was so COOL!!"

4. Vista City, 2366

Richard Dalton walked across the tarmac with his daughter.

"What is this place?" Alex asked, her voice verging on whiny.

"You'll see," Richard said.

It looked industrial, adult and boring to Alex. Warehouses and flat permacrete all over.

Finding the number he was looking for, Richard approached the door and rang the bell.

A half beat later the door swished open.

It took Alex's eyes a moment to adjust from the solid California sunlight to the interior lights.

It was just exactly what it looked like from the outside. A warehouse. Dirty. Prosaic. Industrial.

Alex didn't notice much of that.

What caught her eyes was the airplane that occupied the place of honor in the warehouse. A red, sleek fuselage, elegant wings and a clear cockpit bubble for maximum pilot visibility.

It was one of the display planes from the air show some weeks ago.

Alex didn't realize her breath caught in her throat. There were other planes in the warehouse, too.

A thin man with graying blonde hair and a bland smile was walking towards them.

"You must be Steve Ashby," Dalton said holding out his hand.

"A pleasure, Mister Dalton. I take it this is Alexandra?"

Richard had to nudge his daughter twice before she ripped her eyes away from the airplanes and towards their owner.

"Uh... uh... Hi," she stammered.

Steve crouched down to eye level with Alex, something she usually hated.

He said it quietly but firmly. "Rule one is that trainees work hard. They mostly pilot mops and brooms. Trainees have to complete stacks of homework and do the hardest math correctly, the first time. After days and days of work, you might just get to fly one of my airplanes."

Alex felt her face drain and her eyes bug out. "Really?"

"Interested?"

Alex looked at her father. He smiled through and through. He'd hit it out of the park this time. "Is this what you want?"

Alex's' shriek made dogs howl a kilometer away.

Steve winced. "That sounds like a yes to me."

Richard's smile got wider "That'd be my guess."

II - Graduation Day

5. Starfleet Academy, Graduation Day, 2378

Alex watched the formation flying on a screen in her cockpit, while keeping her skittish little fighter in formation. The training plane wanted to roll and dance. Holding it in formation was not that hard. The hard part was coming up.

Blue Squadron was completing their run. The pilots of the class of 56701.1 were hot and their routine was difficult.

As they finished their planned routine, Blue Squadron made a starburst over the Academy parade grounds and flew out of sight of the audience on the ground.

Fourth year cadet Alexandra Dalton smiled to herself. It was an unspoken challenge. Blue Squadron always tried to one up Red Squadron on graduation day.

Now it was Red Squadron's turn.

Taking a deep breath and focusing formidable powers of concentration, Alex took up her slot position in the formation and Red Squadron went to work.

Inside the plane, there was heavy work. The angles had to be precise, but the air they were cutting through was

anything but, a roiling mass of chaotic oxygen and nitrogen.

Temperature gradients across San Francisco lead to randomized updrafts and down drafts, areas of different temperature made the density of the air vary.

Although it looked like Red Squadron's Kestrel fighters were on rails, from inside, Alex could see the minute imperfections and corrections each pilot had to make.

Alex monitored her power systems, engines, safety systems, shields and emergency transporter transponder, her telemetry channels and the functioning of her main control computer.

She monitored all this while spiraling though an 8 or 9-g corkscrew, keeping Red Five less than a foot off her wing the whole time.

She kept her breathing and her pulse regular as Red Four passed her at approximately the same distance with their combined speed well over thirteen hundred kilometers per hour.

About an hour later, Alex was breathing hard, sweaty and her shoulders ached. However, her soul was satisfied, and you'd need a sonic chisel to get the grin off her face.

She heard Red One, the squadron leader, Kastal M'roka do his best deadpan astronaut impression over the open channel. It was being broadcast live over loudspeakers to the assembled class and visitors on graduation day.

"And that, gentlemen, is how you do that." Red Squadron, class of 55701.1 had capped the day.

6. The Voice of Experience

Somewhere in San Francisco, parties were happening. Brand new Starfleet officers were singing, dancing, shouting and getting seriously drunk.

The restaurant was quiet and smooth inside. The furniture was lovingly polished and finished wood, the decor carefully chosen.

The crowd spoke quietly and Alex could hear the clinking of dishes, silverware and glasses.

Alex spotted Miles O'Brien and a short, dark haired woman, both still in Starfleet dress uniforms from the graduation.

So was Alex. She sat down; the maitre'd gently slid the chair under her.

"Chief," Alex nodded.

"Alex, this is a friend of mine, Ezri Dax. She's stationed at Deep Space Nine," O'Brien introduced.

"Lieutenant," Alex said, the pages of the protocol manuals dancing in front of her face.

"Do you mind if I call you Alex?" Dax asked. "This isn't a formal occasion."

Alex smiled "Please. May I call you Ezri?"

The Trill woman nodded.

Both women looked at O'Brien. "Call me Ishmael," he grumped.

Ezri smiled. "Miles doesn't handle the social transitions that well."

Alex tried a wan smile in reply. She was nervous.

"I loike you, Alex," O'Brien started. "You're the kind of kid who'll go far if you give yourself a chance."

"Thank you," Alex said. *Here comes the BUT...* she thought to herself.

"So explain t' me why yer so all fired hot t' fly fighters."

Alex blinked. "I... I..."

"It's a dead end, Alex. Fighter Squadrons are where they put officers who aren't going t' amount to anything," O'Brien said.

Alex stared at O'Brien, stunned.

"Miles," Ezri said, softly.

"Nobody's been allowed t' tell you this bluntly because once you get through year one, we instructors are specifically forbidden from discouragin' ye. Now yer an officer, supposedly someone who can handle the truth. I've said y' could be a great engineer. I talked to yer navigation teachers, and yer security teachers. They all said ye've got a good head on yer shoulders and yer as quick as hell on the uptake. You could go anywhere you want in the service," O'Brien said.

Alex took a deep breath. "I'm here to fly, Sir." It was her mantra. It got her through the horrible days of year one in the Academy, when exhaustion, despair and impossible demands threatened to wash her out.

O'Brien leaned back with a stubborn look on his face.

Ezri jumped up and with a stupidly perky expression and said, "I have to go to the bathroom. C'mon, Alex."

Alex let Dax drag her off to the women's restroom.

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Tears started flowing as soon as they were safely inside. There was actually a lounge just inside the first doorway. Four hundred years ago, it was a place for women to have the vapors. Alex knew nothing of the original design or she might have been insulted.

Ezri sat Alex down on a paisley couch and sat next to her.

"You know that wasn't an attack, don't you?" Ezri said.

"Ye-" Alex's voice caught in her throat. "No! It felt just like an ambush to me."

Ezri nodded. "He's been eating his heart out about you for a while."

Alex looked at Ezri "Huh?"

"You remind him of his daughter," Ezri explained.

"I have plenty of father figures already!" Alex snarled.

Ezri giggled. "That doesn't stop them when you're cute, Alex."

Alex tried to bite down the snicker. It's hard to cry when you're snickering, or snicker when you're crying. Alex managed it. "Why?"

"Are you aware of the reputation of the fighter squadrons in Starfleet?"

Alex thought about it. "Not... really. I... I was so focused on getting my wings..."

"It's just what O'Brien said," Ezri said brusquely. "Fighter pilots themselves keep this internal image, but the rest of the fleet considers them a waste of time."

Alex looked at the smaller Trill woman. Anger started to burn inside her.

"Have you looked at what fighter pilots do in Starfleet?" Ezri asked.

"Yes," Alex snapped.

"Have you looked at how often they do it?" Ezri asked.

"He brought you here to help him talk me out of being a pilot!" Alex accused.

Ezri looked into Alex' eyes. "I'm a counselor, Alex. I'm here to make sure you're happy, no matter what Miles thinks."

"You have a funny way of going about it!" Alex snarled.

"Tell me why," Ezri said.

"Why what?"

"O'Brien talked my ear off. This new girl, she could be the next Picard. She could be the next Janeway, but she has wings glued onto her ankles and won't stop."

"He said that about me?"

"I told you he'd been eating his heart out for a while," Ezri said. "So. Why?"

"Why do I have wings glued on?" Alex asked.

"Uh huh."

"I don't know, I just do," Alex said, "My best day in the Academy was today, flying the final review. I can't get enough flight time."

"You sure?"

"YES, I'm sure!"

"No, are you sure you don't know why?" Ezri asked.

Alex thought about it. "Ever since I was a little girl, flying seemed like so much fun to me."

Ezri nodded. "Okay. Bear this in mind. Starfleet is about being flexible. Some day you may have to climb out of the fighter and do something else."

Alex looked at her.

"But we don't have to burn that bridge until we get there," Ezri said.

Alex felt relief rush through her. She looked at it.

"Who said you get to give me permission to be a pilot?"

Ezri grinned. "I don't. I'm here to give you permission to give yourself permission. Once you know what you want and know that you're allowed to do it, my job is done."

Alex grinned "I like that."

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Ezri marched up to the table. "Miles!"

"Did you talk -?"

"Shush!" Ezri was sharp. "The discussion is over."

"But, I just-"

"Over."

O'Brien looked at the two younger women and measured their resolve. Then he surrendered. "Alright. What are we having for dinner?"

Ezri looked back at Alex and winked.

"By the way, Congratulations, Ensign," O'Brien said. "Starfleet is well ahead today."

Alex could see the fatherly affection bursting in O'Brien. An urge to hiss and throw things came and went.

Alex was far too good-natured to turn down an honest friend.

III - The Assignment, 2379

7. Serenity

Tanned, fit and rested, Alex Dalton stepped off the cargo shuttle onto the planet of New Canada. She breathed deeply, glad for fresh air at long last.

"Stay in touch, Alex," Vicky Collins said, as she stepped off the shuttle. A year in space under way led to new friends and acquaintances. Alex stepped off the shuttle. "Thank you, Vicky. You too!"

Alex felt a pang of emotion, but it wasn't as if she wouldn't see her friend again. They were both stationed on the same planet.

The air was cool. In the distance, the hills seemed furry and green with pine trees and other vegetation.

The map on her PADD said the VSF-6501 Squadron; the "Banshees" had quarters on the other end of the Starbase 91 Annex. The main base was in orbit high above.

Alex started walking. Warehouses, workshops, offices bordered the long, flat permacrete tarmac of the base annex. It looked familiar to Alex - much of the same thought process was evident in March Field in California or even in the Vista City Municipal Airport.

Although modern vehicles didn't use runways the way airplanes did, having a flat, smooth place to put flying machines was too handy. The planet seemed riotous and green to Alex, like the Pacific Northwest, around Seattle where she'd visited relatives as a girl, not to mention the Boeing Museum.

Some time later Alex was beginning to feel like she was trudging, but she enjoyed the feeling. Even a huge Starliner Pod only had so much space. Being out in the open felt good indeed.

In an obscure corner of the annex, facing flat permacrete landing areas and parking areas, there were the hangars assigned to Banshee Squadron. The doors were open and in the sunlight, people were working on the old workhorse Kestrel fighter planes.

A curved, three story building next to the hangar was the HQ and quarters of Banshee Squadron. Alex walked up the front walk. Flag poles out front had the flags of the Federation, Starfleet, and two Alex didn't recognize. A flag with Blue bars on both side and a blue maple leaf. The other flag was black and featured a silver depiction of a woman riding a sideways Cochrane delta.

Alex walked in through the large transparent steel doors. The lobby of the building featured another flag. Orange, white and green with a golden harp in the middle.

Pictures and artifacts littered the walls in display cases. Pictures of crews, flights, old fighters, even ancient Tomcat class fighters. Obviously, there was a lot of history there.

Alex found the directory and followed it to the office marked "Squadron Commander - Jazz Phoenix".

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"Welcome, Ensign." Jazz Phoenix looked intense. Alex stood at rigid attention.

"Let me tell you what our job here is. We're high mobility Red Shirts. We use our craft to get down on the deck and lug heavy phasers into position. We train hard, we work hard, we fly hard and we play hard. Think you're up to that?"

Ma'am, Yes Ma'am!" Alex found herself barking. Embarrassment flared. You wouldn't think she was an Ensign with a year's service under her belt.

Jazz stifled a grin and worked hard to look serious. "We'll find out. Banshee Squadron had twelve planes. We're in two flights, Green Flight and O-Flight, Short for Orange. You're now Green Six, in my flight so I can keep an eye on you."

"Yes, Commander." Alex forced herself to be less stiff.

"You'll have time to meet the rest of the squadron as we go. I want you to hit the ground running on your training," Jazz said. "Come along."

Alex's' new quarters were pretty standard officer's quarters, with a window that had a wonderful view of the side of the Hangar next door to the HQ building.

Alex didn't get to see them long.

8. Hangar Queen

Lieutenant Luke George was a hairy man, with dark curly hair that threatened to fly away. His voice was surprisingly high. "For the first half of your day, you'll report here, to do maintenance and engineering work on the planes. We're all qualified technicians, out here."

"Yes, Sir," Dalton said.

Here is the crew chief, Lieutenant Dan Grozzick. He runs the maintenance crews. It doesn't matter if you make Admiral some day, you listen to what Grozzick says, am I clear?" George said.

"Yes, Sir."

They walked around half-disassembled Kestrel fighters, with people scurrying around them. Alex could see roughly what people were doing. It looked like routine but heavy maintenance.

Three technicians were wrestling an engine on an anti-grav back into the housing on the bottom of the fighter plane. The control circuitry looked odd and deeply suspect to Alex.

"Lieutenant Grozzick?" George said.

Grozzick was a large Bolian man, his skin lined with age; he rolled out from under the plane easily. "This is the new meat, Lieutenant Commander?"

"This is Ensign Alexandra Dalton. Ensign Dalton, Lieutenant Dan Grozzick."

"Pleased, Sir," Alex smiled.

Grozzick looked at her sternly with calculated doubt. He had to wrestle down a grin. Dalton was puppy fresh. Instead, he growled, "You won't be. And knock off that Sir crap. I work for a living."

Alex tilted her head. Usually it was Non-Commissioned officers shouting that. "Sorry, err. Lieutenant."

"Call me Dan. I couldn't avoid these pips, but they ain't spoiled me, yet," Dan barked. "Come along." He started to march through the chaos of the hangar with long, purposeful, energetic strides.

As Dalton hurried to catch up, she looked at Lieutenant Commander George. He threw her a genial wave.

Grozzick led her out the back of the hangar. There in a field where weeds were starting to slowly reclaim the land from the Starbase annex, were wrecks. Shuttles, Kestrel class fighters, and other things. At the center of the mess, up on blocks, was a one-hundred-year-old Tomcat class fighter plane.

"That one is a replacement unit for the Katala Defense Force. Your job is to get it flying," Grozzick said.

Alex blinked at the ancient hulk, stunned.

"These are your parts locker," Grozzick said.

Alex looked around at the surrounding ruins and her stomach dropped into her shoes.

"Draw your tools and get to work," Grozzick said.

Alex looked up at the big Bolian man and tried not to cry. "Yes, Si - Dan."

Grozzick looked around conspiratorially and leaned down. "This is a test of your ingenuity and improvisational skills, Ensign. You can come talk to me if you get stuck."

Alex nodded, dumbly.

"Right. Let's get on it." He turned and walked back into the hangar with the same long, high-energy steps.

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Conn Piper was a thin man, with a moustache and slicked back hair. He moved very precisely. He smoked a pipe. It smelled interesting to Alex.

"Today we'll be going over the care and maintenance of energy weapons." Piper's voice was deep and distracted. His mind seemed to be more with the phasers on the table than in the room with Alex.

Alex looked forward to showing Piper how much she'd learned at the Academy.

Ten minutes later, she had a PADD out, and was making Piper repeat himself, while she took careful notes. She began to realize how much she didn't know about phasers.

9. Settling In

The next morning came far too early. Alex dragged herself out of bed, stumbled in and out of the sonic shower and struggled into a cover-all. That would be the first half of the day, working on the nightmarish hulk of an ancient fighter plane.

Then Alex went down the stairs to the mess hall.

People were eating with unhurried enthusiasm and talking. Alex immediately felt isolated.

At one table, a foursome of women were talking. A tall blonde waved at Alex. "Ensign Dalton! Over here."

Alex walked over, shyly.

"You're the new kid, right? I'm Lee Carter, the second in command of Green flight. You're with us." The blond woman smiled engagingly. "This is Jo Schmidt; she just got here a couple of weeks ago."

"Hi." Jo could have been Alex' sister.

"This is Sam Beckett," Lee introduced.

Beckett's greeting was a soft "Hi." She seemed quiet.

"This is Morgan Mason." Lee pointed out a woman with curly black hair and deep brown eyes. "Howdy, Sugar. Welcome to the party." Mason's southern drawl was catchy.

"And this is Kimberly Tycho," Lee pointed out.

"Call me Kim." Tycho had short curly brown hair and a catchy smile.

"Hi, everyone," Dalton smiled. She found herself shaking hands with Tycho.

"So what monstrosity do they have you working on out back of the hangar?" Lee asked.

Alex was bleak. "A Tomcat class fighter."

That sparked a round of giggles.

"You're lucky," Kim said.

"Oh?" Alex said dubiously.

"Once you finish it, you get to test fly it. I got a cargo lifter," Kim said. "Strong but slow."

"I thought you liked your men that way," Lee said.

More giggles.

Alex found herself giggling along. It felt good.

=^=

Alex found herself in a dark alley, and tried to keep the sweat from her palm from making her phaser too slippery.

Ahead of her Conn Piper and Max Vasser moved to cover, covering all sorts of angles with phasers.

It was Hogan's Alley, a combat simulation on the holodeck.

It didn't feel all that simulated. The fact that Alex wanted to get a good grade on her security tactics review made the false tension of the holodeck all the more real.

Alex skittered to a doorway and covered the street.

A noise startled her. She spun, dropping to her knee and firing through the door. It was supposed to have been boarded up.

Alex hosed down the Orcs in the doorway, who fell howling and snarling that they'd been denied their tasty prey.

Alex had a bad feeling. She rolled to her left just in time to avoid a green disruptor beam. The door across the alley had also opened up. Green and orange beams flew across the alley.

With a horrible electrical shock feeling and green flash, Alex was hit.

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The gurney spun and Alex retched. It was worse than the phaser stun used to train cadets at the academy. Alex was convinced she'd been seriously damaged by the disruptor blast. She was wobbly, had no equilibrium and her stomach felt like it was going to crawl out her mouth and quit her body in a huff. She wished it would go ahead and get it over with, and quit torturing her.

"Ensign."

Alex looked up grimly into the face of Vasser.

Vasser was gruff. "You didn't suck, but you need a lot of work. See you tomorrow."

If there had been a God, Vasser would have been struck by fourteen lighting bolts. If there had been a God, Alex would be safely and comfortably dead. Alex's' crises of faith was brutal, short and resentful.

Conn Piper watched her suffer with detached amusement.

"Holodeck... safeties...." Alex managed, weakly.

"We use real disruptor stun beams," Piper smiled with graceful maliciousness. "Teaches you to duck better."

"Oh, God!" Alex cried.

Piper reached for his pipe and started to pack it with noxious weed.

"OH GOD!!" Alex cried.

=^=

"And then he smoked that evil thing at me!" Alex protested.

More laughter.

Lee nodded. "They love to do that. It reinforces the lesson."

The women at the table at the El Taco in the city of Serenity, New Canada all said it together. "Don't get hit!"

Rick, the ruggedly handsome manager of the El Taco brought out a tray loaded with food from all over the Galaxy. It honestly looked to Alex as though it had all been cooked in the same pan.

As she got the galactic cheese flauta, slathered with guacamole and sour schplict, Alex felt herself growing green and faint from the memory.

Rick slid a clear soda across the table. "Sprite. Sip it. It'll help," he said.

Alex looked up at her benefactor. How did he know?

Answering her unspoken question Rick smiled.

"They'd do it to all of us, if they could."

Alex sipped the lemon lime soda and sure enough, it helped. "I have a question."

Lee looked at her inquiringly. "Yes?"

"What flag is that in the entry way to HQ?"

"I'm told it's the flag of the land that invented Banshees," Lee Carter said. "It was apparently put up about eighty years ago by the first commander of Banshee Squadron."

"Huh," Alex said. "So Green Flight is one side..."

"The Oh in O-Flight is for Orange," Morgan said. "But no one wants to say orange when there's shooting goin' on."

"Ahhhh," Alex said, sipping some more Sprite. The food was starting to smell good.

10. New Guy

The Tomcat was coming along. Alex found the old wrecks were full of lots of interesting stuff that was actually salvageable with a little effort.

The subsonic thrum of a cargo lifter sounded. Alex peeked out of the type-five shuttlecraft where she was stripping flight controls.

The cargo lifter was big. It set down a comfortable distant out in the weeds.

Grozzick, Kim Tycho and some of Grozzick's enlisted crew got out and opened up the back of the lifter.

More wrecks. Used up, damaged and broken shuttles. The crews attached anti-gravs to the hulks and slowly floated them off the cargo vehicle.

After they had seven new wrecks, they started unloading boxes. Alex wandered over towards the cargo lifter.

"Can I help?"

Tycho turned and nodded. "Yup. New guy coming in tomorrow, grab a box and hide the stuff in it. It's Easter egg time."

Alex looked at her shocked. "Hide it?"

"Well, scatter it around and make it look casual. We want to know if the new guy is going to be stubborn

enough to do a thorough search before he comes in asking for new parts requisitions."

Alex looked around. "They did that to me?"

Tycho grinned. "To all of us. If someone doesn't find a cool piece, it stays for the next newbie."

Alex gulped. "I just looked because I was afraid of Grozzick."

Kim nodded. "Probably a good idea. He's not mister patience."

Alex took a deep breath and then started thinking about the casual and random spacing of used and semi-used components she'd found. Now, how to duplicate that, but make it all look casually thrown around?

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Alex kept the phaser moving around the room. She checked under the bed, behind the doors, and in the closet.

Having checked all the places she said, "Clear!"

Vasser, Piper and the rest of the trainees, Jo, Henry Mark, a short man with unruly blonde hair, Morgan and Kim all acknowledged without taking their eyes away from their own zone.

There was an electronic beep and the holodeck announced, "Scenario cleared. Program ended."

Everyone stood up wearily. It took a lot of energy to be focused and paranoid for two straight hours.

Vasser nodded. "We're getting there. Now we really go to work."

Alex, Jo, Henry and Morgan looked at her.

"This is the training wheels level. This is just to see if you have the spark to do this right," Vasser explained. "Now we're on the road to turning you into real soldiers to be afraid of."

Henry shook his head. "I don't understand. We're pilots. Why do we have to learn this stuff, again?"

Piper said quietly. "Didn't you listen to your briefing when you were assigned here? We're heavy weapons security people. Our job is to move quickly to put phasers on target. The only difference is that instead of running on foot, we're pushing these hopped up flitters."

"And," Vasser pointed out, "learning how to mind your field of fire and work as a team here means you'll be better at it in the air. That way you're not some yahoo I have to be afraid of when you're behind me."

Henry nodded. "Yes, Ma'am."

=^=

The next morning found Alex happily working away on her old Tomcat. Now that she knew success was in reach, things seemed a lot easier. Underneath her Tomcat, wrestling with a power rectifier, she heard the door open and close.

Grozzick said, "The Nybarite Alliance has purchased a type 5 shuttlecraft. That one. You'll restore it."

Another voice spoke with disbelief: "What a piece of junk!"

"She'll be pretty when you're done with her, Ensign," Grozzick said, his voice filled with a dangerous confidence.

There was a pregnant pause. Then the other voice said, "Yes, Sir," sullenly.

Grozzick called out, "Dalton! Come meet your new squad mate!"

Alex put down the power rectifier and her tools carefully, and rolled out from under her Tomcat.

As she stood up and got a look at the new guy her heart caught. He had a classical profile, chiseled good looks and soulful brown eyes.

He looked at her and his sullen attitude turned to sunshine. "Well, hello." His smile sparkled.

Alex had three conflicting reactions. She wanted to melt and sigh at the new guy. It was a visceral, subconscious reaction. Then she realized that she had zero makeup on, was dirty and sweaty, and dressed in a shapeless coverall. So the initial "ooo, pretty" crashed headlong into "oh my god, I'm scuzzy!"

Her third reaction was anger at herself for such an emotional reaction and faint distaste for the new guy. He was sullen and whiny.

Alex found the emotions making her blush. "A-Alexandra Dalton." The stumble over her name, making the embarrassment and irritation dominant in her mind.

The new guy got even sunnier. He could see the confusion in her face and thought it was cute. "Cruz Thompson," he said.

Alex slapped a tight grin on her face and shook his hand. She was glad she'd left her tools under the Tomcat.

He saw that and thought it was cute, too. "Pleased." They looked at each for an uncomfortable moment.

Grozzick waited a touch too long before barking. "Get to work."

Alex looked at Grozzick to see a twinkle in his eye and restrained grin.

Did he misinterpret the awkwardness as attraction?

Did he too think Alex was "Cute"?

Or did he realize that Thomson irritated Alex and relish inflicting the two ensigns on each other?

"I have to get back to work," Alex disengaged awkwardly. She returned to the safe harbor of her ancient plane.

=^=

About forty minutes later, footsteps crunched up to the Tomcat.

"I don't know about you," Thompson said, "but I didn't sign up to be a technician. I'm here to fly."

Alex looked out from under her plane again. It was a hard point to argue. "Me, too," she admitted reluctantly.

"I wonder if we should complain?" Thompson mused.

Alex blinked. This was so far from the normal Starfleet officer's "Can Do" attitude, that Alex couldn't believe it was coming from Cruz' mouth.

"You go right ahead," she said.

Cruz lit up his sunny smile again. "Relax, I was just thinking."

"Probably not your best thing," Alex found her self saying.

Cruz chuckled. "Alright, alright. I give up." He spread his hands in a gesture of surrender.

Alex rolled her eyes. "Is there anything else?"

"Umm, yeaah." Thompson looked embarrassed. "How much do you know about inertial stabilization systems?"

=^=

Fifteen minutes later, Alex found herself in the beat up type 5 shuttlecraft, with the avionics panel apart, and the inertial stabilization module up to show how the gyroscopes and accelerometers kept track of the shuttle's orientation.

"And circuit C handles the sensor feedback," she said, peering at the instructions printed on the avionics access panel. "So we'd plug that in there," Alex demonstrated.

"That's great! Thank you!" Thompson said enthusiastically. "I definitely owe you one. Now, what about the master control unit?"

Alex smiled at him "This must be how he'd gotten through the Academy," she found herself thinking.

Then she had a moment of clarity where she saw her relative place and position in the world.

With a sour expression on her face, Alex unplugged the inertial stabilization module.

Thompson watched her, absorbed in the technical details.

Alex got up off the deck, and walked outside with the inertial stabilizer.

"Okay. What?" Cruz asked, following her.

Once outside, Alex disassembled the device and took the gyroscopes out. She'd laboriously aligned them to the

rotation of New Canada while Cruz watched. She waggled the gyroscopes around ruining their alignment.

"Hey!" Cruz yelled. "What'd you do that for?"

"This shuttle is your job," Alex said simply. "I showed you how, now it's your turn." She pressed the disassembled device into his hands.

Cruz glared at her, his face momentarily showing anger. Then it passed like a shadow. "Ha, ha, ha," Cruz laughed heartily. "Yeah, sure. I get it. Thank you, Ensign."

Alex turned back towards her Tomcat. "Have fun."

"Ha, ha, ha," Cruz said, his insincerity wearing thin. "That's great."

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The rest of the day Cruz Thompson worked with grim efficiency on his type 5 shuttle. He seemed markedly less confused.

11. Flight Time

This was more like it. The Kestrel fighter planes used by Banshee Squadron were heavily field modified, but each changed had been created by pilots to make the planes better.

Green Flight swept over frozen tundra at breathtaking speed, and even more breathtaking altitude. Or rather, lack of altitude.

Alex grinned to herself that 6,000 years of human technology boiled down to a faster, slicker version of "Hide behind the big rock, sneak up on your prey and back shoot it when you get the shot."

To attack planetside targets entailed using the whole planet as cover to approach the target, flying fast and low to avoid sensor beams.

It took real flying. Alex was having a blast. An ice covered mountain loomed and then seemed to dance ever so slowly out of their way as the six fighter planes streaked around it.

They were traveling just at the edge of super sonic speed so that shockwaves wouldn't give them away.

Compared to warp drive or even plain old impulse drive they were moving dead slow, but being that close to

rocks, hills, ravines, and icy obstacles gave a sense of speed that impulse drives and warp speed could never match.

Alex checked her position compared to Sam Beckett. The quiet, shy woman was a whole different person in the cockpit. She attacked every obstacle and seemed to be daring it to reach out, before turning at the last moment and snickering "Sucker" as she flew past.

Alex was Sam's wingman, so she had to keep up. It was heavy work, but Alex was in heaven. This was real flying.

"Green One, Green Flight," Jazz Phoenix said over the comm. "We're entering the engagement zone. Count off, ready to attack."

"Green Two, taking it to you," Lee Carter said with a grin in her voice.

Green Three, wait for me," Sam Beckett said with an uncharacteristic giggle in her voice.

Cruz Thompson was Jazz Phoenix' Wingman. "Green Four. Give me some more," he said.

Morgan's accent was lilting, "Green Five, keepin' the blue side up."

Alex hesitated for a moment trying to think of something witty. Her mouth did it for her. "Green Six, standing by."

"Excellent," Phoenix encouraged her. "Let's go."

Alex had almost a quarter of a second to kick herself for not coming up with a good line before Sam rolled her plane into a huge glacial valley and roared along a frozen lake at almost two meters of altitude.

The valley was wide on the south side with a large frozen lake. It got narrower and seemed to climb steeply

into the mountains. Jumbled rocks guarded their privacy and maintained a foreboding watch that had gone on for centuries.

From a distance, Alex imagined that the Kestrel fighters of Banshee Squadron looked like hyperactive aggressive fireflies. Sort of Christmasy.

"Stay alert, Six. The approach is defended by disruptor cannon and missile emplacements," Beckett said. "We're first in, clearing a path for the rest. Arm phasers and fire as you get targets."

"Acknowledged, Green Three," Alex said. She didn't have time to worry about being witty. She activated the weapons systems on her plane and double-checked the training exercise lockouts, and then made sure her countermeasures canisters were visible to the control computer. No decoy would do a bit of good if you couldn't fire it.

Then Alex was into a hellish set of S-turns through a narrowing canyon. Here the ancient basalt seemed hostile and very sharp, glinting in the moonlight of New Canada's moon, the Moose.

As she struggled to avoid becoming a modern rock painting, Alex saw a flash. She barely managed to get the nose around to put a phaser beam into the holographic turret, without turning so much that she flew into the canyon wall.

As the holographic turret obediently exploded, Alex's heart thrill of victory was cut off by a screech from the warning system. A missile had locked on.

Guessing, Alex slapped the countermeasures panel for a flare and then deliberately got a touch too close to a wall

and barely escaped that. A bright flash behind her told her... something. Hopefully something good. Alex could feel the coppery taste of fear in her mouth. The missiles and turrets were holographic. The rocks, ice, and killing cold were very real. Apparently, the holomissiles tracked energy because the flare distracted that one.

As she righted her plane and tried to regain her equilibrium, Alex almost flew into the path of another beam. Only a quick, lucky feeling jerk got her around it. Alex relished killing that turret.

As she continued, Alex got into the rhythm of it. She began to swoop instead of jerking and her smile got wider.

Then at the top of the canyon, there was the target. Alex laughed. It was Frankenstein's Castle, or at least a good simulation of it. A baroque looking heavy beam weapon started to swing towards her, only to be peremptorily slagged by a beam from right above. Beckett swooped past Alex and pressed home the attack on the castle. Alex dove right in behind her.

They streaked past the Castle, having stripped it of half its point defense weapons, Alex could almost swear she saw the Mad Scientist and Igor shaking their fists at her.

IV - Kelly

12. Kelly

Vince Kelly strode into the pirate base like he owned it. This was not surprising. He did. Kelly dressed in conservative business attire, calculated to work with his rakish good looks to present an aura of technocratic success. He could blend in on any one of a dozen Federation and Orion worlds as a successful businessman on his way up in the world.

Kelly's chosen field of entrepreneurial success was unusual.

"So, Krezuk," he said, smiling. "What's the word?"

"We have taken a great prize," Krezuk smiled. Kelly would be proud.

"Oh? What prize is this?" Kelly asked blandly.

"We took the Federati Starliner City-of-Port-Royal," Krezuk said proudly.

"Ah," Kelly nodded. "I believe I have heard of this. Big ship was it?"

"At least three hundred mega credits, resale. I believe we can ransom the ship itself for a large pile of money," Krezuk grinned. "Let alone the passengers."

"Ahhhh, yes. The passengers." Kelly's smile was dazzling. "The creme de la creme of Earth society. I believe, Krezuk that you actually have a measurable fraction of Earth's economy itself hostage, just from the relatives of the people you took."

"Heh heh heh," Krezuk chuckled, imagining the piles of latinum.

Kelly's smile grew glittering. "I heard it on the news, you see."

"Heh, heh, heh," Krezuk smiled picturing fame as well as fortune, completely missing the point.

Kelly turned and walked towards his office. "Make sure the hostages are well cared for. They'll be your bargaining chips. Damaged goods don't resell as well."

"Huh...," Krezuk nodded. He hadn't actually mistreated any of the hostages. Much. Yet. However, he hadn't gone out of his way to make their stay pleasant either. After all, they were captives of a fierce, deadly and truly badass pirate clan. They shouldn't be having a good time. But when Kelly made a gentle suggestion, you snapped to. Or he snapped you.

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A priceless piece of Andorian crystal smashed itself against the wall with a harsh crack. Pieces flew everywhere.

Kelly's face was a mask of rage.

R'Zal, Kelly's Vulcan assistant waited through the emotional display dispassionately.

Gaining some control of himself, Kelly stomped over to his desk and took out two PADDs. "Get the smart list on the small raiders for a 'patrol' - sealed orders for when they get free to head for fallback Gamma," Kelly snapped.

"Rearrange the guard schedules. I want the stupid list on guard duty when the Marines get here," Kelly snarled. "Offer them bonuses for bravery and bloodshed."

R'Zal nodded.

"Once you have that in motion start cleaning the computers and physical plant," Kelly said.

R'Zal nodded. Kelly meant to erase with great thoroughness all records that could lead back to Kelly or be used to map his operations. Then R'Zal would carefully spray solvent in their rooms and working areas to dissolve DNA and other biological clues that Starfleet might use to track them.

Kelly breathed deeply getting control of his temper. "And leave Krezuk to me."

Except that she was used to such things, the tone in Kelly's voice would have made her shiver.

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Krezuk sipped his poisoned wine cluelessly.

The meal was excellent. Kelly fumed very silently. His cooks would be running for the last ship out now, having abandoned one of the most carefully arranged kitchens in the sector. It would be weeks before they had their kitchens set up properly to cook well again.

"To our success, my friend," Kelly lied smoothly.

"To our success," Krezuk said. He honestly thought he'd made Kelly's inner circle. Krezuk wasn't that stupid. Kelly was that good a liar.

13. To the Rescue

The USS Kitty Hawk drove through space firmly and quickly. A mothership on a rescue mission, no one was going to get between her civilians and her rescue.

Jazz went over the mission briefing again with her crew.

"Confidence is high. The Midas Array took this long range scan," Phoenix said. The screen lit up to show far, far too fuzzy a picture of a structure on an iceball world.

"We'll be the lead wave to take out point defense ahead of the assault shuttles," Vasser said tiredly.

"Making sure the assault shuttles get in and out safely is our main combat goal," Luke George said.

"Don't engage any heavy units - leave those for the escorts," Lee Carter said.

"We'll leave the ship and approach passively on a ballistic heading to mimic probes. Once over the horizon, we'll light up our engines, descend to the deck and approach from the northwest of the station, low to avoid the sensors."

"When will we be back aboard?" Jo Schmidt asked innocently.

Taking the straight line, Morgan Mason drawled, "Cain't tell you that, honey. It's classified."

Jazz Phoenix bit her lip. "Okay. You've got it. Let's go get ready."

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On the flight deck of the Kitty Hawk, the Banshees checked their planes one last time and made sure all necessary survival gear was aboard and working.

Across the big bay, green uniformed marines performed their own checks on weapons, equipment and violent boarding gear. The assault shuttles were almost as old as the Kestrel fighters were. Big rectangular boxes with a circular hatch right up front and a bulbous cockpit for the pilot. Plasma cutters on docking ring, arranged to punch a perfectly sized hole in even the toughest hull.

Starfleet security and medical moved among the Marines. Corpsmen and Specialists who would join the Marine Squads in the fighting on the base.

Boarding actions were insanely dangerous. Boarding actions with hostages so you couldn't use plasma grenades and main starship phaser strikes were even more so.

Colonel Tarik, the leader of the Marines approached across the bay. Jazz went to meet him. There was always a tension between the Marines and the pilots of Banshee Squadron. The Marines considered the pilots pampered prima donnas. The pilots seemed to look down on the Marines as ground pounding thugs.

Until the shooting started. Then the Marines looked to the pilots for fire support. The pilots of Banshee Squadron knew their success lay in the hands of the men and women on the ground.

Tarik stuck his hand out and Jazz took it. "Good luck, Commander," Tarik said, his Vulcanoid composure as solid as the duranium of the hull.

"Take care of yourself, Colonel," Jazz responded. "Good hunting."

Tarik smiled faintly. "An interesting turn of phrase. And you."

He turned to head back to his people.

"Okay, people!" Jazz called. "Let's get suited up and ready to ride!"

Dalton watched the exchange. She couldn't help wondering which of the Marines or Corpsmen wouldn't be coming back from their mission.

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The task forcedropped out of warp dangerously close to the planet. Starfleet didn't use cloaking devices. They had to achieve tactical surprise in other ways.

Alex, clad in her armored space suit, sat in her Kestrel, waiting to launch. The Kitty Hawk shuddered and then seemed to lean dangerously forward towards her nose.

Two Saber class starships, a Steamrunner and the ancient USS Kitty Hawk appeared in low orbit in a blaze of light. As they did, objects separated from them. Probes, meant to give the Starfleet ships a wide and more complete view of the proceedings.

As the tilting deck rolled back into its normal horizontal position, there was a banging thump and the Kestrel was flung out the open shuttle bay door. The Kestrel, powered down into stand-by mode, seemed to

tumble away from the ship. Alex gripped the internal handles tightly. It went against her every instinct to be deliberately out of control.

Alex watched the cold, white form of the iceball roll in front of her. The planet was nearly the same mass as Earth but floated abandoned and quiet, far, far away from its primary.

The fighter plane was in zero-g, the inertial dampeners that kept Alex alive during hard maneuvers powered down to avoid registering on the enemy sensor net.

There was a sharp orange flash. Alex gasped. Phaser fire. The sensors on the Kestrel were down for the same reason, running silent. Alex couldn't tell who was firing at whom. Were the Starfleet ships okay?

A hard white point of light blossomed and faded. A photon torpedo.

The drifting, slowly spinning plane sped along its path. Alex could do nothing but wait.

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Inside the pirate base, chaos reigned. Alarm klaxons bellowed. Pirates of all shapes and sizes ran.

Vince Kelly and R'Zal strode down the hallway quietly, calmly, and yet with purpose. They knew where they were going and what they were doing.

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In the Ops Center, Krezuk was sweating and trying hard not to show it. The pickets were getting pasted

quickly. When Starfleet could pin you into a straight-ahead fight, it was usually a foregone conclusion.

Krezuk winced as an Orion Raider brewed up and splattered itself across the sky. Why had Rann decided to go head to head with the Federation ship?

Krezuk looked at his options. More than half his fleet strength was out on patrol. Most of his ships were small raiders anyway.

There was absolutely no chance of backup. Other Orion colonies, pirate groups, and even the Botchok government itself would laugh in his face for even asking.

Therefore, the battle in orbit was lost. That left the battle for the base. Fortunately, he wasn't as badly screwed there. He could polarize the base hull and prevent transporters from working. Then he could have a standoff with the Starfleeters. They wouldn't dare use their heavy phaser cannon for fear of hurting the hostages.

Krezuk began to see the wisdom of treating the hostages well. They were much better bargaining chips for his freedom intact and untraumatized.

"Go find Mister Kelly," Krezuk said to a junior pirate named Kald.

Once Vince was in Ops, he'd come up with something brilliant and totally mean. Krezuk grinned. He might just get out of this yet.

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Kald was a young Orion and very earnest. He was new to pirating and the whole adventuring thing.

He quickly found Kelly and R'Zal heading towards some obscure storage areas near the back of the base.

"Your pardon, my lord," Kald said. Vince Kelly wasn't an Orion noble. But he could torture people as well as any Orion noble and better than most, so respect was paid.

Kelly looked at the young Orion blankly. "Yes?"

"With respect, sir, my lord Krezuk requests your presence in Ops."

Kelly nodded. "I bet he does. What's your name?"

"Kald, sire," Kald replied. Was it a good thing or a bad thing when Vince Kelly knew your name?

"Come along, Kald," Kelly said.

R'Zal quirked an eyebrow at Kelly but said nothing.

Kelly kept walking.

Kald hurried to keep up.

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The storeroom had absolutely nothing to make it different from any one of a hundred others in that base, and a dozen in that corridor.

Kelly walked right into it. The door hissed open. Kelly walked towards the back of the room where a services trunk fed air, water, energy and information through the base.

Kelly walked up to the conduits, pipes and technology and reaching out with sure moves, he triggered a hidden latch.

The fake services trunk went dark and slid aside revealing a doorway.

"A secret door!" Kald breathed.

"Of course," Kelly grinned, "What would a pirate base be without hidden passages? After you, Kald," Kelly gestured the Orion youth ahead.

Kald stepped forward curiously. Where did the passage go? What lay hidden beyond?

As Kald passed Kelly, Kelly made an odd shape with his hand and snapped a blow into Kald's neck.

Kald gurgled painfully. He couldn't breathe! He was choking!

Kelly slammed his elbow into Kald's temple. Kald flopped to the ground limply, unconscious and suffocating.

"Pirate lesson number one, Kald," Kelly said, stepping on the dying youth on his way past. "Dead men tell no tales."

As she stepped past Kald, R'Zal grabbed his collar and dragged him through the doorway. The hidden doorway slid shut and the fake technology lit back up, for all the world a vital piece of base infrastructure.

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As a fireworks show it was amazing. As a battle, it was frighteningly vague and random. Alex watched until her plane rolled around the planet away from where the Starfleet assault was happening.

The timer counted down and her fighter plane sprang to life. Now safely on the other side of the planet from the pirate base, the fighters of Banshee Squadron came to life.

They would maintain communications silence until after their first pass. Alex could see the angry firefly sparks

of some of the other fighters. But there was no telemetry from them.

Alex breathed a sigh of relief though. The channels broadcast by the big ships came through loud and clear. The task force was scratched up some but not seriously damaged - and the Orions still fighting in orbit were about finished.

Now it was the Banshees' turn. They'd do what fighters did. Put just the right amount of firepower in just the right place.

Alex turned her fighter nose down and advanced the throttles to full. Her Kestrel screamed out of the sky like a bird of prey.

Fresh scans of the base appeared on her screens. Having starships overhead was handy!

At the last minute, Alex yanked her plane out of the dive and screamed along a landscape so cold and so frozen it made the poles of New Canada look tropical. The stuff humans breathed was frozen on the ground as snow.

Dodging mountains and cliffs Alex found herself pacing another plane. Alex made a decision and throttled back a little. Who ever the other plane was, it was probably a more experienced pilot. Since this was her first combat run, Alex decided to play wingman and learn from a professional.

Then, clinging to her new wingman, Alex flew through the frozen night with more confidence.

It wasn't long before Banshee Squadron was most of the way back around towards the base, coming in low and hot. Alex flipped the switches on her control panel. Her

plane made sure it was her and then armed its weapons, pulse phasers and micro torpedoes.

Looking around, Alex could see the other sparks approaching. The rest of Banshee Squadron.

Then, seemingly too quickly, they were on top of the base. Alex locked her weapons onto a phaser cannon along the pirate base's north side and pressed the firing stud on her joystick. Two micro torpedoes thumped away from the plane. Then Alex was past the target and turning hard to come back around for another pass.

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In Ops, Krezuk cursed as several of his weapons turned red on his status screen.

"Fighters!" the sensor operator called. New symbols lit up on the tactical display - fighter planes.

Krezuk sneered "Fighters won't last long against our raiders!"

"Sir, our raiders are all engaged against the starships," the sensor officer pointed out.

Krezuk stopped sneering. That was bad. Where was Kelly?

Thumbing his intercom button to all-call, Krezuk spoke. "We are under attack by fighters. Three bars of gold pressed latinum apiece for each confirmed kill."

It was an extravagant use of money, but Krezuk was starting to have a very bad feeling.

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"Green Flight, sound off!" Jazz barked.

"Green Two, I'm good," Carter said.

"Green Three, leave some for me," Sam Beckett grinned.

"Green Four, I'm at the door," Cruz said.

"Green Five, givin' 'em hell," Morgan called out.

Alex rolled through a turn, and winced as an orange phaser beam splashed off her front shield, weakening it and stopping inches before her cockpit window. She checked her screens for missiles, and dropped a flare anyway, just to be sure. She had three targets in strike range. Heavy phaser? Point defense phaser? Some funky looking missile tube thingie? Alex locked onto the point defense phaser, knowing it was the natural enemy of the Marine assault shuttles.

As she did so, the hours spent thinking of things that rhymed with "six" evaporated like the fog on a summer's morning. Alex said, "Green, uh... Six, yeah, (grunt)." She fired two micro torpedoes and threw a couple of phaser pulses in the direction of the missile thrower thingie on general principle. "I'm... uhhh...." as she swept past the base again, she noticed shuttle bay doors opening.

"Be advised," Alex, said deadpan. "Hostiles launching, 278 degrees true."

Jazz quickly switched channels. "Oh-One, we have hostiles launching. Can you provide cover?"

Luke George came back with his own deadpan. He sounded like he was at work in an office somewhere. "Roger that, Green One. You stay on target, we'll provide cover."

Jazz switched back to Green channel. "Orange flight has our back, stay on target."

"Roger," Carter replied.

"On target," Sam said.

"Yes, sir," Cruz said.

"Pressin' the attack," Morgan said.

"Green Six," Jazz said.

Alex was sweeping around in a long turn to the south of the pirate base trying to spot what was launching. She turned back in her seat expecting to be chided for poor comm protocol. "Go ahead, Green One."

"Nice catch."

Alex's heart flew. "Roger, Green One."

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Alex Dodged around a Ferengi Shuttle Pod that looked like it had Klingon Heavy Disruptor cannon welded haphazardly onto it. From above and behind her, microtorpedoes tore the idiotic machine apart.

Alex focused. The last point defense phaser was located in an odd angle of the base hull, making it frustratingly difficult to hit. The metal all around the phaser was scarred and mangled by phaser and micro-torp hits, but no one had managed to take out the actual weapon yet.

Taking a risk, Alex throttled back and slowed down relative to the base, drifting along at half speed, she rolled right up to the point defense phaser when they both fired at the same time.

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Alex rolled away from the exchange uncertainly. Her plane had red lights all over what was left of the panel. Her cockpit windshield was smashed. She looked at herself and found that her armored space suit was scorched and crunchy in places.

A small light blinked to let her know her urine container was full.

"Green Six, report status," Jazz barked.

"Uh, Green Six. I'm a little singed but I'm okay," Alex said.

"I can see you have a hull breach from here, Six," Jazz said.

"Yes, Ma'am, but my suit is holding fine," Alex said.

Jazz grinned to herself. Fortunately the enemy shuttles were all down, and Alex's kamikaze run ended the threat the base posed to the Marine assault shuttles.

"Green Four, escort Green Six back to the Kitty Hawk," she decided. That would get her two greenest pilots back aboard ship and out of harm's way.

"Aye, Skipper," Cruz said.

"Aw," Alex said. Then she caught herself.

"Acknowledged, Green One, returning to base."

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As the two fighters rose gently above the surface of the ice world, they passed the assault shuttles heading the other way. Alex didn't see much but sparks moving in formation. They looked stately and formal.

Cruz maintained a stony silence. He was faintly irritated that Alex had a better kill score than he did. Obviously, the girl was buffaloed by his brute competence and felt that she had something to prove.

Motion caught his eye. Dialing his sensors in, Cruz spotted a sweet star yacht skipping along the frozen surface. Obviously, it was hoping to escape the way the fighters came in.

"Hey, Six," Cruz said. "Check it out. Three o'clock, almost under us."

"Umm, I don't have much left in the way of screens," Alex said. "What have you got?"

"Looks like a Bearcat class yacht, trying to sneak out the back door."

"Umm. Can we take him?" Alex asked. She didn't know the stats on a Bearcat class yacht off the top of her head.

"I can. Moving to engage," Cruz said.

With that, green Four nosed back down toward the planet and streaked away.

Alex grimaced and rolled into a dive after him. Hopefully her plane would hold together just a little while longer.

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The yacht bucked as the fighter peppered it with phaser pulses.

R'Zal returned fire. The green beam of a disruptor splattered off the shield of the Federation fighter plane.

"They have upgraded their shielding," R'Zal said quietly. "It will take a few more moments to destroy him."

"We don't have it," Kelly said. "Our own shields are almost gone."

R'Zal raised her eyebrow. "They have been upgrading their weapons as well."

"No one flies stock Kestrels any more," Kelly said. "I'm going to jump to warp."

"We're too close to the planet," R'Zal said.

Kelly started setting up the jump. "I think we can do if we time it just right."

R'Zal sat back as her weapon deactivated, drained of power. "There's something-" she started.

"Don't," Kelly snapped.

She looked at him, affronted.

"I turn you on. I know. Working," he said.

R'Zal blushed deep green. She could kill without changing expression but becoming emotionally vulnerable was a new experience for her.

Kelly shot her a grin "If we live through this, I'll take you up on it."

R'Zal blushed more deeply, but she smiled back.

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"His shields are almost down!" Cruz howled, "I almost have him!" His plane careened through the black sky at reckless speed. Cruz maxed his ship out staying with the fleeing yacht and exchanging potshots with her.

"Help me out here, Six!" Cruz cried, "This is a bigwig! I know it!"

"I don't have weapons lock!" Alex replied. "My sensors are fried!"

"Dammit!" Cruz cursed. All his missiles were gone and his fixed pulse phasers made hitting the erratically flying ship difficult.

In a burst of light and weird radiation, the yacht leapt to warp speed.

"Going to warp!" Cruz called. "I can stay with him!"

"Kitty Hawk to Green Four, negative. Disengage pursuit," a new voice sounded over the comm channel.

"But I can catch him!" Cruz yelled.

"Look at your sensors again, Green Four. There's no way. Besides, you have a wounded bird to escort in."

Cruz knew what his sensors said. The yacht easily outpaced the Kestrel in warp speed flight. He just didn't want to believe it. A moment of rage flared through Thompson, and he pounded his fist on the panel of his plane. "DAMNIT!!!"

Then hanging his head Cruz said, "Acknowledged, Kitty Hawk. Green Four and Green Six on approach."

"You're cleared to dock, Green Six and Green Four."

=^=

As the Yacht swept through warp space, Kelly looked at his sensor readings with a glare. "Banshee Squadron," he said the name firmly.

14. The Hard Work

Alex breathed deeply and tried to stop shuddering. The medics almost threw her to the deck in their eagerness. Sensors poked here, there, and everywhere.

"How do you feel?" the blue-shirted medic asked.

"Like I'm going to throw up," Alex said.

"Good," the medic said. "That's just the adrenaline. You'll be fine."

Alex smiled wanly. "Thank you."

=^=

If she'd stopped to remember, Alex would have understood why the medics were in such a hurry.

There was too much to do. Voices yelled. Medical teams moved with efficiency. Some security teams covered with well-practiced ease.

However, mostly people ran around and did their best to be useful.

Alex started a stretcher-bearer, carrying wounded hostages, Marines, Starfleet, and pirates.

Then Alex found herself joining a pig pile restraining a Klingon/Romulan man who didn't think the fighting was over yet.

Then Alex found herself pelting through the USS Kitty Hawk with medical supplies critical to someone's life.

Time seemed to become a disjointed mass of one crisis and then the next. Alex knew on some level she was dog-tired, but couldn't take the time to really feel it. She just kept running, doing, and trying to be useful.

Each time a gentle breeze announced the landing of another shuttle, Alex quietly prayed it would be the last. Each shuttle disgorged worse and worse horrors.

As the most recent shuttle landed, Alex ran up to see what use she could be.

Dirty Marines struggled with a handful of kicking, fighting Orions.

A corporal threw a weapon at Alex. "Help us cover these guys!" he barked. "Look threatening!"

Alex, a slim blond haired girl wearing half an armored vacc suit took the unfamiliar weapon. Concentrating, she located the control panel and pressed a finger to it. The black plastic rifle looking thing scanned, and then asked the ship if she was an authorized person. The Kitty Hawk gave a short confirmation. In less than the blink of an eye, the weapon agreed that Alex was in fact a member of Starfleet and authorized to use it. It came to life, showing three quarters of a charge, and a setting of disrupt.

Alex quickly slid the power down to heavy stun and then covered the Orions, doing her best to look mean.

One large one was over-muscling three Marines. It was a very close contest. "Hit 'im!" one of the Marines called. "HIT 'IM!"

Alex closed and smashed the Orion in the face with the butt of the rifle. He started bleeding green and cursing in a language Alex didn't know.

"Good!" the Marine wrestled an arm down. "Again!"

Alex pounded the Orion until he stopped struggling. It took a while.

=^=

Alex found herself part of an impromptu security squad dragging an Orion in the remains of an expensive suit into a briefing room.

Alex did her best to look mean and tough. In fact, she looked about ready to throw up.

Copying a Security Specialist, Alex stood to the other side of the door. The weapon confused her for a second. It was a little more than a meter long. Alex compromised by going to shoulder arms, a position she hadn't used since boot camp, years ago.

Lieutenant Egeira, Ops officer of the Kitty Hawk, looked at the Orion carefully. She did a much better job of looking technocratically threatening. "Name?"

"Krezuk," the Orion answered sullenly.

"Who's base was this?" Egeira asked.

Krezuk blinked at her "You really don't know?"

Egeira looked placidly back at the Orion and stayed quiet.

"Oh, you have no idea what sort of mess you've just caused," Krezuk chuckled.

"Tell me," Egeira said.

"I want my advocate," Krezuk said.

"One will be provided to you, as soon as available," Egeira said.

Krezuk squinted. "Okay. Then just one more thing and this interview is over. That base belonged to Vince Kelly-AAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

As the name of his superior left his mouth, Krezuk screamed and kept screaming.

"What? What is it?" Egeira asked.

Medical crewmen stepped forward.

Krezuk's screams were agonized and shrill. He kicked and flailed. Alex winced. She could hear his vocal cords shredding, but Krezuk didn't seem to notice.

The medic stared at her scanner "Something in his nervous system! I've never seen anything like it!"

"Get him to sickbay!" Egeira yelled.

The medics grabbed the screaming, thrashing Orion. "Help us!"

Alex joined in carrying the agonized Orion.

He wasn't fighting them; he was just flailing desperately to get away from whatever was hurting him.

It still made hauling him down the corridor and into sickbay a chore.

=/\=

Krezuk whimpered. He was restrained and had three different types of neural suppressors on. Still he wriggled and whimpered.

Doctor Xyaor, the Chief Medical Officer of the Kitty Hawk, reported to the Captain, Ramsey Chong. "Some sort of nanotechnology." Xyaor looked angry and horrified. "It's

bound up in his nervous system and neural tissue. When it activated it triggered literally every nerve in his body to feel pain."

"What can you do?" Chong asked.

"Nothing. The nanites are integrated with his neural cells. If I take them out, he loses his whole nervous system and brain. I'd have to rebuild every nerve and neuron in his body," Doctor Xyaor said. "He lives in a literal universe of pain now, and there's nothing I can do."

Chong stared at his doctor in horror.

Alex stared at Krezuk. His face burned itself into her nightmares.

15. Back Home

Everything seemed gray to Alex. She listlessly tossed her bag on the bed and sat down. They had the rest of the day off. In the morning bright and early, they'd begin the task of ferrying the Kestrels down from the Kitty Hawk. Then, Commander Phoenix promised, lots of boring, tedious labor inspecting the planes, tearing them down and making any repair necessary.

Her own ship was already partly disassembled. The deck crews on the Kitty Hawk removed the damaged parts of her ship and replaced what they could from their own stocks.

Alex stared out the window at the mustard colored side of the hangar.

Try as she might, she couldn't raise any enthusiasm for the idea. Before, the notion of rebuilding her own ship to suit her would have filled her with rainbows and smiles.

Alex tried but could not care about the Kestrel fighter. Somewhere deep inside, Alex felt something was wrong. She found she couldn't care too much about that, either.

Her doorbell rang. Alex breathed deeply. "Come in."

Sam Beckett came in. "Hey."

Alex didn't look at her "Hey."

"Lee sent me to get you," Sam said.

Alex breathed deeply. "Okay." She started to move.

Sam's head tilted. "Lee was right."

Alex looked at Sam. "About what?"

"You're out of it," Sam said quietly.

Alex blinked. It was true. Moreover, someone noticed.

Alex felt embarrassment war with... something else. "Uh..."

Alex knew she wasn't a good liar. She never saw the need to be. "Yeah."

Sam's face softened. "I'm sorry."

Alex peered at the older pilot. "About what?"

"I didn't notice. That was your first combat, wasn't it?"

Alex nodded.

Sam gestured, "C'mon."

"Where?"

"Ice cream."

=^=

Alex sat down in Lee's office. Morgan was there. So were Jo, Kim and Sam. Sam went over to the replicator.

"What's your poison, Alex?"

Alex tried to care about ice cream. "Uh... whatever."

"Triple fudge chocolate chip coming up," Sam said.

"Okay."

Lee sat in a couch next to Kim and Jo, sipping on a cup of something that smelled like hot chocolate's older sister.

"How are you doing, Alex?"

"Okay, I guess," Alex lied instinctively.

Lee peered at her.

"It was her first combat," Sam said. The replicator hummed.

Lee nodded. Then she made a decision. "Morgan, you first."

Morgan took a deep breath. "It wasn't as bad this time. I was scared, but that's going away."

Lee nodded gently.

"I didn't even think about the people this time," Morgan said. "The ships were just things. It wasn't until later that I started wondering..."

Alex stared at Morgan.

Morgan's lip quivered a little. "Then I went and talked to the passengers. That really helped."

Lee nodded. "Me, too. It really helps when I can attach a face to the people I helped."

Sam handed Alex a bowl of deep brown chocolatey chocolate ice cream. "You know it's rare for us to have it be that cut and dried. We don't always get to visit the rescues."

Morgan sighed. "The Commander takes care of us."

Lee nodded. "Any nightmares on the way home?"

Morgan thought about it. "Not so much this time."

Alex stared. "You had nightmares?"

The women looked at Alex.

Morgan nodded. "I read some psychology stuff about it, but I swear it was just so much self-referential gobbeldy gook."

Lee looked directly at Alex. "We just engaged in combat, Alex. People died. I don't know about you but that hurts me every time. I had nightmares for some time after I started."

Sam nodded. "Me too."

Kim Tycho raised her hand and said, "I had crying jags. I don't know if I had nightmares."

Lee, Morgan and Jo nodded understandingly.

Alex found tears running down her face. "I ... You mean...."

Kim and Jo got up and came over to Alex. They hugged her.

"What you're feeling is perfectly normal," Lee said. "We meet when we get home safe and talk it out."

Alex started crying. "I don't know if I want to do this any more."

Kim and Jo hugged harder. "No one says you have to," Jo said.

Sam sat down and swallowed a big spoonful of her own chocolate ice cream. "Boys."

Lee rolled her eyes but smiled.

Alex looked over Kim's shoulder. "Huh?"

"Boys think you should hold it all inside. Be tough. Be an iron man," Sam sniffed. "I think pilot training should include how to deal with feelings rather than ignoring them."

"I... I was SO SCARED!" Alex found herself saying.

Kim stood up and nodded. "Me too."

"Really?" Alex asked.

Lee spoke. "You learn how to deal with it. It seems to grow a little less as you do these missions more often. As far as I know, Max doesn't feel it. She's the only one."

Alex found herself bawling.

Jo rocked her gently.

=/\=

The next morning surprised Alex. She didn't enjoy it. She was on top of her bed, diagonally across it. Her mouth tasted like a mouse crawled into it and died. A chocolate flavored mouse.

The doorbell sounded again. "Uhhhhh!" Alex said.

She vaguely remembered that after a good cry the ice cream sounded better. When Lee pulled a bottle out from under her desk, Alex was suspicious, but it turned out that whiskey dribbled over Super-punch-in-the-mouth chocolate ice cream worked just fine.

Alex recalled getting much drunker, much faster than she expected. Her head exploded. The headache had always been there but waited for the embarrassment to really dig in.

"Oohhhhhh." Alex rolled over.

The doorbell always sounded subtle and gentle before. Now it sounded like a large man hitting a large gong next to her head. "C'min!" she tried to yell. It came out a squeak.

The door opened. Lee Carter was there.

Alex tried to leap to her feet. She recalled vaguely swearing her undying love for her True Sisters in Banshee Squadron. Embarrassment warred with the hangover.

"It's okay, okay, okay," Lee said.

"Oh, God," Alex moaned.

"Drink this," Lee said, pressing a bottle into Alex's hand.

Obligingly Alex drank. It was a liter of orange juice. It tasted good and washed away the dead chocolate mouse.

After slugging a healthy portion of orange juice, Alex found something else in her hand.

"Aspirin. Swallow them."

Alex obeyed. The aspirin tasted nasty. She chewed the bitter tablets noisily and washed the horrible taste down with more orange juice.

Lee's eyes shined. "It's okay just to swallow them. Chewing them makes it worse."

"Bleah," Alex commented. "What are those for, Commander?"

"Old witch doctory for hangovers," Lee grinned.

"Ugh," With the majority of the physical misery fading the embarrassment hit Alex full force.

"The rule is, what's said in that office stays in that office," Lee said.

Alex looked at Lee with gratitude. "Thank you."

Lee nodded. "We've all been there Alex. One more thing."

Alex tried to look attentive. It was easier.

"You have to repair the plane before you can decide whether to go ahead and quit the Banshees," Lee said.

Alex nodded. "I can do that."

"See you downstairs."

16. Know Your Enemy

Two weeks later, Alex was under her plane. The interface between the new master control computer and the engine control unit was fighting her. The engines and their controller were an eighty-year-old design, and the new master control computer was this year's vintage. It seemed that they were designed not just to not work together but also to be actively hostile to each other.

Alex stopped fighting and laid her head back and thought furiously. Was there enough room for a go-between computer? How would that affect signal travel times?

Cruz Thompson nudged her foot. "Dalton. There's a briefing in the main mess."

Alex slid her roller out from under the plane. Her glance at Thompson turned into a glare. He was in uniform and clean. He'd waited until the last minute before informing her of the briefing.

"C'mon. You don't want to be late." He wandered towards the front of the hangar.

Alex rolled to her feet and considered bouncing her hydro-spanner off the back of Thompson's head. She took a deep breath. He might think that meant she liked him.

Putting the spanner back into her toolbox, Alex grinned. In her imagination, a green flash surrounded Thompson while he burred, "You like me! You really like me!" as he disintegrated forever.

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The main mess was arranged in rows like a classroom. At the front, Max Vasser stood. Another officer, one Alex didn't know, was sitting up front near Max.

Max was tense. Alex didn't know exactly why.

Alex was the last one to find a seat. She sat towards the front of the classroom.

"Listen up please," Max, said. She pointed a control at the big screen behind her. The screen lit up to show a face. Alex thought the face was handsome in a kind of blonde Transylvanian way.

"This is Vince Kelly," Max explained. "He's the guy who ran that base we hit last month. The Federation wants Kelly on multiple counts of murder, grand theft, kidnapping, coercion, and other heinous crimes. He also has warrants out for his arrest among the Orions, the Romulans, and other worlds."

"Not the Klingons?" Luke George asked.

"Three Klingon Warlords that we know of would attack Vince Kelly in person on sight," Max replied. "Their forces have a shoot to kill order on Kelley."

"Popular guy," Lee said.

"He has 15 bricks of gold pressed latinum on his head as a bounty," Vasser said. "He is also in the Ferengi Business Directory as a freelance mercenary and assassin."

Alex squinted. Jo asked the question for her. "So why doesn't someone call his ad in the Ferengi Directory, set up a meeting and capture him for the reward, or kill him?"

"There have been five attempts at that. All failed," Vasser said.

"I almost had the guy!" Cruz Thompson howled. "He was that Orion yacht!"

"I doubt that," the man at the front of the room said. "Kelly's smarter than that. We looked at your gun scanner records. We think you came close to nailing one of his executive assistants. "

"Who are you, Sir?" Cruz asked, semi-belligerently.

"Call me Commander... West," the man drawled.

"How do you know who was in that yacht, Commander West?" Cruz asked, emphasizing his faux-respectful tone.

"Kelly has an amazing sense of when to flee," West explained. "He consistently escapes before anyone falls on him with a big hammer. Starfleet Intelligence, Orion Assassins Guild, the Tal Shiar, the Ferengi Better Business Bureau. All the big hitters in the quadrant have taken a run at him. He always leaves a bunch of saps to take the heat for him, but he's always gone before we get there."

West smiled patronizingly at Cruz. "The chances of a green ensign in an operational unit on his first combat mission getting a shot at Vince Kelly are astronomical. No one's that lucky."

Cruz didn't like to hear that, but didn't have anything to say in return and so sat back with a sour expression.

Max returned to her briefing.

=/\=

On the way out of the mess-turned-classroom, Carter stopped Phoenix. "Why is Max researching Vince Kelly?"

"You know Max. She hates to take no for an answer," Phoenix said.

Carter peered at Jazz Phoenix. "You think that was Kelly in that yacht?"

Phoenix looked to see who was around. "Doesn't matter. It was his base and that hostage raid got up Max's nose."

"We're not going to start bounty hunting are we?" Carter asked.

Phoenix shook her head. "No. We're on call for Starfleet Command just like always. Tell me something, if Max digs up a lead on Kelly are you going to pass it off, or do you want him in your sights?"

Carter shrugged. "I'm here to shoot them what needs shooting, Commander. I'm not picky."

"Well, relax. It's Max's hobby now. We won't be seeing Vince Kelly again."

"I hope you're right."

V - Intermission

17. Girl Stuff

The air was faintly cold; bring just a touch of awareness to the tips of Alex's ears and nose. The trees and bushes seemed to fight back against the cold becoming riotous and aggressive. The buildings of the public commerce areas of Serenity City were modern and generic. Alex didn't see the generations of ergonomic engineering that went into making them friendly and accommodating.

Alex sighed deeply and trudged along with her friends. They had mapped the shops and malls of Serenity City with military precision. Now they were just sweeping for targets of opportunity.

Alex was about bored out of her mind.

Kim Tycho sidled up next to her. "You don't look like you're having fun."

"Meh. Shopping," Alex said. Alex liked to decide what she wanted - locate it, go there, get it and go home. Wandering around at random was too much like work.

On the other hand, it beat another day under her Kestrel and the Tomcat. But not by much.

"Aren't you excited?" Kim asked. "It's only the biggest dance all year."

Alex rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on."

Kim shrugged, sounded a little defensive. "It's nice to have something to look forward to."

Alex smiled. "You mean someone?"

Kim blushed. "No... not entirely."

"Surrree you don't."

Kim smiled. "Well, okay. But doesn't it just sound like fun? I mean a big social, music-filled *event*."

"It sounds like work," Alex grouched.

Kim shook her head. "You don't know what fun is."

Alex smiled. "I know exactly what fun is. Flying tight formations at high speed is fun. Rolling, spinning, accelerating and looping. That's fun. This is..."

Kim arched her eyebrow. "What is it?"

Alex searched for the word and for the third time didn't come up with anything better. "Girl stuff."

Kim blinked slowly at Alex. "Girl stuff?"

Alex shrugged helplessly. "That's not... what I meant..."

Kim grinned. "I don't know if anyone's pointed this out to you, Alex."

Alex looked at her.

"You ARE a girl."

=/\=

"Let us see, let us see!" Morgan ordered.

Alex stepped out of the dressing room, blushing furiously.

Morgan, Jo and Kim scanned her with clinical detail.

The dress felt totally odd. Alex didn't know if it was because the dress was totally odd or if it was because she didn't wear dresses most of the time.

"Naw," Morgan said. "See what it's doing to her backside?"

Jo tilted her head. "Sort of."

Kim sighed. "You're right."

"What?" Alex asked, looking around to see. "What's it doing to my backside?"

"Try the next one, honey," Morgan said. "I think it'll work better."

Alex peered at Morgan intently.

"Trust Auntie Morgan," she waved absently. "'Sides, apparently I'm Green Flight's fashion consultant. So you jes' listen and we'll set 'em on their ears."

Alex thought about it carefully. Then, picking up the next item of clothing, she returned to the dressing booth.

=/\=

"What do you think, Alex?" Morgan asked.

Alex nodded vaguely at Jo. "Uh huh."

Morgan looked at her coldly.

After several beats Alex became aware that something was wrong. "Sorry, what?"

"Input, Ensign. Now. We spent time on you, now it's your turn."

Alex looked at Morgan carefully. Seeing no way out of it, she looked at Jo.

"Oh no," Alex shook her head. "With your coloring, Jo, you want to go blue. Solid colors. Go for a classic cut."

"Oh?" Morgan said challengingly.

Jo peered at Alex.

"Why?" Kim asked.

"It's hard to match the blond coloring right. Blue gives her a leg up," Alex explained. "A classic cut in solid colors allows her body to do the work. She's got the body for it. The clothes shouldn't compete for attention."

Morgan grinned, surprised.

"Girl stuff, huh?" Kim said wryly.

"You think so?" Jo checked her own backside carefully. Was there something there she wasn't seeing?"

"Your principles are sound, but the environment is going to be dancing, and the lights are going to dim as we go along," Morgan explained. "She'd disappear as the night wears on."

Alex squinted. "Oh, I don't think so."

Morgan looked again.

Jo bit her lip. "You think I have a nice body?"

18. Solstice Dance

The night was chilly and dark. Moose and Squirrel, the two moons of New Canada looked like they were made of ice.

The convention center of Serenity City was alive with lights and people. It felt bouncy. The feeling was catchy. Alex felt a small twinge of excitement, as if anything might happen.

Inside the convention center, the temperature was noticeably warm, from all the people inside. Conversations were loud and numerous. The music formed a background to the noise.

Alex checked her coat into the coat room. An older woman smiled at her. "Have fun."

"Thank you," Alex said, quietly.

"There's the bar," Morgan said. "Time t' wet our whistles."

Alex, Kim and Jo followed her to the bar. Synthelol was flowing freely. Real booze cost credits, but not many.

Alex decided to stick to her standby, beer, and darned little of that. It seemed like all of Serenity City was there, dressed to the nines. Alex felt lost, excited, and pretty, and scared all at the same time.

The convention center was a swirl of happy faces.

Jo looked about ready to flee. "Have you ever seen so many people?"

Kim smiled. It seemed to radiate from her. "Isn't it great?"

Morgan swept by with a plastic cup of something that smelled reasonably toxic. "Let's go see what's playing."

=^=

The dance floor was dark which was strange because there were so many lights. Colored lights flashed and swept across the crowd. The music was very loud in here. Alex felt a bounce in her step. The music wanted to sweep her away. She grinned.

The dance hall was huge. Few starships had a shuttle bay that big. Scattered here and there, tables held water, glasses and napkins. Large trashcans closely escorted the tables. Peering around, Alex blinked. Over various places along the walls, pictographic men and women - the common sign for restrooms. They were neon, in the same orange and green shades as the rest of the decor. They were dancing, too, in their spots above the bathroom doors.

The table spots were lit, dimly. In between, a dark ocean of people roiled. Many somewhere close to the beat of the music.

Luke George slid up next to Morgan and held out a hand. She smiled and set her drink down on the handy table. She took his hand. They whirled away into the dancing crowd.

Jo, Kim and Alex looked at each other exchanging grins.

=^=

Cruz Thompson walked up. He locked eyes with Alex. A thrill of dread loomed over her.

At the last minute, Thompson turned and lit up his grin. He radiated charm like a subspace beacon.

"Jo. Would you like to dance?"

Alex felt her eyes narrow. The urge to hiss and throw things at Cruz's head was becoming stronger every day. She looked at Jo.

Jo was flustered and confused. She didn't know what to make of Cruz.

Alex took a deep breath and bit her tongue. Jo was a big girl. She could handle herself.

"Ummm..." Jo said.

Thompson took her hand. He radiated warm affection. He winked, "C'mon. It'll be okay."

"Alright," Jo said weakly.

Thompson expertly whirled Jo away into the crowd.

Alex looked at Kim. Kim wasn't any happier than she was.

"We may have to arrange a tragic accident," Alex hissed.

Kim looked at her, shocked for a moment. Then a low grin spread across her face. "Yeah. A painful accident."

They giggled and began plotting.

Then a voice said, "Excuse me."

Alex turned to see Henry Mark.

"Would you like to dance?" Mark asked.

Truth to tell Alex didn't especially want to dance with Mark, but she wanted to dance.

"Okay," she said.

=^=

Two songs later, Kim, Alex and Jo returned to the table to get some water. Alex was hoping for a new dance partner as well.

"Look there," Kim said.

Sam Beckett came through the main door. She was stunning in a full-length black velvet dress. Alex gasped. Beckett always was quiet on the ground, shy. She never dressed up and never tried to draw attention to herself. Alex didn't realize until right then that Sam was, in fact, beautiful. It was an amazing sight.

Sam almost turned. Lee Carter and Jazz Phoenix flanked her. Alex grinned. Lee and Jazz were subtly dragging Sam into the dance.

Alex stepped forward to help. To help Sam, or to help Lee and Jazz?

Alex stopped in front of Becket. "Lieutenant! You're so beautiful! I'm glad to see you here!"

"You're a total knockout in that dress!" Kim enthused.

"Wow," Jo said, impressed.

Jazz smiled an evil smile. "See?" she whispered into Sam's ear.

Lee looked around. "Boys. Where are the boys?"

Sam pasted an extravagantly false smile on her face. "I'm having so much fun!"

=^=

Alex saw Kim dancing with a man in a Starfleet Engineering uniform. His name tag said "Garak," She'd have to ask Kim about the guy later. Kim seemed to have gravitated towards him as a dance partner.

=^=

Later, Alex danced with Luke George. He was rounder, shorter and hairier than Alex pictured a Starfleet Officer being but he made up for it with confidence.

As they danced, Alex found herself enjoying the feeling of being next to a male. Alex didn't trust this feeling. It wasn't new to her. But it had been more than a year since her last date.

After the song was over Alex nodded politely and backed away from George. The tension was fun. But not with him.

=^=

Later, Alex saw Jazz and Commander West dancing a smoky tango. Alex was caught between being amused at the way the tension between them was working out, and being sort of wistful. She wanted a tango partner too.

=^=

As Alex sipped more water, she reflected. She was enjoying the tension in the air, and the dancing. She

resolved to do something to shore up her sagging social life, later.

Now it was time for some just plain fun.

A tap on her shoulder.

Alex turned to see a short, boyish figure in a Starfleet uniform. Ensign pins. Science department. His nametag said "Gray." The patch on his arm said "USS Elsinore."

He held out his hands invitingly. He seemed faintly scared. Alex smiled wryly. The music was too loud to make conversation easy or very meaningful.

"Well why not?" Alex said to herself. This time she focused on the music and just having fun.

=^=

As they danced, Alex saw Sam Becket and Conn Piper. They were dancing like old friends. Piper was calmly beaming. Sam looked comfortable for the first time that evening.

=^=

The cold air was bracing and refreshing. Alex walked around the enormous hatbox of the Serenity City convention center and thought aimlessly.

Behind the convention center, the lights were fewer and the star-speckled sky over New Canada was visible.

Alex stared, seeing the pretty, but no real detail.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" A voice said.

Alex started and turned. It was Ensign Gray. He was approaching from the other direction.

"The stars, I mean," Gray said, hastily. "The view here. It's... pretty."

Alex squinted at the short science officer "Are you following me?"

Gray was confused. "No. I was just taking a walk. Clearing my head."

Alex was acutely aware of two things. She wasn't carrying a weapon. Not so much as a harsh note from her mother. Secondly, she felt like this Ensign Gray felt like the last person in the world who'd hurt her.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Dexter Gray. I'm from the USS Elsinore."

"I'm Alex Dalton," Alex said.

"Nice to meet you, Alex."

"You like the stars, huh?" Alex asked.

Gray looked back up into the sky and sighed happily. "I'm an astrophysicist and a science officer on a starship. Yes, ma'am, you could say I like the stars."

Alex grinned in the dark. He was cute in a goofy, harmless way.

VI - Relief Mission

19. Relief Mission

Starbase 901 was a huge collection of geometric shapes that seemed to coalesce randomly. It was an ellipsoid that had a bad case of spires and cubes.

From the inside, the starbase was a collection of broad hallways, big chambers, technology and people hurrying.

Banshee Squadron docked with the station at an old fighter bay add-on module that was new when the Kestrels were new.

A long turbo lift ride deposited the pilots of Green Flight and O-Flight in a generic hallway - their PADDs led them to a briefing room set up like an amphitheater.

Matthew Cross was thin and blond. His eyes were piecing blue. His collar had commander's pips.

"Mulluran forces have invaded the G'Kra Republic." The big screen in the briefing room showed scans of assault ships landing with blasters firing wildly into a cityscape while green people fled in all directions.

"We're part of the relief force," Cross explained.

Henry Mark looked confused. "The relief force?"

Cross nodded "The Zeon Defense Force defeated the Mulluran invasion and liberated the G'Kra, but the war left horrible destruction."

"What's our job?" Lee Carter asked.

"Shuttle pilots. We need people to deliver relief supplies and do medical evacuations," Cross-said.

Lee leaned back and sighed. "Oh. Real work."

Jazz shot her an irritated glance.

Cross nodded. "I am afraid so."

=/\=

The auxiliary shuttle bay was brightly lit. Engineering crews worked briskly on a motley collection of shuttlecraft.

Jazz stopped dead in her tracks, Banshee Squadron following suit.

Cross called, "Lieutenant T'Skall."

A Vulcan lieutenant in engineering colors approached. "Commander Cross. Your shuttles are ready."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Matthew Cross said. Turning to Jazz, he said, "This is Lieutenant T'Skall, of Starbase 901's engineering staff."

"We've met," Jazz said.

T'Skall raised an eyebrow. "Live long and prosper, Commander."

Cross said, "Commander Phoenix, have your people each draw a shuttle from our collection and take them over to the Sutherland."

Jazz replied, "We're on it, Commander."

Alex saw horrified looks exchanged among her compatriots.

Jazz walked briskly over to a weather-beaten art deco civilian cargo shuttle. "Luke, this one's yours. Inspect it and give me a report in half an hour."

Luke George smiled and said, "A Tango 1138. I used to have one as a kid."

Ignoring him, Jazz walked to the next in the collection, a weather-beaten Starfleet Type 6 shuttle. "Lee, your baby. Same deal."

Lee Carter saluted smartly, grinning. "Yes, Commander."

"Knock it off," Jazz growled before continuing.

=^=

Alex got a shining new Type 4 shuttlecraft.

"That one's older than your grandpa," Cruz Thompson hissed in her ear as he passed. He looked livid.

"Maybe, but it's still smarter than you," Alex hissed back.

Alex stepped into her shuttle. It was basic. Bare metal with the things she needed bolted straight to the hull. The seat had a gesture towards padding. The control screen was smaller than she liked but robust. She could hit it with a ball peen hammer and not damage it.

Everything was shining like new. There was a new Wilkerson Energies power transfer conduit in the floor under a grate. There was a new Skalua Systems inertial dampening core patched into the life support system. The new, sleek device seemed vaguely uncomfortable bolted to deck under the control panel, out in the open.

Alex walked across the auxiliary shuttle bay to the tool locker. She typed in her code and requested a tricorder loaded with the specs for her shuttle.

As the locker opened and she pulled the device out, Henry Mark walked up. He looked sour and faintly bewildered.

"What did you get?" Alex asked.

"A Klingon shuttle of some sort." Mark shook his head. "I'll have to look up the specs.

"T'Skall's crew seems to have been pretty thorough," Alex said placatingly. The shuttles weren't glamorous, but they seemed like they'd work.

Mark looked behind him, and quickly stepped up to request his tools. "At least I didn't get his ship."

Cruz Thompson was stomping across the shuttle bay visibly angry.

"What'd he get?" Alex asked.

"A Ferengi shuttlepod," Henry said.

Alex scurried away grinning.

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The starship was the USS Sutherland, a Nebula class cruiser. Newer and faster than the USS Kitty Hawk, the Sutherland now mounted temporary racks and gear to house the Kestrel fighters of Banshee Squadron.

The hallways were spacious. The Sutherland had plenty of space to support the crew. Alex wandered the new ship and wondered what it was like to work on one. A deep space assignment.

Few deep space ships carried fighters. The mission was too specialized. When the current battle was over, the Banshees would return to Serenity City and await the next one.

Alex wondered what it was like to serve on this ship and see all the different places.

Then she reconsidered. They wouldn't let her take her Kestral.

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The shuttle's tailgate lowered and the atmosphere of G'Kra rolled in. It was hot, dusty. Pungent smells mixed with the smoke of burning buildings.

Alex made sure the shuttle was parked and then joined her enlisted crew in distributing the food that crowded the shuttle.

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"Please! Please!" A G'Kra woman yelled in Alex's face. "My children!"

A man pushed her aside, ripped the box of rations out of Alex's hand and disappeared into the crowd.

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A couple of G'Kra in the remains of business suits tried to rush the shuttle. Alex kicked them until her enlisted men threw them the rest of the way off the shuttle.

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People fought, bit, and kicked each other over food.

The noise was incredible. Alex blocked it out to a roar. Like the crowd at a big soccer game, but worse. It was a far, far uglier noise.

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It seemed like minutes until the shuttle was empty, but it seemed like they'd made no difference at all.

The subsonic thrum of another shuttle coming in to land made Alex almost burst into tears.

"Let's go!" she yelled.

Her enlisted people backed up into the shuttle and then had to physically push refugees out of the tailgate as it rose. Alex took off slowly and gently and then flew back to the Sutherland.

A short, stout redheaded woman in Chief Petty Officer's pips sat in the copilot's seat. "I'm Phoebe Johnson."

"Alex Dalton," Alex breathed.

"This your first time?"

Alex nodded.

Johnson nodded. "It's rough on everyone."

"It was rougher on her," Alex said, meaning the woman with children.

Johnson gripped Alex' shoulder but didn't say anything.

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The conference room off the shuttlebay had been turned into a wardroom for meals. There were showers and dressing rooms off the wardroom.

A repair bay was now a barracks with racks stacked three deep. The Sutherland had room for all the pilots, and each had his own quarters.

However, it was too far to walk after a sixteen or eighteen-hour shift, so they set up bunks close enough that you could crawl into them.

Alex felt wilted. Clean but wilted. A shower and a fresh jumpsuit from the replicator got rid of most of the smell.

Alex looked at her plate and felt... unfair. She had replicators and all the machines bent towards making her comfortable. Alex knew intellectually that they could land the Sutherland, and disassemble her bolt-by-bolt and it wouldn't be enough to help the hundreds of thousands of refugees.

Relief ships were on their way. However, they'd be weeks getting to G'Kra. Until then Starfleet had to fake it with what they had on hand.

Alex wished and prayed she could bring that woman and her children aboard the Sutherland and make them as comfortable as she was.

"Welcome to the glory of war, Ensign," Jazz Phoenix said.

Alex looked at her sharply. "What?"

"The glory of war. That's what the Mullurans thought they were going to get. That's what the G'Kra military

recruited their kids with. And this is what it looks like after the fact."

Alex discovered she was crying. "There was a woman... with the children..."

Phoenix looked at her. "You can't bleed for all of them, Alex. You'll use yourself up quick. Then you won't be there for the next hand reaching for help. Focus on the job."

Alex turned back to her small control screen. "Right." Deep breath. "Focus. Yes, ma'am."

"And remember this the next time some moron starts talking about war like it's a holodeck adventure," Jazz Phoenix said, bitterly.

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Back and forth, back and forth. Alex was surprised that she hadn't worn a groove in the sky.

By now, she was inured to the screams and tragedy of the refugee camps. "Just fly," she told herself.

"Sutherland to Green Six," the comm system barked. At least, it seemed to.

"Green Six. Go ahead," Alex said, digging deep for some perky.

"We have an urgent medivac from Aid Station 704. Can you reroute?"

"Green Six. I'm on my way," Alex replied.

The directions came up on her screen and she set course.

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As Alex approached the aid station, she saw a collection of cargo containers rigged as buildings on a flat piece of dirt.

The landing pad was a circle of rocks off to one side of the cargo containers.

As Alex tiredly homed in on the circle, her panel lit up red and an irritating beep sounded. Alex sat up straight with her eyes wide open. A weapons lock.

Alex slapped the button to raise her shields and grabbed the joystick that steered her shuttle. Where was the lock on coming from? Her tactical panel was too simple! Alex yanked the shuttle to port as hard as it would go.

From the back there were crashes and thuds. "Hey!" someone yelled. "AHH!"

Alex grimaced. "Sorry! Red Alert! We've been locked on to!"

There was a harsh thumping sound. A beam was hitting the shuttle. The shields began dying, protecting the shuttle with their last measure.

Alex rolled the shuttle in a complicated barrel roll trying to throw the beam off target with little success.

Just when Alex was ready to tell her crew to bail out, two triangular shapes swooped past the shuttle. They were Kestrel fighters.

In moments they bathed a section of the landscape in pulse phaser rounds and micro torps. The beam trying to claw Green Six out of the sky died abruptly.

"Bicycle One to Green Six. Status?" The man's voice was filled with grim confidence.

"Green Six," Alex said. "We're still airworthy." She muted the mike. "How are we back there?"

"Fine, Ensign!" Johnson the stout redheaded CPO yelled back.

"No injuries reported," Alex said over the comm.

"You're cleared to land. When you do, check your starboard nacelle. She looks a bit singed." With that, the two Kestrels swooped away.

Alex was too tired and too focused on landing safely to feel jealous.

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On the ground, Alex stood up creakily, opened the tailgate and the port side hatch. Then grabbing a tricorder, she left the shuttle.

Alex smelled the air. Burning smells dominated. Alex enjoyed standing up straight as she walked stiffly around to the starboard side of the shuttle. There were scorch marks all over the right side there the beam hit them. Alex kneeled next to the damaged starboard nacelle. Fortunately, the damage was to the outer hull. All cosmetic stuff. Cut way the damage, weld in a patch, smooth it over and paint and it would be as good as new.

As Alex stood up, she almost bumped into CPO Johnson. "Are we good to go, Sir?" Johnson asked.

Alex nodded. "Yes, Chief. It's just a dented fender. I thought the Mullurans had already been defeated."

John shook her head. "Murphy's Rules of Combat, Sir. When you've secured an area, be sure to let the enemy know."

A man in the brown fatigues and golden eight-pointed star of the Zeon Defense Force approached briskly.

"Colonel Markel, ZDF. Are you flight-worthy Ensign?"

"Yes, Sir." Alex came to attention.

"Good. We have four bad ones that need a full sickbay now. We'll load them."

"Yes, Sir," Alex said.

Colonel Markel marched off purposefully. As he passed a couple of his people, he spoke to them and pointed at the shuttle.

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The shuttle was crowded on the way back to the Sutherland. Four litters carried four humanoid wrecks. Alex tried to see if she could help load them and then quickly returned to her pilot's seat. The Zeon man with half his head missing was quiet, at least.

As they rose though the G'Kra sky, a G'Kra man started screaming.

The lower half of his abdomen was burned away. He was packed in some sort of life support gel, but his body wasn't buying it. His guts knew they were violently damaged and weren't letting him off the hook.

Apparently, this was incredibly painful.

One medic grabbed the man by his shoulders and spoke firmly to his face. "Sir, I need you to calm down, please."

Two others argued. "I can't synch up the delta waves! The guy's all over the place!"

"Well figure it out, he's going to go into arrest this way!"

"Can't we give him something?"

"Like what? Give me a clue about what might work! They aren't humans, Kell!"

The agonized G'Kra man just screamed and writhed.

The minutes of the flight were long and stretched out longer and longer as the man's torment wore on and the medical crew wasn't able to get ahead of it.

Now the man was screaming and crying all at once. The sound grated along Alex's nerves and demanded that she DO something. However, she was powerless. Alex found herself praying that something would work to shut the man up.

"Oh frell," one of the medics said, in a desperate tone of voice.

Alex looked back. Green blood spurted out of the man's wrecked midsection, forcing its way past the gel.

Alex shot a look at Johnson. Johnson was looking at the G'Kra soldier, pale, but still. She caught Alex's look. Johnson looked back and shook her head. The medics were doing everything they could. Alex and her crew could only help by getting them to the Sutherland.

Alex opened the comm. "Green Six to Sutherland."

"This is Sutherland. Go ahead, Green Six."

"Medical emergency on board. We need transport to sickbay."

The Ops officer on the Sutherland sounded tense.

"Unable to comply, Green Six. Transporters are already maxed out with emergency medical transports. You have priority approach clearance."

"Thank you, Sutherland," Alex said. Pushing her throttles to full, the old shuttle leapt ahead.

Alex breathed deeply and focused. She could do a quick flip over in her Kestral and aggressively brake to a stop. How much space did she need to do it in her ancient class 4 shuttle?

The G'Kra's screams were hoarse and fading, His cries were more pathetic. The medical team was huddled and speaking medical babble at a mile a minute trying to figure out something. One medical tech had his hands jammed over the ruined abdomen trying to limit the amount of bleeding. Green blood was going everywhere.

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The old shuttle bombed through the last wisps of atmosphere and into orbit.

Alex spotted the Sutherland, a white speck in the distance. She focused on her flying and the sounds seemed to disappear.

As her shuttle screamed towards the Sutherland - at the last minute, Alex flipped it end-for-end and kicked the lift-off thrusters.

She'd been a little too conservative with her estimates and had to readjust to get into the Sutherland's shuttle bay.

As she landed the shuttle and safed it, Alex came back out of her piloting focus, and looked around.

The lack of noise wasn't just her focus.

The Zeon medics were slumped over and grim.

As the tailgate dropped, a Starfleet medical crew ran in. In a brief non-verbal communication understood - the

G'Kra soldier was past help. They quickly began unloading the other three critical cases.

Alex then completely understood the phrase "I need a drink" for the first time in her life.

=^=

It was endless now. Alex would stagger to a bunk somewhere. Almost half the time it was the one assigned to her. A few hours later, she'd get up, walk through a sonic shower, jam rations down her face and then she'd climb back into her shuttle and fly back and forth from the ground to the Sutherland. Alex's impression of G'Kra was a dirty, filthy burning hell.

After the first three days, Alex hated her ancient shuttle. Everything that was wrong compared to a Type 8 shuttle stood out to her in sharp relief. Trying to be objective, Alec realized that her perceptions were being thrown off by spending too much time in the old shuttle combined with selectively positive memories of the more modern shuttle.

Not too long after that, Alex didn't care and fantasized about dropping the old crate into G'Kra's sun when this hateful mission was over.

By day six, Alex could find every piece of the interior of the shuttle blindfolded and had stopped registering it as something to hate or to love. It was just there.

=^=

Alex woke up suddenly. Where was she? Unfamiliar quarters. A soft bed. On a starship. She had to move! Was she late?

Halfway across the quarters, Alex's brain rattled back into track. The Sutherland. The mission was over. Alex stood blinking in the soft night-lights.

The relief fleet showed up and just like that, the Sutherland's mission was over. An officer on the shuttle deck. "Get some sleep, we're done."

Just like that.

However, it wasn't just like that. Alex felt restless. She belonged in her cranky old shuttle, flying and helping.

What was she supposed to do with herself now?

A look at the chronometer showed her it was 0300. G'Kra was three days in her past and growing further away minute by minute. Her brain was still back there.

Alex thought about it for a long time. Then she showered, systematically groomed herself and put on a Starfleet uniform that felt strange.

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Alex walked into the Sutherland's lounge. The corridors were so bright and well-repaired. The people so well-fed and shiny.

Over in a corner of the lounge, Alex spotted Lee Carter, Sam Beckett, CPO Johnson and a few other women, huddled. They'd all been on the surface. You could tell.

Alex walked towards them. Then she saw what they were eating.

"Ahhhh." Alex felt her soul breathe a little.

Ice cream.

Lee saw Alex and smiled. A subtle gesture revealed a flask of some sort in Lee's hand.

Alex grinned. Maybe not so much whiskey this time.

20. Kites

The roof of Banshee Squadron headquarters looked utilitarian and faded. The weather of New Canada was actual weather. The roof had the look of being someplace rarely visited.

Alex walked across the roof to where the women of Banshee Squadron were gathered.

The focus of the gathering was Sam Beckett.

"Thank you for coming," Sam said. She had a bag on the ground. It was about four feet long. It had handles in the middle like a gym bag.

"I am going to show you a piece of sporting equipment I just got a new pattern for," Beckett said. "Once I demonstrate it, we'll see who wants to play."

Alex looked at Jo and Kim. Both looked back mystified.

Sam knelt, quickly unzipped the bag and began pulling out pieces.

Struts. Wires. Thin super-fabric of some kind.

No one moved to help initially because the shape was not plain.

All at once it clicked for Alex. "It's a kite!"

Sam grinned, sphinx-like. "Sort of."

Alex happily joined in the assembly.

It was a monster of a kite. A delta shape almost two stories across.

Then Sam found the central balance point, the point where you'd put the string to fly the kite from. She attached a two and a half foot wire to it, and then connected a safety belt.

Alex looked at this. A kite... you could ride?

Then Sam attached the handle.

Alex, kneeling next to Sam, rocked back, shocked.

Alex held up the device. Made of modern materials it weighed at most ten pounds.

"This is the simplest possible flying vehicle," Sam said. "It's called a Hang Glider."

Alex got over her boggle. She saw the rest of Banshee Squadron staring at Sam Beckett as though a Hypatrian mega-squid had just tried to crawl out of her mouth.

"You hang below it, and your weight provides the stability. You control the angle of attack with the handle here," Sam explained. "You have to remember your basic aerodynamics very clearly."

A moment crawled past.

"Are you kidding?" Lee Carter asked.

Sam smiled. "This is real flying."

"Oh my God," Kim Tycho breathed.

Alex looked at the device, and Sam...

Something very deep inside her called out. It was insanely dangerous. Alex spotted no safety devices at all. No restraints. No inertial dampeners, no emergency impellers, nothing. But... Sam was right. It was the purest of flying.

"I'm in," Alex said. "Show me how, please."

Sam nodded. "Okay."

=^=

Two weeks later, Alex glided over Serenity City. The air was cold. The view was crisp. Looking around, Alex could see Max Vasser, Jo Schmidt and Sam Beckett.

They were like birds. The sky was quiet.

It was a sublime moment.

Growing up, Alex learned that surfing, a popular sport in California, had been invented in Hawaii as part of a religious ritual.

Now, Alex understood this. Only for her, the medium to commune with was the sky.

Alex didn't even notice the emergency transport beacon on her arm anymore. Jazz Phoenix insisted that the men and women of Banshee Squadron who flew the giant kites make some gesture towards safety.

The wind flowed around and seemingly through Alex.

She didn't even mind the occasional bug that slapped her in her face.

It was very close to being Alex heaven.

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The Norway class USS Elsinore screamed across space at extreme speed.

It was a rescue mission. The Elsinore's long thin nacelles allowed her to slice through space as quickly as any ship in Starfleet.

Aboard, the ship vibrated a little more than was comfortable. The air was faintly warm. All subtle signs of a ship pushed to her extreme.

Matthew Cross, the new captain of the Elsinore, watched impassively as his science office briefed Banshee Squadron on the mission.

Dexter Gray was serious and looked about twelve years old. "This is the Murasaki 312 Nebula. The gasses of the nebula are of an unusual composition. There is something at the center of the nebula charging up the gas. We don't know exactly what it is. Nothing has been able to get that close yet."

Gray took a deep breath. "The practical effect is that the nebula jams sensors and communications signals. It jams them worse the closer you get to the center of the effect."

The screen came to life and showed a star system. "This is the Taurus system. More properly it is Murasaki Taurus Alpha, but it's called Taurus for short."

"Four days ago, the SS Trident Courage, a freighter, was attacked by pirates. Outgunned, she fled into the Murasaki Nebula seeking cover. No one has seen her since."

The screen showed a human face. The woman was middle-aged. Her face showed the tight, grim effect of someone who was at wit's end and holding it together by sheer will. "This is the Trident Courage, twenty-one days out of Colony Q. We are under attack. Main power out. Moderate damage to the ship. We have casualties. Weapons and defenses gone. We're seeking cover."

A sensor plot showed that the Trident Courage was heading for the Taurus system when last scanned.

Gray sounded shaken. "The good news is that the Taurus system has an inhabitable planet. The bad news is that it's already inhabited."

The screen showed an ancient scan. A humanoid dressed in skins raised a spear. The scan froze and a scale mark appeared. The humanoid was 12 feet tall or more.

Alex blinked. The scan resumed to show a foggy, murky rock-strewn hillside. A bloodcurdling scream echoed across the hills. A human getting painfully murdered. Alex had heard enough real screams to recognize the sound.

"That was the first and last Starfleet party to step foot on the planet," Gray explained. "That was at about midday. Their accounts say that visibility is poor and sensors all but useless. The natives are... hostile."

Jazz Phoenix nodded. "All right. And our job?"

"If the Trident Courage crashed on Taurus II, we wouldn't be able to see her except by blind luck," Gray said. "Two other Starfleet ships are combing the nebula, but with no luck."

Cross spoke up. "For this mission, you won't be high mobility heavy phasers."

Jazz looked at him.

"You'll be high mobility heavy tricorders."

Two emotions warred in Alex's mind. She feared for the crew of the Trident Courage. If they were even alive, chances were they weren't having any fun. On the other hand, this mission was all the good stuff, flying, helping.

Jazz spoke for the Banshees. "We can do that."

=^=

Alex found Dexter Gray in the lounge of the USS Elsinore. The lounge was a small curved space near the outer hull. The Norway class Elsinore was a good deal more crowded than other ships Alex had been on.

Alex smiled faintly. Gray was buried in a PADD, idly munching something pastry-like. From his expression, Alex was pretty sure she could steal his filled pastry and replace it with used socks and he wouldn't notice.

Alex walked up to the table Gray was at. "Hello."

Gray started and looked up, his train of thought totally derailed. Blank-faced brain-spinning concentration faded into a smile. "Hi! I didn't know you were aboard."

"I'm Alex." Alex was pretty sure Dexter would not remember her name.

"Yeah. Alex Dalton," Gray said. "I remember."

"So what are you up to?" Alex asked.

Gray turned his drawing board sized PADD to show her. A false color image of the Murasaki 312 nebula was overlaid with equations and graphics. "Trying to figure the nebula out."

"Oh?" Alex asked. "What's to figure out?"

Gray smiled and made a happily exasperated expression "The energy density is too high, the particle signature is all wrong, there are at least two mutually contradictory stellar process happening. It's great. No one has a clue what's happening in there."

Alex looked at the PADD. She didn't exactly understand the science, but it looked like hell itself happening. "And you think you can figure it out?"

Gray shook his head. "Better minds than mine have been stumped by that thing. The first investigator was Spock of Vulcan."

"Oh." Alex nodded as though she recognized the name.

"I mean if he couldn't get it, I'm done. All I can do is to cross off a couple of things on the list, for when a genius comes by and puts it all together," Gray said. He peered at the PADD again.

Alex was struck by how cute Gray was. Like a little boy with a new toy. She carefully held the feeling in stasis. "If you're not going to get it, why are you smashing your head into it?"

Gray looked up at her like she'd said something surprising. "This is a great puzzle! This is totally weird. Don't you want to know why it's here and what it's doing?"

Alex looked at Gray's face. "Yes, I do," she found herself saying.

Alex found herself spending the next two hours in an impromptu lecture about strange stellar physics. But it wasn't all that bad.

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Alex flew through her search box, sweat dribbling down her back. It was the toughest flying she could remember doing. She struggled to stay focused. The amber and red lights of her control panel stared back at her, unyielding and unblinking.

She was flying very low and comparatively slow. Her sensors were almost useless and she was flying through thick fog.

A small beep warned her - was that something ahead? Sensors that could detect a stray bolt at ten thousand kilometers suggested they might see something.

Alex rolled into a left hand turn, hard. She found herself skirting a mountain by feet. Then she had to mind her altitude. If she bobbed too high, avoiding the mountain, then she wasn't searching the ground, and could miss the possible stranded freighter crew.

The sensors gave another confused ambivalent beep. Reading the landscape and guessing wildly, Alex rolled into a right hand turn, avoiding the next mountain in the chain.

Alex and all the Banshee pilots had to find the exact limits of speed and care. Twelve fighter planes would take years to scour the surface of a class M world. The faster they could go, the better the chance they could find the missing freighter and crew while someone was still alive.

Just a smidgen faster and Alex feared she would become an impromptu geology probe.

The ambivalent beeps became strident and cranky sounding. Alex didn't guess quite right. Alex pulled her nose back. The noises stayed the same.

Alex pulled back a little more.

Alex and her fighter roared out of the fog at head level. Alex squeaked and dodged huge boulders.

As she barely cleared the inter-mountain pass, Alex looked to her left and saw one of the Giants of Taurus II staring at her dumbly. She could clearly see his craggy,

Neanderthalish face. She could clearly see his stunned expression. She could see the huge spear dangling limply from his hand. She could see a hat cobbled together from animal skins flop off the back of his head. She saw something shaped like about half a dead animal drop off his shoulder to the ground. Alex could almost smell the rancid musk scent of unwashed giant, dead animal and dirt mixed together through the canopy of her fighter plane.

Alex had the vague impression of other giants fleeing pell-mell down the pass.

Alex pulled back her stick and climbed away from the encounter.

As she rose into blank sky, Alex wondered what the alien giant would tell his friends about his close encounter.

Then Alex noticed more red lights on her board. Her port side sensor pod was reporting a major fault. Alex ran a diagnostic. Main control circuit was out, main power was out, some sort of circuit failure.

Sighing, Alex called the Elsinore. "Green Six to USS Elsinore. Request permission to return for repair. My port side sensor pod is down this time."

The strange radiation and energy of the Murasaki nebula was not kind to the electronics of the Kestral fighters.

"Permission granted, Green Six. C'mon back to the barn," the Elsinore watch officer replied.

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As Alex climbed down out of her fighter's cockpit, one of the enlisted men who manned the Elsinore's over worked

shuttle bay approached with a big grin on his face. "Flying a little low, Ensign?"

Alex looked at him. "That's the job, Chief."

He crooked his finger. Alex followed the deck crewman around to the port side of her plane.

There sticking through the delicate sensor eye of her port sensor pod was a thick stick. Alex grabbed it and pulled. Then she pulled hard.

With a crack, the spear came out of the sensor pod, showing a thick, over sized but skillfully crafted spear point tied to the end of the stick.

Alex looked at the deck crew.

"I've seen phaser burns, disruptor hits, missile damage, all sorts of stuff. But an anti-aircraft spear is a new one on me, Sir," the chief grinned at her.

Alex blinked. "Mental note!"

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"Oh Three to all units," Max Vasser's voice sounded scratchy and tinny on the Comm. "I have them."

Alex pulled out of her scanning run down a fog-choked valley and allowed her Kestral to rise into the sky.

"This is Elsinore. Confirm your location, Oh Three."

"I am at grid nine seven two, sub grid alpha, about two clicks south of a big mountain. It looks like a broken tooth."

"Acknowledged. All units rendezvous with Oh Three and provide cover for rescue shuttles," Nathan Cross said.

Alex accelerated into the high, thin air several miles over the surface of Taurus II and flew to support the rescue.

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As Alex descended into the fog, she slowed her Kestral way down and activated her phaser cannon. The Kestral had six fixed pulse phaser cannon in the wing roots. These were dangerous all out of proportion to the Kestral's size. But they weren't so useful for extremely close air support. The Kestral mounted a small turret on the nose that held a small phaser cannon. Or a large Phaser rifle.

"This is Green Six. I'm in your box, Oh Three," Alex guessed.

"Roger, Alex. Set up to the southwest of us. See if you can keep the natives away until the rescue shuttles get away clean," Max ordered.

"Aye," Alex replied.

Flying very low and very slow, Alex managed to find the ground and then bopped around what she hoped was a box to the southwest of the crash site.

"I can't see thing in this soup," Cruz Thompson said.

"I'm not even sure I'm in the right place, Max." Kim Tycho said.

"This is Elsinore, " Matt Cross' voice sounded. "We'll be giving you some support in a moment."

"Thank you, Elsinore," Jazz Phoenix replied. "It's getting a little crowded out here in the fog."

Alex's board beeped. Lifeforms nearby. Between 500 and 750 pounds. Alex set her phaser turret to heavy stun and winged some blasts in that direction. She didn't want to hurt anyone for just standing around, but the natives were firm believers in "Spear first, roast over a campfire later."

Then a main display lit up. The Elsinore was feeding navigational data. Alex saw the ground represented by a grid and the position of herself and her squadron mates represented as green dots.

The randomized scattering was disconcerting. Alex was a good deal south of where she'd thought she was. Most of Banshee Squadron was scattered to the south of the marked crash site.

Alex quickly reoriented herself and moved to her assigned cover zone.

As she hovered slowly over the fog-shrouded landscape, Alex saw blue dots appear on her screen. Medevac shuttles.

Alex focused on flying and flinging beams around to discourage the natives. In the sensor killing fog, the natives could be anywhere. All the natives Alex found were in the process of fleeing.

Alex found herself wondering about legends of dragons, lightning throwing gods and thunderbirds.

Then a voice sounded. "This is Doctor Chandrasekar. We are lifting off."

The tactical plot showed the Shuttle rising away from the surface of Taurus II.

"Medevac is clear, Banshee Squadron. Return to the Elsinore." Captain Cross said.

Alex lifted her nose towards the sky.

VII - Revenge

21. Served Up Cold

Back at the New Canada system, Banshee Squadron was having a training flight.

New Canada had two asteroid belts. Banshee Squadron was in the outer one.

Alex looked over her shoulder and caught the faintest twinkle of Jazz Phoenix' Kestral. They were separated by ten thousand meters.

This was more like astronautics than stick and rudder piloting. Alex enjoyed it in its own way. It was quieter, but more mentally intense.

The Kestrels were acting as capsules now. The training was in astrogration and precision piloting. The goal was to have Banshee Squadron pass through a specific gravitational point, in order.

It wasn't easy. This was being done manually. Sometimes starships had to maneuver like this to get the data they needed. Sometimes shuttles had to. Every once in a blue moon the Kestrels of Banshee Squadron would be used like manned probes.

So the pilots had to keep their edge at deep space piloting as well as their usual type.

It involved a lot of concentration, math and very delicate touches on the controls, every once in a long while.

Alex looked at the stars. She pictured herself in a snoopy hat with the black ears and white stripe down the middle like the Apollo astronauts used to wear.

"We come in peace for all mankind," Alex whispered to herself. The plaque at the Armstrong City's Apollo Eleven Monument. Alex even had a vial of moon dust at home in her old room.

The sensors on her board screeched irritably. Alex checked the readings and then her own systems.

"Weapons fire. We have weapons fire," Sam Beckett reported.

The pings and alerts continued. Alex was reading disruptors and one small phaser.

"The location is Txamsem," Beckett reported.

"I am seeing seven power signatures. The gas giant is interfering. Looks like Federation and Orion power sources," Jo Schmidt reported.

"Yellow alert," Jazz called. "Serenity Control, this is Banshee Squadron. We're reading weapons fire at Txamsem. Please advise."

Alex made sure her Kestral was ready to spring to life at maximum power with the touch of a button. Her weapons and shields were at hot standby.

"Uh... Banshee Squadron, I have no scheduled Starfleet drills in that area," Serenity Control replied.

Then a new voice broke into the channel. It was a wide band broadcast.

"This is Youthful Dolores! Under attack by Orion attack ships! We're damaged! I don't know how much longer we can hold out! Help He-" The broadcast cut off in a blast of static.

"Jammed at the source, Commander," Luke George reported.

"Red alert," Jazz Phoenix growled.

With the order given, Alex triggered her plane. Power flowed. Weapons armed. Shields strengthened. Sensors reached out. Computer programs activated. The Kestral went from being a hopped up shuttlepod to a serious weapon.

"Banshee Squadron, be advised, we have a Youthful Dolores scheduled to arrive today from Deneb. You're the closest units."

"We're on it, Serenity Control."

"This is the USS Elsinore. We're right behind you, Banshee Squadron."

The Norway class vessel was 15 million miles away from Txamsem at New Canada.

"Banshee Squadron, form up on me and prepare to go to warp," Phoenix ordered. "Slave your navigation to mine."

Alex slid her plane into position behind and above Jazz Phoenix, and told it to do what Jazz Phoenix told it to do.

The Kestrals had small warp drives. Like shuttles they were meant to make a quick dash across a solar system in minutes. They were completely inadequate for interstellar travel. But within a few light minutes it meant the Kestrals could be anywhere they wanted at any time.

Jazz calculated her course and passed the calculation through the network to her squadron.

All twelve planes took up the same heading and streaked to warp.

=^=

In moments, at warp two, the Kestrals were at Txamsem. Alex had the disorienting feeling of watching the planet, bigger than anything had a right to be, float up to her like a Christmas ornament.

The Kestrals dropped out of warp at the last moment. Txamsem dominated the whole sky next to them.

Txamsem had a ring of rocks, iceballs and debris. The gas giant charged this ring up with ionizing energy. It made the place a difficult area for navigation. Which is why the Youthful Dolores fled here. Sensors would be degraded, communications difficult and the ring provided a lot of rocks to hide behind.

"Find me my targets," Jazz ordered.

Several of the Banshee's stepped up scanning.

"Youthful Dolores beacon dead ahead, near that moonlet," Luke George replied.

"I'm seeing echoes of the weapons fire, but I am not seeing any engines," Conn Piper reported. "They've seen us coming."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Max Vasser said.

"Stay on your toes," Jazz replied " Set course for the Youthful Dolores, you are free to navigate."

Alex found herself driving through a much thicker asteroid belt towards the location her sensors had marked

for the stricken ship. This was more like the old vids than a real asteroid belt. Alex had to swoop and turn to avoid huge floating rocks.

There was a bright flash. Blue electrical pulses raced all over Alex's board. Alex gasped. Half her Kestral died in an instant. Yanking the stick, Alex turned away. Her plane replied sluggishly and Alex was jammed back in the seat aggressively. Her inertial dampeners were out. Sensors, gone. Shields, gone. Weapons, pulse phasers only, at 25% power. Main power out, backup power at 50%. Main computer reporting core damage, backup running.

She was out of the fight before it had begun. Alex reconfigured her sensors and began to dodge rocks in earnest. With no shields even a pebble could destroy her.

Then a screeching alarm. A missile locked on. Alex looked around and focused on her crippled board.

The sky was filled with missiles. Dozens of mercurite rockets were in the air, looking for fighters to destroy.

A bright flash. On a board by her right elbow, one of the Kestral symbols repeating the condition of her squadron mates went red. Someone was gone already.

The coppery taste of fear flooded through Alex's mouth. Her arms and legs got a spidery faraway feeling. Pure adrenaline.

Nearby another Kestral seemed to inflate to a large opaque balloon. Sensors had no idea what was going on.

Alex threw her stick over and rammed the throttles to the stops. She had only the slimmest chance of out-flying a horde of missiles in a crippled fighter.

Then a huge green beam reached out. It came from the moonlet where the Youthful Dolores supposedly was. It

touched a fighter and a member of Banshee Squadron ceased to exist.

There were voices on the comm channel. Alex vaguely heard Jazz Phoenix. "All pilots, maximum evasive! Piper, Vasser, form on me!"

A male voice that Alex didn't recognize was saying something smug.

"Where are they!? WHERE ARE THEY!?" Alex heard Cruz Thompson panic.

Another green beam and she didn't hear Cruz any more.

Someone was saying, "take the cannon out."

Lee Carter was saying, "Clear the asteroids, reset your plane and get out of here."

Another pinpoint blossom from a mercurite rocket. Another red Kestral icon.

Alex concentrated on flying as hard as she'd ever flown in her life.

The asteroids weren't just obstacles. If she could convince the missiles to hit them instead of her, she might make it. If there was a big rock between her and that hellish disruptor cannon, it might not be able to shoot her.

Alex dove towards a larger rock and then with incredible effort zigged around its small companion. Without the inertial dampeners every change in motion went straight to her body.

A bright flash and the sound of gravel splattering off her plane told her how close she'd come.

Alex dumped reserve energy into her engines and flew harder.

Somewhere the rainbow flash of warp drive happened. Someone tried their warp drive. In the asteroid belt.

Insane, but what the hell?

Alex spotted a pair of huge rocks grinding at each other. She aimed for the gap and flew.

What was a picture of Vince Kelly doing on her comm board?

=^=

Exhaustion was all Alex knew consciously. She'd been swooping and diving for what seemed like hours. She felt like a punching bag at a Klingon gym.

Her plane was reporting no more missiles.

Which was just fine. There wasn't much Kestral left. Near misses and brushes with rocks left Alex's plane a chugging wreck.

The horrible green beams weren't reaching out any more.

More than half of the Kestral symbols on her board were red.

Alex didn't look at that. She just kept flying.

Then the bugs-under-the-skin feeling of the transporter got her.

Alex materialized on the transporter pad of the Elsinore ready to go down fighting. Phaser in hand, crouched and snarling, as soon as she realized it was a friendly place, things got sort of gray and vague for a while.

=^=

Alex woke up in sickbay. She lifted her head. Her whole body felt bruised. "Ooowww," she said.

Lee Carter was there. Dark circles under her eyes. "How are you, Alex?"

"Fine... I, I don't know. I don't think I'm badly hurt," Alex said.

"When sickbay releases you, come see me. Same quarters they assigned me last time."

"Yes, ma'am," Alex said.

=/\=

Alex walked into the quarters in a newly replicated uniform. She was showered, fed and dressed, but felt like she wouldn't be intact again for a while.

Lee Carter was there. Sam Beckett, Max Vasser, Kim Tycho, Jo Schmidt.

"Hi," Alex said weakly.

"Hi," Carter said sadly.

"Where's everyone else?" Alex asked.

"We're it, Alex," Lee said. "We're what's left of Banshee Squadron."

Alex surprised herself by bursting out in tears right there on the spot.

Vasser snarled. "Vince Kelley murdered us."

Alex sniffled. "Even Jazz?"

Lee nodded "Jazz, Luke, Conn. I'm the C/O now."

"C/O of a ghost," Max said.

Lee nodded "Probably."

Alex just cried. There wasn't much else she could do.

=^=

Kitara Mallory was stony faced. Everyone looked unhappy.

"Report, Commander."

West stood up. "This is a preliminary report, based on forensic evidence gathered from the ring of Txamsem, the flight data recorders of Banshee Squadron and some eyewitness accounts."

He gestured to a large display screen which lit up. "We discovered marker buoys that had been dropped through the New Canada system. They were mostly outdated, stolen Federation technology. They were passive. We wouldn't have found them without doing a debris sweep. And out near Txamsem distances are so huge that there's no point."

"Working backwards from the debris we found, we speculate that the buoys were set to listen for any Banshee Squadron comm traffic, and when they heard some they trigger an activation code disguised as static."

"Then a preset set of buoys in the rings of Txamsem set off charges designed to look like weapons fire and broadcast the fake message from the Youthful Delores."

"The goal was lure Banshee Squadron into a kill zone." West looked tired. "It was a real-life Kobayashi Maru test."

Alex felt sick to her stomach. Carter, Vasser, Schmidt, Tycho and she were part of the after-action briefing.

The screen showed a tactical plot of Banshee Squadron entering the ambush zone.

"A tetryon mine detonated here at the center disabled all subspace systems in range for about 20 minutes," West

said. "A bigger ship's shields would have withstood the effects or moderated them somewhat."

"The tetryon blast activated several dormant mines. The mines fired conventional seeking missiles. The missiles had mercurite warheads. We counted more than 120 missiles fired."

Then an automated disruptor cannon on the moonlet here opened up. Banshee Squadron either had to flee the cannon into the missiles or flee the missiles into the cannon."

West rubbed his face. "All the technology involved was 50 years old or older. The attacker used our reflexes against us. All of it self-destructed after 30 minutes. We pieced our initial information together from sensor readings and examining the wreckage."

The tactical plot showed a haze of missiles englobing Banshee Squadron, and the disruptor cannon firing.

"As the attack was triggered, Commander Phoenix took her two best pilots, Conn Piper and Max Vasser, and attacked the disruptor cannon. As she did so, Lee Carter gave the order to scatter and evade."

"Commander Phoenix and Lieutenant Piper did not survive attacking the cannon."

The plot showed the three fighters advancing. They also showed one of the other Kestrals being covered by a large blob.

"What's that?"

"That's Oh Four, Ensign Schmidt," West said. "Ensign, please explain."

Jo's voice quavered "I... uh... I realized the missiles and the cannon had to be targeting us using real space sensors.

So I reconfigured my nav shields and released some drive plasma. I made a magnetic balloon and then blew it up with plasma. To radar and other normal space sensors it looked solid."

On the screen, most of the missiles turned towards the large blob.

West nodded. "You saved yourself and probably the rest of the pilots that way, Ensign. The missiles detonated at what they thought was the surface of your plasma balloon."

As the plot advanced in slow motion, one of the Kestral fighters warped out.

"Who was that?" Mallory asked, shocked.

"That was Ensign Tycho, Oh Five," West said.

All eyes turned towards Kim. She started crying. "I panicked. I reset my drives and overloaded them. That got me a second or two at warp. Then I was adrift."

Carter put a hand on Kim's shoulder and squeezed.

"I ran away," Tycho sobbed.

"You followed your orders to withdraw," Captain Mallory said.

"Overloading your engines like that and going to warp that close to Txamsem should not have worked, Ensign. We'd like you to show us precisely what you did," West said. "You're lucky to be alive."

Kim Tycho nodded miserably.

As the tactical plot continued, frame by frame, one plane jettisoned chaff and flares and then seemed to disappear, leaving missiles hunting at random.

"Who was that?" Mallory asked.

"That was me, Captain." Lee Carter said. "With that many missiles in the air, I figured that they had to be programmed not to attack each other. So I jettisoned my flares, turned off my IFF and then stopped short in front of one of my flares. It stuck to the rear of my fighter, and so to the missiles, suddenly I looked like another missile, albeit a fat one. Together we wandered off saying 'duh, where did the fighter plane go?'"

Mallory nodded. "You're lucky the flare didn't destroy your plane."

"It did, but it took long enough to do it that I escaped the missiles, Sir." Carter pointed out.

As the plot continued Alex saw two other fighter planes dive, loop and speed recklessly through the ring of Txamsem, barely evading a buzzing horde of missiles, and a huge grinder of rocks.

"These last two are Green Three and Green Six, Captain," West pointed out.

Mallory looked at the plot impassively.

"Wow," Lee Carter said.

Mallory looked at her. "Oh?"

"Remember those planes didn't have any inertial dampeners, Captain," Carter pointed out. "That was just pure stick and rudder flying. I don't know if I could duplicate it."

Vasser added, "I could. Barely."

Mallory nodded solemnly. "Commander West, what you're telling me is that someone set a well planned and well executed trap for my pilots, and except for the fact that they are superior pilots and borderline insane, he'd have killed them all."

West nodded. "Yes ma'am. That's it exactly."

"Who?"

West touched a button.

A generically handsome man, saturnine and intelligent looking appeared on the screen. Alex clenched up inside.

"Hello, Banshee Squadron!" he said cheerfully "Thank you for accepting my invitation! And please remember the name, Vince Kelly."

West said, "Ships all over the system got this transmission. Vince Kelly did a revenge strike against Banshee Squadron."

"Oh my God," Alex gasped. "Cruz was right."

West looked at the floor.

"We have to get him," Vasser said coldly. "We can't let him get away with this."

Captain Mallory radiated cold fury. "West. Tell me that Starfleet Intelligence is taking action to redress this."

West nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Promise me."

West nodded reluctantly. "Starfleet Intelligence is doing everything we can possibly do."

Unhappy, Mallory turned back to the survivors of Banshee Squadron. "Thank you. Return to your quarters. I'll speak with Admiral Pike and we'll see where we go from here. Dismissed."

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Banshee HQ felt empty and haunted. The wake was good, insofar as wakes went. Alex felt buoyed a little by

the presence of Dan Grozzik and his crew. They let Alex know that Starfleet was still there, and felt the loss.

That night however, the old HQ building was dark and sounded empty.

Alex found herself pulled to Jazz Phoenixes office as though by the pull of gravity.

As she approached she heard angry voices.

"We can't let him get away with this!" Vasser hissed.

Alex entered the office to find a confrontation underway.

Lee shook her head. "Banshee Squadron is not a manhunting outfit, Max. We don't have the training and equipment. Other units do. Let them work."

"Jazz Phoenix was a friend of mine! She was a friend of yours! I can't believe you'd just walk away from the man who killed her!" Max yelled.

Lee's voice stayed reasonable, mostly. "Vince Kelly has killed a lot of people, Max. I know what I am good at. Put me in a fighter plane up against Kelly and I'll kill him. But on the streets? In the Orion Sector? He'd eat us for lunch. We'd just be more victims for his list."

"I can't believe I am hearing this cowardice from you! Jazz would never have-" Max stopped short.

Lee Carter looked at her blankly.

Max's face grew red. She threw her bowl of boozy ice cream against the wall. "I'll see you after Kelly's dead."

Max Vasser stomped out of the room.

And then there were five.

The next day, Alex wandered downstairs in Banshee Squadron HQ late. There wasn't any work for her to do. They had too many support people and too few Kestrals left anyway, so Grozzik and his crew were hogging the wrench turning.

As Alex got to the bottom of the stairs, she saw Kim Tycho and another figure. It was Garek Loren, the Engineer Kim was going around with.

It seemed to take whole minutes for Alex's mind to process the next detail. They had jump bags. Garek wasn't moving in.

Alex approached them. "Kim? You're leaving?"

Kim Tycho nodded solemnly.

Alex felt another piece of her heart go away. "Were you even going to say goodbye?"

Kim hugged Alex. "I'm not going very far, Alex. Just over to the Officers quarters. But... I'm leaving the Banshees."

"Not that there's much left to leave," went unsaid.

"I..." Alex started.

"I can't do it anymore," Kim said. "Being scared. Watching people die. I'm... I just can't." Her eyes pleaded for understanding.

Alex grabbed Kim's shoulder and squeezed. "It's okay. They always said this was a temporary assignment anyway."

"I'll see you," Kim said. "We'll meet at the El Taco, okay?"

"Sure," Alex lied. "Maybe next week?"

"Sure," Kim said.

Leaning on Garek Loren, Kim Tycho left Banshee's
HQ.
And then there were four.

VIII - New Mission

22. New Mission

The mess hall was about as much fun as a funeral parlor. Lee Carter, Sam Beckett, Jo Schmidt and Alex Dalton ate grimly and carefully didn't ask the next question.

"What's to become of us?"

Over the last two weeks, most of Grozzik's crew had been reassigned. Grozzik sadly reported that he too, had gotten a new assignment. He was to be the new Chief Engineer of the Elsinore.

It was past time, and everyone knew it.

But no one said anything. The four pilots and the handful of support people just faked their way through the days, packing personal belongings up and preparing Banshee headquarters to sleep until needed again, for whatever reason.

Matthew Cross bombed into the mess hall. "Get ready. We have a new mission."

Lee Carter looked at Cross like he'd lost his mind. "We do."

"Yes, we do."

"All of us."

"Banshee Squadron and the Elsinore. Yes."

"Matthew, there are four of us left and between us we have two and a half working Kestrels."

Matthew Cross looked irritated for the first time.

"Commander Carter. You won't need your planes. There will be some waiting for us. Now gather your pilots and report to the Elsinore in one hour."

Carter stared at Cross. After a beat she corrected him.

"Lieutenant Commander."

Cross turned on his heel and marched out of Banshee HQ. "See you aboard."

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The Elsinore sped across space again, racing to the rescue.

Alex, Jo and Sam sat in the briefing room of the ship, waiting for Matthew Cross and Lee Carter.

After a long while Cross and Carter came into the briefing room. Alex blinked. Carter was now wearing a starship duty uniform in the maroon of command and commander's pips.

There was a moment's silence. Then Sam stood up and went to hug Lee "Congratulations!"

Seeing that it was okay, Alex and Jo joined in. The four women were overdue for good news.

After a few moments Lee broke the huddle and said, "Let me tell you what's going on."

The Banshees and Cross sat down, while Lee called up the report.

"These are refugee ships from the Lefyt Colonies," Lee explained. The screen showed a pitiful collection of junkers and rattle- trap beaters struggling across space.

The screen changed to show a ship that seemed to be constructed of a collection of columns laid end-wise. Small circular ports were scattered in a miserly fashion. Alex could swear she saw thick metal armor and rivets in the thing.

"I'm told this is the last Lefyt battlewagon, the Stellar," Lee continued.

The screen showed some fighter planes. They were serious fighter planes - all engine, gun and the smallest cockpit that could be grafted on. Alex also recognized that the technology was primitive. "These are Lefyt fighter planes. No shields. Anti-matter rockets. Particle cannon and missiles, when they can find some," Lee said.

Alex winced. The Lefyt fighters looked like fun to fly, but were hopeless against any technology she considered modern. Anti-matter rockets would be too finicky to even use as target drones.

The screen showed an indistinct scan of a huge rectangle. Like the Lefyt battlewagon, it was mainly slabs of metal. The scan zoomed in. The slabs of metal covered catwalks and a ship designed with a fine disregard for inside and out. Shiny figures could be seen walking along the outer surface.

Then the rectangle released seeds. Hundreds of them.

The scan wavered and finally settled on one of the seeds. It reminded Alex of pictures she'd seen of a Mercury capsule. But with much bigger engines and particle cannons mounted on it.

"These are the Damyip," Lee read off her PADD.
"Apparently a race of cyborgs. Note that the Damyip attack pods have no life signs. Automated fighters."

Alex blinked. Suddenly things made more sense.

A tactical plot showed the Damyip attack pods spreading out and then conducting a multi-pronged assault on the refugee fleet.

The manned fighters of the Lefyt fought heroically, bravely and vigorously but were badly outnumbered. The Damyip were able to swamp them.

So the battle moved into the refugee fleet and the sad, rattle-trap buckets began to take damage from the automated fighter drones.

Then Federation phaser beams began appearing in the scan. Small ones, weak ones, far too few of them.

"This is the USS Enceladus. A Miranda class ship, refit as a mobile subspace telescope. She scanned the Lefyt refugees and is trying to escort them safely into Federation territory. She's a rear echelon unit. The mobile subspace telescopes were never intended to see battle."

Obligingly the screen showed the Enceladus, a Miranda class with her roll bar replaced by a huge, delicate folded-up subspace telescope dish.

Where the Enceladus' phasers touched, Damyip attack pods died. In time, the Lefyt fighters and the Enceladus drove off the Damyip attack. At the cost of leaving several buckets of refugees burning and dying in space.

"That's why they need Banshee Squadron."

Sam shook her head. "They need a full Banshee Squadron and at least one more. Those attack pods are sad,

but there are so many of them. You can't be everywhere at once."

"A squadron with actual fighters would be nice, too." Alex pointed out.

Lee called up another picture. A Nebula class starship with an odd sensor pod on top. "This is the USS Eon. She was on her way to New Canada with a group of prototype fighters for Banshee Squadron."

"Convenient," Sam said.

Matthew Cross spoke up. "Banshee Squadron is the only fighter squadron for five sectors in any direction. Your job is so specialized that Starfleet just doesn't have many fighter squadrons."

Lee said, "The Enceladus estimates that there are still some 12,000 Lefyt refugees left alive. Our job is to bring them in safely. Us, the Enceladus and the Eon."

Lee added, "I got a message from Admiral Pike along with my promotion. New assignments are in the works. This may be it for Banshee Squadron. So let's bring these people in safely and put one last successful mission in the record books for Banshee Squadron."

Alex, Sam and Jo nodded.

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Up close the Lefyt refugee fleet was even more sad, scary and pathetic.

Alex, and a Lefyt pilot named Flight Leader Enrod flew a shuttlecraft loaded with supplies to a stricken passenger carrier.

"Wait," Alex said, confused. "You fought these Damyip for more than a thousand orbits of your world around it's primary, but they got you with a sneak attack?"

Enrod, a statuesque man with golden skin and jet-black hair sighed. "They sued for peace. We were suspicious but they seemed very convincing. A member of our governing council actually traveled to the Damyip and reported that the offer was genuine. He even advised the Damyip on how to go further to ensure the peace."

"But--" Alex prodded.

"We were so tired of war. We were so sick of the destruction of lives and material. We believed. At the last meeting, the final signing of the peace treaty, the Damyip betrayed the peace. They launched an attack with a secret fleet. Our eight colonies were destroyed. Our entire fleet of battlewagons. Except for one. The Stellar. Our commander, Admiral Darma gathered as many refugees as possible and we fled."

It was a horrible story. Alex felt bad for being so traumatized by the loss of Banshee Squadron. Although she lost friends, Earth would still be there.

Alex mentally kicked herself. She knew full well that trauma and post combat stress didn't work that way. But it was an ugly shock inside that she hadn't even considered things in that light.

The relief shuttle approached a ship that looked like strung out tin cans held together by an anemic suspension bridge.

Alex quickly and efficiently docked the shuttle to a hatch along one of the larger tin cans.

"Wow," Enrod said. "The technology your people have... is remarkable."

"Refugee safety first," Alex bustled. "Shopping for starships later."

Enrod looked at her with a grin. "Yes Ma'am."

Steeling herself, Alex checked her phaser, solidified her balance and opened the door.

The alien ship smelled... metallic. And faintly stale.

There were people on the other side of the hatch, waiting expectantly.

"Hi," Alex said. "Relief flight."

Enrod appeared behind her. "I am flight leader Enrod. These people are here to help us."

An older man, bearing the shreds of dignity about himself said, "We thank you. We are the work party to unload the supplies you bring and distribute them fairly among our people."

Alex looked carefully at Enrod. He seemed to believe this. "Okay. Thank you. Come get."

"May the blessings of the gods rain down upon you, gently," The man said. And people filed quietly into the shuttle.

"Are you the ones?" A young girl asked.

"Which ones?" Alex asked back.

"The ones who will lead us to our sacred goal," the girl said "The lost colony of Botchok."

Alex blinked slowly. "Well, we're the ones who are going to get you to safety," Alex perked. "Where you go from there is up to you."

The girl smiled beatifically. "Thank you, Star Woman! Bless you."

"Great!" Alex thought to herself.

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Flying the empty shuttle away from the tin can collection, Enrod looked at Alex. "That name means something to you."

"What name?" Alex perked harder.

"Botchok."

Alex took advantage of one of the major benefits of a chain of command. "Enrod, I am not at liberty to discuss it. Please ask Captain Cross."

Enrod peered at her. "But you know the name."

Alex stared at Enrod.

"Alright," he agreed. "I'll ask Captain Cross."

"Thank you." Alex said.

=/\=

The Eon came out of warp next to the ragtag fleet of refugees.

The ship was large, well lit and beautiful. Especially compared to the junk the Lefyt were pushing.

The Banshees beamed aboard with Captain Cross.

Cross saluted the keel and said, "Permission to come aboard?"

The man in captain's pips next to the transporter console said, "For the women, sure. For you, Matthew, denied."

Grinning, Matthew Cross stepped down from the transporter pad and hugged the captain of the Eon. The

other captain almost got through it with straight face before he started laughing. "Mathew, Mom and Dad are about to BUST you made it!"

Matthew Cross laughed back and said, "I told you I would, didn't I?"

Realizing that the other Starfleet officers were looking at them like they had squids in their mouths, the two captains turned. "Ensign Shelby," the other captain said. "My brother, Matthew Cross."

Matthew turned the other captain to face the Banshees. "Nathan Cross, I present Banshee Squadron."

"Welcome aboard," Nathan grinned. "Please excuse our high spirits. It's been a while since we've seen each other."

Alex grinned. It was nice to see someone who was happy for a change.

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Commander Claudia Grant, the Eon's executive officer, led the Banshees into the huge shuttle bay that faced forwards across the ship's main hull.

"Ladies. Your new ships." She pointed to six ships parked in slots along the port side of the hangar bay.

Alex stared, crushed.

Far from being a swoopy, delta winged, graceful pilot's machines, the new F-51 fighters were... dumpy.

They were obviously the descendants of type 15 shuttle pods. There was some mutating radiation and steroid abuse in there. But the new ships were small, boxy and absolutely lacking in any style.

They had stubby little wings on which were mounted weapons pods. A bigger turret out front held sensors and an aggressive looking phaser.

The Banshees moved forwards and examined the poor, ugly little ships.

A canopy extended from the top and front, making the thing look bug like.

"Two seats," Lee Carter said.

"The front seat is a gunner's station," Sam pointed out.

"So you fly it from behind the gunner's head?" Alex cried.

They all turned towards Commander Grant.

Lee shook her head. "These won't do at all."

Sam shook her head. "Engineers."

=/\=

"I hear you," Nathan Cross said carefully. "I want you to know that I am listening to your concerns."

Lee looked at him.

"But your request is denied. These are the ships we have; these are the ships you'll use. Period. After this mission if you want to return to the Kestrals, you'll be free to do so."

Lee looked at Nathan Cross. Cross looked back.

After a long time Lee smiled and said, "Yes, Sir."

She spun on her heel and marched out of the Captain's office.

Sam and Jo hurried to catch up.

Alex looked at the backs of her retreating squad mates and at Captain Cross.

Then she came to attention. "Sir?"

Cross looked carefully at his PADD pretending to be hard at work. "Dismissed. Thank you."

Alex fled.

=^=

Alex recognized the Security officer appointed to be her Gunner immediately. "Vicki!"

Vicki Collins smiled "Alex! It's good to see you again! How have you been?"

The two old friends chatted away. The eighteen months since Alex had joined Banshee Squadron seemed like a lifetime.

"Excuse me," Lee said.

Vicki and Alex stopped and stood up straight.

"Time for catching up after the training flight," Lee said, smirking.

There were six F-51 fighters on the Eon. Banshee Squadron was absorbing two new temporary pilots and six new temporary gunners from the Eon's crew.

Lee, Sam, Jo and Alex had to work quickly to try and bring up their new comrades-in-arms up to speed before the next Damyip attack.

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Red alert woke Alex out of a sound sleep. She was running down the hallway for the dressing room before it occurred to her to wonder if she was dressed.

It didn't matter. She bombed into the dressing room and began to throw her armored vacc-suit on with practiced moves. Then grabbing Vicki Collins, Alex checked her seals and checked her suit.

The newbies varied between almost as fast as they should have been to way slow, but it couldn't be helped. Alex reflected that although Banshee Squadron drilled for a red alert reaction launch, this was the first one she had done for real.

After everyone was suited up and checked, Alex and Vicki pelted for Green Four; the fighter assigned to them. Alex had a moment's irritation as they clambered into the fighter. The hatches for pilot and gunner opened on opposite sides of the plane.

Alex knew by now that most of her irritation with the new ship was that it was different from what she was used to. So the flash of irritation didn't last.

The two women strapped into the machine, hooked up life support, power and communications leads and signaled readiness to each other with thumbs up.

Then they waited for fifteen seconds while the rest of the Squadron got settled.

Lee Carter's voice sounded over the comm-channel. "Banshee Squadron, count off, readiness for launch."

Sam was first, "Green Two, this is all new."

Jo was next. "Green Three, it's Greek to me."

Then Alex. "Green Four. Ready for launch." Some things never changed.

Miki Chen, the chief helmsman of the Eon and her best pilot, said, "Green Five. Standing by."

Then it was Dagozx Metalheart, a man who was part Klingon, part Capellan and part no one knew what all. "Green Six. Standing By."

"This is Eon Control." Jamie Piper relayed orders from the bridge to the fighters. "Cleared for launch by number. Good luck."

The small, chunky and seemingly graceless fighters zipped out of the Eon's main shuttlebay like bullets from a gun. Alex liked that the new fighters accelerated very quickly.

Alex called up the tactical plot.

Three Damyip war-blocks were approaching the rag-tag refugee fleet from the rear. Alex blinked. One war-block could come close to swamping them with attack pods. She didn't want to think of how many attack pods three war-blocks were going to throw.

By prearranged plan, the Eon and the Elsinore were moving to form a main line between the refugees and the approaching Damyip.

The Stellar was moving to perform close escort of the fleet.

The Enceladus moved to provide "high cover", hovering over the refugee fleet to add her fire support, should Damyip attack pods get into and amongst the fleet.

The navigational system pointed to a way point several thousand kilometers away from the fleet. The fighters of the Eon would do their best to exterminate all Damyip attack pods before they closed with the vulnerable civilians.

The communications system lit up. A golden man with a long mustache and a sneer on his face appeared. A

symbol told Alex that the Starfleet units were listening in on Lefyt channels.

"Darma." The man's voice oozed satisfaction. "Six fighters? You insult me so."

Darma's voice was stentorian and projected. "Cemves, you despicable traitor. What do you have to say to us?"

Cemves replied, "Even your new friends can't defend you from three war-blocks, old friend. Admit that the campaign is over and surrender peacefully."

"Surrender to be murdered?" Darma asked.

"No, no, no. There's been a change of heart. The Damyip Central Control doesn't want to see the end of the Lefyt people. They want to help us resettle a new, fresh world and to be part of a peaceful alliance with the Damyip. They are really being quite reasonable," Cemves said.

"We fell for that once before and look where it got us. It got your knife in our backs, Cemves."

"Think carefully, Darma. I know how the Damyip think. If the shooting starts it won't end until it's over by a very mechanical and final definition. You've cost the Damyip much. Their patience is not infinite."

"Their capacity for murdering us seems to be, Cemves. If you attack, we will defend ourselves."

"So be it. The time for mercy has ended. We will crush you, Darma." Cemves' anger was evident. The communication signal ended.

The refugee fleet was well behind Banshee Squadron now.

"The Eon is being hailed," Jamie Piper reported.

"Pipe it through, please," Lee Carter said.

On the intercom, Alex said to Vicki, "I'll bet you fifteen strips of gold pressed latinum that he tries to reasonably buffalo us away from the Lefyt."

Vicki snorted. "No bet."

Sure enough, Cemves was oily, but extremely reasonable sounding. "Aliens, I am sure you mean well, and I applaud your willingness to take in a group of interstellar ruffians. I am certain their tales of woe tugged on your heart. However please be aware that this is the final stage of a long and bloody war started by the Lefyt and waged for generations. A war of extermination and slaughter. A war my Damyip friends only survived themselves by the narrowest of margins."

Nathan Cross' voice was calm. "The United Federation of Planets is an organization of peace, Sir. If you and your Damyip friends would like us to help negotiate a cease fire and a peace treaty, we'd be more than willing."

"We seek justice, Federation. Justice for a band of rogues, criminals and pirates. Terrorists who, in their drive to escape the consequences of their own actions, has carved a trail of destruction and death through the Damyip Domination."

"The people of this fleet have requested political asylum, Sir. However, if your government would like to establish relations with the Federation and negotiate for an extradition treaty, we'd be honored to help facilitate that." Cross also sounded very reasonable.

"Your six fighters are inadequate, Sir. Your ships, while advanced and aesthetically pleasing are smaller and less powerful then our war-blocks. I urge you to withdraw, for the safety of yourself and your crew."

"Unfortunately, Sir, I am unable to comply. When we acceded to the Lefyt request for asylum, we took responsibility for their safety. I request that you reconsider any military action against the Lefyt and pursue diplomatic means to resolve your dispute."

"Federationers, you take a terrible risk. The Damyip can be formidable enemies. If antagonized, their wrath can be quick and violent. If attacked they will not be defeated. If you pursue this course, your people may suffer."

Cross became stern. "The Federation believes in peace, Sir. We also believe strongly in self-defense. If attacked we will defend ourselves. Please believe me, diplomacy and negotiation are in your interest here."

"Stand away from the Lefyt or you will be considered authorized targets, as much as any Lefyt vessel or weapon."

"Sir. These are civilians and refugees under my protection. An attack on them will be responded to with all necessary and due force."

Cemves' facade of rationality and civilization cracked. "So be it. When we advance on your worlds and when your people perish in flames, it will be your name they curse as your Federation falls into darkness."

"Yeah. Good luck with that. When you feel like talking, we'll be here." Cross had also reached his limit.

Vicki shook her head. "I thought he was going to try talking us to death."

Alex shrugged. "I could use a nice long wordy speech. I could catch up on my sleep."

"No such luck. They're launching." Vicki pointed to the tactical displays.

The three Damyip war-blocks were disgorging attack pods in incredible numbers.

"Time to go to work," Alex said.

"This is Eon," Piper said. "Hold at first way point and only fire if fired upon. If fired upon, break and attack according to plan."

"Acknowledged, Eon, " Carter said.

The fighters got to the first way point and began to orbit.

They didn't have to wait long. The Damyip attack pods separated into groups, spread out and maintained mechanically precise formations as they approached.

The lead group of attack pods attacked vigorously and without hesitation. Because they were robots, they had no fear of the punishing g-forces of tight turns. They were extremely maneuverable and reacted very, very quickly.

Particle beams splashed off the shields of the new plane. Alex rolled into a turn and said, "Return fire!"

Vicky brought her gun around and began quickly, efficiently exterminating attack pods.

Alex smiled to herself. Although it was disappointing, having steerable guns and a large field of fire was a lot easier than fixed forward guns.

Alex looked for Jo Schmidt in Green Three, her wingman.

There. Being able to fly and not worry about the shooting was a lot easier, too. Alex formed up on Jo. "Green Four to Green Three."

Jo Schmidt replied, "This is Green Three."

"I'm on your wing."

"Good."

The two Federation fighters began to make high speed passes, streaking through bunches of Damyip attack pods, spreading beams and torpedoes liberally as they went.

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"This isn't working," Lee Carter snarled to herself.

"Ma'am?" The purring voice of M'rowan said. He was working a lot harder than she was. He had so many targets and so little time.

The Damyip attack pods were flowing over the six Federation ships like water over a sandcastle. The Federation fighters were slaughtering attack pods in huge numbers, but many of the survivors were just ignoring them and heading for the refugees.

So every pass, Banshee Squadron was zigzagging backwards towards the refugee fleet.

They were slowing the Damyip attack, and making it disorganized, but not stopping it away from the refugees like they wanted.

Lee opened a channel to the Eon. "Eon, this is Green One. This isn't working."

Jamie Piper's voice replied. "We see it, Banshees. Split up and take the flanks."

Lee relayed the order.

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In the lead Damyip war-block, Cemves watched his tactical display with trepidation. He was on a throne, in a

darkened chamber. He watched from above, in a regal position.

Damyip war drones stood impassively nearby. They were shaped something like man-sized mechanical ants, with blade-like mandibles, red compound eyes and blasters mounded on their heads. The golden one was a network coordinator. Cemves called it a centurion.

The six new fighter planes were carving a swath of destruction through his planes like nothing he'd ever seen. Six more and they might have stalled his attack. Three more than that and they might have hurled him back.

"What sort of monsters are we fighting?" Cemves asked.

"They appear to be humanoids with advanced technology," the centurion replied.

Cemves ignored his overly literal assistant. "Have the second and third war-block advance. We'll form an inverted echelon and attack directly."

"As you order," the war drone said.

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Alex and Jo were out on the outriding edge of the Damyip flood, zooming and killing. Alex made a happy discovery. Her fighter did have fixed guns. She had a pair of pulse phasers on her wing roots. She could shoot as well as fly.

"Do you want me to leave some in front of us for you?" Vicky asked distantly. She was working very hard at killing Damyip pods.

"Please," Alex said.

The tactical plot beeped angrily. The Eon and the Elsinore were declaring lanes of fire.

Then they spat dozens of points of light.

The tactical plot beeped another, more shrill tone. Quantum torpedoes were entering the battle space.

An almost painfully bright point of light appeared. And then another. And then another. The fighter's canopy immediately darkened to prevent excessive light.

The Banshees and the refugee fleet were treated to a fireworks show. Huge blasts and shock waves of quantum torpedoes set for proximity warheads were the centerpiece. Shredded, melted pieces of Damyip pods made a glittering backdrop. The detonation of engines and missile warheads made counterpoints.

"Oooo. Aaahhh," Alex said wryly.

"Okay," Vicki said. "There's a statement."

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Cemves blinked at his tactical display, "What... what just happened?"

The Centurion said "The alien vessels fired some sort of heavy missile that was able to destroy war pods by detonating at a distance. They fired sixteen such missiles."

"How many of our attack pods did we loose?"

"Approximately thirty-three percent."

"Can the war-blocks withstand those missiles?"

Cemves was pale and felt ill.

"For a short while."

Cemves swallowed. "Have war-blocks two and three advance at flank speed and engage the aliens. We'll advance at half speed."

"As you order," the centurion said. It was easily able to perceive Cemves' cowardice, but being a machine, it didn't care.

"Oh, good," Cemves said. "They're firing again."

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Alex looked at her tactical plot. "Wow. And they need us, why?"

"Can't fire quantum torpedoes into the middle of a refugee fleet," Vicky replied.

"Ah." Alex noticed something else. "The war-blocks are coming up quick."

Jamie Piper's voice sounded over the comm. "All fighters. Stay on killing attack pods. You're doing great. Do not engage the war-blocks. Leave them to us."

"Green One, acknowledged," Lee's voice sounded.

"Green Six, please confirm, Eon." Dagozx's voice sounded unhappy.

Jamie's voice was professional. "Confirmed, Green Six. You're in a perfect position to destroy attack pods. You wouldn't be as effective against the war-blocks."

There was a pause.

"Green Six, please acknowledge," Jamie said.

Grudgingly, Dagozx replied, "Green Six, acknowledged."

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The large, rectangular war blocks roared into the battle space. Things were becoming complex.

Alex found herself spending a lot of time moving to intercept attack pods that were attacking Jo. And Jo was spending as much time clearing attack pods away from Alex.

Alex lost track of time. All there was were the quick jerky motions of lining up the next Damyip pod and pulling the trigger on it.

Occasional huge beams flashed nearby. This was Alex's warning that she'd strayed too close to a war-block. Their targeting computers were too old and slow to keep up with the fighter planes. Alex spent a moment being thankful. If the war-blocks had been adequately armed, that would have been the end of Banshee Squadron, again.

White flashes marked the impact of more quantum torpedoes. The war-block was burning and full of holes. Somehow, isolated turrets would fire. The war-blocks were tough!

Alex knew things were getting out of hand when she had to dodge one of the refugee ships. The battle moved back into the refugee fleet. People were talking in that pilot's monotone, warning of Damyip pods and missiles. Describing damage.

The fast, swoopy and dangerously under-defended Lefyt fighters appeared, flying in pairs and blowing hot plasma exhaust all over. "Those things are as dangerous from behind as they are from the front!" Alex thought to herself.

She felt bad though when she saw one explode. A light touch from a Damyip beam, the Lefyt fighter plane lost containment and exploded with extreme violence. Were the pilots brave, desperate or crazy?

Alex kept shooting Damyip pods. It was all she could do to keep people from dying.

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The second Damyip war-block exploded. Huge chunks of shredded ultra-dense steel flew ponderously away from a cloud of exploding fuel.

Alex winced and hoped that none of the refugee ships were too close to it.

Damyip attack pods were getting hard to find. Alex felt the clammy sweat inside her vacc-suit but concentrated. The mission wasn't over until the last pod was gone.

Before she knew it, Alex and Victoria, Jo and Zane her gunner had made three loops around the refugee fleet, looking for pods. There were none left.

Alex realized she was hearing other noises. The refugee ships were on open channels.

They were cheering.

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The landing was more difficult than Alex felt was needed. As soon as the recall notice came in, Alex realized how tired she was and how her muscles ached. It wasn't the longest mission she'd ever flown, but it was the longest combat.

The landing bay of the USS Eon seemed to waver as she approached.

It never occurred to Alex that she could turn landing control over to the Eon and let them land the fighter.

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Alex painfully climbed out of the fighter, and popped her helmet seals.

As she pulled off her helmet, she noticed that the air of the landing bay tasted cool and fresh. She could almost feel sweat steaming out of the neck of her suit.

Vicky pulled off her own helmet. Her hair was matted with sweat and she looked like Alex felt after a 50-kilometer hike in Starfleet Basic.

Alex was pretty sure she was just as appealing.

"I enjoyed every minute of that, and I never want to do it again," Vicky breathed.

Alex nodded. "You rock. You did great."

Alex noted people running through the Eon's shuttlebay. Shuttles were being lined up, loaded and readied for launch. The deck crews had no time for talk or anything, they were moving flat out. Carts loaded with boxes of emergency supplies were being moved quickly.

Alex motioned to the deck controller office. "Let's go."

Jo and Zane joined Alex and Vicky. Jo shambled up next to Alex as they walked. "Okay. I changed my mind. I like the new planes."

If Alex had the energy, she'd have called Jo a traitor. But as she considered it, she was forced to agree. The new planes were more maneuverable, had better shielding and

better weapons than the Kestrals. The addition of the gunner's station made shooting things a lot easier.

Alex didn't like this thought process. "Hmmpf," she grunted.

At the deck control office Ryo Tanaka, the Eon's ops officer was speaking loudly and urgently. "The Mitigator reports fires aboard and heavy casualties. I want damage control and repair teams there soonest! They'll need equipment."

"But we don't have the shuttles!"

"See if we can borrow some!"

"The Elsinore is empty. All her shuttles are moving."

"Check the Enceladus!"

"They have a couple of spares, but they're 80 year old junk!"

"Grab 'em. We don't have time to be picky!"

Alex stepped into the office. "What do want me to fly, Lieutenant?"

Tanaka looked at her like she was crazy. "You just came back!" He softened, but was quick. "Thank you, but we can handle it from here. Go rest. I may have to grab you for the next shift if this gets out of hand."

Alex nodded and led her party away from the deck control office.

Vicky caught up with her. "What was that about?"

"It's disaster relief, now." Alex explained. "That's harder work than combat. Let's go find some food and someplace to lie down. The fun is just starting."

23. Serenity

Alex Jo, Sam and Lee stopped and blinked.

On the outskirts of Serenity City, a new town had sprung up. Rows and rows of boxes were set along graveled lanes.

Civilians and Starfleet people from the Starbase 901 crew were moving among the new structures finishing the work of getting them ready.

A man in blue jeans, boots, a work shirt and a hardhat stopped and looked at the arrivals. He turned and blew a piercing whistle, and added, "They're HERE!"

Around the Banshee women, Lefty refugees also stared.

The man came up quickly but seriously. "I'm Will Mackenzie," he introduced himself. "Welcome to New Canada. We're sorry the accommodations are a bit rude, but we were on short notice. Come on in. The single units are here. Over in Section B, we have multiple units for families. Once we get everyone settled in and safe, we'll start working on something real for you all to live in."

"These... These are for us?" one refugee asked.

"Oh, yeah," Mackenzie said. "Like I said, I'm sorry. We'll do better once we have some time to really build."

The refugees started moving forwards with their meager belongings.

A Starfleet officer stood up on a crate. "I'm Lieutenant Lee! Starfleet here! We need to organize the refugees!"

As Alex and the Banshees joined the settling effort, she heard excited babbles from the Lefyt refugees.

"Running water!"

"Lights! Heat!"

"Look at the furniture!"

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Alex led an old woman and three refugee children into their new home. The children excitedly poked into the corners, while the woman sat down tired, but looking around with bright eyes.

It was a Starfleet officer's quarters built into a cargo container. It made sense. Serenity City suddenly needed to house almost eleven thousand refugees in a matter of days. Almost all the patterns were easily available in the replicators aboard Starbase 901.

"Thank you," the old woman smiled. Alex recalled that she'd been camping in the hallway of a rattletrap freighter, existing on sips of water and carefully shaved rations of emergency food.

"It will get better," Alex said. "This is your replicator. It can make food, clothing, tools. Just tell it what you want."

The old woman shook her head. "When it comes time to pay..."

Alex shook her head. "You won't."

The lady glared at Alex sharply. "Young lady. Nothing is ever free."

Alex opened her mouth and stopped for a second and then closed it. "We have a system, but... We'll figure it out. Please don't worry. It'll all work out fine."

The woman stared at Alex for a moment, and then turned back to her replicator. "Food."

"Please specify, using the menu above," the replicator answered.

"Slushies!" one of the children yelled.

Alex backed out of the box and continued on her way.

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That night, Alex straggled back into Banshee Headquarters. Some of the refugees were throwing parties. Others were readjusting their living situations for more comfort. Of course there was a vocal minority who found things unacceptable and complained loudly.

It made trying to keep things orderly and get the refugees settled exhausting.

Lights were on in the mess hall. Alex drifted that way.

Lee, Sam and Jo were already there, with a number of the remaining support people. Smiles and waves of greeting met her. Alex smiled. "Ice cream?"

Lee raised her spoon. "Of course. Come get."

Alex grabbed her favorite double chocolate fudge punch in the mouth out of the replicator and sat down next to her teammates.

"How are you feeling?" Lee asked.

"Tired," Alex said. "But... good."

"We made a difference." Lee scooped some more ice cream.

Alex recognized the feeling and enjoyed it. "We did, didn't we?"

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Enrod was taller than Alex remembered. He looked across the landscape with sculpted features. Almost like a poster. In the weeks since the refugees landed, the work needed to accommodate them became easier and easier.

Alex, Jo, Enrod and Dexter Gray were hiking in the hills over Serenity City.

"Some are pushing on for Botchok," Enrod said.

Alex nodded. There was something religious about Botchok for many of the Lefyt.

"Many want to stay here," Enrod said. "It's the first piece of stability and safety since the Colonies were overrun."

"We'd be glad to have them," Alex said. "The frontier never gets enough people to meet the need."

Enrod looked at Alex for a moment. "How does one go about joining Starfleet here?"

Alex looked at Enrod. It made sense. He saw himself as a brave defender. With the Lefyt military all but disbanded, what was the next logical step?

"I'll show you to the personnel office when we get back into town," Alex said. "From there, it's between you and them."

"Thank you," Enrod said. "I really like New Canada."

IX - The Future

24. The Future

"The Eon is out of refit," Lee said.

The empty base seemed to rattle. It was mostly dark. Alex hated the place now. The lights in the wardroom were dim, as if to emphasize the emptiness of the place.

"Captain Cross wants us to join his crew."

"As Banshee Squadron?" Jo asked.

Lee wagged her hand in a "sort of" gesture. "The idea is that Banshee Squadron would be a part-time thing, as needed. Most of the time we'd be on regular starship duty."

Jo looked at Lee, Sam and Alex, her eyes wide.

Alex looked at it in her mind. "Would we still get to fly?"

"Not as often as we used to, but some," Lee explained. "Admiral Pike wants to keep us together, but Starfleet Command is putting pressure on him."

Sam shrugged. "I can do that. It'll keep us together."

Jo nodded. "I'll go."

Lee Carter nodded and said, "I am going with the Eon anyway."

Alex scratched her chin and asked, "Where are we going on the Eon?"

Lee smiled. "A deep space probe beyond the Briar Patch."

Alex smiled. "Where no man has gone before?"

Lee shrugged. "We'll be bringing some with us."

With the resulting laughter, Alex felt something relax inside. "Let's get going then."

