



CADET CHRONICLES

ADVENTURES ON
WESTERHAVEN SPACE
FORCE ACADEMY

BEGINNINGS

A Love Story



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BEGINNINGS

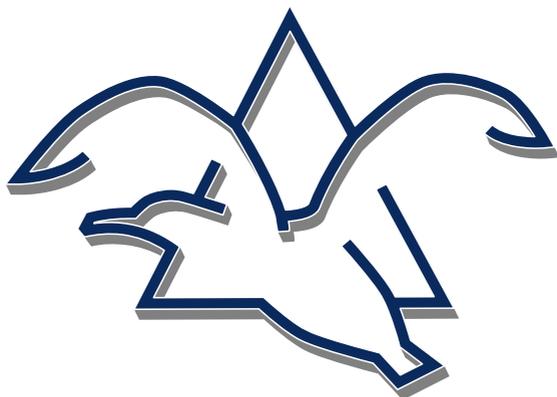
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ALBATROSS

SQUADRON

AUDACES FORTUNA ADIUVAT



FRIENDLY FIRE

The summer sky was a limitless blue expanse and the sun a gleam on the metal nose of the Stingray. Perfect flying conditions. Acceleration pressed Adelie into her seat, and only a thin brown line on the left reminded her of Westerhaven Academy. She scanned the blue until she spotted the little black dot moving towards her. The cadets of Squadrons Albatross Alpha and Omega were pitched against each other in a bout of one against one, and Nate "English" Havisham, Alpha's top dog, was her adversary. He was as cocky as they came and wouldn't be an easy opponent. Her fingers gripped the stick harder. The planes engaged in a waltz across the sky. Beautiful to observe, but deadly for those participating in it. They pulled each other into an endless progression of loops, rolls, and turns, but the only result was that they both pushed the limits of their planes and bodies until nausea unsettled her stomach. Sweat trickled down her back; the cooling system of her flight suit had trouble with keeping up. Neither of them managed to bring the other in front or even into shooting range, and concentration began to wear thin. Eventually, he was coming up behind her, and she forced her 'ray into a sharp turn, almost causing the bird to skid across the sky. Her attacker hadn't suspected her move, or he was getting tired too, but he overshot considerably, ending up in front of her. The opportunity to fire. The crosshairs almost aligned themselves with his tailpipe and she pressed the trigger.

"English, you're dead. Princess, excellent shot. Fantastic fight everybody. Return to base." The confirmation from Mission Control was music in her comm and delighted she pointed the 'ray into the direction of the airbase. Time for a shower.

The air flickered over the tarmac of the runway. A light breeze brushed as hot as jet exhaust over his face as Nate popped open the canopy and it wasn't helping with cooling his mood. He climbed out of his jet and narrowly resisted throwing the helmet across the ground. It hadn't been his day to begin with and now he lost to a girl, after such a rookie mistake. Next to him, the other pilot exited her plane. She was tall, and even the baggy flight suit couldn't hide the fact

that she had more assets than just being an ace pilot. Because she was, he grudgingly had to admit to himself. She had pushed his limits like nobody had before her. A long brown braid fell over her back as she pulled off the helmet. Her eyes met his as she turned around, her face unreadable and professional.

"English." She gave him a commendatory nod.

"Princess." He forced himself to smile.

"Thanks for the excellent fight. You kept me on my toes." A smile broke through her aloofness, lightening up her face with mischief. *Wowza.*

"You're welcome," he grumbled, crossing his arms in front of his chest. He leaned against the body of his plane and glowered at her. "When are you free for a rematch?"

She laughed, delightedly even. "You don't like losing to a girl, eh?"

"I don't like losing at all."

Her opponent was a poster boy for the United Space Force: tall, athletic and cheekbones commissioned from Michelangelo. Tanned skin and bright blue eyes which were trained on her in an upset glare. Jet-black hair stuck up in every direction, damp with sweat. 'rays weren't known for being cool rides.

"Should I get you some ice for the burn?" She teased.

He huffed and pushed himself away from the hull, getting close enough that he blocked the sun. "Next time you won't defeat me so easily."

"I'm looking forward to it." If he thought he could intimidate her, he was wrong. Years spent racing overconfident guys had steeled her for any sort of encounter. But her remark lit up his face in an unexpected smile. He extended his hand and said: "Challenge accepted."

She shook his hand. "You better check your six, English."

Warm air rose from the old stone steps leading to the entrance of the Faculty for Tactical Aeronautics. It wafted over her bare legs as Adelie left after a long and busy morning in one of the library's reading rooms. After the quiet inside, the noise of campus life engulfed her like the surf of the sea, as she headed into the direction of the cafeteria. Groups of students sat on the lawns in front of mighty red brick houses, enjoying their lunch break. Some kicked around a football. Heat hung over the academy like an invisible cheese dome and not only the gardeners wished for a thunderstorm. Walking down the tree-lined street, she mulled over Wilfried Kittendorf's theories, and she paid not much attention to her surroundings. Alarmed yells plucked her out of her thoughts. One of the football players was about to collect the escaped ball from the street and oblivious to an approaching speeding van! Without hesitating, she dropped her books and ran towards him. She tackled the unsuspecting player and pushed him out of harm's way. Together they rolled through the dust, as the truck passed them by a whisker, brakes screeching. For a split second she remembered that she wore a dress with a full skirt, and hoped for a decent landing. Their tumble came to a halt at the border stone. Her shoulder would complain in the morning, and her knee burned like it was scraped, she thought while staring up into the blue sky, trying to catch her breath.

He found his bearings first, scrambling to his knees.

"Princess?"

Nate stared at the woman lying in front of him. His heart hammered in his chest, and he had trouble keeping up with getting enough air into his lungs. Blood rushed in his ears. Her chest was heaving as well, and he could see red trickle down a pale knee.

"English?" She blinked at him, then a sly smile spread across her face, and she sat up. "I told you to check your six."

Shouts pierced his bubble of adrenaline.

"Shit, man, are you alright? This idiot must've won his license in

the lottery!" Jake sounded upset as he reached them. "You can thank your guardian angel your career didn't end right here and now." The eyes of his friend fell on his rescuer. He didn't even know her first name, dammit. "Woah, isn't that the mighty Princess who eliminated our Prince Charming?"

"Shut up." Suddenly Nate wasn't keen on giving her an idea how much this had bruised his ego.

"Prince Charming? Is that your other callsign?" Her mouth twitched as her eyes wandered between him and Jake.

"Are you telling me he hasn't tried to charm you yet?" Jake wagged his eyebrows.

"Will you shut up now!" Nate glared at his friend as he heard her giggle. Others reached them. They were helped up, dust was brushed off their shoulders and several student nurses checked if they were unharmed. One applied a band-aid to her scraped knee. Some others yelled at the driver, asking him if he had lost his mind. As it was evident that neither of them got hurt, the hubbub subsided, and the spectators left the scene. Jake returned to the rest of their group, to report that Nate hadn't been injured.

Adelie turned to collect her books, which were scattered all over the sidewalk, as Nate freed himself from the over-attentive nurses and followed her.

"Hey! Wait. I want to thank you."

She awkwardly brushed a fleck of dust from the skirt of her red gingham dress. "Don't mention it, it was no big deal."

"No big deal? You're joking, right? You could've ended up under the van! You risked your life, your career!" He was right, of course. She had risked a lot without thinking about it, and it hit her unexpectedly. Black dots danced in front of her eyes as she realised what could've happened. Had she lost her mind?

"Hey, you okay?" His arm was around her shoulders to support her until her vision cleared again.

"Yes, I'm okay. Thank you."

He kneeled down beside her and now helped her picking up the

books. Without being grumpy, he indeed seemed to be made entirely out of charm and gallantry and had a terrific smile. No wonder the student nurses had been so occupied with checking if he was alright.

"I was on my way to the cafeteria." She pointed towards the narrow yellow building at the end of the street. "And I don't know about you, but I certainly could use a drink now."

The cafeteria was almost empty and pleasantly cool. They found a table in the back, and Nate went to the counter to get their drinks, ignoring her protests. Her knee must hurt, and he wasn't going to see her hobbling around the tables. They both could use something with lots of sugar, so he opted for two lemonades.

"One elderberry lemonade coming up." He placed the glass with the sparkling beverage in front of her, getting a broad smile in return.

"Thank you." She took a sip and sighed happily. "This is refreshing after the heat outside."

"Yes, it is." He cleared his throat. "Before this gets even more awkward - I never learned your first name. And I can't call you Princess all the time, can I?"

She brushed her hair out of her face and answered with a smile: "No, English, you can't. Especially because I'm in fact a Baroness."

"You're what?" He nearly dropped his glass, and she laughed.

"My full name is Baroness Adelle von Klaiber, but the USF likes to shorten me to Adelle Klaiber. I'm from Eden."

"You're a long way from home."

"I am." She smoothed an invisible crease on her skirt and avoided his glance.

"I'm Nathan Havisham, but I guess you know that already since you didn't ask. My friends call me Nate. I'm from Earth."

"Why did your friend call you Prince Charming?"

Heat rushed over his face and neck. "Insider," he murmured, and she laughed softly.

"You didn't seem too thrilled with him telling me that."

A piece of dry leaf was stuck in her hair, and he reached over to pluck it out, happy to be able to create a diversion.

"Thank you." Their eyes met. Hers were brown with golden speckles, sparkling with amusement. "I must look like a rat, dust all over, a bloody knee. Maybe I should go to the restroom and adjust my appearance."

He shook his head, unable to divert his eyes. "You look fine. Give your knee a rest."

"You saved Nathan Havisham? The Nathan Havisham half the nurse population suffers heartbreak from?" Leslie plunked down in one of Adelle's armchairs, shaking her head and causing her blonde victory rolls to quiver. "I seriously thought you'd be capable of better judgement."

Adelle laughed, sitting down in the other chair, placing a cup of tea in front of her friend. "Sorry, next time I'll ask for credentials before I save someone's life. I'm getting a hunch you don't like him. What's he done to you?"

Leslie huffed. "I wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole, just so you know."

"But why? He's gorgeous and charming. Did he ignore you?"

"The thing with gorgeous and charming men is that they're aware of it. And they take advantage of it. They don't care if they break hearts in the process."

Adelle poured herself a cup of tea, thinking back to the hour with Nate. He was pleasant company and hadn't behaved like the woman-devouring bird of prey Leslie tried to colour him. He hadn't tried to touch her nor had he made any double entendres. Instead, they chatted about Major Payne's antics and the curriculum. "I don't understand why you're so riled up about him. Sure, he's confident, and yes, he knows he's not an ugly looking kid, but he was a perfect gentleman in all our interactions. What's he done to you?"

Leslie tugged exasperated at her starched white uniform blouse. "Listen, Sweetums, be careful, okay? I don't want to see you as devastated as the others when they understand he's not doing relationships."

Adelie gave her a long look. "Leslie - how do you know all this? Did he dump you?"

Her friend crinkled her nose in disgust. "No. He never even spared me a glance. Eloise got lucky, though, or so she thought."

"Sounds like a cracker of a story." Adelie stuffed a pillow in her back and made herself comfortable for one of Leslie's famous rants about men.

Leslie put her cup down with an audible clink. "Men like him are assholes. They exploit our weaknesses ruthlessly. They know that a woman would dream of being "the one" and they still sleep with her, instead of backing out and not hurting her."

Adelie stirred her tea, thinking back to how much enjoyment she got from men Leslie readily called assholes. "Maybe that would be the gentlemanly thing to do. But you can have a lot of fun with them. They're gorgeous and generous, and usually know what they're doing. We're all grownups, and they're not responsible for what a woman hoped when they'd been open about their intentions from the start. Plus they have a lot of experience..."

"And give you STIs!"

"Leslie!" She laughed. "Stop it. I can assure you, right now I have absolutely no interest in Nathan Havisham, or in any other man, no matter their intentions. I'll be safe from heartbreak and catching nasties. You can relax." After all, a man on his knees with a ring in his hands was what had led to her ending up in Westerhaven after all.

The library was the oldest building on campus. It sat in the middle of everything, surrounded by old oak trees and lush lawns scattered with rose bushes. Stone steps led up to a pillar-framed entrance, which gave the whole building the touch of a Greek temple. Nate couldn't stop thinking about Adelie, and he needed to see her again.

"Are you sure you've got the right place?" Jake asked, sitting on the steps and squinting because of the sun. Nate leaned against the low wall that framed the raised beds of roses around the entrance. Their rich fragrance scented the warm summer air.

"Yes. Rojas told me she's always in the library here on Thursdays, right after Foreign Cultures 101."

"I sure hope he was honest with you."

"Stop worrying, there she is!" He could see her tall figure weaving through the other students, swiftly coming up towards the building. She was even prettier than he remembered, wearing slim black cigarette pants and a cream coloured blouse, a satchel with books over her shoulder.

"Hey, Adelle! How's your knee?"

"Hi, Nate! It's doing fine. Sorry, I'm in a hurry - See ya!"

And with that, she vanished into the library with graceful, springy steps, leaving him standing there like an idiot. Jake snorted.

"I never thought I'd live long enough to see this."

He huffed. "See what?"

Jake had a grin plastered on his face. "A woman who doesn't stop, spin and fling herself into your arms. You're not used to the cold shoulder treatment, are you?"

Nate gave him the stink eye, causing only more laughter on his friend's side. But Jake was right. The tall, attractive Baroness, with her brown hair and superior smile, wasn't answering to his advances like women usually did.

"Forget it, she's only interested in books and jets." Jake consoled him with a pat on the shoulder. "There's Patricia."

He didn't even check, he was already halfway in the library. "I just remembered, I should really brush up my knowledge of the Warburton drive."

Jake's laughter followed him through the door. "Yeah man, sure! Good luck!"

"Hi again." Nate placed his books on the table and took the seat across from her. Instead of the anticipated smile, Adelle looked up with an impassive expression and nodded briefly, then continued reading and scribbling notes. He tried once more. "What are you reading?"

"A book." She didn't even look up.

"I can see that. But which one?"

This time, she made eye contact, but her glare nearly made his balls shrivel up. "Nate - I came here to study. This is a tricky topic, and I have to concentrate. I'd love to chat, but can we postpone that until I'm done? Thank you."

He sat down and grabbed one of his books to hide his burning cheeks. The room was secluded and empty, and only the tall cherry wood bookshelves had been witnesses to this encounter, but he was embarrassed nevertheless. Peeking over the rim of the book he saw her diligently copying parts of the text into her notepad. Her hair was in a neat braid, falling over her shoulder. Concentration furrowed her brows.

"You're not going to get anything done if you keep staring at me," she suddenly said.

He cleared his throat. "True. I'm sorry."

The usual tactics were not working. Maybe he would win her attention if he studied too and didn't try to keep her from it. An hour passed with neither of them saying a word. The long shadows of oak trees painted black fingers on the lawns around the library when she finally pushed her pen aside and stretched her back. Heat crept up his neck as he forced his glance down. He was not sure what would happen if she'd caught him staring at her chest, but he wasn't keen on finding out.

"Gee, is it that late already?" She exclaimed as she looked out the window.

"Time flies, eh?" He said. She had a beautiful profile. He was staring again.

"Absolutely. I'm hungry — want to grab a bite at Todd's?"

Hell, did she just ask him to go out with her? He blinked confused at her unreadable face. "Sounds like a brilliant idea, unless you're going to bite off my head..."

She laughed, her frown dissolving like melting ice cream. "I promise I'll behave."

The expression on his face was priceless. Adelle bit her bottom lip to keep herself from smiling. "I'm sorry. I'm sometimes too focused on my work. I hope I haven't been too harsh?"

He rubbed his neck, his glorious blue eyes sparkling with mischief. "I'm not made of sugar. I assume you have a license for those eyes of yours?"

License? She blinked at him, and he grinned. Standing up and putting the books away, he explained: "They're dangerous weapons. I nearly got hurt, you know?"

"Do you need a band-aid?" She raised him a defiant eyebrow, and he stepped towards her, close enough for her to smell his aftershave. It was a warm, subtle scent. His voice was a deep rumble, his eyes intense. Talk about having a license, Mister.

"A bag of ice might be more helpful to ease the burn."

She tilted her head, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "Are you sure you can risk going to Todd's with me, English? I can't vouch for your male pride surviving this without more burns..."

He chuckled. "I'm willing to take a gamble, Princess. It's nothing compared to what you risked jumping in front of that stupid truck."

Jumping in front of the speeding truck to push him out of harm's way had been no conscious decision, she had acted purely on instinct. The same instinct told her now to be careful — he displayed all the traits of a confident man knowing how to charm a woman. Traits that brought up painful memories.

"What's wrong?" His voice plucked her out of her thoughts.

"Uh, nothing." She pushed the pain and the memories away. They belonged to another time, another planet. She picked up her bag.

He studied her with a questioning gaze but didn't say anything. Instead, he followed her out of the library.



**PICNIC BY
THE POND**

The next time she saw him was entirely by chance. Adeline entered the little diner near the airfield, and there he was, standing behind the counter, washing up some glasses. The Lemon Tree was a classic diner, with a black and white checkered floor, chrome accents around the table edges and red faux-leather benches. The wall behind the counter was covered with shelves filled with glasses and cups. Through large windows, sunlight poured in over the tables. Nate looked up as he heard the bell above the door and a broad smile appeared.

"What a lovely surprise. Hello there." He put the glass on the rack and dried his hands with a towel that was tucked into the band of his apron.

She should have taken a seat somewhere in a corner, to not give him any ideas, but after a long and tiring afternoon in the simulator, she was in need of a little small talk. She slid on one of the bar stools in front of him, flashed him a smile and said: "Hi. How're you doing?"

His level of handsomeness was ridiculous. Braced on the counter, his arms showed corded strands of muscles and honey-coloured tanned skin. Even the white apron tied around his waist couldn't diminish his appeal. Blue sparkling eyes drenched with flirtatious mischief. "What can I bring you? Another lemonade?"

She forced her eyes up to the menu above the shelves. "Wow, you have quite a selection on offer. Which one's your favourite?"

"Trudy takes great pride in making her own lemonade. The question is not what my favourite is, but what you need."

"Okay then, what do I need, doc?" She couldn't help but smile at him, and he smiled right back.

"You look thirsty and in dire need of a refreshment. So this naturally calls for something with citrus. But your call sign is Princess... so it can't be any old boring lemonade then. It needs to be exquisite. Unusual!" He waggled his eyebrows at her, and she giggled. With a flourish, he opened the big red fridge behind him and fished out a bottle. "How about Trudy's prized Rosemary Limeade?"

"Rosemary Limeade? This sounds indeed unusual."

He laughed. "Trust me; it's heaven in a bottle. It's delicious."

"Well... I think I trust your taste and have one then."

He chuckled as he reached for a glass. "With or without ice?"

"With ice please."

He placed a coaster in front of her and put her drink on it. Ice cubes clinked. Carefully she took a sip. A small firework of different flavours exploded in her mouth. The sour but fragrant zing of real lime, the sweetness of sugar and then the tangy note of rosemary.

"This... this is delicious. I like it. Spot on selection."

"I'm glad you like it. It's even better in Gin Fizz."

The ceiling fan above them filled the silent diner with its whooshing sound. She realised she was the only guest. "Not many customers today?"

He had returned to cleaning glasses. "It's always slow between three and four. What you've been up to? You look like you had an exhausting day."

She laughed. "Is that your polite way to say I'm looking tired?"

He flashed her a grin. "I worry about my guardian angel."

"I'm not your guardian angel. And I just spent the better part of this beautiful sunny afternoon stuck in a Stingray simulator. I'm friends with one of the engineering students, and she wanted to test something. Sadly, it didn't work as we both thought it would."

"That sucks." The bells over the door tinkled as two nurse cadets entered. "Good afternoon, ladies." Nate dried his hands again and followed them to their table. "What can I offer you?"

They were all aflutter, and it took them quite a while to decide on their order, giving Adelle plenty of time to observe him. He was indeed charm personified but in a genuine way. She could see why Leslie's fellow nurses fell for him head over heels without him having much to do. She pushed back a strand of hair and took her InstaComm out of her purse. There was a message from her cousin Cosima, with an attached picture of a sleeping blonde puppy. It said: "Look what I got! Isn't he cute?" She typed a quick reply, as she heard Nate's rumbly voice behind her.

"Got an amusing message?" She swivelled around on the bar stool, glaring at him, and he took a step back. "Uh, sorry - didn't want

to intrude on your privacy. You smiled at your screen."

Adelie kicked herself, taking a deep breath. Leslie's overly cautious nature was rubbing off on her. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you coming, and you startled me. My cousin got a cute puppy. She sent me a picture of it sleeping in its basket. That's why I was smiling."

"Can I see it?"

"Of course." She pulled up the message and the picture again, and he stepped closer to be able to see. The warmth of his body radiated out to her and with it his unique blend of aftershave and personal fragrance. Also the faint scent of coffee and chocolate syrup. It tickled something deep inside of her.

"Awww, that's adorable. No wonder you were smiling. What's his name?"

"She hasn't told me yet."

"He looks like a Eustace to me."

Adelie snorted. "I'm going to tell her that, right now."

"No, no, no - that was a joke! The poor dog. How about Ajax?"

They spent a considerable amount of time thinking up silly names for the puppy until the diner slowly filled up and he had to serve customers.

The men's locker room of the airbase gym was stuffy with its usual stench, a weird mix of sweat, shower gel and too much testosterone. Nate welcomed this gut-churning odour today, he nearly craved it. He hoped it would take his mind off a pair of brown eyes, lips pursed in a superior smile and a warm, mellow voice.

"You look like you're ready to bench two-twenty today. What's gotten under your skin? Trouble with Payne?" Jake leaned against one of the grey locker doors, watching him carefully.

"No, not Payne." Nate took off his t-shirt and stuffed it into his locker.

"Can't believe that you've got girl trouble. Did a nurse finally capture your heart?"

He only huffed a reply, stepping out of his trousers. Pulling a muscle shirt over his head, he eventually said: "Nope, not a nurse."

And no girl will ever capture my heart."

"It's the Princess."

Nate's locker door slammed shut.

Jake folded his arms across his chest. "Lemme guess - she's still indifferent to you?"

Nate huffed again. "She wandered into the Lemon Tree yesterday afternoon. Drank a lemonade, showed me a picture of her cousin's adorable puppy, and we thought up names for it."

"Sounds like you two had fun?"

"She's like a slippery fish. Every time I think I grasp her, she wiggles away again. There's a witty reply to everything I say."

Jake laughed. "You're so not used to women who are on par with you. She's a pilot, Nate. She's not going into headless chicken mode just because you smiled at her."

"I'm not sure she even has a headless chicken mode."

They walked out of the locker room and into the gym. A careful glance around assured him that Adelle wasn't working out too. Not that he would mind seeing her in skin-tight workout attire, but he wasn't entirely sure he'd be able to handle it. Stepping on a treadmill for warm up, Jake said: "Somehow I suspect you're so interested in her because she's not falling for your schemes. She's challenging your ego."

"Maybe."

"Women are not game, mate."

"Duh, I know that. But she has something that makes her irresistible."

Jake chuckled. "A sense of self-preservation maybe? Sure, she's a total doll, and knows how to handle a 'ray - but you won't be the first guy noticing that. It's not like her squadron is only made up of other women."

Nate laughed. "So? You think she's already taken?"

Jake shook his head. "No. But she probably has a lot of experience in how to keep a cocky guy at arm's length."

Nate fell silent for the rest of their five-mile warm-up run. Jake had a point. Moving over to the free weights, Jake added: "Be careful

buddy - don't get burned."

He went over to the bench press, putting on Jake's predicted twenty. "Bah, humbug. Not gonna happen."

His friend chuckled, shaking his head. "Even a heartthrob like you is not immune to falling for someone. Why else are you still pursuing her, and not moving on to the next one, like you usually do?"

Jake could call himself lucky that there had been a barbell in his hand, and not a rugby egg; otherwise, he'd thrown it after him. Instead, he funnelled the energy into lifting the weight out of its stand and held it, not taking the bait laid out for him. Even the burn in his muscles couldn't take the mental image of her face away. The way she looked at him, how her eyebrows arched defiantly, her smile. Oh god, her smiles. They turned her impassive, unreadable face into something else entirely. Into the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. But falling for with her? Wanting her for something else than the pure pleasure of sex? No. Someone in a former life had made sure that he would never risk his heart like that ever again.

The sun painted glowing rectangles on the wooden floors of the library. Nate's eyes were riveted to how the chestnut of Adelie's hair suddenly had threads of gold woven in.

"You're staring again." Her voice had lost her sting as if she'd gotten used to his gaze. Like she'd gotten used to him showing up every Thursday in this room, taking the place opposite from her and studying in silence.

"Your hair shimmered lovely in the light." The remark won him an almost imperceptible smile. To his surprise, she then shut her book and leaned back in her chair, looking into the gardens around the library.

"The weather is too beautiful to be inside."

"How about taking our notes outside," he suggested, hoping she would agree. The brown eyes abandoned the window and focused on him. For two heartbeats she just watched him, considering the offer, then her impassive face lit up in one of her breathtaking smiles.

"This is a swell idea." She closed her notebook and stuffed it into her bag. "Let's go."

The weather was indeed beautiful, and for a while, they walked along the garden paths in silence. Bees hummed and from open windows, they could hear teachers' voices lecturing. Under the oak trees, groups of students were sitting on blankets, discussing problems. All the good sites had already been taken.

"I know a beautiful and quiet place, very secluded. It's behind the greenhouses." He had no idea why he told her that, but it made her grin.

"Why doesn't this surprise me in the least? Of course, you have a private spot for charming unassuming women."

Her grin got even wider as he tried to look offended. "I haven't said anything about charming you, have I? But it really is a beautiful place, with a pond and waterlilies."

She stepped closer to him, eyebrows arched and eyes brimming with the thirst of adventure. "This sounds quaint and pretty. Why don't you show it to me?"

"Are you not afraid I'm going to try and seduce you?" Two could play this game, and nobody was a better partner in scurrilous teasing than her. She chuckled.

"Over our notes of the history of space travel? Hardly. This always puts me asleep in ten minutes flat."

"Oh, come on then." With a laugh, he walked with her towards the greenhouse, built for the non-hardy plants adorning the campus over the summer.

He led her past some trash bins and a compost hill, around a hedge, and then an old structure became visible, reminding Adelle of an old bomb crater. It was now overgrown with white and pink blooming bushes. The air was full of the sweet scent of honey. At the bottom, there was indeed a little pond, dotted with pink and purple waterlilies. A steep and stony path went down the slope in a zigzag course.

"Ta-dah!" Nate made a flourish as if he wanted to introduce the scenery to her. "What do you say?"

"It's beautiful. Like from a fairy tale."

"Do you want to see the waterlilies from up close?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Descending wasn't as easy, though. She carefully balanced on her heels to not slip on the uneven path. Sneaker-clad Nate watched her efforts with unbridled amusement. "Women and their impractical shoes. It'll take a week until we're down there."

She huffed and grimaced at his back. "Oh, excuse me, if I'd known that I'd go mountaineering today, I'd have picked more sensible shoes than these sandaaaaa..." Not looking where she was going inevitably led to her heel catching in a root. Flailing only seemed to speed up her fall. Nate turned around as she squeaked, opening his arms to catch her just in time. "Oomph."

"Careful, Princess. Don't sprain your ankle. You okay?"

Grumbling she peeled herself away from his chest, trying to catch her composure before she had to face his inevitable smirk. "Yeah, I'm okay."

He offered his arm with a gallant smile. "Allow me to be of assistance, Baroness."

"Thank you." She grabbed his shoulder for balance and slipped out of her shoes. "Before I faceplant myself on the ground. Why didn't I think of this earlier?"

With him to lean on, it was a lot easier to pick her way, and they eventually reached the grassy bottom of the crater-like hollow. It was a truly enchanted place, filled with the hum of insects feeding on the blooming bushes, a duck paddling through the waterlilies and there was even a hidden frog croaking. Adelie pulled out a scarf from her purse to use as a makeshift blanket.

"Ha, I knew this would come in handy!" She sat down, fluffed her petticoats and smoothed her full skirt over her knees. Finally decent and comfortable, she patted the place next to her. "Come and sit here."

"This is an offer I can't refuse." He made himself comfortable beside her.

Cautiously Adelle eyed her companion going through his backpack seemingly without a care in the world. No matter how much Leslie tried to talk her out of it, she enjoyed his company. Nate was pleasant and fun to talk to. He liked motorcycles and books and played rugby for the varsity team. Not to mention that he was easy on the eyes and had manners to match.

Nate hunted for his pen hiding in some parallel universe or crevice deep inside his backpack to distract himself from the fact that Adelle sat so close to him that their elbows brushed against each other. Instead of his pen, he found a box full of apple cake. "Oh, I totally forgot I packed cake this morning."

"You carry around a box of cake, and you forget about it? I have a very hard time believing that." Her face lightened up as he took out the sweet treasure and placed it on the grass in front of them. "But I'm certainly not complaining. This makes our little adventure all the more perfect."

That Adelle found this little spot and the prospect of cake perfect filled him with unexpected delight. With her perpetual mask of indifference, he had assumed it was hard to please her. "You like it here?"

She raised him a mocking eyebrow and stretched out on the scarf, tucking her arms behind her head. "What's not to like? Blue skies, this enchanted little place, a surprise picnic and pleasant company... I'm willing to postpone thinking about how many other women you brought down here."

"Why d'you think I've done that?" Shit, he sounded more offended than he'd wanted. Why was he even offended? He had a reputation, after all, she was right in assuming everything.

"Oh, come on - this is the place to woo a woman. You can't tell me you haven't tried."

"I haven't." Their eyes met, and she quizzed him with a searching squint to see if he was honest. He was. He could never lie while being held accountable by the large brown eyes of his guardian angel. Darn it; this woman had a power over him he was unable to resist. "But

would it work to win your heart?" He couldn't help asking either. She smiled, looking up into the sky above them.

"Certainly. If I enjoyed being courted in an overly romantic way."

"But you don't." Disappointment settled in his chest. Why? He wasn't the romancing guy. He was not after a relationship. All he wanted was to get her out of her clothes and explore the body he had the unexpected pleasure to briefly get acquainted with as she had stumbled into his arms. Unaware of his emotional troubles, she lay next to him, cute toes wiggling in the green grass, giggling as the blades tickled her soles.

"What do you like then?" He had to ask; he needed to know.

She sat up and ran her fingers through her hair, picking out pieces of dried grass. "Little gestures. Honest interest in me. Bringing cake was a good idea too." Her eyes focused on him, twinkling with a smile. "What about you? What does a girl need to do to win a wanderer like you?"

How they'd left casual conversation and made it to the nitty-gritty of personal preferences was beyond Adelie. His gaze drifted from her to the pond to the bushes and back to her. He rubbed the back of his neck, hunting for words. Then he cleared his throat.

"She needs to be a home."

The way his jaw ticked told her that he probably got once hurt as much as she did. Interesting. His face brightened again. "Liking my cake is a start, though."

She shoved him with her shoulder, desperately needing to reach shallower waters. He shoved back. She giggled as she had to steady herself with her hand to not keel over. He caught her around her waist and drew her to the dangerous safety of his body. "Sorry. Rugby player. Don't know my own strength."

"Yeah, sure." She was more out of breath than the giggles should have caused. His hand slipped from her waist to her bottom, and she gave him a warning glance. He put it on the ground but his arm remained behind her, providing a quite comfortable backrest for her. She shouldn't lean against it. She did it anyway. They munched the

cake in companionable silence, only interrupted by pointing out the occasional dragonfly darting over the sunlit pond.

"Your cake is delicious," she eventually tried to jump-start the conversation again.

"Thank you. It's left-over from yesterday. It was Bob's birthday."

"Who's Bob?"

"One of my housemates. The other one's name is Eddy. It's Eddy's house - he's a mechanic and runs a workshop. Bob's a professional guitar player and travels a lot. He gets booked for concerts often."

"A musician, a mechanic and a pilot - what a mix. I live alone, I have rented one of the studio apartments in the Starcity complex. Immaculate, dull."

Behind their backs, their hands had found each other, and his thumb was stroking hers. Little gestures. His proximity was maddening, she needed to put space between them.

"This is really a beautiful place. I should paint it," she declared, rummaging in her purse for her travel-sized watercolour kit. It would give her a reason to get up and fill the little water bottle at the banks of the pond. But as she got up, a sharp pain shot through the foot that had gotten caught in the root.

"Ouch!"

Nate was up and next to her in the blink of an eye. "What's the matter? Are you hurt?"

She steadied herself with her hand on his chest and tried putting weight on the foot. Again pain flared up. "I don't know. I can't walk. Maybe I twisted it earlier on the way down." She somehow managed to sit again.

He squatted before her. "May I take a look?"

Adelie nodded. Gently he took her foot and twisted it. "Does this hurt?"

"No."

He stretched it. "And now?"

"Nothing."

Only as he flexed it, she winced. This time, he needn't ask, it was

evident she was in pain. "Guess you overstretched a tendon. It's not swollen, and it's not hot... but I can drive you to the doctor if you want."

"It's okay, thank you. I don't think it's that bad. But you need to fetch me some water now." She grinned at him, and he grinned back. Before he left, he took off his jacket to prop up her foot. "Even when it's not swollen, I think putting it up would be a good idea." He strolled over to the pond and filled the bottle. Then he pulled out a clean white handkerchief out of his back pocket and wetted it before he returned to her. His movements were poetry, his walk a song. She'd never seen anyone moving with such grace, such harmony. It would be a pleasure to just watch him all day. With a shy smile, he kneeled next to her propped-up foot, folded the dripping piece of fabric into a neat rectangle and carefully draped it over her foot.

"Guess a little cooling wouldn't hurt."

Their eyes met, and the inexplicable feeling of being in good hands rushed through her. "Thank you."

He settled down next to her on their makeshift blanket again.

"Have you been painting for a long time?" He asked.

"Yes. Classically trained baroness." She smiled. "Although it's the only role-appropriate thing my mother could get me to do besides playing the piano, I much preferred racing cars against my brother. Unlike my sister, who always did what she was supposed to do, I was a tomboy."

He blinked. "You mean toy cars, right?"

Setting up her sketchbook and the kit, she shook her head. "At first, of course. But as soon as we were tall enough to drive, we switched to real ones."

"You raced cars?" His mouth stood open, and his eyes were wide. She put her finger on his chin and closed his mouth.

"I'm the youngest of three kids. My sister will inherit the barony, my brother my father's mines - the only role left to play by me was the one of the renegade. I'm well off, I'll probably never have to worry about not having enough money... I was a spoilt brat who needed some thrill in her life."

The nonchalant way with which she offered that information silenced him. Nate needed a moment to digest it, so he simply watched how she skillfully formed irregular blotches of colour into a beautiful picture. Of course, he knew she was a baroness and he sort of suspected that she had money - but the glimpse into her former life made it deducible that there was a lot of money. Racing was an expensive hobby, everywhere. She was so far out of his league, he should stop trying. The beauty of the place around them, her hair falling over her back, with golden highlights shimmering... she fit right in, looking like a little nature spirit, one with her art and her surroundings.

"You're quiet. What's up?" She looked up from her work, a warm smile dancing on her features. She treated him like her equal. She'd referred to herself as a spoilt brat. Maybe she didn't care about status. She'd said she was a renegade.

"It's fascinating to watch. A bit like magic." He sheepishly smiled. "I've no idea how you do it. I would probably just produce a very colourful Rorschach test."

This made her giggle. "Just like everything, it needs practice and knowledge of the right technique. A bit like flying a jet."

"Only someone like you would compare watercolour to flying a weapon." And that was what he found so fascinating about her.

They shared a mischievous glance. "Well, you make a wrong move, and the next thing you know is that everything's going to hell, except that you don't risk your life while painting."

She put the sketchbook aside to let it dry. The sun stood low and would reach the horizon soon, long shadows now filling up the hollow. The skies slowly turned to lavender and indigo.

"It'll be dark soon." His remark triggered a sigh from her.

"Too bad. I had so much fun this afternoon."

He decided to push his luck. "How about burgers, to conclude the day?" Adelle brushed her hair behind her ear, watching him with her head tilted sideways and smiled.

"I'd love to. But going downtown seems a bit tedious."

"Don't worry, I took the car as I had to bring Bob to the train station this morning. It's parked behind the gym."

"You own a car?" Now it was her turn to be gobsmacked.

He smiled. "No, but Eddy does, several actually, and he generously allows me to take one now and then. Is your picture dry?"

She patted it with a fingertip. "It needs a few more minutes."

They packed their stuff as the setting sun tinted everything in a rosy shade. Adelle's eyes wandered warily over the path between her and the top, favouring her foot. "I'm not going to make it up there. I still can't walk."

He scratched his head. "Are you okay if I leave you alone for five minutes? I'll go and fetch the car. I can pull up behind the greenhouses."

"Well, uh... I'd be more comfortable waiting up there, where there's light."

"Okay. Gimme a minute."

Confused, Adelle watched him climbing the slope with long strides. He put his backpack down at the top and came back down. What was he up to?

"Need a lift?" He grinned, stretching his arms.

"Desperately. But..."

He turned and bent his knees a little. "Come on, climb on. I'll take you piggyback."

"I can't do that!" He must be joking. "You can't carry me."

He straightened up and turned back towards her, stepping closer. His eyes were tender and kind as he took her hand. His palm was warm and smooth. "Adelle... I need to get you up there somehow."

"I know! But..." She sighed. "I feel so helpless. I don't like feeling helpless."

He smiled. "It's okay. I understand." He reached back and took a flashlight out of his back pocket. "But you're not entirely useless. I need you to light the way. I don't want to trip while I carry you."

She smiled. "Why do you have a flashlight?"

"Because the yard light is broken and Eddy doesn't come around fixing the snapped wire. I need it to find my way to the door. That's why I have it in my backpack."

"I see." With a trembling hand, she took it. "How do I... uhm, mount you? I can't jump."

He grinned and got into a squatting position. "Does this help?"

She bunched up her skirt and straddled his broad back, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. "I don't strangle you, do I?"

"No." He weaved his arms through her knees and got up. "Are you comfortable?"

"Yes, I think so." She switched on the flashlight, and he began his climb. She looked over his shoulder to see where they were going and to light the way efficiently. They were basically cheek to cheek... and he smelled good. So good, she had to refrain from rubbing her nose against his scruffy jaw. His grip was tight and secure and his pace steady. Again, she felt she was in capable hands, safe even. With regret, she noticed that they had already reached the top.

The fact that she instinctively reached for him to find her balance as Nate put her down triggered a wave of protectiveness. What was wrong with him today? Yet, she stood there in the failing light, fiddling with the flashlight, and he could not leave her alone. Unprotected. Goodness, she was a soldier, she would probably clobber anyone to death with the torch... but she was hurt. She was vulnerable. He rubbed his neck which suddenly was flushed with heat. "I don't feel comfortable leaving you here in this dark place. You're not that heavy - I could carry you to the car."

He thought he detected a smile in the almost darkness. No protest. Not even teasing that he was just looking for an excuse to touch her again? She either was really in pain or...

"I'd be grateful if you'd do that. Behind greenhouses, between compost hills and garbage cans is not exactly a place a girl wants to be alone in."

"Your dignity can take it?" He gently teased, coaxing a chuckle out of her.

"I'll pretend we're practising a search and rescue mission."

"Brilliant idea... and excuse, actually. Should anybody ask."

She took his backpack, and they made their way to the parking lot of the gym without any disturbances.



**LAUNDRY
AND
LEMONADE**

Adelie curled up on her love seat and poured herself another cup of tea. Her foot complained about a day of hobbling around campus, and she was firmly set on not moving anymore this night. Outside a light summer rain made the leaves on the trees shiny. Adelie snuggled deeper into a hoodie that wasn't hers. It belonged to a man she barely knew, and it smelled of him. The musk of his aftershave, traces of motor oil and the personal fragrance of his body. Nate. Memories of the last evening were tied to that scent. Memories of his smile while they joked at the Lemon Tree, after a meal of burgers. The way he always ran his hand through his hair or rubbed his neck when he was flustered or thinking. How he'd offered his arm to lean on so that she could hobble the few steps to the diner. It was silly, but she was in awe of his strength. He'd carried her as if she was a featherweight and she certainly wasn't. Her remark about it had led to him flexing his arm to let her feel his biceps, which she dutifully und giggly did. He deserved some admiration. They had laughed so much her cheeks had been aching in the end. That was when he'd wrapped her in his jacket because he had noticed her shivering.

"Don't catch a cold, Princess. A hurt foot is enough malady for one day," he had said, closing the zipper all the way up. At that moment he had looked like he also wanted to wrap her in his arms. With a smile Adelie leaned back into her seat and imagined how being enveloped in these arms, being pressed against his chest would feel. Probably glorious. She should not think about him in this way. She was not interested. Her InstaComm beeped, interrupting her ponders.

"How's the Princess and the royal foot?" Nate, with perfect timing. They had exchanged numbers after he'd driven her home in the baby blue, banged up workshop truck.

"If I'd known I have such precious cargo today, I'd found prettier transportation," he had sheepishly said in the gym parking lot. She hadn't minded their transportation, she was too busy being grateful that he had a car at all. Even if it was a rusty, creaky truck that smelled of dog and was filled with spare parts.

"The foot's still miffed, the Princess is fine." She hesitated, then

added: "How's the knight in shining armour?" She quickly pressed Send before she could change her mind.

"Currently wondering if you're interested in checking out the new soda shop on Graham Blvd."

Oh. A new soda shop. But that would mean walking again. "Sorry - foot says no." She typed. There was no answer for a while, she'd already almost forgotten the little exchange and lost herself in her book, as the device beeped. It was Nate again. He'd send her a picture with two soda bottles: her all-time favourite Hensley's lemonade in lemon and in raspberry, sitting in his lap propped up against a steering wheel. Underneath he'd written: "Which one do you want?" - "The lemon."

Her doorbell rang. With a groan, she got to her feet and limped to answer it. The sight that presented itself to her was worth the pain, though. Nate stood there, with an impish smile, holding the requested bottle in his hand. He wore a fitted flannel shirt with rolled up sleeves, torn blue jeans and motorcycle boots, his hair was tousled and his blue eyes sparkling. Maintaining her state of disinterest would be very hard if he kept showing up at her doorstep looking like this.

"Hi. I thought, when you can't come, I bring the soda to you." His eyes lingered on her, and he smiled as he realised she was wearing his jacket. "Still cold?"

"Uh, ahem... it's very comfy. What's up with the lumberjack attire?"

He cleared his throat, scratching the back of his head. "I... uhm... Our washing machine broke down, and I'm actually on my way to the laundromat to do my laundry. This was my last batch of clean clothes. Just wanted to check on you, see if you're alright."

"I have a washer and dryer up here. Want to use it? Comes free of charge and with a cup of tea."

He looked at her from below a tilted head. "You serious?"

She crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe. "Of course. You carried me all the way from the pond to your car."

Adelie's place was as very white and very elegant. A generous front of floor-length windows allowed for ample light to come in, even on a grey evening like this. She had a cosy looking love seat, and two armchairs arranged around a coffee table in front of the windows. There was a pot of tea on a warmer, and candles sitting in tall lanterns. Opposite of all this stood a large white bed, her desk, and a tall bookshelf. She also had a tiny kitchen, where her washing machine sat underneath the countertop. Nate was incredibly grateful that he could wait in one of the comfy leather armchairs, having a pleasant chat and a cup of tea, instead of having to wait on one of the wire benches at the laundromat without any company. Adelie lounged in the love seat, foot propped up and still wearing his hoodie. The sight tugged at some almost forgotten heartstrings.

"How was your day?" He asked, putting down his cup.

"It was okay. It wasn't easy to reach the classrooms, and I had to skip combat training." She brushed back a pert strand of hair falling into her face. "I'm glad I don't have to hobble around anymore today. The new soda shop sounds interesting, though." She smiled at him, and even though she obviously was tired and her foot probably bothered her more than she was willing to admit, it was like dawn was playing out on her face. The need for these smiles in his life grew steadily; irritatingly fast.

"I have a rugby game tomorrow morning. Ruins all the greatness of sleeping in on a Saturday, if you ask me. But if you want, we could check it out in the afternoon? If your foot is up to it, of course."

She pulled up a knee and rested her chin on it, looking at him pensively. "Wouldn't you be terribly tired after a game of rugby? I'd feel bad chasing you around town."

He smiled at her. "You're not chasing me around town. I'd get a sleek car from Eddy, I drive you around, and we have some lemonade down there. Sounds chill enough to me."

He managed to get the cherry red two-door sedan from Eddy, which never failed to impress a girl with its generous curves and ample chrome accents. Eddy had also put in a lot of work into the

interior, making it pretty with custom red and white striped upholstery.

"Riding a Chieftain, eh?" Adelle slowly made her way down the handful of steps leading to her building's main entrance. She wasn't limping anymore but still walked carefully. Today, she was wearing sneakers and white capri pants. She had tied her red sleeveless blouse over her belly button, allowing him a glimpse of creamy skin, which instantly put him into hot water. To redirect his thoughts, he focused on her face. Which was a mistake, because now he was confronted with a dancing ponytail of chestnut hair, warm brown eyes and red lips pursed into a welcoming smile. He pushed himself away from the hood, meeting her at the bottom, narrowly hindering himself to take her into his arms and at least hug her hello. They weren't there yet.

"I admit, it's a bit too much metal for my liking. But I can hardly pick you up on a motorcycle, can't I?" He said jokingly.

She laughed and slipped her arm through his, leaning on him while walking to the car. His heart skipped a beat, then lurched into a frantic gallop. It had neither expected her sudden closeness nor the familiarity of her gesture. "Can't you? I've never ridden one, I'd love to know how it feels."

"Too bad my bike is a rusty pile of parts, pipes and two wheels leaning against a wall right now. I'd love to take you for a ride, but I need to restore her before I can do that."

She wanted to know more, and so he told her about his project while they cruised down the road: How he found it buried in hay in an old barn, who the previous owner was and how long it was taking to bring it back to life. To his surprise, she readily commiserated with him about the difficulties he had trying to find spare parts. Adelle kept him always on his toes. Her enthusiastic reaction to his restoration project was just one of many examples. That she used to be a race car driver another. He learned so much about her in the last three days. It had been too long since he'd known more of a woman than how she looked after spending a night with him. It had been too long since he actually wanted to know more.

He tried to find a parking spot close to the soda shop, but they had no luck. Graham Boulevard was a major shopping street, and it

was a busy afternoon. So he parked a block away, hoping her foot wouldn't protest. He opened the car door for her. Adelle smiled at him, a lovely, honest, open smile, as she stepped out of the vehicle. Then she hooked her arm through his again and said: "Sorry - I still need you as my crutch." He didn't mind. Walking with her along the tree lined street while listening to her comfortable chatter was something he could've done for the rest of the afternoon. At one point, she stopped at a window display, asking for his opinion on a dress.

"I might be biased, but I bet you'd look gorgeous in it," he answered honestly.

Laughing she poked him in the ribs. "Oh, you're already biased?"

Thankfully, the soda shop was right next door.

Having him right in front of her, without anything else to concentrate on, made it hard to look away. He had taken off his jacket, and his snugly fitting t-shirt showed off his biceps to their best advantage. No wonder he had an easy time carrying her up that darn slope. The thought alone made her feel warm.

"You're staring." He had the guts to use her own words, to even tease her with them. She grinned, looking up into his blue, blue eyes.

"It's hard not to. There's a reason you're so popular with nurses," she teased right back. "But you know about your effect on women, so don't feign innocence."

He laughed, leaned back into his seat, and pretended surrender in putting his hands up. "Wouldn't even think about it."

Before he could manage to corner her with the topic, the waiter arrived to take their orders.

"We have two Hensley's lemon please," he ordered for them. A man who remembered what she liked. That was new. Together they studied the menu. Nate not only knew the place, he also knew a lot about their cakes. His descriptions were so mouthwatering, she nearly ordered all of it. "You really like food," she stated after they'd placed their orders. "I'd never thought someone could make me pine for eclairs."

"Yes. It's my passion."

"Do you like to cook too?" She could very well imagine his elegant fingers prepping food. He chuckled and ran said fingers through his unruly hair, causing more chaos in it. Her own fingers twitched with the want to smooth it down.

"Yeah, I also like to cook." He drew patterns onto the table, not meeting her eyes. He almost appeared ashamed of his interest.

"Good for you, I can't cook to save my life. As I said, spoilt brat. But I love good food," she offered, hoping it would make him smile. It did. In fact, he lifted his head and their eyes locked while he flashed her one of his amazing smiles that left her heart longing. "If you like food so much, why are we here, in a soda shop, and not in a proper restaurant?"

He laughed. "I didn't expect you wanting to go out to dinner with me."

Their hands touched over the table. Just the fingertips, but it was enough to jolt an electric current through her arm. She didn't withdraw. "The only thing I really miss about my former life is the food. There were always the most amazing buffets ready for the drivers after the races. Not to mention the dinners on the social functions I was forced to attend. So if you're looking for someone sampling restaurants with you, I'd be happy to help you out."

His glance rested on her face, wandering over her cheeks, forehead, nose, meeting her eyes at last. He was intrigued. Their fingers had interlocked, and his thumb was stroking along her index finger again. Slowly. Seductively. She caught it with her own, arresting his movements. His sensual lips widened in a smile. "It's hard to find a woman who appreciates good food for the sake of it. And indeed, I know some restaurants that would be perfectly wasted on a date who's not enjoying getting her taste buds tickled."

"Oh, come on - are you blaming the women going out with you not admiring the sumptuous treats enough? They have another treat sitting right in front of them."

He leaned back laughing and let go of her hand to run both hands through his hair. Oh goodness. She had to remind herself that she was

not interested at all in finding out if he'd close his eyes like a lazy cat if she'd run her fingers through the wild mop. *Get a grip on yourself.* The roar of a powerful engine drew their eyes to the windows, where they could see a black, low laying limousine chasing some dawdling shoppers off the street.

"Tosser," Nate grumbled.

"Ahem."

"Sorry. But look at him... showoff car, but no manners at all." He turned back to her, and his expression softened as their eyes met again. It had a weird effect on her.

"You're not a car guy, are you? You're more into motorcycles." She inquired. He nodded.

"Yeah. More wind in your face. The sense of freedom that I feel when I zoom along an open road... A car doesn't deliver this."

She grinned. "I feel like that when I fly. Velocity pressing me in my seat, the roar of the thrusters, and only the horizon in front of me."

"Yes! Flying is much like it. Minus the wind, though."

They shared a glance, and the peculiar vibe of meeting someone that ticked the same way grew stronger.

"Is that what you liked about racing too?" Nate asked as their food arrived. With glee, he noticed how delighted she appeared to be about her lemon meringue pie.

"Getting into racing was a lot about freedom too, but not so much the high-velocity variety. It gave me a reason to get away."

He put down his fork which he had raised to attack his double chocolate fudge cake. "Get away from what?"

Adelie sighed. "The norms. The conventions. The expectations. I spent a year and a half on the Planet 500 tour just to be away from home. Not that being on a race tour is particularly fun either, but way more fun than being stuck with another fundraising gala."

"And the food is better?"

She laughed. "It doesn't require a formal dress and absurdly high heels."

His brain suggested a mental picture of Adelle in a floor-length dress, a narrow skirt and bodice showing off her amazing figure, hair falling over naked shoulders... and then Adelle in nothing but expensive lingerie she'd likely wear under such a dress, stretched out on black sheets. He was convinced she was the kind of woman who had some expensive lace and silk in her drawer. He focused on his cake, crossing his legs to keep things decent.

"Is the chocolate cake not good?" She sounded worried.

"Oh, it's excellent; why're you asking?" He kept his eyes on the plate.

"Because you look a bit strained." Shoot. She was very perceptive.

"I guess I'm a bit tired from the match this morning." He barely made it across the line, but it was enough to pacify her curiosity.

"Oh goodness, I totally forgot. Were you successful?"

He pushed a bite of cake into his mouth and nodded. By the time he swallowed, he had regained enough control over his body to be able to make eye contact and answer without sounding like in pain. The jeans were still too darn tight. "Yes, we won with a comfortable lead of 20 points."

She beamed. "Oh, fantastic! Well done."

"What sort of cars were you racing?" This probably was a safe topic.

"At first an ELF Tornado and later, on the tour, an ELF Hurricane. Very reliable cars."

Nate had once seen an ELF standing in the workshop yard, and it only had been the street version. Its idling engine sound had rattled the window panes. "Very fast too. And loud."

"Oh yes. I never understood why people actually came to the races, you're practically deaf afterwards."

Something occurred to him. "Why did you stop racing?"

Adelle slumped back into her chair and looked out of the window, granting him the view of her perfect profile. "My brother had a stupid accident - on a regular street, in a regular car. It wasn't even his fault, but still, he got out with almost every major bone broken and he had to spend a terribly long time in hospital. That was when my mother drew the line. Ordered me to come home instantly. Neither of us was

allowed behind a steering wheel for quite some time. Not even my sister, who's seriously the most defensive driver I've ever seen. I made a deal with my chauffeur: He drove me out of the driveway, around the corner, and that was where we would change places. He was thrilled to not having to drive, I still got my fix and my mother her peace of mind."

He laughed. "You never got busted?"

"No." She turned back to him, her eyes brimming with mischief.

"You're not at all how I ever imagined a baroness."

There was her defiant eyebrow again. "That's probably because I'm the renegade baroness. My sister is very different."

He reached across the table, took her hand and laced his fingers through hers. "I like you just the way you are."

She grinned. "By the way, are you still interested in a rematch? How about tomorrow? Or are you afraid you're going to lose again?"

Her gaze held his captive. "Afraid - of a puny girl? Never."

"Famous last words, English?" She leaned across the table. "I like losing as much as you do - not at all."

He put his forehead against hers. "Are you challenging me, Princess?"

"You're not a challenge."

As he drove her back, he regretted that the fun for the day was already over. The afternoon had been too short, but there was the prospect of seeing her again the next day. He got out of the car to open her door.

"Always the gentleman," she teased him. "Which reminds me: I still have your jacket."

"You can return it to me tomorrow. We said at ten, right?"

"Yeah. At the gate." She bit her lips as if she was pondering something. "Thanks for playing chauffeur."

"You're welcome. I understood it's an honour to be allowed to drive you."

She laughed and slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Don't let it get over your head."

He took her hand. "I gonna try."

Her glance got tangled in his, he felt her pulling away and drawing closer at the same time. Confusion flickered over her beautiful face, then it became impassive again, and she extracted her hand from his.

"See you tomorrow," she said, slowly climbing the steps up the entrance.

"See you tomorrow, Princess."

Before she vanished inside, she turned and waved, and he waved back.



THE GREEN FAIRY

Adelie's professional face rarely showed emotion besides a polite smile. Now a deep crease sat between her brows and her mouth was a thin, hard line as she entered the Officer's Club. Nate excused himself from his flight mates and walked over to where she stood at the bar, ordering something to drink.

"What's up, Spitfire?"

"Nothing." She grumbled, but the frown softened as she turned towards him.

"Need to vent?" He pointed at an empty table in a quiet corner. A reluctant smile and a nod. He took her elbow and steered her towards the table. "Tell Uncle Nate what's bothering you?"

"I was just kindly reminded that some people think this here is not my place to be in." She sighed, leaning into her chair. "When I was a racer, I had to deal with a lot of misconceptions and prejudice against women in the field. I've heard my fair share of jokes about of the female inability to park a car, I can tell you. I thought I learned how to deal with degrading comments back then. And..." She made a frustrated sound and took a gulp of her lemonade.

"And...?" Nate asked.

"Only 20% of all applicants are admitted into one of the academies. 8% are good enough pass flight school. I foolishly thought, with the selection process being as harsh as it is... I thought we would all stick together, no matter our gender? I was so, so wrong. And I'm sick of it. I'm one of 24 in the Albatross Squadron. I'm consistently in the Top 5 of the leaderboard..."

"This is a polite way to say that you've been leading the ranks since forever." He interrupted her, but she merely waved his argument away.

"I think I've proven over and over again that I'm worthy to sit in the cockpit, but no. Once more some little prick thinks he needs to tell me I'm degrading the Space Force with my presence behind the stick."

He took her hand, which restlessly pounded the table, and wrapped it between his own. "I doubt he can fly the Double Richthofen with your precision. Who was the idiot?"

Before she could answer, they were interrupted by one of Adelle's flight members.

"Ah, the Princess. Trying to distract your only worthy opponent to eliminate further competition?"

He turned to face Pat "Parachute" Bukovski's oily smile. "Excuse me?"

But before he could put Bukovski into his rightful place, Adelle was on her feet, carefully setting down her glass on the table. "Have you all lost your minds today?" She stood to her full height, shoulders squared, legs apart. Something in her stance had changed, although Nate couldn't quite tell what it was. She suddenly had an intimidating air of authority, and he could very well imagine the officer she would once become.

"I don't think someone flying ten ranks below me is in the position to tell me how I should handle competition, Parachute."

She turned on her heel and left the Club in measured steps, head held high. Everybody made way before her, resulting in an image that reminded Nate of a queen leaving court.

"Nice try, chap. Get ice for the burn." He slapped the gobsmacked Pat on the shoulder and followed Adelle out of the club.

Adelle was grateful for the ever-present wind on the airfield, blowing straight into her face. Her eyes stung with anger and tears just waiting to well over. She mustn't cry now. Absolutely not, under no circumstances. She pressed her palms against her heated cheeks, taking a deep breath. Easy. Inhale. Exhale. Calm down.

"Adelle? Are you okay?" Nate's warm, compassionate voice. Hurriedly she dropped her hands, then she felt his on her shoulder, a soft squeeze. She wished she could turn around and hide at his broad chest. "Hey, little Spitfire. You okay?"

"Sort of." Her voice was squeaky from the strain not to burst into tears. Reluctantly she turned and forced herself to smile. He looked like a model straight out of the latest catalogue of Aerospace Fashion, with the blue of his shirt complementing his bright eyes and the wind tousled hair.

"I'm sorry these idiots ruffled your feathers so much. May I apologise on behalf of my sex?"

She couldn't help but feel better when he grinned at her. "I could forgive you, but you've done nothing wrong. Forgiving your sex for acting like it does - unlikely. The way men treated me had a too high an impact on my life to be quickly pardoned."

"I'm still sorry that some of my fellow men seem to be unable to cope with an intelligent and beautiful woman. For them, a woman is either beautiful or intelligent. Encountering one that is both is too much to compute."

Adelie crossed her arms in front of her chest and cocked her head. "Really? And of course, you're able to handle brains and beauty encased in one female body, aren't you?"

He stepped close enough to shield her from the wind. "I don't know if I can handle you. I do know that you have to work twice as much as any of us guys to achieve the same recognition. You study hard and train even harder, and you've earned to lead the board. If anything, I'm inspired by your diligence and your integrity."

She looked into his blue eyes full of sincerity. "Thank you."

They walked along the row of hangars in companionable silence. Eventually, he tried to jumpstart the conversation again. "So men are the reason you're here?" She pushed her hands into the pockets of her uniform pants.

"Only one."

"Your father?"

"No, not my father."

Nate stopped and contemplated her. "You're a bit monosyllabic."

"It's..." With a frustrated huff, she smoothed some fly-away hair back, which the wind promptly swept back into her face. "It's a long story. I don't particularly enjoy being reminded of it. The wounds have finally closed, I found some perspective in my life, and I just want to move on."

They stared at each other and to her horror, she realised her bottom lip was quivering beyond her control. She wasn't going to cry. Not in front of him. Not in front of anybody.

Nate grappled with the urge to cradle her in his arms. She was fighting with her emotions, and she was on the verge of crying.

"I'm sorry. I had no idea this would be so painful for you. I was merely curious." He went straight to the point and was rewarded with a small smile.

"It's okay. You couldn't have known."

He tried to smile back, to move back to their easy banter, but a glance at her face told him, she wasn't ready. She almost looked fragile.

"I could've thought about it. I mean, with a little thought I could..."

"Nate. It's okay." Her hand was on his arm and stopped his stumbling apology. "You did nothing wrong." She smiled one of her disarming open smiles, and the only thing he could do was to smile back at her. He fumbled for her hand and threaded his fingers through hers.

"I thought you maybe need to repay a deed or were sent on a quest. Nobles do weird things, how should I know?"

"What?" Adelle gaped at first dumbfounded; then an understanding smile dawned on her face. "You thought...? Oh dear, this is priceless." Laughter bubbled up inside of her until she stood in front of him, holding her sides, tears of joy running over her cheeks. "I wish it would be something this exciting and weird," she finally panted. "Sadly, I never lived in a fairy tale. I just had enough of men deciding to change my life on a whim. The guy who totalled my brother's car and cut off my racing career. Or the idiot who brought me here, which is a tale of caution, if anything."

"I hope that you're going to tell me sometime. When you're ready to share it."

She giggled. "You should bring lots of tissues, and I might need a shoulder to cry on too."

His blue eyes did things to her, especially when they lit up like they did now. He stood there, going from apologetic to mischievous in the blink of an eye, and all Adelie could think of was that his set of broad shoulders would be perfect to cry on. He moved closer as if he'd knew where her thoughts were going. He probably did, having honed his skills of anticipating women's desires over the course of a lot of nurses.

"You can cry on my shoulder anytime you want." His voice was a velvety, suggestive rumble.

"How did I know that you were going to say that," she teased him, tapping his shoulder playfully. He caught her hand and tugged her closer so that she nearly stumbled against him.

"Maybe because you want to cry on my shoulder?"

She raised her eyebrow. "Well, I don't quite feel like crying now, although I could use something that distracts me."

"Would a motorcycle ride distract you?"

"I thought your bike's in shambles?"

He laughed. "It is, but luckily I know someone who has more than enough bikes. Gimme a sec." He unclipped his InstaComm from his belt and dialled a number. "Hey, Eddy, Nate here. How's it hanging? ... Ah, that's bloody marvellous man, I'm happy for you! Listen, I was wondering if I could borrow the Green Fairy today? ... You drive a hard bargain, sir. Yeah, I'll help you with cleaning out the second garage. ... Yes, this weekend. ... Thanks, man. Yeah, you too. Later." With a victorious smile, he turned to her. "Do you have a leather jacket?"

She couldn't quite believe it. "Wait a minute... you doomed yourself to help to clean out an entire garage brimming with stuff so that you can take me on a motorcycle ride right now?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why?"

He crossed his arms, grinning at her. "Because I want to cheer you up. And I have a hunch you're going to like riding."

An hour later Nate drove up in front of her house, sitting on a rather low bike with a voluptuously curved tank and wide handlebars. It was a brilliant candy apple green, its chrome accents gleaming in the afternoon sun. She immediately understood why he was willing to sacrifice a weekend in exchange for riding this particular machine - with or without her. The bike was a beauty.

"Hello, beautiful lady. You requested a ride?" He glanced over his sunglasses and waggled his eyebrows at her, his voice mockingly dropped even deeper than it already was. Blue jeans, white button down, a red ascot, and a totally badass looking leather jacket - he had her at hello. She smiled and stepped towards the bike.

"Where do I sit?"

"Right here. Hop aboard." He patted a leather cushion right behind his seat.

As Adelle swung her long leg over the bike and sat down behind him, her thighs aligning with his, Nate remembered that having a guest rider was usually a touchy-feely affair. He had no chance to dwell on the consequences, as her voice right next to his ear inquired: "Is... is it okay when I wrap my arms around you?"

"Of course. And don't be afraid to hold on tight, okay?"

"Okay."

He turned in his seat to check on her. "Hey, I... I don't ride with a passenger often, and even less with female ones. I completely forgot that bikes require a certain amount of body contact. I hope you don't mind."

She grinned, resting her chin on his shoulder, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Not at all." Relieved, he started the engine.

It was more natural than he'd expected. After a while, her grip around his waist got loose, and her body relaxed into the ride. The Green Fairy wasn't the fastest bike in Eddy's collection, but she was steady and as soft as butter. She was perfect for the leisurely stroll he had in mind. The roads behind Meadow Junction were seemingly endless lines stretching towards the horizon, cutting through the

softly rolling hills. He opened the throttle and let the bike pull along them at a comfortable speed. The wind tousled their hair, and the sun warmed their backs.

"This is wonderful." He couldn't see her, but Adelie's voice alone told him that she was enjoying herself. She squeezed him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Do you want to go up Bunker Hill and watch the sunset?"

"Oh yes, please."

"Your wish is my command."

A soft chuckle, her body vibrating against his. Sweet. "This is a dangerous thing to say to someone who's used to people following their orders."

He laughed. "I like the thrill."

The road went up the hill in long sweeping curves. Reaching the top, a breathtaking view over the plains around Meadow Junction greeted them. The sun stood low over the horizon, illuminating everything dramatically. Every blade of grass had a tiny halo. Insects flitted around between them, their wings forming glowing orbs. They found a place to park and enjoy the view. Adelie let her legs dangle, leaning against his back. Instead of the burbling sound of the engine crickets's chirping filled the warm air. Her hand had fallen on his thigh. Not even consciously thinking about it, he put his own on top of hers, and their fingers interweaved on their own accords.

"You said you don't often take other girls riding?" A cute uncertainty laced her question.

"No, I actually only ever took one girl riding. She didn't like it."

Her fingers tightened around his. "What's not to like about riding with you?"

He thought back to the woman he once loved and her distaste for anything fast and dangerous. "Well, it was a much more powerful machine... and she wasn't cut for the speed."

"Mmmh, speed."

"There's my little Spitfire speaking."

Adelie's laugh was like heavenly chimes, and she wrapped her

free arm around his shoulder, her chin back on his other. "Your little Spitfire? Are you using possessives now?"

Heat crept over his cheeks.

Fact was, Adelle liked being with him and she wouldn't mind using possessives. It had been a while, and she missed the warm feeling of belonging to someone. The bitter taste of Christopher's betrayal warned her that Nate's words could be just that: Words without meaning.

"What are you thinking about?" He asked, turning his head to look at her.

"That it's been a while since someone called me their anything." With a sigh, she extracted herself from his warm body and got off the bike to walk a few steps to the edge of the road. "And the last time someone did, it was a lie."

He inhaled sharply. "I have a talent of reminding you of unpleasant things today, haven't I?"

"It's not your fault that I have a painful history." Everything around her was bathed in a golden glow. His steps crunched on the gravel as he got off the bike too.

"How can someone call you their anything and not mean it?"

"Do you mean it when you say I'm *your* little Spitfire?" She turned her head to look at him. "Or are you just saying it to charm me?"

"I admit that it's more wishful thinking than actual fact, but yes, I mean it when I call you *my* little Spitfire."

His honesty baffled her for a moment. "You are very straightforward."

He sighed and rubbed his neck, then he pushed his fists deep into his jeans pockets and stared into the distance with an unseeing eye, his mouth a thin line. She contemplated his handsome profile, wishing for her watercolours to paint him in the burning colours of the setting sun. Eventually, he turned back to her and said: "Being straightforward has to do with my history. There was a time when someone was not honest with their intentions from the beginning. I

don't want to inflict this particular pain on anybody. It's not fair."

"No, it's not fair." She bravely met the sun-faded indigo of his eyes, only to discover that the twinkle that usually danced in them had vanished. A serious Nate. A serious, open and obviously hurt Nate. The sight grabbed her heart and squeezed it painfully. "We seem to be very much alike... we love fast things, we like good food, and we've been both betrayed by people we trusted."

This made him smile. She liked his smiles. The way it crinkled his eyes, how he quickly cast his glance down and how he cocked his head to the side as they made eye contact again.

"Yeah, we're very much alike." He stepped closer. "And I'd like to get to know you better. I want to learn more about the woman who's a menace in a plane, an ex-race car driver and a pretty baroness. I'd never thought I'd meet a woman who's just one of these things, all of them wrapped into one is like Christmas, Easter and my birthday falling together."

She laughed. "Don't be silly, I'm not that special."

He grabbed her hand and tugged her closer. "Oh yes, you are. You are wonderful, fascinating and yes, special. You're my little Spitfire, never forget that."

She couldn't keep herself from grinning. "Idiot."

"Would you go on a date with this idiot here?"

"Another motorcycle date?"

He shook his head. "No, I meant something fancy. A dress and a suit, a restaurant with white tablecloths and real silverware, scrumptious food, candles..."

"And it'll all end in your bed, right?" She poked him, and he twitched out of reach.

He opened his arms wide and shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. That's up to you. I'm a full-service guy."

She folded her arms across her chest. "You're impossible."

"Admit it; you like it." There was the smile again.

"I like riding bikes with you. I like picnics next to enchanted ponds. I even like just studying with you, sitting in the same room for a few hours, scribbling away... You don't need to impress me with

expensive dinners. Just be who you are. Just be Nate, who knows secret ponds and rides bikes with me to cheer me up. I need something real. Not something that feels like a plot to get me into your bed!" She spat the last words out and breathlessly turned away from him. Why was she so angry all of a sudden? Where were the tears coming from?

"That guy really hurt you badly, huh?" Nate's voice was velvety soft and tender, and it unravelled the last stitches that held her countenance together.

The way Adelle nodded and pressed her lips together took away any flirty mood he'd entertained. She took a deep breath, her hand wiping her cheek. Christ, if she was still crying because of that guy, it must've been a hell of a story. Her pain went deep. He moved close and touched her arm. She turned, completely undone, and just like that he wrapped his arms around her and folded her into a hug. He hadn't planned to extend it into an embrace, but to his surprise, Adelle relaxed with a deep sigh and leaned into him. One single ragged sob emerged from her and pierced his heart. He couldn't remember when he last comforted a crying woman. This felt a lot like his first time in a cockpit: Accelerating faster than he could think and he wasn't sure he was entirely in control. Luckily, autopilot kicked in before he could balk. Without giving much thought into it, he rubbed her back and made soothing noises. She sighed, her nose pressed against his neck. *Oh, sweet baby Jesus...*

"Is this part of your usual service too?" Her voice was muffled, but he could hear the tease. Granted, a teary, watery tease, but a tease. Someone else was in need to get back to solid ground. He cleared his throat.

"No, it's not."

She lifted her head from the shelter of his body, giving him a long look. "It's not? Your tactic is not to make the lady cry to have a reason to hug her?"

He adjusted his hold around her to a loose circle, arms crossing behind her lower back, far away from the temptation of catching an

errant tear coursing over her cheek. "No, I'm not Mr Comfort. I'm not the right guy for hugging and listening. I'm the one for dancing the night away and having fun, err, elsewhere."

This brought a smile to her face. "And what you're doing right now is not hugging and listening?"

Damnit, now she had him cornered. And she knew it, as her biting her lower lip told him. He made his poker face. "What I'm doing right now is just first aid."

"Ah, I see." She settled back against him, nose burrowed between the jacket collar and his neck. Autopilot took over again, his arms tightened around her, one hand rubbing the space between her shoulder blades. Tentatively and slowly, her arms wound around his waist. Warmth spread from where her body touched his. "I do like your particular brand of first aid, though," she mumbled. His hand slipped under her ponytail, up to her neck, his thumb caressing her warm skin. With every stroke, he felt her becoming less and less tense. This was more like it.

"You really put me through the motions, though. First forcing me to practice my rescue skills, now you're testing my abilities in administering first aid..." He couldn't resist teasing her a little. She untangled herself from his arms and shot him an amused look.

"You should consider yourself lucky I'm not set on practicing mouth on mouth resuscitation. Who knows where this might end." She twirled a strand of her ponytail around her finger while she looked at him with her damn eyebrow arched. He ran his hand through his hair, rubbing his suddenly hot neck, gazing at the ravishing beauty in the orange light of the setting sun. Her hair glowed in a dark chestnut, and her skin had a faint rosy tint. Her lashes were still wet and sticking together, making her all the more adorable. Then her bright smile broke through her unreadable face, the sight nearly stealing his breath.

"Too bad, this is the one and only field I can confidently call myself an expert in," he growled, taking a step towards her.

His suggestion caused heat to flush Adelle's chest. He stood in front of her, looking as if he was about to actually kiss her. Like during their pond picnic, they had made it into difficult emotional terrain again. Dangerous, difficult terrain. His hugs had been wonderful, he was using possessives and all of this was rather disconcerting. He was not to have exclusively and yet he acted like he was. She realised they were staring at each other and cleared her throat.

"Oh dang, now we've missed the sunset. But look, there's another treat coming in." She pointed at the horizon east of Meadow Junction, where a succession of tiny, fast-growing, blinking lights had appeared. "A convoy."

"Lucky us, huh?" His voice was threaded with relief. She turned and straddled the bike again, and to her surprise, he slid on it behind her. "The wind is getting cold," he said, as he put his arms around her again. Sneaky bastard. She should tell him off. On the other hand, he was right, the wind was rather chilly, and having him in her back was beyond comfortable. She ignored the content spreading through her like warm syrup and focused on the lights. They had grown into diminutive spacecraft, rushing through the sky.

"Look, there are ambulances." Nate turned her attention to a string of emergency vehicles coming from the airbase hospital and beginning to line up at the end of the airfield. Bunker Hill provided an excellent view. The drop ships grew quickly and then fell into a circling pattern over the base. One by one, they made a dash for the landing strip and then taxied to the waiting ambulances. Hatches opened and then each of them dispatched its cargo: Stretchers with wounded soldiers. "It's a medical convoy. A hospital ship must be in orbit."

Icy cold poured down Adelle's back as she watched the choreographed dance of nurses and medics on the field, and she nestled closer into Nate's embrace.

"You okay?" Nate tightened his hold of her as he noticed her shivering.

"I... don't know. I wondered if that's our fate too. Ending up on a

backwater planet, on a stretcher, rushed to the hospital, more dead than alive." Her voice dwindled away. "And I thought of Leslie, who likely was getting ready to go home, and now will have to stay to care for them. There are never enough special care nurses on duty."

His warm breath brushed along her cheek. "These chaps down there are lucky. They're still alive. They've got Leslies and doctors looking after them. Others might've not been so lucky."

They fell silent, watching the ambulances cycling between the airfield and the hospital. Nate's chest moved in the rhythm of his breathing and her temple touched his jaw. His hand found hers resting on the tank of the bike. His fingertips were smooth as he stroked its back, tracing her knuckles. He had beautiful hands, sinewy with long, elegant fingers. Eventually, he fitted it over hers, encasing her in the warmth of his palm. Their fingers entangled, and she nestled closer. She watched the last stretchers being loaded into the ambulances. Holding hands with a gorgeous man while sitting on a motorcycle in the fragrant air of a summer's evening seemed like the right thing to do. Who knew how much time she had left to enjoy life?

A nudge from him pulled her out of her thoughts.

"It's getting dark, Princess. How about dinner at the Lemon Tree?"

"It's a weeknight."

"So? Are you not eating dinner on weeknights?"

She turned in her seat and poked him. "Don't be silly. Of course, I eat on weeknights. I just don't want to go to bed too late, because I'm supposed to manoeuvre dangerous weapons early tomorrow morning."

He laughed. "Don't worry, I'll get you home before 11 pm, 'kay?"



**A MATTER
OF HONOUR**

Adelie stepped out of the airbase administration building into a velvet summer night. A yellow moon hung in the ink blue sky and the amber runway edge lights glowed below like giant fireflies. A faint breeze ruffled her petticoat as it brushed against her bare legs. From the other side of the airfield merry laughter wafted over, the Officer's Club was open. Maybe Nate would be there. She hadn't seen him in the last two weeks, and curiosity got the better of her. Humming she crossed the airfield and entered the brightly lit room. It wasn't too crowded, and she spotted Nate playing pool with his friend Jake at the table in the back. She waved as she made her way to the bar, strangely delighted as he nodded and flashed her a smile.

"Hello, Princess!" Squadron mate Gerald "Haystack" MacLaren was bartending tonight, and he greeted her with a smile. "I don't see you here often." She settled at the bar.

"Hi, Haystack. I just finished work for my semester project over at the airbase, and digging through dry and dusty files sure makes me thirsty. Thought I'd drop by."

"Lucky for us you did." Nate's warm voice was distinctive and rumbling and caused shivers of goosebumps to run over her back. "Hey, Princess. Happy to see you."

She half-turned and flicked him a quick smile. "Hi, English. Nice to see you too." She noticed dark under-eye circles and a yellow pallor instead of his usual honey golden skin tone, and it worried her a little.

"Haven't seen you in a while, what have you been up to?" She asked after Gerald handed her her soda. She took a sip and glanced at him again.

"Like you, I had a lot to do for my semester project."

"You look like you've pulled a few all-nighters... but the papers aren't due until the end of the month?"

"Don't ask." He smiled sheepishly. "I'm not as organised as you are."

She shoved him with her shoulder. "Stop flattering me."

"I'm not flattering you, it's a fact." He grinned, leaning against the bar with one elbow propped up. "Nice dress. I like the gold buttons."

Blush crept into her cheeks as she tugged at the bodice. "Thank you. I bought it because it reminded me of our dress uniforms."

"It suits you."

"Havisham." Pat Bukovski's sneer. "You really better stay away from her. She's not good for your career."

Nate straightened and slowly turned around. His jaws clenched. "Good evening, Patrick. You do know the old adage of if you have nothing nice to say, say nothing at all? It would certainly help to improve my view of you." He crossed his arms in front of his chest, biceps bulging under his shirt, straining the fabric. His eyes had the quality of steel and lost all of the warmth she'd liked so much. Standing head to head, she realised how massive Nate actually was. He was easily a head taller than Pat and stared at him with all the confidence of someone who knew how to take a tackle and still cross the line.

Pat hissed, fidgeting. "What d'you want with the whore anyway?"

Adelie couldn't look as fast as Nate's fist flew towards Pat's face. Blood splattered as the cadet stumbled backwards against a table. Before he was upright again, Nate grabbed him by the collar and pulled him up to his face. "What did you call her?"

Pat apparently didn't know when it was time to let it go. "Whore." He spat the word into Nate's face and the next moment the two men were locked together like feral dogs. Tables crashed, glass shattered. Someone yelled: "Go Havisham, get him!"

A circle of jeering men formed around the two combatants grappling on the floor. Adelie had enough. They were Officers-to-be, not fighters in a carnival tent. She grabbed the soda syphon from the bar and aimed right at the faces. A sharp jet of icy seltzer spritzed, confusing the fighters enough for Jake and Gerald to pull them apart.

"Enough." Anger whipped the word from her lips, and the room snapped back to normality. Pat was unable to stand on his own feet, and his nose looked like he should better see a doctor. But she had no sympathy for him. "Someone bring him to the ER," she ordered, and two cadets followed through, grabbing the barely conscious cadet under his arms. Her attention focused on Nate. His bloody face was a

daggers to her heart. His lip and nose were bleeding, and a bruise was forming under his eye, but he could stand and met her glare unblinking. He even managed a crooked grin.

"Joined the fire brigade, huh?" He pointed with his chin at the syphon.

"Shut up."

"Yes, ma'am." He straightened and winced, but stood to attention.

His formerly white shirt was adorned with blotches of blood. She wanted to scream and yell at him. She wanted to cradle and kiss him. Instead, she jerked her head towards the door. "You better come with me."

Nate sat on Adelle's love seat and tried very hard to not get mesmerised by her beautiful face as she cleaned battle marks from his face. Long, curved lashes contrasted with translucent, rosy cheeks. Faint freckles sprinkled the tip of her nose. The plump pillows of her lips invited to bestow fervent kisses on them and not even the harsh sting of the disinfectant could mute the longing to do so. He wanted to take her sweet face between his hands and kiss her. Not that he actually could, his upper lip throbbed and filled his cheek with a dull pain. And even though Adelle naturally tried to be gentle and careful, every dab was as if she was poking a glowing knife into the wound. He involuntarily winced through clenched teeth, and she looked up.

"Sorry." She cupped the unhurt half of his face with her soft, warm palm and a flicker of worry passed over her features.

"Don't be. I've looked worse after rugby matches."

"That's not something to boast about." Her kissable lips turned into a thin line, and her hand dropped away.

"You're upset."

"I had slightly different plans for tonight." She snapped the ointment bottle shut, stuffed it back into the first aid kit and zipped that close too. She got up, grabbed the bag and stomped into the bathroom, the skirts of her blue dress swishing. He heard the sharp clatter of a cupboard door smacked shut.

"I'm sorry that I ruined your evening," he said as she returned. With a huff, she gathered her hair and tied it into a ponytail, offering him a prime view of her chest.

"It's not even your fault. It's that idiot Pat's," she answered as she walked into her closet sized kitchen. He got up and followed her, which was a blessing and a curse, as now she brushed against him with every move due to the restricted space. She filled the kettle with water and switched it on. He wanted to brush away her hair, put his arms around her and kiss her snowy nape to comfort her. Instead, he was sentenced to watch her rip open a new box of tea, fill the infuser and pour the boiling water over it. Finally, she rested against the counter and stared blindly out of the window into the summer night. In the distance, the white light of the aerodrome beacon blinked in the darkness, guiding smaller blinking dots to safety. Adelle sighed, and he couldn't take it any longer. It only took a step to close the space between them anyway. He put his hands on her shoulders, his thumbs massaging her trapezoid muscle gently. To his immense relief, she moulded into his touch.

"What's the matter? You're like an angry lioness waiting to pounce."

Abruptly she turned around, glaring at him. He bravely met her eyes while simultaneously trying to ignore the fact that their bodies were inappropriately close. Her index finger poked into his chest with every word she hurled at him. "I feel like a damn prize for boys to fight over, not like a person. I'm angry that Pat succeeded in pushing your buttons. And..." The finger wavered and then her hand fell to the side. Her look softened. "And I'm sorry that you got hurt on my behalf."

He took her hands and laced his fingers through hers. "Lily, I play rugby. I get hurt all the time." She huffed and looked at him with widened eyes. "Seriously, don't feel bad about me. I'm fine. You cleaned me up so carefully. Our team doc isn't so considerate." This finally brought a reluctant smile to her face, and she freed her hands to pull the infuser out of the teapot.

"Do you want ice for your black eye and your lip?" She asked over her shoulder.

"That would be great, yes."

Adelie pointed at the fridge behind him while taking two cups from the shelf next to her. "It's in there, help yourself, will you?"

To his surprise, she sat down on the love seat with him, even leaning slightly against him. He put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, needing her proximity as well. Her touch seemed to soothe his soreness.

"Pat looked awful, I'm sure you broke his nose," she said.

"He deserves it. Stupid asshole."

"Nate!" She giggled and looked up at him with twinkling eyes. "You can't just beat up everyone you deem an asshole." She nestled closer, pulling up her legs on the seat too.

"Not every one, true. But all the ones who dare to insult you." He squeezed her shoulder, and she giggled again.

"It was sweet of you, though," she eventually said. "Stupid maybe, but sweet." She looked up and smiled so warmly at him, he'd do it all over again. He slid his hand down over her arm to her waist, and she didn't object. Instead, she reached up and gingerly brushed over his beaten up eyebrow. "Thank you."

Peaceful silence settled between them. The ice dulled the pain in his face, and it took him a full five minutes to realise that Adelie was snuggled up to him, her head on his shoulder, her hand on his stomach and that he played absentmindedly with her silky ponytail. Quiet satisfaction had spread through him, a warm and happy feeling that now was frozen by an arctic blaze of shock.

Adelie felt him tense up under her hand. Awareness trickled in, the fact that they were, and there was no other way to put it, cuddling. Slowly she eased away from him. Nate gave her free without protest, his arm moving to the backrest of the love seat.

"Sorry... I'm not ready... yet." She fumbled for a cover up, but his smile stopped her. It was a sad smile. Maybe it was his battered and bruised state, but he looked as vulnerable as she felt.

"It's okay." His voice was coarse. The sight of him slouched in the corner of the seat, a tired and hurt man, tugged at her heartstrings.

The need to comfort him, to hold him was stronger than her fear. Tentatively and awkwardly, she slipped back, resting her head on his shoulder and his arm wrapped around her again. "Ready now?" He whispered. She shook her head. "Then why..."

"I could use a little more of your particular brand of first aid."

He made a happy sound, a half-chuckle, half-sigh. "I'll try my very best."

"I've accepted that I seem to end up in your arms every time we meet anyway," she added, provoking a laugh from him.

"I'm not objecting." She could hear the teasing grin without the need to look up.

"Of course, you aren't." More laughter. She liked his laughs.

A sigh lifted his chest, and his arm tightened around her, pressing her against him. It didn't matter that he had a beaten up face and a bloody shirt - if anything, it added a nice touch of roughness to his already sky-high appeal.

"I want to beat up that asshole that broke your heart," he said.

"Sh, I don't want to think about him right now. The memory fades when I'm with you." She bit her lips after her unplanned confession, anxiously waiting for his sure teasing, but he stayed quiet. As she looked up, he put down the icepack and tenderly cupped her face with his cool hand. Their glances tangled, and he sighed as he contemplated her.

"Something about you makes me overly protective."

She was still thinking about his words when she ran into him the next afternoon in the hallway of the administration building. He was wearing his uniform and looked even more like a model for Aerospace Fashion, battered face aside.

"You clean up nicely," she joked. He grinned, but there was a strain of worry on his face. "What caused the dress up?"

"Payne ordered me in. Apparently, Parachute complained this morning."

"Oh. That little..." She swallowed the expletive and Nate chuckled. "You know what, I'll come with you."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not going to allow that little douchecanoe to ruin your career. He has to learn to take responsibility for his actions. Provoking people and then complaining that they hit you is bad form, terrible form."

He laughed at her anger. "Now who's protective?"

Adelie just smiled at him, eyes crinkling. She was wearing the blue dress with the gold buttons again, looking prim and proper. "Hey, you're always calling me your guardian angel... I just accepted the job."

She led the way to Payne's office and knocked. To be honest, he was glad not to face the Major alone.

"Yes." Payne sat at his desk over some paperwork. He was a man in his late forties, with a salt and pepper buzz cut and steel grey eyes. Nate didn't want to know how much discipline it took to maintain the Major's fitness, but he clearly hadn't let himself go. He raised his eyebrows in surprise as he recognised Adelie.

"Klaiber? What are you doing here?"

"I figured, if Cadet Havisham is facing penalties because of his behaviour, I should too."

"What?" Nate realised that he and Payne had spoken in unison. The Major added: "What's this nonsense all about?"

Adelie sighed. "Apparently, Bukovski had set his eyes on me and I failed to recognise and stop this development. He thusly became jealous of Havisham. His plan of action was to provoke Havisham in any possible way who only reacted in defence of my honour. I'm sorry."

Payne rubbed his chin with his fingertips but wasn't very successful in hiding his twitching mouth. "Sit down, you two. I need to know what happened. I can't let a cadet breaking someone's nose slip by unnoticed. But I also know that Havisham is not someone who picks fights."

"See, I told you, you broke his nose." Adelie sat close enough to Nate on Payne's visitor sofa to shove her elbow into his side.

"He called you a whore." Nate's guts clenched at the very thought

of it. Asshole. He'd break more than just Pat Bukovski's nose if he'd get the chance.

"That is indeed a grave insult." Payne sighed. "And of course, Bukovski omitted this crucial piece of information in his complaint."

Adelie recounted the happenings in the Officer's Club with her clear and mellow voice. To Nate's regret, she was concise with her words, as he could have listened to her for hours. Payne asked a few more questions, which they both answered until he seemed satisfied.

"Havisham, I see that Klaiber has taken it into her capable hands to keep you out of trouble. You should consider yourself lucky."

Nate cleared his throat, thinking back to the last evening and their delightful snuggle. "She sure gave me hell for my behaviour, Sir."

Payne laughed a rumbly laugh. "I bet she did, so I won't punish you any further."

"Excuse me, Sir?"

"Judging from what you both just told me, the one who should get a penalty is Bukovski, for insulting the integrity of a fellow squadron member and aggravating another to the point of violence. This is not the sort of behaviour I want to see in any of my cadets, let alone a future officer. There will be consequences. But - Havisham." Nate involuntarily straightened his back at the tone of Payne's address. "I can't let you off the hook every time - see that you're not breaking anybody's nose from this point on. It's not acceptable, but considering that you maintained a low profile so far, I can let this pass."

"Thank you, Sir."

Payne nodded. "Dismissed."

"He can't be serious!"

"That's a bad joke!"

"Why's he doing this to us?"

"I don't want to fly with this guy, I don't even know him!"

Adelie listened to her unhappy classmates as the two squadrons trickled out of the assembly hall. Major Payne had just announced a wing exercise, grouping every cadet with their sister squadron counterpart according to their ranking, and it didn't sit well with a lot

of them.

"Hey, Princess! Looks like we're going to share a cockpit for a day." Nate had fought his way through the throngs of people heading for the exit and sauntered along her, all smiles and smirks. He didn't seem vexed by the prospect of flying with someone else, like many others.

"Hi, English. Lucky us, huh?" She followed him outside, where a sunny afternoon greeted them.

"Extremely lucky. D'you have time for a soda at the Lemon Tree? We should discuss our strategy to win this game." He waggled his eyebrows at her, half-way turning around as he descended the steps leading up to the building. Crisp white shirt, dark blue slacks. The black eye had faded to a faint grey shadow and the cut on his lip was merely a thin line. He was almost back to his usual level of devastating perfection.

She adjusted the strap of her bag over her shoulder, tilting her head to the side. "Are you sure you do not just want to spend the afternoon with me?"

He laughed, not at all ashamed that she apparently had seen through his little scheme. "That too. Now that I actually have a valid reason to do so and neither of us needs first aid in one form or another."

Adelie shook her head. "You are impossible. But, okay, you're right - we need a strategy if we want to win. And the exercise is in three days."

They found a quiet corner in the back of the diner and after receiving their sparkling lemonades, Nate indeed came right down to the matter at hand, but not in the way she'd expected.

"You'll fly," he said, flashing his trademark megawatt smile.

"What?" With a heavier than planned thump, she set down her glass. "You don't want to fly?"

"No, ma'am. You're the much better pilot."

"Don't be stupid. I'm not."

"Oh yes, you are. Don't sell yourself short." He smiled sheepishly as if he was about to confess something. "See, I analysed you. Nah,

don't get upset. I wanted to know why I couldn't beat you unless you seemed to have an awful day. I compared results, from our own interactions and with others."

Now he had tickled her curiosity. "What did you find?"

He laughed softly and made eye contact. "We're on par when it comes to hits, but your reaction time is much faster than mine. You're excellent at anticipating your adversary's next move. I guess your racing days give you an advantage here."

Baffled, she blinked at him. "My racing days? Nate, driving a race car has nothing to do with flying a jet..."

"Ha, that's what you think!" He scooted to the edge of the bench. In his excitement to get his point across, he nearly knocked over his glass. "When you race, you need to make split-second decisions. You need to anticipate what the guy in the car in front of you is going to do next, to figure out how to overtake him. All of that while driving at neck-breaking speeds and trying not to get off course. You're simply used to think a step ahead of the game a lot longer than any of us is. Add your discipline and your will to go the extra mile, and it's no wonder you're leading the ranking by miles." He beamed at her. "And that's why you're going to man the stick, and I'll happily take the gunner's position."

His reasoning was solid, she had to give him that. "Nate, it's not that I don't want to fly, but... aren't you afraid they'll make fun of you when you let the girl pilot? You got yourself a split lip because of me already."

His blue eyes became serious, and he took her hands into his. Her mouth went dry for no reason. "Excuse my French, but I don't give a flying fuck what these twats think. I want to win this, and I know our chances to win are much higher when you pilot. And they won't laugh when we've blasted them out of the skies."

The bubble canopy hissed open, and a waft of fresh air promised stable ground. With weak knees and a queasy stomach, Nate climbed out of the Stingray. Adelie followed suit and he already had a quip on his tongue about the wildest rollercoaster ride he'd ever been to, as she dropped her helmet and bowed over the front wheel of the bird. He just had time to catch her braid before her stomach stated its own opinion about their performance.

He greeted her with a handkerchief and a breath mint as she finally came back up. "Better? Here, take this, helps with the vile taste."

A weak smile. "Thank you."

She steadied herself against the plane, the sickly green colour of her face slowly changing back to the usual lovely pale rosy-pink. Eventually, she grinned at him. "Sorry for pulling so many Gs. Hope you're not going to be sick too."

Nate shook his head. "No, I'm feeling okay-ish. Fresh air is lovely, though. D'you want to see the flight surgeon on our way to the debriefing room?"

"Nah, I think I'm all right."

"You were awesome. Even though some of your moves had my stomach either up in my throat or down at my knees. I think it was all worth it."

She blinked at him as she had to look into the sun. "You weren't bad at taking down the enemy either. I admire your jamming tricks. They totally didn't see us coming. This was highly enjoyable."

"It was. We're a good team."

Major Payne clearly wasn't happy with the overall results, which suggested a lack in the capacity for teamwork across both squadrons. He pulled up a spreadsheet with the results for every team. Next to Nate, Adelie gasped and squeezed his thigh.

"I knew we were good - I didn't expect us to be this good." She whispered. His beautiful partner in crime was right - they had indeed blasted everyone out of the sky as he had envisioned. Payne highlighted the first five teams in the spreadsheet.

"These teams were the ones who understood what the exercise was about. Teamwork. Putting your own need to shine behind the greater good. Working with whatever you get. Some of them were more successful than others in their attempts, but they all were professional and resourceful. No bickering, no insults. Instead focused communication. Not to mention skills and the ability to work together instead of against each other. This is how you not only get into Space Force, this is how you make a great career in the Space Force."

"But Havisham and Klaiber trained together!" Someone in the back had the audacity to pipe up. Payne raised his eyebrows and with a dead-calm voice said: "So, they trained together. They sacrificed precious free time to get better at their craft. Either of you could've done the same. These two show a dedication I'm missing in a lot of you. You should not complain that they trained together, across squadrons even, but ask yourself why you didn't."

"How do you manage to keep a straight face through all of the abuse?" Nate sounded worried, and as Adelle looked up, she found a new warmth in his eyes. He'd driven her up to Bunker Hill again, this time in the truck and with a picnic basket, and they had made themselves comfortable in the truck bed, enjoying the view while the driver's cabin sheltered them from the wind.

"I guess I'm just used to it. It's not as bad around here as it was in the race camps. And - at least that's what I keep telling myself - they don't really mean me. They see me, and they have a particular idea of me, but they don't know me. They abuse the picture they have, not me."

He huffed. "Still. It's not fair."

"No, it's not. But it's also no reason to tarnish our little celebration. What do you have in your mystery picnic basket?" She grinned at him, and he grinned back.

"That's a secret."

She quietly observed him while he unpacked the culinary treasures in the form of sandwiches and cake onto the picnic blanket.

She also had to remedy the picture she had had of him, and she must say, she really liked what she had found.

"We all do it, though, don't we."

He looked up. "We all do what?"

Adelie smoothed her hair back and cocked her head. "Create ideas of people before we know them. I certainly had an idea of you, and it couldn't have been further away from the truth."

His smile was pure tease. "What was your idea of me, and what did you find instead?" Hot blush crept into her cheeks, and his smile grew wider. "Come on, tell me."

"Oh, alright then." She huffed. "I thought you were really full of yourself, a playboy, the typical poster boy for a cocky pilot."

Nate wagged his head. "This is not an entirely wrong assessment. Even though I prefer the terms 'dashing' and 'daring'. Or 'impossible', but only when you say it." He looked up and winked. She blushed. Again.

"Sometimes..." She smoothed the creases out of the tea towel that served as their picnic blanket. "Sometimes I wish we would spend more time together. I like you."

He rummaged around inside the basket, but she could see him smile. It was a very private smile, almost invisible if not for a cute dimple in his cheek. "Spend more time with me doing what?" He asked, making eye contact again. She bent over until her face was only centimetres away from his.

"Oh, I don't know. Riding motorcycles? Sitting in truck beds watching space ships? Anything, really."

"Anything, huh? I see..." His smile was downright dangerous. Gently he brushed a hair from her cheek.

"There's no reason to say this so sleazily, English."

"But it makes you blush. It's so flippin' hard to make you blush." He contemplated her face, his gaze wandering over her lips, cheeks and nose up to her eyes. Heat rushed into her cheeks again, and he smiled. "You're unflappable. Not a red hot button like me."

"You certainly found my blush button."

He laughed softly at her confession. "Even worse - I like to push it."

"Are you always such a shameless flirter?"

"Oh yes."

She scooted over, and he wrapped his arm around her. For a long while, they watched the incoming ships in silence. Eventually, he squeezed her and said: "Just so you know, I want to spend more time with you, too."

"You say that as if you usually don't spend time with people." She craned her head to catch a glimpse of his face, but it was unreadable. He cleared his throat.

"I usually don't spend a lot of time with women."

"What?" Adelie struggled to sit upright again, which he prevented with tightening his grip around her. With a huff, she gave up and instead poked her finger into his ribs. "I thought you're the guy who's very successful with nurses. Leslie explicitly warned me about you. Is that not spending time with women?"

She heard him chuckle. "There's a fundamental difference between going out with a woman once or twice, spending time with her in bed afterwards, and allowing someone into your life."

"But you can't fall in love with someone if you don't let them into your life!" She blurted out, biting her lips immediately afterwards.

Nate sighed, then said, after a pause: "I don't believe in love. It just leads to pain."

"That's not true!"

He turned his head and nuzzled her hair. "Says the one who cried bitter tears about some guy who broke her heart. Look, my parents had a gruesome divorce. I have trouble believing in happily ever afters after I've seen two grown-ups fight over a teapot like two toddlers in a sandbox."

She pondered his words while they watched a Class 3 Sandhawk touchdown on the runway, the mighty roar of its engines reduced to a faint meow due to the distance. "And yet you once tried and let somebody close enough to hurt you with their dishonesty."

His body became stiff for a second, then he exhaled forcefully.
"Yeah, once I did."

"So, no more women allowed in Nate Havisham's life?"
He chuckled. "There's always an exception to the rule."



CALIBRATIONS

Rain fell in a steady rush. It gargled from the spout of the gutter, and it splattered into the puddles in the yard. It was still warm enough to leave the garage doors open, but it was clear that the violet and orange asters behind the garden fence were summer's last hurrah. Soon Nate would need to close the doors and fire up the old cast iron stove. He turned his attention from the dripping bushes to the woman sitting on an upturned crate, polishing chrome accents for his bike. Adelle wore a rust coloured, thick, cabled sweater; her old fatigue trousers pushed into chunky work boots. The right attire for a day at a dirty workshop, but too concealing for his liking. He missed the days of sundresses that showed off her perfect figure. His back lamented his crouched position behind his motorcycle, and he stretched. The movement caused her to look up and smile. She put her work aside and stood up, crossing the space between them with large strides. Putting her hands on his shoulders, massaging them lightly, she bowed over him to study his progress with the bike.

"Hey, that's looking great. You're almost done with reassembling it."

He fitted his dirty, oily hand over hers on his shoulder. "All thanks to you and your steady Saturday company. Don't think I've come that far in just a couple of weeks if it weren't for you."

"Come on, what I've gotten to do with your bike?" She pushed her knees into his back, ruffling his hair with her free hand.

He craned his neck to look up. Amber brown eyes shone down on him. "Oh, a whole lot. First, I finally want to go riding with you on my own bike. Then you're always asking about my progress... and I'm not one who likes to show up empty handed, so I kept working on it. And last but not least your quiet company. Your willingness to get your hands dirty and help me."

He got up and stretched his legs. Adelle reclined against the workbench, arms crossed in front of her chest. She watched him intently with a tilted head as he strutted around the garage to get the blood in his legs flowing again. He had enough of tinkering with tools and tightening bolts for one afternoon. He wanted to spend some time gazing into two compassionate brown eyes and listen to her

mellow voice.

"You know, I think I'm done for today. How about some tea on the back porch? The garden offers a much nicer view than the workshop yard anyway."

She laughed, pushing herself away from the bench. "You are aware that it is raining, yes? Not exactly the weather I envision for tea on a back porch."

"I am. But you like the swing, and there are blankets and pillows. It's really cosy on rainy days."

He was right. The back porch was a comfortable and cosy place, even with the rain. Adelie picked up a blanket and sat down between the thick pillows of the porch swing. Gently swinging, she made herself comfortable, not for the first time wondering why a house of three men had wicker chair cushions with floral patterns. It looked quaint and almost grandmotherly. Behind the railing with the chipped white paint, soggy pink roses nodded in the breeze. Way back at the end of the garden, she could see Bob's yellow sou'wester peek over the bushes now and then. He was digging up a bed in the vegetable garden, prepping it for the coming fall. The garden was Bob's domain, just like Eddy's was the workshop where he was always building or repairing things. Nate had made the kitchen his realm, and she admired how the three men had turned the whole place into a home. It was old, and some corners desperately needed work, but it still breathed more life than her polished and styled studio back in the Star City complex.

Nate kicked open the screen door, both hands busy holding the tea tray. He had switched his ratty work sweater for one without oil stains and holes, brushed his hair and washed his hands. On the tray, he had piled up scones, marmalade, clotted cream, cups and a teapot painted with blue flowers, and both her heart and her stomach appreciated the view. She patted the space next to her and with a bright smile, he joined her on the swing after he'd set the little table in front of them.

"You've outdone yourself again, English," she mumbled while munching one of his scones.

"Thanks, Princess."

"Why's Bob digging up the garden in this weather?"

"Because he's a stubborn mule. He's leaving for another concert tour tomorrow and said it couldn't wait until his return."

After a delicious scone break, Nate asked if she could help him picking a colour for his bike and went to fetch the paint chips.

"Here are the ones I collected, but I can't decide. It's all red to me." He turned with pleading eyes to her and dropped a small pile of painted squares into her lap.

"Oh my gosh, that's a lot." She placed the chips on the table to study them. Indeed, they were all different shades of red. "They're all pretty. What are you looking for?"

He'd sat down next to her and pushed the swing with one foot. His warmth enticed her to lean against him, and he put his arms around her, his chin on her shoulder.

Holding her, even just as loosely as Nate was holding her now, was the best thing in the world. Adelie had installed herself in his life in a way he'd never imagined as he'd opened the door to let her in. Her smiles, her conversation, even her teasing - there was something profoundly missing when she wasn't there. The colours were brighter when she was around, with her travel sized watercolour kit and her determination to capture happy memories.

"Why don't you just snap a picture?" He once had asked, as she sat in the middle of the workshop yard, painting the garage and his bike, hair aglow like spun bronze in the setting sun.

"It's not the same," she had answered, "the emotion is missing. This is how I see it with my soul."

As a former racer, she was good with a wrench and not afraid to get dirty. No more blindly groping for tools, she handed him the right one before he could ask and he missed her second set of hands every time she wasn't there to help him.

He tried not to think about what this meant. Instead, he pulled

her a smidgen closer and mumbled: "Too be honest, I was looking for something the shade of your lipstick. It's the perfect juicy red."

She giggled. "You're in luck, I have it in my purse. Let's compare." She freed herself from his tender embrace and fetched the tote bag sitting on a chair. They picked the closest matches and Adelle held her lipstick next to them.

"This one comes quite close. Or this. The others are either too blue or too orange, don't you think?"

His glance clung to her lips, and she probably could have read him the space force's code of conduct, he'd still be as mesmerised. Even after all the weeks he knew her, he hadn't gotten used to her beauty, her appeal, and it still had the power to derail his brain. Other women had vanished from his radar completely.

"Nate? What do you think? This red, or this red? I think this one would look fantastic with metallic flakes to add some depth." She looked at him with raised eyebrows, holding up two paint chips. Focus buddy.

"Pick the one you like best. I trust you more with this than myself." He was somewhere else with his thoughts, Adelle could tell, and she could also tell that these thoughts had something to do with her. She had no idea what to think about this fact.

"This is flattering, but I'd like to wait and see how they look when it's sunny." Resolutely she reunited the two paint chips with their brothers on the table and snuggled back into her corner of the swing. Nate was still watching her, a pensive look on his face. She prodded his thigh with her knee. "Why so gloomy?"

A smile flared up like an old aerobeacon. "I'm not gloomy. I thought about our summer adventures. How much fun we had. I'm gonna miss our weekends together."

She scooted over and used him as a backrest. His arm naturally fell around her shoulder. Calm spread through her like it always did when they were close. "Why d'you think we won't spend time together over fall and winter?"

A soft chuckle. "Because it's unusual enough that you were

willing to spend your summer weekends in the dirty garage. It's freezing cold and uncomfortable in the winter, even with the oven glowing red. And we won't be able to take trips to the coast and visit our secret cove, either."

"There are some art galleries in town I could drag you to," she suggested. "If you need a reason to meet up, that is."

His chest expanded in her back, then air left it forcefully. "What d'you mean, Lily?"

She sat up and turned around so that she could see his face. "I mean that I'd be perfectly happy with holing up with you here or at my place. Watching movies, or something." She took a deep breath and stared at their touching knees. "I liked being here because I had you for myself. I don't need trips to the coast or an art gallery opening as an excuse. I... I just want to spend time with you."

Nate remained silent for a minute that stretched into eternity. She couldn't meet his gaze, so she kept on staring at their legs. Eventually, he moved, reached out for her face and gently lifted it. Embarrassed, she blinked as their eyes met. Sun-faded indigo, little dabs of Prussian blue, streaks of almost white. His irises were an endlessly fascinating kaleidoscope of different hues of blue. His wool sweater was soft under her palms as she slid them over his chest. Nate himself radiated a comfortable warmth. His hand moved from her chin to her cheek, cradling her face.

"My little Spitfire," he whispered. "Beautiful, fierce, little Spitfire."

The sharp memory of Christopher and his lovely words that meant nothing stabbed her heart again and the pain must've shown on her face. Nate furrowed his brows and pulled back a little.

"What's the matter? Did I say something wrong?"

She shook her head, blinking back the tears. Hoping that her voice would not crumble, she said: "No, no, not you."

He tugged her close, and she gave in to the impulse of finding shelter in the crook of his neck. Nate had always been open and honest, and she wished she could believe that what he said was true.

That she was his little Spitfire. That she could trust him.

"What did this asshole do to you?"

He felt her taking a deep breath. And another.

"Christopher..." Her voice was strained, and she swallowed hard. Then she sat upright, still looking like if she was on the verge of tears. Adelle pushed back a strand of hair and looked into the garden, where silver veils of rain danced in front of the flower beds. "He made me believe I was in love. He played me like a stupid fiddle, and I was too blind to see it because I was bored to death after my return from racing. Then, the evening before our wedding, I finally saw it as what it was: a ploy to gain rank and status. The house of cards collapsed."

"Holy shit." He put his arm around her shoulder, needing to comfort her. She nestled into his embrace, her forehead resting against his collarbone. "I had no idea you were practically standing in front of the altar as the relationship failed. I'm so sorry, Lily. That must have hurt... that must have hurt."

She lifted her head and smiled weakly. "I survived, somehow. But... I completely lost trust in my ability to judge intentions. And I have a hard time trusting others as well."

He wanted to ask if she trusted him, but the way she sought his shelter made the question obsolete. It filled him with a strange pride and the urge to protect her even more. Adelle abruptly sat up and smoothed back her hair, taking another deep breath. "So, now you know."

"Yeah, now I know." He gingerly reached out and brushed away another pert strand of her hair out of her eyes. She smiled her lovely, open smile that brightened his day always and instantly.

"How about you? Who broke your heart?" She laced her fingers through his, pulling his hand into her lap. "Tell me, I want to know too."

For a moment he was lost for words and busied himself with pushing the swing again with his foot. "Her name was Sandy. Like you, I thought she was the one. I even bought a ring and was already plotting when and how I wanted to pop the question. Then I caught

her with another man... in the middle of the living room carpet."

"Oh, that's harsh." Her fingers tightened around his in compassion. "But catching your intended boasting to his mother how much more power he'll have as soon as he is my betrothed isn't probably any better."

"May they both rot in hell," Nate grumbled and pulled her back into his arms. With a sigh she let him, burying her face in his chest and he dug his hand into her silky curls.

Adelie wanted to hide from the world in his arms. Nate's hugs were the most potent analgesic against a broken heart. It was confusing and disconcerting, but it also felt too good to push him away.

"What did you do with the ring? Returned it to the seller?"

"No." His voice was thick and rough. "I still have it. I still like..." He adjusted the blanket around her shoulders and looked at her. "I still hope..." He faltered, then tried again. "I believe it's the right ring, but it wasn't the right girl. I kept it so that I can give it to the one it belongs to."

"I didn't expect you to be such a romantic," she whispered, touched by his words so full of hope. "Especially not after you said you don't believe in love anymore."

"Guess I tried to to fool myself there..." He pulled her up and against him so that they were both comfortably curled around each other. The rain rushed, and dusk was slowly settling between the bushes and hedges in the garden. "Come to think of it, why did you leave Eden and how did you end up here?"

"I have no idea how I always end up in your arms, but they are very comfortable, so I'm not complaining." She shoved him again and with a merry laugh he enveloped her in said arms. "The part of how and why I left Eden though... not so easy. The short form goes like this: I ran away and joined the circus. The long form... You see, on Eden I'm a celebrity, being a baroness and all that what comes with it. And a wedding blowing up as spectacular as ours stirs up some dust."

I wasn't looking forward to strings of paparazzi following me around for months. I was sick of having to live my life at the mercy of a man, so I applied to several academies, and Westerhaven was the first one that responded. I packed my bags, said goodbye to my family and once more left the premises."

"You don't like Eden?" Nate guessed.

Adelie sighed. "Eden itself is beautiful. There's no place quite as beautiful, and I've seen a lot of other planets. But it's still a relatively small colony, they're still not done with populating the first continent. It's perfect for adventures in unexplored regions if you're into that sort of thing, but my mother never let me go. It wasn't befitting for a baroness to go exploring."

"You sound like life there was like a bird cage for you."

She nodded. "I had everything and nothing at the same time. I had tasted freedom on the Planet 500 tour, and settling back in was very hard. I felt like I hit the brakes at full speed. Everything had come to a halt. That's probably why Christopher had such an easy time fooling me. Only that he loved my status and my money more than me. And I so want to be loved for myself and not just for my status and what comes with it."

"But you are!" He blurted out, unable to stop himself.

She craned her head and smiled at him. "Am I?"

He rubbed his neck, finding courage in the cobwebbed corners of the porch roof. "Come on, there are lots of people who admire you here. You're a kick-ass pilot. And you do kick ass, especially mine."

This made Adelie laugh. "I have to admit, flying rings around you is the greatest fun." He grumbled and nuzzled her neck, coaxing a delighted giggle from her. She reached out her hand and pushed it through his hair. "I'm very grateful to have you as my friend, too."

He developed a sudden and surprising hate for the label 'friend'.

There were three reasons Adelle preferred the Lemon Tree over every other diner in town. First, it was never crowded, despite the fact that it was practically next to the airbase. Second, the hot dogs. The Lemon Tree's hot dogs were special. The bun always had a crackly crust and a fluffy inside, not spongy like cheap ones. The roasted onions were crisp and caramelised to perfection. The hot dog itself was always indeed hot and not lukewarm like in other places. The ketchup was home-cooked, a chunky red sauce with a spicy aftertaste, and Adelle often just ordered fries because of it. The third reason was, of course, the handsome guy behind the counter, who smiled at her while she finished her hot dog. Nate was the main reason she dropped by because it was an easy way to see him during their busy days. He worked three shifts a week, which ate up a considerable amount of his already rugby-impaired free time. Outside the big windows, the first fall storm played chase with the leaves. Inside, the Lemon Tree's owner, Trudy, was busy putting up some fall themed decorations, mainly pumpkins.

"Do you have training tonight?" Adelle asked, pushing back the empty dish.

"Yeah, it's going to be a hoot in this weather. Let's hope the rain holds off, or it'll be slip, slide and try not to crash." Nate collected her dish and took it to the kitchen. She heard him cracking a joke with Trudy's niece who was in charge of the burger pans.

As he returned, she said: "I'm going to think of you, while I curl up on my love seat, read a good book and drink hot cocoa."

He shot her a dirty look and walked around the counter to sit down on a bar stool next to her. Another customer entered the otherwise empty diner, causing the little bells above the door to chime hysterically in a gust of wind.

"Nate Havisham! I thought the face looked familiar. How are you, and where have you been?" The woman walked up to Nate, grabbed his face and kissed him full on the mouth. Nate flailed overwhelmed. She was beautiful with green eyes, sleek red hair and generous curves. She wore an apple green peacoat that brought out

the colour of her hair and eyes wonderfully. Her victim gently put her away from him, a scarlet blush tinting his cheeks. To her utter surprise, the hairs on Adelle's neck bristled. A sudden surge of possessiveness flooded her, and she had to restrain herself from physically pulling the woman away from him.

"Hello Mary-Lou, how nice to see you here. Let me introduce you to my friend and fellow pilot Adelle." He gestured towards her.

Mary-Lou turned and gave her a sweeping once-over, eyes narrowing. The familiar muster of a woman trying to determine how much of a threat the other was. And there was no doubt Mary-Lou classified Adelle's professional military appearance as not as exciting as herself. Adelle managed a polite smile. "Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you, too."

A measured handshake.

Mary-Lou returned her attention to Nate, licked her thumb and rubbed it over his lips to free him from smeared lipstick. Then she pulled out her compact and reapplied the juicy red to her own mouth. "Where have you been? I don't ever see you anymore. The others miss you too." She had parked her substantial rear end comfortably against his thigh and pinched his cheeks. "Are you alright?"

Nate shook his head. "Sorry doll, I've been crazy busy."

A first class pout. Adelle bit her lips to stifle a laugh. "Too bad. Well, I gotta dash, my shift starts in half an hour and there's always so much prep to do. It was good seeing you again." Mary-Lou pressed her lips on his cheek, leaving a red lipstick mark. "Bye, honey." The bells chimed again, and then she was gone. Adelle blinked. Nate glanced at her and turned an even deeper shade of red, rubbing his neck. He cleared his throat.

"Sorry." He sounded mortified.

With a malicious smile, she pulled a handkerchief out of the breast pocket of her suit jacket and freed him from the skid marks of Mary-Lou's devotion. "I assume, this was one of your nurse conquests?"

He cleared his throat again. "Err, yes. She and I had a brief encounter a few months ago. Long before I met you."

"She's gorgeous. You have great taste." Adelle never reacted in the way he expected. Nate didn't quite know how to answer the compliment.

"Uh, thanks?" Avoiding his look, she played with the napkin holder, biting her lips. "You're not holding her up against me, are you?" He asked.

She shook her head and sat upright with a sigh. "No. I can't, can I? It's just... weird. Weird to see you with another woman." She aligned the napkin holder with the condiments tray. "I think I'm a little bit jealous."

"Jealous?" Of all things, this was the last he'd expected her to be.

She turned and contemplated him openly. Her gaze swept over his chest and shoulders, lingered briefly on his mouth, wandered over his cheeks, forehead, nose and came to a halt at his eyes. She licked her lips and sighed again. "You're gorgeous. It's not like I didn't notice."

He raised his eyebrows. "So? If you want me, you can have me. You know I'm a full-service guy."

She shook her head and returned to fiddle with the napkin holder. "It's not like I don't want to. But, I once slept with a good friend of mine, way before I met Christopher. And... it didn't turn out well. Since then, I don't have sex with people I consider friends."

"Is that what we are. Just friends?" He hated how desperate he sounded.

Adelle met his eyes again, wearing a crooked smile. "I don't know. If I'd trust my instinct, I'd say we're not..." She pushed her hair back and just looked at him, a little lost and a little vulnerable. He gathered her in his arms, relieved as she put her head on his shoulder, sliding off her chair and standing between his legs. He adjusted her head on his shoulder so that her nose burrowed into his neck. Outside a gale rattled the windows. It was good to know her safely in his arms.

She traced his collarbone under his shirt. "I can't sleep with you. I know it won't end well."

He let go of her to occupy himself with wiping down the counter, avoiding her look. His jaws worked while he wiped the stainless steel surface until it gleamed. Adelie gave him space to think. He was a guy after all. Dealing with emotions probably wasn't his forte. Was dealing with emotions her forte? Hadn't she instead failed to acknowledge her feelings for him? She lifted the condiments tray out of his way.

"Thanks." He put down the cloth and faced her. His raw determination dried up her throat and released a swarm of butterflies in her stomach. Friends didn't cause butterflies to flutter. He put his arm around her waist and pulled her close. Seeking steadiness for her weak knees, she leaned against him. He nuzzled the crown of her head, and mumbled: "I'm scared."

"I understand that you don't want to get burned. It takes a lot of faith to trust again. Heck, what do I know... I'm scared too."

"We're both cowards, aren't we?" His voice was soft and only a little bit mocking.

"Nate?"

"Yes?"

"There's safety in numbers."

"True. And with you, I always feel like I can take on the world."

"Idiot." She poked him, and he snorted.

"What? We always work well as a team."

He was right. They did. In planes and on the ground.

"We should go on a date. A real date." His proposal came suddenly and without preamble.

She lifted her head and looked into his face. Instead of the usual mischief and confidence, she found a layer of apprehension. He was taking a risk, muscles tensed under her hands. "You mean a romantic date?" She felt stupid for asking, but she had to be sure of his intentions.

He nodded, brushing her hair back. "Yes, Princess. A real, romantic date. Let's go dancing, at the Marmoset, tomorrow night."

"Nate, I don't know if this is a good idea."

"What are you afraid of? I just feel we both are in need of a bit of

fun. You know, fun with someone you actually like. Fun with someone you care for. Making new memories. Happy memories."

His cheeks glowed red. The butterflies fluttered up again. Against her better judgement, she smiled. "Okay."

The simple word had the most remarkable effect on his face. It exploded into a quiet firework of emotion: disbelief, wonder, happiness. "Really? You'll come?"

She interlocked her arms behind his neck, tilted her head and enjoyed the dabbling with fire a little more than her broken heart might be safe with. "Yes. Yes, I'll come."



THE MARMOSET

Leslie sat in one of Adelle's armchairs, ready for another night shift. Her uniform was starched and ironed, and her nurse cap throned between two perfect blonde victory rolls. Her mouth was twisted in disapproval. "I wish I was your mother, so that I could say 'No, you're not going on a date with him.' Seriously, have you lost your mind? Aren't there any other cute boys worth your attention?"

Adelle adjusted her earring in the bathroom mirror and took a step back to see through the door. "Frankly, no. Nate is a wonderful human being, once you get past his womaniser shell." Returning to perfecting her appearance, she picked the bottle of her favourite perfume and dabbed the fluid carefully behind her ear. "I like him; I like him a lot. He cares, he's never dull, and I'm happy to tell you, he has never stepped out of line once." She walked out of the bathroom to put on her shoes. As she shimmied into her stiletto heels, she heard Leslie gasp.

"You're going to start a bar fight in this get-up."

Adelle laughed. "That's why I've chosen Nate for protection."

"I wish you'd chosen a more reliable bodyguard than Mr Havisham, but okay..."

She could tell that Leslie was not only miffed but seriously upset. She put her hands on her friend's shoulders. "Leslie, please. You don't know him, and you shouldn't judge him only from hearsay. I'm in good hands."

"Oh, I'm sure he's going to have them all over you."

Adelle rolled her eyes. "How many times do I need to tell you that he's an honourable man?"

"He hasn't seen you in this dress yet."

Oh yes, the dress. It was a slip made from multiple layers of organza in a rich chocolate brown, flaring out from a narrow bodice into a swingy skirt. It was a dress made for dancing; it's non-restricting cut allowed plenty of movement.

"Do you think it's too risqué?" Adelle gave herself a worrying once over in her mirror. Behind her, she could see Leslie's face split into a huge grin.

"Risqué? Na, it's gorgeous. Classy. It somehow manages to be

modest even though it's made from all these see-through layers. And it fits you so well. You'll turn heads."

"Thank you." She beamed at her friend through the mirror.

There was a distinct chill in the air, and it smelled of wet leaves rotting on the ground. Nate reclined against the hood of the little midnight blue car. Eddy had given him a once over as he'd adjusted his collar in the hallway mirror and said, with a little smirk: "Take the Speedster. It matches your outfit." His outfit was a royal blue, fitted shirt and black slacks, usually a favourite with the ladies. He had no idea what Adelle liked.

"Hello!" He looked up as he heard her voice, and his breath got caught in his chest. She looked like a movie star. Her red coat covered what she was wearing, but her legs in shimmery tights and high heels were promise enough.

"Hi," he whispered, as she came to halt in front of him. Her hair was twisted up into an elegant updo, leaving room for dangling earrings to draw attention to her neck.

"Hey."

Words failed him. She wore makeup. Smokey eyes and red lips on porcelain skin. He was staring like a little school boy, he knew it, but there was also a satisfied smile from Adelle as her eyes swept over him.

"Meet my noble steed," he gestured towards the car. Her eyes went wide.

"That's a gorgeous Speedster! Great curves. Look at the chrome details! Wait... Is this last year's model? The six or the eight-cylinder version?"

He stared at her dumbfounded as she circled the car excitedly. Then he remembered her racing history. Of course, she knew cars. Especially fast cars. "It is, and I believe the six-cylinder model. Why are you asking?"

"Oh, just out of interest. I didn't recognise it at first, because of the custom grill and lights. Gosh, it's beautiful. And I get to ride in it!" She beamed at him while he still tried to come to terms with the fact

that Adelle could get giddy about cars. Remembering his manners, he opened the passenger door and held it while she stepped inside. She still marvelled about all the little custom features as he had walked around to the other side of the car. Adelle stopped admiring the die shaped lock knob of her door and turned towards him. Her eyes were alive in a way he'd never seen them before. The girl thrived on gasoline.

"I'll report your reaction back to Eddy. He will love you forever."

She giggled. "Is that in your own interest?"

"No." He winked and started the engine.

Adelle watched him steering the little sports car calmly and confidently. It was obvious that Nate enjoyed driving it, but he wasn't a show off driver, a quality she esteemed greatly. They weren't talking, but the silence wasn't uncomfortable. Now and then, he quickly looked over, their eyes met, and he smiled. At a red light, he fitted his hand over hers resting on the middle console, threading his fingers through hers, thumb brushing along her index finger.

"Do you like dancing?" He asked.

She caught his thumb with hers. "Actually, I do. Do you dance?"

He smiled happily at her. "I love it."

Fingers tightened around fingers in happy anticipation. Then the light turned green, and he had to let go of her hand.

Nate found a place to park the car quite close to the venue, so they only had to walk a short distance. In front of the club, they met up with Jake and his date, a curvy girl named Rosalie. Together they entered the club. The first word that came to Adelle's mind about the Marmoset was 'intimate'. Dark wood panels lined the walls; the tables were tucked between giant ferns, illuminated by low-hanging lamps. There were a small dance floor and an actual live band. A few couples were moving to the soft tunes. As Adelle handed over her coat to the cloakroom charge, Nate whistled slowly.

"That's a step up, ah, what am I saying, that's a giant leap from those flight suits."

Adelie chuckled and turned around, to find him in a state of shock. He blinked at her twice, staring helplessly. The way his glance wandered slowly over her legs and her dress, how it lingered briefly on her lips until he finally made it up to her eyes, released another swarm of fluttery butterflies. A grin then slowly spread over his face.

"That's the dress. The dress in the window when we walked to the soda shop."

She twirled around, making the dress skirt flare up. "Do you like it?"

He caught her around the waist mid-twirl and pulled her abruptly closer. It was a secure grip, a dancer's grip. Suddenly breathless she looked into his blue eyes, which naturally brimmed with mischief. And want. She swallowed.

"Like it? I love it. And you and I - we're so going to dance tonight." His voice was a low, sexy growl, and it made a shiver of excitement run down her back. Oh yes, dancing.

"Come on you two; I'm thirsty." She'd forgotten they were not alone. How could she forget Jake and Rosalie? Nate put his arm around her waist and followed his friend and his date further into the belly of the club. For a once, she was glad for the male urge to demonstrate ownership, because her knees were not functioning as they should. Nate's strong arm provided welcome stability. Jake had located a table near the dance floor, which also had an excellent view over the rest of the club. Across the dance floor, she spotted an impressive bar. Glass shelves were illuminated with cleverly hidden lights, causing the liquor bottles to look like pieces of art. It was impossible to take in everything around her, as Nate seemed to be unwilling or unable to keep himself from touching her. He had sat down next to her on the deep leather sofa, his arm around the backrest. Either his knee was leaning against hers, or his hand rested on her shoulder, playing not so absentmindedly with the strap of the dress. If neither were happening, he'd found an excuse to take her hand. Leslie had been right, this time. She didn't mind. No, she absolutely didn't mind that Nathan Havisham was invading her personal space because it meant that she was invading his also. She

was taking full advantage of having the opportunity to lean against his warm body ever so slightly, a reason to place her hand on his thigh or to lace her fingers through his. His proximity made her positively tipsy, and just to keep herself from doing something stupid, she decided that she'd better stick to the non-alcoholic beverages on the menu.

Nate wondered if he'd finally met a woman too hot to handle. Adelle was not only breathtakingly beautiful and dressed to the nines, but she also was not evading him in any way. He was failing spectacularly at keeping his hands to himself, and she apparently had no interest in telling him he should stop. Their bodies had a conversation of their own, and there was a chance it became anything but civil soon. He needed to get her on the dance floor. He needed to be alone with her. He gave Jake an asking glance. Good wingman that he was, he just smiled and nodded him a go ahead, then focused again on his own woman.

Nate leaned close to Adelle, whispering in her ear: "Do you want to test the dance floor?"

She turned her head and whispered back, her lips tantalisingly close to his skin: "I'd love to."

"Well then, let's go."

He stood and helped her up, not letting go of her hand once he had acquired possession of it. The band was playing a fast set of swing music, which was just fitting for finding their groove together without needing to do a lot of talking. It took a few fumbling steps to learn each other's body cues and they were able to enjoy the dancing. Adelle was a skilled partner and the most fun he had in a long time. She allowed him to spin and twist and dip her to his heart's content, and he took full advantage of it, stopping her now and then against his body. Her eyes sparkled, her smile was wide and more than once she threw her head back with delighted laughter.

Then the bandleader took the microphone. "Gentlemen, this is the moment to pull your ladies close - the next few songs are for the love birds."

Nate felt Adelle hesitating and pulling off into the direction of their table. He pulled her back.

"Now where do you want to go?"

"I didn't know we classified as love birds." She gave him a lascivious smile. His knees got weak.

"If you keep smiling at me like this, I guarantee nothing..." He growled, and she snickered.

"Oh, really? Do I need to worry?" She flashed another one of her smiles, but then thankfully the music started, a deliciously slow waltz. He took her into his arms, and she just melted against him like a good dance partner would, handing herself over to him and the music. Her movements were fluid and graceful as those of a ballerina, and he felt like he was dancing with a princess. Adelle had her head tilted a bit to the side, a serene smile on her lips.

"You like this," he stated, and she nodded.

"Waltzes are my favourite dances. Especially slow waltzes, although fast ones are fun too. But only slow ones give you the feeling that you're gliding, weightlessly."

"So why did you want to leave?"

"I wasn't sure if this would be appropriate." She touched her cheek to his, and he nearly got out of step. "But I admit, missing slow dancing with you would've been a mistake." Her breath was a warm draft along his ear and neck, and it caused hot flushes racing down his back. She was as proficient as he was in the game of seduction, he realised. Unlike him, she just never had used her arsenal of female weaponry before - until now. And his defences were down, oh so down.

Adelle was high on dancing. Their bodies were frequently touching, in appropriate and sometimes even not so appropriate places and it was glorious and terrifying at the same time. Nate was an amazing dancer, but the way their bodies moved in sync had nothing to do with their respective skills and all with the fact that she could guess his next move as well as he could guess hers. The result wrapped her in a dreamlike state, a bubble of music and movement

and touch. She tipped her head back to look at his face, which was always half in shadows due to the dim, intimate light. Those eyes. Royal blue in the almost darkness, burning with concealed mischief. It tickled her thirst for adventure. Adventures with him surely were of the memorable kind. Something shifted between them, and it made her heart skip a beat and her breath hitch. She freed her hand from his and cupped his face, her thumb brushing tenderly over his cheek. With a sigh, he wrapped both arms around her, pressing her tightly against him while they moved like a single body to the slow rhythm. Adelie had never felt so light before. Yes, he had his hands all over her body, and yes, that was where she wanted them to be. Because she had hers around his neck and in his hair, her cheek against his and his breath was wafting over her skin. She wanted to stay in this moment forever.

"This is nice." His voice was a gravelly rumble, and she believed she heard a tremble in it.

"It is. Very nice."

His thumb brushed over her bare back, and she shivered due to the intimacy of his touch. She stroked his nape, the smooth, soft skin right above the collar of his shirt, feeling him shiver in return. Nice was not an apt description. Enchanting? His hands shifted on her body, and she abandoned the train of thought. They spent the rest of the set in comfortable silence, letting their bodies do the talking.

As they eventually left the dance floor, she grabbed his arm and brought him to a stop before they reached their table.

"Wait."

With a smile, he turned. "Why? Do you want to do another set?"

Grinning, she shook her head. "No." She stepped close, and he put his hands on her hips. "But you look like a little, uh, dishevelled?" Her heart skipped two beats as she reached up and smoothed his hair back into order, eliminating the traces her fingers had left in it.

"Thank you." He caught her hand on the way down and breathed a soft kiss on its back. "To my utter dismay, I can report that you still look absolutely flawless. Guess I need to put in more effort the next round."

She wound her arm around his waist as they resumed their way.
"Try as much as you like... I use professional grade hairspray."
He pinched her bottom. "You're sassy today."
She returned the favour. "You like sassy."

Jake ushered his lady towards their turn on the dance floor almost as soon as they got back. Nate didn't mind having Adelie for himself a little longer. She sat next to him and watched the dancing couples, one hand supporting her chin, the other resting on his thigh. He reached out and traced a finger over her beautiful pale back, dewy with transpiration from dancing herself.

"Hey." She turned towards him and nestled into his opened arm. "What's up?" Her eyes were almost black in the dim light of the lamp hanging over their table.

"Nothing. You look a million credits tonight... it's hard to resist not touching you."

A throaty laugh. "Thank you."

"Are you having fun?"

She nodded, "Yes! Beautiful venue, great music, great drinks, and very agreeable company."

"Agreeable? Just agreeable?" He poked her shoulder, and she giggled happily, shifting even closer.

"You're right. Agreeable doesn't quite encompass all your amazing qualities." Her hand moved over his chest, then a finger lightly brushed the skin over his shirt collar. She softly cooed, and he answered her with tightening his arms around her. Adelie smelled amazing, somewhat sweet and spicy, and he couldn't help but nuzzle the delicate skin behind her ear. Her breath travelled slowly across his cheek as she looked into his eyes. Their gazes locked and Adelie's luscious lips pursed into a sexy smile. He stroked her neck with the back of his fingers, hoping that the others wouldn't return too soon. Her voice was merely a whisper. "Enticing."

He blinked, his brain frantically backtracking the conversation.

"What?"

Her hand pushed through his hair, and she deliberately contemplated his face. "You are."

He got lost in her eyes, instinctively moving in. She angled her head. Breath mingled. Her hand caressed the back of his neck, and her eyes were drifting shut as he closed the small distance between them.

"Here we are again." Jake's voice. Chairs scraped over the wooden floor. Adelie stiffened in his arms and drew away. Dammit.

Adelie wasn't sure if she wanted to strangle or kiss Jake for killing the moment. Her heart raced, and her palms were suddenly sweaty. They had been so close to changing their relationship irreversible. Their hands had found each other under the table again, fingers caressing fingers, even though he was engaged in a conversation with Jake and Rosalie. Something about an upcoming rugby match. She looked at the joined hands. Hers pale, his tanned, resting on his thigh. Perfectly fitting each other. She liked the look of them together, and she loved how his caress felt on her skin. Her thoughts wandered back to the last time she'd been holding hands with someone. How different her feelings had been then, an innocent rush of euphoric madness. Now it was a disconcerting mix of confusion and need. Determined she swallowed the past heartache. Nate wasn't Christopher. Nate let actions follow his lovely words. She tugged at his arm. "Hey, how about more dancing?"

She danced a lot - with Nate, but also with Jake. They discovered the magic of rhubarb fizz, a pink concoction which thankfully didn't contain any alcohol, or there'd been a hell of a hangover waiting for her in the morning. It was good, oh so good. She had fun, and she nearly pouted as Nate finally suggested that it was time to go home. It must have rained while they'd been inside, as the pavement shimmered wetly in the light of the lamps. Their steps echoed in the quiet backstreets where Nate had parked the car. To her surprise, he slid his arm around her shoulders. She put her arm around him too, for warmth and because she wanted to be close to him. Arm in arm

they walked along the dark street, but Adelle felt safe and sheltered with him at her side. All too soon they reached the little Speedster.

"Here we are." Nate opened the door for her.

"Always the gentleman." She stepped into the car, and he propped his arm on the frame.

"You deserve nothing less than a gentleman."

She shook her head and tugged at his jacket. "Well, the last one turned out to be a barrel burst... I think I'm done with gentlemen."

He laughed and drew back. "Lucky that I'm just a low-level working class kid with manners then."

"Idiot."

He closed the door and walked around the car. After he'd settled in his seat and was about to start the engine, he looked at her and said: "I don't know anybody who says idiot as lovingly as you do."

They shared a smile while hands found hands again.

The drive home was quiet, both of them occupied with their thoughts. Only as he pulled into her street and killed the engine in front of her house, Nate realised he wasn't ready for the evening to come to an end. Her fingers entwined with his on the short way up to her door. Every step brought him closer to saying goodbye. His heart raced as she stopped and turned to him, gracing him with a gaze that made him feel three sizes taller and like a king. Dancing together had evaporated all borders of personal space, at least for tonight - she stood deliciously close to him, her hand brushing his arm. A mischievous smile danced over her face, and she cocked her head.

"You should persuade me to go on romantic dates with you more often."

"If you let me..."

She laughed softly. "Sorry for being so hard to convince sometimes."

She didn't want to say goodbye either: her hand still held on to his. Her body swayed against his as she took a step closer. It was an invitation to slip his arm around her waist. A smile rewarded him, and

he took her completely into his arms. She met him without hesitation as if they were about to dance again. The way her pliable body melted against his suggested a Tango not fit for an audience. She brushed the back of her fingers along the curve of his jaw.

"You're growing whiskers again." His stubble seemed to delight her.

He rubbed his face. "Yeah, I am. I'm sorry."

Her face inched closer until her nose skimmed along his cheek, following the trail of her fingers earlier. "I like scruff," she whispered, then she nipped his earlobe before she slowly drew back. His arms tightened in reflex; he didn't want to let her go. She chuckled. An open perusal of his face, her eyes twinkled and her smile, oh her smile. Sweet. Inviting. He splayed his hand between her shoulder blades, wishing the coat to be gone. There was warm, naked skin hiding underneath. He wanted to feel it. Her hands found their way onto his chest, slid upwards, over his collarbones until her arms crossed lightly behind his neck. Her glance dropped to his mouth, then wandered over his face until she met his eyes. Anticipation became unbearable. He moved in, grazing her neck until he found the spot behind her ear where the fragrance of her delicate skin was strongest. Fresh and spicy. Oranges and Basil. Intoxicating. Her arms tightened around him, and as he left the heavenly scented spot to look up into her face, she leaned in and brushed her lips against his cheek. Her voice dropped to a husky whisper. "I think we still have some unfinished business with each other..."

He laughed softly. "Yeah, I remember we got interrupted at a most unfortunate moment."

Her throaty, breathy giggle was a call his body responded to. As he dipped his head, he felt her fingers on his nape, guiding him towards her. He followed willingly. The tip of her nose brushed along his as she tilted her head and then, finally, lips touched. His knees almost buckled as a wave of want, need and bliss overpowered him. His nose pressed into her cheek, and her warm, yielding lips tasted of cherry lipstick. She lingered, but far too briefly to discover more intimate secrets.

"You know how to kiss a girl good night." Her voice was black lace on dewy skin.

"Do I?" He croaked. She laughed. He was drunk. Drunk on the girl with gold-speckled eyes, who knew how to fly jets and race cars and danced like a princess. Drunk on the woman who smelled of oranges and basil and kissed like an angel. His knees were not to be trusted. She gave him another quick kiss full on the mouth, then she stepped out of his arms and vanished through the door. Rendered immobile, he had to stand and watch the door shut behind her, his fingers on his tingling lips where hers had touched his. He staggered back to the car, sank into the seat and stared blindly ahead. There still was a trace of cherry on his lips. A glance in the mirror showed him Adelle's smeared lipstick and confirmed that he wore the silliest grin.



**MOVIE
NIGHT**

Adelie met with Leslie on Sunday afternoon to go for a run in the little nearby park, like they did every week. It had rained in the morning, and there were a lot of puddles on the paths, splashing up high when they ran through them. The first laps were usually spent in silence until they'd found their rhythm, but Adelie guessed from Leslie's impatient side glances that she was dying to know what had happened at the Marmoset the night before.

"So?" Her friend finally blurted out on their third pass of the statue of General Guisan.

"So what? It was a lovely evening." Adelie wasn't sure if she wanted to relate anything more. The mere thought of their kiss still made her lips tingle. She hadn't heard from him since, and she didn't know what to think of the whole thing herself.

"A lovely evening." Leslie huffed. "Adelie, I know you long enough to know that when you're stingy with words, something more than 'lovely' has happened."

Shoot. There was no way to avoid confessing now. "We danced. We kissed each other good-bye."

"You let him kiss you? Did he make you drunk to achieve that?" Leslie abruptly stopped and pushed her fists into her pink tracksuit clad sides. "You said he was honourable!"

"Woah, I didn't say the kiss wasn't honourable. And maybe I instigated it?" Adelie couldn't help but smirk at her friend, even though she knew that this would make her furious.

"You did WHAT?"

She turned and fell back into running. "Leslie, I know that it probably wasn't the smartest move on my side. It's just..." She stopped again. "I don't know. When I'm with him, I just feel good. He has shown me his vulnerable side, and I feel safe enough with him to do the same. I know you just see the unscrupulous womaniser in him, but I swear he's more than that. So... kissing him was just a natural progression of the events. It felt right then. And he's a good kisser."

Leslie's impression changed from agitated to concerned. "So why do you think it wasn't a smart move to kiss?"

Adelie tightened the elastic on her ponytail. "Before it was just

playful banter. Flirting. Neither of us venturing out so far that we could get hurt. Both playing it safe. This... this has changed now."

Leslie touched her arm, her blue eyes wide with worry. "Why?"

"Because now the cards are on the table. We need to make our next move, and I hate to say it, but all involved parties could suffer a broken heart."

The ran a lap without saying a word. Eventually, Leslie stopped again.

"I'm sorry."

"Pardon?" Adelle brushed back a pert strand and gave her friend a surprised look.

"Because I acted stupidly. I just realised that he's not just a cute boy who goes around and breaks hearts with intention. I never thought that he might do it to protect his own. And that there must be more to him when he manages to win your friendship and possibly your heart. You're not a fool, and I forgot that too. If you think he's worthy, I should not berate you for believing so. I'm sorry."

"Hey, Les." Adelle pulled her friend into a hug. "I know where you're coming from. We're all a product of our experiences. Sometimes this is helpful; sometimes it's not. You know what - let's call this off, have a shower and go pig out at Schmitz's Café. I need some cake."

Nate found Eddy in the workshop, cleaning the rusty engine he'd pulled out of his latest restoration project.

"Hey man, need any help?"

Eddy glanced up and nodded towards a wire brush. "Sure. What do you want to talk about? Did your date not go well?"

"We kissed."

"So what's wrong?"

Nate took the brush and started to clean a rusty spot on the engine. "I don't know what to do."

This made Eddy look up for good. "You're in neck-deep, aren't you?" Nate could only nod. "Well, I can't blame you. If I were straight, I'd fall for her too."

Nate laughed. "Sure you would, she's an ex-racer."

"And pretty to boot. C'mon." Eddy put down his own wire brush and motioned towards the rickety bench in front of the workshop. He pulled a crumpled cigarette packet out of the coverall's breast pocket and lit one up. "Sit down. Tell me. What's the trouble?"

"You know when you're with someone, and it feels like you've known them for ages, even if you haven't? I feel as if I've known her since our nappy days. We just click."

"Not the worst place to start a relationship from?"

"True. And I really like her. She's my workshop buddy and my study partner and... and my best friend. I don't want to lose her. But what if I ultimately find that this relationship thing isn't for me?"

Eddy puffed a cloud of smoke into the washed out sky. "A true, stable relationship isn't far away from what best friends are. Yes, you have the sex and the kisses too, but ultimately and hopefully, you and your partner are also best friends. Because if you're not, once the hormones have settled down, things won't work out. I can't tell you what to do. I can tell you what I've seen, though. You spent a lot of time with Adelle and a lot less with other girls lately. You already prefer her."

Nate cleared his throat. "I just don't want to hurt her."

"Do you want a piece of advice?"

"Sure."

"Forget about not hurting her. You will, sooner or later. And she will hurt you. This is the thing with being together, you can't avoid hurting each other. But there's always the potential of coming out as a stronger couple on the other side."

Nate stared ahead, more talking to himself than to Eddy. "Is it all worth the risk?"

Eddy slap-grabbed his shoulder and shook him. "Nate, jeez, of course it is. Christ, buddy, people you click with aren't waiting around every corner! How often have you found a woman willing to spend time with you in a dingy garage?"

Nate leaned back, rubbing his face. "Never. The truth is, I've never found a woman like her. When she's around the air tastes

better, and the colours are more vibrant. Her smiles... oh god, her smiles. And she has this tiny watercolour kit and is always painting. It's amazing what she's seeing and capturing. Do you know how utterly fascinating a glass of water can be? How the light breaks, and how it magnifies things behind it..."

Eddy laughed. "Do you hear yourself? You're gushing."

Adelie's heart sped up, and her palms became sweaty as she spotted the familiar baby blue, banged up workshop truck in front of her house. She hadn't seen Nate all week since their date, but he had made up for his crazy schedule by writing text messages every day, sending her pictures of himself buried in books. But now it was Friday, and even sleet falling from the skies couldn't dampen her spirits. He'd suggested a movie night but after a week of not having him around her, she would watch paint dry as long as he would be there too. She opened the passenger door and climbed inside, seeking refuge from the nasty weather. Nate greeted her wearing a grey wool sweater that sat snugly around his shoulders, his hair in its usual off-duty disarray and his blue eyes twinkling.

"Hey, handsome." She scooted across the bench and kissed him quickly on his cheek, figuring that after kissing him good night a welcome kiss was justified. His five o'clock shadow bristled against her lips, and she found him smiling appreciatively as she pulled back.

"Hey, beautiful. How's my little Spitfire?" How she had missed his deep, sonorous timbre. It added a much-needed base to the melody of her days.

"Cold and wet and hungry."

He laughed, not taking his eyes off her for a second. "Oh my, that's a lot of misery wrapped inside a pretty girl." He started the engine and turned on the heater, directing the flow of the warm air stream towards her. "I better bring you home quickly."

She placed her hand on his thigh after he'd pulled back into traffic. "It's good to see you. How did your report and presentation go?"

His hand fitted over hers, squeezing it lightly. "The report and the presentation at least went well, considering the short notice assignment. Payne certainly lives up to his name sometimes."

"He sure does. He was such a PITA the whole week. Makes you wonder what ticked him off so badly. Thank you for your adorable study pictures. Although - at one point the circles under your eyes became so deep, I wondered if you'd slept at all."

He chuckled. "I can recall dreams of a beautiful woman who looked remarkably like you, so I must've slept."

One of his quick, teasing smiles. It sent her heart into a frantic gallop and leaving her out of breath. She laced her fingers through his, and he lifted their intertwined hands up to breathe a kiss onto her knuckles while not taking his eyes off the road.

Sleet drummed its rhythm on the truck roof, and the wipers had to work hard to push it from the window shield. Sitting in Meadow Junction's crazy Friday afternoon traffic with Nate was one of the most mundane things she could think of, but it filled her with a happy calm. They chatted about their week and elaborated some more about Payne's mysterious streak of finding joy in punishing his cadets with almost unbeatable deadlines and overall sour demeanour. Eventually, they circled back to the night ahead.

"What movie do you want to see later? We have the house to ourselves, Eddy and Bob took the Chieftain for a spin to Lewiston to watch some shows and exhibitions. I sure hope they have better weather there than we've got here. So, what would you like to see? Something cheesy, something thrilling, something... romantic?" Nate glanced over and winked, trademark grin flashing.

"I really like the Lord Peter Ramsay adventures. They're a bit of everything... cheesy, exciting and romantic. At least the ones with Polly. I don't like the most recent ones, where they replaced Polly with Percy. He's a bore."

They stopped at a red light, and he turned to her. "I like them too, especially the ones with Polly. We have the whole collection, which one is your favourite?"

"Huh, tough question. They are all great. I think I like The

Pyramid of the Moon and The Curse of the Inca Temple best."

Her looks. Her smiles. The blush on her cheeks when he caught her glancing at him. The way she held his hand and sat as close to him as possible. Nate felt a little lightheaded as he eventually pulled into the workshop yard. Eddy had been right; he was in neck-deep. As they exited the car, sleet hit them straight on, coming in horizontally. He wrapped his arm around her waist on the short way to the door to guard her against the elements, happily noticing that Adelle sought shelter herself at his shoulder.

"Gah, horrible weather," Adelle muttered.

"What weather, sunshine?" He squeezed her, and she poked him playfully.

"This water-ice-mix threatening to drench me."

"Come inside then..." He extended his hand and helped her up the slippery steps of the wet front porch. After they'd peeled themselves out of their outer shells in the hallway, he had her sit down on the huge leather sofa in the living room, built a fire and made her hot cocoa. She wore a caramel coloured cashmere dress that clung deliciously to her body and exposed a great view of her silk-clad legs. Inhaling deeply, he switched on the entertainment unit dominating the wall in front of the sofa.

"How hungry are you? I've got a hearty stew on the stove, but it might need another hour or so." He used to be better at making conversation, but her presence made thinking hard.

"Stew is perfect comfort food for this kind of weather. I think I'm good for one movie, but then I'll be ravenous." Adelle seemed to be either oblivious to his troubles, or set on bringing the simmer between them to a boil because the second he sat down next to her, she snuggled up close. "I'm cold."

Nate was anything but cold and feared she'd notice. Yet he pulled her even closer and draped a blanket over both of them. Adelle settled in the crook of his arm, her head resting on his chest, her hand finding his under the blanket. To his great surprise, the tension in him lessened almost instantly. Pieces of him that had been in turmoil all

week suddenly fell into place, pacified by the wave of sheer bliss that swept through him.

"Better?" He mumbled into her hair, brushing a kiss on the crown of her head.

"Much better." She craned her head and smiled happily at him. With both of them comfortable, they began with watching the Pyramid of the Moon, but Nate soon realised neither he nor Adelle were paying close attention to the booby-trapped chase fest that was unrolling in front of their eyes. Instead, their hands had their own agenda, playing with each other and setting forth to tentative explorations. And then, just as the dashing Lord had plucked Polly from certain doom by the hands of the mummified zombie Pharaoh and held her while they shared a long glance, and the score swelled with kitschy violins, Adelle's hand splayed on his chest, gripped his sweater, she looked up and then their lips met like an invisible director had set them up. Nate didn't care.

Adelle had yearned for his touch, for his warm body aligned with hers, for being firmly held in his arms. Her hands stroked his magnificent shoulders, and his thumb was brushing her cheek. The surroundings vanished, there was only Nate. Nate and his yielding lips and his hands in her hair. He was the only stable thing in an exceedingly faster-spinning world, his kiss soothing her aching. Only as a piercing scream broke her concentration, she remembered the still running movie. Nate backed away just enough to rest his head against hers, giving them both a chance to catch their breath, grinning at each other like fools. He fumbled for the remote and paused the movie, returning his attention to her with cupping her face and mumbling: "Now, where were we..."

"Somewhere wonderful..." she whispered, brushing her lips along the edges of his.

"Oh yeah..." His voice was a rough rock tumble down a steep side of a mountain ridge and gave her goosebumps. He pulled her up and across and cradled her in his arms. She pushed her hand from his neck upwards into his hair, feeling his breath on her cheek. Nose tips

bumped into each other, silly giggles erupted from both of them, and they began a lengthy game of catch and release. Soft lips, bristly cheeks, she was all in. Eventually, he asked for more, just a little more pressure, a slightly tighter grip. Smiling she wound her arm around his neck, pulling him closer just as his tongue swept her lips. With a sigh and a pounding heart she opened up, curiosity winning over any reluctance. She didn't regret getting a taste of Nate because he tasted good. He tasted like there was a tomorrow, a tomorrow with him. The thought yanked her right out of her reverie. She pushed her hand against his chest and managed to get him to disengage.

"What...? Don't you like it?" He looked at her, concerned and a little worried. She brushed the back of her fingers over his cheek.

"You shouldn't kiss me like I'm the only one."

"And why not?" He caught her restless hand and flattened it against his chest. She sighed and nervously freed her hand.

"I might get used to it. And there's no use in..."

"Shhh." He cupped her face with trembling hands, his thumb brushing over her mouth. His face was a riot of emotion, naked honesty fighting sheer panic. "Get used to it. You are the only one."

She drew in a ragged breath, tilted her head to lean into his touch, closing her eyes as his thumb caressed her cheek. Her heart thundered in her chest, and her mouth went dry as the enormity of what he just had said sunk in. Their lips met again, the kiss quickly proceeding from soft and tender to passionate hunger. With a sigh she let go and allowed herself to be swept away. It felt insanely good.

A girlfriend. He, Nate Havisham, had a proper girlfriend. He grinned as he put left-over stew into the fridge. The kitchen door opened, and Adelle stepped through it, hands full with their used plates.

"Hey, you're my guest." He freed her from her load and sorted it into the dishwasher.

"So? Doesn't mean I can't help you. And it was lonely in the living room."

As he shut the door of the appliance, she stepped closer, putting

her hands on his hips to pull him against her. Her soft, rosebud pink lips touched his ever so sweetly like they had countless times in the course of the last hour. With a sigh he folded her into his arms, deepening the kiss. Heaven in a farmhouse kitchen. Her lips widened into a smile under his.

"It's getting late..." he mumbled, not wanting to say goodbye for the night.

"Unfortunately, it is..." She neither.

While they bundled up in the hallway, they chatted about the movie, as they had managed to finish watching it over dinner.

"You know what has always bugged me about the Pyramid?" Adelie sat on the wooden stairs leading to the upper floor, pulling on her boots. "After they found the treasure they cut immediately to Peter and Polly outside, in front of the tent, inspecting it. How did they get out?"

He laughed as he closed the zipper of his coat. "You mean, because of all the booby traps and still roaming zombie mummy soldiers?"

She scrambled to her feet, reaching for her purse. "Mostly because the pyramid is supposed to be a maze. They ran haphazardly through it, being chased and all, stumble across the treasure chamber by pure chance and in no way did they know where they were, lest how to find their way back out. Plus indeed, all the mummies and traps."

He opened the front door. "There went the chance for a sequel: The Pyramid of the Moon 2 - The way back outside."

"Are you making fun of me?" She walked past him and suddenly vanished. Instead, he heard a scream and a thud.

"Adelie? Lily, are you alright?" With rising panic, he felt for the light switch. The flood light poured over the porch and the yard, and he found her sitting on the lowest porch step, rubbing her back.

"Be careful, everything is as slippery as the world's finest lube."

Her deadpan comment told him that she was unhurt but annoyed, and he couldn't swallow his snort. Carefully he approached the porch steps and found that the sleet had turned into freezing rain,

covering everything under a thick ice armour, including the truck. The road probably resembled a skating rink.

"Driving in these conditions is suicide," Adelle remarked after she had managed to get back to the dry and safe part of the porch.

"Truer words have never been spoken. Sorry babe, looks like you have to pitch tent here."

She turned and looked at him with an arched eyebrow. "Well, I'm sure there's room in your bed for me." She sailed past him, but the hard line of her mouth betrayed the charade of her flippant tone. He followed her back inside, at a loss what could have caused her sudden mood swing.

Adelle shrugged off her coat. Nate caught it and hung it up, then turned back towards her. Instinctively she stepped closer, and he took her into his arms. In the chilly air of the hallway, he was warm and cosy. One hand slipped up her back and settled on her nape, fingers digging into her hair.

"Why are you upset?" He whispered.

She sighed. "I'm not upset... I'm... not used to this yet? I wanted to take things slow. Enjoy dating, letting things build up gradually. Make sure I know what I'm feeling before I take the next step."

"Mh, I see." His voice was a soothing rumble. "And why do you think staying here would lead to rushing things?" The caress of his fingers on her nape was maddeningly sweet. He smelled good, and she snuggled closer, pressing her nose into the space between his shirt collar and his neck.

"Because my self-control has limits." Just to prove her point, she brushed a kiss onto his stubbly throat. To her surprise, which manifested in a very girly squeal, he scooped her up and carried her back into the nice, warm living room, where the embers of the fire filled the room with a faint glow. A swift kick with his heel closed the door behind them and shut out the cold.

"Whatever the limits of your self-control are, I'm not going to test them in the frigid cold hallway," he mumbled into her hair as he sat down with his load on the sofa.

"Guess I should be thankful for your consideration," she teased, huddling into his embrace. His warm male body was irresistible. He nuzzled her neck.

"I'd love to make you come undone, babe."

Her hand found its way onto his nape, playing with his hair. "The trouble is, you don't need much to make me come undone."

Nate chuckled. "Is this the ex-racer speaking, putting the pedal to the metal, eager to reach the finish line?"

"Maybe." She rested her forehead against his, staring into the bottomless blue of his eyes. "We're both risk-loving, competitive people. That's a combination as safe as gasoline and a box of matches."

Nate roared a merry laugh, his whole body vibrating underneath her. "Are you afraid of a big BOOM...?"

"Nate!" She shoved him and he wrapped her in one of his wonderful hugs. Truth was, she loved being in his arms.

"You can have my bed, and I'll sleep here. How about that? Sounds less dangerous?"

"Sounds lonely. And cold." She pushed a strand of hair back behind her ear, looking into his beautiful blue eyes as if the answer to her conundrum was hiding there. "I don't know."

He chuckled again and kissed her temple. "How about watching Peter, Polly and the Inca Temple, and we decide afterwards about the sleeping arrangements?"

Nate woke from the sweet sensation of breath wafting over his naked chest. The second thing he noticed was the warmth of a human body. A supple, female body nestled snugly against him, a leg hooked around his, a hand on his chest. Her head was on his shoulder, his arm loosely around her waist. He was conquered, and he surrendered happily to Adelle's sleepy invasion. Her chest moved with the ebb and flow of her breathing. Calm. Peaceful. Adelle sighed and burrowed her nose in the crook of his neck, causing a whole flurry of emotions to rise in him. There were familiar desire and the still new but now accepted need to protect her against everything. He tightened his arm

around her, feeling her ribcage move under his hand. There was also something else, a third emotion joining the chorus in him, a bright and jubilant voice, hopeful, powerful. He let it fill him because, with Adelle in his arms, everything felt right as rain. Her hair smelled faintly of jasmine as he brushed a soft kiss onto her forehead. This caused her to stir, to turn and to free his aching shoulder, but also gave him the opportunity to spoon with her, to bury his face in her hair and to wrap his arm tightly around her. A tiny, happy sound that he answered with a soothing growl he had no idea he could make. For a while, he drifted in and out of sleep, happily wrapped inside a bubble of bliss, until nature demanded a trip across the freezing hallway to the bathroom. As he slipped back under the covers, Adelle moved.

"Nate?" Her sleepy, raspy voice was tinged with worry.

"Yeah, I'm here babe. Go back to sleep."

She nestled into his embrace, face pressed against his sternum. "Where've you been?" She mumbled.

"Bathroom."

"You're cold." She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him against her warm, pliable body, tugging at the sheets until they covered his shoulders. "There, better."

He chuckled and nuzzled the crown of her head. "Thank you, sweetheart."

"You're welcome."

"I should make breakfast and get you home," he said.

It was still too dark to see, although the slit in the curtains gradually became more visible. Adelle emerged from the cave formed by his body and the sheets, her body brushed against his. "Do you want to get rid of me?"

"What? No!" He wrapped his arms around the smooth curve of her waist, ignoring the opportunity to slip his hands under her shirt.

"Then why'd you want to get me home?" Her legs tangled with his and her hand smoothed over his pecs and came to rest in the tuft of chest hair. He grabbed her firmly and rolled on his back, pulling her with him, so that she ended up halfway on top of him. She squeaked

in surprise but didn't move away.

"I don't want to bring you home. I don't even want to get out of bed. But I thought you'd might have errands to run or other stuff to do. You didn't plan to stay overnight after all."

She stretched, squishing her breasts against him in the process. Then she settled in his arm, her head on his chest. She sighed, then said: "The only thing waiting for me is dirty laundry and an engines textbook."

He pushed his hand into the waterfall of chestnut silk that flowed over his shoulder until he found her neck. She made a contented sound as he gently massaged it.

Nate's touch was firm but not painful. Somehow he seemed to know exactly where to gently knead her strained neck muscles. The steady beat of his heart lulled Adelie back to a state of slumber, so she almost jumped as he eventually spoke again.

"When we fetch your laundry and the textbook, will you stay until tomorrow night?"

A whole weekend with him. Another night in his arms, which was reason enough to stay, but there was so much more. More kisses, more cuddles, more of his excellent company. Maybe even more massages. She craned her neck a little to brush a kiss on his stubbly throat, causing a rumbly growl of contentment in him. "Forget the laundry, I can do that next week. Toothbrush, nighty and hairbrush are mandatory, though."

His chuckle made him quiver under her. "Don't you like to sleep in my t-shirt?"

She lifted her head and shifted closer, feeling for his face with her hand until she found it. Leaning in, she brushed her lips over his and whispered: "It's very comfy, but lacks a little sex appeal."

"You've no idea how sexy it is to see your girl in one of your shirts."

"Oh, is it? Maybe I'll ditch the nighty then too..."

His hand had left her neck in favour of groping her bottom, and she giggled happily. His face was just a charcoal-sketched shadow in

the faint morning light, but her fingertips filled in the details she couldn't see: Bushy eyebrows, the scruff on his cheeks and the generous curve of his lips.

"So you'll stay?" His voice was soft and hopeful.

"I'll stay." A sigh of relief lifted his chest, compelling her to bury her face in the crook of his neck and to hold on to his broad shoulder. They fell silent again and just laid there in the twilight. Nate absentmindedly stroked her back in languid movements.

"I should really make breakfast. And check the conditions outside." He eventually said.

"Do you have to?"

A soft laugh. "We have to leave the bed at some point..."

She sighed dramatically, causing him to laugh even more. "If you say so."

He moved, dropping her into the pillow in the process, but to make up for it, he also kissed her cheek tenderly. She slid her hands over his neck into his hair, holding him closely. "You said you don't want to leave the bed..."

"Never said I'd particularly enjoy leaving it." Nose tips rubbed against each other. "Happy that you decided to sleep here, and not on the sofa?"

She chuckled and ran her fingers through the short hairs at the back of his head. "Very happy."

"Good."



**GETTING
USED TO IT**

Adelie stepped out of the library. A cold gust of wind forced her to adjust her scarf and trundled yellow leaves over the steps. The sky was a bright, autumnal blue and she looked forward to catching some sun rays with Nate during their lunch break. She found him leaning against one of the pillars in front of the entrance, handsome as always in navy slacks and a grey wool coat. The butterflies in her stomach exploded into a happy cloud of swirling dance.

"Hey, sorry - hope I haven't kept you waiting?" She stopped in front of him, beaming. He smiled and put his hands on her hip to move her even closer.

"Hello, babe." He kissed her softly, and she sighed. "No, I didn't wait long. Just arrived a few minutes ago."

"You look tired." The wind had its way with his hair, and she brushed it back into order. There were faint shadows under his eyes.

"Didn't sleep. Missed you." He pulled her into another kiss, a little more demanding than his sweet welcome. She put her arms around his neck and stilled her own need of him. At length, they disconnected. Nate looked at her with hooded eyes, brushing his thumb over her cheek.

"Already missing me? We just spent a whole weekend together?" She gently teased. He grinned sheepishly.

"I got used to being your pillow quickly. And missed your smile as the first thing I see in the morning. Also, it's Monday. I don't like Mondays."

She laughed, took his hand and pulled him down the steps. "Come on, you grumpy grouch. Let's go to Todd's and enjoy the sunshine and our lunch break together."

"Two hours of lunch are a meagre exchange for eight hours of sleeping next to you." He playfully tugged at her ponytail. She poked him. He put his arm around her shoulder and nuzzled her neck. "Didn't you miss me at all? Were you able to switch back to discipline and business just like that?"

"No." She nestled into his embrace while they walked along the street. "I wasn't. My thoughts kept tracking back to you all morning. Couldn't stop daydreaming about our wonderful weekend and how

you kissed me goodnight yesterday..."

He chuckled happily. "That's a relief."

They were early enough to be ahead of the crowds and scored a window seat in the bistro. Soon after they'd ordered their food, the place filled up. But Adelle didn't pay attention to her surroundings. She was focused on the man sitting in front of her, who insisted on holding her hand underneath the small marble table. The weekend with him had consisted of long walks hand in hand across the windswept meadows behind the old farm, impromptu cooking lessons and movie marathons. In one way nothing had changed, but yet everything was exhilaratingly different. New. Now it was possible to touch his face, hold his hand and kiss him whenever she wanted. Now she could snuggle up to him when she was cold, and he would kiss her forehead softly.

"What'cha thinking about, babe?" He threaded his fingers through hers under the table.

She looked up and smiled sheepishly. "I thought about... us."

"I gathered as much from the dreamy look on your face," Nate grinned as she huffed at him, fastening his fingers as she wanted to pull her hand away.

"I thought about how just as everything around us is dying and getting ready for a long winter sleep... how we found something blossoming and blooming. And I thought how I can now do things I couldn't do before... little affectionate gestures, kissing or simply snuggling with you."

Nate pulled off his sweatshirt and kicked off his boots the minute he entered his room. Finally, Monday was over. He fell on his bed, thinking about the delightful lunch he had with Adelle. It had been the only good thing about his day. Payne had been true to his name again. He stretched his aching muscles and listened to Eddy talking to his dog Snoot in the kitchen. Just as he was dozing off, his InstaComm rang. Adelle. That was new. She had never called him before.

"Babe, what's up?"

"Hi Nate, I... uh, sorry to call you out of the blue... I... uh... can you come over?"

"What's the matter? You sound upset."

A sigh at the other end of the line. "I need to talk to you. Something has happened. And... I don't want to do this over the phone."

His stomach constricted with icy fear. Was she having second thoughts about them? He scrambled to his feet, fishing for his boots.

"Gimme ten minutes, I'll be right over."

"Okay. And Tiger, please... drive carefully."

"I will."

Tiger. He stared befuddled at the device. If she wanted to end their relationship calling him by a pet name for the first time ever wasn't making any sense. He burst through his door and poked his head into the kitchen. "Hey Eds, you need the truck tonight?"

Eddy looked up from wrestling a toy from Snoot's snout. "No, I don't. Has something come up?"

He was already halfway out of the house. "I don't know, Adelie just called, and she sounded upset."

It took him fifteen minutes, but only because he obeyed the red lights and drove carefully, as she'd requested. Having no patience to wait for the elevator, he ran up the six flights of stairs to her studio. Adelie opened the door as soon as he rang. Her lips were pressed into a thin line and her brows furrowed in anger. He wasn't sure if she had cried.

"Hey, little Spitfire, what's up? What happened?" He sat down on her love seat, hoping she would join him. Instead, she paced the room.

"Leslie was just here. Congratulating me. But I never told her! She was so happy for me. Not even here I can have some privacy! It's infuriating!"

She wasn't making any sense, and he had no chance to get a word in edgewise. So he did the only thing a man could do to shut up a woman in a polite way. He got up to intercept her frantic course, grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her quickly. Drawing back

just far enough to still feel her breath on his skin, he checked if Adelle was about to scratch out his eyes or if she was up for more. She looked at him bewildered and confused, so he touched his lips to hers again, lingering this time. Gradually, she relaxed, seeking him. Their kiss deepened. Her hands, first flailing, found his chest, then his shoulders, then she wound her arms around his neck and melted against him. He enfolded her in a tight embrace as the tension in her body lessened. She was still his, she wasn't going to split up with him. Adelle broke up the kiss and buried her face in the crook of his shoulder.

"Thank you," she murmured.

He kissed her sweet neck, brushing back silky tendrils of chestnut. "You're welcome. Now, what got you worked up so much? Leslie breached your privacy, or what was it?"

"Oh." She lifted her head and looked at him as if she only now remembered why he was there. "That."

"Yeah?"

"Someone saw us kissing and apparently the news spread like wildfire among the nurses. Leslie heard from a friend that Nathan Havisham was kissing a girl in broad daylight on the steps of the library, and she deducted that things between us must have worked out, so she came over after her shift to see if she was right."

"But why were you so angry?" He pulled her to the love seat and into his lap. Adelle put her arm around his neck, and he wound his around her waist and thighs. It took him a lot of willpower to not shower her throat with kisses. She was just in a t-shirt and sweat pants, and that was the most casual attire he'd ever seen her in.

"Pangs of history. Being stalked by paparazzi all the time. I had hoped I would find privacy here, but I underestimated your fan girls. I'm not keen on being lynched by a mob of rabid nurses."

He laughed. "Don't be silly. I haven't touched a nurse in ages."

"You're still in high demand."

"Worried about my fidelity?"

She cupped his jaw. Gold-speckled amber quizzed him wordlessly but since the day she saved him from the van, he knew that

he could never be not faithful to her.

"You're an honest guy. I trust you." She kissed him, pushing her hand into his hair and he kissed her back, his hand slipping under her shirt, seeking the smooth curve of her waist. He inched his hand higher, but before he could find out if she were wearing a bra or not she sat up straight again and he froze. "But the whole incident reminded me that we should maybe maintain a professional appearance. We're soldiers after all. Perhaps we should keep the kissing to times and places when we're alone."

"No." It came out more forcefully than he intended, and her eyes widened in surprise. He paddled back a little. "Well, yes, you're right. We shouldn't smooch while we're in uniform and on duty. That's a no-brainer. But I insist on the right of kissing you in public when we're off-duty. Nurses or no nurses, I want to greet my girl the right way."

She chuckled, her surprised frown softening. Then she leaned in and kissed the tip of his nose. A smile crinkled her eyes. "Okay, okay, okay. I underestimated how important this is for you."

He huffed and poked her waist. She twitched. "You underestimated...? Oh, come on..."

Giggles. She was pulling his leg for sure. She poked him back, and he cursed under his breath that he'd allowed her to find his weakest point over the weekend. In vain he tried to squirm out of her reach, but Adelle knew no mercy. At long last he managed to twist and roll and pin her arms safely between them, burying Adelle effectively underneath him.

"Gotcha," he breathed hotly down her neck. She wiggled helplessly, still giggling.

"You do." Her eyes looked up trustingly into his.

"Now, what shall I do with such an insolent girl like you?" He kissed her softly, muffling further giggles. "You really are a menace..." He explored the velvet skin of her neck. She sighed, all excited tension from their tickle fight leaving her body. Convinced that he was safe from further attacks he gave her a little room to breathe and free her arms, and she wrapped them around his torso.

"Mmmh... what are you going to do with me?" Her defiant

eyebrow again. A quick glance at the clock on her nightstand. It was getting late.

"Nothing." He sat up, rubbing his face. "I mean, not that I don't want to do something, but that would mean neither of us would get enough sleep to survive tomorrow. And you said you wanted to take your time..."

She laughed, smoothing his hair back into order. "Are you free for another lunch date tomorrow?"

He grinned and tugged at a strand of her hair. "I can't have the night with you, of course I'll take the lunch date instead."

"Tiger." She breathed a kiss on his cheek. "I'd love to spend the night with you, but you're right... tomorrow is another long day. And you've got to work at the Lemon Tree too. I'll better let you go home and sleep."

"Sheesh, he has balls. This is my territory." Nate grumbled under his breath as he saw Bukovski and a cute brunette enter the Lemon Tree. Adelle placed her hand on his arm.

"Stop being silly. You only work here."

"Luckily, not today. Otherwise, I'd even have to serve him."

She sniggered. "He seems to be able to work his crooked nose in his favour, at least when it comes to the ladies. But I really pity him if he only came here to mistreat you as a waiter." They watched the pair finding a table on the other end of the moderately full diner, thankfully not paying any attention to them. Adelle wasn't keen on a reprise of the events at the Officer's Club, but to her relief Nate quickly lost interest and turned his attention back to the yummy apple pie and his girlfriend. He looked gorgeous in his crisp white shirt with rolled up sleeves and a pair of nicely fitting jeans. To delegate her thoughts elsewhere, she impaled another piece of her own apple pie on her fork, and after swallowing it, she said: "Actually, I should have pity with him."

Nate nearly choked on his lemonade. "With Bukovski? Why the heck is he worth your pity?"

She couldn't help but smile. "Did you know his father is a five-

star big head up in USF command?"

"No. Does this excuse him from being an asshole?"

Adelie leaned back, pensively twirling a strand of hair. "According to the sources, General Bukovski isn't exactly known for being a gentle man. He comes from a middle-class family from Elnor and was the first of his family to be admitted to one of the Academies. He made his name in the Battle of Bazoo III, and from what I gather, he expects his son to be equally ruthless and eventually equally successful."

"Nonsense. I have a working class background, and this doesn't make me an asshole." Anger furrowed his brows. Adelie took his hand and wove her finger through his.

"Tiger, unlike Bukovski you are an exceptionally gifted pilot and you don't have the pressure of a General expecting you to become his successor sitting on your shoulders."

He huffed and tried to keep his voice low. "Are you expecting me to have compassion for him? Even with an asshole father you still can treat a woman with respect. Christ, Adelie, he called you a whore."

"Nathan. There's no reason to get all worked up because of him. I merely wanted to shed some light on his background." She tried to keep her voice calm, but this seemed to enrage him only further. A vein ticked on his forehead and his face slowly turned red.

"Don't go haughty at me, Baroness." He hissed between clenched teeth.

"Don't call me Baroness when you're upset with me." She had her pride too. Very carefully she folded her napkin into a perfect rectangle and placed it next to her plate. She gave him a forced smile and stood up, put on her coat and picked up her purse. "Come over when you're done acting like a toddler with a temper tantrum. I was actually looking forward to telling you what Payne related to me this morning concerning the endurance training next week, but now I'm not in the mood for it." She left him sitting there fuming, and her stomach roiled with upset. She had found the Bukovski family dynamics merely interesting, but clearly, Nate had understood that not as intended. With a sigh, Adelie turned her steps towards her home. She wasn't

sure if Nate would indeed come over after he'd cooled off. A dull pain in her stomach suggested that she'd spent the evening curled around a hot water bottle anyway. Just what she'd needed to crown the day.

Nate strode along Adelle's street with hurried steps, brandishing the biggest rose bouquet his budget had allowed. He had acted like a prime fool, and he sincerely hoped she would forgive him his lapse. There was her house. He took two steps at once, barely able to endure another minute without apologising. He pressed the bell button. It took a moment, then the door hissed open, but Adelle didn't greet him at the entrance like usual. Slightly confused, he hung his coat on the rack and freed the flowers from their protecting paper shell. Venturing into the studio, she was nowhere to be seen. Adelle wasn't on her bed, and she wasn't at her desk. Then he heard a groan as from a dying animal coming from the bathroom and cold sweat beaded on his back.

"Lily, are you in there? Are you alright?" Was she so upset that she'd turned sick?

The door opened, and she leaned against the frame, almost doubling over. Her face was ash-white and her lips a narrow line. One hand was pressing the hot water bottle against her stomach. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"You most definitely do not look okay." He prepared to throw the flowers into one of her armchairs to catch her if she should faint, as she looked as if she was going to any second.

She waddled to the love seat and sank down on it, curling around the hot water bottle. "No, really, it's nothing. Just got my period. Sorry, if this is too much information." She looked at him as if she was expecting him to turn on his heels and flee the premises. He couldn't blame her, after the events of the afternoon. She nodded towards the roses he was still holding in his hands.

"They are beautiful. Are they for me?" A faint smile.

He cleared his throat. "Ahem. Yes. I... I acted like an idiot this afternoon, and I wanted to say I'm sorry. Very sorry."

Her smile grew wider. "Thank you. Yes, you acted a little silly. But I wasn't any better, was I? I should've seen that Pat is a red flag for you. I just found his background interesting."

"Two silly idiots then..." They grinned at each other, and he bowed down to kiss her. "What was the thing you wanted to tell me about the exercise next week?"

"Oh, that! Payne said he wants to team us up again. He didn't tell me his reasons, though."

"Maybe he's of the same opinion that we are: We make a good team?"

"I'm not convinced that's his reasoning." She poked him. "Be a dear and go hunting for a vase in the kitchen, will you? I don't want to move right now." He found a vase on the top of her cabinets, filled it with water and put the roses inside. As he returned to put the arrangement on her coffee table, he found her twitching to find a better position on the seat. She was in discomfort. A wave of compassion washed over him, and he sat down next to her, brushing her forehead lovingly. She might not be up to any horizontal shenanigans, but his other capacities as boyfriend were in hot demand right now.

"Do you need anything? Should I go to the pharmacy, get you some painkillers? Do you need other, uhm, supplies?"

Her smile never ceased to amaze him. "I just took some painkillers. I usually don't have cramps this bad. If... if you could rub my lower back, though, that would be lovely."

He did as requested, rubbing the small of her back in circles with the heel of his hand. "Better?"

"Actually, yes. Thank you so much." She half turned and kissed him, and he wrapped her in his arms, adjusting the bottle on her stomach as she snuggled into his embrace.

"No big deal."

She sighed. "It might not be a big deal for you, but it means the world to me." The trusting way she nestled into his arms, her hand sliding under his open hoodie, coming to rest on his chest and her happy sigh reconciled him with the day. They did fight, but they also

made up. He could regain lost points for his stupid behaviour with being there for her now. He stroked her neck, her soft hair falling over his hand, and she looked up and smiled at him. Her hand moved to his neck, thumb brushing over his chin and jaw. He lowered his head, and she met him halfway, kissing him softly. "I'm so glad you're here."

He was glad too. "Can I do something to help you relax?"

A soft chuckle. "You're here, that's more than enough. Just hold me."

And so he did, while they cuddled on her love seat and dusk darkened the room. Later, after the cramps finally lessened, they cooked together and watched a movie afterwards. Before he fell asleep holding her, his last thought was, that being with her was always wonderful.



CROSSING THE LINE

Rain dripped down into the narrow gap between her helmet and the armour plates. It smudged the sight of the visor and soaked her overall. Adelle crouched behind a fallen giant of the forest, gripped her XTC-24 submachine gun and tried to find a footing in the slippery mud.

"There are two of them behind that boulder at two. Static. Lined up nicely. Three shots each." Nate's voice crackled in her earpiece. She had no idea why Payne liked to team them up, but she sure was happy to have a capable partner in the exercise. "Roger. You left, me right?"

"Roger. Three, two, one... now."

They popped up behind their cover and fired each at their assigned assault robot, a little sphere with a menacing laser eye and a turret gun spewing rubber bullets. They sat atop a boulder overgrown with thick tufts of soggy moss. As Nate predicted, three shots took them out quickly. They sneaked around the boulder, backs pressed against the rough surface. No rubber projectiles hurtled towards them, so they carefully crouched along the path snaking along between fallen trees and rocks. Somewhere behind them, they heard the telltale "tock tock tock" of rubber hitting armour plates echoing through the forest and someone howled in pain. Adelle focused on the path in front of her, to not suffer the same fate.

"We're approaching The Wall. There must be some robots there." Nate said, ducking behind another tree.

"Lemme check." Adelle picked up an arm-thick branch from the ground and threw it from behind her cover towards a steeply rising wall of wet rock, from which a cargo net dangled. Right on cue rubber bullets fizzed across the clearing in front of it. "Here you go." A closer inspection of the clearing revealed stationary spheres in the underbrush to the left side.

"Dammit." Nate cursed under his breath, making her earpiece crackle with static. "These are the ones that you can only disable for a short amount of time, and they're aiming right at the net. You have to climb quickly if you want to avoid getting hit."

"I have a better idea. One of us goes first, the other gives cover, and once up they return the favour."

"Okay. You go first."

Adelie stuffed her gun into its holster and dashed across the clearing towards the net. Bullets whizzed by, but Nate did an excellent job of taking the little spheres out of commission. The net was wet and stiff under her fingers, and only her gloves protected her from scraping her skin on the rough surface of the wall. Climbing up was harder than expected, due to the loose structure of the net and the rigid armour. It felt like a tortoise doing mountaineering. Eventually, she pulled herself over the edge, struggling for breath and with arms on fire. She rolled on her tummy, eyeing the clearing below, spotting the assault robots in the bushes. Little red glowing dots betrayed their position from her vantage point.

"Okay, I'm up."

"Right, I'm coming. Once hit they're out for 10 seconds, and there are five of them."

"Gotcha."

The only thing she had not accounted for was the shakiness in her arms after the climb. Hitting the mark wasn't as easy as she had thought, and once or twice Nate almost got hit.

"Christ, what are you doing up there!" He hissed while dangling in the net, narrowly escaping the dreaded "tock". "Do you want me covered in bruises?"

"Save your breath for climbing. You'll try hitting such a tiny aim with tired arms the next time."

"True. Sorry." His head came up over the ledge, and she helped him up. Panting he laid on his back, reminding her of an upturned bug in all the hard armour. They were both wet, covered in mud and tired. Four hours on a gun-rigged endurance track were not for the faint of heart.

"Come on, we're nearly there." She pulled Nate up. Their next obstacle was to get across a slippery tree, bridging the gap between their rock and the next. Adelie straddled the tree and scooted along, feeling Nate close behind. The tree bent under their weight, but it held. Once safely on the other side, they had to climb down steep steps hammered into the stone until they reached the ground again. A

cascade of rubber bullets nearly hit her, and she pressed herself against the rock in her back. Her surprised yelp alerted Nate who was still up on the last step.

"Are you hit?"

"Nope, but narrowly so. Do you see it? Is it mobile?"

"Don't move. Ah, yeah, I see it. It's at ten o'clock, and static. But you need to take it out, I don't have a clear aim."

"Great." She peeked around the corner again to check on the position of her mechanical adversary, waving a stick to trigger the laser sensor. Another spurt fired. "Ah, there you are. Well, not for much longer. You ready, Nate?"

"Yes." He crouched behind her. She fired three shots, and the cheery shutdown fanfare signalled her that she had been successful. "Hurry!"

They dashed along the path, past the robot and to the bank of a little creek. Water gushed over stepping stones, but it couldn't drone out the whirring sound of an approaching flying assault robot. "Flying nasty, coming in from upstream. We better dash, there's no cover here!" She warned Nate.

"Then let's go!"

They hopped from stone to stone, Adelle leading. Right in the middle, where the water was deepest, a stone was loose. She nearly slipped, but regained balance, just as the first bullets hit the water around them, whipping up little fountains. "Be careful Nate, this one is loose." With a few daring jumps, she made it to the other side, seeking cover behind another fallen tree. Just as she turned, she heard a yell and a splash. Nate had slipped and was now a prime target for the flying menace. But it hadn't accounted for its victim having a backup. She knew she hadn't much time while Nate struggled to get back on his feet, so she quickly took aim on the black sphere. She fired, causing the robot to sway and sending its cascade of bullets into the stream next to Nate. Hurriedly he waded towards the bank, dripping wet. A string of very colourful swears poured through her earpiece, triggering a grin before she focused on saving him from painful bruises. The robot returned, and Adelle aimed again, this time

hitting it much better, sending it so much off course that it nearly flew into a tree. Nate crawled behind the tree to safety. Adelle dropped down next to him, checking on him.

"Tiger, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"There you go, saving my sorry ass once again." Not even the visor could dampen his sunny smile. He scrambled to his feet. "Let's get this done and over with. I've got enough. And I'm soaked."

She laughed. "Be careful, there's at least one battery still waiting for us."

In the end, they made it to the finish line without further trouble. Payne rewarded them with a commendatory nod as they walked past him. "Klaiber, Havisham, well done. Excellent show of teamwork and resourcefulness, and not a single hit to the body. I'm impressed."

"Thank you, sir." Adelle pulled off her helmet, longing for a hot shower and dry clothes. Nate looked as tired as she felt as they gave each other a high-five.

The facilities of the training course clearly had seen better times. The academy must have put all the money towards the top notch equipment to make the cadets struggle as much as possible, Nate thought while he examined the black grout between the old tiles in the shower. At least there was warm water. He decided to delay the relaxing part of getting clean and just get the muck off. Adelle's studio had a bathtub, and maybe she'd let him use it if he asked nicely.

"Hey, Natey-boy, you've heard? Bukovski slipped and broke a collarbone." Jake greeted him as he entered the equally run down locker room, graced by muddy brown, beaten up lockers.

Nate shook his head. "Seriously? How'd he manage that? And Payne won't like it, at all."

"Don't ask me. I just thought you'd like hearing about the fate of your arch nemesis." Jake shrugged, pulling up the zipper of his hoodie. "Well, gotta dash, see you, bro. Rosalie's waiting."

Nate remembered that his own girl was probably waiting too, as he couldn't fathom her taking a prolonged shower in here either. Still rather damp he put on his clothes, stuffed his equipment into a duffel

bag and exited the locker room. And indeed, Adelle was already standing in the tiny lobby, studying faded photographs from the construction of the facility. Like him, she was dressed in the blue USF tracksuit, its hood pulled up over her still damp hair. She smelled faintly of rose shower gel. Delicious.

"Hey, babe - ready to go home?" He said, picking up her duffel bag.

She turned and nodded, smiling her beautiful bright smile at him. "This is one miserable place. I think it might be fun in the summer, but even heat wouldn't improve the bathrooms."

Pushing the door open with his back, he laughed. "Indeed. Speaking of bathrooms - would you mind lending me your bathtub tonight? I could really use a good soak after the splash in the creek."

She followed him through the rain to his truck. "Hopefully, you didn't catch a cold. Of course, you can have the tub - if you allow me a turn under the hot shower first, though."

He put the bags in the backseat. "Sure. I couldn't stand the showers here either."

Compared to the bare bone endurance course facilities, Adelle's small bathroom was the epitome of luxury and girliness. There was an impressive collection of bubble baths on a shelf, with a pile of fluffy white towels underneath. In front of a tiny window throned a pink orchid. Around her sink stood white porcelain crates filled with make-up and creams and whatever else women put on their faces. Everything was white and gleamed welcomingly in the ceiling light. He dove deeper into the gloriously hot water, enjoying the heaps of sweetly scented bubbles. It knocked.

"Don't tell me you need to use the toilet - I'm not ready for that level of privacy yet," he answered.

"Hold on to your hula-hoop, I don't need to pee. Shall we order in? Don't see the point in cooking if we're both so tired." Adelle's amused voice.

"Sure, my love."

"Can I come in and read you the menu?"

He laughed. "If you have to?"

The door opened, and her head peeked around it. "Are you decent?" He flicked her some sudsy water drops, and she squealed. "Stop it!"

"Come in then. No body parts are going to vanish just because you happen to catch sight of them. You were going to see me naked sooner or later anyway, girlfriend."

With a grin, Adelle came in and closed the door behind her, holding the menu and a notepad in one hand. "That doesn't mean I'm prepared to behold the magnificence of your nether regions already, boyfriend." Despite her words, her eyes shifted to where said regions were hiding under the bubbles. Then she looked into his face and turned the same shade as her fluffy pink bathrobe.

"Not prepared, huh?" He teased her, and she stuck out her tongue.

"Okay. You got me. Curiosity is going to kill this cat one day."

She sat down on the closed toilet lid and read him the contents of the colourful flyer of the Chinese food place they both liked while he built foam towers. "So - you wanted the Pork Chop Suey and fried Wan Tan, right?" She scribbled his wishes on the notepad. He watched her, with her damp hair falling all around her face, and her plush bathrobe. Difficult to believe that this was the same woman who ran through a forest in full battle dress just hours earlier. She'd looked like a badass motherfucker in her black armour, saving his ass once more. As she had finished scribbling, she got up to place their order.

"Babe?" He reached a sudsy hand for her, and she stopped, her eyes wandering over his wet and naked body again. Her careful expression relaxed as their eyes met, and a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. Then she bent over and touched her lips softly to his, understanding his need for a kiss. He was relieved that bubbles covered his excitement.

They had dinner in their underwear sitting on the love seat. Naked legs crisscrossed each other while oodles of take-out boxes scattered the coffee table. Adelle slurped up the remains of her noodles and giggled happily.

"This reminds me so much of my racing days. Sitting in the

motorhome after a long day, eating Chinese take-out, talking specs and strategies."

"In your underwear?" He couldn't peel his eyes away from her in a spaghetti strapped camisole, the discarded bathrobe bunching up around her like a deformed waterlily. She giggled even more and slapped his shin.

"Don't be silly. Of course not." She placed her empty noodle box next to the others on the table and slouched into the corner of her seat. "I don't think I ever had dinner in my underwear before. I feel like a proper hoodlum."

"Welcome to one of my most cherished traditions after an exhausting day. There's nothing better than dinner while slouching on the sofa in your undies."

She stretched, and he had to focus on her hair falling over her shoulders and not on her breasts straining against the thin fabric. "Yes, I can see this becoming a fixture in my Friday evenings. Chinese take-out with you after a long week. So simple, so perfect." Her foot stroked the inside of his thigh. He twitched.

"Huh, that tickles!"

Adelie snorted. "Tell that your grandma..."

The candles in tall lanterns in front of the window bathed the room in a soft light. Rain still scattered against the windows, but they were both dry, clean and fed inside, sprawled on her big white bed. As much fun it was to race through the forest and shot robots with him, this was much better. Adelie ran her fingers through the short hair in Nate's nape, enjoying the bristle of it against her skin. A happy sigh as his face burrowed into her chest.

"You smell so good," he mumbled. She made a mental note to only use the jasmine shower gel when he was around. He sighed again and came up. Blue eyes looked at her like none had looked at her before. Loving with a hint of vulnerability. Butterflies all over again.

"Thank you," he said, tenderly brushing over her cheek. She blinked.

"What for? Saving your ass again?"

He laughed his glorious rumbly belly laugh. "That too, but I meant something else. Thank you for wanting to take the slow road. I've forgotten how wonderful it is to take your time."

One hand slipped under her camisole and fondled her waist. Her fingertips wandered over the peaks of his shoulder blades, the domes of his deltoid muscles, the smooth bulge of his biceps. His body was a work of art, the product of countless hours in the gym, a masterpiece of rippling muscles. Manly. Sexy. She closed her eyes and listened to their breaths that soon fell into unison. It smoothed the wrinkles the day had caused in the fabric of her soul.

"This is lovely," he murmured. The mesmerising blues of his eyes caught her again as he moved between her legs. His breath blanketed her skin as his lips grazed her jaw and her neck. "I owe you for saving my clean record, babe."

She cupped his face and brushed her thumb over his rough cheeks. "Come to think of it, why did you slip? I warned you about the loose rock."

He chuckled and placed a kiss on her collarbone. "Oh... uhm... maybe I was more occupied with how sexy your butt looks in those coveralls."

"Nate!" Laughing she poked him. "You're impossible. I should have let that robot get you..."

He shut her up with another kiss. It was a lot hotter than their chaste, fit for the public kisses they had exchanged all week, and this had nothing to do with the remnants of hot sauce she could still taste on his lips. It was a kiss like a thunderstorm after a hot and dusty day, and it swept her away. His hand slipped under her camisole again and cupped a breast. Lightning zipped through her body as his thumb tenderly brushed over her nipple, enlightening a craving fire deep inside of her. His lips left hers for maddening explorations elsewhere, her throat, her shoulders, her collarbones... eventually, he pulled the camisole over her head and ventured further down. Being topless with him was all right, but him heading for her panties was not. But before she could intervene, he blew raspberries into her belly button, causing her to giggle-squeal like a four years old running through a

water sprinkler. She grabbed the nearest pillow and whacked it over his head. He laughed, and she laughed and before she knew how they were pummeling each other with pillows. Oh yes, he was competitive and risk-loving. Fun, too. And not above grabbing her around her waist mid-fight and kiss the living daylights out of her.

"Wha- mmmph..." She just sank against him and allowed him to wipe the wind out of her sails. "That's cheating..."

"I was losing, rapidly. Can't win when I'm distracted by your lovely tits."

She sniggered, snuggled closer and rubbed said pair of lovely tits against his chest. "At least you're not denying it."

"Are you ever distracted by anything?" He sounded a little exasperated.

She pulled him down with her into the mayhem of ruffled sheets and pillows, smoothed her palm over his flank and grabbed his firm bottom. "If I'd paid attention to how your sexy butt looks in soaked coveralls, you would now sport some severe bruises."

"Touché. I think I prefer your level-headedness." He kissed her nose, and she nestled into his arms. Nate reached for the duvet and pulled it over them. As the energy of the fight dissipated, she began to feel cold. Nate himself radiated masculine heat, as usual, making their nest comfortable in no time.

"Why did you blew raspberries into my bellybutton?" She asked, raking her fingers through his irresistible chest hair.

"Because you were getting rigid in the way you only get when something is amiss. I figured maybe things were going too fast, and I was looking for an easy way out... didn't expect it to turn into a pillow fight, though."

"You sensed that?" She tapped the tip of her index finger on his sternum. "You knew I was beginning to feel overwhelmed? Having sex with hundreds of nurses really must have fine-tuned you to a woman's desires."

Nate snorted. "Woah, babe, I didn't sleep with hundreds of nurses. I knew that because I spent all summer with you and had the chance to pick up a thing or two about you."

A sudden wave of tiredness swept through her, and she failed at suppressing a yawn. Wiggling around until she found the perfect position in his arms, she said: "Glad you did."

A soft kiss on her head. "Me too. Otherwise, I'd barged right through, and things might've gotten a little awkward."

Wisps of fog floated like ghosts in the beams of the floodlights around the rugby field. An unmistakably wintery chill hung in the air, and Nate was glad as the coach's final whistle opened up the prospect of a hot shower. Twenty-two steaming bodies plodded towards the changing room and showers.

"Hey, Natey-boy!" Jake caught up with him. "Man, coach was mean today, I'm not sure I will be able to walk tomorrow."

"Don't be such a ninny! Bootcamp was worse. And I'm sure Rosalie will give you a massage later? Adelie gives great massages."

Jake snorted. "Of your dick or of your legs? But, I'm sorry to tell you, Rosalie and I are a thing of the past."

They had reached the facilities, and Nate pushed open the door to the locker room with his shoulder. "What? How did that happen?"

Jake didn't answer right away, but instead peeled himself out of his wet training jersey. Then he dove into his locker to produce a towel and a bottle of shower gel. "I broke up with her. She was too demanding, couldn't understand how little time I had with school, flight and rugby training. Adelie never gives you grief because you have so little time?"

"No, not really. She's quite busy herself, to begin with, and she knew that I play rugby and work three times a week at the Lemon Tree." Nate wrapped himself in a towel kilt and followed Jake to the showers. Their teammates had successfully transformed the room into a steam bath, and Jake's dark skin instantly looked like polished ebony.

They were lucky and found two showers next to each other. Nate welcomed the hot jet of water on his skin. It felt glorious after the long and hard training session. He was looking forward to seeing Adelie

later, she'd love to work on all the tight knots in his muscles.

"How do you manage to spend time at all with each other?" Jake interrupted his daydream of her hands sliding over his shoulders. "Your schedule is even busier than mine, with you having to work..."

"We meet for lunch every day, study together on Thursdays as we always have, we spent Friday nights with each other and most of the weekends. She sometimes visits me at the Lemon Tree, and if I work the early shift, we go to her place afterwards and cook dinner together. We're really just rollin' with the punches." He put a blob of shower gel into his palm and rubbed it vigorously into his hair and all over his body. Rinsing it off, he continued: "It's not like she's sitting at home, waiting for me to have time for her. She is in the Academy book club, she has a watercolour class, and she goes running with her friend Leslie every Sunday morning."

"Wow, you're lucky." Jake turned off the water and wrapped himself in his towel. "Rosalie was whining all the time that she wanted to go with me on this fundraiser for the veterans here, and this play there, and yadda yadda yadda. A guy's got to sleep too!"

"Oh yeah, the best thing is just sleeping next to her."

"What?" Jake peered over the towel he rubbed his face with, dark brown eyes round as marbles. "What do you mean, just sleeping next to her?"

Nate snorted. "Don't tell me you don't know the wonderful feeling of having your girl falling asleep in your arms. Or waking up to being claimed by her as her pillow." He grabbed his towel and patted himself cursory dry. The chance that Adelle would be glued to him for the rest of the evening was much higher if more shower gel scent clung to his skin. Jake stared at him as if he had lost his mind. Nate decided to ignore his ignorance of the simpler joys of having a girlfriend and walked back to the locker room. A splash of cologne. A new t-shirt. He stepped into his jeans.

"She's right for you, though." Jake had followed him and pulled a t-shirt over his head while stating this.

"What do you mean?" Nate stuffed his wet towel and the dirty training kit into his duffel bag. Adelle was probably already waiting in

the parking lot.

"You're relaxed, not perpetually on the prowl. And you seem to be very happy."

Nate put on his black leather jacket. "I am. Adelle is..." He leaned against his locker. "Adelle is not just a pretty girl that knows how to handle a dick. She's a true partner. She's invested in my bike restoration and cheers for me during rugby matches although she says she can't stand seeing me getting hurt. She's my friend and my lover, and I think that makes all the difference."

"Wow. You're in love."

"Maybe." He pushed himself away from the metal locker door, not ready for that kind of conversation. "But I know I'm toast if I don't appear in the parking lot pronto. D'you need a lift?"

"Always."

Adelle was indeed waiting, perched behind the wheel of Eddy's workshop truck, motor idling. Jake paused.

"Isn't that Eddy's truck?"

"It is."

"Why's Adelle driving it?"

"Because my star struck housemate is absolutely smitten to know a former Planet 500 racer. She's even allowed to drive the Halway, which I'm not permitted to touch. So far she refuses politely, saying she doesn't want to risk putting a scratch in the paint job."



NEW HORIZONS

Adelie parked the truck in the barn next to the curvy forms of the Chieftain. Gravel crunched under their steps as they met behind it. She slipped her hand into Nate's.

"It's going to be freezing tonight," she said, her breath forming white clouds.

"Yeah, winter is just around the corner. Time to snuggle up inside." Nate let go of her hand and wrapped his arm around her shoulder instead, swiftly kissing her cheek. A whiff of his delicious cologne, the scratchiness of his chin. She slipped her arm around his waist and snuggled into his embrace, even if it was just for the few steps until they reached the porch.

"Jake was quiet today. Did something happen?"

He opened the front door and switched on the light in the hallway. They hung up their jackets and slipped out of their shoes. Finally done with the day. "Training was gruelling. And he told me that he had broken up with Rosalie, said she was too demanding. I think he just saw her as a convenient way to get laid, but not to spend time with."

"Oh. That's not a very grown-up way to see a woman."

Nate snorted. "No, indeed it isn't."

They entered Nate's room, and he dropped his bag to the floor. Adelie closed the door as he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into a tight embrace. A long and lingering kiss followed. Eventually, Nate buried his face in her hair and sighed. "He was bewildered as I told him how nice it is to just sleep next to you. Clearly, he has no idea how delightful cuddles can be."

"Is that why you always have a boner?" She nipped his earlobe in jest, and he chuckled, gently biting her nape.

"No, I have a boner because you're irresistible with the different flavours you come in."

She stopped exploring the velvet skin of his throat just below his beard shadow and looked up. "Flavours? I come in flavours?"

"Yes, flavours. You come in kick ass pilot, pretty baroness, guardian angel, motorcycle chick..."

"Keep up your sweet talk and I'll stay the whole night." She kissed

him before he could answer and slipped her hands under his t-shirt. Taut abs, a fine strip of hair running across his stomach to his crotch, warm skin. The irresistible scent of his cologne. Need. Want.

"Is that a promise or a threat?" He murmured, pulling her blouse out of the waistband of her skirt. His hands on her skin, sliding upwards over her back until they found the strap of her bra. His eyes became wide, and he chuckled. "This is neither white cotton nor a sports bra..."

"No, it's not. Thought that with your tendency to get me undressed I wear something nice for a change."

They grinned at each other, then he swiftly lifted her up and carried her over to the bed. "You just signed your doom, Baroness. You stay here tonight."

Squeals. Tickles. Giggles. Kisses. At long last they finally had each other undressed down to their underwear. Nate was delighted to find a matching set of shimmery, deep brown silk on her. "This is almost too pretty to take off..."

She pouted and glanced at him through batted eyelashes. "That's a pity. I especially put it on..." Her finger traced the narrow strip of hair across his stomach and pulled back the waistband of his briefs. "... for you to take it off." The waistband snapped back into place, and the next thing she knew was that she was under him. The air was charged with electricity, and she almost expected sparks to spring over as she stroked his neck with her fingertips. His jaws clenched and his eyes were dark with desire. She pushed her hand into his black mop of hair, and he dipped his head and kissed her. Kissed her lips, her brows, the corner of her eyes, her temples.

"My handsome devil." She tugged at his shoulders to get him to lower down.

"God, I love it when you get all husky and sexy." He nibbled at her neck, causing hot flushes to race over her chest.

"What else do you love?"

He grabbed her tightly and rolled on his back, pulling her with him. "I love your spunk. Your spirit of adventure. The fact that you frequently save my life, my butt and my dignity."

She buried her face in his chest hair. "Keep talking..." She licked and nibbled and bit. Nate was a buffet of masculinity. A broad chest with very nicely defined pecs, the taut ridges of his abs, long, lean legs with curly black hair, tanned skin which was a bit paler around his crotch... she wanted to gorge on him.

"Babe, please..." He sounded adorably throaty, and she had mercy. She straddled him and enjoyed the hard bulge in his crotch with only rubbing a tiny bit against it. Her hair fell like a veil around their faces as she bowed down to kiss him. His hands on her butt, stroking the silk. Then on the small of her back, moving upwards. Skilled as he was, the bra clasp was opened singlehandedly. With a delicious smirk, he got her out of the straps. "Happy that I unwrapped my present?"

Giggling she slid off him. "You're still missing a piece..."

"Patience, patience. All in a timely manner. You racer folk are always in such a hurry..." Tiny kisses on her neck. His considerate touches on exactly the right spots fuelled her desire. This night cuddles wouldn't be enough.

"Tell me more about my flavours. How do they taste?" She demanded breathlessly. Nate chuckled and traced her face with a fingertip.

"Your flavours..." His voice was a gravelly, sexy rumble he only ever had when they were alone together. It caused the hairs on her arm to stand up and her core to tighten with anticipation. "The Baroness tastes sweet and smells expensive. Immaculate perfection." He breathed a kiss on the pulse point of her neck, barely touching her skin. She shivered. "The Pilot is tangy, salty and smoky. Adventurous. Fierce." Another kiss, blunt and full on the lips. Then he moved down until he reached the navel. "The motorcycle chick... she's gasoline, the thrill of speed, the scent of hot rubber and the open road. A free spirit." Nate's lips painted a poem on her stomach, and she felt muscles twitch she didn't know could twitch. He reached her panties and pulled them down; she barely had time to lift her hips to help him. His breath wafted over sensitive, moist skin. "The guardian angel, though... she's my favourite. She's golden light and calm and peace.

Tastes like heaven." His tongue found its mark and Adelle blissful minutes in her very own paradise.

Nate tried to regain a modicum of control over his body. Smooth and soft fingertips stroked his nape. His face was pressed into a breast, not the worst kind of cushion in his opinion. A tender kiss on the crown of his head. He should move. He should get off this glorious woman before his weight crushed her. Adelle ran her fingers through his hair, apparently quite content with her situation. With a groan he eventually managed to prop himself at least up on his elbow, gazing down into big brown eyes and the lazy smile of a thoroughly satisfied woman. At least he did well. He rolled off and gathered her in his arms.

"Are orgasms with you always like category five eruptions?" She sighed, resting her head against his collarbone.

"I wish I could say yes." He cupped the base of her head and brushed a thumb over her cheek before he dipped his head and kissed her. She responded with wrapping her arms around his neck and shoulders, her lips soft and warm and welcoming. Kissing for the sake of kissing. Her hands in his hair again. He'd never guessed that it once would be essential to his happiness that a woman ran her fingers through his hair. "You okay?"

Soft giggles. "More than okay."

The faint freckles on her nose, her rosebud-pink lips, tousled hair. Adelle was so beautiful in her freshly fucked state, it almost hurt him physically. He clutched her, and she smiled, kissed his nose tip and snuggled closer.

"No regrets?" He asked, kissing her hairline.

She furrowed her brows. "Why should I regret having sex with you? You took care of me twice, I feel properly spoiled."

Her appreciation of his efforts made him chuckle. "I was afraid you didn't feel ready."

She laughed and pushed him on his back. With a cocked head and a mischievous smile she tapped her fingertip on his collarbone and said: "You think I put on exquisite lingerie and don't think about

possible consequences?"

Her open smile, loving contemplation of his features and the way her naked body met his... no, she had no regrets. He reached up and brushed her unruly hair out of her face. "No, not you. You usually know what you're doing..."

"Usually..." She traced his nose and smiled. "Not quite sure I knew what I was getting myself into as I saved you from the van. But I don't regret it."

"Ha, I don't regret your spontaneity either." He clasped his arms around her, pressed his face into the sensitive, velvet skin of her neck, and inhaled the powdery scent her skin always carried. "Never knew I could become so protective about someone either. But you... there's something about you that makes me want to cradle you in my arms all the time, just to know that you're safe."

She blushed, which was adorably cute. "Maybe it's because I know that I can let my guard down when I'm with you. I always feel inexplicably sheltered when we are together."

They shared a smile and the admiration in her gaze filled him with an immense happiness. They snuggled for a while in silence, drifting on the last remains of spent desire, and enjoyed the feeling of skin on skin without the pressure to take it anywhere. Then they heard a key in the front door and muffled voices. Adelle froze in his arms.

"Shh - that's just Eddy and Bob. I forgot that Eddy said he was going to pick him up in Lewiston tonight."

The sound of the front door closing, then the unmistakable noises of kissing. Groans. A thud against the wall. Adelle giggled nervously.

"They're not about to... you know, right in the hallway?"

"They haven't seen each other for some weeks..."

The sound of zippers and more groans. Adelle flushed pink, from her chest to her cheeks. But by the state of sounds outside, Nate himself wasn't sure if his housemates would make it to their bed upstairs. He got up and walked to the door.

"You're naked," Adelle warned, pulling the sheets up to her chin.

"So what? Likely they're naked too." He grinned.

"Nate!" Now she was beet red. Too cute.

He pounded his fist against his door and shouted: "Guys! You have a bedroom!"

Frantic scrambles. A sorry, likely from Eddy. Steps on the wooden stairs, across the upper hallway, a door closing. Adelle exhaled audibly.

He turned around and found her sitting in the middle of the ruffled bed, sheets still clutched to her chest, but by far less embarrassed. Then a rhythmic thumping sound. Adelle combusted into giggles and fell backwards into the pillows, sheets sliding down and revealing her rosy breasts. Nate almost forgot about his raunchy housemates.

"Shall we take refuge at your place? I don't know if they're not going to fuck the whole night... wouldn't be the first time." He crawled back into bed with her. She nestled against him in a way that stated that she wasn't keen on going anywhere. The thumping got faster, then abruptly stopped. Her fingers raked his chest hair again.

"How long are they together? Ten years?"

"Yeah, something around this benchmark. Why?"

"Oh, just... isn't it great that they still have the hots for each other so hard that they forget they're not alone and nearly do it in the hallway?"

"True." He adjusted his hold on her so that her head rested on his chest. Absentmindedly, she stroked his stomach. Warmth spread where she touched him.

"It must be great," she eventually said.

"Mh?" He had a thousand things on his mind that all involved her glorious naked body, but not his housemates. She moved on top of him, a manoeuvre that wasn't helping with focusing on their conversation.

"It must be great to be with someone for so long. Truly knowing the other, and, you know, not just the chocolate side of things."

"I think I know more than just your chocolate side. For example, I know how you look like after four hours of endurance test on a rainy

afternoon."

She sniggered and kissed him softly. "You do. But you don't know how I look like after a night with a stomach bug."

He rolled them over, determined to bring the conversation to an end. Adelie laughed, holding on to his shoulders. He liked when she held on to him. Suddenly it clicked, and he stilled, looking down to her. "Would you want me to know how you look like when you're sick?"

She cupped his face and brought their foreheads to a touch. "I want you to be there in all my highs and my lows. And I want to be there in your highs and lows. I want to know your cranky side, your tired side, your stressed side. Knowing you only when you're on your best behaviour is as if I don't know you at all."

There was only one answer to her passionate declaration.

Nate's alarm clock interrupted Adelie's dreams harshly. Morning always came too early when half the night was spent with exploring a wonderful man's body. Nate moved next to her, grunted and shut it off, but instead of expected cuddles, he switched the light on and got out of bed. Then rhythmic breathing filled the room. She turned and cracked open an eye to see what he was doing. The view was worth opening the second eye too, as Nate did push-ups right in front of the bed. Stark naked.

"Can't you think of more delightful ways to get your morning workout?" She groaned, watching his back muscles move under his skin like snakes in a bag.

"A hundred push-ups. Every morning."

"I'd prefer cuddles every morning."

"... 97 ... 98 ... 99 ... 100." He got up from the floor and bowed down to give her a quick kiss. His skin was only slightly dewy. "Hi, babe." Then he left the room and shortly after, she heard the shower being turned on. With a sigh she let her eyes wander around his room, unwilling to get out of bed and face another long day. Their clothes were still scattered on the floor, tossed there in the heat of the action. She sat up and stretched, relishing in the decidedly used way her body

ached in certain parts. The sacrifice of sleep had been worth it. Polished oak planks greeted her naked feet as she put them down. For a moment she just sat on the edge of the bed. Without him focusing all her attention, she could take in all the details. The dark wooden floors, the beautiful antique dresser she was sure he had refurbished himself and his old toy motorcycle collection on top of it. She got up to get their clothes off the floor, and Nate returned just as she'd buried her face in his t-shirt. She sheepishly grinned at him, and he smiled as he wrapped her in his arms, still damp from his shower. A long kiss. The hard proof that he was just matter of fact because it was a school day pressed into her thigh.

"Nothing beats finding your woman naked in the middle of your room, sniffing your t-shirt with a dreamy expression," he mumbled into her hair as he finally let her go. The world was still spinning because that was what his kisses made her world do, so she just melted into him.

"I don't want to go to classes today. And it's only Wednesday..."

Nate laughed softly at her dismay. "Hey, beautiful. It's already Wednesday. The weekend will be here in no time."

It indeed came quickly and with it another rugby match. Adelle recruited Leslie to come and watch it with her. The sun shone from a bright blue winter sky, and breath formed white clouds. Adelle cradled a cup of hot tea in her hands while she watched the two teams being locked around the centre line. The bodies of the players seemed to be steaming in the cold air.

"The guys are lucky, they're moving about and don't get cold."

Jake collided with the other team's number five and Leslie winced. "Ouch. Yes, they're running, but frankly, I'm rather cold than dirty."

Nate had acquired the ball and made a daring dash across the field, but was tackled at the 20 yards line.

"He's an antelope." Leslie was in awe. Adelle choked on her tea.

"What? An antelope?"

"Yes! Graceful, fast... especially fast. Look, Jake is more like a wall, and not at all graceful. But he does a great job keeping the others

from scoring."

Leslie was right, Jake was burly and a vital brick in the defence while Nate truly was the more nimble and quick-footed. The referee's whistle called for half-time. Adelle's heart jumped as Nate made eye-contact on his way to the locker room and blew her a kiss. Leslie sighed audibly.

"You're such a lucky girl. He's like a knight in the tournament, greeting his favourite lady."

"Should I drop him my handkerchief as a reward?" Adelle grinned. Nate would get his reward for sure this evening, but probably not in the form of a handkerchief.

"What's with the dreamy expression?" Leslie poked her into her side. "You really like him, don't you?"

"Of course, I like him! I've always liked him."

"You're in love." Leslie sighed again. "How could you not be in love with such a dreamboat."

Adelle settled in her seat. "Can't we just say I'm really into him and ditch the L word? I'm a bit apprehensive when it comes to naming things love. It's nothing else than hormones anyway."

"Yeah, sure." Leslie didn't sound convinced but dropped the issue.

The second half began with a furious run of Westerhaven, scoring three tries in a matter of minutes, bringing them into a comfortable lead. The crowd cheered and sang and everything looked like it would shape into a great Saturday afternoon. Then Nate collided heads first with another player and didn't get up again. He lay motionless on the green grass and the others waved frantically for the medics. Adelle's heart skipped a beat and then proceeded to nearly beat its way out of her chest as they put him onto a stretcher and hurried into the catacombs of the stadium. Everything went mute, and a sick feeling settled in her stomach.

Ever since her brother had to spend half a year in one, Adelle had hated hospitals. A pale Nate still in his dirty Westerhaven blue jersey on crisp white bed linens did nothing to like them any more. He was asleep as the nurse let her into the room, after the doctors had

reassured her that he was alright. A mild concussion maybe, they'd keep him overnight for monitoring. For a minute she just sat at the side of the bed and watched him sleep. It calmed her nerves considerably. Carefully she took his hand in hers and squeezed it lightly. His fingers curled around hers, and he opened his eyes. For a moment, he just stared ahead, blinking slowly, then he focused on her, and a tired smile appeared.

"Babe." His voice was thick and coarse, but to her ears, it was the sweetest sound.

"Hey. How are you?"

"Worst headache of my life."

"Doctors think you have a concussion. You'll be off anything for a while."

"Does this include sex?" The jesting panic in his voice told her that Nate indeed was okay. She pulled her chair closer and bent towards him.

"We might have to take things slow for a week or so?" She softly touched her lips to his, feeling his twisting into a smile. His hand slid around her waist and pulled her even closer. She was unaware of her tears until he cupped her face and asked: "Hey, babe - what's the matter?"

She nodded and sniffled, wiping her cheeks. "You scared me. I was so worried and felt so helpless."

"Shhh. It's okay. I'm okay." His gaze wandered over her face, drinking her up as if he hadn't seen her in a while. "You're cute when you're worried."

"Nathan..." Overwhelmed by emotion, the only thing she could do was shake her head and brush his hair.

"Just wanted to cheer you up a little." He pulled her closer and Adelle buried her face in the crook of his neck, inhaling the mix of sweat, cologne and his warm personal scent as if it was a drug. Leslie's voice echoed in her head. You're in love. Who was she trying to fool? Yes, she was completely in love with this boy.

Nate had waited all day long to hear Adelle's footsteps on the porch. He put his book away as she slipped out of her boots in the hallway and the clinks of the coat hangers told him she'd gotten out of her coat. Then his door opened, and her head poked through. A smile appeared as their eyes met.

"Hey. How's my favourite patient?" She stepped into the room and closed the door, then sat down on the bed next to him.

"Bored to death."

"Awwww," Adelle grinned and bowed down to kiss him. Her hair fell over her shoulder, it smelled of fresh cold air. Tiny water droplets sat in it, glinting like diamonds in the light of his lamp.

"Your hair's wet," he murmured.

"It's snowing again. How's your head?"

"First day without any headaches. I still get dizzy when I get up too fast." He moved to give her some room and she settled into his arms. She wore one of her super soft white angora sweaters and slim wool pants - it really must be cold outside. "Doc said I can go back to school on Monday, but no flying. Or rugby."

"That's great news. I miss our lunch breaks. And you'll be flying soon enough, Tiger." She breathed a kiss on his cheek.

"I could get used to you sleeping here every night, though."

Adelle giggled. "Sure. Even Eddy joked why I don't move in already."

Nate buried his face in her hair again. "He just wants someone to talk cars over breakfast."

"You just want to get laid every night..." Her fingers curled into his hair. He poked his into her waist.

"As if you wouldn't..."

She laughed and shoved him playfully. "To be honest, I wouldn't mind a break."

He snaked his arm around her. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Going all growly and sexy won't help, Mister. You're not exactly a small size, and I begin to feel quite raw down there."

This snapped him out of the haze that always clouded his brain

when he was close to her gorgeous body. "Wait. What? Seriously?"

"A little. It's okay."

He hooked a finger into the waistband of her pants. "Let me kiss it and make it better."

Giggles. A tug on his t-shirt. "You can hold me."

A demand he gladly fulfilled. Adelle burrowed into him like a small critter seeking shelter and he wondered if she had had a rough day.

"Did Payne give you a hard time?" He brushed soothing kisses on top of her head, feeling the body in his arms slowly unwind. She shook her head and sighed.

"No. It just was a long and exhausting week."

He rubbed her back. "C'mere. Relax."

They fell silent. Soon, Adelle's breathing became deep and regular, and her body slack. Her head rested on its rightful place on his shoulder, her hand on his stomach and one leg was hooked around his. He remembered how he told Jake how great it was to have her fall asleep in his arms. It still was. Calm and peace seeped from her to him, filled him, recharged him in a way nothing else could. He fitted his hand over hers on his belly, and she made a tiny contented sound. His heart somersaulted with joy.

"I like it when you hold me," she murmured sleepily.

"I've known since Bunker Hill. That moment, when you just couldn't keep it together anymore. But you let me hold you. Guess I fell for you then and there."

Her fingers laced through his. "I can't exactly pinpoint the day I fell for you. But I knew that I liked you a lot more than I thought after you broke Pat's nose."

More minutes of silence. He played with the silky strands of her ponytail, and she drew circles on his chest. Snowflakes fell outside the window, white swirls against the winter darkness. He heard how Eddy and Snoot came in from a long and cold day in the workshop, Eddy stomping his boots on the porch to knock off the snow. It must accumulate by now. Maybe they could go on a walk through a transformed winter wonderland tomorrow. Adelle had nodded off

again. No matter how enticing her body was to him, he should be a gentleman and grant her a full night of sleep. She had spent every night since his accident with him, but they hadn't slept a lot. And unlike him, she wasn't on sick leave and had to attend classes and flight training. Remorse swept through him that he had ignored it and on top of it made her feel chafed. His fingertips found her neck under her hair, and he gently massaged it. Happy purrs were his reward. He tapped her shoulder.

"Hey your majesty, are you planning to move any time soon?"

A grumbled groan. "Not a majesty, not moving."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"No."

He rolled to his side, forcing her to slide off him. Her gaze was unguarded admiration and happiness. She reached up and pushed her fingers through his hair. "You're so comfy."

"You're a little sleepyhead."

She also was just the right amount of dishevelled and cute. His plan about getting food got abandoned in favour of staying with her. Brown eyes contemplated him lovingly as she traced his features with her fingertips. He moved to touch his lips to hers. Adelle tilted her head, and her arms wound around his neck. Her warm breath blanketed his skin as their lips met. Lots of tiny, affectionate kisses. Some lingering, some not. He loved the way they fit together, he loved how her hands caressed his neck and how she arched ever so slightly against him. Yielding lips. The powdery scent of her skin. The taste of cherry lipstick. Her hand slipped under his shirt, stroking his bare back.

"I thought you want a break?" He whispered, nibbling at her neck.

"Does this mean I can't touch you?"

He chuckled. "You can touch me anywhere you like."

Their eyes met, but there was no defiance in her gaze. Only affection, companionship, desire. There was one word, to sum up all of this. It stood between them, making the air sizzle with anticipation.

"Tiger..." Her voice was raspy. She cupped his jaw and brought

their lips together. He'd never kissed a woman like this before. A long, slow burn, devouring not in its intensity, but in its tenderness. A wordless affirmation.

At last, they needed to separate. He rested his head against her forehead, pressing the back of his nose into her velvety cheek. Three words raced through his mind, but he didn't dare to say them. Adelle saved him once more by whispering: "I'm glad we decided there's safety in numbers. Otherwise, I'd be running now..."

This inevitably broke the spell and the panic. He kissed her nose tip gently. "Ssh. No need to rush anything. Except maybe your way to bed. Things will look less overwhelming in the morning when you're awake and well rested."



RUGBY CHAMPION- SHIPS

"If Haystack isn't careful, the Princess is going to roast his tail feathers." Jake stared through his binoculars to get a better view of the happenings in the sky. Nate shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his parka to keep them from freezing.

"He'll be lucky if she doesn't do worse to him..."

"Come on, come on... boom! There, Haystack's toast."

"Told ya so."

The sky was a muddy grey, and the ground did its best to blend with it under a blotchy blanket of snow. The only upside of the terribly cold weather was that the Stingray cockpits didn't reach oven temperatures as fast as they usually did. Nate couldn't help but sigh proudly as Adelle touched down perfectly. Jake nudged him. "Stop being so star-struck."

"You're just jelly that you don't have such a kick-ass girlfriend." He sauntered over to where Adelle had brought her Stingray to a stop. The bubble canopy swung open, and she pulled off her helmet. Wisps of hair stuck to her sweaty forehead and her cheeks glowed pink.

"Nate!" He lived for the way she beamed at him whenever she saw him. "What are you doing here?"

"I have radar exercises soon. Hunting tiny things hidden in the woods. How boring. Awesome dogfight, by the way."

With a laugh, his beautiful girlfriend exited her plane and climbed down the ladder. "Thank you. Haystack isn't as difficult to beat as you are."

He longed to sweep her into his arms and kiss her in the shelter of the plane, but they had a "No kisses on base" agreement, and he knew Adelle wouldn't sway one iota from her professionalism as long as both of them were wearing flight suits.

"But he's one of the few true opponents you still have left since Payne refuses to pitch us against each other again."

"Silly man fears for his equipment..." She shook her head.

"I don't care as long as this fear means he pairs us up all the time."

Her hand slipped into his as they walked back. Jake welcomed them with a grin. "What a start to the weekend... nice show of force up

there, Adelle. Very impressive."

"Thank you, Jake."

"Are you coming to the rugby game tomorrow? I'll bet Nate has enlisted you for support. If we win, we're going to the playoffs in Shanghai Five!"

"Yes, and how exciting would that be! Of course, I'll be there tomorrow." There was a strange pitch in her voice, and it strummed the string of worry in his stomach. Nate followed her to her locker.

"You've got a problem with the playoffs, babe." He leaned against the adjacent locker, watching her stowing her stuff.

"I don't."

"Yes, you do. Your voice goes all flat, and your excitement sounds forced."

She sighed and placed her helmet more carefully than necessary on the top shelf of her locker. She slowly closed the door and locked it, then turned and leaned against its metal surface. As her eyes met his, they were large and full of reluctance. He stepped closer, wishing he could wrap her in his arms. No chance. Adelle smoothed the parka over his shoulders.

"I don't really want to talk about it here and now."

"Will you tell me tonight?"

"Sure."

She let him wait until after dinner when they were comfortable snuggled up on her bed. With her securely in his arms, he decided to press the matter again.

"So, about the playoffs thing... what's your trouble?"

Adelle sighed. "It's foolish. I'm worried... worried that something's going to happen to you." Exasperated she tugged at his shirt. "As I said, it's stupid."

He gently massaged her neck. "There's nothing stupid about caring for someone and being worried." Her eyes glistened. He knew the look on her face, he had seen it before, on Bunker Hill. She was struggling with her emotions and losing. A tear escaped and coursed over her cheek as she looked at him with her damn big brown eyes that had the power to do him in. He needed an out, and unlike the last

time she unravelled in his arms, he had one. Tenderly he touched his lips to hers. A sigh. For a while he just held her, kissing her softly now and then. Her hand had slipped under his shirt, stroking his waist.

Eventually, she broke the silence. "When you collapsed on the field, I've been so scared like never before in my life. It's very hard to watch you play since then. Every tackle feels like I'm tackled too. The thought that something could happen to you... that I could lose you..." She shook her head, unable to speak anymore. But he needed no words to understand. Pulling her tightly against him, he kissed her again, trying to tell her without words how important she was to him.

Nate's kiss poured a golden glow into every crack and fissure of Adelie's anxious heart until she could breathe again. He held her together with his strong arms until she wasn't falling apart anymore and the painful idea of a life without him retreated.

"Thank you," she mumbled into the folds of his shirt, bringing out his great chuckle. She looked up, diving into the blue of his eyes with abandon because they were her own personal sky. She expected them to be full of mirth, ready to tease her with her silliness, but instead she found him just as undone as she was. He wasn't just holding her, he was as much holding on to her as she was to him.

"Thank you for taking your job as my guardian angel so seriously." His chest expanded with a deep sigh, and he lovingly brushed away her hair while his gaze swept her face. "Guess, it's not just a silly joke anymore."

She chuckled. "Was it ever just a joke?"

Their eyes met, and he cleared his throat. "I think it started as one. But it became real quickly. As..." He stopped and looked at the ceiling. "As our feelings for each other? From friendship to attraction to... to something bigger. But we don't trust this feeling yet."

"No, we don't." She took his hand and laced her fingers through his. His thumb brushed along her index finger. "Right now, I'm feeling as if we're both standing on a very large pogo ball, like on the rings of Saturn. And we're holding on to each other so neither falls off, and we don't - but it's not a stable act yet."

He grinned. "That's the most accurate description of my emotional state I've ever heard." Excitedly, he turned and propped himself up on his elbow, not letting go of her hand. "But I'm convinced that one day we reach the stability we both desire. We will dance on the rings of Saturn and laugh at gravity. We will, babe, we will."

Those blue eyes, sparkling with utmost sincerity and enthusiasm. His smile, bright and happy and contagious. She wrapped her arms around his neck and shoulders and pulled him down. Yes, he was worth learning how to defy the laws of physics.

He was also worth sacrificing her vocal chords, as she discovered the next day. Neither Adelle nor Leslie had any voice left after the eighty minutes were over, and Westerhaven celebrated a victory by a mere point difference. She met her knight at the sideline, dirty and bloody and bruised, but wearing the biggest smile.

"We won, babe! We won!" He lifted her up and spun her around until she squealed.

"You made it to the playoffs!"

He put her down, very abruptly. "What'cha done to your voice?"

"I cheered you to victory." She sounded like the rusty water pump in the farmhouse garden. Nate's mouth twitched, but he succeeded in keeping a straight face. Until she spoke again. "I'm so proud of you!"

He chortled. "Gosh, that sounds painful. And thanks for your commitment, I'm sure it made a difference." He wrapped her into one of his bear hugs. "Thanks, babe, I know it wasn't easy for you," he whispered into her ear. She framed his face with her hands.

"Tiger, you deserve to go to the playoffs so, so much. All of you. You worked so hard to bring Westerhaven back after twenty years of absence. Yes, it's hard for me to see you go, but damn, I was once a competitive athlete, and I want you to win that trophy." Her voice was reduced to a rough whisper, but he understood her nonetheless in the celebrating crowds and clutched her tightly. He looked around and then back to her.

"You know... I better get you home and make you a hot milk with honey, to appease your vocal cords. I don't want you to ruin your

lovely voice."

"But don't you want to celebrate with your teammates?" Adelle pulled a face as her hoarse pipes eliminated all emphasis. Nate still had trouble not to burst into laughter when she spoke, as his twinkling eyes betrayed. He shook his head.

"I'm dead on my feet, it was a hard match. We'll leave for Shanghai Five in three days, and I rather spend as much time with you as possible until then. I'll see the boys long enough during our trip." He put his arm around her waist and steered them towards the exit. "Let's go home, babe. Shower, hot milk, cuddle time. I need that right now."

She snuggled close, absolutely d'accord with his priorities. Three days wasn't a lot of time left with him.

Nate watched her standing beside the huge bus that was about to ferry them to Lewiston Space Travel Terminal. Adelle shivered in the cold morning air. She looked a little lost and miserable. There were other player's partners too, and none of them seemed particularly happy. He stepped next to her and touched her arm. "Hey. Take this." He wrapped her in his team hoodie.

"You'll get cold!" She protested, but snuggled into the warmth of the jacket nevertheless.

"I have a spare."

"Thank you."

"It will keep you warm as long as I'm away."

The coach interrupted them by clapping his hands and yelling: "Okay boys, 5 more minutes, then it's time to get this show on the road."

Adelle's eyes got wide, and she swallowed. "I hate saying goodbye."

He pulled her into a fierce embrace, pressed his lips to hers and relished in the way she melted against him.

"Good luck." She whispered, smoothing his hair. "Win the trophy." Another long kiss. He was sure it wouldn't tide him over to the end of the adventure.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll write every day. Maybe I can find an interstellar phone box and call when we've arrived."

"I'd appreciate the effort, but don't. It's hellishly expensive. 5 credits the minute. Let's write instead. Works better with different timezones too." She lovingly adjusted the collar of his shirt. "Now go forth and bring pride to Westerhaven. I'll be a good girlfriend and wait for your return." She attempted a brave smile.

"Time to go! Havisham, hurry up!"

One last, quick, insufficient kiss, then he was dragged into the bus. Outside he could see the girls huddle, waving as the bus pulled away. They were on the road.

He sat down next to Jake, who eyed him suspiciously. "Man, what's up with you? We're going to Lewiston Space Terminal! We're going to Shanghai Five! And you look like you're getting a root canal."

"Adventures are only half as fun when your partner in crime is missing."

My dear Adelle,

we made it safe and sound to Shanghai Five, after twenty-four hours of tedious travel. Shanghai Five is as breathtaking as you described it. The domes are amazing! We are in the centre one, close to the stadium and the famous night district. I think you'd like the hotel and I much rather share my room with you than with Jake. Our room is on the 25th floor, and we have a breathtaking view over the hanging gardens and the stadium. You can imagine how surprised I was when I found your sweet gift - I don't know when and how you managed to smuggle the little bear and the restaurant guide into my bag. Jake is game to go sightseeing with me so this will come in handy. You are so sweet, and I miss you very much. I'm exhausted and will now go to bed and dream of you.

Yours,

Nate.

Dear Nate,

I'm glad to hear that you arrived safely and that you're happy with the hotel. Nothing's worse than bad lodgings. The guide has done me good service all the time the tour stayed in Shanghai Five. I don't know if it's still there, but if you get a chance, try Fong's at the corner of Emerson and Gibraltar Avenue - they have the best Dim Sum. Everything's the same here in good old Westerhaven. Only you are missing. It was weird to go to bed last night without you and very lonely without you cooking breakfast this morning. My attempts to reproduce your fluffy pancakes failed miserably, but I followed your recipe to a t. Clearly, there's a trick you haven't shown me yet.

*Take care,
your Adelle*

My dear Adelle,

I'm exhausted beyond words. But we made it to the semi-final! Did you watch the game? It was a battle! The masseur here is lacking your talents, though, and I'm very much in need of your capable hands. No, not just your hands. All of you. I thought I'd miss our intimacy the most, and goodness, how do I miss it, but to my surprise the little things sting more. Jake and I found Fong's but his palate isn't as refined as yours, and he was more interested in the cute waitress anyway. Dining there with you would've been a lot more pleasant. You would have made remarks about the quality of the food and not some poor girl's ample chest. But you're not here. There's no one to welcome me with sympathy and a warm hug when I come back to the hotel after a gruelling training session. I miss your hand slipping into mine when I walk down a street and your excitement when something catches your eye. Your giggles when I say something funny. Your little tactical lectures over dinner. Did I ever tell you that I've gotten heaps and bounds better in air combat since I met you? Your words don't fall on barren lands, I'm listening

and take them to heart! Although I know I'll never gonna be a tactical mastermind like you. But to be honest, right now I just want to feel your arms around me, your soothing voice in my ear, and fall asleep. My body is still screaming bloody murder at me, and the game was yesterday! I hope I'll be able to stand upright after the semi-final, no matter the outcome.

I miss you,
Nate

My poor baby,

I hope you're feeling better when you're reading this. I'm so, so proud of you all! Yes, I watched the game - Bob and Eddy asked me to come over, and we yelled a lot at the screen. I was peering through my fingers when I wasn't yelling, though. Nearly died because it was so close! It was painful to see your face so bloody and bruised and not being able to comfort you afterwards. Being stuck here in Westerhaven without the excitements of a new city, I feel there's a Nate-shaped hole in my life right now. I've gotten so quickly used to be able to tell you the happenings of the day. Having you sit across the table, grinning, gesticulating, telling me about your day. It's so darn quiet all the time. I even miss your obnoxious way of falling out of bed in the morning and doing a hundred push-ups right away! But hey, I haven't burned down the kitchen yet in my attempts to get the pancakes right, that does count as success, doesn't it? The days are okay, I can find enough to distract myself from your absence, but the nights give me trouble. First the quiet apartment, then I have a hard time falling asleep without your warm body next to mine. I'm lying awake and wonder if my bed has always been this big and empty. I wake up in the small hours of the morning because there's no one snoring softly into my ear. They always say absence makes the heart grow fonder... I know what they mean now.

*Lots of kisses on every bruise,
Adelie*

Dearest Adelie,
coming into my room after dinner to a new message from

you is certainly my highlight of the day. And I hope that you like waking up to one from me every morning. My shoulder still hurts from the crash with Lexington, but the doc is confident that I'll be able to play in the final. Holy crap, I still can't believe we made it all the way to the end. We're all equal parts excited and terrified. What an honour, what a chance - but Whitestone won't be easy. Heck, neither of our opponents was easy, but I'm not sure our usual tactic will work against them. Oh, how I wish you'd be here, with your tactical finesse. I often find myself thinking: "Now, what would Adelie say, with her razor-sharp mind?" You'd probably say, don't use the same tactic anyway, because this makes us predictable, and you're so right. I miss you, babe. You and your feminine ways. You know how male pilots are, but I don't think you can imagine what happens when you put a bunch of them into close quarters for a few weeks. The testosterone's dripping off the walls. I can assure you when we'll see each other again, you won't get out of bed for a week. Like a mad man, I crave the sweet touch of your lips, the silky friction of your velvety skin against mine. I need to hear you sigh when I kiss the pulse point on your neck, and your moans when I go lower. Your hands restlessly ransacking my hair when you kiss me. I want to make you quiver and squirm and go taut with anticipation. I long to be buried deep inside you, when your body arches and muscles ripple all around me, because nothing, nothing feels as good to me as you do. Sorry to go all troglodyte at you, but when the day is done, and all polite conversation is over, I'm just a man, and I need my woman. Badly.

Yours always,
Nate

Nate,

please never apologise for having needs - even if this need includes my body. I do have an inner troglodette who wants and misses you too. If you want to make me all hot and bothered, keep writing me letters like this. There's a void inside me that demands to be filled with you. I want to be

wrapped all around you, feel you, cradle you within me. I want to surrender to your kisses, I want to be swept away in a flood of exquisite emotions that only you seem to be able to coax from me. Your lips. On mine. On my skin. Always knowing where I like them, where I need them most. You always seem to know what I need - how do you do that? I don't want to sound shallow, and there are many ways in which your absence reminds me of how wonderful you are, as a man, as my partner, as a cook, but right now, I miss your qualities as my lover most.

*Looking forward to a week in bed with you,
Adelie*

Nate stood in the middle of the field, trying to extinguish the shadow of frustration that tainted his greatest triumph. He looked at the cheering masses, the gold confetti raining from above, his teammates celebrating with the cup. It was all so perfect, but he wished he could share this moment with Adelie. She wouldn't even be able to watch it live, nor would she be able to see everything on TV. He wanted to kick something, but Jake's heavy hand slapped his shoulder first.

"Don't be sad. Look who's here."

"Huh?" He turned and couldn't believe his eyes. Through a veil of gold confetti rain, a group of young women and men in Westerhaven Academy blue picked their way across the field. It couldn't be, but one slender figure looked very familiar, and then she saw him and walked up to him. His face contorted into a smile while his chest wrangled with a sob of relief. Adelie! Adelie was here! And then she was in his arms, enveloped in the biggest bear hug he was able to deliver short of breaking her back. She held on to him just as tightly, hands grabbed fistfuls of jersey on his back. He buried his face in her hair, refreshing his memory with its scent. Adelie.

"Oh, how I missed this." Her glorious voice.

He allowed for the tiniest amount of breathing space between them, still trying to understand how it came that she was in his arms. "How... why... what are you all doing here?"

She chuckled, her eyes full of mischievous sparkle. "The

Academy Rugby Association decided it would be nice for the players to have their partners there after the final. So we got shipped here three days ago. They boarded us in an excellent hotel, gave us the full sightseeing tour, and we had our own box near the twenty yards line for the match."

"You saw the game." He still couldn't believe he wasn't dreaming.

She wound her hands around his neck, tilted her head backwards and smiled. "Yes, I saw the game. Everything. I'm so proud of you."

"You saw my try!" Finally, his brain caught up with what she was saying. "So I did hear you yell! I didn't imagine things!"

"Yeah, you probably did. I nearly killed my throat again that moment."

He lifted her up and spun around with her. She squealed, and it was the happiest sound he'd ever heard. His Adelle, his little Spitfire. He put her down again and they hugged in a drunken state of dizzy happiness. Their eyes and foreheads met and the surrounding world went mute. Her soft palm cupped his cheek, her thumb brushed carefully over his bruised skin. "You look awful."

"I know. Doesn't hurt, though."

"Wait 'til the adrenaline drops."

"I don't care. I have you. I finally have you back."

"Hey champ, you left me... not the other way 'round."

"Sorry, won't happen again. No, sir."

"Shut up and kiss me."

He obliged because that was an order he could not resist, nor did he want to. Their nose tips rubbed against each other, her breath was warm on his skin, and no gold confetti could sparkle as beautiful as her eyes. A mutual sigh. Her hands moved into his hair, his tightened around her shoulders. The sensation of something getting loose that had been stuck before. Sound returned, and suddenly the colours were more vibrant than before.

Adelle marvelled at the view of the city spread out before her like a toy land. Shanghai Five was bathed in the pink glow of dawn, pouring in through the crystal clear hull of the dome that protected

the city's inhabitants from the planet's harmful atmosphere outside. The morning's first monorails zipped along their rails through the maze of high rises. Space was scarce, so Shanghai Five was a multi-storey town, with gardens and parks and bridges connecting the buildings on every level. Rumours had it that some people had not been to the ground in decades. Soft snoring made her abandon the view and turn around. They had just returned from a night of celebrating, and Nate laid on the bed sleeping. The state he was in though caused her to smile. He had managed to get off his shoes, jacket and dress pants, but then exhaustion must have overwhelmed him, and he had fallen asleep, legs still on the floor. Gently shaking her head, she stepped closer, the moss-green fabric of her evening gown rustling from the movement. Lovingly she lifted his legs up, pulled off his socks and draped the blanket over him. She had to find a way to get his shirt off later. For now, she needed to get out of the dress and into her own PJs too, maybe she could catch a wink of sleep before they had to leave in the afternoon to return to Westerhaven.

She stood in front of the large mirror over the desk next to the bed and pulled out the pins that held her hair up. One after the other, chestnut curls fell on her shoulders. Morning light streamed into the room, and she made a mental note to close the drapes before she'd crawl into bed.

"You look like a goddess. A goddess of the morning." Nate's voice was slurred from too much champagne, exhaustion and sleep, but it also had this rich, dark timbre that never failed to give her goosebumps. She turned around. He'd braced himself on his elbow, looking at her almost mesmerised.

"Hey."

"Sorry for falling asleep."

"Don't be, my mighty warrior." This made him laugh, and he sat up to rub his hands over his face.

"Don't feel so mighty right now, to be honest."

"Darling, you had a very long and very exciting night. It's allowed to feel like minced meat. A lot happened." Adelie had finished hunting the hundreds of pins in her hair. She took a comb and put a least a

little order into her hair, then she zipped open the dress to take it off. Nate sucked in his breath sharply.

"So that's what you're hiding under such a formal affair? Good golly, if I'd known this, I'd dragged you up here right after desserts."

This made her laugh, and she climbed onto the enormous white bed, silk stockings and lace panties and all. He grinned, suddenly looking not so tired anymore. "Let me help you with this," she said, tugging at his crumpled white dress shirt.

"Thanks. The shoulder is not happy," he groaned. She gave him a peck on the cheek, then pushed the shirt over his shoulders and helped him free his arms. "You're the best."

"Do you need anything else?"

He shook his head. "No, besides you I don't need anything."

His arm wound around her waist, then he pulled her close enough to lean his forehead against hers. Nose tips brushed against cheeks, lips almost touched. The heat of his body radiated out to her, and she found his familiar scent on his skin, peppered with traces of champagne. He breathed tender kisses between her eyebrows, on the corner of her eye, her temple, near her ear. Her guts unclenched like a fist she'd balled without noticing as she answered him in the same vein, brushing her lips over all the battle wounds he'd suffered. The stitches over his left eyebrow, the cut on his cheek, the shadow of a fading black eye. Eventually, he softly cupped her chin, and they made eye contact. Sun-faded indigo once again seemed to fill out her vision.

"You know, after you've been underwater and come up, when you take your first gulp of fresh air?" His voice was only a quiet whisper.

"Yeah?" Hers too.

"This is how I feel right now. I feel like I'd held my breath for four weeks and only now I can breathe again. I missed you so much, in so many unexpected ways..."

Water welled up in her eyes, and she took his beloved face into her hands. "I love you."

His knuckle caught an errant tear. "I love you too, babe. So much."

"So we're dancing on the rings of Saturn, laughing at gravity?"

Her lips brushed along his, a sweet half-kiss, as his arms slid around her and she found herself down in the pillows with him. He chuckled while he contemplated her face with a loving expression.

"Yes, I'm laughing at gravity. You're not afraid when you found your home in the arms of a great woman."

"I'm your home." She had no word to describe how happy this made her, but her broad smile probably told him anyway. He bowed his head and nuzzled the crook of her neck. She wrapped her arms around his massive torso and pulled him on top of her.

"Yes, you are."

As she lost herself in his kiss, she realised that he was hers too.

THE END